The Autobiography of Esther Shechter: Yiddish Print Culture in Winnipeg in Transnational Context

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1994
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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(Interdisciplinary Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

August 2014

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Abstract

This thesis considers the Yiddish book, *Di geshikhte fun mayn lebn* [My life story] by Esther Shechter (1867-1953), published in Winnipeg in 1951. Its central text, initially written for the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research autobiography contest of 1942, is a memoir of the author’s early life and immigration to Canada. In considering this work, questions of authorship and the production of the text are explored. Jewish traditions of life writing and Yiddish secular culture specifically are the terrain from which this work grows. Shechter is found to have a strong commitment to the act of reading and to self-education, and to the creation of a modern Jewish identity which combines Jewish cultural and historical knowledge with awareness of and involvement in non-Jewish political life. This is evidenced through her passionate connection to newspapers and print culture, her involvement in Yiddish secular education, and her expressed and implicit reasons for writing her memoir. Her work comments on women’s activities and roles in ways that anticipate later feminist thought.

Born in Ukraine and arriving in Canada in 1905, Shechter considers her autobiography a contribution to the historical record of Jewish immigration to Western Canada. Like many single-book memoir writers, she sees herself primarily as a consumer of and audience for culture. The self-publication of her memoir is therefore not primarily an act of artistic or aesthetic expression but a social undertaking in keeping with her values: engagement with civic life, the maintenance of Jewish and Yiddish cultural literacy, and the creation of the self through reading, learning, and writing. Her work arises from transnational Yiddish culture, and in turn seeks to enrich that culture.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Faith Anne Jones. The interview conducted as part of this research is covered by Human Ethics Certificate Number H12-01073.
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Note on Yiddish Transliteration

In transliterating Yiddish words and titles, I have relied primarily on the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research transliteration standard. In the titles of Yiddish books, I have used the Library of Congress adaptation of YIVO’s system. Individual words that are widely used in English and have made their way into a major English dictionary, however, are treated as English words and spelled with their most common English spelling.

Capitalizing Yiddish in transliteration is a vexed question as Yiddish itself has no case distinction. Therefore I have followed Library of Congress rules in capitalizing words that would be capitalized in English (the first word of a title, proper nouns, adjectives derived from proper nouns, etc.) but not other words. At times this is a judgement call: I have erred on the side of fewer capitals.

For Hebrew words and titles, I have followed Library of Congress rules.

In quotations from other texts that include transliterated Yiddish and Hebrew words, I have of course retained the spelling and capitalization from those texts.
**Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agode</td>
<td>Jewish lore and legend derived from Talmudic sources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hanukkah gelt</td>
<td>money traditionally given to children at Hanukkah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasidism</td>
<td>an Orthodox Jewish religious movement founded in the 18th century</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haskalah</td>
<td>the “Jewish Enlightenment,” similar to the Western Enlightenment, which</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>promoted rational thought, scientific inquiry, and political integration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>into non-Jewish society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heder</td>
<td>Jewish primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hibat Zion</td>
<td>a pre-Zionist movement promoting Jewish immigration to Palestine, also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>called Hovevei Zion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>landsmanshaft</td>
<td>an organization of immigrants from the same town or region (sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>called a fareyn, or union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maskil</td>
<td>a proponent of the Haskalah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poale Zion</td>
<td>the largest left-wing Zionist movement, also called Labour Zionism,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>which attempted to marry labour internationalism to Jewish particularism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shtibl</td>
<td>a small synagogue, often united around a trade or profession, or adhering</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to a particular religious stream of thought</td>
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<tr>
<td>shund</td>
<td>low culture assumed to be lacking literary or artistic merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yishuv</td>
<td>the Jewish settlement in Palestine preceding Israeli statehood</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

Thanks are gratefully offered to:

- Yiddish-speaking friends who answered questions, identified words I didn’t know, suggested books and resources, and created a space for me not to know things: Eve Jochnowitz, Amy Blau, Joel Berkowitz, Barbara Henry, Henry Sapoznik, Agnieska Legutko, Zackary Sholem Berger, Shane Baker, Zachary Baker, Gennady Estraihk, Cecile Kuznitz, Paul Hershl Glasser, and Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel (doing double duty as friend and Yiddish Bibliographer at the New York Public Library);
- Friends Wendy Frost and Juliet O’Keefe, for their comments on drafts of this work;
- The Yiddish Book Center and its publication Pakn-Treger, which published my translation of an excerpt from Shechter’s memoir;
- YIVO for a generous fellowship to use its resources, and its librarians and archivists, especially Dr. Lyudmila Sholokhova and Gunner Berg;
- The Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, and its outstanding archivist Ava Block-Super;
- Library staff at UBC, particularly the Interlibrary Loan office and the Koerner Research Commons;
- Esther Shechter’s granddaughter, Delsie Dworkin, a delightful person to know;
- My extraordinary committee, Richard Menkis, Judith Saltman, and Daphna Arbel;
- My mother, Lenna Jones;
- My partner, Winnifred Tovey, who has put up with a great deal over the years.
Dedication

Roberta Saltzman, z”l
Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores the nature and expression of Yiddish culture in Winnipeg through the lens of a single participant in that culture, Esther Shechter. This chapter places Shechter in the context of transnational Yiddish secular culture, and describes the history of Jewish immigration to Canada; it also provides a review of the relevant literature in the field.

During the second half of the 19th century, Jewish life experienced an unprecedented rate of change, the effects of which continued to play out through the first half of the 20th century. The coming of modernity, via the Haskalah and through unprecedented interaction with Western, Gentile societies, re-wrote the rules of Jewish life. The mass immigration of Jews to North America was both a cause and an effect of modernity: enabled through large-scale boat travel, made thinkable by the loosening of religious and geographic ties among Eastern European Jews, it allowed for a liberating displacement amid its many hardships. Jews who remained in Eastern Europe experienced and created modernity through the rise of secular, culturally-specific expression in both Yiddish and Hebrew, and through assimilation on a previously unimaginable scale. These cultural movements reverberated through the Jewish world, and influences bounced forward and backwards across the Atlantic, to and from the growing yishuv in Palestine, to new immigrants in South Africa and Argentina, and through Western Europe. The rise of secular Yiddish culture in North America was astonishingly productive, including literature, autobiography, theatre, newspapers and a full range of political thought. This culture
reflected its multiplicity of origin, its experience of immigration, and the social and political conditions of Jewish life in the diaspora. Yiddish, spoken and written, connected Jews in Europe with those in North America and other locales. One of these places was Winnipeg, where a vibrant Jewish community sprung up.

Manitoba was one of the last places in Canada to experience large-scale Jewish immigration. While there were 2,443 Jews in Canada in 1881,\(^1\) only 21 of them were in Winnipeg.\(^2\) Montreal, the first major centre of Canadian Jewry, experienced a wave of Anglo-Sephardic immigration as early as the 1760s, not followed until a century later by the mass migration of Ashkenazic Jews from Eastern Europe. The West Coast, particularly Victoria and the rest of Vancouver Island, experienced a first wave of German Jewish immigrants who followed the Gold Rush up the West Coast in the 1850s, after they had already spent some time in San Francisco and other West Coast hubs acclimating to North American life.\(^3\) In the 1880s, as the Gold Rush subsided, many of the Jewish merchants of Vancouver Island moved to the mainland, and became active in the new business opportunities offered by the coming of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Additional trickles of immigration from Russia and Poland began to supplement Vancouver’s Jewish community.\(^4\)

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Manitoba’s immigration pattern was different from either of these. The first Jews to settle permanently in Winnipeg did not arrive until the 1870s, and while the very first family were Western Europeans from Lorraine, a German-speaking region that belonged at times to France, those who came soon after were a mixed group including both Eastern and Western Europeans, and those who had been in North America for some time, some even U.S.-born, as well as newcomers. Within a very few years, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews predominated. As such there was little tension between “old” and “new” immigrants in Winnipeg like that which formed a central part of the Montreal, Toronto and New York experiences. Hoping to interest the Baron Rothschild in investing in the building of the Canadian railroad, the Canadian High Commissioner in London, Sir Alexander Galt, approached him about moving a number of distressed Jews from the Russian Empire to the Canadian West. During the first half of 1882, 340 Russian Jews arrived in Winnipeg, fleeing pogroms and other hardships. While the scheme to settle Jews in Western Canada was approved and funded directly by the government, the task of caring for the newcomers and helping them settle was placed squarely on the existing Jewish community—a clearly


6 My take here differs from Levine’s. While divisions certainly arose between different Jewish groups on matters of religious observance, politics, and class loyalties, the characterization of these disputes as occurring between an “old, established” group and a “new, more Orthodox” group of incomers is not really plausible. With only 21 Jews living in Winnipeg before the Russians came, there was no “old, established” group with enough money, internal cohesion, and sheer bulk to bully or overwhelm the newer group of arrivals. Nor did they have enough political clout to lobby for their own interests above those of the distressed new immigrants, as did German Jews in New York, for example. Not all the early arrivals were Reform German Jews, and among those who were, several still made their livings as pedlars when the Russian Jews arrived—thus they can hardly be considered an elite. Rather, the community naturally (and acrimoniously, to be sure) split in various ways, with the newcomers of each group finding their spot in the community based on their own histories and preferences.

impossible task for so small a group. The first year in Winnipeg was an extraordinarily
difficult one for these immigrants. While living in overcrowded conditions, with no
sanitation or access to City services, they attempted to find ways to support themselves.
Almost all had to do physical labour. Many individuals from this group of immigrants were
able to get work in the rail yards, and to find housing nearby in the inexpensive and
accessible North End. The city's Anglo elite effectively segregated all Eastern Europeans—
Jews, Ukrainians, and Poles—in the North End by allowing only limited access to housing
and business opportunities in the central and southern parts of the city. This had the
paradoxical effect of creating a vibrant and self-sustaining Jewish community centered
around a geographic core.8

The Jewish population of Manitoba continued to grow through a trickle of
newcomers arriving from Montreal, the West Coast, and the U.S. However, the first large
wave of immigration came about in another government effort to populate the West.
Jewish philanthropists had long been concerned about the growing crisis in Eastern

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8 The Jewish character of the North End has, however, sometimes been exaggerated. While the majority of
Winnipeg’s Jews lived there from the 1880s until the 1980s, Jews never made up a majority within the North End.
They were not even the single largest ethnic group. People of British origin were the largest group for most of that
time; Ukrainians were second; Jews came in third, with around 20% of the population in the middle decades of the
20th century. Other groups large enough to be counted in the census were Poles, Germans, Scandinavians, and
French. Rosenberg, A Population Study of the Winnipeg Jewish Community, 1946, 16–27; Levine, Coming of Age,
2009, 406. Tulchinsky points out that breaking the North End into smaller districts does show some Jewish-
dominated areas, but is careful to note the important relationships between ethnic groups. Tulchinsky, Canada’s
Jews: A People’s Journey, 2008, 114. Another historian who has been measured in his appreciation of the ethnic
mix of the North End is Henry Trachtenberg. Henry Trachtenberg, “Jews and Left Wing Politics in Winnipeg’s
the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, September 8-10, 2001 (Winnipeg: Jewish Heritage Centre of
Western Canada, 2003), 132–55. On the other hand, Arthur Chiel, who wrote the first full history of Manitoba
Jewry, all but ignored the existence of the North End, and certainly gave no thought to the importance of either
geography or the shared Yiddish language and culture in creating Winnipeg’s Jewish landscape. Arthur A Chiel, The
Europe. Not only the pogroms, but famines and widespread economic crises in the Russian Empire had hit Jews particularly hard, and Canadian Jews became active partners with the government in trying to find suitable places to relocate them. The Baron de Hirsch Institute, a charity focusing on long-term solutions to Jewish persecution and economic distress, set up the Jewish Colonization Association. Its Canadian branch was headquartered in Montreal, where an active citizens group also lobbied the government and other Jewish organizations for immigration permits and funds. The plan was to send large numbers of Jews to farm land in Western Canada, with land supplied by the government and training supplied by the Baron de Hirsch Institute in Paris. A number of resettlements were undertaken between 1891 and the outbreak of the World War I, and were taken up again in a small way after the war ended. Although there were several early disasters in these farming settlements, in which several years of bad weather combined with poor soil and a lack of solid agricultural know-how, the Canadian government continued to allow and promote these settlement efforts.9

Through most of this time, the majority of immigrants arriving for agricultural purposes failed to go to or remain on farms. The majority of Jews chosen for immigration arrived from cities and towns in Eastern Europe and had little farming knowledge. They were, rather, simply looking for a way to leave and hoping for some luck once they got where they were going. Many never got further than Montreal or Toronto, and those that

did often relocated, after a few years of farming, to cities, particularly Winnipeg. Some migrated instead to small towns, where they were storekeepers and importers.

Among the unique features of the Jewish communities forged by immigration to the Canadian West was their extraordinary investment in Zionist activities. While Zionism found strong support across Canada generally, on the Prairies it was particularly vigorous. These activities started in the 1890s, growing slowly (and sometimes faltering for a time) until the First World War. During the war, raising money for aid to Jews in the Eastern European war zones helped provide a focus for Zionist activities. Organizations such as Winnipeg’s Yiddish newspaper, the Kanader Yid [Canadian Jew] (later the Yidishe vort [Yiddish word]) took an active part in organizing war relief. The fledgling Poale Zion group in Winnipeg greatly expanded its influence with a door-to-door fundraising campaign that not only raised money, but also built interest in their group. Zionist activity was particularly invigorated by the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Joseph Glass estimates that emigration of Jews from the Prairies to the Palestine yishuv was five times the continental average. Poale Zion, a left-wing stream of Zionism associated with the labour movement, gradually became the largest and most active of the Zionist groups. There was


12 Ibid., 47.

13 Ibid., 48.

also a large overlap between membership in other groups and membership in Poale Zion: for example, Peretz School members were likely to be Poale Zion members.\textsuperscript{15} Although exact numbers are hard to gauge, an estimate of involvement can be made using the material in Chaim Leib Fox’s biographical dictionary of Canadian Yiddish and Hebrew writers. Fox identifies seventy-one writers who lived primarily in Winnipeg or Western Canada. Of these, he mentions Zionist involvement in the biographies of twenty-four individuals, or about 33%. Of those twenty-four, eighteen, or 75%, were members of Poale Zion.\textsuperscript{16}

The cultural values of the North End were rooted in secular Yiddish culture, a newly-created form of expression among Eastern European Jews. Reasons for the rise of secular Yiddish culture are not entirely clear-cut, nor is there a strong scholarly consensus on definitive causes for its emergence.\textsuperscript{17} However, a number of phenomena are usually linked in descriptions of the emergence of this culture in the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. These include the rise of the Haskalah, and, conversely, the rise of Hasidism; the renewal of old forms of antisemitism; the influence of other European nationalist movements; and the


\textsuperscript{16} Chaim Leib Fox, \textit{Hundert yidishe un Hebreishe literatur in Kanade} [A hundred years of Yiddish and Hebrew literature in Canada] (Montreal: Kh. L. Fuks bukh fond komitet, 1980).

creation of new political interests which required a means of mass communication and dissemination.

The Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment which reached Eastern European Jews a good century after the Enlightenment movement affected Christian Europeans, promoted reason, learning, and individualism, and rejected superstition and Jewish segregation. This movement initially also rejected Yiddish qua Yiddish: Yiddish could be used as a method of fighting superstition through writing anti-Hasidic literature, for example, but was not in itself considered a value. However, the Haskalah did promote the self-directed study of secular subjects, which many Jews could only do adequately in Yiddish. Contemporary with the Haskalah was the rise of Hasidism, a populist form of Jewish religious devotion which promoted personal joy in prayer; always, however, under the influence of a charismatic leader who could direct and maintain control over adherents. This form of worship stood in contrast to the rabbinical legalistic disputation of earlier centuries, in which Talmudic interpretation study was the central form of pious expression. Hasidism opposed secularization, and to combat its effects, emphasized prayer, thereby opening itself to the experience of the ordinary individual over elite rabbinical culture. Parables and sayings of Hasidic leaders were also circulated, and these were written in Yiddish to enable a wide audience among followers.

While the Haskalah touted Western, liberal values, and promoted the idea of Jewish integration into Christian societies, the revival of wide-spread anti-Jewish violence in the 1880s, particularly pogroms in the Russian Empire and official indifference to them, proved to many Jews that integration was not only impossible but unwise. Rather than return to a
traditional view of Judaism, or to rely on non-Jewish cultures for aesthetic and intellectual succor, Jewish intellectuals now sought to create a modern Jewish culture that would be able to match in quality and originality other European literatures and cultural expression. In keeping with their understanding of Jewish specificity, the languages they chose to work in were Hebrew and Yiddish.\textsuperscript{18} Hebrew, because it had not yet been revived as a first language for any community, was a far more elite undertaking, and Yiddish came to predominate in this effort.\textsuperscript{19}

In the same era, modern European nationalism began to create the current map of Europe. Small, formerly powerless countries such as Greece and Belgium, and even larger countries such as Poland and Norway, undertook long struggles to free themselves of foreign rule. The rise of Jewish national consciousness—the awareness of the right to political nationhood—is linked to this international phenomenon. The Jewish experience gave rise to both Zionism, which promulgated the notion of the Jewish right to a state, and to Bundism, which promoted social revolution and Jewish cultural autonomy in diaspora. Both movements had little interest in the Yiddish language initially, considering it a debased form of German and a language incapable of expressing nuanced thought. Later the Bund moved towards a Yiddishist stance, holding that the language of the masses was the appropriate language for ensuring Jewish cultural continuity. More prosaically, Zionists,


\textsuperscript{19} A great deal has been made of both the conflict and cooperation between proponents of Hebrew and Yiddish. Nuanced discussion of the matter can be found in Naomi Seidman, \textit{A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish}, Contraversions 7 (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997); Jeffrey Veidlinger, \textit{Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire}, The Modern Jewish Experience (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Barry Trachtenberg, \textit{The Revolutionary Roots of Modern Yiddish, 1903-1917}, Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008).
the Bund, political movements such as Communism, Socialism, Anarchism, trade unionism, and others that gained traction with large numbers of Jews, had to find a way to communicate and disseminate their political thought. Millions of Eastern European Jews, while usually multi-lingual in spoken languages, could only read fluently in Yiddish.

This confluence of circumstances gave rise to an extraordinary outpouring of creativity: not only the writing and publication of books, newspapers, journals, and political pamphlets, but the creation of cultural institutions such as schools, indeed entire school systems, in which the language of instruction was Yiddish. There is evidence of a large number of libraries, literary salons, art galleries, as well as theatres supporting an entire array of playwrights, actors, composers, and set designers. Education was not limited to children: organizations sponsored public lectures, night schools, and self-improvement classes to which Jews flocked in unprecedented numbers. The development of these organizations was uneven. In pre-1905 Russia, censorship restrictions delayed some developments; while in other places, where censorship was less prevalent or could be eluded, specific kinds of cultural expression flourished. Warsaw was the centre of book publishing; Romania emerged as the homeland of Yiddish theatre. With the mass migration to North America, large numbers of Jews could for the first time publish freely. Cultural expression that began in post-Haskalah, post-pogrom Europe bloomed in places such as

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New York and Chicago, and was re-imported to Europe just as Yiddish speakers there began to be able to experience unfettered artistic expression. Influences moved back and forth across the Jewish world, developing into a transnational Yiddish culture, as close-knit as other artistic movements centered in a single country. Although interrupted by the First World War, and although the cultural centre of gravity had shifted definitively to North America by the 1920s, this state of affairs essentially obtained until the outbreak of the Second World War.

One aspect of Yiddish cultural life was the importance of books and reading as part of a programme of self-improvement and political involvement. This is attested by the sheer number and variety of reading-related organizations such as publishers, libraries, and bookstores, and activities such as literary evenings and reading circles. One analysis of Jewish youth reading habits in interwar Poland posits that reading was “primarily an ideological act.” Reading was linked to a variety of activities and movements. People judged each other through their reading habits, and similarly expressed their loyalties or stances through choices such as purchases of particular books. Self-directed study was a crucial part of Yiddish mass culture, because it acknowledged that many people were unable to attain formal education, and where they did it may have been limited by either religious considerations (if they received a Jewish education) or by state interests (if they


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attended secular schools).\textsuperscript{23} In interwar Poland, a huge percentage of Yiddish books published and purchased were translations from world literature, displaying a hunger for access to modern Western ideas and for proficiency in navigating non-Jewish cultures.\textsuperscript{24}

Since the earliest modern Yiddish literature, the literary culture has been marked by “blazing passions of romantic-revolutionary idealism, passions that ran like a red flame between readers and writers and for a time made critical judgment seem all but irrelevant,”\textsuperscript{25} which is to say, readers were less interested in whether the literature was “good” than in how well it evoked their own emotional lives and political yearnings. Yiddish writers were accessible to their readers: Sholem Aleichem’s home address ran in the newspapers alongside his writings, so that readers could correspond with him.\textsuperscript{26} Yiddish memoirs often describe a thirst for literature and the printed word that went beyond reading as a leisure pursuit or even self-education, and became in itself a form of social action.\textsuperscript{27} Those who were not themselves writers could creatively express themselves as readers. Joe Fishstein was an American Jewish immigrant garment worker who collected Yiddish poetry for decades, using much of his disposable income to do so. He not only bought every book of or about Yiddish poetry that he could acquire during his collecting years: he also made individualized dust jackets for them to preserve them in

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\textsuperscript{24} Ellen D. Kellman, “‘Dos Yidishe bukh alarmed!’: Towards the History of Yiddish Reading in Inter-War Poland,” \textit{Polin} 16 (2003): 219.
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\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 441.
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\textsuperscript{27} See Veidlinger, \textit{Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire}, 2009, particularly chapters 2, 3 and 4, for numerous examples of memoirs that evoke the place of reading in the writers’ social involvements.
\end{flushright}
pristine condition. As a garment worker, he had access to fabric scraps, and he used these to make dust jackets and bookmarks. This does not imply that he viewed the books as objects and did not read them. On the contrary, he appears to have read them seriously and with insight. He kept a notebook, also individually decorated, starting before his 1910 immigration to the United States, into which he transcribed his favourite poems. As Ruth Wisse notes:

This sewing machine operator and life-long member of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union had put in a standing order with a Yiddish bookstore for every new poetry title published anywhere in the world, and for any book or journal about Yiddish verse. He had made weekly pilgrimages to the bookstores, and on Saturdays, with what feels very much like transferred religious awe, he had spent the mornings reading, decorating his acquisitions, and copying his favourite poems into a private album.28

Fishstein has the opportunity to be involved in the publication of a book as well. In 1966 his landsmanshaft put out a memorial book for their town, Sefer Kalarash [The book of Kalarash] (Tel Aviv, 1966). He treated this book with the same respect as his poetry collection, making his own copy of it a unique dust cover.

As Fishstein’s story illustrates, readers who were themselves not literary writers could still contribute to literary culture in various ways. Although he aided in the publication of a yizkor book, he did not fall naturally into the role of author. Fishstein’s artisanal covers and bookmarks are another way to make a creative contribution. Each everyday person who was a

passionate reader may have had to find his or her own way to meaningfully engage with the making of culture.\textsuperscript{29}

Tony Michels has documented the emphasis placed on adult, popular education in the growth of the Yiddish-speaking socialist movement, particularly the use of a publishing arm, mass lectures, and literary evenings to promote ideological literacy among those who may not have achieved high levels of education in either Eastern Europe or America.\textsuperscript{30} Basic literacy was high among Jews, which meant that print could effectively be used to create a more informed citizenry. Oral histories attest to the success of this endeavor: one recent interviewee in the Yiddish Book Center’s oral history project emphasized his working-class parents’ habit of reading intellectually demanding literature.\textsuperscript{31}

There was also a relatively high rate of female literacy in Yiddish. The reasons for these numbers are complex. Unlike Christian religious practice, in which only clergy need direct access to scripture, in Jewish religious tradition every community, no matter how small, required ten adult males to be able to read prayers and conduct services. This meant that basic literacy was spread through the population and included at times quite poor families. Although Hebrew literacy was not binding on women (indeed, women were often stringently excluded from religious study), the value of reading was unquestionable. In addition, any family which could afford to give a male child more religious education would

\textsuperscript{29} In 1981, Fishstein’s collection was given to McGill University, where it is available to researchers.

\textsuperscript{30} Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 2005. “Literary evenings” were performances or readings by poets or other writers, sometimes in tandem with musical performances.

\textsuperscript{31} Marvin Zuckerman, We Had World Literature in Yiddish in Our Apartment, http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/video/we-had-world-literature-yiddish-our-apartment.
do so, leaving practical concerns to girls. As Jews were not largely agrarian, their means of earning a living often required basic literacy. “Women were often permitted to study foreign languages, including the languages of the surrounding populations, so they could tend the family store or conduct other business with non-Jews while the men studied.”

Since at least the Renaissance, there was also a smaller number of women, usually drawn from the financial or religious elite, who were able to read Hebrew and to understand and interpret religious works directly. Russian census numbers at the end of the 19th century suggest at least 65% of men and 36% of women were literate in a non-Russian language (by default, this means Yiddish).

Further, Iris Parush suggests that while women attended school in lower numbers than men (only 50% of women compared to about 81% of men), men’s religious education made a majority of them functionally illiterate in any language but Yiddish (they could sound out Hebrew without understanding it, and were taught no Russian at all), while 100% of women who did receive an education were functionally literate in Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian.

Because of the high levels of literacy among Jewish populations, reading and book culture could be used in the Jewish struggle to become modern. As Western political and

32 Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, 2009, 79.


34 Stein, *Making Jews Modern*, 2004, 28. Stein considers these numbers to be far too low due to a Russian official practice of excluding certain Jews from the count. Ibid., 226f25.

intellectual ideas filtered through Eastern European Jewish centres, libraries emerged as a central organization for the involvement of Jews in civic life. Jews used both Russian public libraries, when they held materials of interest to them and in languages they preferred to read in, and created free-standing Jewish libraries, particularly in the decades leading up to the First World War.\textsuperscript{36} Again, women were able to access these resources in numbers similar to men. A 1907 survey of Russian Jewish lending libraries shows 42\% of members were women.\textsuperscript{37} In some locations, women made up a majority of library users, indicating that literate Jewish women used libraries at a greater rate than literate Jewish men.\textsuperscript{38}

In North America, reading circles became a staple of Yiddish cultural life. Many were gender-mixed, but circles specifically for women readers also were common, beginning as early as 1911. They flourished in the 1920s and 30s, giving rise to a super-structure in the form of local “councils of reading circles,” sharing reading lists and other resources.\textsuperscript{39} The first group to organize in Winnipeg emerged in 1914 from women active in founding the Peretz School.\textsuperscript{40} Individual groups were often associated with a particular political or educational stream, but all were secular in their orientation and read literature in Yiddish with Jewish content. Hagit Cohen posits that “members of the reading groups expressed

\textsuperscript{36} Veidlinger, \textit{Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire}, 2009, 28–29.


\textsuperscript{38} Veidlinger, \textit{Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire}, 2009, 55–56.

\textsuperscript{39} Hagit Cohen, “The Demands of Integration - the Challenges of Ethnicization: Jewish Women’s Yiddish Reading Circles in North America between the Two World Wars,” \textit{Nashim} 16 (2008): 117. Ironically, most of the groups’ reading material was by male authors; those that took the names of Yiddish authors almost invariably chose male authors (there was a Malka Lee circle in Detroit).

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 113.
their Jewishness not through religious activity but through the secular study of Yiddish literature and Jewish history.”41 The fulfillment of this emotional need may explain why these groups have lasted so long.42

In addition to reading material, scholarly efforts were needed to create the framework for study of Jewish life. YIVO,43 the most important Yiddish-based scholarly organization, was founded in 1925 in Vilna (now Vilnius), Lithuania, as a central clearing house for all manner of research on Yiddish-speaking Jewry: linguistic, demographic, folkloric, historical, and literary resources were both accrued and created by its academic staff. YIVO’s ethic was purposefully populist and collaborative. In the words of historian Daniel Soyer, “Implicit in YIVO’s mission was the belief that the Jewish masses not only needed the fruits of high-level scholarship, but would also appreciate them.”44

The gathering of first-person testimonials for use as a scholarly resource became an avid interest of the leadership of YIVO. Among the ways Jews interacted with modernity was through the writing of autobiographical texts. Like virtually all autobiography, Jewish autobiography has tended to tell the story of a personal struggle to fashion the self in a changing world. Memoirs of the move from tradition to modernity, from old world to new, 

41 Ibid., 103.

42 One Winnipeg group, the “Women’s Yiddish Reading Circle” still meets under the aegis of a Jewish seniors agency. This group now reads primarily women authors. I attended a meeting of the group in June 2012.

43 The name YIVO is an acronym for the organization’s full Yiddish name, Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut. This is now usually translated as “Institute for Jewish Research,” although in earlier times it was called in English “Yiddish Scientific Institute.” Although the word “Yidish” can be translated as either “Jewish” or “Yiddish,” in this case it refers to the organization’s mission to research both the Yiddish language and the culture of Yiddish-speaking Jews.

and from an ancient form of belief (religion) to a new one (Zionism, Communism, or another radical political movement) abound, particularly in English and Yiddish. To this critical mass of autobiography, women’s stories add the dimension of struggling against patriarchal control (often no less after the embrace of modernity than before it), and expose the particular difficulty of women expressing their self-constructed identities in cultures where they must first assert that women have such a self to fashion.

Such “everyday person” memoirs exist on a continuum of autobiographical Yiddish writings that range from literary productions to informal family documents. From the beginning of modern Yiddish literature, it was common for Yiddish writers to produce memoirs, autobiographical novels, and stories, often serialized in the popular press. After the rise of Yiddish theatre, famous and flamboyant theatre personalities wrote tell-all, sometimes scandalous, autobiographies. After their divorce, both Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky wrote memoirs (in 1916 and 1937, respectively); Boris not only needed the money in the waning years of the Yiddish theatre, but didn’t wish Bessie to have the last word. Ab Cahan, the bombastic editor of the Forverts [Forward], New York’s most enduring—and to many, infuriating—Yiddish newspaper, published his autobiography over five years, 1926-1931, in five massive, tedious volumes.

But autobiography as a literary form in its own right began to emerge. Indeed, a writer such as Daniel Charney was initially considered a poet and children’s writer, but in the 1930s, while still in his 40s, he began publishing his memoirs, diaries, and letters.

45 They both called their books, Mayn lebns-geshikhte [My Life History], as if even the title had to be fought over. My friend Pearl Sapoznik, who read the two Thomashefsky memoirs back-to-back, told me, “They agree that they met.” After that, apparently, there were few points of agreement between the two versions of events.
Eventually seven volumes of these works were produced from the serialized versions, dwarfing his other output: he is remembered primarily as a memoirist. Nor was this form only available to those who were seasoned writers. Autobiography came to form part of the Yiddish vision of modernity, one in which everyone was implicated. As Marcus Moseley has noted in his survey of the Jewish autobiographical landscape, the sheer number of autobiographical productions in Yiddish is staggering. A larger number of women, people of varying classes and professions, and writers from across the ideological spectrum are reflected in Yiddish autobiographies than in Hebrew. The democratizing influence of Yiddish culture extended in such a way as to enable “men and women who were neither writers, nor necessarily persons of cultural standing, to assign their life-histories to writing. Hence there is a far higher proportion in Yiddish than in Hebrew of autobiographers whose only published work was their autobiography.”

As this characterization notes, memoir was open to women, though they wrote in nothing close to the numbers that men did, and none appear to have written seven, or even five, volumes of autobiography. The first published memoir by a woman in Yiddish was the Zikhroynes [Memoirs] of Gluckel of Hameln, an 18th century family document published in 1896 in Germany: however, the text is written in Western Yiddish. This Yiddish was

46 Marcus Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006), 478. That this magisterial text should only lightly touch on Yiddish is telling. Although the book runs to 650 pages, the author only skims the surface of Yiddish autobiography—presumably to go deeper would require another 650 pages. He does, however, make an excellent observation on the debt of virtually all Yiddish autobiography to Maimon, via one of the earliest modern Yiddish texts, Linetsky’s *Dos Poylishe yingl* [The Polish boy]. Ibid., 499-500n93.

significantly different from that spoken by the Eastern European masses, and the book began to be noticed by the Yiddish intelligentsia only in the 1920s. Its influence was great, but this did not immediately translate into a flood of memoirs written by women. Indeed, none of the major women writers of the time appear to have published memoirs. Neither poets Anna Margolin nor Celia Dropkin, nor even a shund writer such as Miriam Karpilove, produced any memoirs. Fradel Shtok and Yente Serdatski, among the earliest modern women writers in Yiddish, produced a very small published oeuvre that did not include memoirs. Several women theatrical figures did produce life writings around this time. In addition to Bessie Thomashefsky’s 1916 autobiography, Bertha Kalish wrote memoirs, titled “Fun mayn lebn” [From my life] which were serialized in the Tog [Day], New York’s highbrow Yiddish daily, during 1925, but these were never produced as a book. In 1927, shortly after the death of Esther-Rokhl Kaminska, her letters were collected and published. Books from other languages translated into Yiddish were also influential in Yiddish culture, and in 1922 Rosa Luxemburg’s prison letters were published in Yiddish translation. Yet despite this not very large corpus, it seems Yiddish literary culture was open to the idea of female memoirs.

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48 Shund is crowd-pleasing, low-brow culture. Yiddish theatre embraced popular romances and tearjerkers that provided a steady income, and mainstream publishers likewise produced chapbooks or novels that would sell well to underwrite serious literature. In recent years this work has been viewed with more critical interest than previously. Karpilove wrote sensational stories about free love and sexuality between 1911 and 1937. Ellen Kellman, “Miriam Karpilove,” Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia (Jewish Women’s Archive, March 1, 2009), http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/karpilove-miriam.

49 As Anita Norich has discussed, at times this openness was a kind of ghetto. Fiction writer Esther Kreitman, whose brothers I.B. and I.J. Singer are among the most celebrated Yiddish writers, chose to write an autobiographical novel, rather than an autobiography, perhaps as a way of kicking against the cage. “Consigning women to the epistolary or to diaries is another familiar mode of dismissing them from the ranks of serious writers, relegating them to genres considered more personal, fragmented, less public, and less mediated.” Anita Norich, “Afterword,” in Deborah (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), 302. “By choosing fiction rather
The onset of the Second World War increased the pace of autobiographical writing in Yiddish. The writer Y.Y. Trunk, who escaped to New York via Siberia and Japan in 1941, immediately began writing his memoirs, producing seven volumes over the next decade.\(^{50}\) Trunk produced memoirs that did not touch on the Holocaust, but which recognized the need to begin articulating the losses that were now inescapable. In 1942, just as YIVO was holding its autobiography contest, the American short story writer Dora Shulner published her memoir *Azoy hot es pasirt, 1905-1922* [That’s what happened, 1905-1922] in Chicago with the help of the Ladies' Auxiliary of her landmanshaft organization. Trunk and Shulner may have been participating in what one scholar has dubbed a “‘talking cure’ for American Jewish ambivalence.”\(^{51}\)

Through a series of lucky events, YIVO was able to reconstitute itself in New York not long after the outbreak of the war.\(^{52}\) Max Weinreich, YIVO's driving force and chief theoretician, was concerned with how American Jewry could heal the rift between the Jewish immediate past and its present, and this was one of the concerns that led to the


\(^{52}\) The story of YIVO’s rebirth in America, and other even more astonishing feats of intellectual courage, is best found in Cecile Kuznitz’s doctoral dissertation and the resulting book, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
creation of an autobiography contest in 1942. The contest asked immigrants to North America to describe their childhoods, immigration, and achievements in the New World. By revisiting a past which had very suddenly come to seem impossibly unlike their contemporary situation, recalling a place that had nurtured Jewish life for centuries but was now literally inaccessible to the Jews in North America, the autobiography writers, no less than professional writers such as Trunk and Shulner, could begin the act of searching their past for images and meaning that could sustain them. The phrasing of the contest, combining the experiences of old and new world in a narrative of “achievement,” encouraged the integration of pre- and post-immigration experiences into a new, positive identity.\textsuperscript{53} The YIVO contest was not entirely unique. Yiddish speakers in the United States were deeply concerned with the situation of the Jews still in Europe. Anita Norich has identified literally hundreds of poems, novels, essays, manifestos, and newspaper debates that speak to the engagement of Yiddish cultural figures with the events of the war and Holocaust as they unfolded.\textsuperscript{54}

Writing by men certainly outnumbered that by women. There may have been a few other women’s memoirs published and available by the time the 1942 contest occurred, but it is clear that this body of material, though growing, was still fragmentary. YIVO’s collection of forty-seven autobiographies from female entrants was a significant addition to

\textsuperscript{53} Krah, \textit{YIVO, Freud, and American Jewry: Discourse on Eastern Europe as a “Talking Cure” for American Jewish Ambivalence}.

the available material, and indicates an emerging consciousness among women of the importance of their stories, and confidence in their ability to tell them.  

Yiddish writers still living in most parts of Eastern Europe had to wait until after the war, if they survived, to be able to recount their stories: the remarkable Warsaw ghetto leader Rachel Auerbach began this project with essays in journals in April 1945. During the war, the one place where Yiddish publishing was still possible was in unoccupied Soviet territory. In Moscow, the official Soviet Yiddish newspaper Der emes [Truth] had a book publishing arm which actively produced new and classic works of Yiddish literature and non-fiction. In 1943, Der emes published a chapbook by Soviet short story writer and literary critic Rivka Rubin, called Yidishe froyen: fartseykhenungen [Jewish women: portraits]. These stories appear to be a mix of memoir and fiction, with the distinction not clearly spelled out; but the book's appearance does seem to signal an interest in the life stories of Jewish women.

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55 As Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer note, some of the women who entered the contest were only marginally literate in any language, yet undertook the onerous task of writing their stories—and one such woman was among the contest prize winners. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer, “Introduction: Yiddish Social Science and Jewish Immigrant Autobiography,” in My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 9–10. However, she was the only female among 25 prize-winners, in spite of about 20% of the entries coming from women. Soyer speculates that men’s experiences of political and business involvement was more heavily valued by organizers than the experiences more commonly had by women. Daniel Soyer, “Documenting Immigrant Lives at an Immigrant Institution: Yivo’s Autobiography Contest of 1942,” Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society 5, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 1999): 235.


57 Following the war, Der emes published a number of survivor memoirs, but even during the war it produced books that already sought to reflect on and respond to the unfolding events. A 1943 book of short stories is called Libe in fayer: front-dertseylungen [Love in fire: stories of the front]; a 1943 book of poems is called Fun shlakht-feld [From the killing fields]; a 1941 non-fiction title is Untern yokh fun di fashitishe farkhaper [Under the yoke of the Fascist occupiers]. This real-time war- and Holocaust-related literary output has not yet been fully explored.

58 This is not unusual in Yiddish literature. Many writers interspersed short memoirs in their books of fiction, without making a genre distinction between them. Another Soviet woman writer, Shira Gorshman, also produced
As World War II drew to a close, the work of memorializing what had been lost began. In 1945, the children of Hinde Bergner, the Montreal Yiddish writers Melekh Ravitch and Hertz Bergner, posthumously published her memoir, *In lange vinter-nekht* [On long winter nights]. These were written and sent from her, still in Europe, to them in Montreal during the late 1930s. The same year, Marc Chagall arranged the publication of his late wife’s first volume of memoirs, *Brenendike likht* [Burning lights]. Although Bella Chagall had died in New York and not as a result of the war or Holocaust, the world she described was of the Eastern European Jewish homeland before its almost complete destruction. A second volume of her memoirs appeared in 1947. In some way, these immediate post-Holocaust memoirs filled the void until survivors could begin writing and publishing their own memoirs. Although these memoirs did not include the war years themselves, they evoked the pre-war world and allowed for the first mourning rituals to occur.

In the years immediately following the war, the first Holocaust memoirs began to appear, a number of them by women. Holocaust memoirs soon took over as the dominant form of Yiddish memoir, but other kinds of memoirs were also published: several more memoirs by actors such as Chayele Grober and Celia Adler; Puah Rakovsky’s autobiography of radicalization and emigration to Palestine; poet Malka Lee’s memoir of her Hasidic upbringing in Eastern Galicia; and poet/playwright Rose Shomer Bachelis’ portraits of the famous people she had known through her father, the *shund* novelist and playwright

memories interspersed with her fiction, and never wrote a coherent life account. Her fragmentary memoirs are nonetheless among the few first-person Yiddish sources by women who stayed in Europe well past the War. One Soviet woman who did produce a memoir was Manya Landman, whose memoir *Tsvishn Yidishe shrayber: zikhroynes fun a mashinistke* [Among Yiddish writers: memories of a woman machinist] was published in 1982 as a supplement to the Soviet literary journal *Sovetish heymland* [Soviet homeland].
Shomer.⁵⁹ Although not a major publication, one Canadian woman’s book to appear in these years was Hannah Viderman’s *Umetike shmeykhl* [Sad smile, 1946]. Viderman was a Montreal journalist at Canada’s major Yiddish newspaper, *Der Kanader odler* [The Canadian eagle].⁶⁰ *Umetike shmeykhl* contains a mix of memoirs, letters, feuilletons, and other short pieces.⁶¹ Viderman wrote a more traditional autobiography in 1960. Another Canadian Jewish woman from the West published an English-language memoir in 1960 as well: Clara Hoffer, a member of one of the most significant Jewish farming families.⁶² Local men were also producing autobiographies: Falik Zolf’s 1942 contest entry came out in book form in 1945 (weighing in at more than five hundred printed pages). Clearly, Canadian Jews were as invested in the autobiographical moment as the rest of the Jewish world.

One person who took part in this movement was Esther Shechter.⁶³ Shechter was born Esther Margulies in 1867 in Mezhbish, Ukraine, to a Maskilic, Yiddish-speaking family. Until the age of fourteen she was educated on the same basis as her younger brothers. When her father died, her education came to a halt, and she fought with her mother and

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⁵⁹ A (probably incomplete) list of Yiddish-language memoirs by women appears in Appendix B. One outlier is a cancer patient’s autobiography written in 1954 under the pseudonym “Bas-Khayim” or “Daughter of life.” This kind of memoir was not common even in English until much later.


⁶¹ In 1966, Yiddish poet Aliza Greenblatt wrote a similarly multi-textual “autobiography,” which included letters from her husband, poems, and other paratexts that make the form less straightforward and less connected to the investigation of a single, unified self. For a full discussion of Greenblatt’s text, see Susanne A. Shavelson, “Anxieties of Authorship in the Autobiographies of Mary Antin and Aliza Greenblatt,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 18, no. 2 (May 1998): 161–86.

⁶² Clara Hoffer, *Land of Hope*, Prairie Books (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1960). This work first appeared serialized in the *Western Producer*.

⁶³ I am using the most common English spelling of Shechter’s name, which she used on the English copyright notice in her book. Other spellings include Schechter, Shector, Schachter, and Shekhter and are reflected in city directories and on official documents. In Yiddish her name is always spelled שעכטער.
grandparents over this issue. Three years later she was able to go to Odessa on the pretext of being ill and needing to take the waters: in fact she enrolled in a midwifery course in a free educational institute. After six months, her family became suspicious and she was forced to return to Mezhbish. She met and quickly married a young man with whom she planned to go to America, but his family was against this and the couple never were able to emigrate. Her husband would not allow her to continue to study (a married woman needed her husband’s permission to enroll in education), although he himself struggled to support them. The couple lived on her dowry and moved frequently, trying to find a place where they could be self-supporting. The marriage was extremely unhappy. They had four children. Eventually, they settled in Odessa, where Shechter managed a print shop, and her husband worked as their travelling salesman. The cultural opportunities in Odessa appealed to Shechter, who was an avid reader of Yiddish, particularly newspapers and literary journals. Her marriage eventually broke down, and by 1901 they were divorced and Shechter had re-married.

Soon after their marriage, Shechter’s second husband was conscripted for duty in the Russo-Japanese War. In order to avoid service, he fled over the border into Galicia, and joined a Jewish Colonization Association group leaving for Canada. Shechter made arrangements to sneak out of the country herself (she could not get a passport because of her husband’s army desertion). She took with her three children from her first marriage, plus a new baby. She arrived with the children to join her husband in Winnipeg in 1905.

64 It was not unusual for women to be printers and proprietors of print shops. Moss, “Printing and Publishing: Printing and Publishing after 1800,” 2010.
The marriage was happy and they had one more child together before her husband died unexpectedly in 1910. Shechter struggled to support herself and her children, taking a series of sewing and sales jobs. In spite of these struggles, Shechter continued as an active participant in Winnipeg’s North End Yiddish-speaking community. She was active in the Yiddish secular school movement, in a left-Zionist organization, and remained a dedicated consumer of Yiddish culture. In 1942 she answered YIVO’s call for immigrant autobiographies. In 1951, she collected this memoir along with other brief writings, and published them as her book, Di geshikhte fun mayn lebn [My life story]. She died in 1953 at the age of 86.

Shechter arrived in Winnipeg during the first large wave of Jewish immigration to Western Canada. Shechter was involved in secular Yiddish culture in a variety of ways: as a voracious reader of Yiddish newspapers and books; as a supporter of Yiddish education and a foot-soldier in local educational endeavors; and as a regular attendee of lectures, concerts, reading groups, and libraries. Because of these activities, she was aware of the autobiographical moment emerging in Yiddish culture. She read Daniel Charney’s memoirs serialized in the press, and likely also read Menahem Boraisha’s two-volume autobiography in book form. By writing her memoir, Shechter participated in the culture that mattered to her.

Shechter, who was not otherwise a writer, produced a text which is blunt, lacking in stylistic flourish, and in places disarmingly unpleasant. This text is both utterly of its time,

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65 Shechter read at least some of these memoirs in serialization, and likely read Menahem Boraisha’s two-volume autobiography in book form. Esther Shechter, Di geshikhte fun mayn lebn (Winnipeg, 1951), 52; Draysik yor I. L. Perets shul [Thirty years of the I.L. Peretz school] (Winnipeg: [I. L. Peretz School], 1944), 90.
in keeping with the autobiographical moment that was unfolding around her, and unique in its tone and content. Shechter’s memoir arises from the central phenomena of contemporary Yiddish culture: the move to secularism, the immigrant experience, the frictions of assimilation. It tells the story of the quest for a modern education and radical engagement with political and social life; of the destabilizing forces of immigration, poverty, and hardship; and of the embrace of secular Yiddish culture existing in uneasy relationship with assimilation and Canadianization.

The format of the 1942 contest was laid out and advertised in this way. Writers were to be adult Jews not born in the United States or Canada. They were to write on the theme “Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America.” They were to submit a minimum of 25 pages, signed with a pseudonym, and to enclose their name in a separate envelope. The call for entries specified:

The essays should be detailed, precise, and true.
Detailed: describe each item in all its particulars. Don’t think that “minutiae” is not important. Of course, clichés about “difficult situations” and “how hard life is” are of little interest.
Precise: Don’t go on and on. Don’t use flowery language.
True: You must not tell tall tales in the hopes of making your story “more interesting.” But at the same time, you shouldn’t hesitate to tell your true experiences.66

The call suggested that a chronological narrative would be the simplest for writers (although they were free to choose otherwise), and suggested a long list of items that could

66 “A konkurs af oytobiografyes fun imigrantn” [An autobiography contest for immigrants], YIVO bleter 19, no. 2 (1942): 281–82. The complete call for entries is translated in Appendix A.
be covered, including life-cycle events, relationships between different generations, and the current status of their family and professional life.

Notwithstanding the specificity of instructions, many entrants did not follow all or indeed any of them. Shechter’s memoir, for example, is shorter than the assigned length. Like many others, Shechter interpreted the list of suggested topics to allow her great latitude in what she wrote about. She offers more pages on her childhood and young adulthood in Ukraine than she does on her immigration and life in Canada, the ostensible focus of the essay. (She did, however, remember to give herself a pseudonym). YIVO scholars despaired of the inability of many entrants to follow instructions.67 In many other respects, however, the autobiography contest exceeded the organizers’ expectations. Two hundred and twenty-three autobiographies were submitted, of which forty-seven were by women. The geographic range included entrants living in the US, Canada, Mexico, Argentina and Cuba, and hailing originally from all parts of Eastern Europe, as well as Germany and Palestine. Most of the writers were between 51 and 70: Shechter was 75. Twelve autobiographies were submitted from Canada. Of these, four came from Winnipeg, three from Montreal, two from Toronto, two from Edmonton, and one from Port Arthur, Ontario (now Thunder Bay).68 Two of the Canadian entrants were also minor Yiddish writers (Elhanen Hanson of Edmonton and Falik Zolf of Winnipeg). Two were women: Shechter and Miriam Rosen of Toronto. Two of the submissions, Shechter’s and Zolf’s, were later


68 The over-representation of Winnipeg in this sample is probably a result of the hyper-literate character of this community. See my essay, “‘Everybody Comes to the Store’: People’s Book Store as Third Place, 1910–1920,” Canadian Jewish Studies/Etudes Juives Canadiennes 18–19 (2011–2010): 95–119.
published in book form (although they could not be more different. Zolf’s manuscript is over 600 pages long).  

The presence of many women and their inclusion of an older demographic are significant. As Daniel Soyer, the most persistent researcher of the YIVO 1942 autobiography collection, has pointed out, these documents are some of the few first person accounts extant written by immigrant women that include women who arrived as adults. These women were not necessarily able to express themselves fluently in English, which may account for the dearth of evidence we have of them. For example, many community oral history projects were undertaken when the interviewers were non-Yiddish speaking second or third generation Jews and could not adequately interview Yiddish-speaking women. Published autobiographies tended to focus on the experience of those who arrived as children or who were the American-born children of immigrants. By contrast, Shechter, like fifteen of the other women who submitted autobiographies, was already in middle age when she arrived in North America, and was already married and taking care of children. “These women […] were not as conspicuous in the public sphere as were young, unmarried women.” But while Shechter can be placed in the same

69 General statistics on the YIVO contest are from Cohen and Soyer, “Introduction: Yiddish Social Science and Jewish Immigrant Autobiography,” 2006. The Canadian statistics I was able to ascertain from the Record Group 102 Finding Aid in the YIVO Archives. However, there are some cases where pseudonyms are used throughout the documentation, and other cases where real names are used. Therefore, there is a possibility that these statistics could change with more research, for example, if one of the pseudonymous authors is found to be a literary author or to have published the memoir under a different name.


demographic category as most of the other women who sent autobiographies to YIVO in the 1942 contest, she is different in several crucial respects. In general, these women’s autobiographies tend to be positive about moving to the New World, tend to find big-city life difficult to adjust to, and tend to end on the positive notes of their children’s successes and the beginnings of upwards mobility. Shechter’s story is different in all these specifics. Thus YIVO’s autobiography contest admirably succeeded in allowing different kinds of immigrant narratives to emerge.

These geo-political, historical, and cultural forces—mass Jewish immigration, the emergence of Yiddish secular culture, and the rise of autobiography as a crucial Jewish genre in the inter-war years—are the context in which I will situate Shechter’s life, and her account of it.

Chapter 2: Production of the Memoir

Given a small push to write a memoir through the contest announcement, 223 Jewish immigrants together produced over 25,000 pages of material to enrich the YIVO archives.\(^74\) The production of these memoirs no doubt varied from one entrant to the next, but it is instructive to look closely at Shechter’s process in shaping her memoir over the course of the years from answering the YIVO call in 1942 to production of the book in 1951.

YIVO’s call for immigrant autobiographies presents a series of contradictions that the entrants had to either navigate or ignore in order to complete their task. The contest announcement is almost 1,000 words long, urging writers in two separate places not to attempt high-flown literary language, yet it also urges writers to be succinct. The announcement begins with a description of the lack of first-person immigrant narratives available to researchers, saying, “the majority of immigrants, those who themselves suffered and who recreated from scratch personal lives and community institutions in the new land—they have been heard from very infrequently.”\(^75\) Later in the document, though, it informs potential writers that “cliches about ‘difficult situations’ and ‘how hard life is’ are of little interest.”\(^76\) Since most potential entrants were not practiced writers, these urgings may have been of little use in any case, but the mixed messages embedded in the announcement stand out as confounding elements. And there was a list of more than twenty potential topics to cover, almost all of them focused on family,

\(^74\) “The YIVO Contest for the Best Autobiographies of Jewish Immigrants to America,” *Newsletter of the YIVO / YIVO Yedies*, no. 1 (1943): 4.

\(^75\) “A konkurs af oytobiografyes fun imigrantn,” 1942, 281.

\(^76\) Ibid.
life cycle events, employment and financial security. There are two mentions of spiritual life, one about conduct of religion in the old country and one about how that changed in America; and only one hint at political activity, in mentioning strikes as a part of working life. “Organizations” are asked about in both old and new worlds, without linking those organizations to other questions. Secular Yiddish culture is hinted at in one topic, “Do the children know Yiddish.”

The list ends with these items: “What goals the writer has for any children still at home. What does the writer think about they and their children’s achievements in America. What life event made the greatest impression on the writer.” Perhaps unintentionally on the part of the contest framers, this sequence of topics gives the impression that achievement is linked to the events of greatest importance in the writer’s life. In all, the suggested topics are surprisingly devoid of community and political life, and focused on individual struggle and success. Surprisingly, given that the announcement specifically states the contest is open to both men and women, the list of topics does not acknowledge that forms of achievement might be different for male and female writers. Financial success appears in these topics in five different forms: women, who, then as now, earned considerably less than men, could not hope to appear anywhere near as successful as men in this regard. This in itself may have discouraged women from entering the contest.

To what extent this list influenced those who did enter is hard to say, but Esther Shechter appears to have attempted answers to some of these questions, although perhaps not in the way envisioned by YIVO’s scholars and in nothing like the detail they hoped for. Reading the

77 Ibid., 282.
78 Ibid.
memoir against the contest announcement, she appears several times to start on a path suggested by the contest topics, then moves of her own accord to areas that interest her more. Once she has exhausted this topic, she appears to return to the list, finding another idea she can tackle, then swerves gradually away from it towards her own interests.

She begins her memoir with her father, as suggested by the question about relationships with family members. Her mother is not mentioned here, but she detours significantly into her father’s religious and intellectual activities (including the numerous newspapers with which both he and later she were enamoured), and moves on to the central issue of her family experience in Ukraine: her education and its sudden end. The question of secular education is not asked or hinted at in the list of topics, much less how it might have differed for men and women. Shechter describes her quest for furthering her education, including creatively managing logistics to enable the deception of her family for some time. This compelling story ends in defeat, with her forced return to Mezhbish and a second halt in her education.

Shechter may have now returned to the list of topics, seen marriage on the list, and began the story of her unhappy first marriage. Again, this story has its own momentum, which takes the reader through the unhappiness of her married life and the tumult of those years, ending with her divorce. If Shechter then turned back to the list of topics, she would have come across the suggested topics, “How they chose to immigrate; who was upset and who helped with immigration. The debt of immigration and the trip itself.” At this point, in both manuscript and book, she added a section title, “My Immigration Years” [10], perhaps a tacit recognition that her story was not a single narrative thread from beginning to end but had discrete, anecdotal sections.
Again, the story of her own immigration takes an unexpected turn. She begins to recount her second marriage, and the decision she and her second husband made to emigrate quickly so he could avoid being drafted in the Tsar’s army at the start of the Russo-Japanese War. As her husband had to leave first, she follows his story as he makes his way to Canada and eventually begins to work and finds his footing in Winnipeg. At the time of writing in 1942, her husband had been dead for over thirty years. Yet, she recounts his stories with an assurance that speaks to years of re-telling. Given the very few years that they had together, this year of separation may have assumed something of a mythic quality in her imagination. She recounts dialogue that she was not present to hear, which she never does when recounting her own story. Writing more than thirty years after her husband’s death, weaving his own immigration narrative into hers fleshes out some of the reasons he was dear to her. She describes his willingness to do backbreaking labour, his ability to quickly find the people who could help him, his creativity in finding work, his belief in himself and his abilities. She even notes his chutzpah with pride: as soon as he found work, he hired a private tutor to learn English. Two weeks later, he knew enough English to ask for a raise, which he got [12]. This interlude reads differently from the rest of the narrative. It is more detailed than the descriptions of her own life, even noting the names of streets, businesses, and individuals, and details such as dollar amounts, in a way she does not do with any consistency in other parts of the text. For example, her husband receives help from an established Jewish immigrant who could speak English: “Mrs. Teper found him a position at the Pill Printing Co. on Market Street (in the building where the Playhouse Theatre is now), working for five dollars a week” [12].

When it comes time to recount her own story of arriving in Canada, she shows much less interest in details. Her narrative is patchy, including numerous lost opportunities to provide the
kind of specifics the YIVO organizers wanted. For example, although it must have been a traumatic event at the time, she sums up and dismisses a major illness this way: “I had a bad illness and was a whole year in hospital, but recovered and we lived happily” [14]. No other details are given.

She continues the story of her transplantation to Winnipeg, suggested perhaps by the topic “how they got themselves organized, and who helped.” But after a few paragraphs describing how she arranged education for her children and tried to learn English herself, she moves into areas entirely unmentioned by the YIVO topics: the building of community structures and institutions, relationships inside the Jewish community, and involvement in the political sphere. The creation of a Yiddish-language newspaper, in which Shechter and her husband were deeply involved, provides a bridge back to personal matters. Shortly after the newspaper starts publishing, her husband suddenly dies.

From this point on, her memoir becomes almost entirely centred on money, a topic very much in line with YIVO’s interests, though in her case not serving their purpose of demonstrating “achievement.” On the contrary, she is almost always short of cash. Shechter details closely how much money she earned; how much money she got from her husband’s life insurance; how much her children did (or didn’t) give her in her widowhood. “When my son got married, I was again left without enough to live on,” she says, in her only comment on this life event [15]. There is also the episode when another son loses his job over a strike, at the most inconvenient possible moment:

79 Ibid.
In 1920 the children wanted a larger house. I sold the cottage and bought a larger house, with the thought that the children would help me pay for it, but right after that a strike broke out at the print shop where my son worked. He was out with the strike, and when the strike was settled my son did not get his job back, because all the scabs became “shareholders.” I went to the union and asked them: where is the justice in this? Their answer was that they couldn’t help us. [16]

In this part of the memoir, these money anxieties and her responses to them take a central role, possibly standing in for the anguish of the loss of her life partner. About him, she merely says that his loss was a tragic one for herself, her children, and the community. The rest of her story is similarly foreshortened. She was forty-three when her husband died, and lived to be eighty-six: her account of the second half of her life is compressed into two and a half pages of text, mentioning very briefly her involvements in the community, her volunteer work, her letters to the editor. She does describe her children’s adult lives, mentioning their occupations, but without the emphasis on achievement sought by the contest theme. In ending her memoir she deviates completely from the YIVO script, writing rather ironically of the world she finds herself inhabiting in her eighties.

I am 84 years old, and when I total up my balance sheet, I see that I haven’t had towering good luck. I lived through tragedies, but I was always game for what came my way, and I am still happy. I remember how my grandmother couldn’t stand the way her grandchildren became so careless of religion, reading scandalous books and not wanting to read our Bibles. And I, her grandchild, 75 years later, don’t care for the world today much either, its brutality and materialism. Who knows? Maybe, maybe, my grandchildren won’t have to say the same. Let us hope so! [17]

80 The strike-breakers were allowed to keep the positions they had taken over during the strike, rather than having to return them to the striking workers who had previously held the jobs, through the ruse of calling them part-owners or investors in the company rather than employees. As owners they could bump employees from a job, circumventing any agreement that strikers get their jobs back, which was usually negotiated in the settlement to a strike.
There is no “achievement” at all in this vision: the new world’s promise has proved brutal and materialistic.

Shechter’s memoir manuscript in the YIVO archive is hand-written on twenty-five small leaves of paper. She must have copied it out for herself at the time, given the close tracking between the YIVO manuscript and the version published in her book nine years later. She also sent in a note saying she was appending two short memories of her encounters with Menachem Mendel Ussishkin and Goldfaden’s family, but these anecdotes are not in the YIVO file. She also mentions, in this appended note, that she was an early subscriber to Sholem Aleichem’s literary journal, Di Yidishe folksbiblyotek [The Jewish people’s library]. She apologizes for her bad handwriting, blaming her poor eyesight. 81 And finally, she says:

I would not have written so many unimportant things, but you wrote that every detail can be important at times. I have obeyed and wrote down every silly thing. 82

Some time after she sent in her YIVO contest entry, Shechter sent in three additional pages as a supplement to her story. These pages were sent some time after the close of the autobiography contest because, she said,

I want to add to my memoirs. I regret not having written about my family, what became of them after they left the Old Country. Heritage is the most important thing. 83

81 Her handwriting is actually relatively easy to read.

82 YIVO manuscript, RG 102, folder 55, unnumbered additional page.

83 Ibid., unnumbered page.
In this brief story, she describes her daughter’s move to New York, where she was able to find Shechter’s two brothers through the Mezhbisher landsmanschaft. Shechter then went herself to visit her brothers in New York. She summarizes their lives and work, although without giving their names or family details, and describes their joy in seeing her (she reports that they cried on seeing her, but not whether she was similarly moved). She learns from them about the loss of her third sibling, a previously-unmentioned sister, who likewise is not mentioned again. This story illustrates how entirely cut off from her family Shechter allowed herself to become, starting even before her emigration. She says in this story how many years it had been since she had seen them: the math brings it to 1896. She left Europe in 1905, but in those nine years did not visit her family, even to say goodbye.

It is likely Shechter always considered publication the logical outcome for her memoir. In a note at the end of the published work, she states:

> For a number of years I have planned this book, in which I could describe the passage of my life’s rich and varied experiences, and my small contributions to Jewish community life. It seemed to me that this could enrich the material available to the historian who is researching the stormy progress of Jewish life over the last few generations. [unnumbered page following numbered page 78]

But even as early as the contest entry, she recognized that the posited structure of her narrative did not leave room for everything of importance. There is no place in the YIVO list of topics for her encounters with famous people: thus, she writes them separately. She then continued with this practice as she prepared the book for publication. The anecdotes about Ussishkin, Goldfaden’s mother, and Sholem Aleichem all appear immediately following her memoir.

Her account of Passover preparations in her childhood home seems to have been specially written for the book. This piece is the most detailed and complete of any of her
writings, and provides just the kind of folkloric evidence and local specificity the YIVO organizers would have loved. It may be that as she became more practiced at writing her stories, she began to understand how to explore a single topic in depth. Other material in the book was drawn from previously-published items she had written for the *Yidishe vort*. These include four travelogues relating her trips to New York and Los Angeles, a large number of letters to the editor, and brief personal remembrances she had written of community members who had died. Most of these items have little lasting historical importance in themselves. Instead, they illustrate Shechter’s concerns, her activism (particularly around education, but also in the political realm), and the way she functioned inside the community that she helped build. Her connections to culture and politics, and to the social institutions that make up the fabric of the North End, are all evoked through the way she weighs in on controversies and feuds. Shechter creates a seamless North End experience, much like the one she, as an immigrant not totally comfortable in English, took part in nurturing. She allows us to hear her voice, particularly in the letters to the editor, in which her natural argumentativeness is given free rein, yet she also tells the story of a growing community and the changes in Jewish life over the formative years of the Canadian community. These texts move the reader from the individual out in concentric circles to the Jewish body politic. (And stops there. Non-Jewish issues barely register anywhere in her writing).

The strangest editorial choice she makes is to include in her book several pages not written by her but about her. In a section entitled “My 80th Birthday Celebration,” she reprints an editorial from the *Yidishe vort* congratulating her on this milestone; announcements of the public celebrations that were to be held in her honour; and greetings from individuals and organizations. There is also a squib not from the *Yidishe vort*, but from New York’s *Tog*, written by the
influential Ben Zion Goldberg, apparently written on a trip to Winnipeg, in which Shechter is described but not named:

Winnipeg is a city of beautiful girls and young grandmothers. If I were a New York matchmaker, I would arrange special excursions of unmarried men to Winnipeg. And a married woman who might seem to us of an age to consider whether to start having children, will turn out to be a grandmother. You speak with a woman and think: She looks very young considering she’s forty! Soon she’ll be telling you that her son is twenty-eight and her grandchild is about to start school. Here in Winnipeg there is perhaps the oldest Yiddish woman reader in America. She was among the first subscribers to Sholem Aleichem’s Folksbiblyotek in 1883. To this day she goes around selling tickets to literary events. In St. Augustine, Florida, someone showed me the eternal fountain of youth. I drank from it and nothing happened. I’m afraid that the fountain made its way to Winnipeg—and the women know how to drink from it. [20]

These are followed by her own responses and thanks to her well-wishers. She includes in these thanks her own wishes that her friends should themselves live to a ripe old age, in good health, surrounded by family, and useful to the community, and that they should live to see the Jewish people equal with all others. She advises them that she was able to participate in organizations and events, in spite of working many jobs and raising her children alone, because she didn’t waste time playing cards, trying to find the latest fashions, or talking on the telephone. She also notes that the celebrations of her birthday show that honour does not depend on wealth, and in keeping with that she thanks the women of the community who work for the greater good [24-25]. These added materials may be Shechter’s way of describing her position in the community. Although she was never more than grassroots participant she became, through her level of involvement and the many decades she continued to be active, an important symbolic figure. Reaching her late 80s in the post-War world, she harkened back to all that was lost. However, she was also a relic of Winnipeg’s history and a reminder of the hardy stock of Jewish
settlers that built the foundations for later generations. Her continuing involvement in Jewish life as an elderly person adds an inspirational tone to these messages.

In preparing her material for publication, Shechter retained her original manuscript almost unchanged. If indeed she consulted the list of topics suggested by YIVO, this may explain why she chose to leave her 1942 manuscript essentially the same for her book, rather than re-writing it to include the intervening years. She may have felt the memoir was internally consistent, offering the kind of narrative scholars approved of and that supported Jewish efforts to understand their own history. There is no evidence of re-working, no material moved from one spot to another in the text, although there are some obvious places where this might have been done. She did not even update information: in the memoir she declares herself to be volunteering in the classroom of Rivke Golomb, which was true at the time of the YIVO contest in 1942. By the time of the book’s publication in 1951, the Golombs were in Mexico. She did update her age in the final paragraph of the memoir, from 75 to 84. A professional, or even a more practiced writer, would likely have revised and smoothed out inconsistencies. Shechter did not find this necessary.

However, she did understand the need for professional guidance regarding publication, and for this she turned to a friend and colleague at the Yidishe vort, Mitchell Nitikman. Nitikman was the long-time typesetter and copy editor, and himself wrote short, humourous memoiristic pieces about his home town in Ukraine.84 He was in a good position to understand Shechter’s linguistic and stylistic questions. Shechter spoke a dialect sometimes called the “Yiddish Cockney,” in which speakers drop the “h” sound at the beginning of some words, but add it to

84 Fox, Hundert yor Yidishe un Hebreishe literatur in Kanade, 175.
the start of others. In spite of Shechter’s extensive education, her manuscript is written in her dialect: she spells words according to her pronunciation rather than in their standard spelling.\textsuperscript{85} She also divides compound words and joins together other words that are not compounds. All these dialect and non-standard features are regularized in the published text.\textsuperscript{86}

Nitikman was also instrumental in a few other ways. Using only minor interventions, he aided in smoothing transitions between the disparate sections of the YIVO text. In several cases, he found a good, solid ending to a story, and added ellipses at the end, making a bridge to the next section. When Shechter is forced to return to Mezhbish after attempting to pursue education in Odessa, her manuscript reads:

\begin{quote}
I had to return to Mezhbish. But the great, wide world had already called to me. But I didn’t have the opportunity to remain with culture and literature. In 1886 there started to be Russian teachers in Mezhbish. Both men and women started having a secular education. I soon found a library where they got Russian Hebrew newspapers and journals.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

The book reads:

\begin{quote}
And so I had to return to Mezhbish. But the great, wide world had already called to me… By 1886 young intellectuals in Mezhbizh had founded a library where you could find Russian and Hebrew newspapers and journals. [8-9, ellipsis in original]
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{85} As standard written Yiddish was not codified until 1925, fifty years after Shechter was learning to write in Yiddish, this is hardly surprising.

\textsuperscript{86} The \textit{Yidishe vort} had a generally high standard of editing and appears to have been aware of the developing consensus around a language standard even before 1925. Nitikman was able to bring her writing to a modern orthographic standard.

\textsuperscript{87} YIVO manuscript, RG 102, folder 55, 7-8.
Later, at the point in the narrative where Shechter’s first marriage is breaking down, she describes the fights she had with her husband over her print shop. She helps some young Bundists by buying type for their illegal print shop under the cover of her own legal business. Her husband was very opposed to this. In the manuscript Shechter continues this way:

Through a miracle we were divorced. My husband had a friend who was well-known, his name was Krutsman. He [Krutsman] convinced him [my husband] that without me, he could do as he wished. Through Krutsman people used to be able to get fake passports, documents, and even rabbinical ordination papers. That was how he made his living. We got divorced and I took the four children with me.  

As delightful as these details are, with the passport-falsifying no-goodnik who leads her husband astray, thereby unwittingly aiding Shechter enormously by delivering her divorce, it detracts from the drama of the moment. Nitikman cut out this interesting but attention-diverting digression. After describing the conflict over her type shop, in the book Shechter merely says:

It came to the point where we had to get a divorce… [10, ellipsis in original]

Small changes like these show how careful Nitikman was in changing Shechter’s story. He relied on solutions he found within the text itself, only pruning gently in places where the manuscript is unfocussed. There is only one spot where a heavier hand is seen. This occurs in the story of her immigration. As mentioned earlier, she begins to tell the story of her immigration by describing her second husband’s need to leave the country to avoid conscription. From there she

88 Ibid., 11.
follows her husband, rather than herself, as he works his way to Canada and gets settled. Only then does she switch over to her own emigration and arrival in Canada. This is the manuscript version:

Later my husband became foreman of that same print shop. In August 1905 the children and I arrived in Winnipeg. It was very difficult for me to leave behind the cultural circles of Odessa, where I had a wide acquaintance among intellectuals. 89

The published version looks like this:

Little by little my husband’s situation improved. Later he became the foreman of that same print shop, and he worked there until the last day of his life.

I couldn’t travel with the children because I couldn’t get a passport since my husband had left illegally, and sneaking across the border with five children was completely impossible. I stole across the border to Volotshisk with my youngest child. This was not a great difficulty because I had a lot of family on my father’s side in Volotshisk. A year later three more of my children were brought to me. One twelve-year-old boy my first husband kept, in order to punish me. His own sister, Clara Waisman, helped greatly in bringing the other children to me. It was very hard for me to leave behind the cultural circles of Odessa, where I had a wide acquaintance among intellectuals. [12]

It seems likely that Nitikman motivated this expansion. He gracefully closed off the husband’s immigration story, and perhaps asked Shechter to supply the story of how she then left and came to Canada. While we don’t hear anything about the actual voyage to Canada, the story we do hear is extraordinary. The specifics of how one crosses borders with children using a network of family to shelter and arrange passage are riveting details. Even more so is the revelation of a son

89 Ibid., 16.
left behind, of whom nothing is heard again. Finally, the small detail of her former sister-in-law’s assistance offers a rare glimpse into this kind of solidarity between women during the turbulence of immigration.

In all, Nitikman’s contribution to the book appears to have been positive. Without changing any of Shechter’s stances, softening her tone, or moderating her distinctive voice, he did find ways to help her storytelling become more skillful. It is likely that he performed his editorial duties without charge as a favour to a respected community member. Like Shechter, who undertook to write her memoir for purposes of building Jewish historical consciousness, Nitikman may have seen his role as a typesetter, editor, and writer of Yiddish words as a social investment. In her author’s note, Shechter thanks the publisher and editor of the Yidishe vort, who presumably typeset and printed the book at a very reduced price, and gives a special mention to Nitikman, for editing and choosing the material in the book.

The book’s final shape is also influenced by choices Shechter made about framing the central texts with paratexts that convey specific messages. At the front of the book she reproduces her citation of merit from the YIVO contest. This citation was awarded, in the end, to every entrant. The YIVO organizers, impressed with the overall quality of the autobiographies, decided to award this citation across the board.90 This citation is certainly a source of pride: it declares, among other things, that Shechter’s autobiography “conveys material important to the history of the Jews in current times,” thus perfectly according with her own vision. It also serves to connect Shechter, in Winnipeg, with the transnational Yiddish intellectual and cultural life that sustained her throughout her life.

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Further framing is offered by the dedication, which reads, “An inheritance for my children.” The page that follows this dedication is an extra page, bearing the title “From my father’s will,” and the text:

“A person’s health is his greatest possession”  
My father died in 1881, at the age of 36, after a long illness.  
I was a 14-year-old child.  
When my father was about to die, he gathered his children around him and said,  
“with all my furs in the closet, with all the silver in my cupboard, my children will be left poor orphans … a person’s greatest possession is his health. Children, take care of your health.”  
With these words on his lips, my father died… [unnumbered page following title page, ellipsis in original]

The message imparted is so mundane that it does not provide any justification for its inclusion in the book. This story is perhaps serving a different purpose. The description of this event as a “will” marks it as a particular kind of text, an “ethical will.” This was usually a document written by an older family member for their descendants, sometimes shared long before death, serving as a guide to conduct and morality in life. The juxtaposition of the book’s dedication and her father’s deathbed instructions, dated in the previous century, serve as a bracket to Shechter’s own life. She emphasizes experiences and forms of knowledge that her children have had little contact with. Within her lived experience, people commonly died young. Educated families passed on values through a written legacy. By implication, the book is her own “ethical will,” the only inheritance of value she has to pass on to her own children.

Finally, Shechter thanks a large number of other people and organizations on the final page of the book. She lists 19 organizations and 72 individuals who made financial contributions towards the publication of the book. Among the individuals are the Miller family, for whom she worked at People’s Book Store, who in addition to making a donation also could be counted on to distribute it in their store. She lists many organizations active in Yiddish-speaking life in Winnipeg, both those in which she was active such as the Peretz School’s *muter fareyn* [mother’s union] and Pioneer Women, and those with whom she has much less to do, such as various free loan associations. The most high-profile individual listed is Avrom Golomb, whose endorsement was likely of great moral support. These lists of donors and supporters are a common feature of Yiddish books since so many were published by committees or another entity other than a professional publishing house. On one level these thanks are simply gracious acknowledgements of indebtedness. In a tight-knit community such as Winnipeg’s, they may also serve to further envelope the book, to show it as arising from and responding to a cultural need for self-expression and the making of its own history.

Shechter’s process of writing her autobiography, beginning with the response to the YIVO call for entries and ending with publication, took ten years. During that time she was able to formulate what she felt she had to say to the world: in fact, at least some of the letters she includes in the book were written during the years she was planning it. The final product does not use an established literary model or mimic the typical structure of an autobiography, but nonetheless does succeed in creating a vivid portrait of the individual at the heart of the work.
Chapter 3: Reading Esther Shechter’s Life

Shechter’s biography encapsulates a huge range of issues in Jewish life, many of which have been explored in detail by memoirists and scholars: immigration in the years of major influx to Canada, the growth of the Yiddish school movement in North America, relationships between secularism and religiosity, gender and the Haskalah, political movements of immigrant Jews, and the arc of Yiddish culture across generations. In many ways she is perfectly consonant with what is known about these phenomena, and an unremarkable example of her historical period. She was never a leader, only a passionate participant in a seamless web of interconnected movements and organizations, through which she acted out her philosophy of engagement and civil activism. She was imposingly intelligent, widely-read, knowledgeable, and had little patience for those who did not keep themselves informed. She was not particularly warm even within her family, although family was important to her.\textsuperscript{92} She approached her numerous volunteer activities as both the right and responsibility of citizenship. Shechter’s extraordinariness lies partly in the insight her autobiographical writings give us into this kind of engaged civic life from the position of the footsoldier. Her particular philosophical vision, honed by a childhood in the Haskalah, a young adulthood in the hotbed of pre-1905 Russian revolutionary foment, and a mature adulthood as an immigrant in an ambivalent backwater of empire, is a hybrid of various streams of thought. She created an ideology that allowed her to feel a sense of

\textsuperscript{92} Delsie Dworkin, Interview with Esther Shechter’s granddaughter, interview by Faith Jones, September 29, 2013.
purpose while also connecting her to Jewish life transnationally. Turning to her life itself, as well as her public presentation of it, allows us to look more deeply into the phenomena she embodies, and to understand the way she shaped her life to conform to her own vision of Yiddish culture, much as she late in life molded a text to represent that life.

I remember when I was eight years old all the Maskilim used to gather at our house. This is when the Maskilim were at war with the Hasidim, and my father took an active part in this Jewish struggle. My father had a wonderful library of Hebrew holy books and he took the Hebrew newspapers and journals of the day: ha-Melits and ha-Tsefira and Peretz Smolenskin’s ha-Shakhar.

There were four children in our family. I was the oldest and went to school along with my little brothers. My father also wished me to be able to read and write Yiddish, and I had a separate tutor for that. I began to read Yiddish with the newspaper Kol mevasser, which came from Odessa and was edited by Zederbaum, in 1869.

I was also the first Jewish girl in Mezhbizh to study non-Jewish languages such as Russian and German. [6]

These paragraphs on the first page of Shechter’s memoir introduce virtually all of the important issues that define her life and re-surface throughout her story: modernity, education, gender, reading, investment in diaspora Jewish life married to both Zionism and secular culture, and the duty of the citizen to be informed.

The newspapers mentioned above were among the most important Jewish institutions in Eastern Europe. The Hebrew-language ha-Melits [The mediator] and the Yiddish Kol mevasser [Voice of the messenger] were both published by the energetic journalist Alexander Zederbaum (1816-1893) in the 1860s and 70s to further the Haskalah
and support the Hibat Zion movement. Zederbaum was a canny editor who employed a wide range of writers with differing views, thus launching dozens of writing careers in both Hebrew and Yiddish. *Ha-tsefirah* [The epoch] had a more checkered publication history, publishing on and off from the 1860s to the 1920s in a number of guises, but was considered “the principal organ of Polish Jewry for almost two generations.” At first it was devoted primarily to science and technology, and thus not only supported the Haskalah but enabled it. In its later incarnations it became a general-interest daily and gained readers among Hasidim as well as maskilim. *Ha-shakhar* [The dawn] was published from the 1860s to the 1880s as a Hebrew-language Haskalah journal, but was also strongly anti-assimilation. In its last years it also became a proponent of the Hibat Zion movement.

Checking off these titles so early in her memoir is Shechter’s statement of *bona fides*. Not only does she come from an intellectual household, but her lineage is maskilic, involved in nationalist causes before the term “Zionism” had even been coined, and deeply connected to important Jewish political and artistic movements. Unlike many male intellectuals, who continued to boast of their descent from a long line of rabbis with whom

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93 Hibat Zion was a precursor organization to the Zionist movement. “[F]ounders of Hibat Tsiyon broke with the view that Jews are solely members of a religion unfettered by national or ethnic ties. Ben-Yehudah, in particular, asserted that the only place for modern Jewish nationalism to truly take hold was in the Land of Israel, where Jews would need to reclaim Hebrew as their daily, spoken language as well as the language of culture.” Although active for only about ten years, 1884 to the mid-1890s, it articulated many of the same goals that Herzl separately formulated in 1897. At that time, former members of Hibat Zion flocked to the Zionist movement as they were already in sympathy with its goals. Thus, although Hibat Zion was short-lived and accomplished little, it served as an organizational boost to the later Zionist movement. Michael Stanislawski, “Hibat Tsiyon,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, August 12, 2010, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hibat_Tsiyon>.

they shared little in the way of outlook, Shechter's boasts centre instead on the political foresight and cunning of her father and the cradle of progressive thought in which her own intellectual life was nurtured. She continues with this practice of grounding her narrative in intellectual pursuits throughout her memoir: once in Canada she subscribes to the Forverts, New York's socialist Yiddish daily, and Novosti [News], a Russian-language newspaper from Odessa. Her reading at this time connects her to her own past—she is homesick—but also to the major centre of Jewish life in the diaspora, New York. The Forverts plays an additional role here as touchstone and bête noire for an entire culture: love it or hate it (or both), you had to read the Forverts. In an anecdote that does not appear in her YIVO manuscript, but was appended to the end of the memoir in the published book, she describes meeting Sholem Aleichem at a print shop [18]. On meeting this great writer she does not find it necessary to discuss literature or art with him, areas which frankly interested her less than current events. Instead, she boasts of having read his non-fiction years earlier in the Yidishe folksblat [Jewish people’s paper] and of being an early subscriber to his literary journal, Di Yidishe folksbiblyotek. She signals (first to Sholem Aleichem, then to us in telling the story) her immersion in the central events that led to the emergence of modern Yiddish culture. She recognizes her own importance in history as a grassroots participant in the metamorphosis of Jewish life.

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95 Yiddish-speaking intellectuals had a number of familiar tropes they returned to in their autobiographies: “One could, with very little exaggeration, write a kind of meta-biography of almost every well-known Yiddish writer in America in the first half of the twentieth century. It would read something like this: born in Eastern Europe; traditional heder education (by which we would also know that the writer is male); began reading secular books in secret around adolescence; rebelled; became a socialist; fled to America, probably for economic or political reasons; struggled through the familiar exigencies of being an immigrant, all the while struggling as well with artistic desires; petrified by the rise of the Nazis and being cut off from family left behind.” Norich, Discovering Exile, 2007, 7.
What she values is modernity itself, and throughout her life we see newspapers acting as a potent symbol of the sea-changes underway for Jews in Eastern Europe. She values the production of newspapers in Hebrew and Yiddish as part of a Jewish engagement with the world which retains cultural specificity. Newspapers may even be sacred in her view, as in the description of her father’s library quoted above. While she mentions the holy books, she dwells on the newspapers: the holy books are invoked only to imply an equivalence, a parallel holiness in the newspapers.

In her discussion of a family friend, Mordkhe Spektor, later an important writer and editor, she describes another friend meeting with Zederbaum to help Spektor get a job editing the *Yidishe folksblat* in St. Petersburg:

Frankfurter had to be in Petersburg on business, and while he was there he met with Zederbaum and told him that he personally knew Spektor and he would make a good employee to work on the *Yidishe folksblat* that they were planning to publish. [7]

Shechter is proud of her family’s connection to Spektor, to newspaper publishing, and to the development of Yiddish cultural life. Not only writing and editing a newspaper, but even printing one is honourable work. She mentions that her eldest son was apprenticing to a printer in Odessa at the time they left [13]: his work included printing a socialist newspaper called *Der kuryer* [The courier]. Her own small efforts to help the Bund, a movement which she admired but did not agree with, involved helping them to publish underground material [10]. The circulation of political and social ideas relied on the press, and in Shechter’s ethos every progressive idea deserved a hearing.
One of the most astonishing moments in Shechter’s memoir is one which she herself does not call attention to or find extraordinary. Following her discussion of Spektor above, she notes:

I became a subscriber to the *Yidishe folksblat* and my two year run of the newspaper, covering the years 1884-5 is now at the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and 5th Avenue. I donated them in 1930. [7]

It is not until five pages later that the reader understands what this must have entailed. Shechter carried these newspapers with her through several homes in Ukraine, then from Odessa to Winnipeg on her immigration journey. She immigrated by sneaking across the border from the Russian Empire into Galicia with her baby. She was then joined by three more of her children, smuggled to her by family members. From there, she most likely took a train, a boat, and another long train trip to reach Winnipeg. Throughout all that, while caring for four children, including an infant, it appears she carried a two-year run of a weekly newspaper. She then took them with her by train to New York years later, recognizing their historical value. [97] This is a fair way to go for a belief in newspapers, but

96 This is given as 1894-5 in the book, but the manuscript at YIVO gives the dates correctly as 1884-5. The newspapers can still be found at the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.

97 It is unlikely the newspapers followed her later. As other information in the book attests, Shechter’s break with her family, ex-husband, and social circle in Odessa was complete once she had emigrated. As extraordinary as Shechter’s immigration narrative is, other women had similar, or even tougher experiences getting to Winnipeg. One immigrant, Chasie Karpachevsky, traveled with two children on a circuitous route to join her husband in Winnipeg during the First World War. “Driven from her home village by Cossacks, who beat her and her children with whips and robbed them of their savings, she set out with only a piece of paper with her husband’s name on it as a passport. She and her children travelled through Siberia and crossed to Japan. Then she made her way to San Francisco, Prince Rupert, Edmonton, and finally to her husband on Boyd Street in Winnipeg.” J. Blanchard, *Winnipeg’s Great War: A City Comes of Age* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 66.
was very much of a piece with her ideas about citizenship and modernity. Writing to congratulate the *Yidishe vort* following its 40th anniversary banquet,\(^98\) she said:

> My imagination took me back 45 years, when a small group of thoughtful young people planted the roots which have branched and widened, and if Winnipeg is now an example of what a Jewish city should be, it is thanks to those stubborn few, with our respected newspaper aiding them. \(^{57}\)

Her newspaper habit continued throughout her life. Shechter’s granddaughter remembers that one of her duties was to pick up newspapers for her grandmother. Shechter loved the news and couldn’t afford subscriptions to as many newspapers as she wanted to read, so a friend with a subscription to the *Forverts* would save her copies, and on Sundays her granddaughter would bicycle over to the friend’s house and pick them up and bring them back to her grandmother. Years later, when Shechter had to sell the house so she could go into a nursing home, her granddaughter remembers her summer kitchen was completely stacked to the roof with Jewish newspapers.\(^99\)

Shechter’s commitment to news reading and literacy in world events is an example of a wider phenomenon, that of mass media and its two-way relationship with modernity (a phenomenon that reached Eastern European Jews approximately a century later than in the West). Broad circulation newspapers were made possible by advances in printing and distribution technology, and then fed the advance of modernity by allowing ideas to be

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\(^98\) While Shechter included many (perhaps all or most) of her letters to the editor in her book, she did not give the date of publication. In this case, we can be fairly sure the *Yidishe vort* banquet took place in 1950, but in most cases it isn’t possible to identify even the year of publication in the newspaper without a hand search of the first 41 years of the newspaper. In most cases I have not attempted to do so.

\(^99\) Dworkin, Interview with Esther Shechter’s granddaughter.
spread and debated. Shechter is unusual only in coming early to the party. As Sarah Abrevaya Stein has shown, in the Russian Empire mass consumption of Yiddish newspapers did not truly become possible until after 1900, shortly before Shechter left to come to Canada. But as Stein further indicates, once various hurdles had been overcome and newspapers began to be readily available, Yiddish readers took to them with a vehemence that “may well have exceeded what was at first deserved.”

Shechter’s consumption of news was tied to her vision of the full investment of Jewish communities in modern life.

Shechter’s story hinges in numerous places on the actions of her family, yet the members of her family figure in the story in very minor ways. Her father is approvingly described as an erudite and learned figure; however, her mother and siblings are mentioned very little. While both husbands figure centrally in Shechter’s stories, neither is named. Her children do not play any major part in the narrative, and are mentioned far less than might be expected. Where they are mentioned, they are shown in a generally negative light. In fact, throughout the autobiography, Shechter never says exactly what we expect her to say in regards to her children, her husbands, or her sexuality and marriages. This begins from the very first mention of her children:

100 Stein, Making Jews Modern, 2004, 31. Stein counts official censorship as one hurdle, as well as the elitism of various early Hebrew and Yiddish periodicals, including those cited by Shechter. So while Zederbaum was the one person who could somehow always get a permit to publish Kol mevaser, its intellectualism limited its reach. Later newspapers struck a more populist tone. Ibid., 25–26. Shechter clearly was at home in the more elitist end of the spectrum, as she read these early newspapers. Growing up in an intellectual household may have given her the tools to read these materials.
There I suffered the first disappointment of my married life: my husband wouldn’t sign my application for the midwifery course. He didn’t need a working wife, he said. And his family wouldn’t let him go to America. My husband could not find a job in Kamenets-Podolsk, and my 500 ruble dowry little by little dribbled away. Meanwhile a baby arrived. I did not write of my troubles to my family, because they had been against the marriage in the first place, and I had only married him in order to be able to come to America. [9]

In the space of a few lines, she has opened up a sea of questions. Did she expect a husband she met through the progressive, Westernized circles in cosmopolitan Odessa to be more open to her aspirations than more traditional men? Was she actually powerless to either obtain an education or effect emigration to America, or was she simply too young to know how to do so? Had she swallowed her pride and written to her family, might something different have happened? In the middle of this stew of resentment and despair, she drops the news, “meanwhile, a baby arrived.” She seems uninterested in the child, except insofar as it represents a hindrance to her in her poverty, affecting her ability to mobilize herself. In the next paragraph, matters get somewhat worse:

Our life together was full of strife, we weren’t compatible, like two separate worlds, east and west. Children came unwanted. [10]

It is not clear if they were unwanted because of the poverty described, or if there is something else lying behind that laconic sentence. The question arises, so it must be asked: were Shechter’s children the result of her husband raping her? The fact that she is blunt about her unhappy marriage is remarkable: she may have run out of candor when it came to sexual matters. Another possibility is that Shechter simply didn’t want children, but lacked the power of choice, without legal contraception or abortion, and given the social pressure to have children. Possibly,
too, this could be a later interpretation. She may have been happy enough to have children, but not to discover that she was thereafter to be eternally defined as a mother rather than a free-standing individual. Given that the memoir was written in 1942, she might have been reading back into their arrival some later unhappiness.

Whatever the reason, describing her children as “unwanted” is a rather remarkable thing to say in a book dedicated to these very children. She does not mention at all any of her children’s birth, education, childhood, personality, or bond with her, until the family is re-settled in Canada. They are ghostly presences hovering over this part of the memoir. When Shechter and her husband return to Odessa and Shechter runs a print shop, we are never given any idea how she manages to raise four children while working.

The children are excluded in other ways as well. Throughout the memoir most of her children are not named, and are usually referred to as “my son” or “my oldest son” or even “one son.” On one occasion she refers to her eldest son as “Waisman,” his last name, creating a startling distancing effect; on another occasion she uses his first name, Morris. None of the other children are named at all. In fact, the only other members of her family she names are her father, Moyshe Margulies (nicknamed Moyshe Toltses) and two uncles in Odessa (Nathan Horowitz and Abraham Greenberg) who supported her while she was studying there. The full name of only one woman is given throughout the autobiography proper (although more are named in other parts of the book).  

As already quoted above, in Shechter’s account of her second

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Although she herself did not name many women, she was aware of how their erasure from history occurred. She reflects on this in her anecdote on Goldfaden’s mother:

She always told me about the difficult fight she’d had with her husband over Avrom’s education: she used to steal money from her husband and send it to Avrom in Zhitomir, at the Rabiner Synagogue, so he could continue his studies.
marriage and her husband’s quick departure to avoid conscription, she requires the help of a number of family members:

My children and I were not able to travel because I couldn’t get a government passport, since my husband had left illegally. To steal across the border with five children was impossible. My youngest child and I crept across the border to Volotshisk. This was not a terrible hardship because I had a lot of family on my father’s side in Volotshisk. A year later my other three children were brought to me. One son, who was 12 at that time, my first husband held on to, to punish me. His own sister, Clara Waisman, helped greatly in bringing my other three children to me. [12]

Her former sister-in-law, Clara Waisman, is here named in full, while her children are described as “my youngest child,” “my other three children,” and “one son.” In this passage she hints at a bond between herself and her children, which is how her ex-husband can use the punishment of removing one of her children from her. However, this bond is nowhere in evidence, while the feeling of gratitude toward her former sister-in-law is clear. Women’s solidarity is compactly evoked but not dwelled upon. The child who is left behind in Odessa is never mentioned again.

During Shechter’s brief, happy second marriage, her children are not much in evidence either. Once the family is reunited in Winnipeg, she describes her children’s education (retroactively filling us in on the education they had so far received in Odessa), and the oldest son is mentioned with pride as a participant in the founding of the newspaper. But these mentions are brief. This section generally deals with the growth and branching of the Jewish community, as institutions were founded and political foment grew. Once Shechter’s husband

In all the literature and reviews I’ve read about Goldfaden, I’ve never seen any mention of his mother—Khane-Rive Goldfaden—who worked on his behalf in his youth. She was something to see: a beautiful, aristocratic, smart woman. [18]
dies, the children reappear again, this time once more as a burden. Three of them are still in school, one has not yet started school, and only the eldest is in a position to help her financially. None of this is related with rancour, but as the children grow older, more blame begins to be attached to them. They urge her to buy a larger house, but then fail to help her with payments; and worse, they have their own opinions about their lives:

My younger son had already decided that he wouldn’t be a printer, but a piano teacher. He married and went to Los Angeles where my other son had gone in search of work. The youngest son studied pharmacy but a year before he was to graduate, he figured “to serve lunches and sell ice cream” he didn’t need a university degree. And since he could also play piano well, he went off in the States and there played music in a band. When radios came in he could no longer make a living playing music, and he came back home to mama in Winnipeg, where he remains to this day. He is an office manager. [16]

Shechter’s indifference to her son’s desires, and her jocularity at his inability to make his aspirations a reality in the long term, is actually shocking. If she notices similarities with her own struggle to break free from her family’s expectations for her, she does not mention it. Finally, she sums up her children with a rather grudging acknowledgement, which emphasizes her own part in any positive role they may play in society:

I gave my children a secular Jewish national education and they are useful people in the local community. [16]

Shechter’s overall approach to her children is unusual among memoirs that explore similar life experiences and historical phenomena. She displays neither maternal pride nor interest in their inner lives. Most immigrant parent memoirs describe their struggles as worthwhile in the end because of the opportunities afforded to their children; in some cases they even describe their
hardships as undertaken specifically for the purpose of creating a better life for their children. Shechter is also quite unimpressed with her children and with the world in which her they operate. Where many immigrants would praise their new home for providing peace, relative financial security, religious and political freedoms, Shechter instead criticizes the “brutality and materialism” [17] of contemporary life.

These criticisms stand in contrast to her values of modern social engagement. In addition to newspaper reading, all reading was a central part of Shechter’s life and a value she felt could not be dispensed with in Jewish life. Nowhere does she make this more clear than in her letters to the editor, which frequently exhort the newspaper’s readers to buy and read books, and community leaders to support literary undertakings. She is rather scathing in one letter about the fledgling Jewish People’s Library, a primarily Yiddish-language library:

I would also like to mention to the [Canadian Jewish] Congress, which is so interested in Jewish culture, that it’s long since past time for them to bring the Jewish People’s Library out of the basement on Aberdeen Avenue and give it a more suitable place, where a librarian will always be in attendance and where people can come at any time to read a newspaper or book. The library is not a

\[102\] Soyer, “The Voices of Jewish Immigrant Mothers in the YIVO American Jewish Autobiography Collection,” 1998. See My Future is in America for various examples. It is worth noting that the son involved did not himself regret his years as a working musician, and felt they had opened him up to experiences he might never have otherwise had, such as playing on a cruise ship which took him to Yokohama, Japan. He did not see his retreat to Winnipeg as a personal failure—the Depression was on, nobody could earn a living at anything—and he was happy to have had a few years of adventure before marrying and settling down. Shechter seems to have raised children who were much like herself: headstrong, adventurous, and focused on their own happiness. Dworkin, Interview with Esther Shechter’s granddaughter.

partisan matter, but should serve the whole Jewish community and all its branches and directions, and it should be Congress’s work to see that the Welfare Fund supports it properly. [57]

She was a hard person to please, even when her complaints were listened to, as this later letter attests:

The teacher B. Ts. Zaretsky has earned a hearty thank you, not only for being a good teacher but also for the active role he has taken in the work of the library. It has now hired a new librarian, Mr. Asper, and the work is being undertaken systematically. A lot of new books are being entered into its catalogue—a lot of new readers should come. I hope that the library will soon have its own home, in which it would be open all day, not just from 8 to 10 pm. [57]

She heaps scorn on people who failed to read in Yiddish, even if they replaced that reading with English. One of the odd jobs she worked at for years was collecting subscription fees for Jewish periodicals, and so she had intimate knowledge of who read exactly what and in what language. In one lengthy letter to the editor, she describes a plethora of inadequate responses to the changing language of the Jewish immigrants. She begins by discussing a family that took the highbrow Yiddish daily Der tog for several years, but then stopped on the excuse that they didn’t have time to read; and later told her they had switched to English language newspapers now that they were Canadians. In addition, the children in the family attended public school, leaving Shechter aghast:

I told her that this is not enough. Jewish children have to get a Jewish education, have to know their language, their history, their culture and their traditions; they need to become proud Jews, not afraid of being called a Jew. She told me herself that her youngest boy comes home from school and tells her the English children call him a “Jew” and he asked, “Why do we have to be Jews?” [50]
Another family tells her they had to take the *Winnipeg Free Press* or the neighbours would look down on them; another family takes their children out of the Yiddish-speaking schools so that they will speak unaccented English; and Shechter herself is reprimanded by an acquaintance for speaking Yiddish in public when there are non-Jews around. Shechter neatly ties all these anecdotes up into one long diatribe that starts with not reading Yiddish and ends with Jewish self-hatred. When people worry more about what the neighbours think than what kind of education their children get, Shechter has little pity. The remedy is, naturally, both individual and communal: the need for Jewish education, for Jewish newspapers, and for individuals to pursue specifically Jewish forms of culture or risk losing an integral part of themselves.  

In another letter, she praises an evening of literary readings held in the home of a literature-loving individual in the south end of Winnipeg: “Mr. Steinberg has earned a big thank you for putting on such a literary evening in River Heights, where the Jews have already quickly forgotten that there is such a thing as the wealth of Yiddish literature” [59]. Shechter is reacting to the movement of Jews out of the North End as the loosening of legal and social restrictions allowed them to branch out. She is quite right in her observation that this led to increased assimilation and a loss of Yiddish cultural knowledge. Her solution to

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104 Shechter’s fierceness in promoting Yiddish reading may have been encouraged by the fact that she never became comfortable reading, or even speaking, English. Dworkin, Interview with Esther Shechter’s granddaughter. It is not entirely clear why she struggled with English. She was clearly comfortable with a variety of languages and alphabets, and dedicated to reading and study. However, she arrived in Canada in middle age, when learning languages is more difficult, and within a few years was the main provider for her family. Learning English may have been a lower priority than seeing to practical matters. Yet, she found time for the many committees and organizations she was involved in, and scorned those who used “not having time” as an excuse not to read. It is possible failing to fully learn English was a purposeful decision to remain invested in Yiddish culture.
self-hatred, assimilation, and cultural illiteracy is always to read more Yiddish. Failure to read is a moral failure, when, for example, it is tantamount to child neglect:

You may remember that every year during Jewish Book Month, as declared by the literati and culture-mavens, I have a tradition of writing a few words on this topic. Yiddish literature, created by our famous classic writers, is being translated into all languages, but is being read less and less by the Jewish masses. There is now in Yiddish the Tanakh translated by Yehoash, and also the Mishnah, translated by Dr. Simcha Petrushka (now on a visit to Winnipeg)—we just need readers. It reminds me of this episode: Two years ago a Yiddish writer visited and was selling her books. An acquaintance of mine bought the book. A few months later I asked her, “How did you like the book?” She answered, “Mrs. Shechter, who has time to read a Yiddish book? I don’t even have time to read an English book or newspaper. There are lunshuns every week, sometimes two in one week, so who has time to read?”

What will happen one generation from now? The children that at least go to school, when they leave school they also leave the language… A few years later if they do want to speak Yiddish on some occasion, they won’t remember the words.

Parents, don’t neglect your children’s language! Forge the golden chain of Yiddish culture! Let Yiddish writers continue their holy creativity! [51-52]

As the end of this letter hints, the financial viability of Yiddish culture was often on Shechter’s mind. In many of her letters to the editor, she praises a particular book. These are often locally produced, and most are recent publications. Her purpose seems more about boosting sales rather than serving as a critic. She says nothing about the literary merit of these books. Although she praises them, her praise focuses on how much one can

105 As the Yehoash Tanakh came out in 1936, and the Petrushka Mishnah started appearing in 1945, this letter dates from between 1945 and 1951.

106 The luncheons—she uses the English word written with Yiddish letters—are fundraising and organizing meetings for the numerous women’s organizations. Although Shechter was active in some of these organizations, she several times pokes fun at the “lunshuns” that seem to take up an inordinate amount of time and sap energy for more intellectual pursuits.
learn from them, and the pleasure they bring the reader. She consistently urges people to buy Yiddish books, both those written in Yiddish and Jewish literature translated into Yiddish (she makes no mention of non-Jewish books). She stood up for the Yiddish writer in non-financial ways too. In 1947, for her 80th birthday, the *Yidishe vort* gave her a copy of Sholem Asch’s 1939 novel on the life of Jesus, *Der man fun Natseres* [The Nazarene], one of the most controversial books in all of Yiddish literature. She voiced her support of it in a letter to the editor in which she agrees with *Tog* columnist Ben Zion Goldberg’s defense of Sholem Asch and his work.  

Securing funding was only one aspect of creating an ongoing Yiddish culture. Just as important was self-education, which could provide the cultural literacy needed to make transmission possible. Among the books and genres she praises is old Yiddish literature, suggesting that the women’s groups and reading circles should take on reading Old Yiddish as a project [52]. The reason this would be a good project, she suggests, is because it would be good to be able to pass that knowledge on to their children; and to accustom the children to reading Yiddish she suggests fathers and mothers could read this literature with their children. Reading within a community setting was also part of her regimen. She became a member of the H. Leyvik Reading Circle, named after a respected

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107 Aside from general elections, the only non-Jewish culture she mentions is the movie “Gone with the Wind.” Her verdict: it was too loud, and there was nothing available to eat at intermission.

108 Ben Zion Goldberg was hugely influential and respected—he was Sholem Aleichem’s son-in-law and a masterful journalist and critic himself. However, in the case of Asch he was something of a voice in the wilderness. There is still much curiosity about how Asch came to write a trilogy based on the life of Jesus and his followers.

109 Old Yiddish is significantly different from modern Yiddish, and is difficult for non-specialists to read, not only because of language changes but because it is printed in now-unfamiliar typefaces. Shechter’s suggestion is highly ambitious.
Yiddish playwright and editor. This group formed in 1939 and had as part of its program the financial support of publishers and writers, even those whom they were not using as reading material in the group:

When a new book is published, the circle buys several copies and raffles them off among the members. In this way the Leyvik reading circle bought and supported *The Wayfarer, The Jewish Encyclopedia*, and a whole series of other important works.\(^{110}\)

This description of the reading circle’s activities was written in 1944; both books mentioned by title are 1943 publications. *Der geyer* [The wayfarer] is the two-volume autobiography of poet and essayist Menahem Boraisha, a self-published, cerebral text that was much admired when it appeared. The encyclopedia is the two-volume *Yidishe folksentsiklopedia* [Jewish people’s encyclopedia], published in Montreal by the major Canadian Yiddish newspaper *Der Keneder odler*—a distinctly easier read, but one which sought to restore Jewish cultural fluency to a generation of Jews who may have had little or no experience of Eastern Europe. The currency and stature of these titles is not an accident.

The H. Leyvik Reading Circle suited Shechter because its role in supporting both the most intellectual levels of Yiddish culture, and the wide dissemination of that culture, accorded with her own priorities.

In other letters, she praises the serialized installments of Daniel Charney’s memoirs then running in one or another of her favourite newspapers (probably the *Tog*); B. Sack’s *Geshikhte fun Yidn in Kanade* [History of the Jews in Canada]; and Falik Zolf’s serialized

\(^{110}\) *Draysik yor I. L. Perets shul*, 1944, 90.
memoirs in the Yidishe vort. Her most common praise of a book is that it gives the reader a "gaystikn fargenign"—spiritual/mental pleasure: she manages to use the phrase twice in this plug for Agev urkhe [By the way, 1948], a collection of editor Mark Zelchen’s columns on community topics that ran in the Yidishe vort also under the title “Agev urkhe”:

I re-read for a second time the book of selected Agev-urkhes which was published three years ago. To my thinking it should earn a prize for Yiddish literature. Every word is a precious pearl. A lot can be learned from this book and therefore it also imparts great soulful pleasure. I understand there are only a small number left and I recommend everyone to buy a copy. Even if you spend the whole day in hard physical or mental labour, when you take this book in hand and read through a few Agev-urkhes about the holidays, or about the education of children, you will feel a great soulful pleasure and learn a lot from it. [53]

While it is clear that Shechter holds reading to be a central value, that value is based on the ideas to be gained by reading, and the connection to Jewish life and history that is maintained through reading in Yiddish. She mentions the pleasure of reading without describing how the writer creates an aesthetic experience. She even says in her letter about Sack’s Geshikhte, “I will leave criticism to the literary critics” [53], although she does go on to say that the book is “shpanend”—gripping. That’s the only real qualitative description she makes of any book or reading. By contrast, when she writes about Jewish education, as we will see, she articulates quite specific pedagogical ideas, or counters arguments against Jewish education with examples. While reading was clearly important to her on a visceral level, it was also largely a means to some ends: the improvement of the mind, the creation

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111 In most places where this word occurs, I have chosen to translate it as “soulful,” in an effort to capture the link, inherent in the Yiddish, between two different intangible experiences: intellectual stimulation and metaphysical satisfaction.
of an informed citizenry, and the increased solidarity of the community of readers and writers. She does not have the education or the interest to serve as a literary critic, but she asserts a role as a promoter and general advocate for books, authors, reading, literacy, and Yiddish culture.

Shechter's reading and advocacy of reading led to an insuperable tension. On the one hand, reading news made Jews modern: it made them informed citizens of the world who were fit to take their place beside other groups in building society. On the other hand, too much comfort in the modern world made them less Jewish, more likely to stop reading in Yiddish, and more likely to find themselves abandoning Jewish culture altogether, and with it any Jewish solidarity or pride. Shechter closes the circle by promoting the same cure for all ailments. If the route to modernity was to read, then the route to retaining Jewish community in the face of modernity was also to read.

Shechter's passion for reading was perhaps only superseded by her passion for the larger undertaking of which it was a part: education. Her early immersion in a maskilic atmosphere instilled a belief in education; this was followed by an experience of her own diminishment when education was denied her. From this early push and pull she developed a habit that lasted throughout her life of proselytizing on behalf of secular education. Because education had been so important to her, to her sense of herself and her personhood, her right to an intellectual life and an independent means of support, perhaps she felt that education was the central way to create new kinds of people. This was the message of much of education theory arising from the Yiddish secular movement. A family crisis over the issue was only averted when she finally convinced her youngest son and his
wife to send their child to the Peretz School—which they agreed to as long as Shechter was willing to pay the fees. While the issues were far different for Shechter’s granddaughter than they had been for herself—nobody was suggesting that Shechter’s granddaughter should stop her education at 14—what was similar was the question as to how Jews would interact with their world in a new situation. In Europe, the coming of modernity had caused upheavals that made Shechter’s world significantly different from that of her mother and grandmother; for Shechter’s granddaughter, it was Canada that caused the generational divide. Ironically, it was Shechter’s own immigration that was the cause of her children’s loss of Jewish knowledge, which she then fought to reverse through her Peretz School activism and her granddaughter gaining a secular Yiddish education there.

As an active member of the Peretz School’s muter fareyn she took seriously her role in understanding curriculum and child development. Years later she recalled that the Peretz School was founded by 25 people, who organized for several years until they could start a supplementary school program with 15 children in attendance. She was also proud that the muter fareyn had led the way in creating a Yiddish-speaking kindergarten in 1919 [59]. This development was far ahead of its time. Kindergarten was at this time still not a regular part of many public school systems in North America, and would not be introduced in Manitoba public schools until after the Second World War.\(^{112}\) The all-male Peretz Board was skeptical of the muter fareyn’s ability to carry out this plan, but they did it and more. When the first group of kindergarten students aged out and had to start going to public school, they established a grade one day school. Every few years they were able to add

another grade, until in 1942 they had a full K-7 day school, one of the earliest of its kind in North America. This structure was considered far better for the child than supplementary school, as children coming from the public schools arrived at their supplementary school after 3:00 pm, tired and with little interest in further study.

These innovations in educational structure were matched with an equal attention to child development and curriculum. For Shechter, several issues were important: that education empower children to find their own strengths; that their education should remain Jewish while not neglecting what they needed to succeed in the non-Jewish world; and that the Jewish element should be drawn widely from artistic culture, folk culture, and religious sources, so that they would be fully culturally literate. In describing her granddaughter’s enjoyment of first grade at the school, she also remarked on a regular family event that took place on Friday nights:

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks for the Fraytik tsu nakht [Friday night/Sabbath eve] gatherings which give me so much joy. The hour spent seeing the children in tune with the Sabbath, where every child brings out his or her talents reading their own compositions; reading literature, poetry, singing and dancing—this is very beautiful. The chapters of agode [Jewish legends] that are read are very appropriate to our lives today. There is also 15 minutes of good music played by local musicians. [40]

This letter, running in the Yidishe vort, may have surprised a number of readers. The idea of the firmly secular Peretz School preparing children to be in tune with the Jewish Sabbath

was not something many even moderately religious community members would have imagined. To Shechter, children reading, writing, singing Yiddish songs, and listening to traditional lore, is a sign of life in perfect balance: their creative freedom occurs within a framework of Jewish historical creativity.

While in this instance she subtly conveyed a message about the Peretz School's suitability for Jewish children, in other letters she attacks head-on the concerns of parents that a Jewish day school may not provide their children with the secular education they desire:

My granddaughter began in the Peretz School kindergarten, and when she graduated from that her Canadian-born parents wanted to send her to public school. They were worried she would speak with an accent. I convinced them to send her to the day school and said if they weren’t happy they could transfer her for second grade. My granddaughter, thank goodness, is now in fifth grade at the Peretz day school and they are happy with it. The little one comes home at 4 pm and still has time for music lessons, dancing, playing, doing homework, and can go to bed at a reasonable time. A lot of children who went through the Peretz day school are already doctors and were successful students with high marks and scholarships. Their parents, who were themselves professional and intelligent folks, didn’t worry about their accents. [45]

This claim is true. Public schools in Winnipeg considered the Peretz School students arriving for grade eight to be well prepared. A large number of Peretz alumni went on to illustrious careers. Longtime Communist city council member Joe Zuken was an early graduate. Mindel Cherniak Sheps graduated from the University of Manitoba’s medical school in 1936, a time when “numerus clausus” was in effect and admission was hard for either Jews or women to achieve. In a 1942 local election, Sheps ran for school trustee; Shechter wrote to the paper to endorse her candidacy with no greater basis for her support than that she was a Peretz School graduate [69]. Sheps went on to greater importance than Shechter even realized, later pioneering biostatistics and population modeling in public health research. Levine, *Coming of Age*, 2009, 152; Doug Smith, *Joe Zuken, Citizen and Socialist* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1990); N Keyfitz and J A Menken, “Obituary. Mindel Cherniak Sheps 1913-1973,” *Theoretical Population Biology* 4, no. 4 (December 1973): 389–94.
Most importantly, the education they received could turn back the clock on the erosion of Jewish knowledge caused by immigration and assimilationist pressures:

My granddaughter’s graduation from grade 7 of the day school is a wonderful celebration for me. I remember how much effort it took for me to convince my children to send my granddaughter to kindergarten and day school, because like all Canadian-born, they were afraid of the child having an accent in English. My children are now delighted. (I remember when my granddaughter was in Grade 2 and told her mother: You should go to the Peretz School to learn to speak Yiddish better). My children appreciate what the day school has given their daughter. I’m sure a lot of fathers and mothers who are three or four times 13 years old don’t know as much about Jewish history and literature as the children in grade 7 at the day school. [41]

Shechter was greatly influenced by the presence in Winnipeg, from 1938 to 1944, of the important Jewish educators Avrom and Rivke Golomb, whose diaspora nationalism was reflected in their creative re-use of Jewish religious forms and ideas for secular purposes, such as the Fraytik tsu nakht event described above. They also viewed secular literature and folkways as equally valid sources for Jewish identity and knowledge. Because they taught children practical skills as well as academic subjects, Shechter was able to volunteer in Rivke Golumb’s class teaching knitting and crochet to the children. We have little indication of Rivke Golomb’s theoretical foundation for her pedagogy, but Avrom Golomb’s writings give a fair indication of the evolution of his educational philosophy. As it happened, the years of the Golombs’ stay in Winnipeg, 1938-1944, coincide with most of World War II and the Holocaust, during which dramatic rethinking had to be undertaken to

115 Shechter’s daughter-in-law was not a native Yiddish speaker. Dworkin, Interview with Esther Shechter’s granddaughter.
make sense of its events. Golomb was part of a group of Jewish intellectuals who shared, in the words of historian Joshua Karlip,

> a sense of betrayal by both fascist and democratic countries; a call for a Jewish retreat from politics in response to this betrayal; a bemoaning of depleted Jewish strength due to a failed attempt at assimilation; and the search for an organic Jewish life that they believed had existed in the medieval ghetto.\(^{116}\)

Golomb’s solution to this crisis was a metaphorical return to the ghetto: he was uninterested in continued political involvement and advocated a radical retreat to an all-encompassing Yiddish world. However, he was pessimistic about the ability of modern Yiddish culture to make such a swerve not only possible but fruitful, because he perceived that it had failed to create the kind of emotionally fulfilling, spiritually adept, self-sustaining cultural works that that could make retreat from the world attractive to a large number of Jews. While living in Winnipeg, Golomb published four books: two books of theory in which he pursued this vision of failure and attempted to formulate a way forward for Jewish sustainability, and two books for use in the Jewish schools. The theoretical books propose the development of a full-throated Yiddish culture which draws strongly on traditional religious and folkloric sources to create a fully satisfying “Jewish world-view” ("a Yidishe velt-banem," in his words) as the only possible way out of the current impasse. Thus, the school books put this into practice, one being a translation of agodes, or Jewish legends, and

the other a collection on traditional folk wisdom titled, with some hubris, *Undzer nayer shas: our new Talmud*.\(^{117}\)

It is not entirely clear how, in the face of the destruction of Eastern European Jewry, one gets up every day and goes to work to teach 5- to 12-year-olds Yiddish literature and culture when one is deeply suspicious of the ability of secular Yiddish culture to overcome the greatest crises of Jewish life. Yet, that is what Golomb did. Whatever his pessimism about the future of Jewish peoplehood, it did not stop him from continuing to teach and to gain a local following.\(^{118}\) Although Shechter had already been an active member of the Peretz School and the *muler fareyn* for 25 years before the coming of the Golombs, and wrote frequent letters to the paper promoting its work, with the Golombs’ arrival her letters take on a star-struck tone. She writes to praise one or another activity, as led by one or another Golomb: the *Fraytik tsu nakht* gatherings, children’s performances, or holiday celebrations, or a fundraising effort for the Zionist movement. She considered her volunteer work in Rivke Golomb’s classroom an honour rather than a job, and at times it even seemed more important than that:

\(^{117}\) Golomb’s four Winnipeg books are: *Yidn un Yidishkayt in Amerike* [Jews and Jewishness in America] (Winnipeg, 1940); *Undzer nayer shas: undzer kultur oytssres farn folk* [Our new Talmud: our cultural treasures for the people] (Winnipeg, 1941); *Umvegn un oysvegn: a pruv tsu formulirn a Yidishn velt-banem* [Detours and through roads: an attempt to formulate a Jewish world-view] (Winnipeg, 1942); *Agodes far shuln un heymen in Hebreish un Yidish* [Legends for school and home in Hebrew and Yiddish] (Winnipeg: Fun kval, 1943).

\(^{118}\) This appears to have been a constant: Golomb was always adored. Given his embittered, sometimes divisive writings which criticized even I.L. Peretz himself for failures of imagination, one might expect him to be an unpleasant person, but this was apparently not the case. For his 80th birthday, an enormous festschrift volume was produced with contributions from all the communities where Golomb had taught, and including poems written for him by major Yiddish writers such as Yankev Glatshetyn, Rokhl Korn, and Arn Tseytlin. Moshe Starkman, ed., *Hesed le-Avraham: seyfer ha-yoyvl le-Avraham Golomb tsu zayn akhtsiktn geboym-yor* [Mercy to Abraham: book of celebration for Avrom Golomb on 80 years since his birth] (Los Andzsheles: A. Golomb yoyvl-komitet baym Yivo, 1970). (This book should have appeared in 1968 to coincide with Golomb’s actual 80th birthday, but at 900 pages, production was delayed).
I would ask that all the mothers and fathers whose children study at the Peretz School should come on Sunday at 11 am and see how we teach the children handicrafts. Parents whose children do not study at the Peretz School may also come. For the ending of the school year, there will be an exhibit at the school of all the works that the children have made during the entire year. Let us hope that next year we will do the same, but with lighter hearts, with a defeat for Hitler and salvation for the Jewish people. [43]

Through her involvement in the Peretz School and her exposure to the Golombs and their philosophy, Shechter formed beliefs about summer vacations, day school versus supplementary school, extracurricular activities, the teaching of social awareness and tzedakah [charity], and the importance of professional teaching staff who were treated with respect. These very specific educational principles fell in line with her priorities for Jewish continuity and her belief in modernization of cultural practice. She believed in the enrichment benefits of extracurricular activities, as long as they did not tire the child unduly [45], and was in favour of summer vacations because of the benefits to the children of play time, itself a relatively new concept [37]. She understood summer vacations could cause financial hardships for schools, but considered the well-being of the children paramount. The fiscal repercussions of this practice may have only strengthened her commitment to raising money for Jewish education. She was proud that the Peretz School always paid its teachers, which many religious schools struggled with [30]. Clearly, the Peretz School wasn’t paying their teachers solely by charging $5 to $7 a month tuition: ongoing, organized fundraising was necessary. The muter fareyn also raised money for the Montreal Hebrew and Yiddish Teacher’s Seminary, as part of their commitment to nurturing a fully-qualified teacher pool [22], which displays an admirable eye on the big picture, and indicates a fair degree of success in their fundraising efforts.
In some ways, fundraising was the perfect democratizing tool for Jewish culture. It was, after all, a contribution anybody could make, whether or not they had artistic or pedagogical talent, and whether or not they themselves had any money. To enable Yiddish art or education by holding raffles and teas could be highly satisfying to a person like Shechter, and it came to form her major commitment to Jewish life. Perhaps because of this, she strongly believed *tzedakah* should be inculcated in the children who attended the Peretz school, particularly when wedded to another Jewish cause, such as Zionism [38, 39].

To Shechter, fundraising didn’t just enable social action: it actually was a form of social action.

Because of these transformative experiences during her long involvement with the Peretz School, Shechter devotes as many pages in her book to her letters to the editor on educational topics as she does to her autobiography. She makes frequent mention of “usefulness” as an outcome of Jewish education: the goal is to be of use both to the Jewish people and to the world at large [41, 43]. As with her philosophy of reading, her approach to education is framed in terms of social utility, rather than for its own sake. Just as she read the classics, she praised the children’s performances: but in the end it is social action which matters to her.

Education was a particular passion for Shechter, but her activities encompassed dozens of organizations and campaigns over her years in Winnipeg. Every activity was based in the North End in the Yiddish-speaking world. In addition to the organizations already mentioned (the Peretz School and *muter fareyn*, the Jewish People's Library, the H. Leyvik Reading Circle) she was also active in the local orphanage, the local council of the
women’s reading circles,\textsuperscript{119} the Kiev Free Loan and Aid Society,\textsuperscript{120} Agudot Free Loan Association, and the Winnipeg Chapter of Hadassah.\textsuperscript{121} All of these organizations were important to her, but after the Peretz School her next greatest love was the Labour Zionist movement, through the local Poale Zion organization and its women’s branch, Pioneer Women.\textsuperscript{122} In Shechter’s 1928 travel report from Los Angeles, she notes that while there is an active left-wing presence in the Jewish community there, “[t]he national movement, on the other hand, is rather sleepy” [31]. Her expectations of what constituted normal levels of activity may have been skewed by her experience of Winnipeg’s active North End.

Shechter’s Zionism grew from her early exposure to the proto-Zionist Hibat Zion movement. Her early meeting with Hibat Zion leader Menahem Ussishkin deeply impressed her. She describes him in 1890, when he would have been twenty-seven, as “a handsome, physically strong, elegant young man” [17] and concludes:

\begin{quote}
Ussishkin’s dream came true just in the last moments of his glorious life. He was young and he built the land of Israel. His name shall always be a monument for the Jewish people. [18]
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{119} Biography of Esther Shechter, in “I.L. Perets folk shuln goldn bukh fun shul boyers” [I.L. Peretz people’s school golden book of school founders], unnumbered page. In the collection of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg.

\textsuperscript{120} Draysik yor I. L. Perets shul, 1944. While landsmanshaftn generally were for people coming from the same town or city, people from a small town might belong to a landsmanshaft for a nearby city as there may not be many people from their town living locally. Equally, Kiev could have been Shechter’s husband’s home city.

\textsuperscript{121} According to death notices placed by these organizations, \textit{Yidishe vort}, March 27, 1953: various pages.

\textsuperscript{122} As noted earlier, Poale Zion was the largest Zionist stream in Winnipeg, and many people associated with the Peretz School were also members of Poale Zion groups.
Individual contact was a crucial part of how Jewish movements grew, especially in the Russian Empire during official censorship. Shechter’s years-later recollection of an idealized Ussishkin is a good example of how this kind of grassroots organizing could continue to inspire participants throughout their lives. Shechter internalized this lesson: she was adamant that children at the Peretz School should raise money for Zionist causes (after 1948, for Israel itself), or even donate their Hanukkah gelt, saying that support for Israel was an important lesson for them to learn early on [38, 39].

Shechter’s group, Pioneer Women, articulated its approach to the Zionist enterprise in terms that were both idealistic and practical:

The Pioneer Women’s organization was founded in 1925. It bound its destiny to the building of a national home in the Land of Israel on the basis of cooperation and free labour. It has 265 clubs across the United States and Canada. Six of these clubs are located in Winnipeg. We conduct ourselves according to the principles mentioned above. We do not forget local work, however: we pay close attention to education and raising of the Jewish woman to nationalist and social usefulness.¹²³

Shechter’s own emphasis on usefulness as the highest calling of the Jewish individual finds a good match here. The organization also tracks closely with her left-wing and pro-labour political outlook. It operated in English and Yiddish, which not only allowed her to participate but met her approval as a staunch Yiddishist. On her 1950 trip to Los Angeles, she notes with some derision that the Menorah Centre, a centralized Zionist meeting centre, held after-school classes in Hebrew, and allowed a Talmud Torah to rent space, but

¹²³ Draysik yor I. L. Perets shul, 1944, 90.
at the Talmud Torah “they speak no Yiddish and teach no Yiddish” [33]. Hebrew for purposes of building Israel was acceptable to her; for religious purposes that excluded the study or understanding of Yiddish secular culture, it was not. She was also critical of any Zionist activity that contravened the kind of utopian vision outlined by the Pioneer Women:

I was recently among a group of people where the state of Israel was being discussed, and was nearly lynched when I gave my opinion that terror would do nothing to soften the stony hearts of the British governors. Terror didn’t ease the situation of the uprooted in the concentration camps whose one hope was to come to the Land of Israel, but only brought great material damage and new victims. Let us hope that our two thousand years of patience will bring salvation and we will become a people equal to others. [67]

Shechter had interests outside the Jewish community, but her lack of English made her concentrate on those she could effectively participate in. She campaigned for Jewish candidates in municipal and provincial elections, and wrote letters to the editor urging people to turn out to vote and arguing for specific candidates. She does not appear to have had a party affiliation, but was rather mostly interested in candidates who could represent the North End adequately.124 While she conducted all her activity within the Yiddish-

124 It is not clear if Shechter herself voted or was eligible to vote. In the 1911 census she is listed as a Russian national. However in the 1921 census she is listed as a Canadian national who became naturalized in 1909. “1911 Census of Canada, Manitoba, District 73-Winnipeg: P. 27, Lines 47-50,” n.d., http://data2.collectionscanada.gc.ca/1911/jpg/e001955298.jpg; “1921 Census of Canada, Manitoba, Winnipeg North, Sub-District 41-Winnipeg (City): P. 20, Lines 40-43,” accessed April 19, 2014, http://interactive.ancestry.ca/8991/1921_031-e002891964/7788342?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.ca%2fcgi-bin%2fse.dll%3fnew%3d1%26gsfn%3desther%26gsln%3dshechter%26rank%3d1%26gss%3dangc%26gskw%3dwinnipeg%26pcat%3dCANADIANCENSUS%26h%3d7788342%26db%3dCanCen1921%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d1&src=&backlabel=ReturnRecord. It is possible that the year of naturalization is listed incorrectly and between 1911 and 1921 she did indeed take citizenship; or she may never have formally taken citizenship but have considered herself Canadian and voted in elections. Election enumeration, too, was notoriously unscientific: among a large number of errors found in early Canadian electoral lists, one genealogical expert identifies the inclusion of people too young to vote and the inclusion of non-citizens as the two most common errors.
speaking North End of Winnipeg, she thought about Canadian political issues and kept herself informed about them.

Shechter’s relationships with for-profit North End institutions also merged seamlessly into her identity as a useful citizen of the Jewish and general world. Her association with the newspaper, the *Yidishe vort*, was complex: she was the widow of a founder, a some-time colleague as print salesperson, and an involved reader and letter-writer. Her belief in newspapers and the centrality of their role in ameliorating the position of Jews in society was an obvious reason for her to remain tied to this institution. However, on her 80th birthday the newspaper surprised her with a front-page notice about her milestone (few people lived to 80 in the 1940s). They also printed an editorial about her activities in the Jewish community, an announcement by the *muter fareyn* about a public event in her honour, and then Shechter’s letter of thanks to all who wished her well. The editorial read in part:

She goes to more Yiddish lectures, events and banquets than anyone, and wants to hear and know what others say, going also to lectures held by people on the other side of the fence. No event in the Jewish or general street is outside the sphere of her interest. She takes an interest in everything and she is always occupied with community problems. Is it not amazing that old age has no power over her? [20]

All this was for a person who held no formal position or title in any of the many groups she was involved in, and who, while opinionated, was quite humble about her

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contributions and abilities. Her work for Berl and Bertha Miller at People’s Book Store was another opportunity to be involved in a practical way with institutions that furthered her values: as we have already seen, she not only collected fees for newspaper subscriptions but also tried to bring straying readers back to the fold. She started this work while she still had young children at home and was desperate for cash:

In 1918 the flu broke out in Winnipeg. People were dropping like flies. An agent (B. Miller) of the Yiddish newspapers in New York, such as the Varhayt [Truth], Di tsayt [The times], and now Der tog, took me on to help him collect subscription fees, a work which I still do a bit of today. At the time of the flu, people were afraid to go from house to house collecting cash. [15]

Whether or not Shechter was afraid, she had little choice if she wanted to have enough money to live on. Though it may have started in desperation, she must have enjoyed some aspects of the work, as she continued to walk the North End collecting subscription fees into her 80s.

Her relationship to religion is nowhere near as clear cut. Like many immigrant Jews, Shechter appears to have been ambivalent. Nowhere does she give a thorough account of her own approach to religion or the role of religion in Jewish life. As mentioned, she is scornful of a Talmud Torah that fails to include Yiddish, but not of religious schools in general. In her letters to the editor she includes the Winnipeg Talmud Torah in her discussions of Jewish education, with no animosity. For example, she praises the Talmud Torah when it institutes summer vacation [37]. In her memoir she relates her father’s brand of maskilic devotion with obvious pride and approval. The book includes, as a free-standing essay, a lengthy description of Passover preparations in her childhood home.
Shechter’s tone in this essay is hard to pin down. She describes her father’s maskilic ritual, and gives detailed attention to food preparation and household events. She is respectful of her father’s religious life, in particular his fight against Hasidism, and she is knowledgeable about the differences between religious groups. She enumerates all the synagogues and shtiblekh [small houses of worship] in her town, describing their dynastic influences and their liturgy. The almost year-long timeline she delineates for Passover preparations uses religious markers: after Shvues (Shevuot), the cherries would be brandied; at Hanukkah, geese were bought for fattening; and so on. She also seems approving of folkloristic elements of the holiday:

My grandmother told me that at her neighbour’s house, when they would open the door for Elijah the Prophet, a goat would wander into the house. They didn’t make the goat leave, but when they went to see if their goat was in the barn, they would find it there. So they would say that Elijah the Prophet disguised himself as a goat. [29]

She describes a Hasidic uncle who ate with them at Passover, requiring yet more stringency in their food preparations, without any apparent animosity. However, she also wryly notes the relationship of religion to money:

In our town there was also a rebbe who was descended from the Apt dynasty. His wife was the daughter of the Ruzhiner’s oldest son. This rebbe had his sanctuary where he prayed with his followers. Hasidim from all the neighbouring towns would come to this rebbe to practice with him, and the town made a nice living off of this. [20]

She sums up her Passover description by saying:
These were the various customs that were followed in my parents’ house and I have strived to follow these traditions and instill them in my children, but too much has changed since I was a child in my parents’ house. [29]

There is no mention here of religion, and even the customs and traditions are understood to belong to a context that cannot be recreated in North America. There is one mention of attending synagogue in the book, not in the memoir but in an obituary for her friend Mrs. Portigal. Shechter describes meeting her friend shortly after arriving in Winnipeg, because Shechter and her husband, having few friends, went to synagogue for high holiday services [74]. In another obituary, Shechter mourns the loss of a highly religious woman who worked tirelessly for Jewish charitable organizations, and also gave direct aid to the poor by buying up houses in the North End and renting them at reasonable prices to recent immigrants [78]. In this case the religious impulse, properly directed towards community obligations, seems to be actively lauded by Shechter. In all, it seems Shechter was not religious herself, but was not opposed to religion in principle, or even in practice much of the time. Nonetheless, religious life, like every other source of thought and action, had to serve the most important goal in life: to enact the highest principles of social justice.

Wealth and fortune also had little interest for her, unless they could be used for community enrichment. Near the end of her memoir, as she enumerates her children’s adult accomplishments, she says nothing of their financial status (which the YIVO autobiographers usually do mention with some pride), although she does list their professions. Rather, she emphasizes their understanding of their Jewish heritage and their connections to community: their usefulness. In her description of attending a
My brothers took me to a meeting of the Mezhbisher Society where Joseph Barondess was also a member. Mrs. Barondess is from Mezhbisch. I saw a lot of people I couldn’t recognize. My brother said to me, “Do you remember Shloyme Shvartsman?” The Shvartsmans were a wealthy family in Mezhbisch. My brother said, “What do you think he does here? He sells pickles on Hester Street.” In the middle of the meeting a man and woman came in. They had diamonds on their fingers. Everyone stood up and applauded. My brother said, “Do you remember him?” I said no. He said, “This is the guy who used to go around on market day with a barrel organ and a canary. He was supposed to bring good luck. For ten kopeks the peasant girls would try to get good luck from the organ player. Now he’s a big manufacturer in New York. I also knew his wife in Mezhbisch. Right now they’re just back from a long trip. People went to meet their ship with flowers.” When people stopped applauding, he gave a $30 donation. Then I understood why they were applauding.125

The point was not just to see the mighty fallen and the lowly risen up, but that they understood the correct use of money, presumably because they too had once needed community charity.

When Esther Shechter wrote her autobiography for YIVO’s 1942 contest, she used the opportunity to express the issues that were of greatest importance to her. She saw her life as emerging from the Jewish modernizing movements of the 19th century, allowing her to be both a fully realized person and to remain committed to Jewish life, and in particular to Yiddish culture. She was cognizant of how being a woman had constrained her and proud of how she had struggled to release herself from these constraints. In writing her story, she not only described the social action she considered every citizen’s duty, she also enacted it by adding to the storehouse of Yiddish culture.

125 YIVO manuscript, RG 102, folder 55, unnumbered additional pages.
Finally, let us consider the role Shechter played in the Yiddish literary ecosystem. As we have seen, memoirs by single-book authors are common in Yiddish. While men wrote many times more memoirs than women did, a substantial body of autobiographical writing by women does exist in Yiddish. Memoirs by non-literary authors could be considered a useful service to Jewish history, as Shechter intended hers to be, and also embodied the ethic of involved citizenship which Shechter embraced. The framing and format of the YIVO contest encouraged both these motivations.

Shechter’s writing was an integrated part of her work on behalf of Yiddish culture, particularly the culture of text and publishing. In her young adulthood in Mezhbish and Odessa, she subscribed to literary endeavors, was a member of lending libraries, and herself printed Yiddish texts in her print shop. In Canada, where there was no tradition of women printers, she undertook other commercial activity on behalf of Yiddish publishing. She collected subscriptions to Yiddish newspapers, and helped the local Yiddish newspaper survive by selling its commercial typesetting and printing services. She also promoted newspaper and book publishing through informal activities. Her letters to the editor urging people to read, praising individual books, decrying the loss of Yiddish literacy, and supporting the artistic freedom of writers such as Sholem Asch, all work towards sustaining Yiddish literary culture. She maintained close connections with institutions and individuals involved in each aspect of Yiddish print culture: publishers, printers, distributors, and readers. She was closely associated with the *Yidishe vort*, which was both a publisher and a printing house. She worked for People’s Book Store, which distributed books; its owners, Berl and Bertha Miller, also occasionally published Yiddish books. She supported the Jewish People’s Library, which increased the availability of books and periodicals in the North End. She was a member of a reading circle, a group of women devoted
to the betterment of themselves and their culture through grappling with serious Yiddish literature. None of this was merely ideological. Shechter was an avid reader, as her newspaper-filled summer kitchen attests. She wrote knowledgeably about current books and followed controversies in literary culture.

Approximately fifty Yiddish books were published in Winnipeg between 1914 and 1974. Besides Shechter’s, the only other book written by a woman was a small edition of the Hebrew poet Rahel, published in Yiddish translation by Pioneer Women in 1931. As an active member of Pioneer Women, Shechter was almost certainly involved in the publication of that volume. One other memoir was published that emerged from the YIVO autobiography contest: Falik Zolf’s Af fremder erd [On foreign soil], which he published in 1945. There were no other Yiddish books published in Western Canada written by women who lived in Western Canada. In fact, there were only nine Yiddish women authors to emerge from or spend significant time in Western Canada, and she is the only one to have published a memoir. Shechter may have been influenced by the publication of Rahel’s book, by Zolf’s YIVO-generated memoir, by the publishing activities of her friends the Millers, and by the general upswing in Jewish

126 These women are: Rivke Golumb-Savitski (essayist); Pearl Akselrod-Weissenberg (prose writer and editor); Ida Tilles (journalist); Bella Lipkin (non-fiction writer); Sheva Zucker (essayist and editor); Brukhe Kopstein (poet); Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein (poet and dramatist); Esther Shechter (memoirist); and Miriam Knapheys (poet and journalist). For information on the first eight women, see Fox, Hundert yor Yidishe un Hebreishe literatur in Kanade, 1980; information on Knapheys is found in Berl Kagan, Leksikon fun Yidish-shraybers mit hesofes un tikunim tsun Leksikon fun der nayer Yidisher literatur, un 5,800 psevdonimen [Encyclopedia of Yiddish writers with additions and corrections to the Encyclopedia of New Yiddish Literature, and 5,800 pseudonyms] (Nyu-York : R. Ilman-Kohen, 1986), http://archive.org/details/nybc213586.

127 Yet. Sheva Zucker may yet be prevailed upon to write a full-length memoir. Her autobiographical essays have appeared in Yiddish in the magazine Afn shvel [On the threshold] and in English in the chapbook Faith Jones and Richard Menkis, eds., A Ruekn Zhum = A Gentle Sound: Yiddish as Experience in Canada, in Honour of Seymour Levitan (Vancouver: Association for Canadian Jewish Studies = Association d’études juives canadiennes, 2008). The best-known of the Western Canadian Yiddish women writers, poet Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein, seems to have not left any autobiographical writing at all, unless you count the poems themselves.
autobiography. She may have been aware of the ways in which she was both fully in tune with the trends of secular Yiddish culture, yet also quite unique in providing a perspective that had not been heard before.

Shechter was humble about her abilities as a writer. Her appreciation of the talent required to write a literary text is evident, and she makes no claims to having those talents. But she may also have used her status as a reluctant writer to allow herself greater freedom in controlling her story. She does not feel compelled to include all subjects, and fails to deliver conventional narratives or conclusions. Her status as amateur releases her from the necessity of creating a text that conforms to expectations or has clear literary antecedents or goals. For all its lack of pretension, Shechter’s text is canny in how it at times mimics and at other times discards standard discourses about Jewish history, immigration, marriage, children, and the autobiographical self. The text is completely of a piece with its time; yet it is completely unique.

Yet, although she was not a literary writer and did not have pretentions of art in her writing, she did see herself as the star and centre of her life story, which makes her autobiography more compelling than many others. Rather than hewing to a narrative in which her experiences reflect an overarching story of Jewish immigration, Shechter’s egotism allowed her to present the vividness of subjective responses to experiences. She did not see herself or present herself as a representative of the Jewish immigrant experience, and thus fails to conform to expectations the YIVO contest framers apparently held. Even today, her work remains spookily different. She places her own thoughts and feelings at the centre of her text; she knows herself to be interesting. The rarity of Yiddish book publication in Western Canada, and especially of books authored by women, was certainly known to her. That she decided to make her own life story the single Yiddish
memoir to emerge from a Western Canadian Jewish woman is indicative of the value she placed in herself.
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Appendices

Appendix A  YIVO Autobiography Contest Announcement


[281]

A Contest for Immigrant Autobiographies

The Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) has drawn up a contest for the best essay on the topic of:

Why I Left the Old Country

and What I Have Achieved in America.

In all of Jewish history it is hard to find as great a transformation as the mass immigration to America of the last 60-70 years. In the United States alone a Jewish community of over 5 million people has grown up. There has also been a huge effect on the lives of European Jews due to their ties with America. Jewish historians have written of this, and there are also a number of memoirs, some of them very important. However, the majority of immigrants, those who themselves suffered and who recreated from scratch personal lives and community institutions in the new land—they have been heard from very infrequently. This is a great hindrance to scholarship.

The Yiddish Scientific Institute, which has for more than 16 years concerned itself with researching Jewish life, now is drawing up a contest for the best essay on the topic of: Why I Left the Old Country and What I Have Achieved in America. Any adult Jew, male or female, can
take part in this contest, as long as they were not born in the United States or Canada. Level of education, social status, occupation, and political affiliations do not matter; lack of experience writing is also no obstacle to taking part in the contest, or even winning first prize.

The top twenty-five entries the prizes will be: first place, $100; second place, $70; third place, $40; fourth place $30; fifth and sixth place, $20; seventh to twenty-fifth place, a volume of one of YIVO’s publications. The essays must be sent to the Yiddish Scientific Institute by September 1, 1942.

The essays should be detailed, precise, and true.

Detailed: describe each item in all its particulars. Don’t think that “minutiae” is not important. Of course, cliches about “difficult situations” and “how hard life is” are of little interest.

Precise: Don’t go on and on. Don’t use flowery language.

True: You must not tell tall tales in the hopes of making your story “more interesting.” But at the same time, you shouldn’t hesitate to tell your true experiences.

Your essay should be no less than 25 composition book-sized pages long; if longer, all the better. Endeavor to write as simply and cleanly as possible. Only write on one side of the paper.

Each writer is free to present the material how he wishes. However, we believe the simplest would be to write in chronological order. You may also choose what to include. Nonetheless, we would like to mention a few points that are worth touching on:
The writer: age, brothers, sisters. Relationships between family members. What purpose parents had in mind. When began to work. How they learned a trade. What occupation(s) held in the old country, and if marriage had a relationship with changing financial situation. Spiritual life in the old country (religion, traditions, reading, organizations, etc). How they chose to immigrate; who was upset and who helped with immigration. The debt of immigration and the trip itself. First impressions of America: how they got themselves organized, and who helped. Occupation from then until now, work and unemployment, strikes. Changes in financial and spiritual life. Taking part in organizations. Connections with the old country, if sent help back, if brought someone over. Children, their education, what they do now. Relations between parents and children. Do the children know Yiddish. What goals the writer has for any children still at home. What does the writer think about they and their children’s achievements in America. What life event made the greatest impression on the writer.

If the writer at any time kept a diary, or if he has other essays, letters, or similar items, he should send them in as well.

You may write in whatever language you like. On the essay you should only write your age and sex, but not name and address. Sign the essay with a pseudonym or a symbol. The same pseudonym or symbol should be written on an envelope. On a slip of paper put your full name and address. Put this in the envelope and seal it. The envelope will be opened after the winners have been chosen.

The names of all winners will be announced in YIVO publications and in newspapers, unless the participants do not wish to be named.
YIVO assures you that all material sent in will be held in confidence. Only selected researchers will have access to this material. If YIVO decides to publish an essay, it will only be done with the agreement of the author.
## Appendix B  Memoirs of Women Written in Yiddish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glikl of Hamlin</td>
<td>Zikhroynes</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>written in late 17th/early 18th century; published in Germany 1896 in Western Yiddish. Translated into modern standard Yiddish in 1967.</td>
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<td>Thomashefsky, Bessie</td>
<td>Mayn lebns-geshikhte</td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>actor</td>
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<td>Kalich, Bertha</td>
<td>“Fun may lebn: zikhroynes”</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>actor; memoirs serialized in Der tog, March 7-May 27, 1925.</td>
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<td>Kaminska, Ester-Rokhl</td>
<td>Briv fun Ester-Rokhl Kaminska</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>collection of letters; posthumous book</td>
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<td>Shulner, Dora</td>
<td>Azoy hot es pasirt, 1905-1922</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>fiction writer and critic; memoir pub. In Chicago by Radom Ladies' Auxiliary; second book 1956</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rubin, Rivka</td>
<td>Yidishe froyen: fartseykhenungen</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>fiction writer and critic; this book seems to be a mix of stories and actual memoirs</td>
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<td>Bergner, Hinde</td>
<td>In lange vinter nekht</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>published posthumously, written in the late 1930s</td>
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<td>Chagall, Bella</td>
<td>Brenendike likht</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>published posthumously</td>
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<td>Viderman, Hanah</td>
<td>Umetike shmeykh</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Canadian (Montreal). Book is a collection of essays, some of them memoirs; second book 1960</td>
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<td>Chagall, Bella</td>
<td>Ersh t bagegenish</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>published posthumously</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fuks, Tania</td>
<td>A vanderung iber okupirte gebitn</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Holocaust memoir</td>
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<td>Zerubavel, Fryda</td>
<td>Na va-nad: fartseykhenungen fun a pleyte</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Holocaust memoir</td>
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<td>Edelman, Fannie</td>
<td>Der shpigl fun a lebn</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Translated as The Mirror of Life in 1961</td>
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<td>Holtman, Rokhl Kirsch</td>
<td>Mayn lebns-veg</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>immigrant story</td>
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<td>Kikhler-Zilberman, Lenah</td>
<td>Mayne kinder</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Holocaust memoir. Original in Polish (poss. unpub. ms.) See also 1962 title--same book?</td>
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<td>Kahan, Shoshanah</td>
<td>In fayer un flamen</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Holocaust memoir</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>Sheyver, Ema</td>
<td>Mir zayen do! Ayndrukn un batrakhtungen fun a bazukh bay der sheyres ha-pleytesh</td>
<td>1949</td>
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<td>Bas-Meltzer, Esther</td>
<td>In di negl fun umkum</td>
<td>1950</td>
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<td>Medem, Gina</td>
<td>A lebnsveg: oytobiografishes notitsn</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Journalist; second volume published 1963</td>
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<td>Shomer Bashelis, Rose &amp; Shomer Zunzer, Miriam</td>
<td>Undzer foter Shomer</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Memoir of their father; see Bashelis book 1955</td>
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<td>Shechter, Esther</td>
<td>Di geshikhte fun mayn lebn</td>
<td>1951</td>
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<td>Grober, Chayele</td>
<td>Tsu der groyser velt</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>actor; second book 1968</td>
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<td>Teitelboim, Dora</td>
<td>Mitn ponem tsum lebn</td>
<td>1952</td>
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<td>Bat-Jaim [Bas-Khayim]</td>
<td>Ikh hob gehat a kanser</td>
<td>1954</td>
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<td>Rakovsky, Puah</td>
<td>Zikhroynes fun a Yidishe revolutsyoner</td>
<td>1954</td>
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<td>Lee, Malka</td>
<td>Durkh kindershe oygn</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>poet</td>
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<td>Shomer Bashelis, Rose</td>
<td>Vi ikh hob zey gekent: portretn fun bavuste idiske perzenlikhkaytn</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Personal memoirs of famous Jews</td>
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<td>Vertheym, Meta</td>
<td>Mayn rayze keyn medines yisroel</td>
<td>1956</td>
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<td>Shulner, Dora</td>
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<td>1956</td>
<td>Collection of brief memoirs and anecdotes, most autobiographical. See also book 1942.</td>
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<td>Elbaum-Dorembus, Khaia</td>
<td>Oyf der Arisher zayt</td>
<td>1957</td>
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<td>Adler, Celia</td>
<td>Tsili Adler dertseylt</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>actor</td>
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<td>Szereszewska, Helena</td>
<td>Tsvishn tseylem un mezuze</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Holocaust memoir</td>
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<td>Broderson, Sheine-Miriam</td>
<td>Mayn laydns-veg mit Moyshe Broderzon</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Memoir of her husband, Moyshe Broderzon; their Holocaust and Soviet suffering</td>
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<td>Dayan, Deborah</td>
<td>In glik un in troyer</td>
<td>1960</td>
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<td>Alte heym un kinder yorn</td>
<td>1960</td>
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<td>Szyfman, Nusia &amp; Inia</td>
<td>Dos lebn nokh far mir</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Letters from camps and ghettos written by two sisters</td>
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<td>Kalisz, Ita</td>
<td>A rebishe heym in amolikn Poyln</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<td>1963</td>
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<td>Federber-Salz, Bertha</td>
<td>Un di zun hot geshaynt</td>
<td>1965</td>
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<td>Kopstein, Brocha</td>
<td>Yom-tov un vokh in Yisroel</td>
<td>1965</td>
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<td>Rolnikayte, M. (Masha Rolnik)</td>
<td>Ikh muz dertseyln</td>
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<td>Greenblatt, Aliza</td>
<td>Baym fentster fun a lebn</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>poet &amp; Zionist activist; experimental format</td>
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<td>Huberman, Hayah</td>
<td>Tsurikgemishte bletlehkh</td>
<td>1966</td>
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<td>In roykh fun Bzshezshinki</td>
<td>1966</td>
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<td>1968</td>
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<td>1968</td>
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<td>Patt, Sarah</td>
<td>Lebn un shafn: 60 yor arbet far Yidisher kultur un kunst in Amerike</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>sculptor</td>
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<td>Londyn, Helen</td>
<td>In shpigl fun nekhtn</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Left-wing movement</td>
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<td>Leimenzon-Engelshtern, Ruth</td>
<td>Farshtribn in a shayer: 15er may 1944-19ter yuli 1944</td>
<td>1972</td>
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<td>Shekhter-Widman, Lifshe</td>
<td>Durkhgelebt a velt</td>
<td>1973</td>
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<td>Varshever tsavoes</td>
<td>1974</td>
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<td>Kinder in geto</td>
<td>1974</td>
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<td>Oyf vegn un umvegn</td>
<td>1974</td>
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<td>Bennett, Feiga Rohel</td>
<td>Dos iz mayn lebn</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Australian</td>
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<td>Baym letstn veg: in geto varshe oyf der Arisher zayt</td>
<td>1977</td>
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<td>Lipshitz, Shifra</td>
<td>Khaloymes un virklekhkayt: Biro-Bidzshan un arbets-lagern</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Labour camps in Birobidzhan</td>
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<td>Yorn fun payn un nisoyen</td>
<td>1980</td>
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<td>In umkum un oyfshtand</td>
<td>1980</td>
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<td>Zaynen yorn gelofn</td>
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<td>In di negl fun toyt</td>
<td>1985</td>
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<td>Fagel, Elvire</td>
<td>An oysgeleyzt lebn</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Soviet. Writer's only book. WorldCat records split on question of genre (biography or novel).</td>
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<td>Di ershte helft lebn</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<td>Lema'an yed'u</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Two short Holocaust memoirs, one by a woman.</td>
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<td>Gorshman, Shira</td>
<td>In di shpurn fun Gdud ha-avodah</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>memoir of doing heavy labour in Palestine pre-statehood</td>
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<td>Besaraber motivn</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>author was a writer; this book contains both stories and memoirs</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>&quot;remembrances&quot;</td>
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<td>Ikh gedenk</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>poet</td>
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<td>Unter shvartse fligl</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<td>Mentshn vos flantsn blumen</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>Antlofn di letste minut</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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