THE VANCOUVER PERETZ INSTITUTE YIDDISH LIBRARY:
THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF A JEWISH COMMUNITY LIBRARY

by

Faith Jones

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Department of _Library, Archival and Information Studies_

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Vancouver Peretz Institute Library, a Yiddish language library housed in a secular humanist Jewish community centre. The organization provides supplementary schooling for children, and holds seniors' groups, adult classes, and special events. In this thesis the organization's library is placed in the context of Yiddish library history, the history of the Yiddish secular school movement, and the mainstream Jewish community in Vancouver. Attention is given to the organization's founding in 1945, and its creation of the library in 1976, as well as its relationship to the Vancouver Jewish community and other organizations in the Yiddish cultural movement, such as YIVO and the National Yiddish Book Center. The school's philosophy was highly influenced by the Holocaust and its destruction of much of Yiddish-speaking Jewry; by the left-wing affiliations of many members and much of the Yiddish cultural community; and by the emergence of McCarthyism in Vancouver's Jewish community. The library emerged from the personal vision of a member who is a Holocaust survivor, Paulina Kirman. Although never heavily used, and although financial difficulties are a constant factor in the organization, the library has been maintained due to the institute's attachment to Yiddish culture. The future of community Yiddish libraries such as this one is examined in light of technical and social factors, including cataloguing and preservation difficulties and the development of a Yiddish literary canon. Finally, the Vancouver Peretz Institute Library is placed in the context of the larger issue of the role of Yiddish in modern Jewish identities. Although usage of the Yiddish language is in decline, the continuation of this library illustrates the symbolic role which it continues to play in the imagination of Diaspora Jews. The marginality of Yiddish appeals especially to those with emotional connections to secular, left-wing, and other minority Jewish identities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chapter One
Introduction

This research was undertaken to explore the historical and social construction of a small Jewish institution, the Vancouver Peretz Institute, and in particular its library, which came into being within a small Jewish community in Western Canada. The unique situation of this organization and its continuing mission to provide Yiddish culture to the few members of Vancouver's Jewish community who consider it their spiritual if not their actual mother tongue is a fascinating story. The Library is the last such community-based Yiddish repository in Western Canada, in a city with fewer than 600 people who report an ability to speak Yiddish (reading ability in Yiddish may be much smaller, for a variety of reasons).[1] The organization has also suffered its ups and downs due to political pressures and financial matters—which sometimes have been intertwined. Nevertheless, this organization has been tenacious not only in managing to survive but also in continuing to provide the programs and services appropriate to its mandate as a Jewish secular humanist organization.

The Vancouver Peretz Institute Library evolved from the vision of its individual creators, whose unique contributions to cultural life in Vancouver have gone almost entirely unacknowledged. The organization is in the process of building a new facility which will include a purpose-built library and is attempting to secure funding for retroactive acquisitions of reference materials from the National Yiddish Book Center.

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[1] Statistics Canada, "Population by Detailed Mother Tongue (156) and Sex (3), Showing Age Groups (15A), for Canada, Provinces, Territories and Census Metropolitan Areas, 1991 and 1996 Censuses (20% Sample Data)," CD-ROM *Nation Series,* 1996.

With these improvements, the Library could become a scholarly centre of Yiddish study on the West Coast of Canada. Therefore, it seems an appropriate time to create a history of the Library; in any event, such an undertaking will be impossible within a few years when the last surviving founders, whose memories alone are the organization's history, have passed away.

I hope this project will be of use to researchers across disciplines and for a variety of purposes. The Vancouver Peretz Institute itself may wish to use this study as part of its process to move the Library, and the organization as a whole, in a new direction. It may also provide a window into a little-studied aspect of local history, both in terms of the Jewish community and more generally the voluntary and non-profit organizations which have contributed to civil life. The Jewish secular school movement, which reached across Canada and the United States, has not been studied in as much depth and detail as might be wanted, and I hope this very local and particular study will illustrate at least how the variety of experiences could be dictated by local circumstance. Finally, librarians and archivists, whose work is so central to the maintenance of culture, whether in the majority language or a small immigrant group, will I hope find something inspiring in the picture which emerges of the cultural activists, of both the past and the present, who created and maintain this endangered-language library against incredible odds.

Previous research

The Vancouver Peretz Institute has no written history. Anniversary booklets have been published in 1952 for the fifth anniversary of the purchase of its first building; in 1985/86 for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the organization; and in 1995/96 for

the 50th anniversary. These sources provide members with major dates, photographs, and observations on the history of the school, and are the most accessible factual resource on the topic for both members and researchers. They also provide a glimpse into the self-image of the school and its mode in creating its own history. In the early 1990s, a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at UBC, Josette McGregor, prepared to do a curriculum study of the Peretz children's programs. She conducted extensive interviews and assembled a listing of events in the life of the school and contextualizing historical events from the years preceding the school's formation, specifically those regarding Yiddish activity in Vancouver. Ms. McGregor's doctorate has not been completed but my access to the rich body of raw material she assembled has been most helpful. While I have made use of transcripts and other written materials she left with the Peretz Institute or with individuals, my research and hers are rather different in nature and I have not attempted to analyze Peretz curriculum. I am deeply indebted to Ms. McGregor, whom I have not met, for the materials she gathered and the sensitivity of her interviews.[2]

In related studies, Sharon Gubbay's thesis for McGill's Faculty of Education, which traces the early history of Montreal's Jewish Public Library, provides a model for studying the community Yiddish library in Canada. This is the only other research I could locate on such a library. Gubbay concentrates her study on the founding phase of the library, which preceded the Peretz Institute by over thirty years and therefore had quite a different trajectory. The situations of the Vancouver and Montreal Jewish communities, and the place of Yiddish within them, are also not comparable for a variety of reasons.

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[2] While many of Ms. McGregor's interview transcripts remain the property of the interviewees, I have placed several folders of non-confidential information with the Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia to facilitate further research. This material includes Ms. McGregor's extensive listing of events and dates.

However, the emphasis which Ms. Gubbay places on the multiple contexts in which the library operates—within Montreal's economic forces, within an international Yiddish movement, and within Quebec's public library history—is similar to the contextualizing which my own study demanded. Among the themes which emerge in her study are the conflicts between Jews of different classes in Montreal's community, which led to a separation that was both linguistic and economic. The Yiddish-speaking, working-class new immigrants had little connection to the more established, English-speaking, affluent and middle-class Jewish community. Since these parts of the community lived in different areas of the city, separate institutions sprang up which, while serving the needs of the community more adequately, also served to extend the period of non-integration of the two forces. Montreal's thriving Yiddish literary life, which grew from the working-class immigrant community, became a major factor in the establishment of the library. Literary culture, including literacy training and author readings, were important to this community philosophically as well as practically, and the library became a central location for this kind of work. Even within this rich breeding ground for such an institution, much dedication and hard work were needed to establish and maintain the library, and on several occasions it came close to financial disasters which were only prevented by individual sacrifice.[3] These themes resonated with my own work.

Another thesis which deals with Yiddish language libraries, though they are research and not community libraries, is Sandra Schwartz Abraham's comparative study of four libraries of European Jewish studies. These libraries—the Weiner Library in London, the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris, Yad Vashem in

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[3] Sharon Rachel Gubbay, "The Jewish Public Library of Montreal, 1914-1952" (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1983).

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Jerusalem and YIVO in New York—have varying degrees of Yiddish holdings and different attitudes towards Yiddish librarianship. Three of the four libraries were created in response to the Holocaust, and the fourth, YIVO, which was founded in Lithuania in 1925, was forced to relocate to New York during the war. Their locations in four different countries have also affected their work, with YIVO maintaining the greatest commitment to Yiddish. (This is perhaps attributable to a number of factors, including its location in New York which remains a centre for Yiddish culture, and its roots in the Old World which demand a more complete institutional identification with the culture in which it was created). Ms. Abraham focuses on the forms and modes in which history is transmitted through the different libraries.[4]

Methodology

The Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia has compiled an admirable collection of taped interviews with local Jewish residents. This collection was searched for topics such as the Vancouver Peretz Institute, Yiddish, secularism, and Jewish education. The recollections of these residents, many of whom have died since the tapes were made, provided in many cases information which was not available through any other source. A few documents held in the JHS archives were also useful, although the bulk of material on the Peretz Institute is maintained by the school itself. These files were made available to me through the VPI Board.

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[4] Sandra Schwartz Abraham, "Views of Jewish History: A Comparative Study of Libraries Focusing on the European Jewish Community" (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1975).

The *Jewish Western Bulletin* provided many items of interest which had been forgotten by Peretz members. Until 1953, all local Jewish organizations and clubs had the right to submit notices of events, elections, committees, etc. to the *Bulletin*. These items were usually printed without editorial intervention, and thus provide a snapshot of each organization's functioning. Longer news articles regarding the founding of the school, Yiddish-language activities in Vancouver, the role of Jewish education, the emergence of serious rifts within the community, and other related topics were also extremely important in helping to create a picture of the Jewish community during the 1940s and 50s. Issues of the *Bulletin* after 1962 were less useful because of tighter editorial control and the political repression of left-wing groups, who were no longer allowed to place notices in the *Bulletin*.

Many individuals responded to questions, either in person or by e-mail, regarding specific aspects of the project, drawing on professional knowledge and experience. These individuals were primarily librarians and library staff, but included others with knowledge in my research areas.

Oral interviews were most important to this project. These interviews with people who were directly connected to the Vancouver Peretz Institute gave this project the most lively and vivid accounts, and served to point out differences between Peretz members, as well as commonalities between them. In particular, a feeling for the organization's mandate, attitudes, and ambience arose from these accounts, making this work more textured and nuanced than the documents alone allowed for. In cases where anonymity was requested by the interview subject, I have disguised names and deleted some material which could identify the subject. These changes have been made carefully and, I hope, do

not distort the comments made but only serve to protect the privacy of those involved. Although I had hoped to append interview transcripts to this work, I found that my interviewees were uncomfortable with this. I have therefore included in the text a fair amount of the interview with Paulina Kirman, as I feel her life story is important to understanding the context of the library's creation.

Finally, I should mention that much of my research has been a process of watching and waiting—in fact, research by hanging around with my research subjects, the people and the library of the Vancouver Peretz Institute. By observing the collection and the use it is put to I have been able to formulate some ideas regarding the relationships between Yiddish, the library, the organization's members and the organization's identity as a whole which I could not have understood through any other method.

A Note on Spelling and Transliteration

Throughout this work I have used Canadian spelling conventions, and have attempted to make direct quotes conform to Canadian spelling, except where to make the necessary changes would be distracting to the reader.

Yiddish transliteration provides many difficulties, some of which are explained and explored in Chapter Five of this work. I have attempted to follow YIVO standard transliteration in the text of my work, except in direct quotes and in proper names where common spellings are established (such as I.L. Peretz). Rules of standard transliteration can be found in the prefatory material to Uriel Weinreich's *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* (New York: Schocken and YIVO, 1977).

Chapter Two
The History of Yiddish Libraries

Early Yiddish Library History

The Yiddish language has been around for about a thousand years, and in that whole time only about 60 years—1880 to 1940—were good ones for Yiddish libraries.

Yiddish is a language unique to the Jews of Europe, western Asia and parts of the Middle East. It evolved around 1000 CE in an area called Loder, now in southwestern Germany. To the German base was added Hebrew words pertaining to Jewish customs, religious life, and other areas not shared with the dominant culture. Over time, as Jews moved east, more Slavic elements, both vocabulary and pronunciation, were added. Its grammar changed over time as well, and eventually it lost its mutual intelligibility with standard German, forming a separate language.[1]

East European Jews usually spoke several languages, including the dominant language surrounding them, but used Yiddish at home and among themselves. Thus, a Jew from the Ukraine would speak Ukrainian when dealing with non-Jewish neighbours but Yiddish at home or when communicating with a Jew from Poland. German and other Central European Jews once spoke Old Yiddish but by the modern period were fully assimilated and spoke German in the home. Western, Southern and Northern European Jews never spoke Yiddish, except those who were recent immigrants from Eastern Europe. Yiddish has never been the official language of any nation, although the Soviet Union allowed for Yiddish as a second official language within its Jewish Autonomous

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[1] Yiddish has continued to change in this century, incorporating English words as an essential element of North American Yiddish, and continuing to simplify grammatically. It is often compared to English in its grammatical deviations from German and in its ability to absorb vocabulary from a wide variety of source languages. See Weinreich, below, as the definitive work in this field.

Region (more commonly known as Birobidzhan) for some decades. This official status, however, was not matched by a political will to empower Yiddish culture and therefore its use even within the region was similar to parts of the world where Yiddish had no official status. Given the history of expulsions, landlessness and, later, pogroms which surrounded the majority of Yiddish-speaking Jews at all times in history, it is not hard to see why there were few Yiddish libraries:

> ...all kinds of writings in Yiddish are included in Old Yiddish
> literature: poetry and prose, fictional and practical notations, pious
> didacticism and mere entertainment.... Not all that was created
> became literature: it was not recorded; it led an oral existence as
> folklore for a while or just passed away with the current of the day.
> Of that which was recorded in writing, the largest part was
> permanently lost, mainly from the days before the printing press.
> Up to the modern period Jews could not have their own public
> libraries, and there were no kings who would include Yiddish
> books in their sumptuous collections; in case of a fire or an
> expulsion undoubtedly scrolls of the Torah and folios of the
> Talmud were saved in preference to writings in Yiddish. Even
> printed items in Yiddish were completely lost.[2]

Up until the 1860s, Modern Yiddish was primarily used in print as the language of Jewish journalism. Mendele Moykher-Sforim ("Mendel the Book-Peddler," a pseudonym for S.Y. Abramovitsh, who up until then had written only in Hebrew) wrote the first serious literature in Modern Yiddish in 1864. Within only a few years, original Yiddish-language novels, short stories, poetry and plays were published, and classic works from other European languages were published in translation. With the boom in publishing, which coincided with a period of relative stability for Jews in many parts of Europe, Yiddish book collecting began in earnest.

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[2] Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*. Translated by Shlomo Noble with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 273.

A few of these private collections became integrated into public, national or university libraries in those countries most amenable to Jews. In 1880, the Rosenthal family of Amsterdam bequeathed its important collection of rare Old Yiddica—including incunabula and early manuscripts—to the University of Amsterdam. In England, the British Library became a major collector of Yiddish literature at about this time. In 1897, the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library was endowed, and began collecting works in Yiddish and other languages. Later, in 1928, Europe's wealthiest Jewish family, the Rothschilds, donated a huge Judaica library to the city of Frankfurt. In 1932 a Danish professor donated his personal library of 40,000 volumes in Hebrew and Yiddish to the Kongelige Bibliotek (Royal Library) in Copenhagen.[3] In these places, where Jews were well-integrated into mainstream civil life, the late 19th and early 20th century represented a flourishing of scholarship which is reflected in the libraries of the period.

Community Libraries in Eastern Europe

However, in Eastern Europe Jews remained as isolated as ever. Poorer than their Western European counterparts, Jews in Poland and Russia nonetheless had a high level of literacy and were motivated readers. Thus, in the early 1900s, many libraries were established in Eastern Europe by Jewish communities themselves. Some were organized by the nascent labour movement. Others were established by Jewish neighbourhood groups in large cities such as Warsaw, or by the Jewish governing council or *kehillah*.

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[3] Universiteitsbibliotheek van Amsterdam, introduction to *Systematische Catalogus van de Judaica der Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana* (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1965); New York Public Library, "The Jewish Division," *New York Public Library,* February 1996, http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/jws/jewish.html (10 October 1997); Kongelige Bibliotek, "Orientalia and Judaica: The Collection," *Det Kongelige Bibliotek,* 18 Feb. 1997, http://www.kb.bib.dk/kb/geninfo/oja/index-en.htm (17 November 1997); Hilda Uren Stubbings, *Blitzkrieg*

Political parties tended to have their own libraries, with small collections that reflected

their individual philosophies. Libraries also came into being as offshoots of other kinds of

activities. A Yiddish handbill published in Lemberg (later Lvov) during the 1920s invited

"friends of the Yiddish book" to join a library of 3,000 Yiddish volumes held by the Sh.

An-sky Yiddish Dramatic Club.[4] An-sky, an ethnologist who had died in 1920, was best

known for a single dramatic work, "The Dybbuk," which combined elements of Jewish

folklore with a modernist sensibility, and was usually performed in Yiddish. The choice

of his name for the dramatic club shows a kind of cultural negotiation between the world

of Jews and the world of modern Europe. Turning away from Jewish parochialism while

retaining specifically Jewish languages, forms of organization, literary production, and

social relationships was a new development in the life of *shtetlekh*[5] and even urban

Jewish communities. The choice of Yiddish also indicates a political choice between

different ideologies and modes of Jewish thought emerging at this time:

> Every Jewish club, association, union or party headquarters had its own
> library. The size of the library was quite often an indication of the
> influence a particular group had on the young people. Most of the books in
> these libraries were in Yiddish, with some in Hebrew and Polish. The
> Zionist and pro-Zionist organizations had, of course, more Hebrew books.[6]

In the 1920s *shtetl* life also felt the impact of new ideas about young people.

Jewish tradition holds age 12 for girls and age 13 for boys to be the onset of adulthood:

the Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, promoted the idea that the teenage years were an

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and Books: British and European Libraries as Casualties in World War II* (Bloomington, IN: Rubena
Press, 1993).
[4] E. Lifschutz, "Selected Documents Pertaining to Jewish Life in Poland, 1919-1939," in *Studies on Polish
Jewry*, 1919-1939 ed. Joshua A. Fishman (New York: YIVO, 1974), 290.
[5] *shtetl*: small town. Plural: *shtetlekh*. Denotes towns in Eastern Europe where the majority of Yiddish-
speaking Jews lived.

important developmental period in themselves. The growth of the Jewish youth

movement in the 1920s led to the formation of many libraries which served, in particular,

the need for higher education which was often closed or extremely limited to Jews. It

may be that use of these libraries was more common among men than women, as certain

traditional ideas about women were slow to dispel. For example, one Jewish woman who

grew up in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century experienced direct male opposition

to female learning:

> Shoshana Lishensky's mother and grandmother favored sending her and
> her sister to learn Russian with a tutor.... Her grandfather, a rabbi, was
> opposed to the plan, however. Her older sister had briefly studied at a
> gymnasium without her grandfather's knowledge, but she had to withdraw
> when he found out. Her grandmother also secretly funded the girls'
> membership in the local lending library.[7]

Through the 1930s libraries in Eastern Europe continued to expand exponentially (see

table 1). There were a number of factors which assisted in this change. The economic

poverty which was rampant throughout the entire region was especially felt by

Jews, who could no longer afford books or education. Subscription libraries, charging a

nominal fee, offered an affordable alternative. In addition, Polish libraries, which had

previously served Jews, began discriminating against Jewish readers because of the

general rise in anti-Semitism accompanying bad economic times, and also because of the

increased pressure placed on the library system by a concomitant rise in usership among

non-Jewish Poles. According to one researcher, women were particularly discriminated

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[6] E. Lifschutz, "Selected Documents Pertaining to Jewish Life in Poland, 1919-1939," in *Studies on Polish Jewry*, 1919-1939 ed. Joshua A. Fishman (New York: YIVO, 1974), 290.

[7] Paula E. Hyman, "Gender and the Jewish Family in Modern Europe," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 33-34.

Table 1: Polish Jewish Library Surveys, 1921-1939

Year	1921	1922	1930	1935	1930s**	1939***
Number of Libraries Surveyed	66	138	748	124	133	251
Type of Libraries Surveyed	Workers'	Workers' & Community	All kinds	Zionist	Bundist	Major Collections
Subscribers	/	23,312	80,000	13,382	15,271	/
Combined Collections	67,000	147,177	860,000	166,522	166,213	1,650,000
% of Books in Yiddish	68%	63%*	/	27%	61%	/

*   73 of the libraries had only Yiddish books.
**   Exact date unknown
*** Survey of pre-war holdings conducted after the war. Major collections defined as holdings of 1,000 or more volumes.

Sources:
Fishman, Joshua A., ed. *Never Say Die!: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*. The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton, 1981.
Shavit, David. *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1997.

against in this area.[8] As a result, Jewish libraries began establishing not only collections

in Jewish languages and on Jewish topics, but general libraries serving all reading needs.

Another factor in the rise of these libraries was the increase in Jewish aid from the United

States, Canada, Argentina, and other established New World communities. Although the

economic depression affected Jews as much as any other North Americans, they were

aware that Jews in the Old World were suffering in much more extreme conditions and

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[8] David Shavit, *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1997), 15. Reasons or justifications for the discrimination against women are not given.

without legal protections as had been won in North America. Books were among the

items shipped to Jewish communities in Poland, especially American imprints in Yiddish.

One of the most important political movements of Eastern European Jews was the

Bund, a

> socialist-democratic party that opposed Zionism and stood for secular
> Jewish nationalism in the Diaspora, international socialism, the
> preservation of Jewish identity, and the advocacy of cultural and religious
> autonomy. It favo[u]red the Yiddish language, which it considered to be
> the symbol of Jewish nationality and the language of the Jewish masses.[9]

It also was a movement which included a sizable number of women, which may account

for another aspect of its relationship to Yiddish, given women's unequal access to

education and particularly to Hebrew.

The cultural wing of the Bund was called the *Kultur-lige*. The Kultur-lige re-

organized a number of small, left-wing libraries into a single unified collection, the

Grosser Library, in 1930. Herman Kruk, a self-taught librarian who became the

acknowledged leader in Yiddish librarianship in Warsaw, was given job of head librarian.

Kruk initiated a service called the *Biblioteken Tsenter*, which assisted smaller libraries in

more remote communities in selection, cataloguing and classification of materials. It also

provided guides to the literature, and published a monthly bulletin as well as pamphlets

for librarians on modern librarianship. Among its innovations were the adoption of a

decimal system and the establishment of an office of reader's advisory.[10]

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[9] Ibid., 9.
[10] Ibid., 27.

Birobidzhan

In the Soviet Union the situation of Jews was somewhat different. An area of the Soviet Far East was designated for Jewish settlement in 1928, and was established as the Jewish Autonomous Republic in 1934 (called both the JAR and Birobidzhan, the name of its capital city). There were several reasons for this move. The Soviet Union was concerned about possible Chinese and Japanese imperial expansion which would endanger the eastern areas which were sparsely populated. A larger population of clearly Soviet citizens was desirable to cement the Soviet hold on this area. Secondly, many regions of the western Soviet Union had historically been strongly anti-Semitic, such as the Ukraine, Crimea and Belorus, and these areas were not receptive to the full citizenship rights granted Jews under Soviet rule. In particular, the rights of Jews to own land—or at least to operate collective farms owned by the state—seemed threatening to the traditional peasantry who were concerned about the lack of arable land. It was hoped that many Soviet Jews would voluntarily remove themselves from these areas to relocate in the JAR. Third, Eastern European Jewry were not heavily involved in agriculture as a result of the economic arrangements of the preceding centuries. The lack of access to farming had created large numbers of tradespeople, small business people, and intellectuals. Although intellectuals were tolerated as long as they adhered to Communist ideology (an increasingly difficult task as official party lines changed regularly during the 1920s to the 1950s), tradespeople and small business owners were seen as bourgeois and lacking in working-class consciousness. Therefore, the JAR was intended to create a class of ideologically respectable peasantry among Soviet Jews. It was also hoped that the creation of a Soviet Jewish homeland would provide a Communist alternative to Zionism,

which was seen as a religious and bourgeois movement. Yiddish was chosen as the

language of Birobidzhan because of its ties to poor and uneducated Jews, unlike Hebrew

which, because it was spoken only by men educated in the religious tradition and the

proponents of Hebrew then active in Palestine, was seen as religious, bourgeois and

Zionist.[11]

The Birobidzhan experiment failed to produce a significant Jewish community in

the region, and also failed to create peasants from the Jewish tradespeople who went

there, because few resources were allocated to train and equip the new farmers.

Therefore, the bulk of Birobidzhan's Jews settled in the city, where a small number

remain to this day. This community created its own institutions, sanctioned by the state,

in newspapers, community centres, schools and other facilities. The regional library was

built in 1934. It was not specifically a Jewish library but contained significant Judaica

holdings, including Yiddish publications. However, after the establishment of the state of

Israel in 1948, Stalin saw any vestiges of Jewish culture as fostering Jewish nationalism

at the cost of a unified socialist proletariat. Various forms of Jewish cultural expression

were shut down, including the Jewish Theatre in Birobidzhan and many Yiddish schools.

As with other aspects of the Stalinist crackdown, Judaica books were destroyed. (The

exact date of this event is unknown, but most likely between 1948 and Stalin's death in

1953).

> [I]n perhaps the most tragic action, local officials burned some thirty
> thousand books from the Judaica collection of the public library. In 1994
> Efim Kudish, a resident of the J.A.R. since 1946, recalled the book

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[11] Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland, An Illustrated History, 1928-1996*. Introduction by Zvi Gitelman. Photographs Edited by Bradley Berman. (Berkeley: University of California Press & Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1998).

burning and how he risked his life by concealing dozens of Yiddish books under his clothes in the library and taking them home for safekeeping.[12]

Yiddish Research Libraries

Side by side with these developments in community libraries was an important change in Jewish intellectual life. In 1925, the most important Yiddish-language library in history was established in Vilna, Poland: the library of *Yidisher Visnshaftlikher Institut* (YIVO), or the Institute for Jewish Research. Vilna was then a medium-sized city in eastern Poland with a large Jewish population, and was a centre of Jewish literature and learning. YIVO was more than just a library: it was the first concerted effort to create a Yiddish-language scholarship of Jewish history and thought. YIVO attracted many of the top Yiddish writers of the day as research fellows. A number of them worked in the acquisition and maintenance of the library, which was at the heart of the organization. The majority of its materials were in Yiddish. YIVO was so successful that in the 1930s branch offices were established in major New World Jewish centres: New York, Buenos Aires, and Sydney, Australia. Vancouver also had a group which collected funds for YIVO, although the size of the Vancouver Jewish community at that time did not allow for any major contribution.[13]

The Vilna YIVO amassed an impressive array of material, and also inculcated an atmosphere of serious research which had not previously been associated with the study of Eastern European Jewry. Although a few anthropologists and folklorists had collected

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[12] Ibid., 84.

[13] A "Local Committee of Jewish Scientific Institute" sponsored a speaking engagement of YIVO librarian Mendl Elkin in 1945 (*Jewish Western Bulletin* 16 February 1945): however, since a Vancouver support organization is never mentioned in YIVO histories it could not have made a major contribution.

materials from the shtetl (including Sh. An-sky who later utilized this raw material in "The Dybbuk"), there had been no concerted effort at investigation into other facets of the social fabric—in fact, in many ways the shtetl Jews had been seen as beneath scholarly consideration, making YIVO's instant success and popularity both unexpected and impressive. The library and archives were among its accomplishments:

> On the main floor, an impressive bibliographic center was housed in a high-ceilinged room with shelves all the way up to the top, layered with neat piles of folders as far as the eye could see. It contained over 220,000 registered items. We took a look into the library stacks, containing some 40,000 books, including rare books. The Press Archives, a separate room, held about 10,000 volumes of Jewish newspapers from many countries and in many languages. Other rooms contained massive archival collections of manuscripts and autographs, of leaflets, pamphlets, and Jewish communal records, some dating back to Vilna's early Jewish history.
>
> [YIVO scholar Zelig] Kalmanovich told me about some of the YIVO's special collections gathered by YIVO committees—folklore materials, Yiddish linguistic and terminological materials, and an archive of over 300 autobiographies of young Jews in Eastern Europe, which served as the basis for sociopsychological research. We looked into the Theater Museum with its permanent exhibit. Artifacts of the Yiddish theater— playbills, posters, and programs, manuscripts and working scripts of Yiddish plays—were collected and displayed here. The public reading room had about six or eight reading tables, each seating four persons. I was impressed that each seat had its own built-in tubular fluorescent lamp—something you didn't have in the main reading rooms of the New York Public Library.[14]

YIVO's was not the only Yiddish-language scholarly collection in Vilna. Lucy Dawidowicz, who studied at YIVO during the 1938-39 academic year, estimated that there were 175 private Jewish libraries in Vilna at that time. Many of these were open to the public and provided research and reference services. The most prominent of these was

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[14] Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938-1947* (New York and London: Norton, 1989), 78-79.

the Strashun Library. Dawidowicz recalled:

> You could see the conflict between the worlds of tradition and modernity played out every day in a kind of dumb show in the reading room of the Strashun Library. I had gone there not just for sightseeing, but to look for material on the Yiddish press in England [her research subject]. Since this great library had no proper catalogue, it took several visits for me to locate, to my surprise and pleasure, three issues of a short-lived Yiddish periodical published in London in 1874, all which I had found no trace of in New York.

> The Strashun Library was open all week and also on Saturday afternoons. On Saturdays you could read the books you had reserved beforehand. The use of pencil or pen was strictly forbidden [in keeping with Jewish religious law forbidding work on the Sabbath]. Because the library was rich in Talmudic and rabbinic works, it was used by pious Jews for advanced study. But the wealth of its holdings in other areas of Judaica also attracted secular scholars and university students. Consequently, on any day you could see, seated at the two long tables in the reading room, venerable long-bearded men, wearing hats, studying Talmudic texts, elbow to elbow with bareheaded young men and even young women, bare-armed sometimes on warm days, studying their texts.[15]

YIVO's Reading Room, Vilna, 1935. Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

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[15] Ibid., 119.

It is interesting to note that the library provided in these cases a meeting ground for Jews who might not otherwise have had much to do with each other. Libraries have often had a democratizing function, and it is especially indicative of the changes in Jewish life that women as well as men had begun to have access to higher education, though in nothing like equal numbers.

The Holocaust and Yiddish Libraries

The Nazi Holocaust killed about 30% of the world's Jews, and about 50% of the world's Yiddish-speakers. Yiddish was already in decline among Jews in the Americas, England, Africa and Australia: the last great strong-hold of the language were the areas now known as Poland, the Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belorus. These are among the areas which sustained the greatest losses in the Holocaust. Most community-based library collections perished with the communities that housed them: however, a frequent story in the narratives of survivors, especially those who were librarians, writers or intellectuals, is the saving and hiding of books or entire collections, even when this put lives at risk. It is also astonishing to note that libraries sprung up, sometimes illegally and sometimes with official permission, to accommodate inmates of ghettos and, later, Displaced Person camps.

Ghetto Libraries

When the German army moved into Poland and Lithuania early in the war, most Jews in large towns and cities were forced into ghettos, small areas of the city from which they could come and go only with permission and during daylight hours. These

ghettos were heavily regulated, with each succeeding month bringing more rules and less

food. Jews were often allowed out of the ghettos to work, especially if their work was

seen as important to the German army in some way. Throughout the occupation the

ghettos were searched for signs of illegal activity, and as more Jews were shipped off to

labour and concentration camps, the boundaries were regularly re-drawn to encompass a

smaller area. Books were among the many items Jews stuck in the ghetto longed for.

Notwithstanding the need to burn books, along with many other possessions, for heat in

the winter months, which destroyed many religious texts as well as secular books, the

desire to read novels and be immersed in a different world for a few hours is a common

theme of ghetto memoirs. At least four ghettos had official libraries: Vilna, Lodz, Kovno

and Warsaw. Theresienstadt also had a library. It was not a ghetto but a deportation

centre for Western and Central European Jews who were slowly being processed for

deportation to the death camps. It became a show centre for the Nazis to convince

gullible outsiders, including the Red Cross, that rumours about the concentrations camps

were untrue. As such, inmates lived longer in Theresienstadt—up to three and a half

years—and had more autonomy than in the ghettos. Theresienstadt had a model library

which, of course, functioned best and had more books available when an international

delegation was expected.

Library activity in each ghetto was determined by local conditions. In Warsaw,

the ghetto was set up relatively early, 1940, and it ended with the Warsaw ghetto uprising

in 1943. All activities of the politicized Jews of Warsaw were closely monitored: almost

any group could be seen as a haven for underground activity. In fact, librarians in general

did not attempt to obtain permits to keep their libraries open in Warsaw because they

were unwilling to reveal the names of political activists or do the other tasks the Nazis might demand in return for a permit. Thus, illegal libraries were the norm in Warsaw, where many private libraries and many millions of Jewish books still remained. Circulation from these libraries was undertaken clandestinely, which entailed runners carrying two or three books at a time, hidden on their body, to subscribers. Some libraries had been sealed and guarded, such as the Grosser Library of the Bund, for political reasons. Bund members managed to enter the Grosser Library secretly to remove as many items as possible to use in an illegal library in the ghetto. They also removed the names of subscribers to avoid the names of left-wing individuals falling into Nazi hands. Meanwhile, the sale of books was a thriving public business: ghetto conditions were not as desperate as in other locations, and ownership of books was possible until the end— they were not burned for heat, for example.

Two individuals who attempted to create extensive libraries were publisher Leib Schur and librarian Batya Temkin. Schur concentrated on adult materials for a library he established in his apartment. He salvaged items from abandoned and ruined libraries and private homes; he bought books on the streets, even when cash was extremely short. Temkin established a children's library in an orphan care facility. While the care facility was legal, the library was not and had to be disguised as a games centre. In addition, among the children in the care facility served by Temkin's library were a number under quarantine for contagious disease and infestations. A special collection was set aside for these children to avoid spreading their illnesses. Temkin and Schur worked together to attempt to recover rare items, and cooperated in many ways to find funds to buy books that were being sold off by destitute owners. However, when the boundaries of the ghetto

were re-drawn during the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Schur's apartment with its thousands of books fell outside the ghetto. Schur would have to move into the ghetto: all his books were to be abandoned, and efforts to shift the books into the ghetto, legally and illegally, were unsuccessful. Rather than move without his books, Schur hanged himself in his apartment. The books were destroyed shortly thereafter. Temkin survived the war working in the underground movement, and became a teacher-librarian in Israel.

A different set of circumstances in Vilna led to quite different results. The ghetto was not set up until 1941, by which time about half the local Jewish population had been killed in the massacres in Ponary forest. As a centre of Jewish learning and literary activity, many prominent writers, intellectuals and performers were interned in the ghetto. A legal ghetto library was established in one of the many research libraries, the Mefitse Haskalah Library. Unlike Warsaw, where private ownership of books was legal as long as they were not considered politically dangerous, in Vilna all books in private ownership were ordered delivered to the ghetto library. Only textbooks and prayer books were allowed to remain in private hands. Herman Kruk, who had escaped from Warsaw only to be interned in Vilna, became the ghetto's librarian, but had to train his staff on the job and arrange materials, many of which had not been part of the original collection. One library patron noted:

> The Gestapo men took out of it rare books and burned the works of Soviet authors. They warned that they will inspect the library often, and if they will find in it "a book with a communist content" they will execute not only the library staff but also a number of people equal to the number of pages in that book.
>
> So that the shelves will not be empty, the ghetto authorities forbade keeping books at home. Everyone was required to give their books to the library, and the library workers were required to be uncompromising that

the books will not disappear, and to demand their return by the readers, even with the help of the ghetto police.[16]

To comply with such searches and threats, the library set up a list of rules:

REGULATIONS FOR THE VILNA GHETTO READING ROOM
1. The Reading Room may be used by all residents of the ghetto regardless of age.
2. Do not bring your own books into the Reading Room.
3. Access to the bookshelves by readers is prohibited.
4. Readers may receive two books at a time and exchange them up to 3 times daily. Scholars may receive as many books as they need.
5. Children may receive only one book and exchange it up to 2 times daily.
6. Children may receive books only on the basis of lists approved by their teachers.
7. Books may not be borrowed from the Reading Room.
8. Scholars may in special circumstances, with the Manager's permission, borrow books.
9. Books may be requested from the Library only until 3:30 p.m.
10. Reading may be done only at the tables.
11. Conversing and reading aloud are not permitted.
12. Walking around the room is strictly forbidden.
13. Do not write any comments on the books.
14. Books must be kept clean; do not fold them and do not stain their pages.
15. Upon leaving, books must be given to the librarian on duty.
16. If you want to reserve a book for a few days you must inform the librarian.
Vilna Ghetto, July 1942   Manager H. Kruk[17]

In other ghettos local conditions likewise caused many variations in library

practice and the availability of books: many official and unofficial channels were used to

maintain reading and culture right up until the final liquidations of the ghettos.

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[16] David Shavit, *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1997), 104.
[17] Zachary Baker, "Vilna ghetto library," mendele@lists.yale.edu Vol. 4.368 (14 Mar. 1995). The second item, which may seem to be in contradiction to the rule about turning over books to the library, was put in

<u>Confiscation of Libraries</u>

During the war, the Nazis seized Jewish art and artifacts from all the territories they occupied, as well as from German Jews, to form the nucleus of a museum which would celebrate the extermination of the Jewish people. The planned Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question seized the Rothschild collection of the Frankfurt Municipal Library, the libraries of the Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Ecole Rabbinique in Paris, and the Rosenthaliana collection at the University of Amsterdam. In 1941, when the German army entered Vilna, YIVO was used as the central depot for the collection of library materials in the region. Several YIVO scholars were forced to catalogue the collected items, to prepare them for shipment to Frankfurt. Among these were the poets Shmerke Kaczerginski, Abraham Sutzkever and Zelig Hirsh Kalmanovich. Kalmanovich attempted to convince the Nazis of the great importance of the works, in order to have as much material as possible preserved in Frankfurt. Kaczerginski and Sutzkever took a different approach: they buried particular treasures in the YIVO basement. Kaczerginski even obtained permission from a Nazi official to bring some materials into the Vilna ghetto, on the pretext that they were useless items to be burned for heating. These were buried beneath houses and gardens in milk cans and other metal containers. During the years of Nazi occupation, YIVO librarians continued the traditional connection between Yiddish libraries and other forms of cultural expression. The librarians smuggled playscripts into the ghetto for illegal theatre performances. Many of them also became resistance workers, smuggling arms and medicine in and out of the ghetto, often working with non-Jewish Lithuanians who could move freely. At times these functions merged,

place to make it impossible to bring forbidden books, such as Soviet literature, into the library and thus endanger all present.

for example, when Sutzkever used the archives as a hiding place for guns, knowing the Nazis were unlikely to look there. These intellectuals also felt the absurdity of working on bibliographic records while the city was under siege, but it did not prevent them from taking the job seriously. When an effort to smuggle a gun appeared to be failing, Sutzkever says, "[e]ven three hitherto unknown letters of Sholem Aleichem's that I found in the pages of an old Talmud did not cheer us up."[18]

For many years it was thought that Kalmanovich had been the more successful in preserving the library. The holdings sent to the planned Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question fell under the control of the U.S. army at the end of the war. Its policy was to return Jewish materials to their countries of origin. To the YIVO scholars, returning plundered Jewish riches to countries emptied of Jews only added to the injustice. With 90% of Poland's Jews killed, and most of the survivors in the Americas or in Displaced Persons camps, there was no real place for Jewish materials in Poland and no community there to appreciate them. Lucy Dawidowicz, while on assignment under the Joint Distribution Committee to locate reading materials for schools in the Displaced Persons camps, came across the YIVO library's holdings in a warehouse in Frankfurt. Calling on a contact in the Library of Congress, Dawidowicz lobbied for the return of YIVO's materials to YIVO in New York, which was now operating as the main branch, along with other items from Vilna's Jewish libraries. The Strashun Library was completely defunct, not having had an overseas branch like YIVO, but due to a pre-war arrangement it had made to merge with YIVO (a plan there was no time to carry out), the Strashun collection was considered YIVO's property. About 25,000 items were shipped

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[18] Abraham Sutzkever, "Never Say This Is the Last Road," in *The Root and the Bough*, ed. Leo W. Schwarz (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1949), 79.

to New York in the end. This number, however, represents only a portion of YIVO's pre-war holdings.[19]

Kaczerginski and Sutzkever survived, escaping with their wives to the Polish forest and fighting as partisans for the last two years of the war. After the war they were able to dig up what items they could locate, and send them piecemeal to the YIVO's New York office. More material than they knew remained in Vilna. Found by the Soviet authorities when they took control of what was now the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic after the war, YIVO's archival material was stored in a basement along with other documents from Vilna's old Jewish quarter. A Lithuanian librarian appears to have taken care of these materials, often protecting them against destruction during the Stalinist crackdown on Jewish culture. In 1989, YIVO scholars learned of the existence of the materials and entered negotiations with Soviet authorities, who were reluctant to allow the materials to leave the country. Lithuanian independence in 1991 did not improve the situation and YIVO continued to lobby for the return of its archives. Eventually, an agreement was struck for YIVO to receive small shipments of materials which would be arranged by its archivists and of which preservation photocopies would be made for YIVO. The materials would then be returned and another shipment made. The first shipment was received in New York in 1995: each shipment contains items which complete partial documents or files already held in New York.[20]

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[19] Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938-1947* (New York and London: Norton, 1989); Jacqueline Borin, "Embers of the Soul: The Destruction of Jewish Books and Libraries in Poland During World War II," *Libraries and Culture* 28, no. 4 (fall 1993), 445-460; Philip Friedman, "The Fate of the Jewish Book During the Nazi Era," in *Jewish Book Annual: Vol 15, 5718/1957-1958*, 3-13 (New York: Jewish Book Council of America, 1958).

[20] "Report From Vilnius: A Firsthand Account," *YIVO News Update* June 1997, 1, 3; Vera Rich, "Jews Seek Return of Historic Manuscripts," *Times Higher Education Supplement* 1260 (27 December 1996), 6; Richard F. Shepard, "Rejoining the Chapters of Yiddish Life's Story," *New York Times* 30 August 1989, C15.

Many other, smaller libraries were saved in a similar way. Several of YIVO's current collections are what remain of former small libraries which were hidden during the war. Among the items recovered is the original list of rules for the Vilna ghetto library, signed by Herman Kruk, who had not survived the war.

Post-Holocaust Libraries and Archives

As a result of the Holocaust, another kind of repository has come into being: the Holocaust memorial collection. Many of these collections are combined libraries and archives, some of them attached to museums. Vancouver's Holocaust Centre is a small institution of this kind: the largest is likely *Yad Vashem* in Israel.

Some collections of materials were created by the Holocaust's victims themselves, even as they were undergoing the most horrific events of their lives. Emmanuel Ringelblum, a Warsaw historian, was determined to create a lasting record of life in the ghetto. He not only recorded events and impressions himself, but also recruited many other intellectuals to make systematic studies of specific events.[21] He was foresighted in realizing that all ghetto experiences were not the same: for example, he initiated a study of women's lives and particularly household finances in the ghetto which has only recently begun to be studied and appreciated for its unique perspective.[22] The Ringelblum Archives are now held at YIVO.

Abraham Sutzkever, in addition to salvaging much of the existing collection of

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[21] Isaiah Trunk, "Religious, Educational and Cultural Problems in the East European Ghettos Under German Occupation," in *East European Jews in Two Worlds: Studies from the YIVO Annual*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and YIVO, 1990), 189-91.
[22] This material was used by various contributors to the recent book *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

YIVO during the Nazi occupation, also collected about 700 original documents of life in the Vilna ghetto. These include items produced by the ghetto's inmates including periodicals and announcements of cultural events and activities for children. There are also official communiqués such as regulations, restrictions, death decrees, conscription and tax notices, identity cards, permits, licenses and ration cards. Items from the underground movement include forged passports, appeals to join the resistance, plans of the city and sewer system, and personal testimonies which Sutzkever later presented during his Nuremberg testimony. This collection is now in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.[23]

In Bialystok, a similar ghetto archive was organized by underground leader Mordechai Tenenbaum. Tenenbaum's documents had to be hidden with a non-Jewish friend, a member of the Polish underground, who safeguarded them through the war and deposited them with *Yad Vashem*.

Places Outside Eastern Europe

In other places outside Eastern Europe, Yiddish libraries were established which resembled in many ways the Eastern European institutions. In Paris, where a large number of Eastern European Jews had migrated during the first twenty years of the century, many of the recently settled Jews retained their political and philosophical ties to Eastern Europe. The Medem Library was set up by the local Bund, a Jewish political

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[23] Rivka Plesser, "Documents from the Vilna Ghetto," *Books & People: Bulletin of the Jewish National & University Library, Jerusalem* 11 (May 1997), 16. For a description of Sutzkever's ghetto activities see Abraham Sutzkever, "Never Say This Is the Last Road," in *The Root and the Bough*, ed. Leo W. Schwarz, 66-92 (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1949).

party associated with labour and left causes in Poland. It was established in 1929 and named after a leader of the Bund, Vladimir Medem. However, during the depression, "problems more pressing than the maintenance of a library"[24] took precedence, including, for example, assisting Jews still in Eastern Europe. As a result, this library took the opposite trajectory from those in Poland in that the 1930s was an era of less activity and use rather than more. However, it followed other parts of the previously described model in that it was connected to many cultural activities, and was part of a political and cultural network rather than an isolated institution. The Medem Library was hidden in a basement during the Nazi occupation of France, and survivors remember many near-misses when the building was searched.

In Canada, Montreal's Jewish Public Library was established in 1914 and was again tied to Old World ideas and the Yiddish cultural life of the city. As with Polish libraries, it was not solely a Yiddish collection but represented the particular political formation within which it operated. Judaica books in English and Hebrew formed important secondary collections at the beginning of its history. However, Yiddish was central to the identity of the library. Irving Massey, whose mother, Ida Maze, was a Yiddish children's poet of the interwar years, writes this of the relationship between Yiddish culture and the Jewish Public Library:

> We lived in what could reasonably be described as a sauna of culture. The public baths, so to speak, were the Jewish Public Library and the Arbeter Ring. Public poetry readings and lectures by members of the group often took place at the latter. The library, around 1934, when I first knew it (we had just moved to Esplanade), had already been transferred from its original location on St. Urbain Street to 4099 Esplanade, near Duluth; it was there, under the guidance of Rachel Eisenberg (later Rachel Ravitch),

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[24] Gernot U. Gabel, "Houses of the Book: The Bibliothèque Medem for Yiddish Language and Literature in Paris," *Judaica Librarianship* 5 no. 2 (Spring 1990-Winter 1991): 228.

that I learned to read extensively, wedged between the narrow stacks and taking down book after book. It was hard for me to tell whether our house was a satellite of the Library or vice versa. Later, the library moved, almost literally, next door to us, to the corner of Mount Royal and Esplanade; but when it was displaced to this larger, more public building, the personal and intimate qualities that it had when it was lodged in what had been a private house were immediately sacrificed. Instead of a beehive or ant-nest of a living culture, it felt like a monument to one that had just been anesthetized and might be presumed moribund. The busy, warm, individualistic atmosphere of the old library was part of what had fostered that culture; the new library was part of a new world, not a living context for its content but a box in which materials perhaps once vital were housed. I believe that my mother's Saturday morning readings for children went on, but the true link between the world of the library and the world of our apartment was broken.[25]

The founders of the Jewish Public Library appear to have been conscious that they were working within a specific library tradition. Although the library was non-partisan, having no ties to a political party or a labour group as many of its predecessors had, it was associated almost entirely with working-class recent immigrants from Eastern Europe who lived in an area of Montreal separate from the established Jewish Community. The ties to Yiddish were strongest among new immigrants, while those of previous waves of immigration felt social mobility required linguistic assimilation. In addition, the new immigrants often found themselves working for the old immigrants, which made for direct clashes in the economic sphere in addition to the generalized loyalties of the two groups to two different sets of class interests.[26] In an institutional history published in 1957, the chapter on the founding of the organization specifically mentions the *folks biblioteken* of Eastern Europe as its antecedent.[27] *Folks bibliotek*

[25] Irving Massey, *Identity and Community: Reflections on English, Yiddish, and French Literature in Canada* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 61.

[26] Sharon Rachel Gubbay, "The Jewish Public Library of Montreal, 1914-1952" (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1983), 58.

[27] *Our Library: 1914-1957* (Montreal: Jewish Public Library, 1957), 11.

means "people's library": the original name of the library was Jewish Public Library and People's University, indicating a link to the Old World terminology as well as to a generally left-wing ideology (if not to any particular form of it).

Circulation figures for the Jewish Public Library indicate that Yiddish books accounted for about 70% of all books borrowed in the first 20 years of operation. Hebrew ran a distant third and Russian, Polish and German constituted a tiny percentage of books borrowed. Later, English and Yiddish circulation figures ran neck-and-neck for many years, until English took a sudden up-turn in 1953. This is partly accounted for by the expansion of children's collections and services. Although Yiddish children's books continued to be borrowed—in fact the sheer numbers rose during the 1950s—the percentage dropped as more English books were acquired and borrowed. The children's librarian continued to provide Yiddish language readings and service in Yiddish until at least the late 1950s.[28]

Libraries such as the Montreal Jewish Public Library are not the norm, however. It is a unique institution which reflects the literary culture of its milieu. In other locations in Canada, as we shall see, a far less intellectual flavour permeates the Yiddish activity of Jewish communities, and libraries were far less central to their community operations. In no location, in Canada or elsewhere, did the Yiddish library function outside of broader cultural concerns. The library was generally an adjunct to serve Yiddish theatre, political life, economic concerns, schools, or as a social adhesive.

[28] Ibid., 53-63.

Chapter Three
The Vancouver Peretz School in Context

The Yiddish Secular School Movement

<u>Roots in Europe</u>

The Yiddish secular school movement had its roots in the new ideas put forth by the left in the late 19th Century. Yiddish secularism was strongly connected to political goals and ideals, and the movement "sought to create an authentic folk culture resting on the daily experiences of the laboring masses rather than on the sacred Hebrew texts of traditional Judaism."[1] The left became associated with Yiddish—although Yiddishism was never solely a left-wing movement—not only because it stood in contrast to Hebrew, with its religious and Zionist connotations, but also because left-wing movements embraced Yiddish. The Bund, although initially taking a solely pragmatic view of Yiddish as a necessary tool for communication, eventually invested Yiddish with a dignity and force of its own. In a party newspaper in 1904 the Bund argued that Yiddish was in and of itself an important part of Jewish proletariat life. This stood in contrast to proponents of the Haskalah who generally regarded Yiddish as a lower form of linguistic expression than Hebrew, although the Haskalah employed Yiddish in its efforts to fight the rise of ultra-orthodoxy. The Bund's efforts did create an appreciation of Yiddish outside its own boundaries:

> In making Yiddish the language of a modern political party and
> stimulating the production of literature in the language, the Bund was
> instrumental in increasing the prestige of Yiddish and in altering the
> attitudes of both the intellectuals and the masses toward it.[2]

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[1] David Weinberg, "Secular Jewish Culture," in *The Modern Jewish Experience: A Reader's Guide*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 105.

[2] Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Rutherford & London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press & Associated University Presses, 1976), 84.

As early as 1908 there were Yiddish-language schools in Warsaw and near Kiev. During World War I normal activities were frequently interrupted, but immediately following the war Yiddish secularism grew exponentially, and with it the Yiddish secular schools. This was especially true in Poland, for a variety of reasons:

> In the first place: there was the fact that a *massif* of several million Yiddish speakers was concentrated in one country. Second, there was the ramified Yiddish press. Third, the deeply entrenched Jewish labo[u]r movement was exclusively Yiddish-speaking. All this was the basis for Yiddish "mass culture," as it was frequently called. Out of this soil kindergartens and elementary schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction sprung up as early as World War I, as soon as the Russian authorities left Poland and Lithuania and the previous restrictions were lifted. In the course of the years, secondary schools, a teachers' seminary, and a technical school were added, in which all studies, Jewish and general, were conducted in Yiddish. These schools, mostly united in the Central Yiddish School Organization, required textbooks; the textbooks required terminologies in fields heretofore barely described in Yiddish, or if so, on a popular, rather than on an exact level.[3]

By the 1930s over 15,000 Jewish children attended all-day Yiddish schools. This number represents about 2½% of the Jewish children in schools in Poland—the vast majority (61%) attended private or government schools that were not Jewish. Nonetheless, this small movement was influential in the United States and Canada, where Yiddish schools became the most widespread.[4] Certain individuals taught in both Eastern Europe and later in North America; ideas also moved freely from Eastern European theorists of Yiddish secularism to North American movements.

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[3] Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 302.

[4] Developments in Russia, Lithuania and other parts of Eastern Europe emerged somewhat later and had little direct impact on the movement in North America, although there was communication and support between the two. I have chosen to exclude them from this study rather than give them incomplete attention.

<u>The United States</u>

In the United States several branches of Yiddish secularism emerged which created different school systems. The regular in-fighting, re-grouping, and changes in philosophy of these movements lead to a confusing cluster of names and associations which can be summed up in a general but far from thorough way:

> In the absence of government restrictions, and spurred by the arrival of the leading spokesmen of secularist thought from Eastern Europe, the American scene became fertile soil for the growth of Yiddish supplementary secular schools.... The beginnings were in 1910 in New York and Montreal, under the name of "National Radical Schools," purporting to offer a "modern" Jewish education, with emphasis on Yiddish language and literature. The initiative came from various political groupings in the non-religious community. By the early 1920s, there were four separate Yiddish school systems, with varying degrees of secular commitment: the non-partisan Sholem Aleichem Institute; the Labo[u]r Zionist; the Workmen's Circle (socialist); and the International Workers Order (communist). There were also a few schools identified as "Borochov," sponsored by the Marxist faction of the Socialist Zionist movement known as Left Poalei Zion.[5]

As this description hints, the degree of commitment to different political issues and secularism was the main difference between these schools. It has been suggested that the initial splinter may have been caused by the question of teaching Hebrew. Left-wing Zionists were interested in both Yiddish and Hebrew as expressions of different aspects of Jewish history and culture; most Yiddishists felt Hebrew, then a dead language, was not useful and that teaching two languages in addition to English imposed too heavy a burden of study on the students. This raised the crucial question of political commitment to Zionism and the already pro-Hebrew stance taken in the *yishuv* (pre-statehood Israel).

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[5] Gershon Winer, "The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism," *Judaism* 161 (41 n. 2; Winter 1992), 84.

It became clear that Zionists could not work side-by-side with anti-Zionists, who believed instead either in the vibrancy of Jewish culture in Diaspora or the promise of Birobidzhan or a similar Jewish national homeland within a communist or socialist framework which encompassed non-Jews. The Sholem Aleichem schools were formed as a result of this split in 1914.

Some schools were anti-religious, viewing ritual observance and faith as mere superstitions uncomfortably reminiscent of the unenlightened *shtetl*.[6] Other schools were simply non-religious, preferring that religion be removed from the public to the private sphere and dealt with as a matter of personal conscience.[7] They believed that rather than religion, Jewish culture and a philosophical commitment to the most progressive principles of Jewish teaching would prevent Jews from assimilating and ensure the continuity of specific forms of Jewish expression. Among the proponents of this point of view was Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky, whose influence was felt among many of the branches of Yiddish secularism and within many of the different schools irrespective of their political alignment. Zhitlovsky, already a well-known socialist writer, first arrived in the United States from Russia in 1904 and quickly became involved in the Workmen's (sic) Circle.[8] The Workmen's Circle was (and is) a secular Jewish organization with affiliations to the labour movement and the moderate, non-aligned left, based in New York. It attempted to serve the wide range of material and cultural needs of secular Jews in Yiddish, with branches providing medical insurance, burial, cultural clubs, and self-

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[6] Ibid., 80.

[7] William Glicksman, "One Man's Opinion Concerning the Place of the Yiddish Secular School in America Today," *Jewish Education* (July 1969), 20.

[8] The organization's Yiddish name is *Arbeter Ring*, which could be translated "Worker's Circle": for some reason, the Workmen's Circle has always and continues to use the gendered form of its name in English.

improvement activities for adults. As a result of Zhitlovsky's leadership, the Workmen's Circle schools appeared as early as 1918, primarily in New York and other large cities in the east.[9]

All the schools flourished during the 1920s, when new Yiddish-speaking immigrants were numerous and the established Jewish community was relatively financially secure. During the 1930s, however, the Depression, the lack of new immigrants from Eastern Europe, and the need to focus on the situation of Jews in Eastern Europe took its toll on the school systems. Consolidation of schools in a particular city was a common way to stave off closure: the result was a greater acceptance of the teaching of Hebrew, religion, and Zionism in virtually all the schools, except those most closely affiliated with left-wing movements that were not specifically Jewish such as the Communist Party.[10]

The Holocaust made inevitable the final transition to a pro-Zionist curriculum which was even more deeply committed to Yiddish:

> Hitler Germany's destruction of East European Jewry accounted for the transition. It was predicated on the premise that American Jewry must rescue and preserve our cultural treasures that were created and accumulated by the martyred millions of Yiddish speaking Jews. The curriculum at the Yiddish schools now [in 1953] include the Pentateuch, emphasis on Israel, celebration of the Jewish holidays, Oneg Shabbat, impressive versions of Friday night services, and Bar-Mitzvah.[11]

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[9] Gershon Winer, "The Religious Dimension of Yiddish Secularism," *Judaism* 161 (41 n. 2; Winter 1992), 80-3.

[10] S. Yefroikin, "Yiddish Secular Schools in the United States," in *The Jewish People: Past and Present,* vol. 2 (New York: Jewish Encyclopedia Handbooks, 1948), 147-8.

[11] Mark Millstone, "Trends in American Yiddish Education," *Jewish Spectator* Oct 1953, 27.

This transition did not come easily, not least because the Yiddish secular schools became less differentiated from the religious schools, which had multiplied in type as well as number and improved in quality over the same period. Parents had more options for providing quality Jewish education to their children, and Hebrew was now the language of the state of Israel, making the Yiddish schools less enticing. Defining its purpose became something of an obsession within the Yiddish school movement. Some argued for a complete removal of political and secular motifs and for a return to Yiddish language instruction as the sole rationale for a separate school system. Others argued that *yidishkeyt*[12], without an emphasis on language fluency, and secular humanism were their *raisons d'être*. Although these debates were often carried out in mainstream Jewish publications, and although the conciliatory nature of these writings often make clear that parts of the secular school movement regret earlier, more dogmatic approaches, there appears to be little interest in the question outside the most narrow of circles:

> Societal factors seem to have arrayed themselves in such a manner on the American scene as to have made the ideas and the activities of the Yiddish secular school movements largely invisible to the Jewish mainstream. That there are large numbers of nonreligiously oriented, noninstitutionally affiliated, philosophically liberal, secular Jews on the American scene, who continue to identify themselves as Jews, seems beyond dispute. Whether they would have found, had they known about its existence, or would now find, some form of Yiddish secular education relevant to their needs is difficult to judge.[13]

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[12] *yidishkeyt*: lit. Jewishness. Usage: Jewish culture emanating from Yiddish-speaking communities of Eastern Europe.

[13] Sandra Parker, "An Educational Assessment of the Yiddish Secular School Movements in the United States," in *Never Say Die!: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*, ed Joshua A. Fishman (The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton, 1981), 505.

Canada

In Canada, developments in Yiddish secular schooling differed geographically. Because of the close connection between Montreal's Jewish community and New York's, and because of the free flow of individuals between these two major centres, Montreal's Yiddish schools were more similar to those in the United States. Toronto was also influenced by developments in the United States. In Western Canada, local conditions appear to have been very important in the development of specific schools which met the needs of smaller communities.

As mentioned above, Montreal's National Radical School opened after a 1910 Zionist convention there at which Zhitlovsky and others convinced the movement of the need for it.[14] The rift which occurred almost immediately fell along Yiddish secularist vs. Hebrew Zionist lines. As a result the school split into the Montreal Peretz School and the Jewish People's School or *Folkshule*. The Peretz school had the more Yiddish orientation while the *Folkshule* attempted to promote non-sectarian Jewish identity. (In practice the *Folkshule*'s efforts to appease the greatest number ended up alienating both left and right wings of the Montreal Jewish community)[15]. In Toronto an almost identical scenario took place, with the founding of the National Radical School in 1911 and the split in 1917 (perhaps as a result of new energy which infused the Zionist movement following the Balfour Declaration). In spite of these travails, which may appear arcane and pointless, it is important to note that these were ambitious schools which took the business of

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[14] The exact date of the school's opening is variously quoted as 1910, 1912 and 1913: certainly the Zionist conference was held in 1910 making it unlikely that the school was opened that year given the need for planning and fundraising.
[15] David G. Roskies, "A Yiddish Utopia in Montreal: On the Role of Ideology in Bilingual Education," in *Bilingual Education: Focusschrift in Honor of Joshua A. Fishman on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, vol. 1, ed. Ofelia Garcia (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991), 153.

education seriously. A later commentator on Montreal Jewish education felt that the example of the Peretz and *Folkshule* were instrumental in leading other forms of Jewish education—including traditional Talmud Torahs and supplementary Hebrew schools—into a more modern form. This included such innovations as teaching girls, raising the qualification levels of teachers, and creating materials which dealt with Jewish ideals and philosophies rather than simply inculcating the forms of ritual and liturgy.[16]

In Winnipeg as in other places in Canada, Zhitlovsky was the most influential figure in the creation of secular education. The National Radical School there began in 1914, but changed its name to the Peretz School following the death of I.L. Peretz in 1915.[17] A group which was more interested in left-wing internationalism, rather than Jewish-centred *yidishkeyt*, split almost immediately, but the Peretz School was virtually unaffected by this move, growing steadily for many years. Hebrew was also taught at this school, although the focus was on Yiddish. In 1920 the local branch of the Workmen's Circle opened a school. 1920 was also the year in which the Peretz School began offering all-day instruction. In 1930 Labour Zionists broke away from the Peretz School to start their own school, but it eventually re-merged with the Peretz School in 1944. The Peretz School was also pro-Zionist, raising funds for Israel, but in the post-1948 era did not encourage its students to make *aliya* (immigrate to Israel), preferring to support Diaspora Jewish culture.[18] In 1940 the Workmen's Circle School severed its relationship with the

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[16] Joseph Kage, "Jewish Education in Montreal: Its Early Beginnings, Development and Prospects" (reprinted from *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle*), (Montreal: The Eagle Publishing, [196-?]), 5.

[17] I.L. Peretz was one of the three "classic" writers of modern Yiddish literature, and of them the most concerned with progressive values such as women's equality. Information on Peretz can be found in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, edited and with an introduction by Ruth R. Wisse (New York: Schocken, 1990) and I.L. Peretz, *Selected Stories*, edited with an introduction by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

[18] P. Hershteyn, "Fertsik Yor Perets-Shul in Winipeg," *Tsukunft* 60, no. 7 (September 1955), 314.

rest of the Workmen's Circle and re-named itself the Sholem Aleichem School (according to one account, this was a hostile move in which moderates were ousted by the left wing).[19] The proliferation of these schools and the varieties of political and educational needs they served is unique in Canada. However, it is the Peretz School which emerged as the largest and most popular, perhaps because of its direct link to the original ideals of the movement. Joe Zuken, a Peretz student who went on to become a Winnipeg school trustee and city councillor on the Communist ticket, remembered that Zhitlovsky himself was the keynote speaker at his graduation in 1925.[20]

Calgary also had a Peretz School, founded in 1929, which went on to have a significant influence on Vancouver's school, although it closed in the 1990s. It was similar to the Winnipeg school in ideals and in embracing secularism, Hebrew and Zionism, while making Yiddish its major focus.

History of the Vancouver Peretz Institute

<u>Yiddish Life in Vancouver</u>

Prior to 1945, Vancouver had a small but active Jewish community which included several groups that were interested in Yiddish. Yiddish was also taught along with Hebrew at the Talmud Torah of the first synagogue in Vancouver to (male) students as early as the 1920s. A drama group was organized by an enthusiast, a Mr. Goldin, who arrived from the prairies and was eager to see Yiddish culture in Vancouver.[21] This group

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[19] Harry Gutkin, *Journey Into Our Heritage: The Story of the Jewish People in the Canadian West,* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1980), 163.

[20] Doug Smith, *Joe Zuken: Citizen and Socialist,* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1990), 17.

[21] Dora Roseman, interview by Sandy Fouks and Naomi Katz, 27 April 1972, tape #19-72:08, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Also see notices in *Jewish*

produced several plays beginning in 1923. A Yiddish-language literary journal appeared very occasionally between 1928 and 1935. (In contrast, the English-language, mimeographed *Bulletin* began to appear in 1925 and evolved into a printed, weekly eight-page newspaper by 1930). A chapter of the Workmen's Circle was set up in 1925, though subsequent activities were few. Occasional theatre and musical acts appeared in Vancouver on cross-country or West Coast tours.

In 1924, a group called the *Muter Fareyn*, or Mother's Union, launched the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute. Apparently unaffiliated with other Yiddish schools around the country, this organization hosted speeches on issues of the day, invited Yiddish authors from across Canada and the United States to read, and held parties and dinners for both Jewish and secular holidays. By 1928 a supplementary school program began, and ran successfully for several years with 40 children enrolled in 1931.[22] The Sholem Aleichem Institute was not without controversies: the visit to Vancouver of prominent Bundist Gina Medem was hosted at the Sholem Aleichem premises on March 24, 1931, although as a rental to a group called ICOR. ICOR and Medem's anti-Zionist stance was objected to both in a vociferous argument at the meeting and later in the pages of the *Jewish Western Bulletin*.[23] This led the Sholem Aleichem Institute to disavow any political affiliation of any kind, stressing that it was a cultural organization. Notwithstanding this disclaimer, it is likely that many local ICOR members were involved in the Sholem Aleichem Institute since both organizations were Yiddishist.[24]

Western Bulletin 21 October 1925, 10 November 1928, 23 February 1929, 20 March 1931, 28 April 1932, 28 July 1932 (tenth anniversary report), 5 January 1933, 16 March 1933, etc.

[22] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 7 August 1931.

[23] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 3 July 1931; 24 July 1931.

[24] ICOR was a Yiddish-speaking pro-Birobidzhan Communist Party organization which "mounted a vigorous propaganda campaign in the 1930s to combat ethnic nationalism and link Jewish identity to the class struggle." Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish*

Several reasons have been put forward for the demise of this school. Dora

Roseman, one of the founders, simply felt the Jewish community in Vancouver wasn't

big enough to sustain a school aside from the mainstream Talmud Torah. In 1931 the

school made a plea through the pages of the *Bulletin* to the larger community:

> This school, alike with many other Jewish institutions, local or otherwise,
> is experiencing a moral and financial crisis, and it is in grave danger of
> closing its doors to the forty local Jewish children, who are brought up
> there as good Jewish citizens.[25]

Although the organization did manage to regroup, it only lasted a few more years. Hyman

Berson, who arrived in Vancouver in 1936, shortly after the school had disbanded, was at

that time told "that there was friction among the membership at that time that forced them

to collapse. It didn't take much to push it off the map because things were tough anyway.

But if there wasn't the friction I think they could have weathered the storm."[26] This

perhaps suggests some residual tension over the question of Zionism and the public face

of the Sholem Aleichem School. Finally, Yiddish itself took a nosedive in its public

acceptability in Vancouver in this era. Between 1931 and 1941 the percentage of

Vancouver's Jews who declared Yiddish to be their mother tongue on the census declined

from 98% to 48%.[27] This steep decline is not accounted for by the in-migration of non-

Yiddish-speaking Jews—the Jewish community only increased by 11% in the same

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Community (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), 124. Gina Medem's visit to Vancouver was probably part of this campaign. On the Sholem Aleichem School's political neutrality, see *Jewish Western Bulletin* 3 April 1931. Also see an announcement of a debate on Zionism, with representatives of three strands of Zionism plus a "non-Zionist," planned by the Sholem Aleichem School, *Jewish Western Bulletin* 18 December 1930, which appears to indicate the organization had no particular position on the matter.

[25] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 7 August 1931.

[26] Hyman Berson, interview by Naomi Katz, 12 July 1972, tape #19-72:11, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

period. It seems that Yiddish was suffering some sort of stigma locally (as perhaps in other parts of Canada). A combination of all these factors is the most likely cause for the demise of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute.

Founding the Vancouver Peretz Institute

Within a few years the Jewish community in Vancouver changed dramatically. "1945 was a very exciting year for the Jewish community in Vancouver," remembers Galya Chud, who arrived that year. The number of former servicemen moving here after the war increased the Jewish community substantially. Among these were many who came from Winnipeg and Calgary, where Jewish communities were larger and more established. These new Vancouverites had experience working in Jewish organizations and were perhaps seeking to recreate the communities they came from. In addition, Chud says, "people felt very strongly about the Holocaust, and Jewish education and Jewish culture was an important item in their life."[28] Among these were many people from Calgary who had been involved in the Peretz School there, such as Saul Wyne, his brother Archie and sister-in-law Anne.

Saul Wyne remembers the founding of the Peretz School this way: Saul was active in the Peretz School in Calgary before coming to Vancouver in 1943. He had promised the Yiddishists there to help start a Yiddish school in Vancouver. When he arrived in Vancouver he began talking about it with other people. Eventually about five families got together at Max and Susie Dodek's house. These families agreed to talk to as

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[27] Richard Menkis, "Kulturkampf in the Far West: Yiddish and Hebrew in Interwar Vancouver," paper presented at the 5th annual conference of the Western Jewish Studies Association (Seattle, Washington, 14-16 March 1999).

many other Jewish families as they could to see if there was interest and to get commitments to send their children once it was established.

The Dodeks recount the story this way: Harry Weinstein wanted to start a Yiddish school. At first the right-wing wanted to be involved, but only if the school took a pro-Zionist stand. The left wing wouldn't agree to that and the right wing was kicked out. The Dodeks, who were active in the Orthodox Schara Tzedek Synagogue, felt it was important to have a Yiddish shule and didn't care if it was left or right. Since they figured this was the group that was going to make a go of it, they stuck with the left group. This group of parents brought the Yiddish writer Peretz Hershbein, then living in Calgary, to Vancouver for a meeting. He was to help them make decisions about the school. At a meeting at their house, the group talked about different names for the school, Folkshule, Sholem Aleichem Shule. These were too far left for the Dodeks. Hershbein decided it should be named the I.L. Peretz Shule. According to Susie Dodek: "I distinctly remember him saying, 'I now declare that the Peretz School was born right in this house.'"[29]

Hyman Berson recalled that a number of families transplanted from the Prairies, including the Wynes, the Dodeks, and "Weinstein—the short one" started talking about forming a school in 1942. Like the Bersons, these families had experienced the Yiddish schools of the Winnipeg and Calgary communities, either as children or, in the recent past, as parents of students. They joined with people who had been involved in the Sholem Aleichem school to make enough families to support the school.

The official record does not support any of these versions, although the details

[28] Gallia [sic] Chud, interview by Naomi Katz, 17 June 1997, tape #19-97:03, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

[29] Max and Susie Dodek, interview by Irene Dodek, 29 Oct 1973, tape #19-73: 06, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

they recall may form a part of the story. According to items in the *Jewish Western Bulletin*, the initial impetus came from the local branch of the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO). The UJPO was aligned with the Communist Party (CP) although not all members of the UJPO were in the CP. Yiddish was the language of the UJPO, both because it was considered the working-class Jewish language and because it was natural for those individuals. In February 1945, inspired by a trip to Toronto during which he had visited a Workmen's Circle school, a local member of the UJPO called a meeting to discuss formation of a school. The identity of this person is unclear (although he is referred to by the male pronoun in the *Jewish Western Bulletin* notices); however, it is clear that from the start the school was envisioned as a larger project than the UJPO alone could achieve:

> The main purpose of this meeting is to discuss ways and means for the establishment of a modern Jewish School, that could be adapted for a Jewish Cultural Centre also, for the people of Vancouver. All members and interested friends are asked to attend this meeting of the United Jewish People's Order.[30]

The speed with which the school was established does in fact suggest that preparations may have been underway already. The announcement of the plans to open the school, already named the Vancouver Peretz School[31], was covered in the *Jewish Western Bulletin* in late June of the same year. Included was a photograph of the house that had been bought for school premises, although the full cost of its purchase was still to be raised. The *Bulletin* wholeheartedly endorsed the school, mentioning the necessity

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[30] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 16 Feb 1945.
[31] Although officially named the Vancouver Peretz Institute, the organization is often called the Peretz School within the Vancouver Jewish community; members tend to refer to it simply as *shule* (school).

of Jewish education for the continuity of cultural life and praising I.L. Peretz as a suitable

hero. It even subtly urged the community to contribute by mentioning the amount needed

to be raised ($10,000); that the campaign to raise the funds had been approved by the

Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council[32], the umbrella organization for Vancouver

Jewry; and by calling the school "this unquestionably necessary project."[33]

At this point the School did not have a great deal of trouble raising the necessary

funds. "The community was quite generous," Anne Wyne remembered later.[34] People

from other sectors of the community pledged small amounts or attended the fund-raising

socials. These socials became quite famous in the community for being the most fun,

according to Sylvia Friedman. They often involved a theme and ingenious ways of

getting money out of party goers. The founders themselves pledged amounts that were a

fortune at the time—up to $1,000 from a single family, if they could afford it. Max

Dodek was known for being able to talk money out of anybody. Years later Saul Wyne

credited him with quietly and persistently talking to everybody in the Jewish community:

"[He] used to go out, day in and day out, to collect a dollar, and for the Peretz Shule it

wasn't the easiest to collect. We went outside our membership, we were so small so we

had to go outside ... to the Jewish community."[35] Dodek's endorsement meant a lot

because of his affiliation with mainstream Jewish institutions such as the United Jewish

Appeal and Schara Tzedek. Dodek even claimed to have gotten $100 from Sam Cohen,

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[32] This organization has been known by various names over the years, such as the Jewish Community Council and the Jewish Community Administrative Organization. For the sake of consistency, I will continue to refer to it by the name Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council, which was its name at the time of the Peretz School's founding.
[33] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 29 June 1945.
[34] Anne Wyne, interview by Naomi Katz, 18 June 1972, tape #19-72:12, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.
[35] Saul Wyne, interview by Naomi Katz, 15 July 1997, tape #19-97:04, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

Muter Fareyn, 1945. Courtesy of Vancouver Peretz Institute.
Back row, left to right: Lil Slobod, Matilda Porte, Rachel Korn, Susie Dodek, Sarah Sarkin, Bernice Abramson.
Front row, left to right: Anne Wyne, Sarah Stone, Sara Rubin, Lucy Lacterman, Bunny Braverman,
Galya Chud.
"They were actually the founders of the Peretz School," Sylvia Friedman says.

of Army & Navy fame, but only by emphasizing the educational aspects without

mentioning that it was a secular organization, which would not have pleased Cohen.[36]

The house was bought outright—but City Council would not give a school permit

because of zoning regulations. The School rented rooms in the basement of the Jewish

Community Centre while its building stood unused except for offices and the occasional

meeting which was held there. The UJPO rented it for meetings, extending the links

between the two groups which already existed by virtue of overlap in membership. The

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[36] Max and Susie Dodek, interview by Irene Dodek, 29 Oct 1973, tape #19-73: 06, Oral History Archives,
Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

Vancouver Jewish Chess Club was also centred there but for big events used the basement of the Jewish Community Centre, such as when visiting Soviet sailors challenged the local chess club to a tournament in December 1946.[37]

The next aspect of the school which needed attention was a principal. Although much of the teaching could be, and eventually was, done by volunteer parents (all women in the early years), at least one person had to be in charge of curriculum, planning, scheduling, and so on. Through the UJPO's Toronto branch, someone heard about Ben Chud (sometimes called by his family's original name, Chudnovsky). He had been a Yiddish teacher in Winnipeg's Sholem Aleichem school and had planned to attend medical school when he enlisted in the army during the war. He married Galya shortly before being sent overseas. She remembers:

> When he came home from overseas people from Vancouver had made contact with people in Toronto saying that they were looking for a Jewish teacher…to take on organizing the Peretz School…. Coming home from the war I can't begin to tell you how strongly Ben felt about the question of the genocide and the Holocaust, so we had really our first argument, because I felt that he should do what he wanted to do [i.e. go to medical school] and he felt—it's unfair for me to say he felt duty-bound. He felt that he just had to do this…. I didn't know a soul west of Winnipeg. Vancouver was the last place I would ever want to come.[38]

Galya Chud soon found that the community that greeted her in Vancouver was a welcoming one. Like her husband she threw herself into the school and devoted her own energies to it: "My heart, my life is with the Peretz School," she said later. However, it couldn't pay much—as principal, Ben Chud made only $2,000 a year. Almost

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[37] Peretz School photo archives.
[38] Galya Chud, interview by Josette McGregor, 20 May 1993, transcript, property of interviewee.

immediately the school had 100 children enrolled in supplementary programs. Most students attended two days after school plus Sunday mornings. Part way through the first year a kindergarten was established which took care of children below school age from 10 a.m. to noon (there was no public kindergarten in the Vancouver school system at that time). This program proved enormously popular and experienced tremendous growth almost instantly. Sarah Sarkin, who with her husband Sid had been a founding member, ran the kindergarten. At this point only she and Ben Chud were paid employees.[39]

The women's branch of the organization was called the Muter Fareyn[40] in the manner of the Sholem Aleichem School (perhaps because it included many of the same individuals, according to Dora Roseman). It conducted its business in Yiddish and included many people, like Roseman, whose children were too old to attend the Peretz School. For them, the Muter Fareyn performed multiple functions, as both a social organization for the participants, and as a branch of the Peretz School which participated in fundraising and celebration events. In 1946 the mothers of the kindergarten children began another group, the PTA. These women were generally younger than those in the Muter Fareyn and had different interests. They also found it difficult to participate in the Muter Fareyn since many did not speak Yiddish. The PTA focussed on day-to-day running of the school and self-improvement and education programs on childrearing philosophies and child psychology. The Muter Fareyn continued to host talks and readings on matters of general Jewish interest in addition to its work for the school.

According to Hyman Berson, the women's organizations did most of the work of

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[39] Anne Wyne, interview by Naomi Katz, 18 June 1972, tape #19-72:12, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

[40] The name is rendered here in YIVO transliteration; however, it was usually spelled Muter Farein in newspaper clippings and other variations also crop up (Mooter Varein, Mutter Farein, etc.)

raising money and finding new members. Raffles, bazaars, teas and dinners were held at least once a month for the first several years, providing the school with its only regular income since school fees would often be used up soon after they were paid. Several members were merchants who could get donations of goods from factories and dealers with whom they had contacts for raffles and food was always supplied for free by the Muter Fareyn and PTA members. Due to the size of the community, it was common knowledge when a new Jewish family moved to Vancouver, and the PTA was particularly good at ferreting out any with small children who might be convinced to send them to the Peretz School. However, the actual governing of the school was for many years done by a board made up almost exclusively of men: "We hadn't heard of the Women's Liberation, so the men ran the show and we *permitted* the women to send two delegates to the meeting," Hyman Berson commented acerbically years later. "Wasn't that kind?" In spite of this, their role is often mentioned in both official communications and the reminiscences of Peretz members. "They were actually the founders of the Peretz School," Sylvia Friedman says.[41]

One area in which men did most of the fundraising, Berson said, was in somewhat illicit events, the "Saturday night poker games. People with no interest in the schools came to the poker games. They were in people's houses." It may be these forms of income were recorded merely as "donations" since many of the women, Anne Wyne in particular, were opposed to using gambling to raise funds for a children's school (although this was apparently a favoured method in other Jewish organizations). However, it did bring in donations from members of the community who might not have

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[41] Sylvia Friedman, interview by Josette McGregor, 23 June 1993, transcript, property of interviewee.

otherwise contributed to the organization.

Once the organization had established at least its initial program, with Ben Chud present to create a unified curriculum, the next stage was to relocate in a permanent home. To the school's relief, the original building could be sold to make room for a senior's home without infringement of the by-laws. It became the first Jewish seniors home in Vancouver. This facilitated the purchase of a house on West Broadway which was larger and qualified for a school permit. Luckily, the school didn't lose any money in the sale and re-purchase, and in fact ended up with a valuable piece of real estate on its hands years later when Broadway expanded.

The coalition nature of the Peretz School does not appear to have hampered it in any way during these years. "On the first organizing committee I think there were three people who at that time were members of the Community Party. But at that time it was quite respectable to be in the Communist Party because Russia was our ally, Russia had liberated the concentration camps, and Russia had saved as many of their own Jewish population as they possibly could," according to Galya Chud. "There was nothing disreputable about being a member of the Communist Party."[42] Its internal peace was matched by a general acceptance in the Jewish community. The Peretz School had normal relations with the organized Jewish community, sending a representative to the Jewish Administrative Council and receiving funding through the United Jewish Appeal.

The organization attempted to create activities for adults, aside from the fund-raising parties, which would serve Yiddish-interested people in Vancouver whether they were members or not. The first event sponsored by the Peretz School, before it had even

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[42] Galya Chud, interview by Josette McGregor, 20 May 1993, transcript, property of interviewee.

opened its doors in the fall of 1945, was a reading by the Winnipeg Yiddish author Falik

Zolf. The guest speaker at the end of the first term was Rabbi Abraham Bick, described

by Max Dodek as "left wing but a real Rabbi."[43] Bick was a Yiddish novelist and the

leader of the New York-based Council for Yiddish Education in the United States.[44]

Other Yiddish authors who spoke while on reading tours included H. Leyvik, Peretz

Hershbein, I.E. Ronch and Zalmen Reisen. Sometimes their literature was secondary to

their personalities, at least for the audience:

> I remember Zishele Vaynper. A Yiddish poet, he used to write poetry. He
> had the bluest eyes and I think he thought that he was the cat's meow. He
> was very short and stocky but he had the bluest blue eyes, this I remember.
> I think it was in Kaplan's home, he may have also spoken [at the Peretz
> School], but then she had a reception and he read a few of his poems. He
> would read them, he was a very passionate person. Unlike so many poets
> that you see today, they read their poems almost dispassionately, or in a
> monotone. He's one that I remember.[45]

These readings served a number of purposes, including keeping Peretz members

in touch with the larger Yiddish world, and creating a sense of continuity from Old World

to New. The readings were also social events, and also helped support the writers through

book sales. But Peretz members were not, by and large, readers. Many of the younger

members did not speak Yiddish fluently, or if they did may not have been able to read

and write it. Older members, although fluent in Yiddish, had less education if they came

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[43] Max and Susie Dodek, interview by Irene Dodek, 29 Oct 1973, tape #19-73: 06, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

[44] This organization may have been an umbrella group which arose as part of a trend towards less sectarianism in the Yiddish secular school movement. The trend (though not this particular organization) is noted in: S. Yefroikin, "Yiddish Secular Schools in the United States," in *The Jewish People: Past and Present*, vol. 2 (New York: Jewish Encyclopedia Handbooks, 1948); Yudel Mark, "Changes in the Yiddish Schools," *Jewish Education* (Fall 1947), 31-8; Mark Millstone, "Trends in American Yiddish Education," *Jewish Spectator* October 1953, 26-7.

[45] Sylvia Friedman, interview by author, 22 February 1999, tape recording.

from Eastern Europe than those who were raised in Canada. This meant that only a few members were actually comfortable reading in Yiddish and they did not see it as a priority. However, support of Yiddish generally was part of their identity and they dutifully bought books from the visiting readers:

> I guess it was YKUF, *Yidishe Kultur Farband* out of New York, where somebody would come through here every year. He would say this book's coming out and everybody has to buy this volume of this latest Yiddish work. So, my folks who never sat down and read Yiddish would buy this, and over the years there was a huge collection of books that were being published. I imagine they were at our place and all the other people around the Peretz School and anyone who was a Yiddishist. And of course publishing wasn't so expensive at that time in comparison to today. How else would people afford these things that they weren't going to read?... It's like the book of the month club, you get the book and sometimes you read it.[46]

Perhaps as a response to the lack of reading ability, or perhaps simply to foster a literary climate among this group, a later innovation (from the 1960s on) was listening to a Peretz member read aloud from a Yiddish novel:

> [T]hey used to have the *leyenkrayz* here, the reading circle, where Basman would read, it was beautiful. The people didn't read, but somebody would read to them. Basman started it. Then Benny would read to them. Then Paula. They didn't even do much reading, even those who probably could read. But they loved to hear somebody read. It was a lovely little group, entertaining.[47]

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[46] Rueben J., interview by author, 23 February 1999, tape recording. The YKUF representative may have been Vaynper: Vaynper was involved with YKUF and its journal *Yidishe Kultur*. YKUF was a Yiddish-Communist writers group but published non-Communist authors as well (for more information on this group see *Encyclopedia Judaica* s.v. "YKUF").

[47] Sylvia Friedman, interview by author, 22 February 1999, tape recording. Basman was Label Basman, principal of the school 1960-71; Benny was Ben Chud; Paula is Paulina Kirman.

The children also participated in Yiddish activities. Yiddish was not the language of communication since many children were not being raised in Yiddish speaking homes. They were taught the language systematically in class time and they were expected to be able to read, write and sing in it at an elementary level. Ben Chud wrote a play in Yiddish for the children to perform in 1960, when many students did not even have a Yiddish speaking grandparent alive.

One question which might be posed is why internal dissension did not tear this group apart as it had in similar schools across North America. First it should be noted that there was a short-lived attempt at a rival school, called the Farband School or Farband Folk School. Beginning in the fall of 1947, classes were conducted at the Jewish Community Centre under a Riva Isakson or Isackson. A Mr. J. Slobin was one of the organizers, and groups affiliated with it were the Jewish National Workers' Alliance, Poale Zion, and the Pioneer Women's Organization. These were all Labour Zionist organizations with local branches. The main distinction in curriculum as compared to the Peretz School appears to have been religious training, which the new school described as the basis for Jewish morality, and a greater emphasis on Hebrew.[48] The effort appears to have petered out by about 1950, at which point those parents who were still committed to Yiddish might have filtered back to the Peretz School. Another competitor was the private Sunday classes run by local doctor Isaac Stoffman in his own house. Stoffman was a committed secularist but vehemently anti-left and Yiddish does not appear to have been a particular interest of his. He refused to send his children to the Peretz School because of its political leanings, although he equally would not send his children to any

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[48] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 26 November 1947, 30 January 1948, 14 October 1948.

place where religious training would be a part of their education. Thus, Stoffman was forced to give his children their Jewish education privately, and joined with several like-minded families to provide joint schooling.[49]

Aside from these small-scale efforts, however, the Peretz School did not have a real rival nor did it collapse under the weight of internal bickering. Perhaps this is because from the beginning it was envisioned as a coalition, and early compromises were reached which have never been breached. Also, it benefited from coming into being after the Holocaust when questions about Jewish survival were much more clear-cut. For example, while many of the founders were personally anti-Zionist before the war, in the wake of the Holocaust it was difficult to maintain this position and most acceded to the wishes of the younger generation to have a mild, pro-peace Zionism taught in the classrooms and celebrated by the school. However, modern Israeli culture was never allowed to stand in for Jewish culture in general as occurred in many religious and pro-Zionist schools. The focus was always on the Yiddish culture of Eastern Europe with special sensitivity to its endangered status. Also, although the school's membership was heavily weighted with leftists, no particular political structure was advocated in the classroom, only vague ideals which emanated from progressive movements. Many of these are virtually indistinguishable from, for example, curriculum in the Vancouver Public School system today: multiculturalism, peace, justice and equality. In the era before the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., or in fact the winning of many basic rights

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[49] Isaac Stoffman, interview by Irene Dodek, 23 Nov 1988, tape #19-88:05, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Although it may be unfair to characterize Stoffman as "right wing," the hostility between Stoffman and the Peretz School may have been a result of the conflict the Dodeks recalled from the early stages of planning which they described as a right-vs.-left struggle, in which the "right wing" was ejected.

in Canada (for example, in the 1950s the *Jewish Western Bulletin* reported on the difficulty of renting a hall for an event because many auditoriums would not rent to Jews), these ideals were identifiably left-wing.

It is also the case that a significant minority of members were not particularly left-wing, or were not completely secular, or were neither. The Dodeks were the only family of this kind in leadership, however others also did attend synagogue (either regularly or on High Holy Days): this is why classes were never held on *shabbes*[50], to allow religious members to participate in both synagogue and Peretz activities. The school was seen as one of several options for providing children with a Jewish education, and no doubt practical considerations such as distance from home and school, cost, and time commitment were important factors for parents choosing the Peretz School.

Many individuals indicate that the real glue that held the school together was Yiddish. Anne Wyne recalled older women attended the Muter Fareyn not to hear about a particular topic but to hear Yiddish spoken. Sylvia Friedman remembers a Mr. Sapoznik who would only speak Yiddish in the school, even to people whose Yiddish was minimal. Galya Chud says it was particularly important to Ben Chud because of his experiences in Europe during World War II. When its first purpose-built school was finished in 1962, it was dedicated to the six million, in honour of the fact that most of the dead spoke Yiddish.

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[50] *shabbes*: the Jewish Sabbath (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown).

McCarthyism in Vancouver's Jewish Community

For the first seven years after its founding the Peretz School lived something of a charmed existence. It had managed to purchase the house on Broadway, to grow from simply after-school programs to encompass a morning kindergarten and adult activities, and to establish itself as the centre for Yiddish culture in Vancouver. However, influences emanating from the political culture of the United States were felt everywhere in Canada. Although no parallel to the House Committee on Un-American Activities developed in Canada, Canadian intelligence and government circles were subjected to pressures from the United States to spy on Canadians, to collect names of left-wing activists to supply to the United States, to revoke passport privileges for suspect individuals, and to apply pressure downwards on other branches of civil life to cleanse all suspected radicals from the ranks of civil service and law. The Canadian government responded to these pressures, and local and private agencies responded likewise to the pressures from government.[51]

Community and service groups also were pressured to purge undesirable elements from their ranks. While in the United States this occurred openly and on a grand scale (particularly in the labour and African-American movements), in Canada these efforts appear to have been scattered and short-lived, and to have involved euphemisms and rationalizations rather than naming anti-communism as the cause. Within the Jewish community, at least in Vancouver, there appears to have been a clear understanding that Jewish groups were particularly vulnerable to government pressure and threats of

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[51] These activities are documented in: Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials and the Cold War* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1983); and Len Scher, *The Un-Canadians: True Stories of the Blacklist Era* (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1992).

retaliation, and that in ousting the left one might hope to preserve the rights and reputability of the remaining community. The historic association of Jews with the left was never far from anyone's mind. As early as 1947 the *Jewish Western Bulletin* published an article arguing that more Eastern European Jewish refugees, then languishing in Displaced Person camps, should be allowed to settle in western nations because they were not communists: the headline read "Jewish DP's No Reds."[52] Whatever the personal beliefs of the mainstream Jewish community, it continued to work with the Peretz School for five more years.

The first sign of McCarthyism's influence on Jewish community functioning in Vancouver was the response to a proposition by the Canadian Jewish Congress (Congress) to disaffiliate the UJPO. As an openly and unabashedly left-wing organization, the UJPO had long-standing clashes with Congress. The UJPO often held unpopular beliefs, maintaining an anti-Zionist position and supporting the Soviet Union long after the glow of wartime alliance had faded. The UJPO had also received press coverage of its vocal opposition to the re-armament of Germany, while Congress took a more neutral and bureaucratic route to protest quietly to the Canadian government. Therefore while the UJPO and Congress were aligned on the issue, they differed on tactics and the UJPO's tactics gained it notoriety which Congress felt unbecoming to the Jewish community. The trick for Congress was to turn political opinion and action into something which could legitimately be seen as contradictory to membership in Congress. The national executive of Congress declared in 1951 that UJPO members could not be

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[52] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 7 Nov 1947. The specious argument given was that those who were communists would have chosen to settle in one of the Soviet-block countries, and therefore the remainder were patently not communists.

elected as delegates to the upcoming Congress national meeting. Reasons given were the UJPO submitting briefs to the government which conflicted with Congress briefs, taking positions considered not to be in the best interests of the Jewish people (these were not elaborated), and supporting "phony peace movements."[53] Each of the four regional branches was asked by the national executive to expel the UJPO independently on these bases. Three of the four branches did: the Pacific Region did not. At an acrimonious meeting in Vancouver, the UJPO managed to hold on to membership through a combination of appealing to principle and packing the meeting. (It should be noted that the right wing also attempted to pack the meeting, but were less successful).[54] Also helping the UJPO cause was the fact that a number of avowedly conservative members of the local community were staunch defenders of the right to dissent. Groups which spoke against the motion to expel included such mainstream and Zionist organizations as the National Council of Jewish Women and B'nai Brith. Also different in the Pacific Region was the fact that the decision was made democratically by the full membership of the regional branch. In the other regions only the executive voted on the motion after being instructed to remove the UJPO by the national executive.[55]

Unfortunately for Vancouver's UJPO, the national executive decided on its own to expel it from the Pacific Region, on the grounds that it was inconsistent to allow it to be a member in one region when three had voted against it. Although this was obviously a disappointment for UJPO members, it did not immediately affect its work since its main areas of interest did not overlap with Congress concerns. The UJPO did not need

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[53] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 18 October 1951.
[54] Sylvia Friedman, interview by Josette McGregor, 23 June 1993, transcript, property of interviewee.
[55] Ibid. and op. cit.

Congress membership in order to continue presenting its plays in Yiddish and English; the Yiddish-speaking branch and the English-speaking branch both continued to publicize their meetings, speakers and events in the *Bulletin*.

However, this relative cordiality again did not last. Within one week in early 1953, the Peretz School was denied participation in the United Jewish Appeal and the UJPO was expelled from the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council. The United Jewish Appeal was run locally by two groups, the Pacific Region of Congress and the Vancouver Zionist Organization. The Vancouver Zionist Organization was also the member group which proposed expulsion of the UJPO from the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council. Therefore it seems that a certain segment of the community exercised enormous power over the umbrella groups. The umbrella groups in turn controlled almost exclusively local funding (the United Jewish Appeal) and local publicity (the *Jewish Western Bulletin*, published by the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council).

The UJPO's expulsion from the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council and its loss of privileges in putting notices in the *Bulletin* were perhaps foreseeable. In addition to the stormy relationship with Congress, 1953 was the year of the Rosenberg execution in the U.S., perhaps the height of the Cold War mentality when killing communists was more acceptable—even to many Jews—than killing former Nazis.[56] In fact, the UJPO circumvented the ban on publishing its name through a variety of transparent ruses. The UJPO Drama Workshop folded and a "new" group called the Vancouver Drama Workshop sprang into being with exactly the same members. It didn't hurt that the editor

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[56] See, for example, letter to the editor, *Jewish Western Bulletin* 6 November 1953, which supports the Rosenberg execution. Letters were also written in protest of the Rosenberg execution.

of the *Bulletin* was at that time Abe Arnold, who later became a member of the Peretz

School and was always (and remains) friendly with the organization. Arnold was

prevented from naming the UJPO even in his coverage of efforts to get it reinstated,

referring to it only as "a certain group" that had been previously expelled. Since only the

organization and not individuals had been prevented from using the *Bulletin*'s free

publicity pages, coded notices were put in the paper in which a particular person invited

the community to a discussion on a particular topic. In a community as small as

Vancouver's Jewish community in 1953, everyone knew what group was behind these

notices: this suggests that the entire expulsion was in some ways a false front meant to

show the community's anti-communist leanings. Critics of the move believed it was a

form of internal scapegoating as often occurs when there is pressure from the outside:

> A great tragedy has taken place in our Jewish community life by expelling
> the UJPO... Judging by the closing remarks of the chairman [sic] Dr.
> White, we took it that all the leaders of the community council did not
> favo[u]r such drastic action. It would be a dishono[u]r if they would
> associate themselves with such a despicable piece of McCarthyism and
> witch hunting which is very much in vogue these days.... Do not get
> panicky and draw conclusions, I am not a member of the UJPO nor do I
> belong to any left wing group.... Should the [N]azis some day return to
> power and begin the selection to feed the gas ovens, I wonder if they will
> select only "bad" Jews.[57]

It is also possible that the UJPO had simply been a thorn in the side of mainstream Jewish

leaders for long enough, and the popularity of anti-communist feeling in the 1950s

allowed them to expel the group at that time when they would have preferred to do it

much earlier.

The Peretz School's loss of funding was certainly more shocking and caused

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[57] Joseph Tolzes, letter to *Jewish Western Bulletin* 2 April 1953.

much more hardship. Throughout the McCarthy period various rumours circulated about the Peretz School, including that there was a picture of Stalin in the front hall. (It was actually a picture of I.L. Peretz, who does not particularly resemble Stalin aside from sporting a large moustache.) There were also numerous complaints about the non-religious nature of the school which for many people was conflated with anti-religious and anti-Jewish sentiment. It was also connected in many minds to communism. Most oddly, although the school celebrated the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and continued to celebrate its anniversaries, the school was identified as anti-Zionist.[58]

The expulsion from the community was certainly a blow on a financial level, but more deeply felt was the insult to the school's achievements. Years later Saul Wyne told an interviewer:

> It's nothing new in Jewish life, Naomi, that if anything progressive comes along, the status quo don't like it. They want everything progressive or liberal out of the way.... [The right wing] started different rumours about the Peretz School: "it's a leftist school, it's not religious, they're anti-Zionist." All those are fabricated lies because we never preached anything against Zionism, we never preached anything against religion, we cared. We minded our own business, we brought up our own children in the spirit that the school was built on, not any other organization.... Then it reached a point to choke us we received very little funds from the United Jewish Appeal, and even that they wanted to cut out... They were trying to close down the school. But Jews don't give up.[59]

As Saul Wyne's anger years later attests, feelings about the injustice of the exclusion probably ran the highest in the leaders who had worked hard to make the school inclusive and accepting of a variety of political and religious viewpoints. The

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[58] It is important to note that as I was writing this thesis, in 1999, all of these rumours except the charge of anti-Zionism were repeated to me as fact by members of Vancouver's mainstream Jewish community.
[59] Saul Wyne, interview by Naomi Katz, 15 July 1997, tape #19-97:04, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

Dodeks were devastated.

> Max: When the Peretz School was banned that took a lot out of me.
> When people started to tell me "it's a bunch of communists, 100%
> communists..."
>
> Susie: Or "they teach the children communism," which they never did.
>
> Max: They never did. And I had to take that and I had to start explaining:
> "they are not teaching any communist [sic] in the book. You come
> and look over the book." I says "the curriculum, I can't see one
> communist word in the curriculum. The only thing is they don't
> wear yarmulkes."[60]

It is also the case that in at least one family individuals ended up on opposite sides of this

divide, causing a rift that has never completely healed. In private family members had

agreed to disagree for some time and family relations were basically normal. After the

expulsion and the funding denial, when everyone knew who had voted what way, the

sense of betrayal was strong. Those in the UJPO felt that their right to political expression

had been sacrificed in order to buy community respectability for their conservative

relatives.

One effect of the coincident, though officially unconnected, expulsions of the

UJPO and the Peretz School from polite Jewish society was that the two organizations

grew together. While maintaining separate spheres of work, joining each other's groups

and certainly support for each other's events grew more crucial. According to one person

involved in the school, the UJPO/Peretz nexus of families and friends retreated into an

insular, self-contained community with little direct relationship to the rest of the Jewish

community. Even those who were leaders in the Peretz School, devoting enormous

energy to the school on an almost daily basis, only met with the organized Jewish

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[60] Max and Susie Dodek, interview by Irene Dodek, 29 Oct 1973, tape #19-73: 06, Oral History Archives,
Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

community on official business. The school was again allowed to participate in the United Jewish Appeal starting in 1955, but the amount allocated to it was lower and each year brought a fresh threat of expulsion. This situation continued for many years.[61]

Although the *Bulletin*, thanks to the editorship of Abe Arnold, continued to cover Peretz events or to print its news releases, these items took on a beleaguered tone. The 1955 official summation of the first ten years of the Peretz School, while celebrating its achievements, also contains ominous paragraphs that hint at the level of frustration:

> Yet from the very first days of the organization of the School there have been people who found fault, spread rumo[u]rs and defamed the school. They have raised false issues and attempted to subvert the School....
>
> The Peretz School is an independent organization, affiliated with no other body except the local Community Council and the Canadian Jewish Congress. Everybody is welcome to join the Peretz School if they are interested in progressive secular Jewish education.[62]

A big change for the Peretz School occurred when the *Bulletin* changed management in 1960. The Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council sold the newspaper into private hands, Arnold left as editor and the new owners apparently openly declared that there had previously been too much coverage of left-wing organizations like the Peretz School.[63] Although they did not stop listing Peretz events in the pages where all the community announcements were placed, longer articles, coverage of events, and photographs virtually stopped until the 1990s. Although no longer bound by decisions of the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council, the new owners continued its practice of not

[61] Soli Jackson, interview by Naomi Katz, 22 Oct 1997, tape #19-97:10, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.
[62] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 31 May 1955.
[63] According to Josette McGregor, the *Bulletin* owners made this comment to her when she was researching the Peretz School. Sylvia Friedman, interview by Josette McGregor, 23 June 1993, transcript, property of interviewee.

mentioning the UJPO at all.

Another cause of friction was the question of how to commemorate the Holocaust. A free-standing committee of Polish survivors formed the Warsaw Ghetto Committee and UJPO members joined them in planning events around the anniversary of that event. The UJPO saw a movement of Jews who resisted their persecutors as more in line with their vision of revolutionary justice than the then-common perception of Holocaust victims as timid and compliant even when marching to their deaths. The mainstream Jewish community was more inclined to commemorate Kristallnacht, a 1938 event in which German synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses were destroyed which is widely viewed as the first hint of the genocide to come. In the early 1960s the artist Arnold Belkin offered a mural depicting the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to the Peretz School. However, since the school had no real security system it suggested that the mural be donated to the Jewish Community Centre. Although the Community Centre accepted this work of art by a well-known artist, it refused to hang it on the basis that it was too violent for the children who might see it. Although many child psychologists attested that the work would not damage children (and in the light of the graphic children's television of the 1990s it certainly appears to be a mild depiction of violence), the Community Centre has never hung the work permanently and has only displayed it occasionally in conjunction with specific events. This is still perceived in the Peretz School as a slight to the school, which quite selflessly gave up this valuable piece of art, as well as to the artist.[64]

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[64] Sylvia Friedman, interview by Josette McGregor, 23 June 1993, transcript, property of interviewee. According to Friedman these events took place in the early 1960s. The Belkin mural was apparently again the cause of dispute in 1968, although "there was no article [in the Bulletin] on this issue, only a letter referring to the story in a local daily, the *Vancouver Sun*." Lewis Levendel, *A Century of the Canadian*

Phase Two of the Peretz School: Ash Street

**Board and Muter Fareyn at the site of the "new building" on Ash Street, 1961.
Courtesy of the Vancouver Peretz Institute.**

In 1961 the Peretz School had an opportunity to sell the house on Broadway

during one of Vancouver's periodic real estate booms. At the same time, the CPR was

selling off land which it had obviously decided was not going to be used for railroads.

The Oakridge area was opened up for sale to the public at the same time as Vancouver's

Jewish community was getting more established and had more money available for

Jewish Press: 1880s-1980s, (Ottawa: Borealis press, 1989), 217. The history of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising observance in Vancouver is also discussed in Jean Miriam Gerber, "Immigration and Integration in Post-War Canada: A Case Study of Holocaust Survivors in Vancouver 1947-1970" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1989), 86-7. The entire issue of Holocaust remembrance in the Vancouver Jewish community cries out for further exploration.

communal projects. The Jewish Community Centre (JCC) had outgrown its building at Oak and 11th and there was no cost-efficient way to expand it. For a time it considered buying several other properties, including the Peretz School's Broadway house, presumably because it was adjacent to other properties which could be used for expansion.[65] In the end, however, the Peretz School sold its property privately and the JCC purchased land from the CPR at 41st and Oak.

The movement of the Jewish community up the Oak Street corridor was gradual. As in many North American cities, a certain neighbourhood provided immediate absorption to successive waves of ethnic immigration, but was not a permanent home. In Vancouver, Strathcona was a largely Jewish area at the turn of the century, both following and preceding Chinese immigration booms, but the Jewish community began moving out by 1926.[66] The first new location was the Mount Pleasant area, because it was close enough to the old neighbourhood to allow for walking to the synagogue which was still in Strathcona. The synagogue itself eventually moved in 1947 to the Oak Street area, at 19th Street, and the Talmud Torah followed to Oak and 14th. New synagogues were built, notably the Orthodox Beth Hamidrash in 1941 and Conservative Beth Israel in 1947.[67] In 1948 the Talmud Torah relocated further up Oak Street, to 26th, in an early CPR land sale, simultaneously switching from supplementary to day schooling. At the same time, Vancouver's Jewish community was becoming less Orthodox, which meant it was not necessary to live within walking distance of synagogue. The purchase of land by

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[65] Jewish Community Centre, *Celebration: Official Opening of the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver* (Vancouver: by the author, 1996), 13.

[66] Cyril Leonoff, *Pioneers, Pedlars, and Prayer Shawls: The Jewish Communities in British Columbia and the Yukon* (1978: Victoria, Sono Nis Press), 150.

[67] Rozanne Feldman Kent, *Educating Vancouver's Jewish Children: The Vancouver Talmud Torah, 1913-1959 and Beyond* (Vancouver: by the author, 1995), 18, 47 and 69.

the JCC in 1958 (the building was completed in 1962), which began a process of expansion to serve more needs, shows a greater awareness of internal differences. The new synagogues with their differing religious approaches, and the Talmud Torah's enhanced role in the community, both indicate a more ramified community, with less centralization but greater personal commitment to their various organizations.

The Peretz School took advantage of this confluence of circumstances to relocate itself to the heart of the new Jewish neighbourhood. A large parcel of land was bought— it was bush at the time—at Ash and 45th. The building was planned and constructed for a minimal cost, with Peretz members themselves overseeing construction contractors. The "new building" (as many Peretz members still call it, although it is scheduled to be torn down in June 1999) had many more facilities than the house on Broadway, including an auditorium, several classrooms, a commercial kitchen, offices and a large lounge.

At the same time, Ben Chud left as principal and Label Basman, who had been associated with Winnipeg's Sholem Aleichem school, was hired to take his place. Though not as inspired a teacher and public speaker as Ben Chud, Basman was a well-known Yiddishist even outside the small world of secular schools and was devoted to Jewish literary culture. His presence at the Peretz School re-affirmed that this was first and foremost a Yiddish-based organization. Innovations were introduced such as the secular Bar and Bat Mitzvah program of which Moishe Engle was the first graduate.

Many more small incidents with the mainstream Jewish community contributed to the Peretz School's strained relationships with umbrella groups and official bodies. Threats to discontinue United Jewish Appeal and (later Jewish Community Fund and Council) funding came at regular intervals. After the construction of the Ash Street

building, when property values in Oakridge soared and the City saw its tax base expand exponentially, the Peretz School applied to the Jewish Community Fund and Council for an additional grant for tax relief. The Council advised the school to declare itself a religious organization to obtain tax exempt status and refused to give the grant on the basis that the school was not availing itself of this opportunity to avoid the tax. The school felt that for a philosophically secular organization to declare itself religious was a violation of its principles. In the 1980s the City created a designation for "fraternal" organizations which had a lower tax rate, for which the Peretz School qualified; later the non-profit exemption was made across the board. In the meantime, however, the Peretz School was $64,000 in arrears and the City was in a legal position to seize and sell the property for back taxes for almost thirty years. It was not until the deaths of founders Sid and Sarah Sarkin, early in the 1990s, who left a significant bequest to the school, that the organization finally paid off this debt.[68] One particularly bitter exchange between the Peretz School and the Jewish Community Fund and Council came in 1982 when the Council suggested the Peretz School sell the building in order to pay its taxes; it simultaneously suggested that any profit from the building would belong to the Council, not the School, based on the Council's grants over the years. The School was enraged that what it considered meagre grants should come with an obligation that was not expected of any other recipient organization. Council grants had worked their way up to $4,000 when it was cut in half in 1972. In 1974 the Council withdrew the Peretz School from the campaign, but reinstated it after public pressure.[69] The grant gradually increased

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[68] Soli Jackson, interview by Naomi Katz, 22 Oct 1997, tape #19-97:10, Oral History Archives, Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

[69] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 31 May 1974 and 7 June 1974. The story is not covered in the news section: the Peretz School took out advertising space to explain the situation to the community.

again to $9,000 in the early 1990s, when it was cut to $5,000 (the current funding level).[70]

Luckily, the Ash Street location allowed the school to collect more in rental incomes than had been possible at the Broadway site. This income was crucial in overcoming the very difficult years of the early 1970s when interest in Yiddish was low, Basman had left and a strong teacher was not found to replace him, the Jewish community in Vancouver had stopped growing and the Peretz School's activity virtually ground to a halt. In 1979 the national, progressive Jewish magazine *Outlook* moved from Toronto to Vancouver and began renting as office space one of the large dressing rooms just off the auditorium. The other dressing room was made into an office for a Karate instructor who rented the auditorium for classes in the evenings. The classrooms and the adjacent area was rented out during weekdays to a private Chinese-language pre-school which remained in the building until 1998.

Although after school classes continued, enrollments were low and some years did not even have a special event or adult program. This was the time of greatest internal strife for the organization. Some members did suggest selling the building to get out from under the tax burden, and hold programs in rented rooms: others felt this would erode the school's identity and lead to its eventual disintegration. The bitterness of this debate seems disproportionate to its cause, but many believed the very life of the school was at stake. It appears lucky that the school decided to stick it out, because the secular schools in other parts of the country which did relocate to rented rooms, or merged with non-secular Jewish organizations, have all disappeared.[71]

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[70] Peretz School 50th Anniversary booklet.
[71] Ibid. According to Soli Jackson, these schools include ones in Calgary, Winnipeg and Montreal.

When the school did eventually become active again, it was on a much smaller scale and with fewer paid staff than before. The older members had begun to die and the quest for new members set the school in a new direction, the affiliation with Jewish secular humanism of whatever political philosophy, less connected to Yiddish and more in line with contemporary concerns of progressive Jews. In the 1970s two umbrella groups sprang up in the United States to promote the idea of a specifically Jewish form of humanist philosophy which would honour both traditional thought and the idea of human agency. Simply put, secular humanism is the belief that human beings are responsible for the conduct of human relationships. In Jewish secular humanism, then, the moral duty of human beings to each other is found in traditional ideas of justice, charity and respect: these are given a modern accent with the addition of equality and peace as core values. At the same time as the Peretz School was re-aligning its organizing principles to reflect this new conception of Jewish secularism, it began reaching out to Jews who were intermarried. Many were seeking to maintain their ties to Jewish life without undergoing the cumbersome and, to many, unfair and unnecessary task of the conversion of the non-Jewish partner. Openness also demanded that Jews who were practicing Buddhists[72], lesbian and gay Jews, and others who had not seen their choices respected in the mainstream community would be welcomed.

These additions to the school created a second growth period for the school. After its most difficult period in the 1970s, the 1980s saw a revival in interest in its work. At

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[72] I cannot account for the phenomenal popularity of Buddhism among Jews. Unlike other world religions Buddhism does not require the relinquishing of previously-held beliefs, and is to many therefore compatible with maintaining a Jewish identity and its core values. It does not seem likely to me that the Peretz School would welcome a Jewish convert to Christianity—nor that one would desire membership—as it has welcomed "Buddhist Jews" because of this distinction. Those interested in this topic may wish to see Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: a Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

the same time, the school switched to Sunday programs rather than after school, allowing more children to come from further away without putting a strain on parents to get them there. Children's activities were broadened, for example with the addition of a performing group called the Jewish Young People's Theatre. (Nonetheless, student enrollments have never reached previous levels, which was up to 100 in the 1960s). In the 1980s weekday activities for seniors were instituted due to the changing demographics of Vancouver and increased funding for such programs.

One major new addition to the Peretz repertoire was the formation of a choir in 1980. While in previous years adult performance had taken place on an occasional basis, the choir created a constant presence for Yiddish culture. Searle Friedman, who founded the choir, was a well-respected musician (and school music teacher) who brought both professionalism and fluent Yiddish to the task of organizing a choir. The choir's music allowed Yiddish to remain a part of Peretz events even though Yiddish language instruction in the school had ceased (most choir members learn Yiddish lyrics phonetically, coached by native speaker Sylvia Friedman). Searle also wrote original arrangements for some material and made contacts with many other musicians both in the Jewish and the left communities in Vancouver. These activities spurred some rapprochement with the Jewish community when the choir performed with mainstream Jewish performers such as cantors from local synagogues.

Community relations were further assisted by the Peretz School's offers of assistance to two local synagogues firebombed in February 1985. The eighties also saw the Peretz School's first foray into the political arena when it joined the peace movement in its effort to quell cold war hysteria. With the UJPO, *Outlook,* and UBC's Hillel House,

it formed a Jewish sub-committee of End the Arms Race, Vancouver's largest peace organization.[73]

Summation of the Peretz School's achievements is somewhat difficult. The amorphous nature of school activities cannot render a full understanding of the school's culture. A list of concerts given, numbers of members, names of prominent individuals or the statistical details that come so readily to the researcher's hands don't explain why the organization either began or continued. As the only organization of its kind in British Columbia—both in terms of its Jewish secular humanist philosophy and its support of Yiddish—it has overcome enormous odds in terms of its mere existence. The fact that this tenuous existence was not snuffed out by the McCarthy-inspired punishments of the community is almost miraculous. Saul Wyne's comment "Jews don't give up" stands as a rebuke to the Jewish community: it says "we are Jews" while identifying the mainstream Jewish community with an external oppressor. The contributions of school leaders to Jewish life in Vancouver, and of the organization as a whole to the culture of the city, is largely unnoticed by the mainstream Jewish community: virtue has had to be its own reward, since none other is forthcoming. Only a kind of interior strength nurtured by a vibrant community which enabled a close identification with the school can explain the stubbornness with which the organization stuck to its mission. The dedication of these individuals is remarkable: "My heart, my life is with the Peretz School."

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[73] Peretz School 50th Anniversary booklet.

Chapter Four
The Library

The Original Library at the Peretz School

On February 19, 1953 a notice appeared in the *Jewish Western Bulletin*:

Library at Peretz School Available for Public Use

The Peretz School Library is available for public use. The library has now 340 Yiddish books and 140 in English, all pertaining to Jewish life, and many of the books are now very difficult to buy.

Anyone interested in making full use of the library can do so by contacting the library chairman [sic], Mr. J. Greenberg, at CE. 8643.

Jack Greenberg was an active participant in both the school and the UJPO, particularly the UJPO Drama Workshop. He was fond of literature and culture of all kinds, which probably explains his participation in the organizing of the Peretz School's books into a working library. He is best remembered at the school for two attributes not related to his library enthusiasm. First, to the delight of the leftists, his wife's name was Rosa Luxemburg (she was actually related to the German-Jewish revolutionary of the same name); and second, he was very hard of hearing but didn't like to admit it.

Well, a very famous anecdote that happened at meetings, Mr. Greenberg and I think Mr. Cohen both wore hearing aids—as I do now—but hearing aids weren't too efficient in those days. And Mr. Greenberg would sit in back and he had a loud booming voice, he had done some acting. When a speaker would speak he'd always say *"redt a bisele hekher, khaver, Cohen hern nisht."*[1]

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[1] "Speak a little louder, comrade, Cohen can't hear you." Sylvia Friedman, interview by author, 22 Feb 1999, tape recording.

It is unfortunate that the effort to make the library publicly accessible should bear fruit one month before the Peretz School had its first full-blown funding crisis, the United Jewish Appeal's refusal to allow the school to participate. All trace of library activity vanishes from official records almost as soon as it started. No doubt everyone involved in the school had to regroup and concentrate efforts on raising funds through alternative means. Rosa Luxemburg Greenberg was active in the *Muter Fareyn,* which, as noted before, probably took on the biggest part of the organizational work of raising money. Through 1953 fundraising bazaars and dinners were held as they had been in 1945 during the school's start-up campaign. These events represented enormous effort, especially since they were all catered as kosher events to allow for maximum attendance.

The school continued to collect books in the same manner as always, buying from travelling speakers and publishers who came through Vancouver.[2] At the same time, older members had begun to die and younger members could not necessarily read Yiddish. Throughout the 1950s and 60s the collection grew into a haphazard assortment held by various teachers in their classrooms. Ben Chud had an enormous collection of books which he used as teaching materials for the more advanced readers. He and other members also adapted stories from traditional writers to create plays for the children to perform at annual events.[3] He translated poems for inclusion in the *Bulletin* at holidays and in the pieces he wrote to promote the school. He particularly used the work of Peretz, whose values corresponded most closely to those the school promoted. The books, therefore, were integrated into curriculum and the active life of the school, but were not organized separately as a library.

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[2] Rueben J., interview by author, 23 Feb 1999, tape recording.
[3] Peretz School file "Historical database."

The New Library

In 1958, when the worst of McCarthyism was over in the Vancouver Jewish Community, and the Peretz School had been funded regularly for several years again, a new immigrant family arrived who would become the school's volunteer librarians. Paulina and Shaya Kirman and their children were Polish Jews and, though not the first Holocaust survivors to be drawn to the Peretz School, they were particularly attached to Yiddish as a result of their wartime experiences. As the story of her life indicates, Paulina's relationship to the many languages she speaks is complicated by the facts of German occupation and Russian oppression during the war, and her discomfort in her native Poland after the war. These experiences perhaps gave her a closer bond to Jewish languages, and as a secularist, who nonetheless finds meaning in religious ritual, Yiddish is her chosen language.

The Life of Paulina Kirman[4]

Paulina Kirman was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1919. As a young university student she married just as the war broke out. Her family, anxious to save the young couple, sent them away to prevent them from being trapped in Warsaw when the German army arrived.

> In January 1940 we ran away from Warsaw, both. Just married and we ran
> away from Warsaw because we had to save our lives when the Germans
> came in and we saw right away that it was not the place to live or to stay.
> So we ran away from Warsaw… we had to run to the border [with Russia]
> and then go over there. We came to a place where I was born that was on
> the river and I had some relatives there and it was easier for us to cross,
> illegally, the border. We had some help from our family, my family
> members there. We went and there on the other side the Russians

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[4] All quotes in this section are from Paulina Kirman, interview by author, 4 February 1999, tape recording.

intercepted us both and they took us both to jail and I never saw my husband again.

In Russia I was pregnant already. So they kept me in jail until the birth of the baby, Laura, my oldest daughter. So she was born in July. So I had just conceived when they took me to jail. I was in jail pregnant and then for having the baby they took me to another jail to Gomel. Gomel is the capital of Belorussia but it belonged at that time to Russia. And there I had the baby, Laura. And thanks goodness, thanks to her I am alive, because I had to take care of her and … they couldn't put her jail because she didn't commit [a crime]. So we were together four months in Gomel and then they sent us both to Siberia. And we were there in a Russian camp, prisoner camp. And it was divided in two, for women separate and for men separate. And it was so cold there if you went out in the winter with not a covered face your nose could freeze in one minute. So anyway, the men were chopping trees. And a lot of them were not dressed properly and whenever they went out one of them was frozen right in the forest. And they left them there, nobody cared. Because I had the baby, I had better conditions there. I had some nursing experience. It's interesting how they find out that I am telling the truth that I had some nursing experience. They ask me how to name a few medicines and to write it down. So I wrote it down in the Latin alphabet and that's what made them believe I really went to some nursing courses. You know, before the war we were preparing for it and I did go to special courses, Red Cross courses.…And I did use it during the bombing of Warsaw.

I have to admit I had a little better conditions in the camp. I was working in hospital there as a nurse's aide or nurse, whatever it was. The hospital was close to the nursery of children who were children of the prisoners. And I took care of some of them and I had entrée to my daughter. This was how we kept the bond between mother and daughter, but with no intention by them to do it for us. But somehow it came out I was lucky. I was with her [sometimes]. I couldn't [live] where she was, I was with the sick people, that's how come I know what happened with all the others in the forests. Some were brought to the hospital.

…After the war between Russia and Germany [began], they created in Russia a Polish government in exile. And they took care of all the citizens. And because I was a citizen I was included. And they came to an agreement with Russia that Russia would let out all the prisoners, Polish citizens who were prisoners, so that some of them, if they were of age, could…create a Polish army in exile. … And they let me out too. That was I think in 1942. So they give me a choice of wherever I want to live. The only thing is not close to the German part of the occupied territories, far away. So I choose, I heard before, when I was in Poland, about a very good city in Orenbourg, the city was Tchikalef, a city in like a district, in

one of the republics in Russia.... Anyway, they send me there and I went, with the baby of course...when we were let out I had her all to myself. Anyway we went to Orenbourg. I didn't know anybody there. I went to the Polish committee, there was in every capital city of the different republics, some temporary committee of Polish, to prepare people for emigration back to Poland in the future. They thought in the future it would happen they would get back Poland free. So I get a job there, because I had already my education, high school and one year of university in Poland. So they took me and I was working, and I found a place—not a room or a suite, no, but with a family together. We were sleeping there on the floor. It was a Polish family. So I was working and one day I go, I am walking to work on the street, and I went and I saw a familiar face, a guy was passing the other way. And I looked back, and he looked back. Because he recognized me and I recognized him. That was a good friend of my older brother and he used to come to our home. And that was Shaya. That's how it started. He was working in the directorate of the railways, as a painter.... That's when I got married to him.

In 1943 Paulina's father was sent to the death camp from which he never emerged. Her mother was hidden with a gentile friend in what was called the "Aryan" section of Warsaw. Thus she escaped both the destruction of the ghetto during the uprising and deportation to the camps, although she lost a leg in the German bombing which followed the Nazi retreat in the final days of the war. Paulina's older brother also escaped to Russia and survived.

We came back to Poland in 1945, they let us. We [had] lived in Warsaw, grew up there. When we came back, we went to Brodslav, which is part of Poland, returned to Poland after the peace agreement. It ... was on the border with Germany so it was under German occupation a century or so. They gave it back to Poland. Poland was glad she has it because all the [returnees], who left Poland during the war for this reason or the other reason, they wanted to come back to their homeland. So we settled in this eastern territories returned to Poland under the agreement, the peace agreement between Russia, Germany and Poland. We came to Silesia, it's called. My city in Silesia was Brodslav in German, in Polish it was Vradslau. So we live there since 1945 until 1958 when we came to Canada.

Well, I had two children more with Shaya... And we worked there [until

there was] an opportunity to run away from there. There was mass emigration from all over Poland and other countries because the anti-Semitism didn't cool off during and after the war. We were expecting any time a pogrom or something. So it came the opportunity to emigrate and people were emigrating mostly to Israel, which was open. And some who had any relatives somewhere else were trying to go somewhere else. And so it was with me, my family. My brother also survived in Russia with his family and after the war he came back to Poland and he didn't stay there. Right away he went to emigrate to Austria, but they had an opportunity, they came here to Canada, Vancouver, because his wife's sister [was] here. She is still alive, she's in Louis Brier now. And she sponsored them. That was in 1948 they came here. When we were in Silesia my brother sponsored us. That's how we came in 1958 over here. Thanks goodness. I ruminate every day. I am thinking every day and every minute of it. How lucky we were. What a place to come and live.

Immediately after arriving in Vancouver, the Kirmans were approached by the Peretz School about putting their children in the after school program. In 1958 the Vancouver Jewish world was small enough that newcomers were greeted and their interests were made known to the appropriate agency. The Peretz School followed up on these leads to increase membership and to infuse the school with new energy. It turned out that the addition of the Kirmans to the Peretz milieu was a stroke of luck. Keeping Yiddish alive was easier with enthusiasts like Shaya around, who participated in music activities at the school which were then generally led by Claire Klein Osipov.[5] Both Shaya and Paulina were voracious readers in a number of languages, including Yiddish, and they eventually collected a sizable number of books in Yiddish.

Paulina and Shaya worked at a variety of low level jobs. In spite of Paulina's two degrees from Polish universities—she had completed both her bachelor's and a master's

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[5] Claire Klein is one of the world's leading Yiddish sopranos. Involved in the Peretz School from inception, she had a professional singing career well underway when she married UJPO member Lou Osipov. Deciding to have a family and refusing touring opportunities, she became the Peretz School's resident musical leader for many years, eventually handing over the reigns to Searle Friedman.

degree in economics after returning to Poland—her lack of English hampered her. Again

her nursing training was useful as she got a job as a nurse's aide at Vancouver General

Hospital. It was through a patient there, a Polish-Canadian man with many connections in

the Slavic-speaking community, that she was given her chance to have a more satisfying

career. Impressed by her command of many languages, and finding out about her

education in Poland, this patient put her in touch with faculty teaching Slavic studies at

U.B.C.

> ...At that time it was very much in style to know about Russia. And they
> were looking for somebody who knows Slavic languages, all of them
> including Russian, to be able to work there [in the library]... I heard about
> this job, but I am not a librarian.... But they needed somebody very badly
> so [a faculty member] sent me there. He phoned them up to get me an
> interview. And I went there and the librarian ... interviewed me and they
> discovered that I know seven languages. Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish,
> Russian, German, Latin, and also Slavic [languages generally]—
> Czechoslovak, Belorussian, Ukrainian. So it's even more than that. So
> they want me, but not so simple. They send me to put an application at
> personnel at UBC. I went there and first they ask me how old I am. At that
> time in 1962 [I was] forty-four, forty-three, something like this. So this
> head of the personnel office tells me they can't accept me, I'm too old.
> What can I do? So I went back to the librarian. She—the [head librarian]
> was a lady at that time—she was so mad. She picked up the phone and
> calls the head of the personnel department. It's my responsibility, she says,
> and you take her application. So that's how I got the job. They trained me.
> And all the Slavic department was mine. Books coming in, they trained
> me how to catalogue, what to do. I catalogued all those books... If you see
> a PK on the card catalogue, that's mine.

Paulina worked at UBC for twenty-two years.
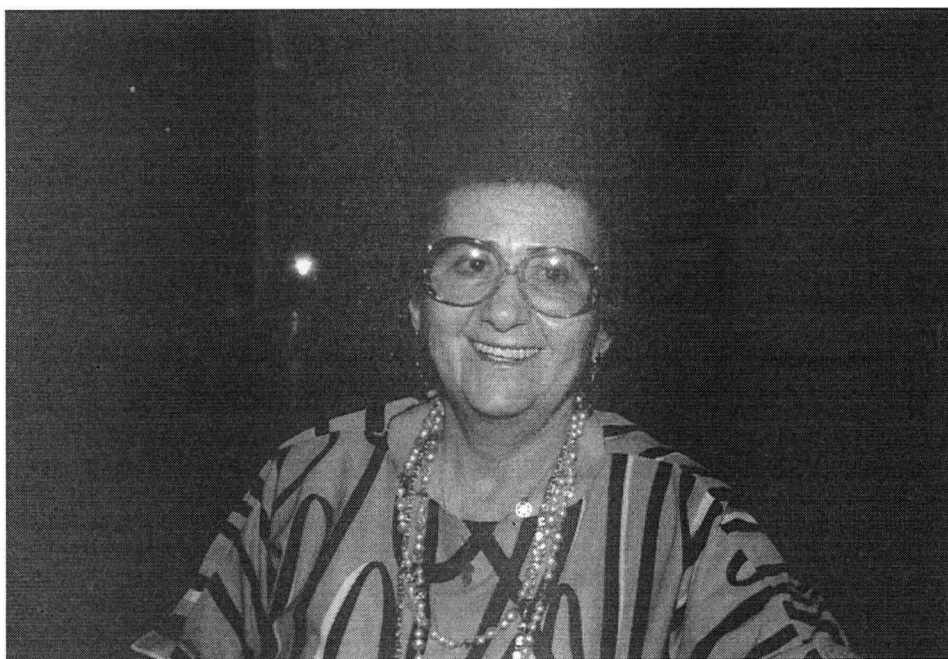
Paulina Kirman, founder of the Vancouver Peretz Institute Library.
Courtesy of the Vancouver Peretz Institute.

Starting the Library

In 1972 Paulina and Shaya began a Yiddish reading group. The group included

both immigrants and Canadian-born members who had Yiddish as their first language.

They met at the Peretz School initially, bringing their own books and making multiple

copies so they could read aloud to each other. By that time Paulina had ten years' library

experience. She realized that there was a demand for a Yiddish library in Vancouver, and

that the Peretz School had the books, although they were scattered and not arranged in a

logical order. In 1976 she and Shaya got permission to use one of the classrooms to

shelve and organize the books into a library.

Although both were working and they still had children at home, they spent hours

at the school organizing the books into a working library. Paulina was able to scavenge

old cataloguing materials from UBC, for example collecting old Library of Congress

class summaries as they became obsolete. An old card catalogue was donated as well, and Paulina set to work cataloguing and classifying. Shaya assisted her, painting call numbers on the spines and typing cards which Paulina had prepared. Paulina used Library of Congress systems for both subject headings and classification for two reasons. First, as this was the scheme she had been taught with, and was using on a daily basis at UBC, she could easily transfer the skills to the Peretz library. Second, although this was a community collection, she already saw her mission in preserving and disseminating Yiddish literature as one which connected the Peretz School to research libraries rather than to public or Jewish libraries. Therefore she saw a benefit in maintaining the Peretz's bibliographic records so as to be compatible with the Yiddish collections of research libraries. However, following the LC standard means using transliterated Yiddish (which was inevitable since the Peretz School didn't have a Yiddish typewriter). The transliterated card catalogue has predictably served no-one very well, neither Yiddish nor English readers being able to navigate it very well. In general, as is so often the case, the librarian's personal knowledge was usually called on to find items either on the shelf or through the card catalogue.

The library's opening was timed to coincide with the visit of a distinguished guest, New York Yiddish literary figure Itche Goldberg on January 21, 1979. Paulina invited not only every Jewish group in the city but virtually every organized seniors' group. She did endless amounts of publicity, sending personal invitations to UBC librarians, synagogues, and the Jewish Community Centre's library workers. Her press release to the *Jewish Western Bulletin* was published although the *Bulletin* did not cover the opening. This outreach was successful not only in attracting participants for the

opening, and users for the library, but also in encouraging donations, which came from individuals who were not Jewish as well as those who were, and groups such as the Jewish Community Centre's seniors' club. The Ukrainian Fraternal Association made a donation requesting that it be used to purchase a book on Jewish-Ukrainian relations.[6]

The Library's Collection

In addition to these donations, the library was given a budget by the board and was able to buy materials to round out the collection. The UBC library's Gifts and Exchanges program donated most of the Peretz library's reference works, and a number of other books which were duplicates of literature held at UBC. The reference works were not duplicates of the UBC collection, and it is not clear why UBC did not keep this material—indeed, some of it may have been donations which UBC did not accession at all. Since Yiddish use at UBC has always been minimal—the current subject specialist believes he has had five Yiddish-related questions in the past fifteen years[7]—there may simply have been an acknowledgement that reference works would be more used at the Peretz School than at UBC (which indeed they are). However, if Yiddish studies ever comes to UBC it will have to either acquire this material or make an arrangement for student use of the Peretz Library. Whatever the cause, Paulina was most grateful to receive these items, and maintained an excellent working relationship with UBC's librarians.

Other important relationships for the library were with non-local organizations. The library became a member of both YIVO and the National Yiddish Book Center.

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[6] Peretz School file "Library History."
[7] Personal conversation with Joseph Jones.

YIVO supplied a newsletter which reported important events in the Yiddish world, the publication of new works or re-publication of older works, and generally kept the Peretz School in touch with the Yiddish library world. Membership also included the annual *YIVO Bleter*, which published the most scholarly Yiddish-language research. The National Yiddish Book Center was established in 1980 in Amherst, Massachusetts, and immediately Paulina signed the Peretz Library up as a supporting member. The NYBC sought to collect Yiddish books which would otherwise be discarded, recycling them back to users in other parts of North America. The NYBC also published a newsletter which reported on its work, and sent the library its listings of available titles. There is no evidence that the Peretz Library ever bought titles from the NYBC, but the membership was important because it connected the library to new directions in Yiddish. The library was also a member of the New York group the League for Yiddish, which had a popular rather than a scholarly mandate, and received its magazines *Afn Shvel* and *Yugntruf*. (*Yugntruf* publishes new Yiddish creative writing, much by second language learners, while *Afn Shvel* has memoirs and general interest articles).

The school had already been receiving the only Soviet Yiddish literary magazine, *Sovetish Heymland*, in multiple copies (presumably for classroom use). The school did not pay subscriptions because *Sovetish Heymland* would deliver for free to almost anyone who asked, apparently for propaganda purposes. Although there may have been adult members who read it, by the time the library came into existence the children were only being taught small amounts of Yiddish and could not possibly manage the high literary style of *Sovetish Heymland*. In addition, in accordance with Soviet linguistic policy, all Soviet Yiddish publications used a simplified orthography which did not correspond to

the Yiddish being taught at the Peretz School. However, the result of the multiple copies is that, even though many issues were destroyed by years of being piled in the basement, the Peretz School has an almost complete run of *Sovetish Heymland* covering about thirty years—1961 to 1991—when Yiddish Soviet writers had few other publishing opportunities.

The library also has an almost complete run of *Yidishe Kultur*, the literary journal of YKUF, beginning before the founding of the school and continuing to the present. The historical set must have arrived as a personal donation from a subscriber to the journal. The library did subscribe at one time, but it continues to arrive although a subscription has not been paid in some years, which probably indicates something about the Yiddish community in general. Perhaps a sense of mission in disseminating Yiddish literature overrides concerns of profitability.

The overall collection continued to grow, primarily through donations. The budget was used to buy expensive items which were unlikely to arrive by donation: that is, scholarly works and re-issues, useful items such as Shirley Kumove's *Words Like Arrows* (a collection of Yiddish sayings in Yiddish, transliteration and English), and library-bound dictionaries. The donations, however, were made up primarily of literature. Today the call number PJ5129, Yiddish literature, makes up about half the library's book collection. Yiddish literature of all modern eras and locations is represented, but Canadian imprints, the 1950s publications from YKUF, and full sets of the three classic writers are more numerous than others. In addition to Yiddish literature, world literatures in Yiddish translation, most dating from the turn of the century, are numerous. These include many Russian 19th Century writers such as Dostoevsky, Americans such as

Longfellow, and the complete works of Guy de Maupassant.[8]

Reference works are the next largest section, which includes dictionaries of various languages (Yiddish-English, Yiddish-Hebrew, Russian-Yiddish-Hebrew, etc.). Another important kind of reference work is the *leksikon*, a term which in Yiddish often denotes a thematic dictionary which includes biography: for example, the *leksikon* of Yiddish writers is bio-bibliographical, while the *leksikon* of the Yiddish theatre includes entries on individual actors and producers as well as theatrical companies and major productions. Yiddish language encyclopedias and multi-volume histories of the Jews also are in the reference collection.

The final section of Yiddish books in the library is the hodgepodge of non-fiction, which takes up a very small area but covers the range of classes. History is represented, for example with the *Black Book*, the first work attempting to document Nazi atrocities using the testimonies of survivors, better-known in its English-language version. Old textbooks in a range of subject areas, presumably used for personal study since universities did not teach in Yiddish, make up another interesting sub-set. Books of political science in translation include Marx and Engels, Soviet dogmatic works, and English-language liberals such as John Stuart Mill. Yiddish-language political figures such as Zhitlovsky are also represented. There are also a few books of Orthodox sermons, a book of sexology, a vegetarian cookbook, and other items of self-improvement, all dating from the turn of the century. Although small, the Peretz School's collection is eclectic enough to offer virtually any political viewpoint and literary style except,

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[8] The de Maupassant books are famous for being the most over-represented (and unneeded) book at the National Yiddish Book Center. This is because it was translated and published as a bank promotion in New York in the days when opening an account usually involved receiving a gift.

perhaps, Hassidic tractarian materials.[9]
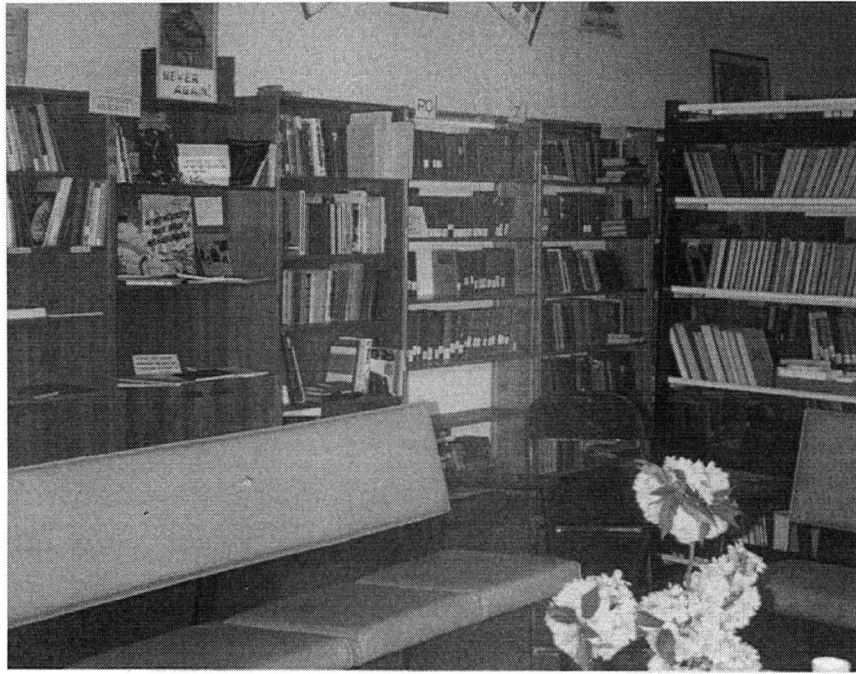
The library in its larger location, 1985.
Courtesy of the Vancouver Peretz Institute.

Circulation & Public Service

Paulina's decision regarding circulation was to make the books available to the

public generally, rather than Peretz members only, for several reasons. First, the school

was interested in expanding its user base and serving a larger portion of the community.

Second, to exclude non-members would cut out most of the Yiddish speakers in

Vancouver. It seems odd that many Yiddish speakers did not come to the Peretz School

for other functions, since no other Yiddish culture was available in Vancouver, but

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[9] Vancouver's small Hassidic community is not largely Yiddish-speaking, unlike similar communities in Toronto, New York and Israel. At any rate, since most Hassidic groups do not encourage reading for entertainment and since most Vancouver Hassids dislike the Peretz School for religious reasons, this lack of representative material is not of great concern to recreational readers.

perhaps a combination of the bad relationship with the mainstream community and the low esteem in which Yiddish was previously held can explain this. However, in the 1980s many elderly people who had not been active in the promotion of Yiddish culture found reading in their mother tongue to be an enjoyable return to tradition. Paulina began regularly hosting seniors' groups from other organizations on trips to the library.

Other than these planned visits, there has been very little public service work. At times a question is asked by members of the media, or by performers or writers, about a particular Yiddish writer, word or saying. Paulina was generally able to answer these with very little reference to the collection, using either her own general knowledge or calling on Shaya's intense study of Yiddish literature. Other Peretz members have asked the library for assistance regarding Yiddish poems and stories which are incorporated into activities. Poems are read at holidays, often in the original with a translation provided in the programme, along with brief biographical information about the writer. The library is used to find new material and check facts.

The use of the library by non-members is not without its attendant difficulties. A common problem has been recovering books when a user dies. Family members do not necessarily know that the books come from the Peretz School—although they are stamped—and throw them out or give them to another organization. Peretz School books have turned up in garage sales and the sale tables of other libraries. It is not uncommon for books offered by a surviving family as a donation to the Peretz School to turn out to be mostly books borrowed from the library some months earlier.

These factors also make circulation figures difficult to determine. Another problem in estimating circulation is that only the original collection—those Paulina

accessioned before the 1979 opening—have borrower cards, the only source of circulation information. This represents about 500 of the books currently in the collection. However, a search of those remaining items with borrower cards has turned up the following information regarding circulation:

- about one in twenty volumes has been signed out ever, and no item showed more than two loans;

- only literature (poetry and fiction) has been borrowed, except one volume of Zhitlovsky's philosophical writings;

- the most popular single author was Sholem Asch, showing about a dozen loans of his various novels;[10]

- one reader worked his way through the complete works of S.Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim) during the 1980s and early 90s;

- no one has ever taken out Guy de Maupassant.

The number of lost volumes must also be added to circulation figures since books generally go missing while on loan. These can be determined through a comparison of the number of books with call numbers on their spines and the number with cards in the catalogue. By a rough estimate there are several hundred more cards in the catalogue than can be accounted for on the shelves. To that as well we must add loans of non-catalogued items—those without borrower cards—assuming that number to be about equivalent to the usage shown by those with borrower cards. Taking all these factors into consideration, it seems likely that the total loans of Yiddish books since the library's inception in 1976 is no more than 500.

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[10] This also appears to be true of Peretz members who read in English: the most common donations to the English collection are translations of Sholem Asch.

Later Developments in the Library

Shaya Kirman died in 1982. Paulina continued working at UBC until her retirement in 1984. At this point she was able to give much more time to the library. The school agreed to moving the library into the lounge, a much larger space which finally was able to accommodate the growing collection. For about ten years following the official opening in 1979, the library seems to have been both active and a source of pride for the school. In 1980 Archie and Anne Wyne donated most of their Yiddish books to the school and bought shelving units to house them. Sid Sarkin donated ten cartons of Yiddish books in late 1985. Paulina donated many of the books Shaya had collected. After the death of Ben Chud in 1986, his family also donated most of his Yiddish books.[11] As the books poured in, the number of duplicates increased and in 1985 Paulina organized a work party to collect, pack, and send a large shipment of books to the National Yiddish Book Center for redistribution. The school's official publications mention the library often, particularly its unique status as the only Yiddish library in British Columbia or, later in the 1980s, as the only Yiddish library west of Winnipeg.[12] Paulina opened the library every Sunday and at other times hosted groups of seniors from various programs in the city. The *Jewish Western Bulletin*, although not generally responsive to Peretz School activities, printed Paulina's press releases and made news of the library available to many non-members.

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[11] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 13 March 1980; Peretz School file "Historical Database"; Peretz School 50th Anniversary booklet.
[12] Peretz School file "Newsletters."

At the end of the 1980s Paulina began to experience health problems associated with her age, and she could no longer give the library the attention it needed to continue functioning. The Peretz School was experiencing its first space crunch in the Ash St. building, and finally came to the decision to push the library shelving to the sides of the room and re-create the lounge in the library, the only room now available for the seniors' daytime programs since the schoolroom area was rented. Paulina was enormously upset, but since there was no successor in sight to take care of the library and make it relevant to the younger, non-Yiddish-reading membership, she had to accept the situation. The books remained on the shelves, but crowded and disorganized.

Donations continued to pour in as the Yiddish-speaking generation began to die in large numbers. These new items were not accessioned or catalogued, but simply put on the shelves. Volunteers who attempted to keep up with even the simple duties of re-carding and shelving returned loans were hampered by their lack of Yiddish. Nonetheless, readers continued to come, including a number of members of the seniors' groups who were coming to the library anyway. It was impossible to find specific items, but browsing was still possible since most of the library's collection is pleasure reading material. Non-members who had started borrowing as a result of Paulina's outreach work in the early 1980s continued to come but they were also decreasing through attrition (only two of these readers are still alive). The library continued to serve a purpose in its way, but its situation reflected the state of the Yiddish language: its elderly librarian and shrinking number of readers could not maintain a normal level of activity.

The library has also begun to collect English language materials, both for adults and children, to support the school's programs. The adult materials reflect Jewish secular

and political concerns among the non-fiction, while the fiction focusses on Yiddish literature in translation. There are about 500 adult books in English: they circulate minimally to a few regular users. The library has also acquired long runs or about a dozen English language magazines, representing left, Jewish progressive, and Jewish feminist movements. These have become more popular recently due to the change to a circulating policy. The children's collection consists of about 400 books and includes materials on the Holocaust, Jewish holidays, Israel, and Jewish folk tales and other forms of Yiddish culture. The children's materials are perhaps now the most heavily used area of the collection, with about a dozen books taken out each Sunday when the children have their classes. The most heavily used section is the Holocaust books, particularly around the time of Yom ha-Shoah, the Holocaust remembrance day in the Jewish calendar. Not only do the Peretz teachers use the library materials to support their Holocaust curriculum, the students borrow these books in greater numbers around that time (late April or early May). The teachers also sometimes put up book displays of each holiday as it arrives, and use the books for storytimes and interactive activities. Picture books and story books for younger children are used more heavily than those for the young adults in the Bar and Bat Mitzvah class. This is possibly because the young adult books are kept with the children's books, which is notorious for lowering their appeal to potential users. More attention would be needed to make the children's collection as well utilized as it could be in the organization.

Yiddish, the Library and Me

I hope a short detour into personal matters will not be startling to the reader. It is

impossible to tell the next part of the story of the library without putting myself in it, for reasons of personal honesty as well as factuality. I have spent hundreds of hours in the past three years volunteering in the Peretz School library and now constitute its de facto librarian (though unpaid). I cannot obscure the fact that the library has personal meanings for me, as for Paulina. Working in her library has been central to my studies of both librarianship and Yiddish, which form the nexus of this work.

I'm not sure why I started learning Yiddish, though I always manage to come up with a reason when someone asks. I have been asked hundreds of times, twice by the media. Usually I mutter something to do with my grandmother, with loss, with a longing for culture; with being secular and not wanting to "do" Jewishness as religion (because that's all it would be for me, doing something, not believing something) but with wanting to be Jewish in some way that's more than just an assertion, that's demonstrable. Or I talk about pride, about looking at a once-vilified part of our history and recognizing it as part of the history of the vilification of all the parts of us. Whatever reasons I come up with, they only convey part of the story, the part which is most familiar and most individualistic. Yiddish must speak to something many post-Holocaust North American Jews are experiencing because a lot of Jews my age are learning Yiddish, they're just not doing it in Vancouver. But equally Vancouver must be part of my story, because the isolation I used to feel as a secular, left-wing Jew in Vancouver has a lot to do with why I can't stop going to the Peretz School.

I started wanting to be a librarian in 1994 when an undergraduate research project took me to special libraries and archives in New York, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. There I learned that a librarian can make the difference between good research and bad;

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and even, in extreme cases, between remembering history and forgetting it. In September 1996 I started taking Yiddish classes at the Peretz Institute. My friend Rachel told me about them: she was planning to attend and thought maybe I would like to join her. As it turned out, Rachel couldn't find the time to take the classes but since I was signed up I went anyway. The classes were held in the library at the Peretz School because it is more comfortable than the classrooms which have kid-size chairs. Gradually as I learned the alphabet—we really had to start at the beginning—I looked at the books more closely and figured out what should have been obvious, that they were completely out of order. So I called the Peretz School's office one day and offered to work on it.

There was one other library volunteer, David Kaetz, who had come to the school initially as a researcher looking for old Purim plays to adapt for a children's show he was writing. David's Yiddish was good but, like me, he had no idea of what running a library meant. We struggled through together, even when we discovered the "duplicates" in the basement: donations that hadn't fit on the shelves, as well as books that had been boxed and moved for re-painting the library two years earlier and had never been unpacked. They were in boxes on a cement floor, some of them wet from a dripping pipe. Here is David's account of our work together:

> We were both excited to meet someone else with a *meshugene* passion for these love-children of the Jewish mind, and so we began…. [A]fter at least eight long, long days *shlepping* up and down those basement stairs, wearing dust-masks—like a *yarmulke* on the mouth—we had completed the first stage of the task. The triage went something like this: 1) Yiddish books in readable condition went back on the shelves; 2) books beyond hope of recovery were consigned to oblivion—sacred books for burial, others for the landfill; 3) multiple copies were put aside for sale to scholars and other collections; 4) duplicates of books with no likely

scholarly or research interest were shipped to the National Yiddish Book Center.[13]

Of course David and I could not find buyers for most of the duplicates we kept. Just as the library is having trouble finding readers, nobody in Vancouver is crying out for scholarly materials in Yiddish.

The library does get used, though. Since it is the lounge, people hang out there. The resident musicians who make up the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir use the music books to find Yiddish-language songs. Choir members also dress in the library before performances and leave behind half-drunk cups of coffee sitting on hundred-year-old lexicons of the Bible, which I clean up and leave nasty notes about. The Yiddish class still meets there, and sometimes we look something up in a dictionary. Every Friday morning when the seniors come in Paulina reads them a short story or a few poems from a book in the library. The library provides an atmosphere more than reading material: it gives the school its only remaining connection to written Yiddish. And the Peretz School is Vancouver's last link to Yiddish.

The Community Yiddish Library: A Dying Breed

Book donations arrive almost every week at the Peretz School. Many people are delighted to have someone who will take the books off their hands. Nobody likes to throw books away, and since many people don't know about the National Yiddish Book Center that is what would otherwise happen. In addition to personal collections, there

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[13] *meshugene*: crazy; *shlep*: pull (usually used in English to mean "carry a big load" or "make a difficult trip"); *yarmulke*: skull cap worn for religious observance. David Kaetz, "On Saving Yiddish Books and Jewish Memory," unpublished article (dated 4 Oct 1997).

have been donations of libraries of other Yiddish schools and Jewish left organizations which didn't manage to weather the change in demographics as the Vancouver Peretz Institute has. When Calgary's Peretz School closed in 1997 it sent teaching materials to the library. In the 1990s the UJPO Toronto branch no longer could afford the space its library required, nor the time to serve the public, and sent much of the collection to Vancouver while keeping only a small number for its own use. Unlike the situation in Calgary, this is not a serious loss to the Toronto Yiddish-speaking community since that city has several excellent Yiddish collections and duplication is not necessary given the number of users. The Toronto Jewish Public Library, which has never been primarily a Yiddish library, does have about 450 circulating Yiddish volumes, which saw a total circulation of 416 during the last twelve months.[14] Six branches of the amalgamated Greater Toronto public libraries also have Yiddish collections, the largest at the Barbara Frum Branch of North York Public Library which includes serials and audiovisual materials.[15]

Winnipeg's Jewish Public Library has experienced a rocky recent history and its efforts to find a home for its Yiddish books have been frustrating. Winnipeg's Jewish community is shrinking and can no longer support as many free-standing services as it once did. In 1997 the library lost its main funding source, a grant from the Winnipeg Jewish Community Council. Like most service organizations, the umbrella group tends to see usage figures as the most important determinant in funding matters rather than

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[14] Steven Bergson, "Re. JPL Collection," personal e-mail (12 April 1999).
[15] North York Public Library, "Guide to Multilanguage Collections," *North York Public Library*, http://www.city.north-york.on.ca/Library/Collections/S_Zmultilanguage.html (10 April 1999).

scholarly or historical interest, which it rightly sees as the province of educational institutions. However, the library could not find a university or college locally that wished to increase its Yiddish holdings. It struck a deal to transfer its collection to the Asper Jewish Community Campus, a community centre. Planning is underway for the Community Campus' resource centre to become a library which would serve both the public and the Jewish day school, which does still teach Yiddish. However, the resource centre only accepted 500 of the Jewish Public Library's books. David Kaetz was hired to spend several weeks choosing items for the resource centre: while he was there he weeded duplicates, sending those which were not already in the Peretz School library to Vancouver. The rest of the books remain in the library's premises on Main Street, but without funding the library has been unable to open regularly to the public. In 1998 and 1999 the Winnipeg Jewish Community Council gave emergency grants of $3,300 each to the library: this obviously is not enough to pay a librarian or even to cover the rent. Members have donated both money and time to keep the library afloat, though it is difficult to imagine that they can sustain it much longer. It is not unlikely that the rest of the collection will arrive at the Vancouver Peretz Institute before long.[16]

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[16] "Jewish Public Library Gets More Emergency Funding," *[Winnipeg] Jewish Post and News* 3 February 1999, 2, 7.
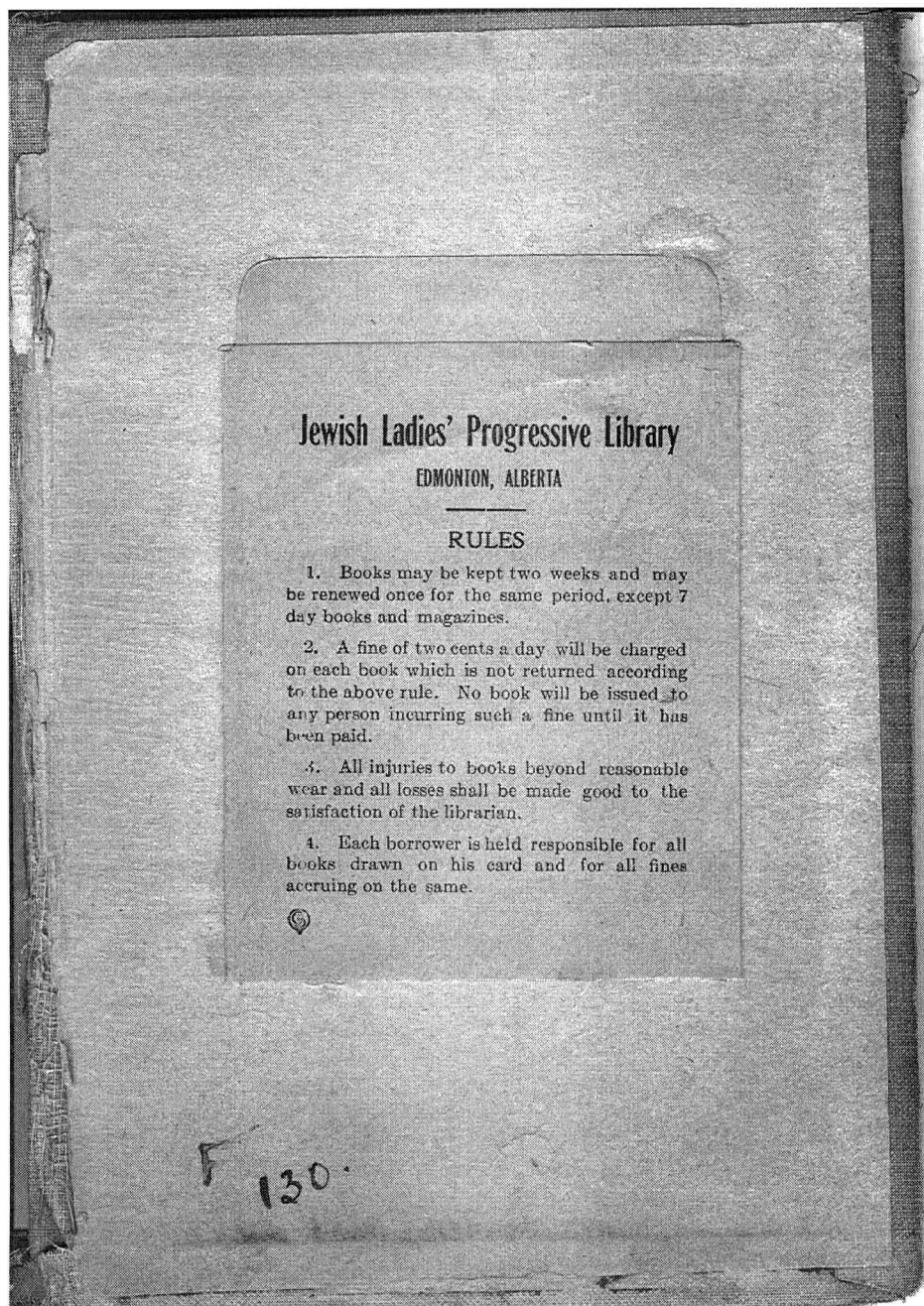
Jewish Ladies' Progressive Library

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

RULES

1. Books may be kept two weeks and may be renewed once for the same period, except 7 day books and magazines.

2. A fine of two cents a day will be charged on each book which is not returned according to the above rule. No book will be issued to any person incurring such a fine until it has been paid.

3. All injuries to books beyond reasonable wear and all losses shall be made good to the satisfaction of the librarian.

4. Each borrower is held responsible for all books drawn on his card and for all fines accruing on the same.

F 130.

Books have arrived at the Vancouver Peretz Institute from many defunct libraries.
This card pocket is in *Dos Togbukh fun an Elender Meydl (Diary of a Lonely Lady)*,
a steamy 1920s novel of free love. Courtesy of the Vancouver Peretz Institute.

Vancouver's Jewish Libraries

Vancouver has a few other Jewish libraries. The Talmud Torah day school

maintains a library to support all school subjects, including secular subjects. Its collection

numbers 20,000 and covers reading ages nursery to Grade Seven, with materials in

English and Hebrew. The Talmud Torah library attempts to collect a well-rounded

Judaica collection, from historical to contemporary and from local to international

coverage, although its priority areas do not include folk tales or Yiddish in translation.[17]

The Louis Brier Home holds a number of books for seniors' recreational reading and the

Holocaust Centre has a small, specialized collection. A number of synagogues have

small libraries which support supplementary Hebrew school programs and even some

adult recreational reading for the congregation, although in a very limited way.[18] UBC

has an excellent research collection of Judaica, and UBC's Hillel House supports

undergraduate reading and study. However, a public, general-interest Jewish library was

not in existence when Paulina established the Peretz School Library. There had been

previous efforts to create a Jewish public library. Throughout the history of the Jewish

Community Centre, various efforts were made to create a library. Early, mimeographed

issues of the *Jewish Western Bulletin* (from the era when it was, in fact, the bulletin of the

JCC) mention library activity as early as 1925.[19] The books described in these postings

include both Jewish and non-Jewish titles, but were primarily fiction bestsellers. These

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[17] Conversation with Doreen Papadopoulos.
[18] The Yiddish collection of Temple Shalom, Vancouver's largest Reform synagogue, was donated to the Peretz School a few years ago, to make more room for its expanding Hebrew collection. The Louis Brier Home, a Jewish seniors' residence, also donated most of its Yiddish books in 1983 when its users began to be primarily Canadian-born Jews with a preference for reading in English.
[19] Cyril Leonoff, *Pioneers, Pedlars, and Prayer Shawls: The Jewish Communities in British Columbia and the Yukon* (1978: Victoria, Sono Nis Press), 143; *Jewish Western Bulletin* 24 July 1930.

activities continued sporadically for many years. In 1954 an opinion article in the *Bulletin* complained that the library had never received proper funding or resource support from the JCC board, although each succeeding board had blessed the project. According to the writer of the article, the task of organizing the library had been taken over by the Business and Professional Section of the Council of Jewish Women and was showing signs of success:

> ...they are beginning to fulfil[l] a library's need in a community such as ours. Recognition has been given to the requirements of our older citizens who read only Yiddish and have difficulty in keeping currently informed. At present a limited quantity of papers and periodicals are regularly available and it is heartening to know that daily at least a handful of our community makes good use of the library's facilities. We are told that the library room in our Community Centre is becoming increasingly popular with our newer citizens who find such limited information as the library provides, of use in starting out in this new country.[20]

Books mentioned in a 1955 press release to the *Bulletin* include primarily Jewish titles and show a fair complement of Yiddish in English translation.[21] However, this attempt may not have lasted long. There does not appear to have been a library planned for inclusion when the JCC moved to its new building at 41st and Oak St. in 1962.[22] Expansion of the building in 1986-87 allowed for increased services, and the Canadian Zionist Federation's office in the JCC loaned its collection of non-fiction English-language books on Israel and Zionism in the early 1990s.[23] Finally in 1994, the current Isaac Waldman Jewish Public Library was opened in the JCC. This is now a well-used

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[20] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 10 Dec 1954.
[21] *Jewish Western Bulletin* 18 March 1955.
[22] Jewish Community Centre, *Celebration: Official Opening of the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver* (Vancouver: by the author, 1996), 14-16.
[23] Shalom Vancouver, *The Guide to Jewish Life in British Columbia, 1993-95* (Vancouver: Preview Graphics, 1993), 20.

general Jewish collection serving recreational as well as research users. It includes two non-English collections: about 1,000 popular reading titles in Hebrew, and about 200 Yiddish novels, most by the classic authors.[24] This Yiddish collection does not circulate very much, serving primarily a Yiddish reading group which meets once a week in the library. Funding for the library comes from a variety of sources, including the organized Jewish community, but its existence was made possible by an endowment from local resident Sophie Waldman.

Within current conditions of Jewish life in Western Canada, the Vancouver Peretz library appears to be uniquely able to maintain itself as a secular, Yiddish-based organization with little mainstream community support. The library is not central to the organization's mission, yet the Peretz School has committed itself to keeping the books as long as no other organization on the West Coast appears to be willing to do so. It does this on a shoestring, and there is certainly a need for funding and professional staff to take on tasks such as cataloguing and preserving the incoming books. Yet that it still exists at all is worthy of some notice, and reasons for it range from practicalities to the inexplicability of emotional bonds.

Practicalities include demographics and economics. Vancouver's Jewish community is now the third largest in the country, after Toronto and Montreal. More than Calgary or Winnipeg, it can now sustain differences and minority interests within it. This is not just with regards to Yiddish: smaller religious congregations in suburban areas, klezmer bands, and a film festival also have sprung up in the past ten years. This can only mean good things for Yiddish and for the acceptance of the Peretz School as the range of

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[24] A multilingual assessment of the Waldman Library was completed by this researcher for LIBR 544D taught by Sylvia Crooks.

avenues for Jewish expression becomes broader. It is also important to note that the Peretz School might not have lasted to see this new era if it had not, through a combination of good planning and dumb luck, found itself in possession of a valuable piece of real estate in 1961 which could be sold to buy the much larger property on Ash Street. Again this was a wise choice of locations since this property has now, with its hugely increased value, allowed the school to enter a re-development partnership which will leave it with less land but a significantly larger and more usable building at the same location. This building will include, for the first time, a single-purpose library with such standard features as climate controls and library-quality shelving.

In terms of the emotional, perhaps even illogical reasons for the Peretz library's continued work, we must look to the will of individuals and the philosophy which binds them together at the school. Paulina Kirman's dedication to the project of creating an ordered library from a room full of books is the single greatest reason for the library's existence. She believed strongly in the goals of librarianship, particularly equal access to information and the dissemination of culture. Her husband, though not a library professional, assisted her in this task because of his commitment to Yiddish. After his death a number of school members have volunteered in the library, and even when the library has been completely inactive and in disarray the school has not indicated any desire to cease to hold the materials. That the books are in Yiddish is enough of a reason to keep it going, although most members would prefer to see it better organized and better used. Respect for the work Paulina and her late husband did has been felt outside the Peretz community, particularly among librarians who understand the scope of the work involved in creating a special library—for example, then-UBC Head Librarian Basil

Stuart-Stubbs wrote to congratulate Paulina on the opening of the Peretz Library in 1979, clearly recognizing it as a personal achievement.[25] The Peretz School will officially recognize Paulina's contribution by naming the library in the new building the Shaya Kirman Library in accordance with her wishes.

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[25] Peretz School file "Library History."

Chapter Five
The Future of the Yiddish Library

The main issue facing Yiddish libraries today is simply how to exist. The circumstances which gave rise to their collections have changed, as communities in the Diaspora have undergone radical transformations. There are no longer enough readers to sustain recreational collections. Scholarly collections require extensive attention by librarians and technical staff which many non-specialized libraries cannot afford. Older books and archival materials already in collections are fragile and require preservation. Materials which come to light suddenly, as with the YIVO find in Vilnius, may require coordination of different libraries, scholarly bodies, governmental agencies, and the negotiation of regulations across international boundaries, tasks which are time-consuming and require particular skills. The Yiddish language is itself in Diaspora: wherever a Yiddish collection exists, it must be integrated into a dominant-language context—even in Israel, since Yiddish has little official support there. Finally, there is the spectre of anti-semitism which still hangs over many Diaspora communities, and which can cause the issue of library preservation to seem trivial in comparison to the loss of human life which attends anti-semitic violence.

National Yiddish Book Center

The most important recent development in Yiddish-language librarianship has been the National Yiddish Book Center's introduction of a Library Development Program. The NYBC was established in 1980 to collect Yiddish books that would otherwise be discarded by individuals and organizations that can no longer care for them.

Headquartered in Amherst, Massachusetts, the NYBC relies on volunteers in various cities in North America. The response has been greater than anybody, including NYBC founder Aaron Lansky, had anticipated: about 1.4 million Yiddish volumes, multiple copies of 25,000 Yiddish titles, are in storage in Massachusetts. The NYBC is not a library *per se*, and its own small library serves only a few researchers and is primarily used as internal support for its roster of cultural activities. However, as a book clearing-house its work has been central to Yiddish libraries.

At first the NYBC sold it books primarily to individuals. Changes in the academic climate have created a more far-reaching mandate. In 1980, about 60 universities around North America offered courses in Yiddish literature, but most of those universities did not have lending materials in Yiddish. To provide materials for such programs, the NYBC's librarians have created pre-selected collections for scholarly use. A particular collection of 500 books is considered core material capable of supporting undergraduate study of Yiddish language and literature. A larger collection is sold for those universities teaching Yiddish at the graduate level. The books in these collections arrive pre-catalogued and classified in either Dewey or Library of Congress schemes. The smaller package sells for as little as USD$5,000. Because of the increase in Yiddish-studies programs, almost 500 of these packages have been sold, most within the Eastern United States but some to universities in Sweden, Belarus, Estonia, Australia, and China. Other programs include an upgrade service in which a library's Yiddish holdings will be analyzed for lacunae and recommendations made as to appropriate additions.

Before the initiation of this program, retrospective acquisitions usually took the form of donations of personal collections—most of them consisting of the same few

books produced by major New York publishing houses. The NYBC program has made a greater diversity of materials, appropriate for scholarly study, available at an affordable cost to even those libraries without subject specialists. The NYBC's pre-packaged collections are likely to constitute the majority of Yiddish library collections within a few years.

In addition to this work facilitating small Yiddish collections, the NYBC has also created an important link with major libraries in the field—particularly those which attempt to collect Yiddish or some sub-set of Yiddish publications comprehensively. Most books which arrive at the NYBC are duplicates of common items already in its warehouse. On rare occasions an unusual item has been found among the donated books. To deal with these situations, the NYBC has created a pecking order of libraries which will receive the item if they don't already have it. First is YIVO, second is Library of Congress, and third is the NYBC library; other American university libraries follow.

Work has also begun on two projects which attempt to use technology to solve the unique problems posed by Yiddish books. First, the NYBC is planning an on-line catalogue which could serve as a central source of bibliographic information which is particularly difficult to come by in communities with small Jewish populations. Secondly, the NYBC plans to digitize 20,000 Yiddish books, thus minimizing the work to be done by individual libraries to preserve the most fragile items. (This will be done as image scanning, not character scanning which is not yet possible in Yiddish letters: however, conversion to character scans may be possible in the future). The NYBC has received funding from Steven Spielberg's Holocaust memorial foundation for this project, perhaps indicating that the connection between the decline of Yiddish and the

loss of human life in the Holocaust has truly been made in public, or at least Jewish,

consciousness. Although the digital library has received more media attention and more

funding, for librarians the on-line catalogue is likely a more useful project. After all, there

are 1.4 million books at the NYBC available for a reasonable cost, but most librarians

don't know what is there or what its significance is. Making them available on CD-ROM

will not solve the dilemma of retrieval for far-flung library users, especially in those

libraries without a Yiddish specialist, until there is searchable bibliographic information

available.[1]

The Canon of Yiddish

The NYBC's laudable efforts are not without their attendant intellectual

difficulties, not least in its choice of a small number of volumes which will likely become

the representative Yiddish readings for most students. This brings into focus the question

of which Yiddish traditions are to be preserved, disseminated, and considered worthy of

scholarly study.

The Yiddish scholarly world formed its "canon" almost as soon as it began to

emerge as a field of study. Yiddish belles-lettres, as opposed to the earlier Yiddish forms

such as journalism and books of prayer and homiletics, came into being in the 19th

Century, a late bloomer among European languages. The turning point for its entry into

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[1] While many libraries with significant Yiddish collections have web-site catalogues available to the public, searching their databases is not always possible or easy, even for a librarian; or if it is possible and easy, it does not provide comprehensive access to their collections. Reasons for this include: pre-1970s holdings are only available in the card catalogue; transliteration problems as described below make ascertaining authorized name headings difficult; interface used does not allow for searching by language or does not include Yiddish as one of the language limiters. For these and other reasons, until the NYBC on-line catalogue is complete I recommend MELVYL, the on-line union catalogue of the University of California libraries, for on-line searching of Yiddish titles.

serious literature is generally considered the publication of Sh.Y. Abramovitsh's "The

Little Person" in 1864 under the pseudonym/persona Mendele Moykher-Sforim. Within

one generation, Yiddish literature underwent many of the developments which other

literatures passed through over the course of centuries.[2] S. Rabinovitsh, under the

pseudonym Sholem Aleykhem, best known for the Tevye tales which formed the source

material for "Fiddler on the Roof," and I.L. Peretz, the first true modernist among

Yiddish writers, were slightly younger than Abramovitsh. In spite of the closeness of

their actual ages, it was Rabinovitsh/Sholem Aleykhem who often referred to

Abramovitsh/Mendele as the "grandfather" of Yiddish literature, himself as the

"grandson" and inheritor of the tradition. The introduction of these titles, still widely used

in popular materials on Yiddish, established an instant tradition: the image of the

grandfather quintessentially encapsulates Jewish notions of continuity and cultural

transmission. These three writers continue to be considered the "classic" writers of

Yiddish, notwithstanding the later Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Isaac Bashevis

Singer in 1978.[3] It is interesting to note, however, that of the three Peretz has acquired the

least recognition in English-language literary studies, perhaps because his work does not

lend itself to a folk-traditional interpretation.[4]

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[2] Dan Miron, "The Discovery of Mendele Moykher-Sforim and the Beginnings of Modern Yiddish Literature," in *East European Jews in Two Worlds: Studies From the YIVO Annual*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore, 71-86 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and YIVO, 1990); and Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 148-50.

[3] Singer and other writers of his era did, of course, launch a separate canon in the form of Jewish-American literary studies, leading to academic bickering regarding the rights of different scholarly fields to ownership of Singer studies. "That these skirmishes make good viewing does not mean that the stakes are insignificant or that the field of contention was inappropriately chosen. Upon reflection, taxonomy turns out to be an ideal arena of ideological conflict, not least on account of its tradition of putative value neutrality." David Neal Miller, "Bibliography as Ideology," *Yiddish* 8 (1991), 64.

[4] For example, although the entry for "Yiddish literature" in my edition of the CD-ROM *Encarta 96 Encyclopedia*, which arrived unasked with my computer, describes Peretz as "the most cosmopolitan of the three writers," displaying "psychological subtlety" due to the influence of Western European writers, he is the only one of the three not given his own entry in the encyclopedia. Abramovitsh/Mendele is described as

Another factor in the ad hoc formation of this canon has been the study of Yiddish in a primarily Anglophone environment. The availability of translation, which makes necessary materials available to non-specialists and cross-disciplinary researchers, has been crucial to the wide-scale study of Yiddish literature. Often specialists who wish to investigate non-canonical works are forced to include translations of their source material in lengthy addenda to their criticism.[5] The choices of what to publish in translation, or not, are not merely market-driven, although the plethora of Singer materials suggests that the relative fame of the author is a factor. There are also ideologies at play regarding the suitability of certain kinds of material for inclusion in the Yiddish canon-in-translation. Even the relative availability of Singer translations presents lacunae:

> Singer's softly pornographic translation/adaptations from the European boulevard press.... reflexive and self-deconstructing pieces, never reprinted, let alone translated, give the lie to Singer's pose as naïve teller of tales.... [This lack of representation] entails a double abdication: to Singer's own blandishments, and to Anglo-American generic norms and notions of canonicity.[6]

More crucially, there are certain groups whose entire output is crucially underrepresented in the "canon" of the National Yiddish Book Center pre-selected collections; in available translations and scholarly, text-book-like anthologies; and under scrutiny in criticism. Most notably underrepresented are women. Women writers are well

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"popular for his lively, gently satirical accounts of *shtetl*...life and vivid descriptions of the countryside"; Rabinovitsh/Sholem Aleykhem as "describ[ing] the life of simple Russian Jews in small towns." While scholars of the field might contest these characterizations of what are in each case fairly diverse literary outputs, it does indicate that the acceptability of Abramovitsh and Rabinovitsh is in some ways connected to their concentration on *shtetl* themes.

[5] E.g. Irving Massey, *Identity and Community: Reflections on English, Yiddish, and French Literature in Canada* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), who provides his own translations of his mother Ida Maze's poetry.

[6] David Neal Miller, "Bibliography as Ideology," *Yiddish* 8 (1991), 69.

represented in Yiddish reference materials, although in nothing like equal numbers to

their male counterparts. Yiddish-language *leksikonen* of Yiddish writers tend to include

about ten per cent women, probably accurately reflecting women's participation in

Yiddish literary life. As a feminist I would argue that in contemporary scholarship we

should give women equal attention even if they were not equal participants in a given

movement, since they provide the only source of half the community's perspectives and

concerns. However, far from equalizing the representation of women, contemporary

Yiddish scholarship does not come close to the representation offered by the source

material:

> In 1954 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg defined and popularized
> *yidishe veltlekhe kultur*/"worldly" or secular Yiddish culture for English
> readers through their extensive introduction and selections in *A Treasury
> of Yiddish Stories*. This culture—intellectual dialogues, arts, and history—
> appeared to be devoid of women and women's concerns, except as
> depicted and interpreted by men. In 1967 an almost exclusively male
> canon and tradition was given further credibility by Lucy Dawidowicz's
> popular anthology *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in
> Eastern Europe.*[7]

The National Yiddish Book Center has made an effort to include women in both its small

and larger pre-packaged collections, even if their work is not available in translation,

which is perhaps the most hopeful sign for future studies of Yiddish women writers.

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[7] Irena Klepfisz, "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers,"
introduction to *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, ed. Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus,
Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994), 22. Klepfisz provides
data on all major English-language collections to the date of her writing. Of the thirteen books she
examines, women are absent from four; represent 1% of the writers and 0.6% of the pages in another; and
from 5 to 14% of the writers and from 4 to 7% of the pages in 7 more anthologies. One book has women
comprising 21% of the authors and their writings accounting for 16% of the pages. It is notable that even
when women writers are included their work is dealt with in far less detail than men's writing is.

Canadian writers also do not appear to be thoroughly represented in Yiddish collections. (For simplicity of taxonomy I have considered Canadian writers to be those who lived in Canada and wrote significant parts of their work there: this embraces such figures as Melekh Ravitch and Peretz Hirshbein, whose writing careers spanned national boundaries). The Peretz School library, for example, probably contains more Canadian Yiddish authors than an NYBC-endowed collection such as Syracuse University[8]: the Peretz School's particular strength is Western Canadian authors and imprints, while the NYBC pre-packaged collection appears to include many more Montreal writers and those such as Peretz Hirshbein who published in New York. However, books like M. Usiskin's *Oksn un Motorn*, and authors such as Sholem Stern and Falek Zolf, who reflect the Western Canadian experience, are not found in Syracuse University. The single memoir published by Vancouver Peretz Institute's own (and to date only) Yiddish-language writer, Sid Sarkin, is not held at Syracuse.

Publications of ultra-orthodox religious groups comprise the most consistently ignored section of Yiddish publishing in scholarly collections. The lack of literary merit of the few fictional forays made by this community may account for the lack of scholarly interest in it.[9] Other publications, however, notably the tractarian press, could be given more serious attention by Yiddishists, whose number includes historians and sociologists.[10] While some of the largest Yiddish libraries do attempt to collect

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[8] I have chosen to look at Syracuse University because its only Yiddish holdings come from an NYBC collection.

[9] This is, of course, merely my own opinion. The examples I have seen of this genre bear a resemblance to the literature of moral instruction produced for school children in Canada in the first half of this century.

[10] In fact, Yiddishists have been internally critical of their own practice of basing their view of Yiddish-language history too exclusively on "literature rather than social documentation," which by definition excludes the majority of ultra-orthodox Yiddish-speakers. Arnold J. Band, Review of *The Meaning of Yiddish* by Benjamin Harshav, mendele@lists.yale.edu Vol. 1.234 (30 April 1992).

comprehensively, even YIVO reports difficulty locating ultra-orthodox publications, and

it is likely that many of these groups do not meet legal deposit requirements at national

libraries. The NYBC reports that this material is virtually non-existent among the books

sent to it by its network of *zamlers* (book collectors): it is not possible to include it in

collections unless and until the materials arrive in Massachusetts.[11] Like YIVO, the

NYBC lacks the funds and time to solicit this material directly, and even if they did it is

not at all certain that it would be forthcoming should they contact ultra-orthodox

communities directly. Thus, future studies in this area are limited by a combination of

lack of interest from other portions of the Yiddish-speaking world and the self-imposed

seclusion of the community itself.[12]

Another indicator of "canonicity," particularly from a library point of view, might

be found in the "Yiddish Studies Pathfinder" prepared by an eminent Yiddish librarian

ten years ago, which is still the only real source of bibliographic advice for non-specialist

reference libraries.[13] The majority of works listed—dictionaries, encyclopedias, histories

of various aspects of Yiddish language and literature, *leksikonen*, and compendia—

emanate either directly from YIVO or from scholars who are, were, or have been

associated with YIVO. The goals of standard Yiddish and standard romanization which

YIVO advocates certainly make for more user-friendly reference works, and the care

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[11] Neil Zagorin, "Re. Questions Regarding Yiddish Libraries," personal e-mail (5 April 1999).

[12] It has become common in Yiddish scholarly circles, when speaking of Yiddish usage decline, to note that this formulation leaves out ultra-orthodox sects which use Yiddish and are procreating at a greater rate than the Jewish community in general (this item was thoroughly dealt with on the Mendele listserv in 1998, for example). However, even while noting this discrepancy, most Yiddish scholars do not seem to intend further research on the issue, leaving research on ultra-orthodoxy to religious studies. I sense two reasons for this. First, the Yiddish-speaking ultra-orthodox world is not *Yiddishist* in the sense of having a cultural programme emerging from, or a deep interest in, the Yiddish language *per se*—it is merely a means to a religious end. Secondly, although the ultra-orthodox are speaking Yiddish, they are not speaking it *to us*.

[13] Zachary M. Baker, "Yiddish Studies Pathfinder," *Judaica Librarianship* 3, no. 1-2 (1986-87), 125-9.

with which YIVO's materials are prepared is often noted to set them apart from more popular works in the field.[14] However, this only partly explains the prevalence of YIVO materials. It appears that the canon of Yiddish is taking its coloration from YIVO's mission, which takes a modernist approach to Yiddish studies. It is again ultra-orthodox materials which are less represented (and less likely to become represented) in this arena, since those communities do not necessarily define themselves in modern ways—that is, a writer of Yiddish stories in an ultra-orthodox newspaper might not define himself (it is unlikely to be herself) as a writer, since all worldly activities take second place to the religious and spiritual activities of the community.

The NYBC notes another lacuna in its research collections: serials. The Yiddish press was a crucial outlet for writers, and many of them never published in book form. It is my guess that many women writers who lacked the prestige to interest a publishing house, or the money to self-publish, as many male poets did, would be found in the pages of the Yiddish press. It is simply a matter of money and time (how quickly the serials disintegrate) that will determine whether these items will be available for future research or not.

Whatever the reasons for its emergence, the Yiddish canon has implications for librarianship in that major library collections must now provide both canonical works, as well as the growing body of criticism dealing with the source material, and endeavor to ascertain future directions the field might take. Although Yiddish publishing overall is a small field—some estimates are as low as 50,000 monographs published in Yiddish in total—the bulk of it has been unstudied or understudied and could prove to hold scholarly

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[14] At the time of writing the pathfinder Mr. Baker was not affiliated with YIVO, so I have not identified organizational chauvinism as a cause of the preponderance of YIVO materials in his listing.

interest once it has been more fully researched. Almost all Yiddish publishing occurred in the era of high-acid paper and corrosive glue; none of these works is likely to emerge in the form of a reprint. Acquisition and preservation cannot wait until librarians discover what scholarly fashions will be down the road. This is truly the area which will benefit from the NYBC's digitization scheme.

Preservation

In spite of the NYBC's digitization plans, there is still an urgent need to preserve original works for certain kinds of research.[15] Microfilm has allowed several collections at YIVO to be not only preserved but purchased by other libraries, for example an almost complete set of works by the three classic Yiddish-language writers (Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleykhem and Peretz) and a representative sample of Yiddish children's literature. There are many more items, at YIVO and elsewhere, which require attention, but since demand for them is low it is not likely that they will be microfilmed and therefore they must be preserved in original through careful storage and handling.

Preservation of materials has gained some momentum since the breakup of the USSR and the opening of Eastern Europe to outside scholars. "Library and archival repositories that were once sealed off have been opened to the public, and collections long feared to be lost have miraculously come to light."[16] The first part of the process is often simply finding out what's still there, given the ravages of time, the histories of anti-

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[15] Historians, who notoriously despise even high-definition microfilm, are unlikely to find grainy bit-mapped images acceptable replacements for primary materials.
[16] Zachary M. Baker, "History of the Jewish Collections at the Vernadsky Library in Kiev," *Shofar* 10, no. 4 (summer 1992), 31.

Semitism in these countries, and the changing official attitudes towards minority cultural expression, in particular Jewish culture, in various countries in Eastern Europe. In the Ukraine, the discovery of a major repository of Yiddish and other Jewish materials in the national library has been a case in point. The materials were originally collected by Communist Jewish intellectuals to form the nucleus of an official scholarly Jewish body. The acquisitions came largely from the remains of Jewish religious and cultural organizations which were closed down as ideologically suspect, but also from individual collectors and important literary figures in the 1920s Soviet Union. Before they even had time to catalogue these hastily and haphazardly gathered materials, the instigators of this collection were purged during a change in Stalinist policy towards Jewish leadership. All collecting activities halted and the materials were sealed from public view. Then the Nazi occupation of the Ukraine created another disruptive element in the maintainance of the materials: some parts of the collection may have been sent to Frankfurt like YIVO and other libraries. Now fragments of the collection are scattered througout the world, including at YIVO in New York: nonetheless, a significant body of materials remains in Kiev awaiting arrangement. Unfortunately, none of the library's staff members read Yiddish and only two read Hebrew, and the library lacks all necessary reference materials which would aid in identification and cataloguing its holdings.

The Ukrainian situation is unique in that it is the largest collection to come to light so far: however, other important materials still remain in Poland and other places in Eastern Europe where there are few Jews and even fewer librarians able to read and preserve Jewish materials. To answer this urgent need, the International Research and Exchanges Board, an organization which promotes scholarship in the former Soviet-

block states, recently arranged for three librarians to be trained in preservation techniques at leading Judaica libraries in the United States. These librarians—from the Russian National Library, the Vernadsky National Library of the Ukraine, and Poland's Jewish Historical Institute—are responsible for significant, crumbling, Yiddish collections at their libraries. Preservation is generally being undertaken using time-proven methods such as microfilming, preservation photocopying, and improved storage and handling procedures. These methods are particularly useful in cases where original items are in pieces scattered between institutions. Runs of periodicals can be filled in with the addition of microfilm from other libraries, while preservation photocopies of manuscript fragments can be linked with original fragments to create a unified holding.

Technical Problems in Yiddish Librarianship

The Yiddish alphabet has idiosyncracies which can present problems for librarians. Yiddish is written in an alphabet derived from the Hebrew alphabet. While Hebrew uses twenty-two consonants and diacritical marks which represent vowels, Yiddish has developed actual vowel letters from the source alphabet. Yiddish also has two combination letters (like "sh" in English) and five letters which change their shape if appearing at the end of a word. One letter (yud) has two sounds, and a diacritical mark is used to distinguish these sounds from each other and from the double-yud in cases which are not clear from context. Another diacritic is used on the letter vov when it appears beside the double-vov, to indicate which letter is the single vov. There is one silent letter (shtumer alef) which is used functionally; and five letters which duplicate the sounds of other letters which are used only in words of Hebrew origin. The Hebrew words

appearing in Yiddish continue to be written in their original form, not altered to fit Yiddish orthography. Therefore Yiddish has many more letters than Hebrew, although in writing they appear very similar.[17]

The technical problems surrounding the integration of Yiddish into catalogues and on-line union lists has been dealt with in a variety of ways. Transliteration into roman characters (or romanization) has been the most common way for these materials to be catalogued. However, the intricacies of transliteration have not always rendered ideal access. A standard transliteration of Yiddish from Hebrew to roman characters was developed by YIVO in the 1930s. YIVO's transliteration table has several characters in Yiddish being rendered as the same roman letter (for example, the Yiddish letters *sof* and *sin* are both transliterated as s). The Library of Congress, in its transliteration, attempts to use a separate symbol for each Yiddish letter to ensure reversability from the transliteration into Yiddish orthography, introducing diacritical marks to distinguish between same-sound letters. Given that YIVO transliteration is used by virtually every scholar in the field, LC transliteration introduces a confusion which may not be balanced by a benefit. Another confusion is caused by differences in pronunciation between the four dialects of Yiddish. A study of the LC catalogue showed that transliteration errors creep in based on the dialect of the cataloguer: as a recent innovation, standard orthography does not come naturally to most native Yiddish speakers. LC practice has also changed over the years. For some time Yiddish acquisitions were romanized as if Yiddish were a dialect of German. (This is roughly comparable to writing French using

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[17] For detailed information on the Yiddish alphabet see: Dovid Katz, *Grammar of the Yiddish Language* (London: Duckworth, 1987); Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* (New York: Shocken and YIVO, 1977).

an Italian orthography: there is a connection, but it's not close enough for the result to make sense). There have also been changes in the Library of Congress' romanization scheme for Yiddish as recently as the summer of 1998 in response to pressure from the Association of Jewish Libraries. Given all these factors, romanized Yiddish in catalogues requires further study and perhaps ingenuity before access can be reasonably assured.

Some Judaica librarians feel inadequate leadership has been provided by the major bibliographic utilities such as RLIN and OCLC in providing access to the Hebrew alphabet, although RLIN now provides Hebrew/Yiddish script. The Yiddish library market is simply not significant enough to anticipate any major assistance to be forthcoming from these organizations. In addition, many library catalogues which might make use of Hebrew/Yiddish script catalogue records have no ability to display them through their OPACs and no pressing need to do so. Much more urgent for most research libraries is improving user understanding of and access to records through the OPAC, rather than introducing another technical innovation which might require further tinkering with an already complex hardware-software nexus. Many libraries will continue to use RLIN's Hebrew/Yiddish capabilities for cataloguing purposes, while consigning users to transliterated on-line versions or vernacular card catalogues. Indeed, the appeal of the card catalogue should not be underestimated.

Contemporary Destruction of Yiddish Libraries

The intentional destruction of Jewish institutions which still occurs with stunning frequency is a factor which must be addressed by libraries and the organizations that house them. Canadian Jews have witnessed attacks on Jewish community centres,

synagogues, cemeteries and schools in recent years: so far, no libraries have been among the targets. However, in Argentina the single greatest attack on civilian Jews since the Holocaust demolished a building which included the biggest Judaica library in Latin America.

Like the New York YIVO, IWO—Instituto Científico Judío in Buenos Aires began as a financial and material collecting agency of the YIVO main branch in Vilna. However, it separated from its parent institution during the war—since its Vilna branch no longer existed to send materials to—and began a separate mission to document the history and accomplishments of Argentine Jewry. The main instigator of the organization was librarian Samuel Rollansky. Unlike the New York YIVO, however, its main focus was always the library and archives, as well as a small museum/art gallery, as it was envisioned as a documentation centre rather than a fully-rounded scholarly organization. Nonetheless, it has regularly published documentary histories and other source materials. The IWO was housed in the building which served as a nerve centre for Jewish social services in Buenos Aires, the building of the umbrella organization AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina).

The AMIA building was the victim of a car bomb of incredible force—not unlike the one used in the Oklahoma City bombing—on July 18, 1994. As it was 10 a.m. on a weekday, hundreds of people were in the building and almost 100 people were killed, including people across the street, due to the force of the blast. Many Argentine Jews experienced the attack as an effort to deny the existence of Jewish influence in Argentine society, an impression reinforced by the participation of police officers and the military in overt anti-semitism in Argentina generally. There have also been several arrests of police

officers who may have provided the vehicle, thought to be a stolen car sold through

corrupt detectives to the suicide bomber. However, official explanations, let alone arrests,

for the bombing itself have never been offered. Speculations have included local Nazis

(Argentina was one of the major havens for former Nazis under Peron) who objected to

the Nazi-hunting activities carried out in the building; neo-Nazis (in whose number a

right-wing faction of the army can be counted) taking part in a random anti-semitic act;

and various parties (usually cited as Iraqis or Muslim fundamentalists) objecting to the

then-recent Oslo Accord between Israel and the Palestinians. Argentina's right-wing

army faction has accused the Israeli religious right of the attack, as some sort of

retaliation for Argentinian Jewry's pro-Oslo sentiment.[18]

While the loss of human life dwarfs all other considerations, the fact that this

building contained many unique artifacts of Jewish life adds to the survivors' sense of a

generalized anti-semitism in Argentine society. The lack of respect given these items in

the official investigation also increased survivors' frustration in the aftermath of the

bombing. In a semi-illicit rescue operation, the library, paintings, and other valuable

objects were removed for safekeeping by the community itself:

> The story of the removal of the [IWO] library from Pasteur 633 is quite
> dramatic. Hundreds of schoolchildren—not all of them from Jewish
> schools, and not all of them Jewish—volunteered, as human chains were
> formed to pass large plastic bags filled with books and newspapers from
> the third and fourth floors down to the building's lower levels, and from
> there they were moved off-site. The surviving paintings from the [IWO]
> art museum…were detached from their positions by means of improvised
> "fishing rods"…[19]

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[18] Stephen Scheinberg, "Waiting for Justice in Argentina," *Toronto Star* 8 July 1998, A11; Esther Hecht, "Cry For Them, Argentina," *Jerusalem Post* 9 January 1998, 8; Gabriel Escobar, "Argentine Jews Reconsider Passivity: 2 Years After Bombing, Recurrent Antisemitism Rankles Long-Silent Community," *Washington Post* 4 August 1996, A28.

[19] Zachary Baker, "Impressions of Buenos Aires," mendele@lists.yale.edu Vol. 4.223 (8 December 1994).

It can perhaps be seen as part of Argentina's unique culture that the site of a massive

bomb attack was not secured against public intrusion. While this worked to the advantage

of the library, the disorganization of the police investigation that followed did not:

> After the rubble was scrutinized for bombing victims, the debris toward
> the front of the AMIA building was excavated and removed to an open
> field near the Ciudad Universitaria, where investigators then sifted through
> it and were thereby able to identify the vehicle used to transport the bomb
> used in the attack. [IWO] representatives did not have access to the debris
> for six weeks, during which time any surviving books and documents were
> exposed to the rain, cold, and wind of a Buenos Aires winter. [By this time
> a court injunction prevented another rescue operation]. When we visited
> the site [in November 1994], weeds had sprouted among the piles of brick
> and concrete that had been deposited there.... clearly no books or papers
> may be salvaged from that site, beyond what [IWO] people were able to
> unearth right after Rosh Hashanah, when they finally gained access to the
> site.[20]

Like the historians who created archives of life in the ghettoes, or the YIVO

librarians who buried historic materials in milk cans under Vilna's houses, the survivors

of the AMIA bombing sought to preserve for the future whatever could be salvaged from

tragedy. In the wake of the AMIA bombing, Yiddish libraries have to make decisions

regarding security and safety which most community, and even research, libraries are not

normally required to make. The building AMIA commissioned to replace its destroyed

location can withstand a bomb blast far more powerful than the one which leveled the

previous building, and it has instituted increased security measures. YIVO in New York

has also had the opportunity to increase security due to its recent move to a custom-built

location. But smaller organizations are unlikely to be able to take these measures: basic

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[20] Ibid.

tasks of collection and cataloguing are as much as most libraries can afford. More importantly, the ethic of open access to library materials which guides the professional librarian must be balanced against the physical safety of both the collection and the staff. In such cases, human life is rightly given priority: but the cost of operating behind security measures takes a toll psychologically as well. No librarian can like the idea of having to treat users as potential enemies.

The Yiddish Library Reinvents Itself

Like other aspects of Jewish cultural life in the 20th Century, the Yiddish library must make decisions about its future in light of changing demographics, social needs, ideological and religious identifications, and scholarly interests of the community it serves. Options range from extinction to mass preservation efforts: the availability of funding is a key factor in how the decision will be made in different local situations. But funding cannot be the only story, or the Peretz School would have closed its library years ago when it ceased to experience reader demand from dues-paying members. Other factors such as the desire for cultural continuation and transmission must be equally important, whether on the part of older people who remember Yiddish as a living culture or on the part of younger ones who wish to discover it.

Different libraries have taken different approaches to revising their missions in the light of declining readership. Montreal's Jewish Public Library, always a leader among Yiddish community libraries, has created several unique features which will extend the Yiddish collections' useful life. It has had over 200 works of Yiddish literature read onto audiotape by local native Yiddish speakers, making this body of work available

to the generation which can generally understand or speak Yiddish but not read it. These items could later become useful for students studying Yiddish as well. The Jewish Public Library has also created an archives of Canadian Yiddish writers, strongest, of course, in those figures who were Montreal-based or connected with the library in some way, as so many writers were. These archives are a rich source for researchers in a variety of disciplines. However, the main means by which this library continues its work is through English and French language materials which cover Yiddish language and literature.

An approach taken by an academic library has been quite different. Florida Atlantic University spent almost no money on acquisitions of Yiddish-language material, instead using the available energy of local residents who were dedicated to creating the collection and had the appropriate contacts to do so. Like the NYBC's international team of *zamlers*, the FAU volunteers, most of them seniors who retired into the community from locations with more Yiddish libraries available to them, collected thousands of volumes to enhance the Yiddish holdings of the FAU Judaica collections. Duplicates were of course among those collected, so the FAU librarians exchanged these for other items at the NYBC or with other libraries. Unusually for an American academic library, but as part of the agreement between the library and its volunteers, the Yiddish collection was made available to the general public. This has increased interest in the collection by the local community.

The public libraries in New York—the branches of the New York Public Library as well as the Borough libraries—discovered that Yiddish usership continued longest in those branches which held collections that exceeded the "canon." Well after the Yiddish decline was underway, readers and researchers continued to flock to the branch in

Manhattan which held the most rare items and older material, even if they lived closer to branches with Yiddish recreational reading collections.[21] This suggests that only those libraries with truly outstanding or unique collections have any hope of serving users in the future.

New technologies have also had an impact on librarianship. While awaiting developments in the NYBC's planned on-line catalogue and digitized library of books, less comprehensive projects have shown the potential for computer technology to disseminate bibliographic information on Yiddish. The Virtual Shtetl, a website exploring traditional Eastern European Jewish life, has created a small (and so far the only) electronic library of Yiddish materials with scanned reference works and bibliographies in the original (not transliterated) script. Another project, the Spoken Language project of Columbia University, has made small samples of recorded Yiddish speech available through a website.

Often it seems the revival of a Yiddish library is not consciously undertaken by the librarians but takes on a life of its own in response to other dynamics in the community. The Medem Library in Paris is a case in point:

> At its inception, the library was a meeting place, a kind of people's university, frequented not only by Yiddish intellectuals but also by the *folks-leyeners* (Yiddish for "self-educated readers") of the Arbeter-Ring and the movements associated with the Bund.... That type of user is on the way to disappearing entirely from Medem and other such institutions. But paradoxically, the Medem library is ever more vibrant.... [W]e've seen the arrival of many young readers involved in research, teaching and translation, eager to deepen their knowledge of Yiddish culture. Thus there is continuity, but of a different kind and orientation. We come across the same phenomenon at the university, where we have more and more

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[21] Ray Faust, "Di Tsirkulatsie fun Yidishe Bikher in New Yorker Shtutishe Biblioteken un di Leyen-Shaft," *YIVO Bleter* 44 (1973): 283.

students—but they are people for whom Yiddish never was, or no longer is, an everyday language.[22]

It is difficult for many libraries to continue going when so few users appear to want their books. This is particularly true of community libraries which were often created for a particularly need: in the absence of that need, the library's very existence seems pointless. Samuel Rollansky found it necessary to explain this principle regarding his leadership of the library of IWO—Instituto Científico Judío in Buenos Aires:

> The library was developed with this approach: a book which will be consulted once in ten years might cost more than ten other books which are more used, but nevertheless we acquire them equally.[23]

The difference for Yiddish community libraries now is that this is likely to be true of all their books, rather than just a portion of them. The principle of material availability may not be enough to withstand the pressures to replace the library with other services which will be more used by more people.

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[22] Jean Baumgarten, "Yiddish in France," *Shofar* 14, no. 3 (spring 1996), 136-7.

[23] Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina, "Que Es el IWO," *Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina.* http://www.bibnal.edu.ar (14 June 1998).
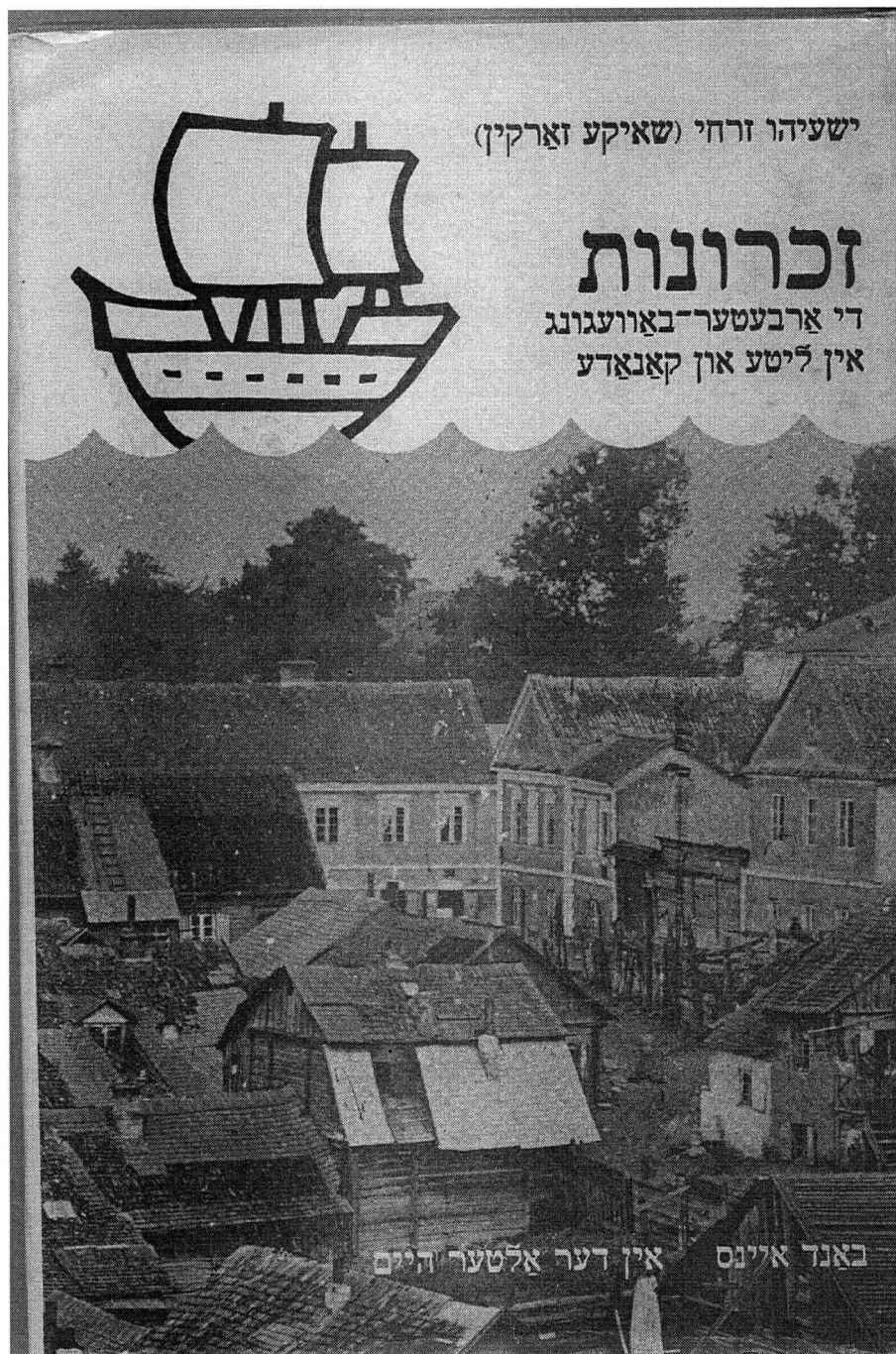
Non-canonical: the memoirs of Peretz founder Sid Sarkin.
Courtesy of Vancouver Peretz Institute.

Chapter Six
Yiddish Marginality and Secular Identity

It is perhaps unavoidable that Yiddish language decline is accompanied by a great deal of scholarly soul-searching, regret, castigation and bickering. Since the situation of Yiddish is usually spoken of in terms of its putatively inevitable "death," the emotions raised are bound to be strong. The scholarly struggle around the "death" of Yiddish is only one manifestation of the struggle within Jewish culture for definition, perhaps even closure, around the vexed issue of language and Jewish identity. It is impossible to imagine Yiddish as a neutral entity: its meanings are never simple, and very often it conveys contradictory messages. Yiddish culture resists any normative reading. It disrupts categories, creates uncertainty, and urges reconsideration of held positions. These are not easy qualities to live with: perhaps this is why some scholars—even scholars of Yiddish—are hastening to proclaim Yiddish dead. Its death would at least relieve the burden of nursing the invalid. But equally, these very qualities of uncertainty and marginality are appealing to younger Jews in a post-modern age.

Yiddish as Contradiction

The contradictory meanings which Yiddish engenders can be seen in the official responses to it over the years of the Soviet Union. Yiddish was both a folk language and therefore worthy of lip service tribute, and the language of a despised class and therefore ideologically suspect. It was given special status in Birobidzhan but not in the regions where most Jews actually lived—the Ukraine, Belorus and Russia. It stood in opposition to Hebrew in terms of religion (at least in the minds of Soviet bureaucrats), but was

associated with Zionism, a Hebraist movement. Yiddish language planning, the official process of making orthographic and demographic decisions regarding schooling, publications, and culture, which should have been the safety net for Jewish expression, was always at the mercy of the ideology of a trans-national Soviet identity which was essentially Russian. Yiddish was finally dealt a severe blow in 1952 with the political assassinations of two dozen leading Yiddish language writers, one of Stalin's last anti-Zionist purges.[1]

Contradictions abound also in Israel, where Yiddish has been associated with Diasporic powerlessness, with women, and with the emasculation of Jewish men, and was thus rejected as the official language of the state.[2] Hebrew stood in opposition to it as the language of Jewish male power in the rabbinic era. The struggle to build modern Hebrew took the concerted energies of several generations of *yishuv* political leaders. The form of these maneuvers often put Zionist Yiddish-speakers in conflict with themselves psychologically and their own expounded views internationally:

> At great psychic cost a European elite rejected all of its European languages—those borrowed as well as those reshaped—and persuaded itself and its followers that it could build a new and inter-ethnically united Jewish people only by so doing…. The notions of diglossia, of cultural pluralism, of bilingualism and biculturalism, so common in culturally-multiple democracies the world over, are unknown or disregarded in SELF-reference, however much Israeli experts may recognize them in dealings with others (e.g., in criticizing Soviet restrictions of Jewish cultural life).[3]

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[1] Aaron Lansky, "Yiddish in the Soviet Union: A First-Person Report," *Massachusetts Review* 31 no. 4 (Winter 1990): 600-24; Rakhmiel Peltz and Mark W. Kiel, "Di Yiddish-Imperye: The Dashed Hopes for a Yiddish Cultural Empire in the Soviet Union," in *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages: Their Past, Present and Future*, ed. Isabelle T. Kreindler: 277-309. Contributions to the Sociology of Language, ed. Joshua A. Fishman, 40. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1985).
[2] This conflict is thoroughly dealt with in Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

The majority of Israel's Yiddish-speaking citizens were Holocaust survivors, simultaneously honoured for their sacrifices and despised for their language.[4] Israel has now softened its policies towards Yiddish—and other minority Jewish languages, such as Ladino—with some funding for research and educational projects. Yet most Israelis think the fate of Yiddish is sealed: and this from a people who revived Hebrew after thousands of years of disuse as a daily language.[5]

Closer to home, Yiddish meanings are just as complex and have had similarly negative effects on Yiddish maintenance. My grandmother believed Yiddish was the source of immigrant shame: she did all she could to erase its accent and spoke English with a fanatical perfectionism. Yiddish was also to her a symbol of women's oppression: it was in Yiddish that her mother toiled to keep a kosher home, and in Yiddish that her rabbi father told her that girls could not be taught Hebrew. Yiddish was the language of stultifying poverty: she married a middle-class German-Jew and hardly spoke Yiddish for many years. Yet at the end of her life, when my grandfather had died, she returned to Yiddish. For those ten years of her widowhood, Yiddish was the language of home—the shtetl as well as loved ones whose memories were precious to her, including family lost in the Holocaust. And if it was the language in which women were oppressed, she also saw it as the language in which women were active participants—unlike Hebrew—and a language which women could wield with power (when she needed to swear, she always

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[3] Joshua A. Fishman and David E. Fishman, "Yiddish in Israel: A Case-Study of Efforts to Revise a Monocentric Language Policy," *Linguistics* 120 (15 January 1974): 141-2. Emphasis in original.
[4] Ronit Lentin, "A Yiddishe Mame Desperately Seeking a Mame Loshn: Toward a Theory of the Feminisation of Stigma in the Relations Between Israelis and Holocaust Survivors," *Women's Studies International Forum* 19 nos. 1-2 (1996): 87-97.
[5] The current status of Yiddish in Israel was debated in some detail on the Mendele listserv in 1998. Interested readers may wish to look at the Mendele archives, Vol. 8, at http://sunsite.unc.edu/yiddish/mendele.html.

did it in Yiddish). And since she was no longer in poverty, she could afford to remember the poverty she had grown up in with something like respect. In fact, the meaning of Yiddish changed for her between her immigration in 1909 and her death in 1988, as it could hardly fail to.

Yiddish Identities

Certainly one of the contradictions of Yiddish is that it grew from an intensely religious world and spawned—among other things—a secular movement. This movement has always been at the margins of mainstream Jewish life in North America, occupying a position which is clearly delimited not only by its lack of religion but by its lack of official or institutional Zionist activity or affiliations. (Thus, for example, while the Vancouver Peretz Institute celebrates Israel's national holiday, it does not raise funds for Israel). Left-wing Jews in North America sought a Jewish past which could provide cultural expression without the religious component, and without a Zionist agenda.

Women too found more expression through Yiddish culture: as writers, certainly, though more commonly as teachers and organizers in the Yiddish world. I have noted the importance of women's role in the organization of the Vancouver Peretz Institute, and the leadership which, though initially unacknowledged, provided a measure of personal satisfaction. Women's exclusion from Hebrew, as well as from most religious functions, strengthened the connections between women and Yiddish, and between women and secular culture. Within the Vancouver Peretz Institute, parents could see their daughters being accorded an equal role to that of male students, which they could not have seen in a synagogue at the time of the organization's founding (and for many years thereafter).

The movement for Yiddish secularism was unlike other secular European cultures in that it did not arise in response to the dominant religion. Within a minority culture, religion often plays a role in sustaining the community through adversity: Yiddish secularism sought to replace the sustaining role of religion with that of a folk traditional past. In creating this alternative view of historical Jewishness, the Yiddish secular movement was at both its most powerful and its weakest. The mythologies of Jewish ethics, imagination, creativity, communal life and primary values which arose from Yiddishism have been fully incorporated into many modern Jewish identities, most of them not secular. The power of the created image is such that it transcends the boundaries of the movement which gave rise to it. Religious identities have proven more flexible than previously thought in reclaiming newly respectable aspects of the past. The Yiddish secular movement simply failed to take into account the "deepest emotions of Jewry and…the sustaining power of the religious regimen and religious symbolism."[6] Nonetheless, the important contributions of the Yiddish secular movement to modern Jewish identities of all kinds speaks to its accomplishments in historiography.

Recently, however, the Yiddish secular movement has been infused with a different kind of energy, with the attraction to Yiddish of younger people who do not experience religiousity and secularism as binary opposites, but who can embrace aspects of both with equanimity. This ease with contradiction lends itself to Yiddish. Women find in the Yiddish past fissures in the male authoritarianism which has alienated many from religious practice (or at least from mainstream religious practice). Yiddish offers a link with an alternative history, which is both more folk-based, as earlier Yiddishists

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[6] Emanuel S. Goldsmith, "Yiddishism and Judaism," in *The Politics of Yiddish* ed. Dov-Ber Kerler (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998): 15.

envisioned, and more woman-oriented. That this past can be painful to explore does not in any way diminish its allure. On the contrary, it is precisely this honesty in the face of overwhelming erasure of women which allows for political identification with the past:

> The classical writers left us images of Jewish life which lend themselves to nostalgia and to the fabrication of a coherent and orderly past. These women's stories do not allow for such fabrication. More resistant to nostalgia, they provide a past which cannot be romanticized and which, for women, does not differ in many ways from the "liberated" present in its contradictions and challenges.[7]

The historical image of Yiddish as a women's language (since women were generally not taught Hebrew) carries over into its use by men. In a sense, Yiddish was made to stand in for all of Ashkenazic Jewry in its relations with 19th Century Gentile Europe. Because the position of Jews as a whole was reminiscent of the position of women within patriarchy, Jewish males were seen as emasculated or feminized. The Yiddish language became a symbol of this feminized Jewish male. While mainstream Jewish men seem intent on reclaiming masculinity, a feminized male image has its appeal to other Jewish men, particularly gay men and those with a philosophical commitment to feminism.[8] A leading group in the Yiddish revival has been the New York band The Klezmatics. This group often refers to itself as "queer" although its members include heterosexuals: the designator "queer" is philosophical and political, an act as much of solidarity as of self-description. The group called one of its CDs "Shvaygn = Toyt,"

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[7] Irena Klepfisz, "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers," introduction to *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, ed. Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994): 57.

[8] Further information on this feminized image and the efforts to re-establish Jewish masculinity can be found in: Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). On the specific relationship of Yiddish to women, see Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

taking the slogan of the AIDS movement "Silence = Death" into Yiddish, making an

explicit comparison between the dangers of being silenced for gay people and for Jews,

and perhaps the Yiddish language as well.

Yiddish is, above all, a language which allows for contradictions, at least partly

because Yiddishism is a modern movement. It is ideologically malleable, personally

invested, open to subversive readings, and available without adherence to a particular

political or religious credo.

> It no longer embarrasses me that what I have called my love affair with
> Yiddish (like Peretz's before me, and Abramovitsh before him, though
> less heterosexual, I suppose) is so fed by the imaginary, so much the idea
> of the thing. ...Yiddish was significant to me because it gave me both my
> worlds in one paradoxical package: the traditional life and my rebellion
> against it.[9]

In speaking of his mother, the poet Ida Maze, literary critic Irving Massey

describes a dynamic at work in the artistic endeavors of Yiddishism:

> [In Ida Maze] we encounter the poet's responsibility to her group as the
> very essence of her writing. No doubt this is so in part because she was
> working in a minority language, which necessarily carries with it a high
> degree of group awareness; the matrix of her culture could not disappear
> from her consciousness as readily as it might have done from that of a poet
> working in the medium of the cultural majority.[10]

This could be said to be true of all Yiddish cultural activists, whether they were writers or

not. The women of the Muter Fareyn equally had an awareness of social responsibility, as

their choices of speakers on Jewish topics will attest. The Yiddish mission of the school

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[9] Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 134.

[10] Irving Massey, *Identity and Community: Reflections on English, Yiddish, and French Literature in Canada* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994): 97.

is consistently described as a result of, and an attempt to instill, love for the Jewish past.[11]

It is significant that the English-speaking PTA did not undertake this kind of work,

focusing rather on individual concerns such as childrearing and educational techniques.

But if Ida Maze was highly group-aware because of working in Yiddish, the current

workings of the Vancouver Peretz Institute are Yiddish because they are group aware.

While working primarily in English, social responsibility and Jewish particularity are

evoked through the strategic deployment of Yiddish, especially in large holiday

gatherings. As only one example, at the Peretz School's communal Seder, the "Four

Questions" are asked in Yiddish. The child who asks them must be coached for months in

advance, and the answers are given in English: but the use of Yiddish occurs at that

critical moment in the Seder, when children demand reasons from their elders and the

answers revolve around the symbolic acts which force Jews to remember the pain of their

past.

Premature Rumours of the Death of Yiddish

Frequently missing from any discussions about Yiddish decline is any clear

definition of the conditions under which linguists consider a language "dead" or even

"dying." It seems to me disrespectful to consider a language dead when even a few living

people have it as their mother tongue. Others have noted the extreme casualness with

which the death of the language is proclaimed on the one hand while its living, vibrant

use is noted in the next breath. A scholar of Hebrew said recently: "Yiddish in Israel is a

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[11] See, for example, the Peretz School's 40th and 50th Anniversary booklets; and B. Chudnovsky [Ben Chud], "More Parents Urged to Consider Need of Jewish Education for Children," *Jewish Western Bulletin* 21 August 1952, p. 4.

dead language, used mostly in homes for the elderly and as a literary language by a few

Holocaust survivors."[12] To which a scholar of Yiddish replied: "Gershon Shaked has

every right to his opinions. It remains, however, incomprehensible why the Yiddish-

speaking inhabitants of homes for the elderly and the allegedly few Yiddish reading and

writing Holocaust survivors should be buried alive by one of the leading experts on

modern Hebrew literature."[13]

These debates over the death or relative dead-ness of Yiddish also occur within a

political framework. The historic links between Yiddishism, secularism, and non-Zionist

politics have certainly not meant a wholesale acceptance of those ideologies by

proponents of Yiddish. A professor of Yiddish wrote recently of her own students, those

who in the 1960s began the return to Yiddish:

> They saw [Yiddish], sentimentally, as the language of Jewish socialism
> and of Jewish poverty, hence acceptable in the recycled leftist terms of the
> day.... [Y]oung Jews in revolt against their own "patriarchal" religious
> civilization imagined they could find in Yiddish and in "*Yiddishkayt*" [sic]
> an alternative and wholly innocent mode of identity.[14]

Professor Wisse continues by declaring a left-wing agenda to be "a perversion of

historical truth" about Yiddish: this, she claims, is its inherently religious nature.

"[W]ithout the need for a separate calendar, kitchen, judicial courts, and customs, Jews

would have had no reason to create or maintain a separate tongue." And she declares:

"These days, Jewish (and non-Jewish) spokesmen [sic] for gays and lesbians, feminists

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[12] Gershon Shaked quoted in Dov-Ber Kerler, "On the 'Politics of Yiddish'," in *The Politics of Yiddish* ed. Dov-Ber Kerler (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998): 3.

[13] Dov-Ber Kerler, "On the 'Politics of Yiddish'," in *The Politics of Yiddish* ed. Dov-Ber Kerler (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998): 3.

[14] Ruth R. Wisse, "Yiddish: Past, Present, Imperfect," *Commentary* 104 no. 5 (November 1997): 38. Further references to this item are to the same page.

and neo-Trotskyites freely identify their sense of personal injury with the cause of Yiddish."[15]

Professor Wisse's is perhaps the most extreme example, but many others in the Yiddish community also seem to be concerned with the fact that Yiddish is being studied and spoken by a self-selecting group rather than the full community as in previous eras. In Professor Wisse's case, since she is also a proponent of the view that the demise of Yiddish is inevitable, she appears to *prefer* that Yiddish die rather than fall into the wrong hands. But much of the hand-wringing over the demise of Yiddish follows a less political agenda to a similar conclusion. Some despair of the power of the ultra-orthodox even to maintain Yiddish, since they will do it in a manner suited to their own interests: and if Yiddish stops serving their interests, they will stop using it. The fear seems to be that if only a few people speak Yiddish, then they will own Yiddish. In essence, the scholarly community is fighting a turf war in which the rhetoric of "the death of Yiddish" is employed as a scare tactic or a strategic retreat.

It is important not to fool ourselves as to the real situation of Yiddish, but I believe it is possible to be relatively objective without condemning it to death before its time. I am in no way making a case that Yiddish is certain to "live," and even if it does I adamantly believe it will not be the same (perhaps not even similar) to how it has been in the past. But these considerations do not mar my basic view that the meaning Yiddish has

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[15] While a close rebuttal of Professor Wisse's argument would be personally satisfying, it falls outside the scope of my argument. I will only say that this description of younger Yiddish-speakers is guilty of both generalizations and outright mischaracterizations. It is important to point out an error: I have not been able to identify the term "neo-Trotskyite" in usage in either the political left or the discipline of political science. I believe Professor Wisse is referring to the left in general, not all of whom are Trotskyists (the recognized term she was perhaps reaching for).

for Jews will continue past the lifespan of its native speakers. A prominent Yiddish

secularist put it succinctly:

> Years ago, I propounded a theory about Hebrew and Yiddish that I know
> must be right, because 24 hours after hearing me state it informally, a
> prominent professor proclaimed it from the platform, without attribution.
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> I contended then and now that, in our time, Yiddish and Hebrew have
> exchanged places. The former loshn koydesh (holy tongue) is now, in
> Israel, the language of daily intercourse (in all sense of the word), of
> commerce, politics, criminality, military functions, etc., etc. Yiddish, on
> the other hand, has assumed the mantle of loshn-hakdoyshim (tongue of
> the holy—martyred—ones).
>
> Yiddish is the language—both in Israel and the rest of the Jewish world—
> of roots, of heritage, not spoken in the street but preserved in the modern
> ark of books, journals and academia…[and] the "holy books" written in
> Yiddish to which the Jews of the 21st century and beyond will turn to
> know where they came from and what treasures are theirs.[16]

Why a Library in Yiddish is Not a Cemetery

The maintenance of a Yiddish language library in Vancouver, against all odds,

can only be ascribed to a certain stubbornness of spirit on the part of a few individuals.

The Peretz community continues to insist on the importance of a Jewish past which most

Jews—including its own members—cannot access directly. That this past will inevitably

be filtered and condensed due to translation, and that it will need constant re-examination

in order to keep it a living and sustaining component of Jewish identity, does not reduce

its power. Unlike those who declare Yiddish already dead, the Peretz School's members

do not appear to need closure on this question.

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[16] Hershl Hartman, "The 'Death' of Yiddish," mendele@lists.yale.edu Vol. 8.089 (27 November 1998).

It would be too simple to say that the decline of Yiddish does not sadden Peretz members. The day may come when the school's annual Holocaust remembrance includes a candle lit for Yiddish as one of the dead. But by and large they would probably agree with Paulina:

> Yiddish was taught because people, Jews, had to keep together in order to be able to defend themselves. There was always something against the Jews. And now it's not like this. It's freedom for everybody. You're a Jew, I'm not a Jew, we still can cooperate and work and have access to everything in the world. Yiddish grew from the difficulties the Jews had. They were isolated, they were fought with by the other populations, they didn't have a country to defend, as now thanks to Israel we have a country, and on the other hand people are more open and tolerant. And there is a big change in economics. People are more comfortable … [while] in those days they didn't have enough of anything. Everything was [considered the Jews'] fault. So now there is nothing to put at your fault, that you are taking away the bread, taking away everything. It is a different situation. It's normalcy and more tolerant.[17]

Paulina believes Yiddish can live on in translation, and that the library provides the raw materials for these translations. She also firmly believes that younger people should study Yiddish—not because it is ever returning to its previous status, but because studying history is in and of itself a good thing. She learned Latin in high school in pre-war Poland because it was seen as a cornerstone of Western Civilization: she doesn't see why Yiddish can't occupy a similar place in Jewish creative and philosophical history.

Younger people who study Yiddish have multiple needs and will function differently once the older generation of native Yiddish speakers has died. To learn a language as an adult requires an enormous commitment of time and money, and most people do not undertake it on a whim. One Yiddish professor says of her students, "it is

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[17] Paulina Kirman, interview by author, 4 Feb 1999. Tape recording.

fair to say that they come to learn not only a language, but also about a culture, about a life that they hope to begin to grasp through that language—through Yiddish." And she notes that their reasons for this focus on the past "is much more present and future-oriented than might be assumed.... Yiddish can serve to unify the historical continuity between Jewish life in Europe and the nature of contemporary America."[18]

In looking at the nexus of secular identity, the left, women, lesbians and gays, and Yiddish, it has occurred to me that what these strands have in common is the belief in the power of human beings to alter the course of history. In left political life, in feminist theory, in the movement for lesbian and gay equality, in the political culture of secular humanism, it is not the past which is romanticized, but the future. Yiddish does not offer the path to the past as much as to a collective future which is linked with the past: a better future, but better because of human endeavour. The library at the Vancouver Peretz Institute is one such endeavour.

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[18] Hannah Kliger, "Who Needs Yiddish Today? Report From the Campuses," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 19 no. 1 (1991): 135 and 136-7.

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