Judah YIDDISH CULTURE
Waten IN THE WEST

The facts about the decline, often overlooked, of Yiddish culture in the West.

OFTEN when anti-Soviet propagandists assert that today Yiddish culture is in a serious plight in the Soviet Union and that soon the Soviet Jews will be without a literature and language, they appear to try to leave the impression that conversely in the West, the Yiddish language and literature are flourishing. Actually the reverse is true; Yiddish literature is at a very low ebb in the U.S.A. and is virtually extinct in Britain, but in the Soviet Union there is still considerable creative activity in the Yiddish language. As Dr. Nahum Goldmann said at the recent meeting of the World Jewish Congress, the Soviet Jewish community is “culturally one of the most creative” (Melbourne Herald, August 1, 1966).

Yiddish, a younger language than Hebrew which goes back to antiquity, was derived from Middle High German between the 10th and 12th centuries, and after the Jewish migration eastward to Poland and Russia was mostly spoken in Eastern Europe where it was enriched by new words and word formations.

Modern Yiddish literature was born in the mid-19th century in Czarist Russia in which lived nearly 50 per cent of the total Jewish population of the world at that time. Yiddish cultural expression grew up in the Pale of Settlement, the vast ghetto set up in 1835 by Nicholas I, in parts of white Russia and the Ukraine in which most of the Jews were compelled to live. The majority of Jews engaged in petty commercial pursuits, lived in indescribable poverty, and were denied entry into Russian schools and universities.

The first important Yiddish writer, Mendele Mocher Sforim (Mendele the bookseller) began to write in Yiddish in 1863,
after he had visited many communities in the Pale. He depicted the horrors and miseries of ghetto life and championed the ordinary people as did the other two celebrated Yiddish writers who appeared soon after him, I. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. These three writers constitute the classical trio of Yiddish prose. Perhaps the greatest of all Yiddish writers and certainly the most widely translated and best known is Sholem Aleichem (1850-1916), a rare humorist with a matchless style. His work represents an almost complete repertory of all the sufferings and humiliations, the economic hardships and the religious and political intolerance which, without respite, the Jews had to endure in the Czarist Empire between the years 1880 and 1915.

Outside the Czarist Empire in Europe where the bourgeois revolutions, first in 17th century England and later in France in 1789, gradually brought the Jews civil and political emancipation, Yiddish died out, particularly after the French revolutionary armies battered down the old Ghetto walls in Germany.

The Russian Jews did not acquire full civic, political and educational equality until the establishment of the Soviet Union, although the Pale had been abolished by the March revolution in 1917. Prior to that time, from the 80's, with the incessant pogroms which cost thousands of Jewish lives, went a tightening of the Pale, a further limiting of education in the Russian schools to which an increasing number of Jews aspired despite their love of Yiddish.

Between 1881-1914 no fewer than 2,000,000 Jews from Czarist Russia left their homes, the largest number going to the U.S.A. By 1915 over 1,500,000 Jews in Russia were living on charity parcels sent by Jewish philanthropic organisations in the U.S.A. and Britain.

During that whole period more and more Jews began to participate in the Russian socialist and labour movements as distinct from the separate Jewish labor organisations. This was partly the result of the spreading of marxist ideas in the ghettos of the cities of the Pale and in Poland, by Jewish intellectuals fortunate enough to receive education in Russian schools and universities. There was also a growing understanding that emancipation could not come about by the efforts of the Jews alone, but only in co-operation with the Russian democratic, labour and socialist movements. The words of the famous German-Jewish writer Ludwig Boerne, the contemporary of Marx and Heine, were widely quoted:
“He who wants to work on behalf of the Jews must fuse their cause with the demands of universal freedom.”

From the 80’s Jewish socialists began to make an outstanding contribution to the Russian Socialist movement and they were among the founders of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. The attempt to separate off Jewish socialists and the Jewish working class movement in a separate compartment from the general socialist movement was the policy of the Jewish Bund, against which Lenin waged battle.

This conflict, as indeed the whole question of integration or assimilation which as a rule was accepted and encouraged by the European socialist movement, was increasingly discussed in the Yiddish press that arose in Odessa and Warsaw. Even then Russian culture was beginning to exercise a profound influence on Jewish intellectuals and workers, largely because of the universal character of the ideas that animated it, the ideas of writers like Tolstoy, and Plekhanov and Lenin. At the turn of the 20th century significant numbers of Jews were turning to the Russian language and Jews began to enter Russian literature and culture.

However, Yiddish remained the language of the Jewish masses, and in all the towns and villages of the Pale and in Poland there was some Yiddish cultural activity, theatres, readings and publications, often bound up with the Jewish Labor movement.

Britain and the U.S.A.

In the 80’s and 90’s in Britain the Russian-Polish immigration initiated new trends within the Jewish community which led to the formation of the working class movement among the Jews. In 1884, a year before William Morris launched his Socialist paper, “The Commmweal”, the migrant Morris Winchevsky began to publish in London the first Yiddish socialist paper in the world, which was also the first Yiddish paper in England.

In less than 25 years the Yiddish labor and general press declined as Jewish labor gradually became part of the general labor movement, for it was largely the migrants that had supported the Yiddish press. The need for separate organisations diminished with the drying-up of immigration and the growing up of an English-born generation going through the Council schools and many of them battling their way to higher education.

As though symbolising the rapid change, Morris Winchevsky emigrated to America, where he became the bard of the Jewish workers in the New York sweat shops. Living to a great old
age, he took part in the foundation of the Communist Party of
the United States, and in 1927 visited the Soviet Union where
he was received by President Kalinin and honored in the same
way as Eugene Pottier, the author of the “International”.

Nothing of the Yiddish press which continued in an enfeebled
form until the end of the second world war remains today. Nor
did Britain produce one Yiddish writer of note, probably not one
British-born Yiddish writer, although many Russian Yiddish
writers including Sholem Aleichem wrote about the Jews in
Britain. Except as a private family language, generally imperfectly
spoken, Yiddish has disappeared from the Anglo-Jewish world.
The London Jewish Quarterly in its summer issue 1964, comment­
ing on the visit to London of the Polish State Jewish Theatre,
asked:

“How many of those who were clamouring for the revival of
Yiddish in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries
went to see the Polish State Jewish Theatre on its recent visit
to London for a four weeks’ season of Yiddish plays? Judging
by the attendance figures, not very many. Was it, perhaps,
because they were not really concerned?”

And in truth they are not except for a handful of devotees,
and even anti-Soviet propagandists who are allegedly disturbed
by the fate of Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union would never
dream of writing their own books in Yiddish even if they could.
Jewish life in England has gradually found expression in an
expanding Anglo-Jewish literature precisely because English has
become the only language of the English Jews.

In the first thirty years of this century there were two disting­
ished Anglo-Jewish writers, Israel Zangwill and Louis Golding.
Since 1945 there has been a veritable wave of Anglo-Jewish writers.
Some of the best known are Arnold Wesker, Alexander Baron,
Gerda Charles, Frederic Raphael, Wolf Mankovitz and Harold
Pinter, all of whom have been understood and accepted by the
non-Jewish public as well as the Jews, a significant fact which
underlines the break-up of Jewish separatism in England.

An even greater outburst of Jewish literary creativity in English
has taken place in the U.S.A. in the last 40-odd years. There
were first the New York East End novelists and in the 30’s Clifford
Odets, Nathaniel West, Myer Levin and Michael Gold, famous
for his “Jews Without Money”.

Since the second world war their numbers have increased. These
include Irwin Shaw, Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer,
Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud and J. D. Salinger, who have all drawn from Jewish life as well as from the general American scene.

But during the same time the American Jewish community which has been the world’s largest since 1918, has not produced a Yiddish writer of stature although many Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem emigrated to New York. American propagandists however do not hesitate to lay claim to the famous Yiddish writers I. J. Singer, J. Opatoshu, Sholem Asch and Z. Schnoeur because they lived in the U.S.A., although all of them were born in Poland or Russia and were mature writers when they emigrated to the U.S.A.

Yiddish literature and culture have catastrophically declined in the U.S.A. in the face of the integration of the American-born Jews and powerful Americanisation campaigns. "Time", in an article on December 28, 1962, dealing with the anti-communist Jewish daily "Forward", one of the few Yiddish dailies remaining in the U.S.A., said:

"The children of Forward readers do not read the paper, because they cannot. As the second generation sons and daughters of Jewish immigrants, they have forgotten the mother tongue, that backward running curious cross of Hebrew and medieval German. Like Yiddish itself, the Forward is an anachronism, born in a departed past to meet a need that no longer exists".

The well-known Yiddish authority David Flakser, writing about Yiddish in the U.S.A. on the occasion of the second World Congress for Yiddish culture, held in New York, which has the largest concentration of Jews in the world, said:

"During the 10 years between the Congresses the number of Yiddish-speaking and Yiddish-reading Jews has decreased greatly... Hardest hit has been the Yiddish book. The number of readers has declined steadily. Yiddish books are now read by Yiddish writers and the narrowing strata of the Yiddish intelligentsia. Talented Yiddish poets and novelists and essayists are forced to publish and distribute their books at their own expense."

The Yiddish theatre in the U.S.A. is even more moribund than Yiddish literature. There is not one permanent Yiddish theatre in New York. In the London "Jewish Chronicle" on July 14, 1961, the American-Jewish actress Stella Adler, the daughter of the late Jacob Adler, one of the greatest figures in the history of the Yiddish theatre, said:
"The Yiddish theatre is dead. Part of it died with my parents. Maurice Schwartz tried to keep something of it alive, but it could not be done. The pressures of American life, the commercialism, the things people search for. It isn't a world in which arts can thrive."

**The Future**

Is there a future for Yiddish and Yiddish literature? As far as the English speaking countries are concerned the outlook is indeed bleak. For the majority of the Jews in these countries English is their native tongue. Literature can finally only be made out of the speech of a people.

The State of Israel offers no hope to Yiddish. In their introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg say:

"For the State of Israel, through a variety of semi-official devices, has discouraged the use of Yiddish among its citizens. The language is looked down upon for the very reason that Yiddish writers cling to it so fiercely and with so desperate an affection: because it is the language of the Jewish dispersion, stained by exile, defeat and martyrdom."

It is not quite so true of Israel now as when those words were written back in the fifties. Nevertheless, Yiddish is not encouraged, only Hebrew, which is the official language. It is repeatedly stated by Israel's leaders that Israel's cultural consciousness is Hebrew.

It would seem that in the Soviet Union, Yiddish literature might have a better chance of survival than anywhere else. This is not only because it has deeper roots in the Soviet Union, but also because Soviet Yiddish literature has adapted itself to the new life and does not draw on a Ghetto sensibility, which is still the case with Yiddish writers elsewhere.

And not least the republications in very large editions of Yiddish poetry and Yiddish novels into Russian, Ukrainian and other languages of the Soviet Union is a tremendous encouragement to Yiddish writers to continue writing in Yiddish.

Nevertheless, it cannot be precluded that Yiddish may eventually die out in the Soviet Union, as the younger generations, as in Australia, England, etc., cease to speak the Yiddish language. This will not be because of repression and the lack of official support but because of historical development. The large and increasing number of Russian writers of Jewish origin in Soviet literature is a pointer in that direction.