



MEMORIES,
REALITIES AND DREAMS

Aspects of the
South African Jewish Experience

EDITED BY MILTON SHAIN AND RICHARD MENDELSON

Between Ideology and Indifference: *The destruction of Yiddish in South Africa*

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Conflicting ideologies and communal indifference threw Yiddish writing in South Africa into almost total neglect. A vigorous body of work about the Jewish experience in South Africa has therefore effectively been erased, to the detriment of building a full picture of the growth, development and demise of the South African Jewish community.

Although the work published in Yiddish in South Africa has

been listed in three progressively enlarged bibliographies,¹ very little research has been undertaken to evaluate it. Most scholars of South African Jewish history have relied for their primary source material on minutes of Jewish communal organisations, and the work of earlier chronicles, all written in English. While full sets of South African Yiddish books have been preserved in a few specialist libraries,² a number of other publications, chiefly journals and newspapers, have been lost. Among the most historically important of these are the short-lived early periodicals that, in exceptional circumstances, go back variously first to the time of the South African War, were then published in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War, and subsequently appeared between the world wars. Although potential researchers regrettably have no access to this vanished material, much has survived from a later period that deserves assessment. It is worth sketching briefly the range of this available material, before identifying the forces that obliterated Yiddish in South Africa.

A century of Yiddish writing in South Africa

In 1890, in a remarkable burst of confidence about the viability of Yiddish as an international language, ND Hoffman immigrated to South Africa, carrying with him in his luggage a set of Hebrew typeface. The overseas correspondent for several Yiddish periodicals in Eastern Europe, Hoffman was determined, if he could, to develop Yiddish culture in South Africa. Thus for three months during the Anglo-Boer War, between October and December 1899, he produced a daily single-page news bulletin in Yiddish for what was evidently a sufficiently large number of interested readers. Hoffman continued to file reports about life in South Africa to overseas Yiddish newspapers, and in 1916 he used them to produce a volume of his *Zikbroynes*, the first Yiddish book to be published in South Africa.³ From this early beginning, and in the teeth of setbacks, Yiddish writing in and about South Africa blossomed, reaching its full fruition between 1947 and 1975. During that time, South African Yiddish writers produced and published eight collections of essays and short stories, ten volumes of poetry, two novels, four historical or polemical pamphlets, one full-scale

history, and a great deal of journalism. Active though small-scale, Yiddish writing continued in South Africa until the mid-1980s, appearing in both journals and limited-edition books. In 1983, to commemorate his 80th birthday, the uncollected poems of David Fram were published in a volume entitled *A shvalb oyfn dakh*. The most active of South African Yiddish writers continues to be the poet, critic and essayist David Wolpe, who in 1999, at the age of 91, published the second of two volumes of his memoirs.⁴

Notwithstanding the loss of the earliest South African Yiddish newspapers and journals, those published after the Second World War are readily available. Their pages offer a virtually untapped vein of insights into the moral complexities of life in apartheid South Africa. The monthly (later quarterly) journal *Dorem Afrike* (1947-1989) and the weekly newspaper *Der Afrikaner yidishe tsaytung* (1953-1983) are the two most significant of these serial publications of which complete sets exist. In addition, several volumes of historiography and socio-political commentary by Leibl Feldman offer idiosyncratic but informative perspectives on the South African Jewish community, not found elsewhere and well worth scholarly appraisal. The most important of these are *Yidn in dorem-afrike* (Vilna, 1937), *Yidn in yohannesburg* (Johannesburg, 1956), and the monograph *Oudtsboorn: Yerushalayim d'afrike* (Johannesburg 1940).⁵

Fiction and poetry predominate in the extant published material. Some of the poetry is undeniably work of world class. David Fram's two epic poems confronting the Holocaust, *Efsher* and *Dos letste kapitl*, were internationally acclaimed after their appearance in London in 1947. For his collected poems, published in Johannesburg in 1975 in one volume under the title *A volkn un a veg*, David Wolpe was honoured with the Itzik Manger Prize in Israel in 1983. In 1956 Jacob Mordecai Sherman published South Africa's first Yiddish novel, *Land fun gold un zunshayn*, a retrospect of the difficulties of an immigrant Jew's life in South Africa from the beginning of the twentieth century. Mendel Tabatznik provided a detailed picture of South African immigrant Jewish life between the world wars in a three-volume novel entitled *Kalman Bulan*, published between 1968 and 1971. Particularly prolific were the writers of short prose fiction, almost all of whom wrote from the rare perspective of working-class 'whites'. Many tales

unsparingly portray the hardships and moral dilemmas faced by Jews in a country predicated on institutionalised racial discrimination. Perhaps the most striking in this regard are microscopic studies of the labouring lives of Yiddish-speaking immigrants employed in the abusive 'kaffir eating houses' established by concession on mine property along the Reef during the gold industry's boom period. The plight of these impoverished immigrants, exploited by rich fellow Jews, is biting contrasted with the smugness of unscrupulous get-rich-quick men who benefited handsomely from opportunities created by legislated racial discrimination.⁶ Many stories highlight the contempt of large numbers of immigrants for traditional Jewish learning, and their attenuated respect for the tenets of Judaism. They probingly scrutinise the self-seeking materialism of the *nouveaux riches* who use the outward forms of religious and communal service as a convenient handle on social purchase. Overall, South African Yiddish fiction offers a startlingly enlarged view of the white immigrant experience in this country.

Such uncomfortable depictions undermine self-congratulatory assumptions about the nature of the Jewish enterprise in South Africa. Our Yiddish fiction makes clear that, by and large, Jews who immigrated here exploited to the full the ample scope for self-advancement opened up in a social formation that privileged whites at the expense of blacks. In doing so, of course, Jews were no different from any other groups of white immigrants. However, the disproportionately large number of men and women of Jewish parentage who shared in the struggle for black emancipation has fostered a popular belief that Jews in South Africa were ethically more sensitive than their gentile counterparts. The picture presented in our Yiddish fiction does much to dispel this myth. On the other hand, some of our Yiddish writing does show itself profoundly disturbed by political injustice and racial inequality. Rakhmiel Feldman and Nehemiah Levinsky each produced a volume specifically entitled *rash-dersteylungen*, 'race-stories', which express shocked revulsion at South Africa's apartheid legislation, and which highlight the equivocal position of Jews forced to confront racial prejudice in themselves.⁷

Nowadays, though, the few interested researchers who might wish to examine this work have no entry into the available texts, because they know no Yiddish. Nor can it be expected that they

should. Although the Jewish population of South Africa was virtually doubled by the influx of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1930, their language and culture has left no significant mark on our communal structures. The disappearance of Yiddish in South Africa was no accident. It was the inevitable casualty of conflicting ideologies, a desire for rapid acculturation, and an insidious communal indifference abetted, if not overtly encouraged, by the communal leadership.

Hebrew and Zionism

Zionist ideology militantly opposed Yiddish. From its inception as a political movement, Zionism demanded the revival of Hebrew as a precondition for fulfilling Jewish national aspirations in a restored Jewish homeland. The attempts of the Czernowitz conference in 1908 to replace Hebrew with Yiddish, the language spoken by more than one-third of the world's Jews before the First World War, succeeded only in having Yiddish declared *one* of the languages of the Jewish people. Despite the best efforts of its cultural leaders, Yiddish was rejected alike by the Zionists and by the Westernised heirs of the Enlightenment. Perceived as the language of Exile, it was despised as the coarse folk tongue of the uneducated masses, denied respect as a literary medium, and deemed incapable of expressing 'higher thought', for which either the major languages of Europe or a revived modern Hebrew were judged exclusively suited. Following the destruction of European Jewry, and then the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Yiddish was further abhorred as the utterance of passivity in the face of genocide. Hebrew, the revived language of the Bible, was to be its virile replacement in a militarily strong Jewish nation-state that was sounding the summons to Jews to abandon the *Galut* and return to the Land.

The Zionist movement was always very powerful in South Africa. During the 1920s and 1930s most world Zionist leaders, including Reuven Brainin, Nahum Sokolow, Chaim Weizmann and Vladimir Jabotinsky, visited and found overwhelming emotional and financial support here. By contrast, the Yiddish movement in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, was linked to the social-

ist ideals of the *Bund*, the Jewish Labour Organisation, which favoured – above narrow nationalistic ideals – the worldwide empowerment of the Jewish working classes through the medium of Yiddish. In South Africa, however, to be 'white' and working-class was to occupy the lowest rung on the power structure's social ladder. Hence the upwardly mobile Jewish bourgeoisie was solidly Zionist in sentiment, a commitment that probably sprang at least as much from social ambition as from nationalistic fervour. Social and racial pressures certainly exerted as much push from within as international political forces exercised pull from without to draw South African Jews towards Zionism. As a result, the Jewish language-culture struggle in South Africa was, from the start, loaded heavily in favour of only one side.

The tenets of international Zionism made themselves most strongly felt in Johannesburg, where most of South Africa's Jews were concentrated, and where the rabbinate was headed by Judah Leib Landau (1866-1942), a passionately committed Zionist born in Galicia and educated at the University of Vienna. Landau was determined to suppress, as far as was in his power, any counter-Zionist sentiments emanating from South African Yiddishists who, before the Second World War, were unsympathetic, if not wholly hostile, to Jewish national aspirations. Thus in 1931 Landau used all his influence to block the establishment of a Yiddish daily newspaper at a time most propitious for its foundation. Landau's efforts proved singularly successful, since they chimed with the widespread desire for rapid acculturation of the majority of Jewish immigrants.

Radical negation of Yiddish accelerated after the establishment of the State of Israel, particularly in the field of Jewish education. The South African Board of Jewish Education (SABJE), founded in 1928 against a background of divisiveness and conflict, was finally able, two decades later in 1948, to establish the first Jewish Day School in South Africa. Its aim was to provide a curriculum of which Hebrew was to be the central pillar, not simply for religious instruction, but for the encouragement of *aliyah* to Israel. South African Jewry thus came to offer its children a brand of 'Jewish National Education' in counterpoint to the state education model of 'Christian National Education'. Its Zionist-orientated instruction plan consciously and deliberately effaced all contact with Yiddish.

Many of the earliest pupils of the Jewish Day Schools established by the SABJE – myself among them – came from homes not committed to the destruction of the *Galut*, and rich in the resonance of Yiddish. For many such pupils and their parents, the primal role in Jewish life of Hebrew, the language of scripture, law and liturgy, was in no way threatened by a parallel devotion to Yiddish. The exclusionary emphasis the Day Schools placed on Hebrew, the *tatelosbn*, over Yiddish, the *mamelosbn*, seemed to many of us a linguistic encouragement to cleave to our father by spitting in the face of our mother.

Rabbi Isaac Goss, the SABJE's Director of Jewish Education from 1944 to 1979, unequivocally spelled out the Board's educational policy in repeated speeches and newspaper articles:

Jewish education is today ... something which the Jewish child as an individual urgently requires in order that he may become a well-integrated, happy and creative personality. ... The child must be made to feel that his people are not merely living memories of a great past, but are a living entity capable of building and restoring the Jewish State. ... Hebrew is an indispensable and vital element in Jewish education as I envisage it. There is an irreducible minimum of knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish ritual, religion and history, without which one cannot even begin to understand the Jewish heritage. ... Furthermore, with the establishment of Israel, the pre-eminent importance of Hebrew today needs no stressing, and tendencies to operate with so-called Jewish-content curricula in English must be strenuously opposed, if the implication is to demote Hebrew from its central place in the curriculum.⁸

This insistence disguised several ironies, the most obvious of which was personified in the first teachers of Hebrew at King David High School in Johannesburg during the 1950s and 1960s. These men had been born and educated in Eastern Europe, mostly in Lithuania, where they had been the beneficiaries of a Jewish school system that, implementing the best principles of nineteenth-century *maskilim*, trained them as secular teachers, thoroughly conversant not only with Biblical and modern Hebrew, but also

with Yiddish and, in many cases, also with Russian language and literature. Since in their classrooms they never spoke a word in or about Yiddish to their pupils, one must assume that they were prohibited by the terms of their employment from doing so. I remember vividly that any attempt I made to address my own teachers in Yiddish, or to ask questions about Yiddish literature, was brusquely dismissed. This overt denigration was particularly unfortunate, not only for us pupils, but also for our teachers, among whom were such tireless contributors to Yiddish cultural life in Johannesburg as C. Achron, J. Batnitsky, L. Goodman and M. (Ben-Moshe) Grossman. At the very time they were teaching and preaching only Hebrew in Johannesburg's Jewish Day Schools, all these men were active workers for the *Dorem afrikaner yidisher kultur-federatsye*, participating members of the editorial board of *Dorem Afrike*, and vigorous contributors to the Yiddish press both locally and abroad. As a matter of course they wrote and published in Hebrew as well. Yet this kind of Jewish bilingualism, so natural to the men of Eastern Europe who taught us, was ruthlessly discouraged in pupils like myself. The dictates of Goss determined that there was to be only Hebrew with a Zionist slant in South Africa's Jewish Day Schools. Indeed, it often seemed to members of my generation that learning modern Hebrew was more important than studying our scriptural and liturgical heritage. And since Yiddish was never mentioned, the stigma the Zionists pinned on it also stuck in the minds of many of my contemporaries.

A Hebrew set text we were required to prepare for our matriculation examination tellingly illustrates how far this ideological zeal was prepared to go. Entitled, as I recall, *Sba'ar le-sifrut* (Gateway to Literature), this book included two of Peretz's stories in Hebrew translation. Through studied omission, our Yiddish-speaking teacher cultivated the impression that Peretz was exclusively a *Hebrew* writer. Although in his earliest writing Peretz had at first moved between Hebrew and Yiddish in search of an authentic narrative voice, he soon settled firmly on Yiddish, and so ardently promoted its cause that he steadily became accepted as its final arbiter to whose judgement every major Yiddish writer of his time deferred.⁹ And now here he was, barely fifty years after his death, denied in a South African Jewish Day School the cause

to which he had devoted his life. Instead, he was transmogrified into a small-town *maggid* moralising in Hebrew. The stories chosen for our edification were, of course, two of those Hasidic tales that Peretz had carefully re-crafted, and never to our unformed understanding and limited reading experience was it ever suggested what is most obvious to a mature reader about Peretz's use of this Hasidic source material – the fact that in most cases it is used to make ironically negative reflections on the obsolescence of Old World pieties and the constricting limitations of traditional *shtetl* life. Instead, in Hebrew translations by another hand, Peretz's work was harnessed into service as an ideological workhorse for religious-Zionism.¹⁰ Such teaching trickery was hardly untoward, given Goss's shallow personal evaluation of what Peretz was doing:

Peretz's unique contribution is that, together with Berdichevski, he is one of the founders of the new genre of Chassidic stories. Peretz did more than merely tell Chassidic stories – he rediscovered Chassidism for the masses of Jews. A new world of innocence, piety and holiness is evoked in his stories. ... Peretz ... found in Chassidism what was best in Judaism, the love of life and its constant sanctification by filling its form with social justice and beautifying it by eschewing the trivial ...¹¹

As though to emphasise his own limited, literalist reading of Peretz, in the two books he left Goss published his own English translations of no fewer than eight of Peretz's Hasidic *mayselekh*. Born in the 'miniature Lithuania' of Fordsburg in 1913, Goss himself unquestionably grew up speaking Yiddish.¹² That he chose to study German at university suggests that, like so many other Jews of his generation, he regarded Yiddish as a kitchen patois; by returning to its source in one of the languages of European *Hochkultur*, Goss was obviously seeking his own 'passport to European civilisation' in an idiom far removed from the cultural inadequacies of the Yiddish-speaking *shtetl*. Accordingly, as Director of Jewish Education for thirty-five years, Goss laid down a policy that denied South African Jewish children a rounded awareness of their Jewish heritage, a policy that, to echo Isaac Bashevis Singer's tart dismissal of Zionist dogma, promoted the

belief that 'we jumped from the Bible to Ben-Gurion with nothing in between'. Such ideological programming guaranteed that Yiddish literature and culture would remain *terra incognita* to the majority of South African-born Jews.

That the fostering of Zionism remained the chief objective of the SABJE was confirmed in later years when it started to import as Hebrew teachers *shlikhtim* from Israel. These *shlikhtim* had to meet three basic requirements: they had to be observant, Hebrew speaking, and qualified teachers – of any subject, not necessarily of Hebrew. Many were trained to teach subjects as diverse as geography, history and mathematics; few were specifically equipped to teach Hebrew, least of all at the specialised level of foreign language instruction. As committed Zionists living in Israel, moreover, and coming to South Africa on a limited *shlikhtut*, they were either hostile to, or ignorant of, any South African connection to Yiddish language, literature and culture.

Disesteem of our South African Yiddish heritage naturally informed the attitudes and actions of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), an organisation by definition committed to propagating the values of the State of Israel. This was forcefully brought home to me in 1983 when Marcus Arkin, the SAZF's Director-General at the time, was preparing for publication a volume of essays under the title *South African Jewry: A Contemporary Survey*. As the compilation of this book was nearing completion, I received a telephone call from a colleague who, knowing of my work on South Africa Yiddish literature, asked if I could supply Lionel Abrahams, then finalising his overview of South African Jewish writing, with some random names of Yiddish writers that he could 'scatter' through his piece. Astonished that a general survey of literary work in South Africa should not, from its inception, have planned to include a discrete sub-chapter of its own describing the contribution made by our Yiddish writers, I objected to such denigrating tokenism. Representations to a personal friend on the committee of the SAZF led to my being permitted by the editor to write an essay exclusively devoted to South African Yiddish writing. Having gained the grace of a few weeks more than I had initially been allowed, in consideration of the fact that I was being fitted in as a last-minute addition, I was able to conduct a number of personal interviews with Yiddish

writers and teachers still alive in South Africa, and to begin the compilation of an up-to-date bibliography. Shortly after I had submitted my piece for publication, I was summoned to the offices of the SAZF to be given a fresh typescript that, I was told, comprised the 'proof pages' of my work. I was instructed to peruse this typescript 'for spelling errors only', and was pointedly informed that I would not be permitted to make any other changes whatever. Reading through what had been returned to me, I saw to my indignation that every reference I had made to the anti-Zionist polemics conducted by our Yiddishists before the Second World War – integrally part not only of South African, but also of world Jewish history – had been systematically excised. Not a single anti-Zionist sentiment, demonstration or attitude, however mildly expressed, had been permitted to appear in the pro-Zionist, censored version. South African Jewish history itself was being rewritten in order to uphold a specific political ideology. That this deliberate misrepresentation was the calculated work of an editor who had formerly been an academic added to my outrage.

I was faced with a painful choice. To have argued against the editor's doctrinaire policy would have accomplished nothing but the removal of my sub-chapter, itself a barely welcome afterthought. Although the research I had written up was now compromised by the censorship to which it had been subjected, I was nevertheless unwilling to abet the erasure of the significant role Yiddish had played in our community from a volume supposedly designed to update available data. So I returned the mutilated piece without comment, but I vowed for the future to restore South African Yiddish writing to its rightful place in our history.¹³ As might have been expected, given its editor's prejudices, Arkin's book was unfavourably reviewed. More disappointing, however, was the fact that no single reviewer even mentioned its hitherto unrecorded overview of South African Yiddish writing. It was painful to discover that no one in either the academic or the popular press regarded South African Yiddish writing as of any significance. Here was conclusive proof of the success of the long campaign to expunge the Yiddish presence from the historiography and consciousness of South African Jewry. Zionist ideology, combined with dwindling Jewish historical awareness, had won its battle – but at a cost our community could scarcely afford.

Upward social mobility

Other forces were at work to deaden consciousness of Yiddish in South Africa. From the moment of their arrival, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European immigrants had been viewed with mistrust and resentment; their coming had inspired waves of open anti-semitism that reached from the popular press to legislative enactments. These immigrants, many unskilled and poorly educated, unfamiliar with our country's languages, despised on the one hand for their foreignness and working-class status, yet on the other hand automatically privileged in the wider social formation because of their 'white' skins, seemed even to South Africa's settled Anglo-German Jewish establishment an embarrassing excrescence that had to be integrated into society's mainstream 'white' culture as quickly as possible, if it were not to provoke tension within the Jewish community and hostility from without. Their language itself, scorned as outlandish and unrefined, had been the subject of heated controversy and had required impassioned representation to the government before it was accorded official recognition as an immigrant entry requirement.¹⁴ Once having gained for Yiddish acknowledgment as a 'European' language for the purpose of entry, however, South Africa's Jewish establishment saw no reason to encourage its continuance. English was the language that assured protection under the British Crown; it was the *lingua franca* of government, business and influence in the half-century before the Afrikaner-dominated National Party swept to power in 1948; thus it was to English as the instrument of empowerment that most Eastern European immigrants were drawn. Outside pressures apart, Yiddish speakers were anxious as quickly as possible to share themselves, and enable their children to share, all the privileges of upward mobility in white South Africa. Generally lacking interest in any literature and culture, most of them declined to nurture a sentimental attachment to a language they spoke only for convenience until they were fluent enough in English. As a whole, the South African Jewish community was fundamentally Philistine in outlook, valuing language not as the vehicle of an enriching culture but as a tool for material betterment. Goss himself was compelled to recognise this:

We may as well admit that, on the surface, it seems that the climate of opinion here (and I am only talking of our local scene) is certainly antipathetic, if not indifferent, to cultural values.

Despite all the lip-service we pay to education and culture, we do not, as a community, place a premium on ideas and culture generally.¹⁵

Pandering to the same indifference, Goss persisted to the end in devaluing Yiddish language and culture, refusing ever to acknowledge that it could and should exist side by side with Hebrew in a country whose Jewish population had been so greatly enlarged by Yiddish-speaking immigrants:

... in order to increase the chances of worthwhile survival in this country, two things are imperative: (a) a more creative Zionism, and (b) the creation of a Jewish intelligentsia. ... This would mean ... the encouragement of a body of men rooted in their past, with a knowledge of the classical sources and history, or at least sufficient knowledge to give them a sense of the past and a sense of the facts of Judaism as well as the contemporary situation.

It goes without saying that this body of men and women would have a speaking and (more important) a reading knowledge of Hebrew. They would be able to read Hebrew sources in the original, as well as having a knowledge of Yiddish, necessary for keeping them in contact with our articulate masses, and would also have to have a knowledge of the disciplines of literature, psychology and sociology.¹⁶

To pay lip service to the need for keeping Yiddish alive merely as the means of communicating with non-existent 'articulate masses' was a certain prescription for its death.

Yiddishism

Like so many of their counterparts in Europe, those committed few who did carry a torch for Yiddish in South Africa were in their turn, however, partisans of one side or another in the bitter ide-

ological war waged around the concept of 'Yiddishism'. The battles fought in huge centres of Yiddish life in Lithuania, Poland and the Soviet Union before the Second World War were translated into a country where the numbers of Yiddish speakers were proportionally infinitesimal, and interest in Yiddish was at best tepid. As a result, through vicious infighting, South African Yiddishists largely contributed to their own destruction.

While Yiddish movements all shared a general faith in socialism, the way they defined it was a source of rancorous polemic. The socialism of the *Bund*, accepted by most Yiddishists in the West, was rejected by orthodox Communists who demanded ever more stridently that all *kulturarbet* should be oriented towards Moscow.¹⁷ Soviet Communists joyfully pointed to the creation, by the Commissariat of Nationalities in 1926, of the autonomous Jewish region of Birobidzhan, and they called on Yiddish-speaking Jews worldwide to abandon bourgeois nationalistic aspirations and populate instead the newly designated Soviet 'Yiddishland'. The *Bund*, on the other hand, was concerned with the emancipated future of Jewish workers in the Diaspora, and most of its members were no more interested in colonising Birobidzhan than in settling in Palestine. Many Yiddishists followed the teachings of Shimen Dubnov, and later those of Khaym Zhitlovsky, striving for the creation of a *doyiker* Yiddish life in the Diaspora while accommodating themselves to the languages and cultures of the gentile nations among whom they lived.¹⁸

In South Africa, acrimonious quarrels dragged on between Yiddish-speakers ideologically committed respectively to the Jewish agricultural workers' association or, as it was known in Yiddish, the *Geserd* (*Gezelschaft far erdarbetendike yidn*); the *Yidisher arbeter klub*, a strongly Bundist society; and *Po'alei Zion*, an ardently pro-Zionist movement. The political atmosphere of the *Yidisher arbeter klub* before the Second World War has been sharply described at first hand by Woolf Levick:

Johannesburg from the late 1930s until after the War had a vibrant Yiddish social and cultural life. The *Yidisher arbeter klub* was a hive of activity: its dramatic society produced plays regularly; there were frequent lectures on a variety of topics by both guest speakers and members, all of whom

were to the political left. Their main interest was avidly following daily events in the 'socialist Sixth of the World'. ... The bright light of Marxism, which was supposedly leading the Soviet people to the millennium, and in their wake the rest of the world, diffused a strong glitter worldwide, and the Arbeter klub got its fair share. The very air one breathed there was 'Marxist', and if the actual tenets of Marx's teachings were unknown from first-hand study, slogans from the Manifesto, which were freely bandied about, took their place so adequately that several members could proudly boast of being Marxist by intuition.¹⁹

Like all internecine wars, these conflicts were self-destructive. Competing factions in South Africa tried to establish rival publications, without the slightest regard for the fact that the numbers of Yiddish-speaking Jews who wanted to read Yiddish at all were too small to support them. The majority saw no point in devoting themselves to a futile struggle for a language and culture utterly remote from the socio-political situation in which they found themselves. Even though they were fighting a losing battle, however, this widespread indifference did not stop South Africa's Yiddishists from fervidly pursuing their conflicting ideological programmes.

The chief ideologue of a Soviet-orientated agenda for South African Yiddishism was Leibl Feldman, a wealthy capitalist businessman who played a major role in the *Kultur-federatsye*, establishing himself as a powerful voice on the editorial board of *Dorem Afrike* and, through his financial sponsorship, making himself the policy director of Johannesburg's Yiddish *Folkshul*, which he revived.²⁰ There, despite strong objections from the teaching staff, Feldman insisted on downgrading the teaching of Hebrew, showing himself as wilfully blind on his side as the Hebrew ideologists of the SABJE were on theirs. Feldman totally ignored – for it is inconceivable that he could have been ignorant of – the extent to which a central range of Yiddish discourse depends on Hebrew words and phrases. His damaging attitude was dictated by a slavish adherence to the Party line on Yiddish enforced by the *Yeusektsia*, the 'Jewish Section' attached to the Department of Propaganda of the Soviet Union's Central Committee. In its attempt to purge

Yiddish of its 'petty bourgeois religious' elements, the *Yeusektsia* not only frowned upon the use of Biblical and Talmudic idioms, but also reconstructed the orthography of Yiddish, decreeing that words of Hebrew origin be spelled phonetically.²¹ Feldman undeviatingly followed this *diktat* in all his own writing, and he demanded the same conformity from everyone else. In their anti-theoretical but equally narrow dogmatism, both Yiddishist and Zionist educators instituted Jewish instruction policies for South African children that consciously cut them off from half their heritage. Both groups were deaf to the insistence of the great Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever: 'Yiddish and Hebrew are the two eyes of Jewish life; take one away and we are blind.'

So fanatically did many South African Yiddishists idolise Stalin that even after the publication of Khrushchev's 'secret speech', delivered in February 1956 to the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow, denouncing the 'cult of personality' and unmasking Stalin's massacres, they refused to believe it.²² In the wake of that speech, at the end of May 1956 David Wolpe, who had assumed the editorship of *Dorem Afrike* a year before, received a dispatch from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) reporting the wholesale murder of leading Soviet Yiddish writers and scholars four years earlier. Appalled by this news, Wolpe immediately decided to broadcast it by rewriting his leading article for the June issue, then at the printers, and he sought the sanction of the *Kultur-federatsye's* executive to do so. The account of their refusal given in Wolpe's memoirs is chillingly informative:

To begin with I read out the information filed by the JTA: the general revelations of Stalin's mass-murders and, as their consequence, the unrestrained killing off of Yiddish writers and Yiddish culture, although not yet specified nor officially confirmed. ... Very soon I stepped on the landmine – as soon as I mentioned the name Stalin and his murderous deeds, an enraged voice roared out: 'No! No! Not that far!' It was Zalmen Levy. Leibl Feldman leapt up after him. The noisy chorus of 'No!' exploded. [Misha] Szur [then chairman of the Yidisher kultur-federatsye] rapped his bony fingers on the table ... the tumult was stilled. But I was completely shaken, and I felt ... anger and shame. ... [Then] Szur asked:

'Who wants to participate in the discussion about the article?' Almost all of the left wing declared themselves. ... The first who moved to stifle the 'counter-revolution' was, naturally, Zalmen Levy. Achron and Goodman sat silent, as though it were not their concern. Feldman turned his head towards me. ... And the attack began. The commander of the 'Red Front' was Zalmen Levy. He spoke heatedly so that that his patron [Feldman] and their 'comrades' might see how faithfully he defended their position ... He began from ... the title as I had presented it and as he had jotted it down. No one else would even have noticed it, but he did: 'We dare not entitle it, as its heading does, "A Murder Tragedy", because as yet we do not have any official confirmation of such a thing as "murder".'

An uncontrollable rage welled up in me, and impulsively I strode over, stood opposite him, and with all my strength yelled into his face: 'You're a toady and a cynic! What else is it but murder? Tell us!' The colour drained from his face. It was obvious that he had taken fright. ... I stood with a clenched fist and his pallor gave me pleasure. Had he not remained silent, something would have happened.

As though in expectation, dead silence reigned. The people here would gladly have preferred a brawl between the two of us than this heated polemic. Szur said, 'sit down and don't excite yourself. I have an emendation that is a good substitute. Instead of "A Murder Tragedy", let it be "A Culture Tragedy".' And before I could refuse, Achron gave his consent: 'Yes, there's no distinction.'

All at once I felt as though I had been shoved out of the battle arena. ... I had done my share; I had written about it. Now I passively observed the cheap huckstering that followed, as though in a market trade-off: here a word changed, there a sentence deleted, until they came to the explosive point: the paragraph containing the inviolable name ... Again Zalmen Levy raged. 'We won't permit it!' and Leibl Feldman, with furious bulging eyes repeated after him, 'Definitely not! That is utterly impermissible!' And as before, the chorus muttered aloud, 'No! No!' And Szur again beat on the table and was barely able to quieten the mood of

hostility. Finally he said: '... In order to save unnecessary talk and time and noisy arguments, which will convince no one ... I propose that we ... put the whole paragraph to the vote ...' ... It was decided to conduct a secret ballot ... When the slips in the box had been counted, those in favour of not publishing had a considerable majority. Satisfied, they rejoiced.²³

Given the time it occurred, the irony of this *contretemps* is savage indeed. From the time the National Party government had passed the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, Red-hunting had become a national preoccupation. Mindful of the National Party's long history of antisemitism, the wider Jewish community was particularly alarmed because a number of named Communists, actively fighting for black rights, were Jewish by birth. With such Communist activists virtually none of South Africa's committed Yiddishists would have allied or identified themselves. So the scene Wolpe describes is mere play-acting. It presents a cast of Yiddish-speaking bourgeois, all profiting from a racially discriminatory capitalist system, striking ideological attitudes behind the closed doors of a limited-membership club.

For others outside this club, though, fear of the government's anti-Communist witch-hunt was real enough, and led to other pitiful absurdities. Leibl Yudaken, a quiet man of letters who had acquired a number of Yiddish books published in Moscow, was scared enough personally to deface them so as to remove all evidence of their place of origin. I discovered this when I obtained Yudaken's library for the University of the Witwatersrand. Among its rare books was Yekhezkel Dobrushin's critical study of the work of Dovid Bergelson.²⁴ When I read Yudaken's copy of this insightful study – made especially interesting as a consequence of Dobrushin's obligatory adherence to Stalin's fiat that all writers be judged strictly according to the dictates of 'socialist realism' – I was amazed to find that the publisher's logo had been cut out of its cover with a razor blade, and that the book's title and imprint pages had been torn away. Compelled as a result to seek the volume's place and date of publication in an international library catalogue, I came upon another tragic irony in the worldwide Yiddishist enslavement to ideology. Dobrushin's

study, published in Moscow by the newspaper *Emes* in 1947, was among the very last Yiddish books issued in the Soviet Union before Stalin launched his murderous purge of Jews; Dobrushin, like Bergelson, was himself among its victims. Yet here in South Africa, at the very time when government-led anti-Communist hysteria was daily gaining ground, our own Yiddishists were playing out a hollow farce: privately clinging to Communist theory while publicly living by capitalist practice; publicly silent about the racist policies of South Africa's government, but privately vocal in defence of a Soviet regime in the process of being discredited in Moscow itself.

Unlike the Zionist *sblikhim* who were at least specifically engaged to *teach* here, the *Kultur-federatsye's kulturarbeter*, despite supposedly being 'cultural workers' for a great international Jewish cause, saw no part of their duty as interesting young people in Yiddish. So far from attempting to counterbalance the powerful Zionist influence in South African Jewish education, these *kulturarbeter* behaved as though Yiddish were their personal property. It soon became obvious that Johannesburg's Yiddish *Folkshul* could never hope to compete with the SABJE's Jewish Day Schools for the support of South African parents. Yet members of the *Kultur-federatsye* did nothing whatever to strike a balance, to promote Yiddish cultural activities, or attempt to foster interest in the Yiddish language and its literature, among young people. Instead these 'cultural workers' went on preaching to one another. As should have been obvious from the outset, this was virtually a programme of planned self-destruction. Perhaps it was. Nearly 30 years later, when I interviewed the few *kulturarbeter* left alive, it became depressingly obvious that these ageing people were perfectly content to let Yiddish die with them. With few exceptions, they were actively hostile to any incursion by younger, non-native speakers into what they circumscribed as their private world. Furthermore, although they created no long-term programmes to teach Yiddish themselves, they maliciously undermined such efforts made by others. The attempt to build a Yiddish library at the University of the Witwatersrand – ultimately thwarted by that university's expulsion of Jewish Studies from its Humanities curriculum – was greeted with apathy by those Yiddishists left alive in Johannesburg who could have contributed most towards it.

Significantly, the majority of Jewish parents here were little interested in seeing their children acquire a rounded Jewish education. The proposal to establish a network of Jewish Day Schools, firmly mooted in 1945, from the first encountered vigorous opposition from a significant sector of Johannesburg's Jews, who argued that they did not want to 'ghettoise' their children, but rather to send them to schools where they could 'mix with all types'.²⁵ Baldly put, this meant that they wanted their children to mix with peers whose parents could facilitate their advancement. The SABJE was obliged to mount a strenuous propaganda campaign to persuade Jewish parents that their children would gain, not lose, by attending a Day School, where, apart from receiving a first-rate secular education, they would study Hebrew during school hours, and so be able to take a normal part in extra-mural activities. To judge from the number of times Isaac Goss was obliged to repeat this enticement in his public addresses, it was plainly a marketing strategy that continued to meet with parental resistance:

There is a need for more intensive Jewish education, which a supplemental school [the *kheyder*] cannot for obvious reasons give. The difficulties which face the teacher in the latter school are inherent in the circumstances of our environment. ... The Jewish Day School was therefore an inevitable development, if a greater qualitative Jewish education was the aim. Since in these Jewish Day Schools, Hebrew and Judaism are taught in the morning as a normal subject and the child is not deprived of his sport, no artificial dichotomy is created between his secular studies and his Jewish studies. Further, since he does not need to make so many sacrifices and he has no sense of frustration, it is here that one can hope for a more balanced Jewish education and more qualitative scholastic results. More than that, the Day School provides a wholesome synthesis of Jewish studies and Jewish living; it affords the child a vital, inspiring Jewish environment.²⁶

Steadily, however, Israel's military successes did much to encourage indifferent South African Jews to accept Hebrew-Zionist education as a positive benefit. So did periodic outbursts of antisemitism

from the Afrikaner government, notably in 1961 when Prime Minister Verwoerd cut off South African Jewish funds to Israel in reprisal for Israel's United Nations vote against South African racism. None of this, however, improved the attitude of South African Jews towards Yiddish. On the contrary, it intensified their hostility. If they mentioned the language at all, English-speakers tended to miscall it 'Jewish', presumably to avoid contamination with the antisemitic pejorative 'Yid'. This shamefaced euphemism marked a stage more than halfway between embarrassment and erasure. The anti-Yiddish, anti-*Galut* attitude of the Zionist State was soon accepted here as the only valid orthodoxy. Any attempt to address a wider dimension in Diaspora Jewish life was deemed manifest blasphemy.

What is to be done?

Yiddish in South Africa is now dead, and cannot be recalled to life. Lack of sufficient teachers has vitiated all attempts in both Johannesburg and Cape Town to build up a body of new readers who might research our indigenous Yiddish literature. The loss, as I have indicated, is enormous. The corpus of Yiddish writing published in this country offers far more than a casual encounter with a vanished culture. It provides a unique insight into the historical, political and socio-cultural forces that shaped our life here. There can never be a rounded picture of the South African Jewish community without a thorough knowledge of what was written about it in Yiddish. Now that South Africa's socio-political structure has undergone radical change, it is crucial that such a picture be acquired and analysed. Every ethnic minority – and every people within the black majority – now requires a reevaluation of its own history. There is a pressing need to place in adjusted perspective each of the diverse population groups that constitute our nation.

Since we have library holdings of the key books and periodicals published in Yiddish in South Africa, what we need at this stage of our history is an ongoing project, sponsored by our leading research institutions, to translate and publish in English most of this material. A small though encouraging beginning has been made – at least three South African Yiddish books have appeared

in English translation to date; additionally many short stories have been translated and published in our cultural journal, *Jewish Affairs*. Much more needs to be done, however. Most obviously, Leibl Feldman's two major chronicles, *Yidn in dorem afrike* and *Yidn in yobannesburg*, urgently need translating, for Feldman has recorded a mass of information unavailable elsewhere. Feldman, it is true, was not only a cramped ideologue but was also very much an amateur, and far from meticulous in citing his sources. But Feldman's claims can be a spur to more professional scholars to seek their verification; his books will mark out a richly rewarding road for future analysis. Postgraduate students in Jewish Studies, history, sociology and politics should be encouraged to pursue their primary research from Yiddish texts, and once these have been translated, published and put into the public domain, they will offer appreciably refocussed angles on our community. In literature, moreover, most of our best Yiddish writers were determined to leave their mark on international Yiddish letters by vivifying their experience of life in Africa in both poetry and prose. Their view of this African life differs considerably from the responses of other immigrant groups, for having been themselves the victims of racial discrimination in Eastern Europe, as 'whites' they found themselves in a shocking role reversal in racist South Africa. Their poetry movingly sets their longing for the values, climate and rootedness of the Old Home in contrast with their shock, courage and determination in the new world they had entered. This work is a noteworthy addition to the body of general South African culture, and has been neglected for too long, to the great injury of our fullest self-awareness as an ethnic minority.

In South Africa's new dispensation, it is not longer possible to rest content with old clichés about our Jewish life here. Reevaluation is essential, and its greatest impetus will come from a thorough study of our homegrown Yiddish writing. Not to accept this challenge, especially at this decisive time in our history, is to renege on a duty we owe both to our forebears and to ourselves.