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*Travels in Yiddishlands:*  
Three Centers of Yiddish Responses to the Holocaust

In an attempt to classify writing on the Holocaust, the United States Library of Congress first recognized “Holocaust literature” in 1968, even though people wrote of the horrors witnessed during the Second World War well before the late 1960s. But as with any construct imposed on a literary phenomenon, it took at least two generations for its history to acquire shape and meaning (Roskies 157). To date the inception of Holocaust literature proves to be a difficult task mainly because the first studies looked predominantly at post-traumatic, survivor narratives that were available in English. It is only recently that scholars have turned their attention to Yiddish language representations of the Holocaust. This anachronistic impulse seems dreadfully delayed as on the eve of the Holocaust, an estimated eleven million Jews spoke Yiddish.

The reasons for the delay are multiple. First and foremost, the idea that the Second World War “spelled the end of the Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe” (Rosen 1) and by extension, of Yiddish-language responses to it, has dominated scholarship. Second, Soviet Yiddish responses, which constituted the largest bulk of the literary corpus during the war years, were not recognized mainly because they remained known to a select few Soviet Jews and became available to the West only in the post-Soviet era when archives began to open. Third, the canonization of writers such as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and to some extent, Tadeusz Borowski, eclipsed other authors that addressed the gruesome episode in history. Although the reasons for this are beyond the scope of the paper, their recognition may well have something to do with the fact that all three wrote of their experiences either in Auschwitz or Buchenwald, both of which have come to “symbolize the Holocaust in the West” (Roskies 5).

Unlike the reasons above which were by and large of historical and therefore external circumstance, the fourth and final cause for the exclusion of Yiddish texts from initial catalogues of Holocaust literature, comes from the Yiddish writers themselves who did not view the event as unique, but rather filtered it through the lens of Jewish history, where destruction was a unifying and recurrent factor in Jewish collective memory. Early attempts to categorize Holocaust literature did not include Yiddish texts simply because the authors did not identify themselves as writers of the Holocaust. Indeed, in Yiddish there was no word for “Holocaust.” Instead the word, *khurban*—or destruction—was used to talk about the Nazi Final Solution. For Jews the word carried great historic meaning as it was initially used to lament the destruction of the Second Temple in 587 B.C.E. (Roskies 5). Subsequently, *khurban* was used to refer to *any* massacre of the Jews in the Diaspora, and as such was common in pre-Revolutionary Russia during the peak of the pogroms.

To this point, it is important to note that for Eastern European Jewish writers, the Jewish experience as represented in its literature often vacillated between two leading modes of self-awareness: continuity and rupture. In the continuous model, Jews interpreted their present predicaments within the greater Jewish past. Conversely, in the ruptured model, those who saw the events of the Holocaust as having no precedence viewed it as unique in the history of the Jewish people.

In hopes of filling the lacuna in contemporary research on the Holocaust and Yiddish, I divide the Yiddish responses into three geographic categories: concentration camps and ghettos, Soviet Russia, and the United States. I do so because these were the three major centers of literary production during the war and the cultural and historic conditions unique to the three geographic points shape the nature of these responses. As such, what we have before us is not a hermetically sealed literary category of “Yiddish Holocaust Literature,” but a varied response that requires

careful analysis of literary and historic context. In isolating these centers we can better examine the relation of Jews to their history and literature. Put differently, although the Holocaust exceeded all past massacres in Jewish history, at the heart of the struggle to represent its magnitude in each of the three geographic centers is the attempt to engage with and internalize the continuous mode of Jewish self-awareness.

The first center, concentration camps and ghettos, form what Holocaust scholars Roskies and Naomi Diamant term the “Jew Zone” (Roskies and Diamant 22). Here, in the epicenter of destruction, Yiddish Holocaust narratives interpret events in relation to the continuous model. Conversely, in the two other geographic centers, Soviet Russia and the United States, Yiddish writers’ reactions to the Holocaust demonstrate significant modifications made to the continuous model to best reflect the needs and desires of the people writing from the respective geographic loci.

### **The Death of a People: Ghetto Writing in Yiddish**

In terms of locating initial responses to the Holocaust in Yiddish, a good place to start are the memoirs, diaries, songs and poems written by Jews in concentration camps, ghettos, and partisan outposts. It must seem strange to us today to think that during these horrific moments, people were writing and creating. But the need to transcribe—to bear witness—and perhaps even transcend history was quite common. For these Jews, history, which was rooted in a deep knowledge of Jewish holy text, was linked to collective memory. The commandment “to remember” (*zhakhor*), which “appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for the memory is

incumbent upon both” (Yerushalmi 5), permeates Yiddish texts found in concentration camps and ghettos.

Yitzhak Katzenelson’s “Song of the Murdered Jewish People” represents the culmination of such efforts. Born in 1886 in Minsk, Katzenelson and his family were trapped in a ghetto after the German invasion. Separated from his wife and children (they were taken to Treblinka extermination camp and murdered there), Katzenelson was sent to a detention camp in Vittel, France, where he wrote the “Song of the Murdered Jewish People,” a text largely influenced by what he witnessed during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Song is made up of fifteen cantos with fifteen stanzas in each, structured to not only serve as testimony, but also to highlight a tremendous ability to wed the Jewish holy literary tradition with the gruesome events of the Holocaust. Evoking the neoclassical literary tradition of calling on the muse, the poem begins with a plea:

Sing! Take your light, hollow harp in hand,  
Strike hard with the heavy fingers, like pain-filled hearts  
On its thin chords. Sing the last song.  
Sing of the last Jews on Europe’s soil... (Katzenelson, 531)

To this request, the poetic voice responds: “How can I sing? How can I open my lips?” Unable to come up with a song because there is no one to hear it, the speaker concludes that the dead shall move him to sing and thus become his inspiration. The poem reaches its climax when the speaker addresses the heavens and succumbs to the agony of death surrounding him when the heavens, too, are silent. In the final stanzas, the speaker addresses an anonymous reader, thereby passing on the responsibility of future generations to sing of the murder of the Jewish people.

By the winter of 1940, the largest concentration of Jews in all of occupied Europe was in the Warsaw Ghetto. Despite tremendous hardships, Jews adapted to the new world order of ghetto life, creating makeshift schools, theatre performances, and other aspects of community life. But

adaptation did not mean acceptance. Understanding that they were living in drastic times, people turned to writing in order to record the events for future generations.

One of the most famous “scribes of the ghetto” was Emanuel Ringelbum (1900-1944), a Polish-Jewish historian, who upon arriving in Warsaw set out to record ghetto life “as if the war were already over” (Roskies 381). In the Warsaw Ghetto, Ringelbum led an underground operation known as “Oyneg Shabbes” (Sabbath Delight). The purpose of Oyneg Shabbes was to collect diaries, documents, and testimonies that would be preserved for readers. Today, approximately 25,000 sheets of paper have been saved. They showcase an extraordinary effort to document the life of a people on the eve of their destruction.

The efforts to record the destruction of the Jewish people were indisputably heroic. Although most of the ghetto scribes saw the events as part of the continuous model in the chain of Jewish history, those who survived went on to interpret it as a frightful new beginning, which had no precedent in Jewish history. One such person was Rachel Auerbach (1903-1976), a Polish Jewish writer and essayist, who worked side by side with Ringelbum in the Warsaw Ghetto. Her testimony, “Yizkor, 1943,” is the only work of Auerbach’s to be translated into English and was written shortly after she escaped the ghetto in 1943. Calling her work “Yizkor” (remember), Auerbach’s gripping elegy to the Jewish people killed in the ghetto demonstrates an internalization of the commandment “to remember,” and like Katzenelson’s, uses biblical imagery to recast the event in holy context. Comparing the destruction to a flood, Auerbach concludes: “And that is how the Jewish masses flowed to their destruction at the time of the deportations. Sinking helplessly into the deluge of destruction” (Auerbach 459). Although Auerbach portrays the Jews as having little to no agency, she concludes her testimony by taping into an equally significant commandment found in the Bible—forgetting. Enjoined to remember, the people of Israel are likewise instructed

not to forget. In “Yizkor, 1943,” the responsibility of remembering is complemented by the obverse, the duty of the witness to never forget: “And if, for even one of the days of my life, I should forget how I saw you then, my people, desperate and confused, delivered over to extinction, may all knowledge of me be forgotten and my name be cursed like that of those traitors who are unworthy to share your pain” (“Yizkor, 1943”). Evoking the words from Psalm 137 (“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning”), Auerbach elevates the memory of the Jewish people, thus sanctifying their shared fate and memory.

The impulse to recast the Holocaust within the collective Jewish experience shapes a majority of Yiddish responses to these horrific years. Others, mainly those who found themselves in forests fighting alongside partisans or witnessed the heroic efforts of inmates in ghetto uprisings, created songs and poems that featured Jewish spiritual and physical resistance, thus viewing their songs as a call to resist the enemy. A prominent example of song as a form of resistance and celebration of Jewish self defense and determination is the wildly popular “Partisan Song,” known in Yiddish as “Zog nit keyn mol.” Written in 1943 by Hirsh Glick (1922-1944), a young Jewish inmate of the Vilna ghetto who took part in the underground Vilna Ghetto uprising, the song has become an anthem for Holocaust survival, defiance, and resistance. Born out the horror of spilt Jewish blood, the song nevertheless celebrates the struggle, thereby inculcating the spirit of pride in Jews both during and after the war. Consisting of five stanzas, the song opens and closes with the following lines:

Never say this is the final road for you,  
Though leaden skies may cover over days of blue.  
As the hour that we longed for is so near,  
Our step beats out the message: we are here! (Glick 484)

For Glick, the inspiration to write the song came on the heels of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943), a unique event in the Holocaust wherein a group of Jewish prisoners of the Warsaw Ghetto resisted the Nazis. The song became instantaneously popular, traveling from German-occupied Europe to the Soviet-occupied lands in the east. It became a hit in Soviet Russia as the Russian Jewish popular Jazz singer Leonid Utyosov famously performed the song to soldiers on the front in an effort to ignite feelings of patriotism (Khiterer 30).

Until now, I have devoted most of my attention to documentary writing; that is, literature written under the impulse to reflect as best as possible daily life within the ghettos. Complementary to this, imaginative literature forms another major component of Holocaust literature written in Yiddish during the war.

In terms of poets of the ghetto, none other has reached the status and singular achievement of Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2010), “the greatest poet of the Holocaust” (Cohen, New York Times). Born in 1913 in the Russian Empire, in 1941 he and his wife were sent to the Vilna Ghetto, where he wrote a series of poems based on his experiences there. Sutzkever’s large poetic output—more than eighty poems—present readers a “microcosm of east European Jewry in their life-and-death struggle” in the Vilna Ghetto (Roskies 467).

During the war and in the immediate postwar years, Sutzkever reflected on the power of poetry as both a form of resistance and a vehicle to eulogize the dead. His poem “The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers” (Sutzkever 168), written in 1942 in the Vilna Ghetto, compares the Rom Printing House, a famous institution of pre-war Jewish intellectual life and civilization, to an underground Jewish self-defense establishment, where ink and the melting of letters are synonyms for “liquefied bullets.” Writers become, quite literally, soldiers who “melt down, for our bullets, the spirit of the lead.”

Whether writing documentary prose, fiction, or poetry, ghetto scribes found themselves at the center of Holocaust. This, coupled with the fact that these men and women were of the same generation *and* from similar parts of Eastern Europe (namely, Poland and Lithuania) sheds light on pervasive attitudes rooted in the Eastern European Jewish experience. As such, Yiddish literature from the ghettos depicts not only the remarkable effort to record the events, but also demonstrates that for the ghetto writer, the Holocaust was internalized and understood within the continuous narrative. But what happens as we move away from the “Jew Zone” to our second geographic center: Soviet Russia.

### **Soviet Yiddish Responses to the Holocaust: Between Soviet Patriotism and Jewish Solidarity**

If for the ghetto scribes, preservation and a shared Jewish fate are chief concerns, for Soviet Yiddish writers, who were both geographically and ideologically removed from the dire circumstances of ghetto life, a slightly different picture evolves. This has much to do with the development of Yiddish in the Soviet context and as such, I pause to briefly address the history of Yiddish in the Soviet Union.

In terms of Yiddish responses to the Holocaust during the war, the largest output is found in the Soviet Union. The reasons for this stem from the fact that prior to the war Yiddish language and culture flourished, and was even sponsored by the Soviet government. Indeed, after the Bolsheviks took over in 1917, many Jewish intellectuals flocked to the Soviet Union, proclaiming it to be the future for Jewish literary and cultural life. Their predictions were somewhat true. In the 1920s in the Soviet Union, Yiddish literary journals, newspapers, and publishing houses outnumbered those in America. But by the mid to late 1930s, with the rise of High Stalinism,

Yiddish schools, newspapers, and publishing houses were destroyed. By 1939, the short-lived Soviet Yiddish romance was, more-or-less, over.

When the Germans invaded Soviet Russia on June 22, 1941, the sudden attack—known as Operation Barbarossa—took Stalin by surprise, for just two years prior, Stalin and Hitler had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact, an agreement that assured that the Germans would not invade the Soviet Union, and moreover, that divided Eastern Europe between the two countries. For the Soviets, fighting the war against the Nazis was as much an ideological battle as a military struggle. In order to help rally worldwide Jewish support against Fascism, Yiddish culture and its activists were mobilized for the Soviet war effort. On August 24, 1941, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) was created with the hopes of reaching out to the American Jewish community for financial, political, and moral support. Active participants included well-known Soviet Yiddish writers Dovid Bergelson, Peretz Markish, Der Nister, Jewish writers and intellectual figures such as Il'ia Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, and the famed Yiddish actor, Solomon Mikhoels.

Importantly, the JAFC produced the only Yiddish-language newspaper in the Soviet Union, *Einikayt* (“Unity”), which ran from 1942-1948. The bulk of the newspaper covered news about the war, as well as texts ranging from poetry to prose. The newspaper, which mainly reported on the heroism of Soviet Jews fighting the Nazis, also featured poems, stories, and articles that called for both Jewish national revival and revenge. To be sure, because the JAFC and its newspaper were closely monitored by the Soviets, the amount of self-determination and therefore, ability to write freely was suppressed and compromised.

All in all, although the initiatives in the 1920s to integrate national minorities with the Soviet system were quite successful, shaping as it were a healthy Soviet Jewish hybrid identity,

the shutting down of Yiddish schools, newspapers, and publishing houses in the late 1930s signaled an alarming return to pre-Revolutionary Russian anti-Semitism. The formation of the JAFC, although in hindsight only a tool of the regime serving a short-term goal during the war, came as a welcome respite. JAFC writers, especially those writing in Yiddish, seized this rare opportunity for a Yiddish revival. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a letter written by the famed Soviet Yiddish poet and JAFC member, Peretz Markish to another prominent Polish Yiddish writer, Joseph Opatoshu:

Now there must be a word about our literature, but not a descriptive one. Most importantly, it has to interpret and, as a result, to test the spirit of our wretched people. The blood of six million victims has to shout not through the mouth of Julian Tuwim who fed himself on anecdotes about Jews until the graves reminded him that he was associated with the Jewish people. His Jewish-Catholic mysticism indicates a belated acceptance of the notion of the Jews as a Chosen People rather than an understanding [of what happened]. Our literature now will have to sum up and re-evaluate the notion of *kidesh-hashem*, death for being a Jew, as an eternal national category, which, in fact, helped fascism annihilate our people (Markish 331).<sup>5</sup>

Revealing his familiarity with the Jewish continuous narrative, Markish nevertheless rejects it, calling for a re-evaluation of historic anti-Semitism and the leading trope of *kidesh-hashem*, loosely understood as someone who sacrifices himself for G-d. “Our literature,” here understood to be Yiddish literature, is responsible for interpreting the death of six million; it must offer “something new that made this current wave of destruction different from other *khurbans* (destructions)” (Shneer 145). If Jewish history was peppered with Jewish self-sacrifice in the form of *kidesh-hashem*, then Markish shows that Jews in 1941 were responding differently. For Markish, Jewish self-sacrifice was envisioned in the form of Jewish-Soviet heroism:

The best sons and daughters of our people, weapons in their hands, are giving their lives on the fields of battle in the fierce struggle against fascist vandals... Fellow Jews! The time of submissive

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<sup>5</sup> A reference to Tuwim's 1944 article “We—the Polish Jews,” which he wrote on the first anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising after discovering his mother had been killed by the Nazis.

non-resistance to the butchers is the most shameful page in the tragic history of our ancient people (Markish 11, 12).

In both his writing and in public orations, Markish shifted “from a literature of destruction to a literature of Jewish heroism” (Shneer 147). On August 24, 1941, Markish joined a group of Soviet Jewish intellectuals who gathered in Gorky Park in central Moscow for a rally and an appeal to world Jewry to support the Soviet war effort. Markish addressed the Jewish population in Yiddish, stressing the image of blood. Though the word “Jew” is never mentioned, the image of blood in relation to “our people” recalls the persistent trope of Jewish sacrifice—*kidesh-hashem*—in the Diaspora:

The blood of our people is flowing over cities and on the roads that connect one country to the next. It is everywhere that the butcher Hitler’s fascist hordes have stepped. The blood, spilled during the horrible murders in Germany, had not yet dried up; the cry of tens of thousands of plundered and degraded refuges had not yet abated, when a new bloody carnage broke out in Austria... (Markish, 11)

Markish’s mounting interest in cultivating a radically new image of Soviet Jewishness is reflected not only in his wartime speeches and private letters, but also in his magnum opus, *Milkhome (War, 1948)*, a cycle of narrative poems that describes the Soviet Jewish experience in the Second World War. A leading image throughout the cycle is of the Soviet Jewish soldier Gurarii kissing a rifle bestowed to him by a fellow Red Army soldier after he witnesses the destruction of the Jewish people. We can read this gesture as akin to the religious ritual of kissing a *siddur* (the Jewish prayer book) or the *tsitsis* (fringes for four-cornered garments worn by Jewish men). This symbol of Soviet power serves as a substitute for the traditional religious symbols of Judaism. Gurarii’s gesture, therefore, reflects the emergence of Markish’s new Soviet Jewish war hero.

Representations of Jewish heroes went beyond the markedly patriotic and featured a strong layer of Jewish national revival. JAFK member and Yiddish writer Der Nister (born Pinkhes Kaganovich) is a good example of this impulse. His wartime short stories, *Regrowth: Seven Tales*

*of Jewish Life Before, During, and After Nazi Occupation*, collected and translated into English for the first time in 2008, contain characters who are not only fighters in the Red Army, but through personal loss, are also fueled with a sense of a re-awakened Jewish allegiance.

To offer an example of how *Der Nister* addresses this theme, I turn to “Regrowth,” a story that explores a re-awakened nationalism engendered by loss and death. More literally, “Regrowth” is about “a man without a wife, and a wife without a man” who live “with facing doors, on the same floor of the same building, in a Soviet capital city” (*Der Nister* 155). The heroes of the tale, Dr. Zamelman and Mrs. Zayets, “have grown estranged from their Jewish origins and all that occurred in the thicket of their people.” The man and the woman share similar fates as both their son and daughter leave their homes in order to fight the Great Fatherland War. From the very beginning of the story we know that Dr. Zamelman and Mrs. Zayets’ fate is intertwined. Toward the end of the story, Dr. Zamelman’s reconnection with the *kehilla*, or Jewish community, motivates him to adopt a young boy. “Regrowth,” which ends with a union between Dr. Zamelman and Mrs. Zayets, brings the characters closer not to their Soviet homeland but rather to their Jewish heritage. The unity of characters who do not share biological parents, but rather a common history showcases *Der Nister*’s relationship to the continuous mode of Jewish self-realization.

Whether written to appeal to Soviet ideology or Jewish allegiance, a shared theme in Soviet Yiddish wartime literature is vengeance. *Der Nister*’s “Flora” tells a story about a young girl who, upon losing her father and being thrown into a ghetto, joins an underground group of partisans. Initially told by Flora herself, the narrative abruptly ends and is picked up by a professional narrator. “There ends Flora’s record,” writes this second narrator. “And it is also understandable why: she went off to where there was neither room nor time to hold a pen in one’s hands—just a chance for something better: a rifle” (*Der Nister* 134). The author here makes a conscious play

using the sounds of the Yiddish word for book, “bukh,” and the word for gun, “biks.” The rifle is the logical extension of the pen. As in Sutzkever’s “The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers,” writing is here a form of spiritual and physical resistance.

Unfortunately, no amount of writing would prepare Soviet Yiddish writers for the ensuing postwar years. No longer deemed useful after the war, the JAFK and *Einikayt* were summarily closed and the Yiddish writers taken to prison, accused of “overt Jewish nationalism,” (Redlich 148) and shot in what has come to be known as the Night of the Murdered Poets (Rubenstein 1-65).

In contrast to writing from the first geographical center, where recording, preserving, and interpreting the present within the chain of Jewish history form a common response to the years of the Holocaust, Soviet Yiddish responses celebrate Jewish heroism and Jewish national revival. We can provide some explanations for the difference. First and foremost, unlike the ghetto writers who understood that their lives were at risk, the need to record is not present in Soviet Yiddish texts simply because most of the authors were in Moscow, safe from the murders occurring in Eastern Europe. Second, and perhaps of even greater consequence, a particular context informs writing in Yiddish in Soviet Russia. Soviet Yiddish writers saw the installment of the JAFK as a welcome return to the rich socialist Yiddish culture of the 1920s. These were writers cradled by the Revolution, sculpted by the initiatives of the budding Soviet State to create, albeit in its own image, an ideologically neutralized Soviet Yiddish culture. For this reason, Soviet Yiddish wartime Holocaust texts, though still rooted in the continuous mode, display a revival and celebration of Jewish national identity.

### **Yiddish Across the Sea: Holocaust Literature in America**

Farthest from the epicenter of the Holocaust, American Yiddish writers nevertheless closely followed the tragedy unfolding in what was once their homeland. Indeed, despite America's rather tardy involvement in the Second World War, news of Hitler, Fascism, and the destruction of the Jewish people quickly reached the United States. Though reports began to accumulate by 1942 and 1943, already in 1938 American press reported widely on the events of *Kristallnacht* (Novick 21-22).

An important difference, however, between the three geographic centers was the relationship of writers to the Yiddish language. In this final American setting we see Yiddish function as a bridge for longing and continuity. Here, Yiddish, affectionately called "Mameloshen" (mother-tongue), was closely associated with a longing for the old world. As such, in terms of initial American Yiddish responses, those who wrote most avidly on the topic were first-generation immigrants with deep roots to their Eastern European homes.

A representative of this Yiddish-speaking community was the Yiddish poet Yankev Gladstein (1896-1971), who immigrated to New York City in 1914 due to the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland, and whose extended family was still in Eastern Europe during the war. His poem "Good Night, World" (1937), though written before the appearance of concentration camps and killing squads in Eastern Europe, nevertheless bemoans the miserable fate of the Jews in this "big stinking world" (Gladstein 373) by depicting the Jewish people as society's perennial sacrifice. Like Markish, who identifies the *kidesh-hashem* trope in Jewish history, "Good Night, World" offers readers a transatlantic Jewish narrative, where a familiarity with the continuous model is fully internalized by the poet.

Another prominent and equally powerful Yiddish poet was Kadia Molodowsky (1894-1975), who immigrated to New York in 1935, where she worked in the Yiddish publishing houses

and wrote extensively. Her 1945 poem, “God of Mercy” begs G-d to “choose another people.” Like the ghetto scribes who viewed the horrors of the Holocaust as part of the tragic Jewish narrative, Molodowsky’s plea to “choose another people” (Molodowsky 570) echoes a pattern in the way Jews internalize their history. As the poem progresses, however, the idea of “choosing another people” shifts to mean not only a plea for safety and preservation, but also, and perhaps more shockingly, to make another nation G-d’s chosen people. The poet’s rejection of G-d and the land of Israel may be read as a desecration, but in the context of the post-Holocaust Jewish experience, the impulse to discard Judaism became a common way of dealing with the trauma.

In the post-Holocaust world many American Jews were confronted not only by their disillusionment with their faith, but also with reconstituting their lives. Some addressed the iniquities of the world by rejecting G-d, while others turned to Jewish folklore, mysticism, and allegory to further stress morality and justice. Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “The Last Demon” (1957) explores sin, morality, and the Holocaust in the context of fable. Told from the perspective of a demon who happens to be the last survivor of the town of Tishevitz, the narrative addresses the manifestation of human evil in relation to the supernatural world. As the demon himself asks, “Why demons, when man himself is a demon? Why persuade to evil someone who is already convinced?” thus relegating the power to commit evil to mankind. Unable to feed on Jewish bodies as they have all been killed, the demon turns to Jewish books in order to satiate his appetite for Jewish blood. “I suck on the letters and feed myself,” the demon declares. “Yes, as long as a single volume remains, I have something to sustain me.” Jewish text as sustenance for the demon suggests an unnerving relationship between evil and text. Here, unlike for the ghetto writers, Der Nister, and many of the Soviet Yiddish writers, writing is neither liberating nor sanctifying. Indeed, the parallel between demon and writer may have something to do with the fact that, unlike those

Yiddish texts written during and in the immediate postwar years, “The Last Demon” was written in 1957 when conversations around the Holocaust and the ethics of literary representation began to dominate American Jewish life.

Tension between documentation and representation, however, is not the only way to read “The Last Demon.” An activist for Yiddish culture and language, Singer began his speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978 with the following question: “People often ask me, ‘Why do you often write in a dying language?’ And I want to explain it in a few words.” Stating that he mostly writes “ghost stories,” the language of the dead—here, Yiddish—is, thus, a fitting choice to depict the underworld. Read in this context, the demon’s desire to devour Jewish text prepares the world for the return of Yiddish literature. Such messianic visions haunt Singer’s obsession with preserving Yiddish language and culture.

In the end, whether set in the context of fable or historical fiction, for Singer, language defined the author. Acknowledging that writing in Yiddish has made him a “heavy loser” (Singer, 1968) in terms of reaching more American readers, Singer nevertheless champions the idea of the Yiddish writer as one who is entirely immersed in Jewish literary, historic, liturgical, and philosophical traditions. For American Yiddish writers, eager to reconnect and reconstruct the world of their ancestors, discussions around the Holocaust transformed into a profound longing for Yiddish—the language of the murdered Jewish people in Eastern Europe—and effectively, a substitute for Jewish continuity and identity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although there are an estimated 600,000 Yiddish speakers today—an extreme fraction of the eleven million that spoke the language on the eve of the Holocaust—the enormous literary

output in Yiddish during and in the immediate postwar years allows us to better conceptualize the meaning of *Yiddishland*, “a place that can be reached without passport or visa” (Jeffrey Shandler, 47). Travels to this land entail a slight detour to the repository of Jewish collective memory, in which continuity forms an essential backdrop. As such, Yiddish writers from each of the three geographic centers did not eschew the continuous mode of Jewish self-awareness, but instead engaged with and internalized it in three distinct ways.

Although today there is no Soviet Union with a thriving Yiddish literature nor an Eastern Europe populated by a rich Yiddish culture, our travels in space and time give us a lasting portrait of how writers from three very distinct loci, engaged with and internalized the Holocaust within the continuous Jewish narrative.

For this reason, I began our journey to the epicenter of the Holocaust, where Yiddish writers reached into the reserve of Jewish history to recast the event within the collective Jewish experience. In the Soviet lands, on the other hand, Yiddish texts display familiarity with the continuous narrative, but also a desire to revise its leading tropes to best reflect a positive hero who was both a Soviet flag-waver and a Jewish loyalist. This most often converged in the figure of either the Jewish soldier or the Jewish orphan searching to reconnect with his ethnic roots.

I concluded our travels to the American lands where Yiddish writers with deep historic, familial, and emotional connections to Eastern Europe treated the Holocaust in several stages of grief, all of which drew from the continuous narrative in order to address living in the post-Holocaust world. Farthest from the murder and destruction in Eastern Europe, American Yiddish literature on the Holocaust moved from a literature of destruction to reconstruction. This was a literature burdened with the notion of surviving after the evils of the war. For this reason, American Yiddish literature tackled such taboo topics as disillusionment with faith and rejection

of G-d. In its final stages, reconstruction was bound to the language itself, so that writing in Yiddish, became in and of itself, an act of continuity.