Peretz Markish (1895–1952)

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> And all of a sudden, Markish interrupted in his bass voice that in moments of passion became a heroic tenor: "We shall host a literary event that will make the whole of Warsaw tremble. On a Saturday morning, when all the old pious Jews in every synagogue are praying to God—we, the young Jews, shall offer our own hymn in our synagogue to our god."[1]
>
> —MELECH RAVITCH

IN HIS MODERN-CLASSIC REFLECTION ON JEWISH HISTORY AND MEMORY IN *ZAKHOR: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously links the entry of Jewish life into modernity with the emergence of Jewish historiography. "The modern effort to reconstruct the Jewish past," Yerushalmi writes, "begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever-growing decay of Jewish group memory. In this sense, if for no other, history becomes what it had never been before—the faith of fallen Jews."[2] This rupture, the theoretical break in what was understood as a continuous progression of Jewish life, divides modern Jews from their past, and with it comes a consciousness of the Jewish past. According to this theory of rupture, the catalyst, if not the direct agent, for creation of Jewish modernity is the abandonment of traditional faith for secular historical consciousness.

Many Jews were abandoning traditional faith in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and nowhere was this process of becoming modern more complicated than in the Russian Empire. After all, this was a place that was still ruled by a tsar, that had never had legal emancipation or instituted citizenship, and in which Jews continued to maintain a separate existence in ways unheard of in places like England, France, and Germany. One would be hard-pressed to find another place on earth where, as late as 1897, 97 percent of Jews listed a Jewish vernacular, Yiddish, as their native language. Although a small segment of Russia's Jews were becoming modern through urbanization and secularization, for most in Russia, becoming modern was a conscious choice—an act of breaking with one's past.[3] Peretz Markish,

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who was born in 1895 in the heart of Volhyn province, was one of those consciously breaking with history.

How and when does a young Jew from the sticks become modern—can we even begin to pinpoint the moment? Could it be when he made his seemingly secular break, leaving his position in Berditchev as a *meshoyrer*, a synagogue chorister, after his bar mitzvah to part ways with the world of religion?[4] Or was it five years later, when the rupture with tradition widened as he abandoned his traditional Jewish antimartial masculinity to enlist in the tsarist army at the start of the Great War? Perhaps it was when he continued his militaristic stance during his time in Ekaterinoslav amid the turmoil of the Russian Civil War? In these brazen acts, the young Markish not only picked up a weapon to defend not only his country but also his fellow Jews during the worst wave of antisemitic violence to ravage the region in centuries. And not coincidentally, it was at this time that he began his career as a Yiddish poet self-consciously reflecting on Jewish life. He published an untitled poem in the provocatively named journal *Kempfer* (Fighter), which appeared in Ekaterinoslav in 1917.

Or, in accordance with what was "truly modern" in Russia after 1917, did Markish have to move beyond Yerushalmi's postmaskilic sense of Jewish historical presence and embrace historical materialism, devoting himself to the revolutionary overturning of history? It is this Marxist sense of *Umwälzung* (upheaval), both in the figurative sense of a cataclysmic shift in power and in the literal upending of language, that Markish began to express in his earliest published poetry of 1917–1919. His work was steeped in a curious mixture of rhymed, isosyllabic quatrains and the radical poetics of Vladimir Mayakovsky–styled Futurism. In this postrevolutionary moment, Markish not only embraced a particular Marxist modernity but also became its chief representative in Jewish literature through the medium of Yiddish poetry.

> fargosn hot a veykhe finsternish di velt
> shoyn bizn kop . . .
> farendikt der farnakht zayn goldn bentshn
> shtil un—op . . .
>
> Un altsding shvaygt un hert,
> i mentsh, i ferd . . .
> Nor a vintl blondzhet un redt tsu vent
> un shtume vintmil makht tsum himl
> epes mit di hent . . .
>
> Then a tender darkness flooded the world
> Right up to its head . . .
> The dusk finishes its golden blessing
> —Quiet, now it's done . . .
>
> And everything hushes and hears
> Both man and steed . . .
> Only a breeze rambles and speaks to the walls

And silent windmills wave their hands saying
    Something to the skies . . .

In this early, untitled poem, Markish, echoing the prayers that end the Sabbath on Saturday evenings, evokes the traditional tropes of Jewish liturgical poetry for revolutionary purposes. He draws from both the Hebrew *havdola* prayer, with its forceful separation of sacred from profane and light from darkness, and the traditional women's Yiddish blessing, the *Got fun avrom* (God of Abraham). Markish overturns the conventions of Jewish prayer; his new liturgy does not usher in a peaceful "good week," as "God of Abraham" does, but rather depicts the coming night as an onslaught in which the evening twilight is looted by the forces of darkness. Despite all of the violent action in the poem, not a sound is made and there is no mention of a divine, dividing power, but rather the night stealthily subsumes the twilight. The poem fuses the traditional and the modern, the sacred with the profane. Alongside the Hebrew liturgical strains, Markish weaves quotations of John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," with the futile image of Don Quixote with his horse and windmill, all in a poetic style reminiscent of Mayakovsky's 1915 "Oblako v Shtanakh" (Cloud in trousers). Perhaps more remarkable than the imagery or politics of his early poetry was this young modern's choice of language—Yiddish.

A central feature of Markish's emergence as both a figure and a representative of the modern moment is his decision to write in Yiddish. Writing in one's native language may, on the one hand, seem like a perfectly "natural" choice for a poet. Yet, this naturalness proves to be decisively deceptive for Jewish writers, perhaps even more so when considering the choice of Yiddish. Writing in Yiddish, which importantly was neither universally called "Yiddish" at the time nor even considered a language by many of its speakers, was a particularly complex and highly fraught move on the part of any writer, let alone a "modern" one. Traditionally, to write in Yiddish meant to write with an embodied audience in mind, often a feminized audience. Although Yiddish literature has existed alongside Hebrew literature for at least seven hundred years, the use of these literatures in Jewish culture was strictly regulated.[5] Yiddish was used for low-status genres and for edifying prose aimed at those who did not have access to the Jewish canon from which Jewish law was generated. Such literature was intended, in the oft-repeated prologue to early modern ethical literature, for "women and for men, who are like women in not being able to learn."[6] As far as Yiddish poetry and liturgy, the primary genre in which such literature was created in traditional Ashkenazic Jewish culture was the *tkhine*, a Yiddish supplicatory prayer for women to read while Jewish men prayed from a more formalized liturgy in the Siddur, or canonical prayerbook.[7] From the sixteenth-century explosion of Yiddish literature, with the advent of printing presses and Jewish publishing houses, through the nineteenth-century emergence of the maskilim, who wrote Yiddish "with a bitter taste in their mouths," the use of Yiddish as a self-consciously *literary* enterprise—as opposed to an entertaining or edifying one—was simply not possible.

To write in Yiddish for literary posterity, and to imagine volumes of these works kept on readers' bookshelves, was already a clear break from the prescribed role for Yiddish within the traditional Jewish cultural network—the interlocking, interrelated social and linguistic system that Itamar Even-Zohar termed a "polysystem."[8]

As Benjamin Harshav, who later developed Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, describes, from the Middle Ages onward Jewish life in Europe was grounded in a complex, distinct trilingual culture that operated in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish, with each of these languages possessing "a separate library of texts, a separate educational system, an ethical movement, and a separate conceptual world," but together making up a culture that completely lacked aspects of a territorial or statist power. According to Harshav, "the definition of Jewishness in the Religious Polysystem was *legal* and *essentialist*: a Jew was defined by *being* a Jew and was included in the whole network; whereas in the new Jewish Secular Polysystem it is *voluntary* and *aspectual*."[9]

One of the biggest problems of the advent of modernity, along with the displacement of the traditional cultural polysystem, was a linguistic one. Simply put, could modern culture be Jewish but take place in non-Jewish languages? For some writers, following the earlier maskilim, the answer was decisively in favor of the abandonment of the languages of the traditional system. But to others–perhaps the characteristic response of the new moderns–the choice to write in Hebrew or Yiddish, was a project intimately linked with modernity. Even though there were major exceptions to the politicization of Jewish language choice, the decision to write in Hebrew or Yiddish also became associated with particular worldviews: for example, Hebrew and political Zionism and Yiddish and the left (Bundism and communism). And even though all writers in the modern polysystem were typically multilingual and able to read and write in Hebrew and Yiddish as well as in German and Russian, among a host of other local languages, as the major worldviews of the twentieth century evolved the formerly intertwined linguistic cultural systems separated. Therefore, when Markish chose to write Yiddish poetry in the biggest revolutionary moment in Russian history (and for many in world history), he was performing a self-consciously radical act. He made the Revolution a modern Jewish event. And at the same time, by choosing the "lowly" Yiddish instead of the "queen" Hebrew, he was making a modern statement by elevating the popular at the expense of the elite.[10]

Markish became a published writer in the wake of war and two revolutions. He published his first volumes of poetry in 1919, when language was, as in the title of Benjamin Harshav's book on the subject, "in time of Revolution."[11] By giving one of his first volumes of poetry the title *Inmitn veg* (Midway), he was referring to the process of overturning history but signifying that Russia was only in the middle of that process. As important was the name of the publishing house that put out his book, significantly named in Russian Mayak (The beacon), although spelled in Jewish letters.[12] In contemporaneous reviews of Markish's work, the prolific literary critic Shmuel Niger used nearly every possible synonym for "modern" to describe Markish, characterizing his poetry as iconic of the here and now. Writing in 1922 about Markish's four 1919 volumes, Niger said, "He is no revolutionary who wishes to overturn the world; rather he, himself, is the overturned world; he alone is the glowing ember that the wind has carried off from a wildfire. He is not only the poet of the present moment [*fun der hayntiker tsayt*]—for the poet of *his* time is a poet for all time—Markish is a *record of that moment*."[13] Niger traces out the strands of contemporary Russian and German poetic artistic movements as they are woven together into Markish's text; he sees the form, technique, and

imagery of the German Expressionists and hears the voice of Mayakovsky and, even more prominently, of Aleksandr Blok. Niger insists that the influence of Blok is most explicit in *Inmitn veg*, a volume that begins with a long prose poem cycle entitled "Draystn" (Thirteen). Just as Blok evokes Christian messianic images and references to the apostles in his famed "Dvenadtsat" (Twelve), in Markish's gory "Thirteen," the poet invokes the estimated thirteen million war dead (the number is repeatedly multiplied by powers of ten throughout the poem) to conclude with kabbalistic significance:[14]

mir zaynen draytsn khurbns!
mir zaynen draytsn hundert toysnt milyon.
mir zayen umonheybdik—
undzere sharbns flakern—draytsn kroynen.
—keser!
Mir zaynen—draytsn!

We are thirteen remains!
We are thirteen hundred thousand million.
We are never-starting—
Our skulls gleam—thirteen crowns
—KETHER
We are—thirteen!

The continuous chain of metaphorical extensions ends with the transformation of the thirteen decomposing corpses that begin the work into the topmost point in the kabbalistic sefirot, or emanations, which Markish introduces as *umonheybdik* (lit., never-starting), the antithesis of the *Eyn-sof* (never-ending, or infinite). The thirteen skulls become the *kether*, or crown, the source of Cordovero's thirteen attributes of mercy. In reaching such a conclusion, "Thirteen" reads like a Yiddish, particularly Jewish sequel to Blok's apocalyptic, revolutionary "Twelve."

For someone so clearly invested in the Russian Revolution, why would Markish not write in Russian, the language of the Revolution? The easy answer is that he wasn't good enough to earn a reputation among the lights of radical Russian poetry like Mayakovsky and Blok. And that may well be true. But for Markish, Yiddish would not just be a safe linguistic universe in which to write. It was also the most modern of modern *Jewish* choices. In the same year that several volumes of his poetic works appeared, the Soviet state, centered in Russia but expanding to include Ukraine, Belorussia, and elsewhere, named Yiddish the official language of Soviet Jews. On the one hand, this was simply an act of normalizing Jews' relationship in the brotherhood of nations that would come to define the Soviet Union, an entity officially established in 1924.[15] But it was also a way of making the Bolshevik Revolution Jewish by overturning the Jewish linguistic hierarchy.[16] For someone like Markish, there was never a separation between a political and a cultural revolution. By choosing Yiddish, Markish was taking his place in the Soviet Revolution in the most Jewish way possible.

In the aftermath of the pogroms in Petliura's independent Ukraine in 1919–1920, Markish wrote his first major *poema*, or long-form formal poem, *Di kupe* (The heap),[17] in a clear break from the accepted poetics of Yiddish poetry in the early

decades of the twentieth century—not so much for its radical secularism but for its use of revolutionary poetics to respond to anti-Jewish violence. After all, this was no traditional Jewish lamentation. In terms of apocalyptic themes and gory imagery, the poem was nearly identical to "Thirteen," published *prior* to the specifically Jewish massacres in Ukraine. Several years later, in an appreciation of Markish's poetic oeuvre, the Soviet literary critic I. M. Nusinov rejected the claim that the Yiddish readership would have been astonished or shocked by the "blasphemy" of Markish's work: "Neither Markish nor his readers believe in god any more—and so god [in the work] was for the most part an act of staging," he wrote.[18] He claimed that Jews were "*inmitn veg*," on the path toward the abandonment of faith and tradition and an embrace of social reality in the face of unprecedented violence. Markish's fully secular, modern articulation of violence breaks with the redemptive eschatology that embedded the pain of loss into a yearning for the Messiah through lamentations and martyrology. Moreover, according to Nusinov, Markish produced work that did not revel in an outdated, nationalist mode of threnody, a poetry of mourning composed or performed as a memorial to the dead, but rather wrote in a productive social vein.

In the year 1920, Markish moved from Soviet Ukraine to Moscow where he worked for the Communist Party's Yiddish-language newspaper, *Der Emes* (The truth), as a contributor and translator. While in Moscow, he lived in an apartment that served as the salon for Moscow's growing Yiddish cultural community.[19] Several Moscow-based writers put out the Yiddish literary journal *Shtrom* (Current) from 1922 until 1924. But by then, Markish was gone: in late 1921, he had left for Warsaw. In the post–World War I, post–Civil War, and post-pogrom era, when millions of Jews were on the move from the devastated heartland of *yidishland*, Markish was simply one more peripatetic Jew. But he made Warsaw, the largest Jewish center and most vibrant Yiddish literary center in the world, his (always temporary) home. In fact, he himself helped make Warsaw the ground zero of modern Yiddish literature. From there, he maintained his personal and professional contacts with colleagues back in the emerging Soviet Union and with friends throughout Europe. But unlike other exiled Yiddish writers like David Bergelson, who settled in Weimar Berlin and earned money writing for the New York–based Yiddish daily press, Markish didn't regularly earn his bread publishing in the Yiddish dailies. Instead, he bet on radical poetry and modern aesthetics.

Upon arrival in Poland, Markish joined the Ringen avant-garde literary group, and he also helped found other publications. Like most Yiddish writers, Markish didn't associate himself with a single ideology, such as expressionism or futurism. The closest he ever came was during his Warsaw years, with the publication of his 1922 expressionist manifesto *Estetik fun kamf in der moderner dikhtung* (The aesthetics of struggle in modern poetry). The presentation of this manifesto at a public performance rocked the Yiddish literary world. Markish's literary manifestos from this period show how he saw literature as a new secular liturgy.[20] In the same year, he helped found the expressionist journal *Albatros* and the group Khalyastre (Street Gang). In addition to his work with avant-garde magazines, Markish also cofounded the influential journal *Literarishe Bleter* (Literary pages) in 1924, making himself a central figure in its Yiddish literary scene. But Markish was rarely settled in this period. From 1921 to 1926, he demonstrated his commitment to internationalism

by constantly traveling, spreading the gospel of modernity to Yiddish-speaking audiences throughout Europe. Poet and critic Melech Ravitch once said, "[O]ne could rarely find Peretz Markish in Warsaw on a Friday night. He usually traveled across the country with his fiery word waterfalls, with his blazing geysers, with his lectures, all of which had many titles but one theme: 'Warsaw, Moscow, New York, Jerusalem,' 'The Past, Present and Future of Yiddish Literature.' "[21] Markish was the wandering poet-prophet of the revolutionary moment, but he saw Russia and the Revolution, even while in Warsaw, as the center of his creative universe—as the source of his own sense of being modern. In his 1922 essay collection on aesthetics called, typically, *Farbaygeyendik* (Passing by), he wrote that contemporary Yiddish poetry, like socialist revolution, originated in Moscow and radiated out from there. Linking his own modern project to the work of his contemporaries across national and linguistic boundaries, who were also experimenting with language, his early work shows a pronounced engagement with international modernism. For Markish, like Mayakovsky, there is no poetics without revolutionary politics. From Markish's earliest work and perhaps through his entire career, we can see the strains of Mayakovsky's 1918 "Open Letter to the Workers," in which he proclaimed that "The revolution of content—socialism—anarchism—is unthinkable without the revolution of form—futurism. . . . No one can know what immense suns will light the life of the future. Perhaps artists will transform the grey dust of the cities into hundred-colored rainbows. . . . One thing is clear to us—the first page in the newest history of the arts will have been written by us."[22]

Markish makes the Mayakovskian radical break with poetic form and abandons the confines of traditional metrical systems and rhyme in many of the poems in his earliest collections of 1919.[23] At the same time, this revolution in form was realized in various ways. In other work Markish shows a particular attraction to a different stream of the Russian Silver Age literature: the distinctive Symbolism of Blok and Osip Mandelshtam. He often directly emulates the rhythms and rhyme of Blok and Mandelshtam and even the eccentric metrical systems of Andrei Belyi. For Markish, the importation of the Russian versification systems of his contemporaries into Yiddish poetry was—like the act of writing an engaged, modern Yiddish poetry itself—a revolution in form. Although the Mayakovskian shattering of formal aspects of versification may seem more "radical" or "modern" than the creation of a body of Yiddish poetry that resonated with formal Russian verse, adopting classical verse form to modern Yiddish stood in stark contrast to the longstanding, official uses of Yiddish in *tkhines*.[24] Setting Yiddish poetry free of its historical confines was not only a revolution in form and content but also a far-reaching assertion of the poetic and, following Mayakovsky, *political* possibilities of the Yiddish language.

The opening poem to his 1919 volume *Shveln* serves as a poetic credo for the volume and aptly thematizes the radical transformation of modern culture while using the forms of classical verse.[25] In this case, it is in the form of a deconstructed sonnet (perhaps even a decadent "limping sonnet," or *sonnet boiteux*, à la Paul Verlaine), filled with futurist imagery and style. Markish provides the rudiments of the form: fourteen lines, (nearly) regular iambs, consistent—although alternating—rhyme. He also takes on the typical apostrophic posture of the Petrarchan sonneteer while thematically engaging another Western poetic tradition, the *aubade*, the song of lovers taking leave of each other at daybreak.

ikh zegn zikh mit dir
fargeyendike tsayt,
ikh ken dikh nit, fargangenhayt,
ir kert nit mir,—
ikh hob zikh aykh gekholemt! . . .

Un du ver bist, mayn tsukunft,
farvaksene in groye hor?
kh'geher nit dir,
du kholemst zikh mir nor!

kh'bin dayner, 'nishtiker atsind',
blind!
un blinderheyt kh'bin raykh!
mir shtarbn beyde glaykh
un vern glaykh geboyrn!

I take my leave of you
Passing time,
I don't know you, Past,
You don't belong to me,—
I dreamt you! . . .

And you who are, my Future,
Grown old in grey hair?
I don't belong to you,
But you dream of me!

I am yours, insignificant "Now,"
Blind!
And blindly I am rich!
We both of us die the same
And the same are born![26]

Markish's parting address in the opening stanza is not to an embodied woman but rather to a different type of female addressee, "Passing Time," a grammatically feminine substantive in Yiddish. In the same stanza, Markish thematizes the moment where the speaker transitions from the intimacy of the bedroom, using the intimate "du," to the estranged distance of the formal "ir." And as if to emphasize his engagement with the Western canonical tradition, the poem closes with a near quotation from John Donne's poem "The Canonization": "We die and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love."

From the perspective of many of his Warsaw colleagues, Markish's move back to Moscow in the summer of 1926 seemed like a permanent goodbye, a writer choosing "the other side." From the perspective of Soviet colleagues, and likely for Markish himself, his move heralded his homecoming and his commitment to the building

of Soviet Yiddish culture. The Soviet Union he left in 1921 was a chaotic, wartorn world of poverty and famine. By 1926, a more defined Soviet literary and political culture had begun to take shape with the Communist Party playing a larger role in cultural production. Markish adjusted quickly to his new environment, although writers who had never left the Soviet Union always reminded him of his self-imposed "exile" in Warsaw. In February 1927 in Moscow, several Soviet Jewish cultural groups sponsored a celebration welcoming Markish back to the Soviet Union. His speech was a declaration of his continuous connection to Soviet culture, even during his five years in Warsaw: "I am not a guest here, because I never went anywhere. I never broke with Moscow, and I never allied myself with any other place."27 Markish became part of the Soviet Jewish literary establishment and one of its leading figures. He published extensively in the Kharkov literary journal *Royte Velt* (Red world), and less extensively in the Minsk literary journal *Shtern* (Star) and the newspapers *Der shtern* (The star) and *Oktyabr* (October).

If the tumult of the Revolutionary era was dominated by a new Yiddish poetry and the obsession with the manifesto, by the late 1920s Yiddish prose became the most important medium for producing Soviet Jewish literature. This shift in genres reflected a more general movement away from the experimentation of the 1920s toward a more rigid definition of Soviet literature in the 1930s that came to be known as socialist realism. Soviet Yiddish writers began producing literature in this new model, a move to realism in a socialist key, one that portrayed Soviet life through the prism of triumphalism and heroism. Having experimented with prose in *Inmitn veg*, Markish's own literary career reflected this more general shift, as evidenced by the 1929 publication of his first novel, *Generations* (*Dor oys, dor eyn*), which centered on a Jewish family living during the Revolution. If "modern" is defined as a secular sense of time and history, then Markish remained modern until the day he died. But if being modern also means breaking with one's expected path in life, which he did when he left the synagogue behind and joined the Russian army, then Markish stopped being modern only when he became embedded in a Soviet state literary system. Perhaps it was in the establishment of socialist realism, of an aesthetics tied to a state political structure, that marked the beginning of the end of Markish as a modern.

Ironically, although Markish established himself as an important Soviet Yiddish writer, his standing in the non-Yiddish Soviet intelligentsia was no less strong. According to Gennady Estraikh, Markish was embroiled in caustic internal debates among various Yiddish literary cliques, and several times he was bitterly criticized in the press. But at the same time, his reputation as an important *Soviet* (and not specifically Yiddish) author was sealed, as he became one of the most translated contemporary Yiddish writers.28 Not unlike Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Warsaw-born, New York–based Yiddish writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature as an American writer via English translations of his Yiddish works, in the 1930s several volumes of Markish's work came out in Russian, including translations of his two novels: *Generations*, in Russian *Iz veka v vek* (1930); and *Eyns af eyns* (One on one), in Russian *Vozvraschenie Neitana Bekkera* (1934).29 With the 1934 establishment of the Soviet Writers' Union that served as the umbrella organization for all professional writers in the Soviet Union, Markish quickly rose to a position of political power.

The 1930s were a challenging time for a writer with such a radical literary reputation and such a foreign biography as Markish. He was appalled to see his friends disappearing in the Gulag. After the arrest, in May 1934, of Osip Mandelshtam, poet Anna Akhmatova wrote: "Among the men, only one visited [Osip's wife] Nadya—Peretz Markish. On that particular day, though, many women visited her."[30] The emphasis is clearly that Markish was the only man brave enough to visit Mandelshtam's grieving wife. Yet in January 1935, as Melech Ravitch recalls, Markish demonstrated a knee-jerk Soviet suspiciousness when Ravitch, Markish's old Warsaw friend, unexpectedly arrived at his doorstep in Moscow with an Intourist chaperone in tow. Upon opening the door, the first words Markish uttered, even before greeting his old friend, were to the chaperone: "Are his papers in order?"[31] At this moment, in the disappointed eyes of Ravitch, the brave, brash writer of the Revolution showed himself to be a poet ingrained in the bureaucracy of the Soviet state, a status made official in 1939, when he was awarded the Order of Lenin, one of the highest state honors.

Markish put his poetic voice in service to the state shortly after Germany broke its nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union and invaded on June 22, 1941. Two months later, on August 21, 1941, together with a group of Soviet Jewish cultural and political leaders, Markish appealed to "the Jews of the world," in particular to their "fellow Jews [*brider yidn*]" in the United States, to pressure their government to enter the war against German fascism. Among the three speakers recorded for the short propaganda film that circulated widely, Markish was the sole Yiddish voice. He reminds his audience that "only *here* in the Soviet Union, after years of persecution, have Jews found a haven and a homeland that healed the wounds of centuries of massacres like a devoted mother."[32] The 1941 speech is not simply a desperate wartime appeal, but rather a reminder of a not-terribly-distant past, only two decades earlier, when choosing to write in Yiddish was to be a participant, if not a leader, in the enterprise of Soviet Jewish nation-building. But by 1941, Markish's Yiddish speech did not resound with the same challenge to existing power structures or his obsession with being in the moment of revolution as his work of the late teens and early 1920s did. If modernity is about being on the cutting edge, by the time Markish was using Yiddish as part of the Soviet war project and in the service of the state, he was no longer modern.

During the Great Patriotic War, after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Markish wielded considerable cultural and literary authority. From 1939 to 1943 he served as the chair of the Yiddish section of the Soviet Writers' Union, and in 1942 he finally became an official member of the Communist Party, a step that in 1942 could only be seen as an expected act of patriotic duty. Throughout the war, he was a member of the board of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC). Despite his many administrative roles, he wrote prolifically in this period. His early wartime work was published in small pamphlets by the Emes (Truth) publishing house and, on occasion, the major Russian press. After the JAFC's newspaper *Eynikayt* (Unity) began appearing in June 1942, Markish was one of its regular contributors. He wrote frequently about Soviet Jews and their destruction. His work repeatedly alludes to the Jewish literary canon, but not to lamentational literature like many other Yiddish writers responding to the Holocaust. Instead, like his Zionist contemporaries, Markish searched for Jewish heroes, martyrs, and vengeance-seekers to craft a counterhistory to traditional Jewish responses to catastrophe. Markish's

wartime "Dem yidishn shlakhtman" (To the Jewish warrior) emphasizes Jewish heroism and battle-readiness, rather than Jewish suffering.[33] It is also the poem in which he introduces the image of the biblical avengers, Shimon and Levi, who wipe out an entire town in response to the rape of their sister Dinah. Rather than reading these two brothers ambivalently, as Jewish tradition did, Markish suggests that they are models of Jewish behavior. As he writes near the end of the short essay: "The crying earth of the city of Odessa, and the cry from the bloodied Lukianov cemetery [in Kiev], for the communities ritually slaughtered [*geshokhtene*]. . . . You, Jewish soldier, will not part from your gun, just as your grandfathers refused to part with their holy book. . . . A city for every slaughtered child! A city for every raped sister. Now go, Jewish Red Army soldier, take revenge, and may the pain never be depleted from your heart until Berlin lies in ruins like Shechem, until the blood of your graves is repaid."

If in his early work Markish rejected the traditional Jewish polysystem and exploded the whole idea of lamentation and martyrology, during the war he went further by excavating a secular Jewish literary history in the Bible. Such a literature responds to violence not by reveling in its horror but by turning it into a call for revenge. In the case of Markish's work from *Inmitn veg* to *Dem yidishn shlakhtman*, he mines tradition in order to subvert it. In his earlier poetry, he does this by showing that violence does not bring on messianic redemption. His later work excavates a Jewish textual history of revenge to suggest that the possibility for redemption is only in human hands. The characters that the traditional Jewish literature rejected, in this case Shimon and Levi, are made heroes in Markish's work. He continued to believe in the union of pen and sword: the power of the written word to inspire and of the sword to ensure a Jewish future against perennial enemies. Markish emphasized that this particular chapter in history marked an end to Jewish passivity. As he wrote to the writer Joseph Opatoshu in 1945, "Our literature will now have to re-evaluate the notion of *kidesh-hashem* [Jewish martyrdom], as an eternal national category, which, in fact, helped fascism annihilate our people."[34] Like the Jewish national poet-prophet Chaim Nachman Bialik, who, in 1903, lashed out against traditional Jewish (particularly male) passivity in *City of Slaughter*, Markish criticized the traditional *kidesh ha-shem* as an explanation of the massive Jewish destruction at the hands of the Nazis. Although Jewish martyrdom traditionally meant mass suicide to avoid falling into the hands of the non-Jewish enemy, Markish valorized dying in the act of armed resistance.

One of Markish's most powerful late works was his illusive (and allusive) poem "Sh. Mikhoels—a ner tomid bam orn" (Sh. Mikhoels—A memorial flame at his coffin), his literary response to the murder of Solomon Mikhoels in January 1948 in a staged car accident in Minsk. Mikhoels's death, which signaled the start of the antisemitic "Anti-Cosmopolitan" campaign, was followed by a full state funeral featuring many Soviet political luminaries. Markish was pained by the murder of Mikhoels, who for all intents and purposes was *the* symbol of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, and his public, poetic response was subversive. Kronfeld argues that Markish's poem, with its clever use of biblical references, subtly implicated the regime in Mikhoels's death. If Markish's patriotic use of Yiddish during the war put his status as a modern in jeopardy, this final ode to a departed friend was a return to countering the status quo and challenging authority.

Markish's condemnation of the murder of Mikhoels exposed Markish to accusations of being a Jewish nationalist. Perhaps, this was well earned since he had rallied the Jewish nation, which at the time was in the interest of the Soviet Union. But with the end of the war, in the eyes of Stalin and his inner circle, the expression of Jewish nationalism, especially after the founding of the state of Israel, was no longer acceptable. Yiddish cultural institutions were closed down, and in late 1948 and 1949 many Yiddish cultural activists and members of the JAFC were arrested. On January 27, 1949, Markish himself was arrested. In 1952, he and several other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were convicted of anti-Soviet activity, espionage, and bourgeois nationalism. In his final statement before the court, Markish pleaded for his life and summed up his work: "The entirety of my life and literary work and activity have been a battle against backwardness in literature. All of my books were brimming with this struggle."[35] His words, tragic and true, rang hollow, and ultimately futile in the courtroom where his perverted staged trial was held. On August 12, 1952, Markish was executed by the regime he served so loyally.

Rehabilitated after Stalin's death, his poems were again published in 1957, not in the original Yiddish but in Russian translation. But by the 1960s, as Estraikh has argued, the Great Patriotic War became the great unifying symbol of the Russian motherland; therefore, censors would only allow Markish's work to appear in the original Yiddish to keep the specifically Jewish story of the war limited to a Yiddish-reading audience. His novel of wartime Jewish heroism during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, *Trit fun Doyres* (Footsteps of the generations), which he wrote immediately after the war, was published posthumously in 1966 in the Soviet Union. Unlike mainstream American audiences, who were eagerly purchasing copies of Leon Uris's popularizing historical novels such as *Exodus* (1958) and *Mila 18* (1961), the Soviet Russian-reading public could read about the ghetto uprising only in Yiddish or in the wildly popular, but underground, *samizdat* version of *Exodus* circulating in the late 1960s. According to the state, the Soviet reading public wasn't ready for a 500-page novel about the uprising and its Jewish protagonists.

Epilogue

There is a presumption in Jewish historiography that, by definition, a believing communist can't be a Jewish modernist. The anticommunist strain in the criticism of Markish developed early in his own career and persists to this day. Perhaps this is a result of lingering Cold War attitudes to the Soviet Union and anything connected with it. Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union was both a profound modern social and political experiment and home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the world. This puts Markish at the center of Jewish modernity. His presentist approach to literature is part of what makes him modern, and in many ways, he was ultimately a Russian and then a Soviet poet of the modern in Yiddish. Anticommunist critics often assert that Markish's modernness comes to an end when he moves back to the Soviet Union in 1926. Yet, if Jewish modernity is defined by being cosmopolitan, then Markish ceases to be modern, not in moving back to the Soviet Union, but when he stops moving altogether and strikes permanent roots in Moscow. If Jewish modernity is based on a break with dogma, then Markish begins

to lose his status as modern when he becomes a part of the state literary apparatus. But if being a modern Jewish writer demands an aesthetic revolution against literary tradition, then despite his rootedness and his deference to the state, Markish remains the quintessential modern Jewish writer.

Notes

1. Melech Ravitch, "A kurtse geshikhte fun a dinamisher grupe fun dray yidishe poetn in varshe in 1921–1925," in *Warszawska awangarda: Antologia*, ed. Karolina Szymaniak (Gdańsk, 2005), 266–301 (269, 276, 278).

2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), 86.

3. On the creation of a modern Russian Jewish community, see Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 2002). See also Eugene Avrutin, *Jews and the Russian State: Identification Politics in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, 2010).

4. Melech Ravitch, "Di geshalt fun Peretz Markish," in *Eseyen*, eds. Melech Ravitch and Yossl Birstein (Jerusalem, 1992), 63.

5. See, e.g., Shmuel Niger, *Di yidishe literature un di lezerin* (Vilna, 1919); or his *Di tsveyshprakhikeyt fun undzer literatur* (Detroit, 1941); and Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley, 1997).

6. Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (Boston, 1998)

7. Devra Kay, *Seyder tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women* (Philadelphia, 2004).

8. Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Studies," special issue of *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (1990).

9. Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley, 1993).

10. Seidman, *Marriage Made in Heaven*.

11. Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution*.

12. Peretz Markish, *Inmitn veg* (Moscow, 1919).

13. Shmuel Niger, "Perets Markish: algemeyne kharakteristik" (1922), reprinted in Shmuel Niger, *Yidishe shrayber in sovet-rusland* (New York, 1958), 232. Emphasis in original.

14. The 13 million figure also appears in other avant-garde works, such as Erwin Piscator's *Das politisches Theater*.

15. David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (New York, 2004).

16. See Kenneth Moss, *Jewish Culture and the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, 2009).

17. Peretz Markish, *Di kupe* (Warsaw, 1921). The Kultur Lige publishing house and cultural network was established in Kiev in 1918, but moved much of its operation to Warsaw with the Bolshevik takeover of Ukraine in the fraught period 1920–1921. See Shneer, *Yiddish*; and Moss, *Jewish Culture*.

18. "Nit Markish un nit zayne leyner gloybn mer nit in got—deriber iz der got . . . geven der iker an instsenirung." I. M. Nusinov, "Fun natsionalen troyer tsu sotsialnmut," *Di Royte velt* 5, no. 8 (August 3, 1929): 95.

19. For address lists of the Yiddish writers, see Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv rossiiskoi federatsii, f. 2306, op. 22, d. 73, l.1; and RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 29, l.49.

20. Karolina Symaniak, "The Language of Dispersion and Confusion: Peretz Markish's Manifestos from the *Khalyastre* Period," in *Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895–1952)*, eds. Joseph Sherman, Gennady Estraikh, Jordan Finkin, and David Shneer (Oxford, 2011), 66–87.

21. Melech Ravitch, *Dos mayse-bukh fun mayn lebn* (Buenos Aires, 1962), 374.

22. Vladimir Mayakovsky, quoted in Peter France, *Poets of Modern Russia* (New York, 1982), 172.

23. On the history of use of the concepts of "modernity" and "modernism," so complicated in literary terminology particularly in the Central European context, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Modern, Modernität, Moderne," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart, 1978), vol. 4; or the English translation in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, trans. Glen Burns (Minneapolis, 1992), 79. An exemplary study on the complexity of the concept of "modernism" can be found in Astraður Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, 1990).

24. A similar attempt to create Yiddish verse in tightly constructed poetic forms was also undertaken by the American Yiddish poet A. Leyeles (the pseudonym of Aaron Glanz, born in Włocławek in 1889). Leyeles, who began publishing in the American anarchist organ *Fraye arbeter shtime* (Free worker's voice), published in New York a volume of poetry in 1926, *Rondos un andere lider* (Rondeaux and other poems).

25. As per the editorial notes in the anthology *A shpigl oyf a shteyn*, Benjamin Harshav, Chone Shmeruk, Abraham Sutskever, and Mendel Piekarz, eds., (Tel Aviv, 1964). Where possible, we have tried to use the original publication of the poems; however, we were unable to procure an original copy of *Shveln*.

26. English translation adapted from Jordan Finkin's original in his "Markish, Trakl, and the Temporaesthetic," *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 4 (November 2008): 795.

27. This description of the Markish celebration comes from a letter from Shlomo Niepomniashchy to Daniel Charny, February 7, 1927. YIVO, RG 209, File 57.

28. Gennady Estraikh, "Anti-Nazi Rebellion in Peretz Markish's Drama and Prose," in Sherman et al., *Captive of the Dawn*, 172–85.

29. On Markish's early novels, see Harriet Murav, "Perets Markish in the 1930s: Socialist Construction and the Return of the *Luftmensch*," in Sherman et al., *Captive of the Dawn*, 114–26.

30. Anna Akhmatova, "Listki iz dnevnika: Vospominaniia ob O.E. Mandel'shtame" as found on http://ahmatova.ouc.ru/vospominanija-o-mandelshtame.html.

31. Melech Ravitch, *Mayn Leksikon* (Montreal, 1945), 1:126.

32. "Bratiia evrei vsego mira," or "An Appeal to the Jews of the World" (USSR, 1941), 6 min., black and white. Russian, Yiddish, and English with English subtitles. Available from the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.

33. Peretz Markish, "Dem yidishn shlakhtman," *Eynikayt*, August 31, 1943, 7.

34. Markish as quoted in Estraikh, "Anti-Nazi Rebellion."

35. Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven, 2005), xx.