

INTRODUCTION

In July 2008, a group of Toronto children and teenagers at Camp Naivelt, on the outskirts of Brampton, Ontario spent a week re-enacting the lives of children who in 1920 were part of the Twelfth Jewish Children's Work Commune in Vitebsk.¹ The commune was one of the efforts of the new Soviet regime to deal with the "demographic earthquake" they faced in the aftermath of the First World War, the civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the resulting epidemics and famine. An estimated seven million children roamed the streets of Russia's towns and villages. The government evacuated as many children as they could, placing about five hundred thousand in abandoned and confiscated estates. The communes emphasized hard work, responsibility, and children's initiative, reflecting the social philosophy of a collective upbringing.

Adopting the personas and the biographies of these children, the Naivelt participants approximated as closely as they could the conditions in the commune and the children's lives.² Like the original communards, they had the advantage of resource people to assist with art, music, and dance, but what they created was based on their own initiatives. For a week, they lived with no running water, no electric lights, no washing machines, no beds, and a limited amount of food. They dressed in one set of clothes, cooked, cleaned, slept in one room, ran meetings, learned Yiddish songs and dances, created art, and, in the spirit of the journals written almost ninety years ago, made their own hand-bound journal, writing stories about their experiences. Here is what one young woman, Shifra Cooper, then sixteen, wrote about the experience:

Through the week, we achieved many things: we learned to bake bread, to mend benches, read about Yiddish writers, sing folk songs and debate period political ideas.... One of our huge accomplishments was the publishing of our



Manya (Margolia Kantorovitch) in the fourth Jewish Children's Commune, Vitebsk, USSR, 1920. Manya is in the centre of the top row, wearing a kerchief. The teacher, Doroshkin, is in the first row, third from the left.

York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, Sam and Manya Lipshitz fonds, FO444.

journal, *Kommunar*, organized by the Editorial Board. Just like the journals of the real Twelfth Commune, our journal was comprised of the daily writings of all the children, including such topics as “Dancing and Singing,” “The River” and “How Children Can Change the Future,” as well as poetry and art... I find myself homesick for a place to which I never “really” went, a place that we re-created that hasn’t existed for almost 100 years.... One great teaching of the week is the importance of dreams. From a building with hay all over the floor to a finished flower embroidered on a pocket, it was a week full of realizing our hopes—both in character and out—through our work together. That is a lesson that is relevant even 88 years later, as it teaches us to believe in our own strength, and in the power of deep friendships, however unusually formed.

The young people at Naivelt learned about the Vitebsk commune from a talk I gave at one of our Sunday bagel brunches at Camp Naivelt, a cottage community with a history that dates back to 1925. Sitting in lawn chairs in front of one of the modest cottages under the trees, I tried to convey the idealism of the founders of our left Jewish community through describing the memoir written by Manya Lipshitz, who had been a member of the Vitebsk commune and, for many years, a teacher in our shules. I was pleased that the teenagers stayed around for the lecture after the bagels, but there was something about the notion of a children’s republic that interested some of them. And one of the Naivelt

community cottagers, Ruth Howard, is the artistic director of Jumblies Theatre, a community arts organization. She was able to provide period costumes, music, art, and dance teachers as resources to assist these young people in making the commune happen.³

Manya's Memoir

In 1920, in the midst of the hardships and chaos of the civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution, the teen-aged Manya Kantorovitch was separated from her family who were living in Bialystok. She joined the Twelfth Jewish Children's Work Commune in Vitebsk, then part of the Soviet Union.

The new regime provided the children with a broken down two-storey house. One of the children described it as dirty and cold, with cracked windows and the wind wafting in. Before they could make straw mattresses for themselves, they slept on bare wooden beds that were used as dining tables in the daytime. There were serious food shortages and high inflation. The commune was given food from a government store, but the children collected rations themselves with a cart in summer and a sleigh in winter. Their diet consisted of coarse barley three times a day, which was particularly disastrous for the very young children. When they washed the floors, the water froze. However, the young people took charge. In a short time, the commune was a model of cleanliness; the children made mattresses and clothes and planted a garden. With the help of teachers from Leningrad they organized a full schedule of activities, including nature study, culture, and art, in addition to the work of cooking, cleaning, and mending clothes. Everything was planned by the children.

By this time, Manya's brothers had made it to Canada. In a letter Manya wrote from Vitebsk to her brothers, she insisted that she was not in a *priyut* or orphanage but a commune, which had a new form of socialist education, with thirty friends from eight to fifteen years of age. Even the teachers were not to be thought of as supervisors but simply older friends. She told them: "We were



Camp Naivelt re-enactment of the Vitebsk Commune, summer 2008, Brampton, Ontario.

Jumblies Theatre photo by Michaela Otto.



Shifra Cooper reading Manya's memoir, *Blel fun a Shturmisher Tsait*, translated as *Time Remembered*. Shifra played Margolia, as Manya Lipshitz was known as a young girl. Camp Naivelt, 2008.

Source: *Jumbles Theatre* photo by Katherine Fleitas.

completely independent, responsible for our own lives, which we ourselves were shaping.” The children produced handmade journals with poems and stories describing their lives that they presented as a gift to a visiting Yiddish poet.

Some five decades later, in the 1970s, reading an article in the Yiddish magazine *Yiddishe Kultur* (Jewish Culture), Manya rediscovered the journals she had edited as a girl. This prompted her to write a memoir describing her life and her experiences in the commune. The idealism and the importance of collectivity, which the young people

in Manya's commune would have described as building socialism, is expressed differently by the young people of the twenty-first century. However, the message expressed by one of the young participants in the commune re-enactment remains a timely one: “As individuals, we may not change the world, but by creating the world we want to live in, at the commune together, we encourage others to do so as well.”⁴

The Secular Jewish Left

Naivelt, where the re-enactment took place, is connected to the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO). The UJPO is part of the Jewish left in Canada, the subject of this book. I am a member of the Toronto organization and spend a good part of my summers at my cottage in Camp Naivelt. The left Jewish community in Canada was one of a variety of movements of secular Jews, all with different understandings of how to build a better world for Jews. All the movements had strong connections to similar organizations in the United States.

I distinguish the Jewish left from other secular Jewish movements by referring to their politics as pro-Bolshevik and, until 1956, friendly to the Soviet Union. They are often described as the “communist Jewish left” which I believe is misleading. While the Jewish left was communist-led, participants explained that being part of this broader organization was quite a different experience than being a member of the Communist Party (CP). In the policy known as Democratic Centralism, CP members undertook to follow directives once party policy was

decided. UJPO members had no such constraints in the views they held or their actions. A UJPO person could hold a view quite at odds with the leadership, but one could not be ousted from the organization. While members often shared a belief that the USSR was the model of a socialist country, particularly in the late 1930s and 1940s, others came to enjoy the rich cultural and social activities the left offered. It was a “scene” that many young people wanted to be part of. Most (one former leader estimated 95 percent) of the progressive Jewish left were not communists, and a good part of their activities had nothing to do with Communist Party policies for Canada.⁵ They are also referred to as *di linke* or the left; they called themselves “progressive Jews.” When Jews from this community speak of the “old country,” they mean Eastern Europe, usually Poland or Russia.

I grew up in the sister community in New York, the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order of the International Workers Order. Born in 1941, I did not know any of my grandparents, three of whom perished in the Holocaust; one grandmother died when my father was a child. I inherited the grief over the loss of those murdered in the Second World War from my parents. I also was imbued with the hope and idealism of an earlier period, which sustained my friends and me through the threat of the Cold War. A few of our friends’ parents had lost their jobs as teachers, refusing to sign affidavits swearing they did not belong to any “subversive” organizations. In the midst of the fearmongering around the “evil” Soviet empire, my left-wing friends stuck together. We knew that the exercise in school of hiding under our desks away from the windows would not really help in the event of nuclear war. Peace, not stockpiling weapons would protect us, and we celebrated the birth of the United Nations, the international forum for resolving conflict. We sang its praises:

Everywhere the youth is singing freedom’s song
We rejoice to show the world that we are strong
We are the youth and the world proclaims our song of truth.
United Nation on the march with flags unfurled
Together fight for lasting peace, a free, new world.

Like the children in Manya’s commune, I grew up with a firm belief that my experiences and my history as a Jew were a route to an understanding of international solidarity. And like the children in Camp Naivelt, I believe in the power of collectivity. My education taught me that my Jewish identity is to be used to try to understand what it is like for an African American in Mississippi,

גראדואאנטן און לערער



פון לינגס צו רעכטס :
שולמית ריבאלאוו, אסתר רייטער, נעאמי ריבאלאוו, מעניקע (לערער).

Kings Highway Shule Graduation, Brooklyn, New York, 1953. From left to right: Shulamis Ribolow, Ester Reiter, Naomi Ribolow, Menke Katz (Teacher).

Brooklyn Committee for Jewish Education, Almanac of the Jewish Children's Schools.
Personal collection of the author.

a child in Vietnam, a First Nations survivor of the residential school system, a Palestinian separated from family, or a refugee from any number of countries in the world today. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each tragedy is specific and unique, but the lesson I learned from those years linked a strong commitment to my history with respect for all those who struggle for social justice. I do not react with dispassion to those who would use the Holocaust as justification for oppressing other people, and I find it upsetting when the significance of this history is diminished through the facile equation of every wrong being “just like” the Holocaust or the Warsaw Ghetto. It’s through valuing the specificity of my own history that I can connect with others.

As a child growing up in New York in the 1950s, I attended the Kings Highway *shule* (Jewish secular school) in Brooklyn and the *mittlshul* (high school) after my regular school day. I went to the elementary shule three times a week. It was part of the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO) of the International Workers Order (IWO) and called an *Ordn shule*. The IWO, organized in 1930, comprised fourteen language groups, with the Jewish section the largest. It offered benefits such as health and life insurance and medical and dental clinics.⁶ The IWO was placed on the Attorney General’s list of subversive organizations in 1947. In 1953, the IWO lost its insurance charter. Although it was financially healthy, the New York State insurance examiner found its activities “unpatriotic” and a “moral hazard” and the IWO was forced to disband. My shule continued, reconstituted as part of the Jewish Cultural Clubs and Societies. My graduating class from the *elementar shule* (Jewish elementary school) consisted of a class of three—the Ribolow twins and me. The rest of the children had been withdrawn, their parents afraid of the repercussions of an association with a leftist school. The poet Menke Katz was our teacher. Meyer Eisenberg, who I later learned was part of the ARTEF collective of radical Yiddish proletarian

artists, directed the Yiddish plays we performed for parents and friends. The year I graduated, 1953, was also the year Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were put to death for conspiracy to steal the secret of the atom bomb. My Aunt Anna was a communist and an active member of the Emma Lazarus clubs of the IWO; she regularly went to demonstrations, even as an old lady with sore feet. She was unable to get my mother to join her, with one exception—all of us attended demonstrations to save the Rosenbergs.

After graduating from the elementary shule, I attended the mittlshul, which was held all day Saturday. By then, the Yiddish high schools had amalgamated because of declining enrolment. Students from Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens travelled to 14th Street in Manhattan each weekend. Our teachers were dedicated intellectuals, their commitment to Yiddish keeping them in a profession where they could earn very little. We kids, on the other hand, were unruly teenagers determined to have fun. It's a miracle that we learned anything, but we did, especially respect for the classical Yiddish writers and sweatshop poets whose songs we sang.

I spent summers in Camp Kinderland in Hopewell Junction, not far from Peekskill, New York. My first year as a camper was 1949. September 1949 was the date of the Peekskill Riots, when vigilantes attacked Paul Robeson's benefit concert for the Civil Rights Congress. He was defended by the left, many of them Jewish, including the counsellors from Camp Kinderland. I was eight, and I knew how our hero, Paul Robeson, had been targeted in a riot aided and abetted by the police. Several years later, when HUAC, the US House Un-American Activities Committee, was still going strong, the children's camp was investigated. One of the charges ostensibly proving "communist affiliation" against Edith Segal, the dance teacher at Camp Kinderland, was that she wrote poems and songs in honour of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.⁷ But we benefited from the Cold War in a perverse way. We were privileged to have Pete Seeger, Earl Robinson, Harry Belafonte, and some of the eminent blacklisted stars of the theatre such as Morris Carnovsky and Hershl Bernardi perform at our camp



Camp Kinderland, 4th group, Hopewell Junction, New York, 1949. Ester Reiter is third from the left in the second row. The banner reads, "Cleanliness flag."

Photo by Itzkowitz. Personal collection of the author.

and at the small venues related to the shules where they were able to find work. It seems that for Senator McCarthy and the HUAC, Jews and communists were virtually identical.⁸

As a New Yorker by birth, the names of many of the people I came across in my research on the Jewish left in Canada were surprisingly familiar. They were known by their last names: Davidovich, Yakhnes, Korn, Kamenetsky, Eisenberg. Many of them had been my teachers in the shules of New York. Itche Goldberg, Rabbi Bick (the Marxist Rabbi), and Aaron Bergman—all teachers based in New York—were frequent visitors and lecturers in the Canadian communities of the left. I learned that the philosophy and the teaching materials in the Canadian schools were identical to what I knew. As a New Yorker, I was less familiar with Jewish life in Canada than Canadians were with the New York Jewish community. I moved to Winnipeg, Canada in 1968 as a young mother with two sons and became active in *Voice of Women* and *Canadian Dimension* magazine. It was only after I moved to Toronto in 1978 that I became involved in the Jewish left here in Canada.

I believe that the left Jewish community has often been misrepresented in the literature on the Canadian Jewish experience. In my view, the Yiddish left is often approached anachronistically, allowing the experience of the later years—when those holding pro-Soviet sentiments were viewed as “dupes” and mindless followers of “Moscow”—to cloud an understanding of the early years. What Paul Buhle has termed a “grizzled anti communism”⁹ dominated scholarship on the communist-led left for many years. This approach obscures a much more varied history.

Fortunately, this is changing, at least in Canadian historical scholarship. Women historians such as Mercedes Steedman, Ruth Frager, Andrée Lévesque, Joan Sangster, and Julie Guard have pioneered new paths in understanding the contributions of left Jewish women. Ian McKay, in a paper presented to a Canadian Jewish Studies seminar in honour of Gerald Tulchinsky, maintained that even in the 1930s, when narrow dogmatism was at its height, Communist Party members were hardly “soldiers of the international.” The reality, he argues, was far more dynamic, complicated, and interesting.¹⁰ Gerald Tulchinsky’s biography of Joe Salsberg, a labour activist and member of the Ontario Legislature from 1943 to 1955 who remained in the leadership of the Communist Party throughout his career from 1926 to the late 1950s, presents a view of a warm-hearted, intelligent man responsive to the needs of the Jewish community with an egalitarian vision that encompassed all people.¹¹

Thanks to access to the Communist International archives available from Library and Archives Canada, scholars are discovering that some of the Canadian Communist Party's most significant achievements were realized in spite of, not because of, Moscow's directives through the Comintern. The Comintern, originally a collective of all Communist parties worldwide, became under Stalin an instrument of Soviet politics.¹² In the mid-1920s, the Comintern, enacting a policy known as Bolshevization, attempted to minimize the role and activities of the ethnic organizations. When the party attempted to impose this reorganization it lost almost half its membership. The ethnic organizations not just survived but flourished, quite in opposition to Moscow's plans. While some historians of Canadian communism are exploring the relationship between the Canadian party and the Comintern, the international organization, the concerns of this book are different. The focus is on the varied political and cultural activities of those who were part of the secular Jewish left. It is worth keeping in mind that the violent purges that characterized Stalin's policies never crossed the ocean. No CP member or sympathizer was murdered because of holding the "wrong" views. The left admired CP people because they saw them as "American radicals committed to a program of social and political change that would eventually produce what they hoped would be a better society." Neither CP members nor sympathizers viewed party people as "soldiers in Stalin's Army."¹³

The bifurcated view of the world as divided between the "free" world and the "evil" Soviet empire led many on the left to accept what needed to be challenged. It was a terrible disillusionment to learn that the Soviet Union did not embody the kind of society communist Jews were working to create in North America. We still don't really know why some of the prominent communist Jewish leaders who had been in the Soviet Union numerous times stayed silent so long.

However, the ending obscures the hope that inspired leftist Jews in the early 1920s. What gets lost is how they were acting subjects, why they became radicals, and the many ways they worked to build a *shener un beserer velt* (more beautiful, better world) in Canada, in accordance with deeply felt ideals. This was reflected in the organizations they formed, the activities they participated in, and the valuable contributions they made to North American society in pursuit of this vision. I do not see the question of "are you now or ever were a communist" as central to this story. This book is about left-wing Jews and how their Jewish identity led to their political and cultural activism.

The movement that secular socialist Canadian Jews created consisted of different, sometimes fluid aspects, depending on the time and place. At times,

there were left groups throughout the country—in Hamilton, Windsor, Calgary, Edmonton, with the strongest ones in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Montreal left organization was called the Canadian Worker's Circle, in Yiddish the Kanader Arbeter Ring. In Toronto, it was the Labour League and in Winnipeg, the Freiheit Temple or Liberty Temple Association. The Jewish Workers' cultural centres were affiliated with these mass organizations as well as with the IKOR (Yiddish Kolonizatsiye in Rusland) supporting colonization in Russia, and the YKUF, the Yiddish Kultur Farband or Yiddish Cultural League. The main left organizations also supported groups such as choirs, sports leagues, mandolin orchestras, Jewish schools, and summer camps, which were sometimes part of the organization, and at other times, closely affiliated. While many participants in these activities were members of the mass organizations, not all were. In 1945, the left organizations in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg joined to form the United Jewish People's Order.

This community was at its strongest from the 1920s to the 1950s. I explore several themes: why people joined the socialist Jewish left; women's participation in this community; and the importance of Yiddish in their lives. This involves exploring various facets of the community: the organization of the Yiddish shules for children; the choirs, originally the Freiheit Gezang Fareyn (Freedom Singing League); the summer camps; the dance troupes; drama groups; sports leagues; and union activism. I explore some of the reasons for the community's decline in the late 1950s, including the Cold War and the expulsion of all "left-leaning organizations" from the United Jewish People's Order, the Twentieth Party Congress of the USSR and its revelations of Soviet anti-Semitism, and the emergence of a new Canadian-born generation removed from the struggles of their parents.

Jewish ethnic identity in this community was not based on religion. Support for inter-ethnic and interracial alliances and anti-racist politics were unique for the period, indications of a multicultural approach before such a policy was articulated. The left Jewish community's notion of ethnicity encompassed a universal vision of social justice and human mutuality—what we all as human beings share in common. The Jewish left emphasized translocal solidarities that celebrated difference as a path to what Gilroy calls a universal, responsible humanism.¹⁴ The issues of striking Irish silkworkers in Paterson, New Jersey, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the violence of lynching, and the effects of colonization in Africa were all deeply felt in this community. For them, class was the unifying factor for solidarity.

This was a community of Jewish internationalists, a seeming contradiction in terms. Indeed, the left Jewish community's criticisms of Israeli government policies and sympathy for the plight of Palestinians have been criticized as traitorous sentiments of "self-hating Jews." But the notion of a fixed, immutable identity, whether it is racial, ethnic, or national identity, which sets one group apart from others becomes not an affirmation of individual agency but rather a fixed destiny in a closed culture.¹⁵ It is also historically inaccurate. Over time, a Jewish identity with Yiddish as the mother tongue that was once a given for members of this community has changed. The Jewish identity is no longer in the air that they breathe, and so it has to be consciously inculcated. Religious observances such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which the founders either defied or ignored, are now celebrated in a non-religious fashion. The Jewish schools prepare young people for a coming of age ritual, the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah, which had been rejected by an earlier generation. These rituals are secularized, to be sure, but the new generation, many of whom come from mixed Jewish and non-Jewish families, need to be taught a Jewish identity.

While the effects of the Cold War were felt most directly in the United States, members of the pro-Bolshevik left in Canada also suffered during the Cold War. One of the significant events in its onset in Canada was the notorious Padlock Law in Quebec, which declared that any house or institution containing what the authorities considered "subversive material" could be closed without charges, evidence, or even a clear definition of what constituted subversive material. The Montreal Winchevsky Centre was padlocked in 1951, and in 1952 the community was barred from participation in the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC). The United Jewish People's Order and related left organizations were expelled from the CJC for forty-four years, until 1996. I maintain that with the weakening of the voice of this community, we have lost an important alternative vision of an ethnic identity, which, while respecting difference, was not absolutist.

My connection with the left community is not only from my early life in the United States but also through my activities in Canada. As a member of the UJPO, I have access to all of its materials but am not confined to expressing any particular viewpoint. Using interviews and autobiographical accounts wherever possible, I aim to convey how commitment to this community and its activism were people's heartfelt responses to the conditions around them and to convey some sense of the lives that lie below the surface of "politics."

When I began this project, a few of the original founders of the secular Jewish left organizations who came to Canada from Eastern Europe in the early

years of the twentieth century were still alive. I interviewed some of them and drew on oral histories available from archival sources. This was supplemented with dozens of individual interviews with members born in the 1920s and after (including those who left the UJPO in the late 1950s and those who remained); a review of the documentation, including the movement's weekly newspaper, *Der Kampf* (The Struggle); and many other primary and secondary materials primarily found in the Winchevsky Centre in Toronto, the Archives of Ontario, and the Lipshitz archives at York University. Much of the material is in Yiddish and has not been previously researched or translated. Political life, cultural life, and women's activism were all interconnected. Because the chapters are organized thematically, there is some overlap in chronology, as well as participants. The "People" and "The Communist Party and the Jewish Left" appendices offer an outline of some of the main people and events profiled in the book.

PART I

A REVOLUTIONARY DIASPORA

Jewish Immigrants and
What They Brought to Canada

1 ORIGINS:

The Making of Jewish Socialists

In the late nineteenth century, in the midst of terrible poverty and virulent anti-Semitism, the old way of life for Jews in Eastern Europe was crumbling, along with the hegemony of the rabbis and the well to do. Jewish families were driven from their homes in Russia, Poland, and Romania by anti-Semitic pogroms and poverty. As the *shtetlekh* (small towns or villages) disintegrated, many people, driven by economic need, left for larger cities in search of jobs and freedom from restrictive village life. The developing Jewish working class faced both anti-Semitism and class exploitation.

Yiddish culture and its progressive politics were developing in the midst of political upheavals in Eastern Europe and Russia. In Russia, the unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Tsar in the 1905 revolution and its aftermath led to repression and terrible pogroms targeting Jews. On “Bloody Sunday,” January 9, 1905, crowds of workers from St. Petersburg gathered to present a petition of their grievances to the Tsar and were fired on by troops guarding his winter palace; over fifteen hundred people were killed. This massacre unleashed a wave of anti-tsarist strikes, demonstrations, and social unrest in Russia. A constituent assembly, the Duma, was set up, but both the Bolsheviks and the Jewish workers’ movement, the Bund, rejected the moderate reforms proposed as too limited and boycotted the elections. The reaction to the worker unrest was fierce as the right-wing opposition reassembled and targeted Jews. By the end of October 1905, the Black Hundreds—reactionary, anti-revolutionary, and anti-Semitic—instigated a ferocious wave of pogroms, with murderous mobs attacking Jews inside the Pale, where most Jews were forced to live, along with intellectuals and students. The pogroms in Kishinev (1903), Kiev (1905), and Bialystok (1906) drove thousands from their homes to seek a safer life in North



Chava Rosenfarb (1923–2011) was born in Lodz, Poland and came to Canada in 1950. She published in Yiddish *Der Boym fun Lebn* (The Tree of Life), a three-volume epic of historical fiction chronicling the destruction of the Jewish community of Lodz during the Second World War. It was one of the few novels written by an actual survivor of the Holocaust. She later wrote two novels, *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love*, describing life in shtetlekh before the Holocaust.

Photo courtesy of the Montreal Jewish Public Library Archives JPL Photograph Collection (1235), pr000622.

America. As the revolutionary momentum collapsed, there was widespread political disillusionment and economic depression.¹

Conditions worsened during the 1914–18 war. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the civil war that followed produced political and economic chaos, and millions left for the United States and Canada. Many of those who arrived in the new world were people who had been radicalized in the dying days of the old tsarist empire. They brought their passion for learning and their politics with them. They were the founders of the secular Jewish left, connecting the emergence of a Jewish working class in Eastern Europe with the development of a Jewish workers' movement in Canada.

The Old Country

For several years, from 2005 to 2008, the seven or eight members of the Velvl Katz Leyen Krayz (Willie Katz Reading Circle), most of them in their nineties, met weekly in Toronto's Winchevsky Centre to read aloud the work of Chava Rosenfarb, a Yiddish writer.²

Rosenfarb, born in Lodz, Poland was a survivor of the ghetto and the camps who later migrated with her husband, Henry Morgenthaler, to Montreal. Her books describe a world that was disappeared by the Nazis, bringing to life the Eastern European milieu in which the secular movements began. For the older members, the readings evoked memories of Eastern Europe, where they were born. For the *higer geboyrene* (those born in North America) such as myself, the older members' comments and discussion provided an invaluable opportunity to learn about their world—and the milieu in which the secular movements developed—firsthand.

Chava Rosenfarb's books, *Bociany I* and *Bociany II*, about a fictitious village just outside Lodz, and the three-volume *Der Boym fun Lebn* (The Tree of Life) offer an unsanitized version of *Fiddler on the Roof*.³ Our reading group relished every word, and sometimes the older members interrupted the reading to comment on Rosenfarb's descriptions. The narrowness, the superstition and the cruelty of a Jewish father in *Bociany* who, out of ignorance rather than malice,

mercilessly beat his youngest daughter was not exaggerated. Our group agreed: “That’s the way it was. People didn’t know any better,” they said.

Rosenfarb describes how Jews in Poland were surrounded by an anti-Semitic Gentile world which could and did turn on them regularly. In the second volume of *Bociany*, translated into English as *Of Lodz and Love*, the miller, *Reb* (Yiddish for Mister) Faivele, has guests from the town for the Sabbath. They are the town “intelligentsia”: the barber-surgeon, called “the Doctor” and the landowner’s bookkeeper, *Pan* (Polish for Mister) Faifer, the “writer,” also referred

to as “Pumpkinhead” because of his bald head. Pan Faifer’s wife, dressed in the latest Paris fashion, considered herself a superior being. Rosenfarb says: “She was even more educated than the doctor’s wife (who read German and Russian) since she did not understand a word of Yiddish. Like the doctor’s wife, she considered Yiddish a vulgar language, a jargon, the knowledge of which was a sign of inferior education.”⁴ Rosenfarb, a staunch *Yiddishist* or lover of the Yiddish language, was poking fun at her character’s disdain for Yiddish.⁵

Pan Faifer’s wife’s view of Yiddish reflected a rather diluted version of the Enlightenment as it moved east from Western Europe. Displaying her ignorance, her “advanced thinking” consisted only of her admiration for the latest European fashions and her negative view of Yiddish culture—nothing more. Known as the *Haskalah*, the Enlightenment was a class-based movement of the Jewish bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, who looked to Western European culture and the ideals of Russian liberalism. It was decidedly paternalistic, exemplified by the slogan, “let us bring light into the dark hovels of our people, Israel.” *Maskilim* (literally the enlightened) took the path of what they called “enlightened assimilation” and felt that educated people should communicate in Hebrew and Russian. Yiddish, the language of everyday life, was seen as the inferior, servant girl’s language.⁶ It was to be left behind, eradicated.

Another powerful force emerging at that time in Eastern Europe joined the Enlightenment ideals of learning with the development of a working-class



Brenda Fishauf’s birthday party, 2008. This is our Yiddish reading group with the staff of the Winchevsky Centre, Toronto, 2008. Brenda is seated in the centre. She is about 94 in this picture.

Photo by Lisa Roy. UJPO Archives.



I. L. Peretz,
Mendele
Mokher Sforim,
and Sholem
Aleichem. The
three writers
credited with
the use of Yid-
dish in classical
literature.
UJPO Archives.

consciousness. It was called *veltlekher* (secular) *Yiddishkayt*, or a Jewish identity centred on culture rather than religious observance. The promise of a better world emerged, a young person's dream. Young people were full of hope and creativity, with a commitment to enlarging life through a shared involvement, their personal lives enormously enriched by engaging in the collective enterprise of changing a world that badly needed changing. And language became central to this project.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, three giants of Yiddish literature emerged—the authors Mendele Mokher Sforim (Mendele the Bookseller, pen name of Sholem Yankev Abramovich), I. L. Peretz (Yitzhok Leyb Peretz), and Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitch)—beginning a cultural renaissance. They provided a picture of the lives of ordinary people, challenging an ossified tradition of learning based solely in the Torah or scriptures. Their work exemplifies how one can treasure a culture that includes a religious heritage without accepting its literal beliefs. When Jews immigrated en masse to Canada in the early years of the twentieth century, they brought this *veltlekher* or secular culture with them.⁷ For these Yiddishists (people committed to the language), Yiddish was the medium both for the perpetuation of a people and social transformation.⁸ Yiddish became known not just as the everyday language of women and the uneducated, but also as the language of those committed to change.

Yiddish and Secular Jewish Culture

The Yiddish language is approximately one thousand years old and is closely related to medieval German, Hebrew, and Aramaic.⁹ It became the vernacular

of Jews in Central Europe. Yiddish is written in the ancient Hebrew alphabet known as the Ashuri alphabet, taking most of its words and grammar from medieval German. Jews living in Central and later in Eastern Europe were known as Ashkenazim. As they settled in Eastern Europe, Slavic words also entered the language. Hebrew, known as Loshn Kodesh (the holy tongue), was used for study and prayer and was understood by a small number of men. Aramaic, required for advanced inquiry in the Talmud, was studied by even fewer male scholars. The commonly spoken tongue, the language of everyday life, was Yiddish. It was the language in which one raised one's children and provided the necessities of life. As these were the responsibilities of women, the language itself became associated with women and the *proste* (or ordinary folk).¹⁰ While women were not supposed to study the holy texts, they were permitted to enjoy literature, theatre, and singing in Yiddish, as were men.¹¹ Books in Yiddish date from the sixteenth century but the cultural explosion of Yiddish as serious literature dates from the late nineteenth century.

Language was a political battlefield. Ideological commitments were expressed in how one dressed and worked, what a person read, but especially the language used. For the followers of *Haskalah*, Yiddish epitomized everything to be discarded in traditional Jewish life. In the late nineteenth century, the revival of the use of Hebrew in the vernacular was a part of the Zionist project aimed at migration to Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state in the Middle East. Yiddish, however, was associated with *do i kayt* (literally here-ness), the desire to build a socialist internationalist secular culture wherever Jews lived.¹² Its proponents celebrated how Yiddish remade its Semitic, Germanic, and Slavic sources into an exciting, joyous, powerful language.¹³

Yiddishists were attempting to navigate a space somewhere between Russian imperialism and Jewish nationalism, fusing the development of a national but stateless culture with an internationalist inclusiveness. Their leaders were what Gramsci termed “organic intellectuals,” people who came from the working class and shared the suffering of the poor and exploited.¹⁴ They were socialists and had a deep desire to make people “socially aware”; they loved the Yiddish language, the language in which people lived. These two social forces, the emergence of secular enlightenment and socialism, were connected. A generation developed that was passionate about learning and devoted to Yiddish. It was a period of rising nationalist sentiment and a difficult time for Jews.

There were physical symbols of the revolt against religious orthodoxy. Young men started to shed the long *kapotes* (coats) of their religious elders



Yeshiva boys. Yeshiva students on Nalewki Street, Warsaw, 1928.

Menakhem Kipnis, Raphael Abramovitch Collection. Courtesy of YIVO.



Chaim Ber, Brenda's friend, is on the left. Notice the short jacket, which marked him as breaking away from orthodoxy. Staszow, circa 1928.

Courtesy of Brenda Fishauf.

and go around in short jackets, a sign of a different way of thinking. Brenda Fishauf, the mainstay of our early 2000s reading circle, described how her parents disapproved of her beloved, Dov, in Staszow, Poland. The way he dressed, in a short leather jacket, was suspect; it meant he was throwing off the old ways. Young women such as Brenda yearned for an education, not the confining *kheder* (religious education) that restricted her brothers, but exposure to the treasures of European literature. Through the political movements, young people gained access to a life of the mind. Parents' approval was important, but as happened in Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye and His Daughters*, many daughters, like Brenda, followed their hearts, not their parents'.¹⁵

Thus, Yiddish culture and its progressive politics were developing in the midst of political upheavals in Eastern Europe and Russia that directed a massive exodus of Jews to North America, where they dreamed of a better life. However, they found that the promise of the new world was not as bright as they had hoped.

Settling in Canada

The Jewish exodus from Eastern Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century was extensive, and the distinctions between the United States and Canada were not very clear; Jews were going to "America." Unless there were family connections, New York was the preferred destination. Between 1880 and 1924, when the United States border closed to immigration from Eastern Europe, about two million Jews immigrated to the United States.¹⁶ Although immigration to Canada was much smaller, there was an 872 percent increase in the thirty years between 1901 and 1931. In 1901, there were 16,401 Jews in Canada; by 1931, there were 156,726 Jews in Canada, three-quarters of them in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg.