On Reading the Bundist Press

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What follows is not a systematic account of the Bund’s press from its inception until its virtual demise in September 1939, but rather a selective overview of Bundist newspapers and periodicals during the period 1919-1939, that is, from the time when the Jewish Labour Bund emerged from full or partial illegality to become an openly functioning political party, at first speaking for a relatively limited—that is, ‘class’—constituency, and by the late 1930s gaining the support of the overwhelming majority of Poland’s three and a half-million Jewish citizens. My aim is to provide a general picture of the Bund’s press, with some apposite examples drawn from various time-periods, and to consider the press as a mirror both of the Bund’s concerns and activities and of Polish-Jewish reality.

Early Sprouts

The press of the Jewish Labour Bund was as much part and parcel of its ideological program, aims and its activities as a Jewish socialist party as it was a product of the general Jewish renaissance that swept Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Nourished by preceding movements such as hasidism and the Haskala, the renaissance spawned new ideologies, movements, institutions and literary forms—e.g., political Zionism, socialism, modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature and together with this Hebraism and Yiddishism as distinctive and mutually hostile ideologies, fresh trends in religion and education.

Yiddish papers came into being and began to proliferate in the late nineteenth century. But as the historian Jacob Shatzky pointed out in an essay published in 1936, that year marked the 250th anniversary of the first Yiddish newspaper, or if you will Judeo-German newspaper, called Di kurantn (The Chimes), published in Amsterdam and printed in the Hebrew alphabet.

As Shatsky notes, there was a significant similarity between this first Yiddish paper in Holland and the Yiddish newspapers in Russia and Poland that emerged more than two centuries later. Both Di Kurantn and the modern Yiddish press aimed at satisfying the curiosity of Jews about their co-religionists, or as we might say today their co-nationals in other countries, and especially about their treatment—or rather perhaps mistreatment—at the hands of their Gentile rulers. Both Di Kurantn and the modern Yiddish press that reached its apotheosis in the first four decades of the twentieth century sought to provide information about significant developments at home and abroad, to serve the needs of the local Jewish community, of commerce and finance: it was hardly fortuitous that the first Yiddish paper came about in the Netherlands, at that time a powerful centre of Jewish commerce, handicrafts and finance. Its contemporary heirs embarked onto uncharted grounds and struck out in new directions, following the monumental changes that have taken place throughout the world and in Jewish life within the past few centuries. But the essential goals and features of the Jewish press, much as that of the non-Jewish press, remained basically the same.
Since the Bund was to become the most ardent advocate and sponsor of Yiddish, it might be assumed that it also pioneered the Yiddish press. Not so. The first Yiddish paper in Russia appeared in 1862, and was called *Kol mevasser* (The Messenger). Its founder and editor was a supremely energetic man by the name of Alexander Tsederbaum, who was also the founder of a Hebrew publication established a few years earlier, called *Hamelits* (The Advocate), both of which can be characterized broadly as middle-of-the-road publications, not tied to any particular political ideology.

The achievements of *Kol mevasser* were nothing short of monumental: it was the first to standardize Yiddish orthography, it paved the way for Yiddish newspapers in the 1870s in Rumania, Galicia, England, the United States and other countries and localities. And it was the journal where Mendele Moykher Sforim (S.J. Abramovitch) and Y.M. Lipshits made their debuts as Yiddish writers.¹

The first Yiddish daily that came out in Russia was *Der fraynd*, in 1903. Neither *Der fraynd* nor any of the other Yiddish periodicals that were published in the late nineteenth century—note that I singled out both of these papers as the first Yiddish *dailies*—were inspired by any particular love for the language or by what later came to be known as Yiddishism. Tsederbaum, in fact, a maskil who thought that Hebrew was the only ‘pure’ Jewish language, went on record a few years before launching *Kol mevasser* by labeling Yiddish as ‘nothing but corrupt German’—an idée fixe among adherents of the *Haskalah*, admirers of Hebrew and assimilationists of various hues and descriptions. Tsederbaum decided to launch a Yiddish journal because *that’s where his audience* was. Indeed, most of his potential readers knew Yiddish better than Russian, and few actually knew Hebrew well enough to read journalism or belles-lettres in that language. This was what caused Jewish writers, too, to turn to Yiddish and thus lay the foundation of modern Yiddish literature—i.e., Mendele, Sholem Aleikhem, and Peretz. (They began writing either in Hebrew or in Russian or, in Peretz’s case, in Polish).

Respect for, or endowing Yiddish with ideological significance, would come later. Tsederbaum went as far as envisioning Yiddish—or zhargon, as it was often referred to in those days—as the national language of Jews in Palestine.² Even Theodor Herzl, who knew not a word of Yiddish and furthermore held Yiddish in disdain, once toyed with the idea that Yiddish might become the official language of the Jewish State. The aforementioned *Der fraynd* was in fact a outspoken Zionist paper whose publishers regarded Yiddish as simply the best instrument for propagating their views—and earning some profit into the bargain—rather than something to be valued for its own sake. Later on a number of Labour Zionist groups began to champion Yiddish not merely for

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¹ For this and some other data mentioned in the succeeding three paragraphs see Emanuel Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish culture* (New York, 1987), chapter one.

² The term ‘zhargon,’ though it acquired a negative connotation, was at first purely descriptive—though also used as an invective. The first Yiddish groups in Russia at the end of the 19th century, for instance, were called ‘zhargonishe komitetn.’
practical reasons as an inseparable part of modern Jewish culture. In this respect these
groups came close to the position espoused by the Bund. Basically, however, all Zionists
agreed that Hebrew rather than Yiddish is the national language of the Jews and should
be so recognized in the future Jewish state (more of it below).

Into the Fray

Necessity as the mother of invention is also the key to the Bund’s early attitude towards
Yiddish. Though the Bund’s first Yiddish-language publications began to appear at the
end of the 1890’s, and although the Bund’s program of national autonomy, of which
Yiddish was to become an essential component, was already adumbrated at the turn of
the last century, it was not until after the language was enshrined in its ideological
program that the Bund began to view Yiddish as more than a convenient vehicle for
disseminating socialist propaganda. Even for a time after the Bund formally acclaimed
Yiddish as a major ingredient of Jewish national culture and demanded for it rights—
such as schools in Yiddish and the use of Yiddish in the courts (a concept borrowed from
the first theoreticians of national autonomy, Austrian socialists who lived in a country
where many nationalities maintained institutions in their own languages)—it was still
committed to the notion of ‘neutralism,’ first elaborated by Vladimir Medem, one of the
Bund’s principal theoreticians. The Bund, it held, while fighting for the rights of
Yiddish, must remain indifferent as to what role—if any—it would play in the future
development of national culture. Within a few years, the Bund in effect dropped the idea
of ‘neutralism,’ and embraced Yiddish with the passion of a neophyte, to the point of
terminating it the one and only national language of the Jews and denying to Hebrew any
value except as the language of Jewish religious lore.3

The same year that the Bund was born, in 1897, it founded the journal Di arbeter
shtime, which lasted until 1905, subsequently to be replaced by other publications. In
addition, the Bund also established a Foreign Committee as its official representative
abroad, with its own organ, Der yidisher arbeter. Both papers were printed in thousands
of copies—not a mean achievement, especially in the case of Der yidisher arbeter, which
was printed outside Russia (most of the time in Geneva), and had to be transported by
underground channels for distribution throughout Russia. The Bund also issued local
newspapers and periodicals in Vilna, Warsaw, Bialystok, Lodz, Panevezys, and other
towns, as well as brochures (73 between 1897 and 1904 alone), leaflets, proclamations,
and the like.4

The Bund’s espousal of Yiddish, though manifesting itself most dramatically in
its publishing activities, was of course expressed in other areas as well, such as education,
the use of the language in public and party meetings (since 1907, for instance, all Bund’s
congresses were conducted exclusively in Yiddish) and in the championship of Yiddish

3 See my essay ‘Anniversaries in Conflict: the Centenary of the Jewish Socialist Labor

4 On the conference, see Goldsmith, op.cit., 183-223
versus Hebrew in the party’s conflict with Zionism. For the Bund, it became axiomatic that Yiddish was the only national language of the Jews, a position that was vigorously defended by Esther Frumkin, the Bund’s foremost representative at the first Yiddish language conference held in Czernowitz, Bukovina (now Ukraine) in 1908, and which remained Holy Writ for the next three decades.

It could be argued that this view was hopelessly parochial, inasmuch as it left out the speakers of Hebrew and Ladino, not to mention the millions of Jews who spoke the languages of the countries where they resided. It must be remembered, however, that the Bund’s one and overwhelming concern were the Jews of Russia and Poland, more than 90 percent of whom, according to the census of 1897, claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue. In the heated polemics on this subject that took place in the early 1900s, the proponents of Yiddish frequently cited the figure of eight million speakers of Yiddish. Inflated or not as this figure may be, my main point is that for the Bund Yiddish was not a matter of scholarly disputations, but part and parcel of the political struggle to liberate Russia’s and Poland’s horepashne masn— toiling masses—from political and economic oppression, to imbue them with a sense of worth and dignity, and with a pride in their own language and culture.⁵

**On New Territory**

Now let me proceed directly to the 20-year period of Polish independence. Starting with the first Yiddish paper, published in both Yiddish and Polish, *Der beobakhter an der vaysl—Dosstrzegaz nadwislanski—* in 1827, that is, when Poland was still part of the Tsarist empire, the Yiddish press in Poland grew by leaps and bounds, especially after 1918. According to one source, by 1930 a total of 150 Yiddish newspapers and periodicals had been printed in Poland, of those 30 dailies. This number, as a matter of fact, seems to me to sin on the side of caution. Be it as it may, no other country, neither in Europe nor in North and South America, achieved what Poland achieved in the number and variety of Yiddish publications—dailies, weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, magazines dealing with economics, sports, commerce, health, theatre, publishing, films, professional and union organs (e.g., of butchers, handicraft workers, bakers and others), youth and children’s magazines—a veritable cornucopia of printed matter. (See Illustration 1).

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⁵ Oddly enough, it was the South African parliament that was the first to grant Yiddish the status of the Jews’ national language, which in practical terms meant that Jewish immigrants would be able to use Yiddish to fulfill the literacy requirements for entrance into the country. This took place, on the initiative of some Jewish intellectuals, in, mirabile dictu, the year 1906! (See Z. Reyzn, *yidishe shprakh un yidishe literatur*, Buenos Aires, 1965, 38).
What was the Bund’s share in this overall total? In a word—enormous. This is
not to say that the circulation of Bund’s major newspapers, certainly not until the mid
1930s, was larger than those of other publications. In Warsaw alone, for instance, a total
of three—and for a time four—Yiddish dailies came out, and two of the major ones, Der
haynt and Der moment, had a much larger circulation than the Bund’s daily, Di naye
folkstsaytung (henceforth F.) But those papers were addressed to a much larger
audience, and one with pro-Zionist sympathies, which were shared by many Polish Jews
regardless of whether they had the slightest intention of ever emigrating to Palestine. The
papers were supported financially by Jewish businesses, whereas the Bund’s paper was
financed out of the party’s far from overflowing coffers, occasionally by donations from
abroad (principally the United States), and from the sales of the paper, which didn’t
amount to much. The Folkstsaytung could not even run advertisements of certain
products—a normal source of income— if their prices were beyond the reach of most of
the paper’s readers.

Moreover, the F. was strictly a party newspaper, edited by Bundists, and
committed to the Bund’s ideological and political program. It was, as I noted earlier,
only in the mid-1930s that the Bund fully broke out of its ‘proletarian’ mould (though its

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6 Without going into much details, suffice it to mention that the newspapers, especially
during the early 1920s, came out under slightly different names, such as folkstsaytung,
undzer folkstsaytung, and other names without the word folkstsaytung in them. The
custom of changing the name, borrowed from the experience of anti-Tsarist papers before
1917, was a ruse designed to enable the paper to come out daily, without actually changing
anything in the text. The censors were well aware of it, but were by law unable to
prevent it. Censorship occasionally forced the folkstsaytung—and for that matter most
other papers critical of the Polish government—to skip an issue or to appear with empty
spaces demonstratively calling attention to the fact that articles had been deleted by order
of the censorship—but that’s a story unto itself.

7 In his aforementioned essay, Sholem Hertz notes that while the main lines of the Bund’s
ideological program was a given, the editors, ‘were differed in their characters, education,
knowledge, interests, [which manifested itself] in the nuances of language, and even
interpretation.’ (Hertz, 154).
‘proletarian’ credentials were fairly flexible even earlier). The paper was also read avidly by people who did not subscribe to the Bund’s ideology. But all told the magnitude of the readership was, until the 1930’s, smaller than that of the other papers.

Nevertheless, the range of publications issued by the Bund was extraordinary. In his study Der bund in umophengikn poyn 1915-1925 (The Bund in Independent Poland, 1918-1925) which in fact contains some material regarding post 1925 developments, too, the Bund’s historian Sholem Hertz lists 88 titles, of those about a dozen in the Polish language, published by the Bund in Poland. 8 To be sure, some of those titles appeared just once or for a brief time only. Still, it’s an impressive list, what with publications in Łomża, Kalisz, Lublin, Łódź, and many other towns.

**Left-Right-Centre**

I shall examine some of those publications further on, but first a few words about one that deserves special mention. This was the monthly Kegn shtrom (Against the Current), organ of the Bund’s left-wing faction, the so-called tsveyers. I have written about it at considerable length elsewhere,9 so here a few words will suffice.

Kegn shtrom was published under the imprimatur of the Bund, but it represented exclusively the views of the ‘left opposition’ within the party. The tsveyers (from the word tsvey— two) were members of the ‘second’ faction, while the other faction were the ‘eynsers’—from the word eyns (one). Both groups (the eynsers also embraced ‘Centrist’ members) came into being in the early 1920s, and for several years the ‘tsveyers’ were in a majority. By 1930, following an passionate intra-party debate, the Bund voted to join the Second Labour International, much to the distress of the tsveyers, who felt that the International, by embracing ‘reformist’ programs and countenancing the formation of coalition governments with ‘bourgeois’ parties, strayed from the essential principles of ‘revolutionary Marxism,’ espoused by the Bund and a few other West European socialist parties.

The tsveyers now became the minority, representing about forty percent of the total party membership (including some of its leaders). Since they continued to adhere to their principles yet remained supremely loyal to the party, they requested and were granted the right to publish their own journal. Kegn shtrom came out fairly regularly between 1930 and early 1938, publishing articles demanding the Bund’s withdrawal from the Second International, sticking to its Marxist ‘revolutionary’ guns, and offering what might be termed qualified approval of the Soviet Union.

This support came to an end after the ‘Moscow Trials’ of the late 1930s. By now virtually all Bundists agreed that the USSR no longer represented a species—however ‘degenerated’—of socialism. As far as I know, the tolerance of a dissenting faction and

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of a journal propagating its views it is the only such case in the history of post-World War I social democracy.\textsuperscript{10}

**The Fires of Hell**

The *Folkstsaytung* was edited by a board of seven editors, three of whom, constituting its highest authority, were appointed by the party’s Central Committee. The paper came out at first six days a week, but in the mid-1920’s it decided, whatever the wrath this might incur from the orthodox Jews, also to come out on Saturday—shabes—the day of rest of most Jews. The decision was prompted, among other things, by the fact that young Jews were becoming increasingly secularized.

Yet wrath the decision did arouse. Groups of Orthodox Jews, their beards and peyes flowing in the wind, poured out on the streets, beating up the paper carriers, seizing and burning stocks of the Saturday edition. (Shades of future Nazi ‘book burnings’!) Warsaw and other towns became the scene of riots once nasty and farcical at the same time. At first F. tried to sweeten the pill by refraining from publishing any fiction on Saturday, but the ‘shomrey shabesnikes,’ as the paper called them, would not give up. Here is a characteristic passage from the paper at that time:

*Khilul shabes geshet shoyn in yidishn lebn oyi yedn trit un shrit. Bifreyse forn yidn in di tramvayen shabes; bifreyse shteyen hundereter kromen ofn; roykhern yidn un bifreyse koyfn zey alts vos zey darfn shabes.*

(Desecration of the Sabbath is a common and everyday occurrence in Jewish life. Jews ride publicly on the Sabbath, hundreds of Jewish shops stay open on the Sabbath, and the Jews buy openly everything they need for the Sabbath.)

At the same time, as the paper points out, the ‘shomrey shabesnikes’ do not utter a word of protest against Jews publishing and distributing Jewish papers in Polish on Saturday.\textsuperscript{11} The flavour of this battle can be judged from the following passage in the newspaper two months on:

*Nokh a tsvey khadoshim hot der varshever rabinat zikh metsaref geven tsu der aktsye. dem 14tn februar l924 hot er aroysgerufn a kheyrem ofy der shabesdiker tsaytung. In di beysi tviles hot men oysgeklept a kol koyre mit di sharfstverter fun tadlung. In im iz geven gezogt, az di tsaytung is ‘oser tsu leyen, barirn un dernentern.’*

(After two months the Warsaw rabbinate stepped up its actions. On February 14, 1924, the Sabbath paper was excommunicated. The walls of synagogues were plastered with a solemn appeal severely condemning the *folkstsaytung.* It said Jews must not read, touch, or come close to it.)

(Shades, this time, of the lunatic antics of Israel’s ‘hareydim’?)

\textsuperscript{10} See Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism—the West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1996)

\textsuperscript{11} F., September 23, 1923
After a while, the *folkstsaytung* was forced to suspend its Saturday edition, not because of the attacks by the Orthodox, but simply because of financial difficulties. In a few years, when the financial condition of the paper improved, the Saturday edition was reinstalled—this time without too much of a hullabaloo from the ‘shomrey shabesnikes.’

**What’s in a Language?**

In the past, the Bund was sometimes criticized not only for its effusive championship of Yiddish, but also, presumably in line with its anti-Zionist and anti-Hebraist credo, for seeking to denude Yiddish from Hebrew elements and of anything smacking of ‘the synagogue’ or ‘Zion.’ Already in 1907, the Zionist thinker Nahum Sokolow, a fervent believer in—and fluent speaker of—Hebrew but also an admirer of Yiddish scornfully referred to the ‘Bundists’ extreme fondness for Yiddish,’ which he termed ‘opportunistic.’ They often use it, he said, ‘because of their hatred for Hebrew’, their contempt for ‘tradition,’ the ‘bourgeoisie,’ and ‘Eretz Israel’—all of which have become for them antiquated and degenerate.’ Yet what, he went on, is ours if not the Hebrew language, the Torah, Hebrew literature, the Land of Israel...What is that we have no more than the Torah of Rabbi Marx or that temporarily we must use the Jargon and transpose all the scientific terms into Hebrew script?  

Then, warming up to the subject:  
And when general schools are mandated, why will we need special schools? What special things will they offer that will make them necessary? Saying *der kind* (as do the Litvaks), and not *dos kind?* Will people be willing to sacrifice themselves for that?  

I cite Sokolow’s (both witty and scathing) remarks because his chief accusation—that the Bund, for ideological reasons, was determined to ‘de-Hebraize’ Yiddish—was to be voiced repeatedly by other critics, too. As one who has read a good deal of Bundist literature I find these charges groundless: they are more relevant to the ravages perpetrated upon Yiddish years later by the Yevsektsia in Soviet Russia than to the Bund’s use (or misuse) of Yiddish either before or after 1917.  

Indeed, reading the Bundist press one is struck by the richness and vibrancy of the secular Yiddish that blossomed forth in the first few decades of the twentieth century—the mix of folk expressions, internationalisms, and newly coined terms, along with a liberal sprinkling of Hebraisms. The latter was neither the odd flash in the pan nor certainly—at the other extreme—a laboured attempt to ‘enrich’ the language with as many Hebrew words as possible, on the curious theory that words derived from Hebrew are generally superior to terms of German origin—a notion favoured by some Yiddish

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12 Quoted by Goldsmith, op. cit., p. 157
writers in the last thirty-fourty years, as the active use of the language was beginning to run dry. 13

Most of the Bundist writers, after all (virtually all men, with a few brilliant exceptions, such as the daughter of Simon Dubnov and wife of the Bundist leader Henryk Erlich, Sofia Dubnow-Erlich), had all received their primary education in a heder, and some of them, in fact, also attended yeshivas. Hebrew and Hebraisms came to them as naturally as words with Slavic—specifically Polish—roots. To be sure, there were Bundists whose anathemas against Hebrew were as fanatical as the vituperation hurled by many Hebraists at Yiddish and Yiddish speakers. This aspect of the linguistic Kultur-Kampf was particularly fervent on both sides of the barricades around the turn of the last century. It continued unabated, indeed more acidulously, on the anti-Yiddish side, in Palestine. By the 1920s the Bund regularly denounced the Zionist establishment for its scorn and virtual prohibition of Yiddish in Palestine. 14 But this bitter struggle was not reflected in any ‘censorship’ of Hebrew words in Bundist publications.

All this is not to say that the Yiddish of the Bund’s press was sui generis. Der haynt and Der moment, the largest Yiddish newspapers at that time, were much the same. With two caveats: both these papers were far less consistent in shunning ‘daytchmerizms’ and antiquated expressions than was F. Purity of language was for the Bund part of its struggle for the khshives (dignity) of Yiddish and Yiddish-speakers in general. Not so for the ‘bourgeois’ papers.

As for the fourth major Yiddish newspapers published in Warsaw, Dos yudisse tognblat, which represented the views of the Agudas Israel and of the Orthodox community in general, while its editors were also Yiddish enthusiasts, 15 it tended far

13 What constitutes a legitimate ‘dayshmerizm” is a subject that many Yiddish linguists often discussed. I remember in the late 1940s the budding young linguist Uriel Weinreich published an article in the journal yugntruf in which he facetiously—though compellingly—compared ‘good’ and ‘bad’ daytshmerizms to ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ Germans. (I quote from memory.) Who were the ‘good Germans’ was of course a topic frequently debated in those days.

14 (that is, (i.e, theaters with a propensity for shund).

15 Thus one of the editors of the yudishe tognblat, A Rogovoy, in a essay about his paper, published after the war: 'The Yiddish language is a language created by the Jewish people in the Diaspora. The Yiddish tongue became the expression of the Jewish soul, of Jewish
more than the other Yiddish papers towards the use of Hebrew terms close to people brought up in a religious milieu—those who could savour the odd posuk (verse) from or reference to the Talmud, or an old Hebrew saying (sometimes but not always rendered in Yiddish), and the like. As can be seen from the very name of the paper, modern Yiddish and modern orthography were not, however, among the paper’s icons.

Occasionally, politics and business make for strange bedfellows. Though there was not much love lost between the Togblat and the Folkstsaytung, what with the former regularly inveighing against the ‘evekhori yisroel’ and khale-mit-tschvekes apikorsim of the Bund and the latter making free with epithets such as frumakes (pejorative for ‘believers’) and got-strapches (God’s guardians), the Orthodox paper was actually printed in the folkstsaytung’s printshop, as part of an amicable business arrangement between the staff of the Bundist paper (at that time a cooperative) and the togblat. More, on matters of pay and workers’ benefits, the printers of the togblat always joined hands with their Bundist colleagues.

The Youngest and the Young

Another digression, this one pro domo sua. The editorial office of F., four rooms in all, was located on one of Warsaw’s teeming Jewish streets, Nowolipie, number 12. I spent some of my early childhood in Warsaw and our apartment (we were three—my parents and I) also happened to be located on Nowolipie, at No. 32. I once visited the newspaper office with my father, a dedicated Bundist, who probably had to discuss some matter with the editors. I remember the rooms as dark and dank, but it was for me a veritable zkus (honour) to be among those almost legendary comrades, though I don’t recall exchanging a word with any of them.

A few years later I was again in that office: This time it was in connection with a poem I wrote for the children’s section of the paper, called Di kleyne (little) folkstsaytung (henceforth KF). The poem was called (not surprisingly) ‘ershter may,’ (May Day), which I hoped would be accepted and printed on the day of this great Holiday. I was received by the editor of Di kleyne folkstsaytung, Leyvik Hodes, a mild-mannered man with a gentle smile, who put me at my ease by assuring me that the poem was very good indeed. (It wasn’t.) With what excitement I gazed upon that page two weeks later, with my name and poem so prominently (so it seemed to me) displayed! My first published work!

Since I mentioned Di kleyne folkstsaytung, a few words about this publication are in order. Established in 1926, the K.F. came out, with a few exceptions, every Friday, and occupied from one to one and a half pages in the parent paper. It was a unique endeavour, not duplicated, as far as I know, by any other Yiddish newspapers in Poland. From the moment of its founding, it enjoyed an almost ‘built-in’ audience—the Jewish children from the Yiddish Tsysho (Central Yiddish School Organization) schools, many of whom also belonged to the SKIF—sotsyalistisher kinder farband—comprising demands and aspirations, of Jewish joys and sorrows, and any denigration

(gringshetsung) of this folk language is a slur on our entire magnificent heritage.’
children between the ages of 7 and 16, and directed by a Bundist appointed to this post by the party’s Central Committee. The KF printed regular reports about the various activities organized by the Yiddish schools and/or the SKIF, such as trips to places of special interest to Jewish children (e.g., the town of Kazimierz on the Vistula that boasted one of the oldest Jewish synagogues in Poland), summer camps, led by a teacher, where the children set up the showers and latrines, set up tents, and helped provide running water for all the memoirs. Occasionally the Tsukunft also organized winter camps. The camps, judging from the response by the children, were extremely popular, affording the campers—many of them from bleak impoverished homes, more like hovels— their first encounter with the wonders of nature.

The KF was written in simple language, and for a time Hebrew words in it were spelled phonetically—unlike in the rest of the paper—so as to make it easier on the young readers. The SKIF and Yiddish schools were favorite topics. Some Yiddish writers, such as Borukh Glazman, L. Olitsky, Shmuel Horontchik and Yehoyshua Perle contributed their stories and longer novels (printed seriatim), and the paper also featured stories or excerpts from books by West European writers, such as Vicki Baum, Aleksey Tolstoy, Jack London, Sigrid Undset, Selma Lagerhof (very popular in pre-war Poland among adults as well as young readers) and others. In addition, the paper featured reports on the lives and activities of workers in various countries, on the struggle of socialist parties against fascism, news about socialist children’s organizations abroad, and, of course, on the values and principles of socialism.

To cite one example illustrative of the paper’s concerns and approach:

On May 23, 1932, the K.F published a contribution—one of many—from one of its readers, called *fun der shoyb hot zikh es ongehoybn* (It all started with the window-pane). The story illustrated the solidarity of a classroom of children when one of them unwittingly broke a window—pane. His classmates decided unanimously to make a collection, so as not to let the culprit be faced with a ‘prohibitive’ expense (five zlotys). The editors published the story, and then addressed the following words to the author:

Should you decide to publish the story once more, you must make it clear whether this incident took place in your school, or whether you have made it up, or perhaps you have read it somewhere and then decided to retell it for other readers. And one more thing: you write very, very interestingly, but you make a lot of errors! You must learn how to improve your writing. If you are a member of the SKIF, join one of its Yiddish groups, and if not, find a friend who can teach you how to write better.

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16 The Left Poalei Zion, a champion of Yiddish that cooperated with the Bund in the Tsysho, also had a children’s cum youth organization.

Thus morality, Yiddish, and socialism were all brought together in a single useful pedagogical tale.

This brings me to another publishing activity, of paramount importance to the Bund, namely, its various youth newspapers and magazines, most of them in Yiddish and a few in Polish.

The main youth magazine was Der yugnt-veker (The Sentinel—henceforth YV), a fortnightly that came out uninterruptedly from the early 1920s till the outbreak of the war in September 1939. Again as in the case of the KF, the YV could avail itself of the support of the youth organization of the Bund, Di Tsukunft; in addition, it found an eager readership among young men and women who had left their traditional religious backgrounds and were seeking new causes and organizations to cast their lot with. (The same is true, of course, of Zionist-socialist organizations such as the Hashomer Hatsair and Dror, as well as the Communist party—though membership in the latter entailed difficulties and dangers because of its illegal status.)

The YV carried articles on workers unrest in Poland and other countries, on antisemitic outbreaks, on the history of the Bund and other theoretical matters written by the veteran Bundists Vladimir Kosovsky and E. Mus, on various activities of the Tsukunft such as mass rallies, educational programs and sports. In the later 1930s, the journal published regularly reports on the Spanish Civil War and on the increasingly antisemitic atmosphere in Poland.

Incidentally, accounts of antisemitic attacks in shtetls and universities by gangs of Endeks armed with knives, fist knuckles and razor blades, while increasingly frequent in the mid and late 1930s with the rash of pogroms and the policy of confining Jewish students to special (‘ghetto’) benches, were featured prominently in the pages of the YV and other Bundist newspapers already in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These stories tend to contradict the received wisdom that bloody antisemitic incidents occurred only under the post-Pilsudski regimes. Headlines such as vilde geshlegen tsvisn studentn—a shiseray oyfn hoyf fun varshever universitet (wild clashes among students, fusillade in the courtyard of the Warsaw university), ektsen fun endekishe studentn in kroke (excesses of Endek students in Cracow), and der protses vegn di radzhiviler anti-yidishe ektsen (the

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19 Endek—from Narodowa Demokracja, Polands largest anti-Semitic and neo-fascist paper established ion the late 19th century and becoming the country’s largest political party in the 1930s.
trial about the anti-Jewish excesses in Radziłów) are merely three random examples out of many.\(^{20}\)

Like *Di kleyne folkstsaytung* and even more so the regular *Folkstsaytung*, the youth magazine, too, carried articles about Yiddish writers, and also reprinted works by non-Jewish writers. Articles of general interest proliferated—e.g. on new airplanes, on the upcoming international fair in New York, and a rather timely piece *vi azoy zikh tsu farteysdkn fun luft-ongrafn* (how to defend oneself against air-raids, April 13, 1939).

Reading the YV, then, is like occupying a ring-seat for viewing the range not only of the Bund’s commitments and activities, but also facets of Polish and Polish-Jewish reality in general. The same, but more, of course, is true of F. Some time ago, the great Polish poet Czesław Miłosz published a remarkable book called *Wyprawa w dwudziestolecie* (An Excursion into a Twenty-Year Era, Krakow, 2000). It consists of excerpts from the Polish interwar press, arranged topically—e.g., ‘Pilsudski’s Hesitations’, ‘The Western Borders’, ‘Capital’, ‘Countryside’, ‘Workers’, and so on)—with the author’s introductions and annotations. As a guide to the history of Poland during its brief brush with independence, Milosz’s book (which contains some astounding pages on the magnitude of the country’s antisemitic passions) has few if any equals.

**Mirror, Mirror**

Much the same kind of volume could be construed out of the pages of the Bund’s press—and/or of other Jewish papers in Poland. The Bund’s press was neither pedantic nor sectarian. To be sure, in the ‘bourgeois’ papers one would not come across as often as in the F. on reports of teachers’ struggles for higher wages and better working conditions, on evictions of whole families, along with all their worldly goods, onto the street, as punishment for failing to pay the rent (a common occurrence in Poland those days),\(^{21}\) or similar stories about flagrant social injustices. In the Bund’s press they occupied a place of honour.

But crime, too, was not shunned by the F. and other Bundist papers. The Bund’s leaders condemned the ‘sensationalism’ of Yiddish papers such as *Haynt* and *Moment*.

\(^{20}\) For a good historical account, see *No Way Out—The Politics of Polish Jewry 1935-1939*, by Emanuel Melzer (Cincinnati, 1997).

\(^{21}\) Thus *merderishe eksmisyes oyf zamenbhof—yidisher hoyzvirt hot mitamol aroysevorfn finf familyes fun37 perzon—‘klal tuer’ kalikshteyn varft aroys a familye fun akht perzon* (Murderous evictions on Zamenhof Street, Jewish Houseowner Suddenly Ousts Five Families numbering 37 people, ‘Community Leader’ Kalikshteyn Throws Out a Family of Five Persons)—F., April 26, 1933)
their penchant for mawkish and sleazy details—especially if the subject had anything to
do with sex. However, cases of theft, muggings, rapes, murder, marital tragedies,
suicides (a veritable rash of them in Poland in the late 1930s) were regularly reported. This
was part of everyday life and of concern to the F.’s readers.

The detestation of ‘sensationalism’ also extended to shund (roughly, ‘thrash’)---
the cheap writing appealing to the lowest popular taste. The fight against shund was not
confined only to the Bund. In the literary annual that he established in 1888, Yidishe folks
bibliotek, Sholem Aleichem waged a bitter campaign against these writings which he felt
poisoned the minds of Yiddish readers. For the Bund, it was part of a struggle for a
new progressive culture imbued with the values of enlightenment and socialism. The F.
listed the daily theatre and cinema fare in Warsaw, but did so selectively, as the paper
was fiercely hostile to any manifestation of shund. Here is a typical article on this
subject:

No to the shund theatre!
We are often asked why we do not feature a special theatre section with reviews
of all Yiddish plays performed in Warsaw. We consider it necessary, therefore, to
explain to our readers that we have no interest whatsoever in reviewing shund
plays. Occasionally we make an exception but only in order to warn the Jewish
workers against this clap-trap (makheraykes) which only warps their taste and
detracts them from the better Yiddish theatre. We shall wage a determined
struggle against these shund theatres, without being in the least swayed by any
appeals to pity and sentiment. In our view, it is precisely this attitude of
compassion (‘Alas, poor theatre!’) that has caused the proliferation of shund and
the departure of better Yiddish theatre from Warsaw, as happened to the Vilna
Troupe.

22 Sholem Aleichem’s main target was the writer Shomer (pseudonym of Nahum Meyer
Shaikewich, author of about 100 novels and plays with titles such as di umgliklikhe libe
(The Unhappy Love), der oytser oder der kalter gazlen (The Treasure and the Cold-
Blooded Bandit), der yid un di grefin (The Jew and the Countess) and similar works.
Sholem Aleichem published a scathing attack on Shomer in his pamphlet shomers
mishpet (Judgement on Shomer), 1888.

23 F., October 19, 1933. The Vilna Troupe was one of the most innovative Yiddish
theatrical ensembles. Founded in 1916, it soon succeeded in earning local and
international fame. In 1924, it fell victim to the ‘popular’ theaters and, faced with
financial difficulties, left Warsaw and moved to the United States.
Ideological concerns also pervaded other areas covered by the Bundist press. What with the importance of the organization Morgnshtern, which I mentioned earlier, it was natural for the F. and other papers to pay attention to this subject, to report regularly on sport events both in Poland and abroad. The ‘class angle’, however, was never far from the surface—e.g.:

Each worker sportsman is fully aware of the fact that the goal of the Morgnshtern—the physical development of the working class—will be achieved only when the working class overthrows the capitalist order, thus making it possible for the worker to develop physically and spiritually. For precisely this reason the morgnshtern is a component part not only of the Jewish but of the entire proletarian movement in our country.24

The F. is also a splendid source on the intricate political struggles waged by the Bund against its adversaries—from those on ‘the Jewish Street’ (all Zionists parties with the partial exception of the Left Poalei Tzion), the Orthodox parties, competing left-wing parties, all the way to the Polish parties, most of which by the 1930s adopted an unabashedly antisemitic policy postulating the exclusion of Jews from Polish political and economic life (a la the Nuremberg laws—and eventually, physically, from Poland.25 Relations with the Polish Socialist Party, the closest to the Bund in its ideology and rejection of anti-Semitism, were also difficult, with the two parties finally reaching a full accord by the mid-1930s.26

Another area of conflict were the relations between the Bund and the local Communist Party, which were acerbic, especially the early 1930s, when the Communist movement branded socialism as ‘social fascism’, often staging attacks on Bundist meetings and institutions that would lead to casualties on both sides. The view of the Communist Party as a lackey of Moscow and one dedicated to the destruction of the socialist movement was common to nearly all Bundists, including those who entertained some ideological sympathy for the Soviet Union. At the same time, negotiations between the Bund and the (underground) CP regarding a common front against fascism were occasionally held, always terminated by the Bund when it became clear that the Communists were only interested in turning the rank-and-file Bundists against their leaders. Much of this—though sometimes in Aesopian terms, was recounted in the Bundist press. In 1934, it was discovered that the Warsaw CP was under the control and pay of the Polish secret police.27

24 F., November 22, 1932.

25 See Melzer, op.cit.

26 See my essay on he PPS and the Bund in Gutman, Mendelsohn et al, The Jews of

Poland Between the Two World Wars, 1989.

27 This has only recently come to light in the memoirs of a distinguished Bundist leader,

Emanuel Nowogrodzki, translated and published by his son, Mark Nowogrodzki. (The
This is obviously not the place to analyze the politics of the Bund in all its ramifications, so suffice it to repeat that there is no better guide to it than the pages of the Bundist press.

Yet another noteworthy feature of the Bundist press was the feuilleton, an essay combining factual information and comments, laced with humor and wit—a genre favored by European newspapers. The F. featured a number of feuilletonists, but none of them more adept at this craft and more the rage than the writer, journalist, political commentator and literary critic Borukh Shefner. I collected about 15 pieces written by Shefner in the 1930's, but find it difficult to give succinct examples of Shefner’s mordant wit, his playfulness, erudition and sparkling turn of phrase without going into them at some length. Still, perhaps one example will do to illustrate Shefner’s superior skill—a feuilleton published in the F. on March 18, 1938, called ‘The Latest Asch Scandal.’

The subject of the piece is the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch (1880-1957), a man of enormous gifts and diverse accomplishments, author of novels, short stories and plays, but also one whose eccentricities and curious political judgments often bemused his readers, and caused him no end of troubles throughout his long career. In 1926, after the May coup d’etat by Marshall Pilsudski, Asch addressed an ‘Open Letter’ to the military dictator, praising the ‘noble knight’ whose sword ‘set free the Polish soul’ (for which munificent compliment the Marshall’s government awarded Asch with a distinguished medal in 1933). All this, needless to say, was not quite to the liking of many of Asch’s admirers, who had considered the writer, with all his idiosyncracies, as a bona fide man ‘of the left.’

In his feuilleton, Shefner takes Asch to task for a stirring but wrong-headed speech he had just delivered at the Jewish Writers’ Union. Shefner starts his comments, as he was wont to do, with an innocent obiter dictum. ‘There are countries,’ he writes, which go through an earthquake every few years. It would seem as if the earth in those countries is unhappy that the inhabitants forget about her, and feels a need every one and then to produce some quavers so as to remind the inhabitants of her existence.’

The same, says Shefner, ‘is true of the Jewish public. Every few years it is subjected to a new Asch-quake, a new Asch-scandal. Asch,’ he goes on, ‘is one of those artists for whom the impression they create on their audience will not do. They have a weakness for stepping out before the curtain between one act and the next one, and deliver a speech—thunderously, passionately, in unrestrained anger—to wit, ‘I the earth, am quaking’.

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Without questioning Asch’s literary achievements, Shefner then discusses the author’s other non-literary episodes, his habit of issuing public pronouncements designed to shock or mystify his audience, to wrap meaningless assertions in veils of profundity, or to speak plain unadulterated nonsense.

Asch’s latest broadside, says Shefner, to the effect that literature has been stripped of any meaning and ideas whatsoever, explains why Jewish readers have turned away from it ins the same why both Jewish and Polish readers have also turned away from butter, meat and sugar, though they know that sugar is very nourishing. To turn a world crisis into a crisis of Jewish literature reminds one of that ‘small-town rabbi who said that the reason why the Jews in his shtetl have no shoes was because they don’t go to synagogue often enough…’

This is vintage Shefner: light, playful but on the ticket, witty but never malicious, wise, canny, and easily grasped by his readers, who adored him.

**By World of Mouth**

One of the reasons for Shefner’s popularity (and he was not the only one who enjoyed respect and affection) were his frequent trips to towns and shtetls in behalf of the Bund or the F. to deliver lectures on a variety of topics, from ‘The Current World Situation’ or ‘The Magic of Sholem Aleichem.’ This was ‘S.O.P.’ for many Bundists, and many of his feuilletons reflected his peripatetic life and provided him with topics for his pieces—e.g., ‘The ‘Lovely Provinces,’ ‘A Visit to a Tailors’ Shtetl,’ ‘A Walk Through a Chassidic Town,’ and so on. Here, chosen at random, is one announcement of forthcoming lectures and meetings:

‘From the Balfour Declaration to the Zionists Certificate’—Comrade Z. Artur [Zygelboim], Monday, Kalushin; Comrade Dineh, Ostrolęka, Wednesday; Gutowrowe, Monday; Com. Natan Shafran—Saturday; Wloclawek, Tuesday; Aleksander Koyavsk, Kalushin, Com. Engineer A. Sheynin; Com. V. Shulman—Mława, Monday, Baranovitch, Saturday; Nowogródek, Sunday; Zhetl—Monday; Iwie—Tuesday. Com. B. Shefner—Mezrich, Monday-- Biala-Podlaska, Tuesday; Com. Dr. Sh. Berkowitch—’Marx and Marxism, Tuesday Chrzanow; Com H.Erlich—’With the Swastika Against Marxism--Gritse, Monday—

and so on and on, all these (and more) spanning a period of just five days.

For Bundists and sympathizers of the Bund in some remote provincial shtetl in Galicia or Lithuania, these encounters were major events, eagerly looked forward to, as we know from letters and memoirs (some in the YIVO archives in New York). They provided opportunities not only to gain fresh knowledge, but to exchange views with the (often celebrated) speaker from Warsaw and with local comrades.

I cannot resist telling yet another story pro domo sua. As a high school and then college student I got to know Schefner in the United States in the 1940s, where he would occasionally be invited by Max Weinreich to take part in a modest literary soiree, attended by just a few people. A marvelous raconteur, Shefner would hold us enthralled

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29 F. August 14, 1933
with stories of his lecture-trips in prewar Poland. One story pertained to a talk he gave, in some God-forsaken town in Galicia, on the meaning and future of socialism. At one point, he said, he got carried away, he exclaimed: ‘Comrades, I believe honestly, from the bottom of my soul, in the future of socialism here in this country and throughout the world!’ At which point a small bedraggled man rose from his chair in the back of the hall and cried out excitedly ‘yekh okhet, khaver Shefner, yekh okhet!’ (I too, Comrade Shefner, I, too!)

At which point, Shefner told us, he told the local comrade that he was delighted to find that both of them were so fully in accord about the inevitability of socialism in Poland world-wide.

For the editors of the F., contact with their readers was their professional lifeblood, it was a way of testing the waters, of assuring themselves that they were on the right path, that they enjoy the confidence of the masses. Occasionally the F. would stage an evening of lebedike (live) folkstsaytung, where authors would read from their works and ask the audience for comments. These encounters would sometimes lead to ardent polemics, but never, as far as I know, to bad blood. The Bund’s hallowed principle, after all, was miishpohedikayt, the unflinching belief that loyalty to the collective—the mishpokhe—must transcend political or ideological disagreements.

The Folkstsaytung would also arrange meetings with distinguished guests from abroad. How important such meetings were for the readers of the newspaper can be gauged from the following report on an appearance by the Bund’s leader and theoretician Tsivion (penname of Ben Tsion Hoffman) in early 1931. Tsivion had left Poland for the United States a few years earlier, but he would come back regularly to Poland, where his comrades always arranged for him a tumultuous welcome.

On this occasion, a member of the audience asked Tsivion when the social revolution would finally break out in the United States. Tsivion, known for his dry wit, assured his questioner that when he left the United States three weeks earlier, he saw no sign of any impending disturbances, but when he returns and finds out that a revolution had indeed broken out he will immediately notify the F. about it. ‘This only goes to show, comrades,’ concluded Tsivion, ‘that you must read the F. diligently so as always to be on the top of the news.’

Envoi

The story of the twenty years of the Bundist press in independent Poland is one of remarkable achievements and triumphs as is so much of organized Jewish life in general, but it is also one of punishing work, of daily struggles for subsistence, of moments of gloom and disappointments. Polish censorship affected almost all of the country’s press, but none more than that of the Bund. The censors whose job it was to read the paper before it was sent to the printer frequently insisted on changes which the editors, defiantly, refused to heed, preferring to come out with blank spaces (which the readers fully understood), or to skip an issue altogether. Of the three regular censors of the Yiddish press-, two were right-wing Zionists, pathetic time servers who would plead with

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30 On this, see my essay in Journal for Jewish Social Studies, op.cit.
the editors to acceded to their requests and thus save everybody trouble and hartsveytogn (grief), and one whom the F. editors preferred way above the others because he was almost permanently inebriated and inclined to give in than to argue.

In addition, editors would occasionally be hauled in by the police on the flimsiest of charges, fined or sentenced to several days’ imprisonment. Exhausting polemics with political adversaries on the left and on the right, Polish and Jewish (often with other Yiddish newspapers), too, took their toll, and in the early 1930s the danger of physical attacks by Communist gangs were omnipresent. The demands made on the editors were excruciating: some of would be forced to worked 18 or 19 without end.

By 3 September 1939, three days after the outbreak of the war, all Yiddish papers ceased to come out—all with the exception of the folkstsaytung, which appeared till 8 September, the days most of its editors closed shop and departed from Warsaw. A few stayed behind. Several months later, in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, the Bund, its ranks thinned, driven underground and now mostly in the hands of younger members, resumed its activities, among them the publication of many papers and periodicals, a far larger number than those published by any other political group in the Jewish underground.

But that is another story.