

TSUM FOLK VEL IKH FUN KEYVER ZINGEN

I WILL SING TO THE PEOPLE FROM THE GRAVE: THE EMOTIONS OF
PROTEST IN THE SONGS OF DOVID EDELSHTAT

By

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Transliterations and Yiddish are YIVO standard orthography unless otherwise indicated.

SINGING FROM THE GRAVE

מײן צוואה.

געווידמעט צו H. S.

אה, גומע פריינד! ווען איך וועל שטארבען,
טראגט צו מיין קבר אונזער פאהן—
דיא פרייע פאהן מיט רויע פארבען,
בעשפריצט מיט בלוט פון ארבייטסמאן!

*

און דארט אונטער דעם באנגער רויען,
זינגט מיר מיין ליעד, מיין פרייעם ליעד!
מיין ליעד „אין קאמפף“, וואס קלינגט וויא קייטען—
פון דעם פערשקלאפטען קריסט און איד.

*

אויך אין מיין קבר וועל איך הערען,
מיין פרייעם ליעד, מיין שטורם-ליעד,
אויך דארט וועל איך פערגיסען טרעהרען,
פאר דעם פערשקלאפטען קריסט און איד!

*

און ווען איך הער דיא שווערדען קלינגען,
אין לעצטען קאמפף פון בלוט און שמערץ—
צום פאלק וועל איך פון קבר זינגען,
און וועל בעגייסטערען זיין הערץ!

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*Mayn tsavoe*¹

*O gute fraynd ven ikh vel shtarbn
Trogt tsu mayn keyver undzer fon
Di fraye fon mit royte farbn
Bashpritst mit blut fun arbetsman*

¹ Dovid Edelshtat, *Folks-gedikhte*, Steven Spielberg digital Yiddish library 04549 (Nyu-York: Hebrew publishing company, 1906), 40; Eleanor Mlotek, *Mir Trogn A Gezang! : Favorite Yiddish Songs of Our Generation*, 4th ed. (New York: Workmen's Circle Education Dept., 1987), 92. Translation, Lorber

*Un ven ikh her di shverdn klingen
In letstn kamf fun blut un shmarts
Tsum folk vel ikh fun keyver zingen
Un vel bagaystern zayn harts*

My Testament

Oh good friend when I am dead
Carry our flag to my grave
The free flag of red color
Stained with the blood of the workingman

And when I hear the swords clanging
In the last battle of blood and pain
I will sing to the people from the grave
And will inspire their hearts

Dovid Edelshtat “*Mayn tsavoe*” (My Testament) in *Di varhayt* 22 March 1889

“The October revolution sharply raised the grand question of the epoch for the artistic intelligentsia: with whom are the artists – with the people or against them? The best minds in literature welcomed revolution and immediately began building the new Soviet literature and culture.”²

Hersh Remenik (1905-1981), “*Tsu der frage fun di onheybn fun der yidisher sovetisher literatur*” (On the question of the beginning of Yiddish Soviet literature) 1966

² Hersh Remenik, “*Tsu der fage fun di onheybn fun der yidisher sovetisher literatur*,” *Sovetish heymland*, no. 11 (1966): 132–140. Remenik was a Soviet literary historian and significant contributor to the post-Stalinist Yiddish journal, *Sovetish heymland*.

לידער גייען אריבער גרענעצן און פאספארטן און וויזעס.
“Songs cross borders without passports and visas”³

A. Litwak (1874-1932), “*dos yidishe arbiter-lid*” (The Jewish Labor Song) 1926

The fate of the Sweatshop Poets [Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923), Morris Winchevsky (1856-1932), Dovid Edelshtat (1866-1892), and Joseph Bovshover (1873-1915)], a group of late nineteenth century Russian immigrant Yiddish writers, was not obscurity and irrelevance as the twentieth century progressed, but persistence, significance, and passion well beyond their demarcated time and place. The assimilation of the their fellow East European Jews in America did not diminish this, nor did the upheaval of the old order and revolution of the new in the Russian Empire. In fact, decades after their work was produced it was still relevant and worthy of fervent and even polemical discussion. Surprisingly, much of the discourse about these Yiddish labor songs written in the United States was taking place in the emerging Soviet Union, the land of the writers’ origin.

Of particular interest was the fierce debate over Dovid Edelshtat’s place in the pantheon of Soviet literary pioneers; the case of the so-called “Edelshtat Wars.” It was described in detail by bibliographer Aleksander Pomerants (1901-1965) in his

³ A. Litwak, “*Dos yidishe arbeter-lid*,” in *Vos geven: etyudn un zikhroynes: Litwak, A. 1874-1932* (Vilne: Vilner farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1925), 242, accessed November 23, 2010, <http://www.archive.org/details/nybc208225>. Litwak was the pseudonym of Khayim Yankl Helfand, socialist, Yiddish writer, translator, and editor. He was a so-called “half-intellecutal” responsible for translating political, scientific, and other documents into Yiddish for the Bund. He immigrated to America during World War I, and Vilna in the 1920s where he continued to advocate for the Yiddish socialist cause.

remembrance on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Edelshtat's death.⁴

Pomerants was born in Grodno, Belorussia and immigrated to New York in 1921, but from 1933-1935 was member of the faculty of the Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture at the Ukrainian Academy of Science and so was quite familiar with the literary-political context in which the argument was framed. The attention to Edelshtat stands out in part because of his romantic biography – he died in 1892 at twenty-six from tuberculosis contracted in the sweatshops and had been a single-mindedly passionate ideologue for the labor cause. However, it was even more remarkable because of the unusual resonance his songs seemed to have with workers of his generation and those who came after, as well as with labor movements on both sides of the Atlantic. The Soviet debate sparked the question: What are the elements that conspired in those songs to powerfully affect such diverse groups with equal force and cause such a stir generations later? To address that question, one needs to know how to measure a song's effectiveness, what criteria were used in the Soviet arguments, what role his biography played, and how the songs were transmitted and made meaningful beyond the context in which they were written.

In the Soviet Union new institutions were established under the Commissariat of Nationalities for the creation of Soviet Yiddish culture.⁵ And although there was a larger dialogue taking place throughout these Soviet Yiddish institutions about the legitimacy of a variety of cultural products, "In the field of literary criticism, battles were waged around several key issues, most notable the question of tradition and hegemony within

⁴ Aleksander Pomerants, "Edelshtat in der yidish-sovetisher literatur-kritik" in Benjamin Bialostotzky, ed., *Dovid Edelsh-ta-t geden-k-bukh: tsum zekhtsi-ks-tn yortsay-t* (New-Yor-k: Dovid Edelsh-ta-t ·Komi-te·tn, 1953).

⁵ David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.

Soviet-Yiddish literature. Central to this debate was the evaluation of the proletarian credentials of the Sweatshop poets,” including Dovid Edelshtat.⁶ Tradition in this case refers to the critical theory that Yiddish proletarian literature could originate with works produced before the Revolution and even in other lands as long as they articulated and catalyzed the proletarian cause. However, hegemony implies that only literature created in the Soviet Union during and since the October Revolution and conforming to certain institutional standards was sufficiently revolutionary to be included in the canon. The discourse, definitions, and those who subscribed to them shifted as often as politics required, evolving from the immediate post-Revolution period in 1917, through the civil war, the NEP, the Cultural Revolution, and beyond to the Retreat in the 1930s.⁷ Context, form, and proletarian purity were thought to be literary imperatives for the creation and transmission of Soviet culture to the masses at that time. Because of the nature of that objective, and the “high level of insecurity” of the writers and critics alike due to possible “central government reprimands”, only those narrow criteria were applied.⁸ While many experienced and understood the intangible factors contributing to the persistence of Edelshtat’s work, none used them as elements in their critique.

This essay assesses the emotions produced by Edelshtat’s songs and their causes, in order to unpack the unexamined primary question evoked by the debate: To what can one attribute the tenacity with which these poems and songs held the imagination of

⁶ Marc Miller, “Tradition and Hegemony,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 35, no. 2 (December 1, 2005): 189.

⁷ Miller, “Tradition and Hegemony”; Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*.

⁸ Miller, “Tradition and Hegemony,” 189.

workers of such different times, in such different places?⁹ The Soviet Yiddish debate over the origins of proletarian literature led to the question, and without rearguing it or venturing an anachronistic analysis some possible answers can be unearthed by examining the available primary source evidence.

The creative works of Edelshtat and much of the radical Jewish Labor movement in the United States were derived from their European populist past in Russian and German, but delivered to the Soviet socialist future in Yiddish. What transpired in the interim, from exile to return? What characteristics of these works helped them transcend literary and national politics? The works' survival and vibrancy into the 1930s is a testament to the power of pragmatism, emotion, and tradition more so than dogma, intellect, and hegemony.

Edelshtat presciently promised in his song *Mayn tsavoe* (My Testament), *Tsum folk vel ikh fun keyver zingen* (I will sing to the people from the grave), but he also vowed *Un vel bagaystern zayn harts*, and will *inspire* their hearts. It takes a considerable measure of passion to create a work that will inspire others, but it must also be constructed from meaningful tropes, which tap into the common memories and hopes of the people it intends to move. Edelshtat's songs captured this spiritual authenticity and endured because they were both emotionally accessible and materially available.

⁹ James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research," *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011): 286, accessed July 26, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015>. Emotions are a relatively contemporary analytical tool with regards to social movements and protest. Jasper argues that though cultural theories of social movements are prevalent, they are "mispesified if they do not include explicit emotional causal mechanisms."

SONGS OF PERSUASION

There are some basic criteria that first must be established. The lens through which these songs will be examined will hopefully explain their origins, validity, and role within the movement, and might also provide a broader understanding of the work of the vernacular and cultural creations in promoting and sustaining a group identity essential for the coherence of such a movement. The approach developed by Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, who view social movements as knowledge producers, is logical for the study of the Yiddish songs and poetry being discussed. They look at “the construction of ideas [...] and the role of movement intellectuals in articulating the collective identity of social movements,” and therefore allow for an examination of the content rather than the structure of the movement itself.¹⁰ In the case of Yiddish labor songs, the intellectuals changed from Russian populists, to immigrant socialists and anarchists, to Bundists, and finally Soviet Yiddish apparatchiks; and the environment changed for their creation, dissemination, and use. It makes sense then, that the context is examined first. This includes the historical and circumstantial environment in which the movement and its cultural products were generated. Next, the process of articulation of the group identity is considered. The products in this case are the songs written by Edelshtat and the other “Sweatshop Poets,” and the process is how they were created and distributed. When appropriate, an evaluation of what Eyerman and Jamison call the “knowledge interests” follows, with a discussion of the purpose each song or poem serves. To be clear and consistent about their common qualities, Denisoff provides a suitable framework for

¹⁰ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21.

understanding the goals of songs of persuasion, and for determining their validity as such.

He specifies six required functions:

1. The song attempts to solicit and arouse support and sympathy for a social or political movement.
2. The song reinforces the value structure of individuals who are active supporters of the social movement or ideology.
3. The song creates and promotes cohesion, solidarity, and high morale in an organization or movement supporting its worldview.
4. The song is an attempt to recruit individuals into joining a specific social movement.
5. The song invokes solutions to real or imagined social phenomena in terms of action to achieve a desired goal.
6. The song points to some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms¹¹

These functions reinforce the qualities for successful framing for recruitment and retention, which include *diagnostic* (the problem exists), *prognostic* (the problem can be solved by us), and *motivational* (join with us).¹² The Jewish immigrant community in

¹¹ R. Serge Denisoff, "Songs of Persuasion: A Sociological Analysis of Urban Propaganda Songs," *The Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 314 (December 1966): 582, accessed November 13, 2009, <http://login.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/stable/538223>.

¹² James M. Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 3 (September 1998): 413, accessed December 3, 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/684696>. Jasper cites the work of Snow, *et al* in "Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation." (1986); and Snow and Benford in "Master frames and cycles of protest." (1992).

particular was one with a common history of oppression and persecution, difficult struggle as new proletarians in the teeming sweatshops and crowded tenements, and hopeful disposition in their first free political environment. With that in mind, Edelshtat's poetry and songs successfully framed the history, problem, and solution for the worker of his era in the United States, but also accomplished this for those back in the homeland, future immigrant or not.

Therefore, the object here is not to assess the success or failure of the social movement, but to create a narrative that explains the movement's role in the creation of these songs and reciprocally, the role of the songs in instilling and reinforcing the identity of the movement. These six criteria objectively address the origins and qualities that make a song of protest valid, genuine, and attractive to the movement participants. What they do not articulate is how a song makes the listener or singer feel, and that emotional response is the element that makes these songs durable and not simply topical.

Emotions of Protest

While the literary critics in the Yiddish Soviet Culture Project may have known instinctively how valuable songs that evoke powerful emotions were to the reinforcement of their goals, it was not an assessment tool available to them. In his 1998 study on the relationship of emotions and protest James Jasper divides emotions between primary "transitory reactive responses to external events" such as anger or surprise; and secondary or underlying affective ones such as "loyalties to [...] groups, individuals, places, symbols, and moral principles." Citing Randall Collins work, Jasper states that emotions

are the “glue” of solidarity, which makes them important to examine here.¹³ While he suggests the possibility that “primary emotions are more important in face-to-face settings [...] than in ongoing political processes, where secondary emotions such as outrage and pride may be more influential,” he admits that “even gut level emotions [...] are conditioned by our expectations” which are shaped both culturally and contextually. Therefore temporary reactive emotions, supported by affective stable loyalties can shape, for example, the relationship a group of workers feels singing in the shop or on the protest barricade. And that feeling can have long-term residual consequences. This makes sense in the Edelshtat case. His political purity, mythic biography, language choices, and passion translated into durable allegiances, so that at gatherings when his songs were sung, they evoked a powerful sense of connection and purpose among even strangers. Jasper recognizes the affective type can include “identification with a group and loyalty to its members; fondness for places and objects, perhaps based on memories; [and] positive responses to symbols of various kinds.” Singing together could stimulate a connection to those symbols and memories.¹⁴ This is the missing factor in the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia’s arguments. They analyzed Yiddish literature for components that reinforced the Soviet ideology, but were myopically focused on only state-sanctioned symbols and memories rather than meaningful ones that evoked real emotion. As a result, there were gaps in their arguments and their identification of what should be valued in pioneering works of Soviet Yiddish literature.

¹³ Ibid., 399.

¹⁴ Ibid., 401–402.

SOVIET YIDDISH CULTURE PROJECT

“The February Revolution, like the French Revolution, granted Jews rights as citizens. But the Bolshevik Revolution had to go one step further to relate to the Jews, as to all other ethnic groups in the Russian empire, as a *nation*.”¹⁵

Hersh Smolar (1905–1993)

Despite the fact that their songs resonated deeply with Yiddish-speaking workers, or possibly because of it, the status of the Sweatshop Poets and Dovid Edelshtat as pioneers of Yiddish proletarian literature became the object of a lengthy, contentious debate between factions in the new Soviet Yiddish culture project throughout the 1920s. The project began with several publishing institutions established in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1917 to address the question of oppressed nationalities and to instruct them in the new dominant ideology. At that time, Lenin wondered how to remove the stigma of that oppression by supporting ethnic national identities and still promote the anti-nationalism that socialism required. This question was particularly complicated when it came to the Jews. Were they an ethnic, religious, or national entity? And who would lead, when many of the Jewish intelligentsia were former members of the Bund, which was both nationalist and socialist? Stalin famously believed that territory was a requirement of nationality, and subsequently was against designating the Jews a nation. Still, Lenin and the new Soviet government needed to promote state unity through nation building within its borders in order to gain the support of Ukrainians, Georgians,

¹⁵ Hersh Smolar (1905–1993), Polish and Soviet Yiddish writer and editor quoted in Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 14.

Muslims and other ethnic minorities. Territory aside, Stalin wrote in *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), “equal rights of nations in all forms (language, schools, etc.) is an essential element in the solution of the national question.” That belief would become the basis of the program where each nation could create socialist culture in its own language; what Stalin would characterize in 1934 as “national in form, socialist in content.”¹⁶ Lenin had adopted the theory that the layered functions of the press as educator, communicator, and unifier were what he called, “the invisible bond between the party and working class.”¹⁷ To that end, the Commissariat of Nationalities with Stalin as its commissar was formed in 1917 in order to adhere these groups’ nationalism to the universal principles of Soviet socialism and the state through guided creation of culture. Including the Jews as a nation made the Soviet Union “the only country in the world to have state-sponsored Yiddish-language publishing houses, writers’ groups, courts and city councils, and a Yiddish-language school system.”¹⁸ The Jews were shepherded by a Soviet-Jewish intelligentsia determined to maintain and promote a Soviet-Jewish secular culture detached from its religious tendrils. Each national group had its own Bolshevik party operation that communicated its message in its own language. The official Communist institution for the Jewish nation was the *Evseksiia* (Jewish section) and each territory had its own local publishing house and leadership, be it Moscow (Russia), Kiev

¹⁶ David Shneer, “Who Owns the Means of Cultural Production? The Soviet Yiddish Publishing Industry of the 1920s,” *Book History* 6, no. 1 (2003): 198, accessed October 10, 2014, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/book_history/v006/6.1shneer.html. Shneer is quoting Stalin, understanding that language was to be the variable of an otherwise common socialist discourse.

¹⁷ Marten-Finnis, “The Bundist Press: A Study of Political Change and the Persistence of Anachronistic Language During the Russian Period,” 15. See note 7, p. 26.

¹⁸ Shneer, “Who Owns the Means of Cultural Production?,” 198.

(Ukraine), Vitebsk (Belorussia), or other locales. The principals of this group were both state functionaries and national leaders.¹⁹

Even with this groundbreaking national designation, unity was elusive, and Jewish literary critics developed numerous philosophical divisions and fractures based on each one's interpretation of Soviet literary principles of form, diction, or author's proletarian credibility. According to David Shneer, an historian of the Soviet-Yiddish cultural landscape, "Soviet Yiddish writers and critics were very good at and obsessed with defining groups and categories, and at creating and re-creating their own literary histories as politics changed around them." This is particularly important when considering the volatile political and cultural dynamics of the first years of the Soviet Union. He also notes that their "own polarizing rhetoric" defined these groups more than their labels as proletarians or non-proletarians, older generation or new, Communists or fellow travelers.²⁰ One of the notable debates was whether the Sweatshop Poets belonged in the Soviet canon or not. Were they bourgeois propagandists or pioneers of proletarian poetry?

Sweatshop Poets/Edelshtat Wars

From the outset, this internecine tension existed among the leading voices of Soviet Yiddish literature, and the battlefields were the numerous literary journals produced and edited by the combatants. This was a struggle for authority to define the literary and political terrain and would have a direct bearing on the status of Edelshtat

¹⁹ Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 20–21. Also see Commissariat for Nationalities, 19–22. Stalin was its initial leader and was against designating Jews a nationality. (Note 17 p. 232 cites Stephen Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice: Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, 1917–1924* [Greenwood Press, 1994]).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

and the others. Conversely, how one felt about the Sweatshop Poets would become a litmus test for the critics' political-literary legitimacy. The genealogy of these publications will help clarify their positions. The first modernist Yiddish group was *Eygnis* (Our Own), formed in Kiev in 1918 but displaced mainly to Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow because of the pogroms during the Civil War. Writers and critics associated with it include Hofshiteyn, Dobrushin, Litvakov, Bergelson, and Mayzel. A competing, more politically oriented journal, *Baginen* (Dawn) was established by the Ukrainian Enlightenment Commissariat in 1919, edited by A. Litwak where he argued that "Jews had experienced a revolution, but Yiddish literature had not" and that the new Jewish writer should not just be a "tombstone engraver," but a "creator of life." Shneer points out this tension between the need to reflect and to create was "endemic to the Soviet conception of literature."²¹ While this journal moved the conversation towards a more activist literature, only one issue was ever published due to the violence during 1919 in Kiev.

Then, in 1920 the first Yiddish journal officially sponsored by the Communist Party, *Khvalyes* (Waves) started in Vitebsk, Belorussia as a reflection of the Proletarian Culture movement (*Proletkult*) and the Communist Youth League. It declared it would "add stridency and clarity to the young Jewish Communist movement, [...] not express itself in the language of the old Jews," and encourage workers to become "storytellers."²² But the criticism leveled at *Khvalyes* by critic and author Yekhezkl Dobrushin in the Muscovite central party paper *Emes* (Truth) argued that in spite of its claim to be the

²¹ Ibid., 136-142.

²² Ibid., 143.

voice of “youth and innovation” *Khvalyes* was instead like the work of the obsolete Sweatshop Poets, who wrote “bombastic and, at times maudlin poetry about the downtrodden working classes of America.” This was not an institutional conflict as both journals had official support, be it *Evsektiia* or the Communist Youth League, as much as it was youth versus age. Dobrushin warned that these young writers should be careful whom they emulate because their audience was passionate but naïve.²³ This is exactly the type of audience that evidence will show embraced Edelshtat’s work and gave it such longevity. However, this was not the only disagreement to involve the Sweatshop Poets.

In 1918, “amidst the very flames of the Bolshevik revolution” Shmuel Agursky, Jewish commissar in Vitebsk and publisher of the Yiddish Communist newspaper *Der frayer arbeter* (The Free Worker), published the first acknowledgement of the Sweatshop Poets as fathers of proletarian poetry. His article on Joseph Bovshover was printed in *Di varhayt* (Truth) in Petrograd, the predecessor to *Der emes* (Truth) in Moscow, which had also published many poems of Edelshtat and Vintshevski.²⁴ That article subsequently became the foreword to a pamphlet of Bovshover’s poetry. Agursky and the American labor poets had few supporters among the establishment literati between 1918 and the onset of the Cultural Revolution around the end of the NEP in 1928 when their reputation was rehabilitated. Before then, critics like Dobrushin, Nakhman Mayzel, and Moyshe

²³ Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 143–44 and note 36, p.255 citing Benjamin Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

²⁴ Aleksander Pomerant, “Edelshtat in der yidish-sovetisher literatur-kritik,” in *Dovid Edelsh-ta-t geden-k-bukh: tsum zekhtsi-ks-tn yortsay-t*, ed. Benjamin Bialostotzky (Nyu-Yor-k: Dovid Edelsh-ta-t ·Komi-te-tn, 1953), 532; Gennady Estraikh, “The Yiddish-Language Communist Press,” in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism*, vol. 20, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63.

Litvakov held the dominant opinion, that pre-revolutionary culture was not proletarian. Mayzel's attack in 1919 in the *Kultur-lige's* journal *Bikher velt* (Book World) renounced the aesthetics of the diction of Bovshover's and Edelshtat's writing. *Kultur-lige* was an independent leftist publishing network established in Kiev, which became officially Soviet in 1921.²⁵ In it Mayzel argued that, "nowhere is there nuance, no arc [...]" "Freedom, storms, slavery, struggle, revolution" repeat themselves," and should not be elevated "from simplistic revolutionary pronouncements" to high art.²⁶ Dobrushin was equally critical of the effort to resurrect Edelshtat and the others as pioneers of proletarian literature. He warned against creating a modern "Edelshtat-Vintshevski era."²⁷ He derided *Khvalyes* (Waves) as cliché and, nearly quoting Mayzel verbatim, claimed Edelshtat's poetry was "without nuance or arc, individual suffering and personal redemption" and worst of all, it was "artificial."²⁸ In his analysis of Edelshtat's literary legacy in the Soviet Union for the *Dovid Edelshtat gedenk-bukh tsum zekhtsiktsn yortsayt* (Dovid Edelshtat 60th anniversary memorial book, 1953), Aleksander Pomerants remarked, "The extremes of the reputation of Edelshtat's work range from a "proclamation of nothing" to a "classic" from a "slanderer who dips his pen in slop of ignorance and lies" to a "holy martyr;" from a "writer of minor rhymes" or "rhyming little thoughts" to a "great proletarian poet;" a "preacher," "our legend;" and from an "agitator" to a "proletarian prophet" and "our tradition."²⁹ He added, "Often the

²⁵ Shneer, "Who Owns the Means of Cultural Production?," 208.

²⁶ Pomerants, "Edelshtat in der yidish-sovetisher literatur-kritik," 532.

²⁷ Miller, "Tradition and Hegemony," 200; Pomerants, "Edelshtat in der yidish-sovetisher literatur-kritik," 533.

²⁸ Pomerants, "Edelshtat in der yidish-sovetisher literatur-kritik," 533.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 531.

discussions about Edelshtat in the Soviet-Yiddish literary context were echoing and mirroring the general Soviet literary discussions as a result of the political changes in the country.”³⁰ From the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, the civil war, though the NEP, Edelshtat and contemporaries were not exiled again, but neither had they returned. The advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1928 and the support of long time advocates like Yashe Bronshteyn changed that decree.

Revival

By 1928 the Sweatshop Poets were being universally hailed as pioneers of proletarian literature. The defining example of the changing landscape is the convoluted, almost comical apologia Moyshe Litvakov, a critic, but also an original high-ranking party functionary with *Evseksia*, felt compelled to publish in 1931. In an article titled, “*Vegn di ershte proletarishe dikhter*” (About The First Proletarian Poet) he completely recanted his earlier position that demeaned Edelshtat’s poetry and confessed that his characterization of Edelshtat as a “contrived rather than organic” poet was incorrect.³¹ Critics on both sides of the Edelshtat problem focused on the same issues: his diction, his form, and his socialist bona fides. What neither side could refute was that his songs were still passionately sung in workshops, in factories, by hearths, and on the streets by the only people whose opinion mattered, the workers.

The lyrics and melodies triggered what Jasper defines as moral emotions, which include “compassion for the unfortunate or indignation over injustice.” These in turn

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Marc Miller, “Tradition and Hegemony,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 35, no. 2 (December 1, 2005): 201. See note 55 “*Vegn di ershte proletarishe dikhter*.” in Litvakov, *Af tsvey frontn*, 173.

elevate emotional energy, which he describes as “[...] excitement or enthusiasm, generated in interaction rituals [...] that encourage further action.”³² Therefore, one must look to Edelshtat’s motivations for writing, his literary and political influences, and his ability to communicate his zealotry first to a newly proletarian uprooted immigrant worker in America, then to the anti-Tsarist revolutionary of the Bund in Eastern Europe, and finally to the emancipated Yiddish speaker in the Soviet Union.

DOVID EDELSHTAT (1866-1892) FROM RUSSIA

Where once there had been an intelligentsia without a people and a people without an intelligentsia, the Yiddish press and the social movement it represented gave the intelligentsia a people and the people an intellectual leadership. [...] Creative individuals found an audience and the spiritually thirsty masses found an opportunity to quench their thirst.³³ –

Shmuel Niger (*Jewish People: Past and Present*, 1955)

Dovid Edelshtat was born on May 21, 1866 in Kaluga, Russia 93 miles southwest of Moscow, well outside the Pale of Settlement where most Jews had been legally required to live since being mandated by Catherine the Great in 1791. His father had

³² James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011): 287, accessed July 26, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015>. Jasper's taxonomy of emotions in social movements include: reflex emotions, moods, affective commitments or loyalties, moral emotions, and emotional energy. He rejects the premise that all emotions are irrational, and need discreet definitions relative to their causes.

³³ Samuel Niger, “Yiddish Culture” in *Jewish People: Past and Present*, Vol. IV, A Menes, Ed. (New York: Jewish Encyclopedia Handbooks, 1955), 289 in Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York: Wiley, 1979), 147

been conscripted into the tsar's army as a teenager and served twenty-five years in the military, which earned him the right to live outside the Pale. Dovid and his seven siblings were educated by tutors in Russian, as there was no public school in Kaluga and certainly no Jewish institutions. At eleven he won local recognition for a poem he had published and in 1887 he wrote autobiographically about being fifteen:

Already then I was known as the Poet among my friends and acquaintances, and I wrote poetry in Russian. My passion for poetry, especially for the poetry of Nikitin and Nekrasov, was aroused in my heart early [in my life]. I spent whole days and nights over their masterly descriptions of the sufferings and trials of the poor Russian people.³⁴

He had no real exposure to *yidishkayt* (Jewish way of life) or to Yiddish language, although his mother could speak Yiddish, until moving inside the Pale to Kiev in 1881 to be with his older brothers.

That year the upheaval in Eastern Europe following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, the great reformer, resulted in a return to repression previously suffered and codified under Nicholas I in the early nineteenth century. Among the recurring affronts to the Jewish population were years of pogroms from Warsaw to Konotop; the imposition of the May Laws of 1882 by Alexander III that restricted Jewish settlement, livelihood, and education within the Pale; and the eventual expulsion of Jews from Kiev in 1886. Along with the prospect of conscription into the Tsar's army, these events spawned one of the great mass migrations in modern history. More than two million East European Jews arrived on the shores of the United States over the next forty years. This

³⁴ Ori Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy: David Edelshtat's Revolutionary Poetry* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: P. Lang, 1997), 17. See also note 15 for sources.

extraordinary migration represented approximately one-third of the total Jewish population of Europe. Left behind were the deeply religious who believed their faith would be subsumed in secular America, and the passionately radical who believed the struggle for modernity should take place in Europe, not abroad.³⁵

During Edelshtat's early teenage years, his revolutionary zeal was ignited as a devotee of the populist *Narodnaia Volia* or People's Will, and especially of the martyr Sofia Perovskaia, for whom he would compose one of his most popular songs.³⁶

סאפּיא פּעראווסקאיא.

(געווירמעט מיין שוועסטער שרה עדעלשטאדט.)

דאס וואר א פרוי! זעלמען זיינען פרויען
זא פראוו, זא נאפעל, זא גייסטיג וואונדערשעהן,
זיא וואר בערופען דעם פרייהייטס־מעמפעל בויען
און מיט איהר בלוט האט זיא געפארבט זיין שטיין.

*

*Sofia Perovskaia*³⁷

*Dos var a froy! zelten zaynen froyen
za brav, za nobel, za geystik vundersheyn
zi vor berufen dem frayhayts-tempel boyen
un mit ihr blut hat zi gefarbt zayn shteyn*

³⁵ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 26.

³⁶ Kalmon Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat* (New York: Kooperatiyer folks farlag, 1942), 166.

³⁷ Dovid Edelshtat, *Folks-gedikhte fun D. Edelshtat* (New York: The Hebrew Publishing Company, 1907), 160, accessed January 19, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/details/nybc204549>. Translation S. Lorber. Printed Yiddish texts are from Russian and Soviet sources which do not subscribe to YIVO orthography

Sofia Perovskaia

(Dedicated to my sister Sarah Edelshtat)

There was a woman! Rarely are there women
So brave, noble, spiritually resplendent,
She was called to build the freedom-temple
And with her blood she painted its stones

Perovskaia was executed along with three others for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on April 15, 1881. The inclusion of women in Edelshtat's work began with this poem but was not limited only to those martyrs whose names evoked emotional, heroic memories. His poem "*Tsu di arbayter froyen*" (To the working women) also became one of his most sung as a call to arms for women to join the struggle.³⁸

Many Jews' path to radicalism in Russia was through populism (*narodnaia*) rather than anarchism or socialism because it allowed for a synthesis of the particular nature of their Jewish identity (one which they could not cast off even though they tried desperately) and the universal nature of the socialist/anarchist creed.³⁹ Later, as his knowledge of *yidishkayt* developed in America, Edelshtat would combine the language, structures, and passion of the *narodnaia* martyrs with Jewish cultural, linguistic, and religious tropes to create potent and resilient poetry.

Although he was ardently radical, he left the Russian Empire under the aegis of the *Am Olam* movement in 1882 after experiencing the terror of the Kiev pogrom on May

³⁸ Ori Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy: David Edelshtat's Revolutionary Poetry* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: P. Lang, 1997), 141. Kritz's translation and remarks show how Edelshtat used the same romantic and religious (*heylige/holy*) imagery for men and women as a matter of belief in equality.

³⁹ Ezra Mendelsohn, "The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement.," in *East European Jews in America, 1880-1920: Immigration and Adaptation*, ed. Jeffrey Gurock, vol. 3, 13 vols., American Jewish History (London; New York, 1998), 755–782.

8, 1881 and meeting one of its leaders, Dr. Max Mandelstamm, while recuperating in a hospital there from emotional trauma. *Am Olam* encouraged immigration to the United States and the formation of Jewish agricultural communes to escape Tsarist instigated and peasant perpetrated anti-Semitism. The initial impetus for their flight however, as if survival weren't enough, was to emigrate under the *Am Olam* banner in order to burnish their credentials as "movement" men who could reclaim their peasant roots, and reject the parasitic middleman, lender, and peddler identity forced on Jews by prohibitions against land ownership in the Pale of Settlement.⁴⁰ Still, it was the 1881-82 pogroms and rampant anti-Semitism that drove many Jews from Russia, losing hope of a secular unification for all proletarians. "The pogroms seemed to demonstrate that the hopes of the russified (Jewish) intelligentsia," among which Edelshtat considered himself, "had been dashed, that the longed-for rapprochement between the intelligentsia and the "people" was now an impossible dream,"⁴¹ and those people with whom the Jewish radicals fervently identified had become their persecutors. Although *Am Olam* was ultimately unsuccessful at creating and sustaining agricultural settlements, it did succeed in bringing many of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia to the United States, a place that was desperate for leaders, as literary critic and activist Shmuel Niger famously observed.

In America – Exile

Edelshtat and his group arrived in the United States on May 29, 1882 at the port of Philadelphia then traveled by train to New York. He traveled along with others of the

⁴⁰ Benjamin Harshav, *Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry: A Historical Anthology* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 53; Mendelsohn, "The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement."

⁴¹ Mendelsohn, "The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement.," 757–58.

intelligentsia, including the future iconic Yiddish newspaperman and author Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), socialist theoretician and lawyer Morris Hillquit (1869-1933), and anarchist writer/editor Saul Janovsky (1864–1939). But when they landed, they learned there was not enough money to establish their commune. According to group member Alexander Harkavy, they divided the remaining money and went to find lodgings and jobs. Edelshtat instead travelled to Cincinnati to meet his brothers, who had also immigrated, where he became a buttonhole maker, and eventually joined immigrant radicals of the Russian populist group, *Narodovoltzes*.⁴² Because of his secular Russian education and his experience with the *Narodnaia Volia*, Edelshtat resisted learning Yiddish when he first arrived. But the events of the next few years brought the 17-year-old Edelshtat to communist anarchism. Initially, after hearing Albert Parsons speak in Chicago he became a member of the *Yidisher arbeter fareyn* (Jewish workers union) in Cincinnati but eventually abandoned it and other such democratic labor organizations for more revolutionary groups after the Haymarket Riots and subsequent executions in 1886. By 1888 he had joined the nascent *Pionere der frayhayt* (Pioneers of Liberty) in New York along with new members Saul Janovsky, Moyshe Katz, Alexander Berkman, and Emma Goldman.⁴³ Having difficulty finding and keeping work due to his reputation as a labor organizer, he and his brothers in Cincinnati, struggled with crushing poverty. This poverty and his time in the sweatshops began to take their toll on Edelshtat's health as well. But it also became his opportunity to write.

⁴² Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy*, 23–25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31–37. Kritz cites N. Goldberg, "Pionere der frayhayt," *Geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeter bavegung in di fareynike shtatn*, ed. Tcherikower, 305

Although he published several pieces in the Russian language journal *Znamia* in 1889, his breakthrough came with the publication of his first Yiddish poem, *Tsuruf der varhayt* (Call for the Truth) in the newspaper of the *Pionere* group called *Di varhayt*.⁴⁴ There was fierce competition among the American Yiddish papers and their affiliated social movements that led to the demise of *Di varhayt*. Out of the turmoil in July 1890 the anarchist paper *Fraye arbeter shtime* (Free voice of labor) published its first edition and would continue, though occasionally interrupted due to finances, until December 1977.⁴⁵ This would become the central conduit for the dissemination of Edelshtat's poems, songs, and articles, and in January 1891 he became its editor until he left for Denver for treatment of tuberculosis that September.⁴⁶ During his time as editor he sacrificed his health, comfort, and companionship to keep the paper published.⁴⁷ His death on October 17, 1892 in a sanatorium in Denver at the age of 26 due to complications of his illness came after a furious output of articles, letters, poetry, and songs lamenting the state of his health and that of his beloved movement.

RUSSIAN HEART, YIDDISH VOICE

The genealogy of Edelshtat's political affinities provides the groundwork for his poetry's expression of what Jasper calls "affective commitments or loyalties," those

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁵ Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher, *Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists*, Documentary, 1980.

⁴⁶ Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy*, 72.

⁴⁷ Saul Janovsky, *Ershte yorn fun yidishn frayhaytlekhn sotsializm, oytobiografishe zikhroynes fun a pioner un boyer fun der yidisher anarkhistisher bavegung in england un amerike* (Nyu York: Fraye arbayter shtime, 1948), 194.

rational, long-term feelings “positive and negative” as well as the aforementioned moral emotions.⁴⁸ Once in the United States, Jewish radical writers would continue to channel the voices of the *Narodnaia Volia* to infuse the passion of their Russian past into their American present. They longed for the fervor of the martyrs of their homeland and the urgency with which they conspired against their oppressors. Philip Krantz, editor of the newspaper *Arbeter tsaytung*, remarked that, “The Russian revolutionary is hard pressed to maintain his revolutionary passion once he has left sacred Russia behind.” In other words, though there was significant class oppression in America, complete legal emancipation removed much of the steam from his *cheynik* (tea kettle) of revolutionary fervor.⁴⁹ Many wrote of the old prison of tsarist Russia and the new prison of America where only the capitalist is free and murder, like the hanging of those convicted of instigating the Haymarket riots of 1886, is state-sanctioned.

The Haymarket Riots and subsequent execution of Albert Parsons, George Engel, Adolf Fischer, and August Spies, as well as the death of conspirator Louis Lingg, who committed suicide a day before the scheduled execution, motivated Edelshtat to write poems that attempted to ignite the revolutionary spirit many Russian immigrant radicals found lacking in the United States.⁵⁰ This is exemplified in his poems *August Spies*, *Albert Parsons*, *Louis Lingg*, and the third anniversary memorial to the date of the executions, *Der 11-ter november*.

⁴⁸ Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements,” 287.

⁴⁹ Mendelsohn, “The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement.,” 764.

⁵⁰ Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy*, 102–132. Kritz explains Edelshtat's use of political mythology, in this case fictionalizing the martyrs, to create emotional ties to the audience as described by Bronislaw Malinowski. These myths become regarded as “sacred” and are “embodied in ritual, morals, and social organization.” (127).

דער 11טער נאוועמבער.

עס פלאמערען וויעדער דיא בלוט־רויטע פאהנען,
עס קלינגט דער פרייהייטס הייליגע שטים,
נאך א מאל וועט מען דעם פאלק דערמאנען,
דיא קעמפפער, וואס לעבען און שטערבען פיר איהם.

*

*Der 11-ter november*⁵¹

*Es flateren vider di blut-royte fonen!
Es klingt der frayhayts heyilige shtim!
Nokh amol vet men dem folk dermonen
Di kemfer, vos leben un shtarben far im!*

The 11th of November

Again the blood-red banners are fluttering!
Freedom's holy voice is ringing!
Again the people are reminded
Of the fighters who lived and died for them!⁵²

Notwithstanding these martyrs' sacrifices, Edelshtat was still frustrated with the quality of American radicals. He wrote:

When we consider the holy images of the Russian revolutionaries, full of self-sacrifice and immortal courage, and then we consider those who, in America, bear the name revolutionaries, what a sad comparison it is. At a time when the Russian revolutionaries amaze the world with their iron energy and holy spirit, our American revolutionaries offer empty phrases, with disgusting metaphysics, which they pass off as philosophy...⁵³
(*Fraye arbayter shtime*, No. 5, Aug. 1, 1890)

⁵¹ Edelshtat, *Folks-gedikhte*, 106.

⁵² Kritz, *The Poetics of Anarchy*, 123–124. Transliteration and translation, Kritz.

⁵³ Mendelsohn, "The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement.," 768. See note on 780, Dovid Edelshtat, "Eyn vort tsu di yidishe revolutsyonern," *Fraye arbayter shtime*, No. 5, Aug. 1, 1890.

Dovid Edelshtat was never far from his Russian roots though he realized he needed to communicate in Yiddish if he was going to effectively connect with the uprooted immigrant Jewish worker in the teeming atmosphere of the Lower East Side of New York. This combination had a powerful effect on his friends and fellow radicals according to his biographer, Kalman Marmor. Edelshtat had a sense that once he mastered Yiddish he could become a “poet of the Jewish worker masses.”⁵⁴

Edelshtat’s third Yiddish poem, *In kamf* (In struggle) was “modeled in form from his Russian poems, which were all written in cross-rhymes” or alternating rhyme using an *a-b-a-b* scheme.⁵⁵

אין קאמפף.

מיר ווערען געהאסט און געטריבען.
מיר ווערען געפלאגט און פערפאלגט—
און אללעס דערפאר ווייל מיר ליעבען
דאס ארעמע שטאכטענדע פאלק.

*In kampf*⁵⁶

*Mir vern gehast un getribn,
Mir vern geplogt un farfolgt;
Un alts nor defar vayl mir libn
Dos oreme shmaktnde folk*

⁵⁴ Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat*, 49.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Edelshtat, *Folks-gedikhte*, 15.

In Struggle

We are driven and despised
We are tortured and persecuted
And all because we love
The poor and the weak⁵⁷

According to Mikhail Druskin's 1954 publication, *Ruskaia revoliutsionnaia pesnia* ("The Russian Revolutionary Song) Edelshtat's *In kamf* appropriated the melody of one of Lenin's favorites, "*Zamuchen tiasheloi velolei* (*Tormented by Cruel Captivity*), itself derivative of other Russian folk melodies.⁵⁸ In a further testament to the origins of the songs' melodies, in the foreword to Edelshtat's writings, published in London in 1909, Morris (Moyshe) Katz, an early member of the Jewish anarchist group *Pionire der frayhayt* (Pioneers of Freedom), wrote that a Russian melody was adapted by some of Edelshtat's friends for the poem *Di tsavoe* (The testament) and the effect was so powerful that involuntarily, "tears would run from my eyes."⁵⁹

During the time from April until June 1889 he was publishing Yiddish poems derived from or directly translated from his Russian poems and printed in the newspaper *Varhayt* (Truth). Marmor specifies that, "a portion of his poems in the "*Varhayt*" Edelshtat had rewritten from his Russian poems." He lists "'Flowers and Stars," a rewrite of the poem картинки (Pictures) and "True and False Heroes" from the poem

⁵⁷ Mlotek, *Mir Trogn a Gezang!*, 80; Harshav, *Sing, Stranger*, 54.

⁵⁸ Robert A. Rothstein, "On the Melody of David Edelstadt's 'Vacht oyf!,'" *Musica Judaica: Journal of the American Society for Jewish Music* IV, no. 1 (1982): 74; Eleanor Mlotek, *Mir trogn a gezang!: Favorite Yiddish Songs of Our Generation*, 4th ed. (New York: Workmen's Circle Education Dept., 1987), 89. For melody of *Zumuchen tiazheloi nevolei* see Rothstein Example 8 page 75. For melody of *Vakht oyf!* see Mlotek, page 89.

⁵⁹ Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat*, 261 note 82.

Герой нашего времени (Hero of our time). His poem “My Last Hope” has entire verses from Записки пролетаря (Notes of the proletarian), and “A Piece of Bread” has motifs from Друзьям (Friends/comrades) and from Работники (Workers).

One poem, “Der arbeter” (The worker, *Varhayt* 7 June 1889) was published with the attribution, “after Nekrasov.” It seems he had reworked a Russian folk-weaver song with a revolutionary slant.⁶⁰

Nikolay Nekrasov was the famous poet and critic who glorified the Russian peasantry and was admired by many radicals including Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Back in Russia, heroic populist literature inspired young Jewish radicals, especially Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel, *What is to be Done?*, and its main character, Rakhmetov – the model for anarchist Alexander Berkman, and Vera Pavlovna – the model for Emma Goldman. The publication of the book landed Chernyshevsky in prison for seven years. Coincidentally, Dovid Edelshtat met a revolutionary populist named Vera at age 15 who inspired him to read Chernyshevsky and act as Rakhmetov would.⁶¹ These powerful influences of his Russian youth would continue to inspire Edelshtat’s Yiddish writing and connect with audiences on a personal and emotional level.

Edelshtat, like the other Sweatshop Poets Morris Winchevsky, Morris Rosenfeld, and Joseph Bovshover grew up speaking and reading Russian, and only begrudgingly learned Yiddish, a language the intelligentsia derided as jargon. Although he had written poetry in Russian since he was fourteen, his first poems in Yiddish appeared only after he moved to New York from Cincinnati, where he toiled as a buttonhole maker. There, he

⁶⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁶¹ Mendelsohn, “The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” 762–63.

became enthralled with the zeal of the anarchist movement. Because of his premature death at age twenty-six his Yiddish never attained the fluency of the other writers in this group. Even so, he translated his experience with the *narodnaia* and in the pogroms of Tsarist Russia, and in the publishing houses, meeting halls, and sweatshops of America into compelling songs like *In Kampf* (In Struggle), *Vakht Oyf!* (Awake!), and *Mayn Tsavoe* (My Testament), which became the most repeated, alluded to, and sung works of the Sweatshop Poets.⁶²

⁶² Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]*, 420–421.

וואכט אויף!

וויא לאנג, אה וויא לאנג וועט איהר בלייבען נאך שקלאפען?
און מראגען דיא שענדליכע קייט!
וויא לאנג וועט איהר גלענצענדע רייכטהימער שאפפען,
פיר דעם וואס בערויבט אייער פרויט?!

*

וויא לאנג וועט איהר שטעהען אייער רוקען געבויגען,
ערנידעריגט, היימלאז, פערשמאכט!
עס טאגט! וואכט אויף! עפענט דיא אויגען!
ערקענט אייער אייזערנע מאכט!

*

פרעדיגט דיא פרייהייט פון קאמפף באריקאדען!
ערקלעהרט דיא מיראנען א קריעג!
מוטה און ענטשלאסענהייט, בראווע קאמעראדען!
וועלען אייך פיהרען צום זיעג!

*

קייטען און מהראנען, אללעס מוז פאלען,
אונזער דעם ארבייטערס שווערד!
מיט דופטענדע בלומען, מיט גאלדענע שטראהלען!
וועט פרייהייט בעציערען דיא ערד!

*Vakht oyf!*⁶³

*Vi lang, o vi lang vet ir blaybn nokh shklafn
Un trogn di shendlekhe keyt?
Vi lang vet ir glentsnde raykhtimer shafn
Far dem, vos baroybt ayer broyt?*

⁶³ Edelshtat, *Folks-gedikhte*, 81; Mlotek, *Mir trogn a gezang!*, 88. Transliteration and translation by Mlotek.

Awake!

How long, oh how long will you remain slaves
And carry degrading chains?
How long will you produce riches
For those who rob you of your bread?

His lack of fluency in Yiddish may have even worked in his favor because he kept his lyrics simple, emotional, and to the point. Many European Yiddish speakers could barely understand the New York Yiddish newspapers that were exported to them because the elitist writers themselves tried to convey complicated political discourse using awkward Yiddish phrases peppered with German and Russian, languages they were more familiar with. Author and critic Irving Howe (1920-1993) describes an anti-scab meeting held by Russian immigrant radicals with handbills in Yiddish and speeches in Russian. One of the speakers was Abraham Cahan, who insisted to the Russian-speaking labor organizers that Yiddish was necessary to reach the masses. Pompously asked by another speaker what Jews did not understand Russian, he replied, “My father.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]*, 102–103.

Immigrant Audience, Yiddish

“How much long-held pain and joy, how many profound experiences, how many gray secrets, how many eternal longings are embodied in the language. And how much intrinsic beauty and harmony lies within it. Whether it is beaming or laughing, serious and harsh or soft and dreamy, dry or damp – [Yiddish] is always a divine work of art, always a picture of the people that created it.”⁶⁵

Esther Frumkin (*An entfer af di gegners fun yidish*, 1922)

Upon arrival, the mostly poor Jewish immigrants had to cope with the shock of alienation from their history, culture, economy, and community, as well as integration into a dynamic, rapidly modernizing and industrializing new country. However, they did not arrive empty-handed.

What they retained from Europe was a vibrant nascent Yiddish culture, reverberations of the *Haskalah* or Jewish Enlightenment, and passionate echoes of the unbounded zeal of *Hasidism*. Combine these qualities with the proletarianization of these formerly *petit bourgeois* tradesmen, artisans, shopkeepers, scholars, and housewives, and the Jewish immigrants emerge as perfect candidates for the radical movements they encountered in the United States. Irving Howe perceptively understood that Jewish life in the late nineteenth century was created in the tension between “the sufferings of an oppressed people” and “utopian expectation and secularized messianic fervor.”⁶⁶ The

⁶⁵ Ester, *An entfer af di gegners fun yidish* (Czernowitz, 1922) in David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5. Esther Frumkin (1880-1943) was a Bundist turned Communist Jewish intellectual, writer, and party leader.

⁶⁶ Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]*, 16.

labor movement and the songs of Edelshtat and the proletarian poets produced by that tension were poised to address both of these experiences.

Immigrant Community

There were effectively three waves of Jewish immigration. The first three thousand Jews were primarily Sephardic and arrived before the Revolutionary War. The second wave was comprised mostly of Germans fleeing after the 1848 revolutions. They would become the so-called “Uptown Jews” in New York, who were assimilated and secularized by the time the third and largest wave arrived. This wave included the more than two million Eastern European Jews who emigrated from Russia after the Kiev pogroms of 1881 until the golden door was closed in 1924.⁶⁷ This wave can be divided into two distinct groups. The first of approximately 600,000 came before 1900 and was much more variegated than the myth of the *shtetl* perpetuates.⁶⁸ They arrived from cities and towns, some urbanized, some educated, some radicalized, and not all as poor ignorant *shtetl* dwellers. Still, they were largely less sophisticated than the second more urbanized and educated group that fled Russia after the Kishinev pogroms in the early 1900s. Those who came before 1900 landed in a daunting new environment, which had experienced a period of unequalled economic development during the second half of the nineteenth century, produced largely by worker exploitation. Labor markets were bloated with the unskilled immigrants pouring into the industrial centers creating progressively

⁶⁷ Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong* (Philadelphia : Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 365.

⁶⁸ Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950), 38–39.

worse conditions in the shops.⁶⁹ At this time, the United States could fairly be regarded as a “plutocracy brazenly flaunting its wealth,” plagued with panics, depressions, and strikes.⁷⁰ Along with the demonstrations, especially the Haymarket Riot of May 1886, the driving forces behind the early proletarian poetry were the abject poverty of life in the tenements and the oppressive conditions in the sweatshops.

Yiddish and the Yiddish Press in the Diaspora

Yiddish was originally a dialect of German, inflected with Jewish and Romance languages, spoken in the Rhine region during the twelfth century and spread east as Jews migrated to escape Crusader instigated persecutions and the Plague. The language developed initially as a result of the isolation of the Jewish communities in France and western Germany. Once in Poland, and later in Russia and other points east, the language took on elements of Slavic languages, and continued to be written in Hebrew characters. As Jews migrated west again, eventually to England and the United States, Yiddish even took on characteristics of English. Yiddish and its various inflections had become the everyday language of East European Jews. In nineteenth century Russia though, intellectuals who preferred German, radicals who preferred Russian, and *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) Jews who preferred Hebrew, dismissed the language as jargon.⁷¹ Legitimation began with the publication of *Kol Mevasser*, a Yiddish newspaper and supplement to the Hebrew *Ha-Melits*, which was distributed between 1862 and 1871 in Russia by Alexander Tsederbaum (1816 – 1893). Ironically, an original intent of the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁰ Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong*, 345–46.

⁷¹ Mordecai Soltes, *The Yiddish Press, an Americanizing Agency* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1950), 19–21. This work is a reprinting of Soltes’ 1924 Columbia dissertation.

editors was to create a means to advocate for the wider use of Russian. It was the benchmark for the beginning of the “standardization of Yiddish orthography and the development of modern Yiddish literary diction,” and created the first consistent “mass audience for Yiddish and a Yiddish writing profession.”⁷² Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the bookseller), the pen name of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, considered by many the father of Yiddish literature, published his first Yiddish story there. He asked, “what life is there for a writer, what profit in his labor, if he is of no use to his people?” Citing poet Judah Leib Gordon he confessed the question – “for whom do I toil?” and replied, that from that moment on, “my soul desired Yiddish.”⁷³ But the hostile environment in Russia in particular and Eastern Europe in general in the 1880’s drove Jewish writers to America along with their audience, creating a demand only a vibrant Yiddish press could satisfy.⁷⁴

⁷² Emanuel Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture : the Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*, Expanded ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 45.

⁷³ Mendele Moykher Sforim, “My Soul Desired Yiddish” in Paul Mendes-Flor, Reinhartz, Jehuda, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York [u.a.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).

⁷⁴ Soltes, *The Yiddish Press, an Americanizing Agency*, 21.



The only Yiddish paper in Russia-Poland before 1890 was Tseederbaum's weekly *Dos yidishes folks-blat* in St. Petersburg, whereas the Yiddish press had been growing rapidly in United States.⁷⁵ In America, the proliferation of the Yiddish press was not guaranteed or immediate, but over time and due to the special genius of Abraham Cahan, founder and editor of *Forverts* (Forward) and a tremendous wave of immigration after 1900, the daily circulation of Yiddish publications in New York City alone by 1916 exceeded an astonishing 537,000 and 716,000 nationally.⁷⁶ This number is not indicative of the actual number of people the press touched because friends and co-workers shared papers, and read aloud to members of every household. Even in distant Jewish outposts

⁷⁵ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 92.

⁷⁶ Soltes, *The Yiddish Press, an Americanizing Agency*, 186; Milton Doroshkin, "The Yiddish Socialist Press in New York, 1880s-1920s," in *Politics of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Literature, and Society*, ed. Dov-Ber Kerler (Walnut Creek (Calif.): Altamira press, 1998), 78.

like Richmond, Virginia, the *Forverts* was read aloud at the end of the working day.⁷⁷ The radicals of Russia may have disrespected Yiddish as jargon, but the Russian radicals of the United States understood quickly that in order to communicate their agenda effectively it must be in a language the common worker understood and to which he was culturally connected. This is the same rationale Lenin used years later to create the Commissariat of Nationalities. The function of the Yiddish press in 19th century Russia was only to disseminate news and literature, but in the United States it was to inform, acculturate, educate, and especially to agitate.⁷⁸ Each paper voiced the sentiment of a particular movement. For example, *Die warheit* (Truth) and *Fraye arbayter shtime* (Free Voice of Labor) represented the anarchists. The United Hebrew Trades established the *Arbeter Zeitung* (Workers' Newspaper), while the *Forverts* (Forward) and *Tsukunft* (Future) were considered arms of the socialist movement.

The radical press became the “bearers of the new social faith,” introducing translated works of literature, news, short stories, science articles, and especially new works by the labor poets. Other than the anarchist *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (their transliteration, see below), all the papers urged their readers to join a union, become a citizen, and vote socialist.⁷⁹ Diasporic literature's ability to connect new world problems and old world modalities in part explains why poets like Edelshtat were effective voices

⁷⁷ Beatrice Lorber, October 27, 2009. Interview in which she described how her father, a member of the Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle), read the *Forverts* to her mother in bed every night.

⁷⁸ Fischler and Sucher, *Free Voice of Labor*. The objective of the *Fraye arbayter shtime* was first to explain the evils of capitalism, then using literature and poetry to educate and inspire labor to join the anarchists.

⁷⁹ Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement*, 274.

for the workers in shops, on the picket lines, and in the union halls. The poetry was often prominently displayed on the front page.



Diasporic Literature

Oscar Handlin wrote of displaced immigrants, “Understanding of their reaction in that exposed state may throw light on the problems of all those whom the modern world somehow uproots.”⁸⁰ Understanding their recent past, though, is the means to comprehend their reaction. Yes, much of the content of Edelshtat’s writing was a product of the trauma caused by his immigrant experience, a reaction to the trials of being uprooted, but it drew its emotion and form from his Russian memory. Jewish diasporic history may have ameliorated some of the shock of migration because of their two thousand year status as permanent exiles. Subsequently, they may have had adaptive skills other groups may not have had. But the most powerful difference from most other immigrants was they did not have a homeland to which they could return, and emigrated mostly as an escape from violence and marginalization, not by choice. Therefore, as Irving Howe observes, “the dominant motif in the culture of the immigrant Jews during

⁸⁰ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 6.

these early decades was nostalgia, the homesickness of castaways.”⁸¹ The radicals in New York used lectures to attract the Yiddish speaking masses of immigrants longing for events to socialize, belong, and feel less displaced. As Tony Michels observes, with lectures, like songs, the audience did not have to be literate to gain substantial benefit because these methods had the “ability to simplify complicated ideas” and access their collective memory.⁸² The songs of Edelshtat were simple and direct, colored with hues of the past: the heroes and tragedies, the familiar sounds of Yiddish used to effectively reach his fellow immigrants.

His poetry and songs may have done more than just reach immigrants; they may also have helped to sustain the labor movement by giving it an identity. Matthew Frye Jacobson distinguishes diasporic literature from other works of protest, saying that group coherence, distinctiveness, and all definitions of national character are also articulated in its literature. “In this respect (diasporic) literary work exerted a normative influence upon the social relations within the group and upon the relation of each member to the group itself.”⁸³ And that literature had to be in Yiddish because it was that Yiddish gave the labor movement the voice it needed to embrace each presser, cutter, buttonhole maker, and cigar roller.

Over time, Edelshtat began to learn and write in Yiddish as a means to transmit his radical message to the people. As his biographer Kalman Marmor tells it, “With the

⁸¹ Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]*, 116.

⁸² Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 79.

⁸³ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 97.

poem, *In kamf* (In struggle), written in four line verses, Edelshtat [was] immediately pleased. He recommended to his sister to sing the poem with the melody of *Ikh sits bay mayn arbet* (I sit at my work) that the old tailor Zolotarov used to sing in their radical club in Cincinnati. And “I myself,” wrote Edelshtat, “am now also in love with the Yiddish language and feeling, because it is so musical and adaptable to express the people’s misery and their hopes for the victory of truth and brotherhood.”⁸⁴ The Yiddish poems of Winchevsky, Edelshtat, Rosenfeld, and Bovshover, delivered in the Yiddish press, shaped the consciousness of the East European immigrants and their new identity as oppressed, but empowered and hopeful workers.

Jewish Religious Memory

Abraham Cahan understood that “Jewish values and traditions were embedded in the Jewish imagination,” no matter what the person’s current status as practicing, non-practicing Jew, or even an atheist like himself. “Ethnic attachments, in the richest sense of that term, operated even upon those who thought they had discarded them as “backward.”” To this end he produced a column in the Yiddish workers newspaper in 1890 called *Sedre*, the Hebrew word for the portion read from the *Torah* each Sabbath. The anarchists followed suit with a column in their paper, *Di fraye arbayer shtime* (the Free Voice of Labor), called *Haftarah* after the writings of the prophets used as commentary in the weekly Sabbath service. As one complimentary letter to the editor commented, the column’s “ideas were hidden in my heart and in my soul.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat*, 50.

⁸⁵ Gerald Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 91.

The use of Jewish language, allusions, and symbols created a connection even when the message was decidedly non-religious, and even anti-religious. Edelshtat wrote:

Each era has its own Torah
Ours is one of freedom and justice.
We also have new prophets -
Borne, Lassalle, Karl Marx;
They will deliver us from exile.⁸⁶

Cahan, working at the newspaper *Forverts*, grasped “the way religious emotions slide into secular passions and how necessary it was for anyone trying to organize immigrant Jewish workers not only to avoid antagonizing but positively to draw upon their religious loyalties.”⁸⁷ According to historian Gerald Sorin, many studies demonstrate that “mobilization of wider support for new interests [...] depends on whether those interests can be reconciled or legitimized by communal values of the traditional culture.” With the proper guidance from the intelligentsia (as Shmuel Niger noted), they can “revive the traditional culture and [...] modernize it,” in other words, “create new identities out of traditional materials.”⁸⁸ This is certainly the case with the scaffolding of new concepts using the prior knowledge of an audience, in this case the new proletarian Jewish immigrant.

⁸⁶ Tcherikower, *Early Jewish Labor Movement*, p.257 in Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 92.; See also Dovid Edelshtat, *Di naye toyre: oder printsipen erklerung fun di anarkhisten-komunisten*. (Leeds: Lidzer anarkhistishe grupe, 1902). Edelshtat composed an entire pamphlet using the Torah motif to promote anarchist-communism.

⁸⁷ Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]*, 112.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 92–93. See also Note 57, p 183 for sources.

Edelshtat, the Martyr: *fun keyver zingen*

During the last days of his life and after his death Dovid Edelshtat's work was transmitted to Europe through the press, particularly the "*Arbeter fraynd*," and through the songs that were sung in meeting halls, in the sweatshops, and on the barricades. His biographer, Kalman Marmor says that three of his songs, *In kamf*, *Di tsavoe*, and *Di arbeter*, all written at the beginning of 1889 were most used by revolutionary organizations in Russia for propaganda purposes and so powerful that the "Tsarist government used to consequently persecute the workers who were found with Edelshtat poems."⁸⁹ Saul Janovsky, Edelshtat's comrade from the earliest Jewish anarchist group in New York, *Pionire der frayhayt* (The Pioneers of Liberty) believed his reputation was "literally as a saint, as the prophet of our movement."⁹⁰

When Edelshtat died on October 17, 1892 his reputation on both sides of the Atlantic had already been established through his poetry, essays, and songs in various newspapers and pamphlets. In fact, several Edelshtat groups were formed in cities across the United States, including a singing group in New York. In Denver, the memorial service included dignitaries of many stripes, anarchist to socialist-democrat, in spite of the ongoing public tension displayed daily in their newspapers. Among those who eulogized him in New York were his early mentor German-American anarchist Johann Most (1846-1906) and his comrade Moyshe Katz. In London there were two memorials

⁸⁹ Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat*, 50.

⁹⁰ Janovsky, *Ershte yorn fun yidishn frayhaytlekhn sotsializm, oytobiografishe zikhroynes fun a pioner un boyer fun der yidisher anarkhistisher bavegung in england un amerike*, 193–195.

for him the Saturday following his death as reported by his longtime friend Saul Janovsky.

Decades later, Janovsky wondered if his death at such a young age contributed to the impression he had made on workers in London back in 1892. He mused if it was because his poems and songs simply aligned with the powerful emotions of each worker and spoke directly to his or her hopes and history. For those who had met Edelshtat in person, he was magnetic and mercurial, and according Janovsky, his words and deeds were in “beautiful and high harmony.”⁹¹ He was ill during the week after Edelshtat’s death but managed a eulogy at the memorial service nonetheless. He speculated that the London comrades might have mourned even more deeply than those in New York and Denver because their knowledge of Edelshtat was gleaned from his poetry and biography, not from knowing him personally. Just a week earlier the *Arbayter fraynd*, the London anarchist newspaper, had printed one of his final poems, and he wondered if its proximity of that last breath of his life may have made his death feel like such a shock.

Janovsky relates this evidence of the solemn and emotional impact Edelshtat’s work had on the common worker at the memorial service at the Berner Street club:

Among the comrades there was one Shteynberg, a cabinetmaker by trade, one of the most devoted and stoic comrades that I knew. Not only had he never contributed a word in any discussion whatever, but rarely even a word from him in a business - meeting, so that we all expected that this person can not utter two words publicly. Today, to everyone’s astonishment, suddenly we saw this same Shteynberg ascend the platform, start a recitation of Edelshtat’s “Testament,” and then begin speaking and explaining with the simplest words, what meaning Edelshtat’s works had for him in his drab worker’s life. He spoke and tears flowed from his eyes, and together with him the entire assembly wept.⁹²

⁹¹ Ibid., 193.

⁹² Ibid., 195.

While this account takes place at a memorial service in the immediate aftermath of his death, there are other witnesses to the power of Edelshtat's influence in London many years later. Anarcho-syndicalist writer and theoretician Rudolph Rocker (1873-1958) recalled the reaction of ordinary onlookers to a massive demonstration as it wended its way to Hyde Park in London after the infamous Kishinev pogroms of 1903. He remembers, "As we marched through the streets, thousands gazed in mute surprise," and when "the singing of Edelshtat's *In kamf* was heard, the onlookers became very solemn and took off their hats to the marchers."⁹³ Janovsky even contends that Edelshtat's death breathed new life into the newspaper *Arbeter fraynd*, even though it was a mere four pages long. It continued to be published until 1914, the beginning of World War I when its pacifist ideology fell into disfavor. After his death Edelshtat's songs remained a force in New York and London as testified to above, but found yet another life with the emergence of the Bund in Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire.

EUROPE AND THE BUND – RETURN

Although there had been a vibrant Yiddish labor movement in England since the 1870s, by the end of the last decade of the nineteenth century a significant conduit for the transmission of revolutionary Yiddish songs created in the United States to the European movements was the Bund. The Bund was the General Jewish Workers' Alliance of Russia, Lithuania, and Poland established in 1897 by thirteen workers in Vilna expressly

⁹³ Mlotek, *Mir trogn a gezang!*, 80.

to agitate and unify the Jewish trade groups or *kassy* and specifically to use Yiddish as the mode of communication.⁹⁴ Ironically, none of the original thirteen was fluent in Yiddish themselves and as late as 1906 the business of the Bund was conducted in both Yiddish and Russian. The establishment of the Bund was the culmination of three distinct eras of socialist organizing in Eastern Europe and the Pale. The first phase from the 1870s until the 1890s was the propaganda era. During this time “Jewish socialists of various tendencies [...] began to propagandize among the Jewish artisans.” The *khruzok* or circle was an institution that was to characterize the second phase of the movement in the 1880s and 1890s. The early circles, first in Vilna during the late 1870s were comprised of students and intellectuals. Later there were circles of tradesmen and workers whose purpose was to create a worker-intelligentsia, which could carry on propaganda independently and create a worker elite. Lastly was the agitation era that began in the 1890s as the circle movement was at an impasse. It had failed to ignite the hoped-for revolutionary zeal for which it was intended. In its stead economic interests were addressed through agitation, including secret meetings, shop organization, and strikes. As early as 1889 the Union of Polish Workers advocated direct action.⁹⁵ This era moved the conversation from Russian to Yiddish as the lingua franca of the movement. What had been evident to Edelshtat and his contemporaries in the United States several years earlier was now dawning on the intellectuals of Europe and Russia.

⁹⁴ Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 79.

⁹⁵ Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale; the Formative Years of the Jewish Workers' Movement in Tsarist Russia* (Cambridge [Eng.] University Press, 1970, n.d.), 30–47.

The years 1890 to 1914 also saw an exponential rise in the creation, printing, and distribution of Yiddish literature, newspapers, and other publications separate from the Bund, which would not officially come into existence until October 1897. There were non-radical events that also explain the growth of Yiddish. There was the establishment of the first Yiddish literary thick journals – *Yidishe folksbibliotek* (1888-89) and *Hoyzfraynd* (1888-96) edited by bourgeois writers Sholem Aleichem and Mordechai Spektor, the first daily newspaper *Der fraynd* (1903) edited by Zionist Sal Ginzburg, the first non-travelling Yiddish theater – Kaminsky theater of Warsaw (1903), and of course the Czernowitz Conference in 1908.⁹⁶ Even so, the Bund was the most potent transmitter of radical poetry and songs and created a bridge between the labor poets of the United States and the Soviet Yiddish Culture project. “The cultural work conducted by the Jewish labor movement was strictly intended to further the cause of socialism, and there were no champions of ‘art for art’s sake’ within the organization.”⁹⁷ This was certainly Edelshtat’s position, and may explain the criticism of Edelshtat as a propagandist by the later, more literary minded critics, but also explain the canonization of his work by the Soviet proponents of Yiddish culture in the late 1920s because of its purity.

⁹⁶ David E. Fishman, “The Bund and Modern Yiddish Culture,” in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 108–109. The thrust of Fishman’s argument is the equal if not secondary influence the Bund had on the growth of Yiddish culture relative to other political and non-political organizations and events despite the popular belief to the contrary.

⁹⁷ Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale; the Formative Years of the Jewish Workers’ Movement in Tsarist Russia*, 124–125.

Half-Intellectuals

The Russian and Polish Jewish intelligentsia of the Bund needed a mediator group to help them communicate with Jewish workers in the city and the village. “Half-intellectuals,” or *polintelligenty*, were the conduits through which the Bund learned to communicate to the Yiddish-speaking worker the ideals of Marxist socialism, using the Yiddish press in an educational capacity. They were not scholars, but graduates of Vilna high schools and teachers college, as well as local yeshivas. They were necessary because, just as in the United States, members of the Russian-Jewish working class were not literate in Russian, and the intellectuals and ideologues were not literate in Yiddish. Shmuel Gozhansky, a leader of the Bund, described their function:

“A specific Jewish workers’ movement only started developing after we had started addressing the workers in Yiddish. [The half-intellectuals were] a kind of an intermediate layer’ [...] who had been brought up with Jewish literature, who could speak and write Hebrew and Yiddish fluently [but] were not yet Russified, [and had the ability...] to write and speak Yiddish to the Jewish worker.”⁹⁸

Joshua Zimmerman explains the tension, irony, and evolution of Gozhansky’s statement by examining his personal history. He was born and raised in Grodno and educated at the Vilna Teacher’s Institute, completing his studies in 1888. He pursued a career teaching in the Crown Jewish school in Vilna where, according to his student Herz Abramowicz, he was notoriously strict applying a Russian-only rule to his students, even though they

⁹⁸ Susanne Marten-Finnis, “The Bundist Press: A Study of Political Change and the Persistence of Anachronistic Language During the Russian Period,” in *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: the Bund at 100* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 13-14. For Gozhanski citation see note 2, p. 26.

lived in a city famous for its pro-Yiddish character.⁹⁹ According to Marten-Finnis, the idea of a Bundist press was first discussed in 1895 at a conference in Minsk, to not only educate the workers in Marxist principles, but also to “*faraynigen di arbeyter fun ale shtedt un ale melokhes*” (unify the workers of all towns and all crafts).¹⁰⁰

Power of Singing

Of the ninety-one pamphlets published by the Bund from 1897 – 1905, most all were political, including four anthologies of revolutionary poetry. Yiddish poetry was central to the life of the Bund. Poetry and the companion songs were printed in newspapers and distributed at meetings in the woods, and “librarians” passed along the illegal literature to members of the circle. The proletarian and revolutionary poems of Vintshevsky, Edelshat, Rosenfeld, and Reisin were “extremely popular among organized workers and youth, and secret meetings of Bundist cells and trade unions usually concluded with [their] recitation or communal singing” because it “added to the power of the poems.”¹⁰¹ This action of singing together to express mutually understood principles would bring these group members closer and make strangers feel as if they belonged.

⁹⁹ Joshua Zimmerman, *Poles, Jews, and the politics of nationality : the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party in late tsarist Russia, 1892-1914* (Madison Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 44-45. Interior quotes from Hirsz Abramowicz, and Yivo Institute for Jewish Research. *Profiles of a lost world : memoirs of East European Jewish life before World War II.* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 124-125. _

¹⁰⁰ Marten-Finnis, “The Bundist Press: A Study of Political Change and the Persistence of Anachronistic Language During the Russian Period,” 14. Also, see note 3 on page 26.

¹⁰¹ Fishman, “The Bund and Modern Yiddish Culture,” 112.

Jasper reminds us that there is a bonding sense of pleasure in protest when collective, and especially reciprocal emotions are shared, such as “losing oneself in [...] song.”¹⁰²

In the mid-1890s when these illegal songs were distributed in the workers’ circles, the first question asked of a visitor from the West was if they had any new songs. For his first meeting with the committee, A. Litwak (pseudonym of Khaim-Yankev Helfand, 1874–1932 and future editor of the Soviet Yiddish literary journal *Dawn*) was advised by Shmuel Levin, a movement leader, to “bring a few labor songs; they will come in handy.” According to Litwak, “the first Yiddish worker songs that were sung in Lithuania and Poland were Edelshtat’s “How do I come brothers, happily singing;” “oh good friend when I am dead;” “we are hated, we are driven”” and others. He added that they were “stronger than a speech or brochure” and “spoke more to the heart of the simple worker.”¹⁰³ He tells the story of that initial meeting with the match workers in Pinsk in 1899. “We first issued a printed proclamation about the situation in the factory.” Later, he added, “we issued a hectograph of two songs, Vintshevski’s “ To the worker’s friend” (*Tsum arbeter fraynt* [literal transliteration]) and Edelshtat’s “Oh good friend when I have died” (*Mayn tsavoe*). The proclamation made an impression and the songs made this impression deep and solid. They simply tore the printed leaflets with songs out of our hands, copied them one after another, and learned them by heart. In a few days all the workers in the factory sang the illegal songs.”¹⁰⁴ The desire of the workers to sing

¹⁰² Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest,” 418. Jasper specifies that collective rituals stir up emotions, and create a sense of “we-ness.” And that “collective rites remind participants of their basic moral commitments.”

¹⁰³ Litwak, “Dos yidishe arbeter-lid,” 232.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

was evident but the depth and power of the contextualized singing had yet to be revealed to him.

Litwak continues in his chapter on Yiddish worker songs in his book *Vos geven – etyudn un zikhroynes*, that illegal literature came to Russia, Lithuania, and Poland by way of London and New York, “first Edelshtat and Vintshevski, later Rozenfeld.”¹⁰⁵ When he first joined an illegal study group of the Jewish Social Democratic movement at age nineteen he says, “the conscious workers sang almost exclusively Russian songs by Nekrasov [and other Russians], and other revolutionary songs of the *Narodnaia Volia*.” Once he witnessed a group of girls sing very simple songs in Yiddish with such great emotion that it stunned him. The girls sang with “rapture!” His own emotional reaction surprised him because the lyrics without the melody were forgettable and unsophisticated. Later he was looking over the lyrics, which he had written down and placed in his book bag and asked himself, “it is not a song ... just a little piece of propaganda in rhyme. Why was it so powerfully felt by the girls?” Later he was in a similar situation with some workers in Kreslov and the same thing happened. He was astonished they had transformed “dry prose into high poetry.”¹⁰⁶

These observations informed his understanding why these songs resonated so powerfully with many newly proletarian Yiddish workers. He explains, “Separated from the primitive state in which they were created, from the proletarian atmosphere and the revolutionary moment, one cannot begin to understand their worth and importance.” He added, “the Yiddish worker sang out; his heart was overflowing; he searched for words

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 226, 231.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 226–229.

for his interior *niggun* (melody) and found in *these* songs that which was easy for him to understand, easy to pronounce.” As a result, “that which we describe [in 1926] as poetry would for the Yiddish worker from another time be too complicated.”¹⁰⁷ Litwak understood that a sense of community, common purpose, and a charged environment have the ability to infuse powerful emotions into the simplest sentiment--and that esoteric forms and language are not necessarily good vehicles for the emotional connection needed to adhere people to a group or an idea. As Jasper recognized, “the richer a movement’s culture – with more rituals, songs, folktales, heroes, denunciation of enemies, and so on – the greater these (emotional) pleasures.”¹⁰⁸

In the 1926 political environment in which he is writing, Litwak laments that none of the new songs (post-1917), which conform in form, content, and provenance to the new political reality have gained traction and that Jewish workers in the Soviet Union and Poland mostly sing songs “written a quarter century back or even earlier.”¹⁰⁹ He is referring to the era when the dissemination of radical literature, poetry, songs, and other Yiddish cultural products created in the United States was transformed due to the efforts of the Bund. For them, poetry was “politics pursued by other means,” and after the 1905 revolution when the state lifted the ban on the Yiddish periodical press, theater, and other literature; the illegal literature that once sent people to Siberia “flooded the cultural marketplace.”¹¹⁰ Litwak, like Janovsky, was able to articulate what the Soviet intelligentsia had missed because his experiences and observations exposed him to that

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 231.

¹⁰⁸ Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest,” 417.

¹⁰⁹ Litwak, “Dos yidishe arbeter-lid,” 242.

¹¹⁰ Fishman, “The Bund and Modern Yiddish Culture,” 112–115.

which could not be empirically gleaned from the page alone. In the woods, in the shops, in the union halls and tenements, Edelshtat's songs moved people and they endured. While the Bund was responsible for the importation, creation, and distribution of illegal Yiddish songs and literature through "librarians," it also prepared the ground for the future Soviet state. The Fourth Congress of the Bund in 1901 called for "national cultural autonomy for Jews in the future Russian democratic republic," later argued by Vladimir Medem in his essay, "The National Question and Social Democracy," which appeared in *Vestnik Bunda*, the Bund's Russian language publication.¹¹¹ The essay provided logic similar to that which Lenin used to establish the national cultural institutions that would be the creators, disseminators, and filters for Soviet cultural products after the October Revolution. Called "neutralism," Medem made his case for national cultural autonomy based on the zero-sum concept that the state could negate national cultural oppression by creating the positive response of allowing "each nation with the opportunity to freely develop its own culture through national institutions [...] without assigning any value to national culture *per se*."¹¹² However, national culture reflects the history of its people and its value is in adhering them to each other and the movement. As Jasper emphatically says, "Our relationships with other humans, even fleeting ones, are charged with emotions," and to positively charge the culture created in a movement, it should reflect its members' history.¹¹³ One example of a misstep or overstep in this regard was the mandatory phonetic spelling of Yiddish words with Hebrew-Aramaic origins and the

¹¹¹ Yoav Peled, "The Concept of National Cultural Autonomy: The First One Hundred Years," in *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 255–256.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 256.

¹¹³ Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest," 405.

removal of final Hebrew form by the Soviet Yiddish Institute.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, the hugely popular speeches and writings of Abraham Cahan are examples that Jewish workers responded positively when propagandized in more authentic Yiddish. Cahan made a point of communicating in “a folksy ‘*yidische yidish*’ so that ‘even the most uneducated worker could understand it,’” rather than, as Tony Michels characterizes it, the “Germanized Yiddish typical of late nineteenth-century journalists.”¹¹⁵

And that returns us to the dilemma confronting the editors of *Emes* and *Khvalyes* fifteen years later.

INSPIRING THEIR HEARTS

This study began as curiosity why Dovid Edelshtat’s legacy was the subject of such debate long after his death, and long after the immediate political circumstances that compelled him to write had passed. That interest prompted investigation of his origins in the Russian Empire, his exile and death in America, the return of his soul but not his body to Eastern Europe, and the eventual rehabilitation of his work and reputation as a pioneer of Soviet Yiddish culture. What were the cause or causes for the transnational as well as trans-political success of his work?

¹¹⁴ Alfred Abraham. Greenbaum, *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in Soviet Russia, 1918-1953* ([Jerusalem]: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, 1978), 63, 110–111.

¹¹⁵ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts : Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 79. Michels is citing Abraham Cahan, *Bleter fun mayn lebn*, vo. 3 (New York: Forverts, 1926), 198.

The framework used to evaluate his work in the Soviet debate seemed insufficient. Why be captive to the capricious nature of state policy and analyze anyone's work with so narrowly circumscribed a set of criteria, especially when looking for values that would qualify it as pioneering or foundational? But that was part of the complicated Soviet cultural-political milieu during its first decades. And until 1928 and then again in the 1930s during the Retreat, the authority favored hegemony over tradition, in what appears to have been a false choice. But the politics of Soviet era false choices is another matter.

Deeper examination of what makes cultural products like Edelshtat's songs valuable to a social movement – be it populism, anarchism, socialism, Bundism or Bolshevism – revealed aspects of his work that had been observed but not accounted for. And while the specific language did not exist until the concept of emotion and its rational use to bind and advance social movements found voice decades later, it was nevertheless palpable and knowable by those in its presence. Janovsky, Litwak, Rudolph Rocker, and others had seen and felt the affective power of Edelshtat's songs whether sung by a few or by thousands; recited in a union hall in the Lower East Side, in the forest outside Vilna, or in Hyde Park.

Certainly lyrical and musical devices contributed to their efficacy. *In kamf*, set to a determined march tune like *Vacht oyf!*, was written one year before Edelshtat died of consumption in 1892. Yet over ten years later, Rocker reported that the thousands of onlookers at a march, “became very solemn” as the masses sang the song that had

become “a hymn of Jewish workers everywhere.”¹¹⁶ Its emphatic meter and repetition of the word “we” in the first two lines of each verse connect both singer and listener to the collective narrative.¹¹⁷ A familiar, stirring melody was also a means to unite writer, movement ideology, and participant. Michl Gelbart identified Russian melodies in three of Edelshtat’s songs: *Der yidisher proletar*, *Tsu di genosn*, and *A romans*. *Vacht oyf!* was recognized by most who heard it because its melody was derived from a famous Polish song of the November Insurrection of 1830-31 and had been used by others in the interim and after. Moyshe Katz reported that after he and some of Edelshtat’s friends listened to Edelshtat recite *Mayn tsavoe* for the first time, they put a Russian melody to it.¹¹⁸ Finally, Edelshtat reportedly asked his sister to sing *In kamf* to the melody of a well-known Yiddish folk song, *Ich sits bay mayn arbet* (I sit at my work).¹¹⁹ Familiar melodies made these songs immediately memorable and sing-able, but also resurrected memories of home, past struggles, and a feeling of hope. He also inscribed each message with his own tragic biography.

Edelshtat transformed his personal experience in the shops where he contracted his disease and radical ethos into declarations of rage, expressed in personal not purely ideological terms.

*O gute fraynd ven ikh vel shtarbn
Trogt tsu mayn keyver undzer fon*

¹¹⁶ Mlotek, *Mir trogn a gezang!*, 80.

¹¹⁷ Marc Miller, *Representing the Immigrant Experience : Morris Rosenfeld and the Emergence of Yiddish Literature in America*, 1st ed. (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 69. Miller identifies this rhetorical device as anaphora, commonly used in Sweatshop poetry.

¹¹⁸ Rothstein, “On the Melody of David Edelstadt’s ‘Vacht oyf!’,” 76–77.

¹¹⁹ Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat*, 50. Rubin, *Voices of a People: the Story of Yiddish Folksong*, 366

Oh good friends when I am dead
Bring our flag to my grave

Confirming the emotional value of his work years later, author and poet Abraham Reisen wrote that in Russia Edelshtat was regarded as a legend and “workers speak of him and sing his songs with tears in their eyes.”¹²⁰ Remember Shteynberg the cabinetmaker. Authors frequently quoted the first stanza of the stirring ballad, *Mayn tsavoe*. Parts of it, as well as his poem *Der arbeter* even emerged years later in folksongs.¹²¹

The songs’ anti-tsarist energy should have been an evaluative factor in the Edelshtat Wars by the members of the *Evseksia*. Three of his songs – *In kampf, Di arbeter*, and *Mayn tsavoe* were utilized by Russian workers’ groups and were eventually banned by the Tsar. People were imprisoned if discovered to have copies in their possession.¹²² There is even one account by “The Golem” poet H. Leivick (1888-1962), who overheard a fellow prisoner in Siberia singing *Mayn tsavoe* in protest of a hanging that was taking place.¹²³

Edelshtat brought the first person into the verses of the proletarian poem while sustaining the movement’s universal themes, a connection that earned his songs devotion, longevity, and inscription into the collective consciousness of workers worldwide.

The components that were needed to create a successful bond with the Yiddish speaking proletarian masses had been understood and documented. Niger and Cahan grasped the fact they needed an intelligentsia to lead them, but not with esoteric

¹²⁰ Mlotek, *Mir trogn a gezang!*, 92.

¹²¹ Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong*, 268.

¹²² Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat*, 50., 366

¹²³ YIVO Institute for Jewish Research., *In Love and in Struggle: The Musical Legacy of the Jewish Labor Bund*. (New York : YIVO, 1999), liner notes 6.

platitudes. They were beleaguered but hopeful, and as Howe said, they could be affected in the tension between “the sufferings of an oppressed people” and “utopian expectation and secularized messianic fervor.”¹²⁴ Connect with their history, identify the problem, be the solution, but most importantly, have an authentic voice and make them feel something. This was Dovid Edelshtat’s strength and gift.

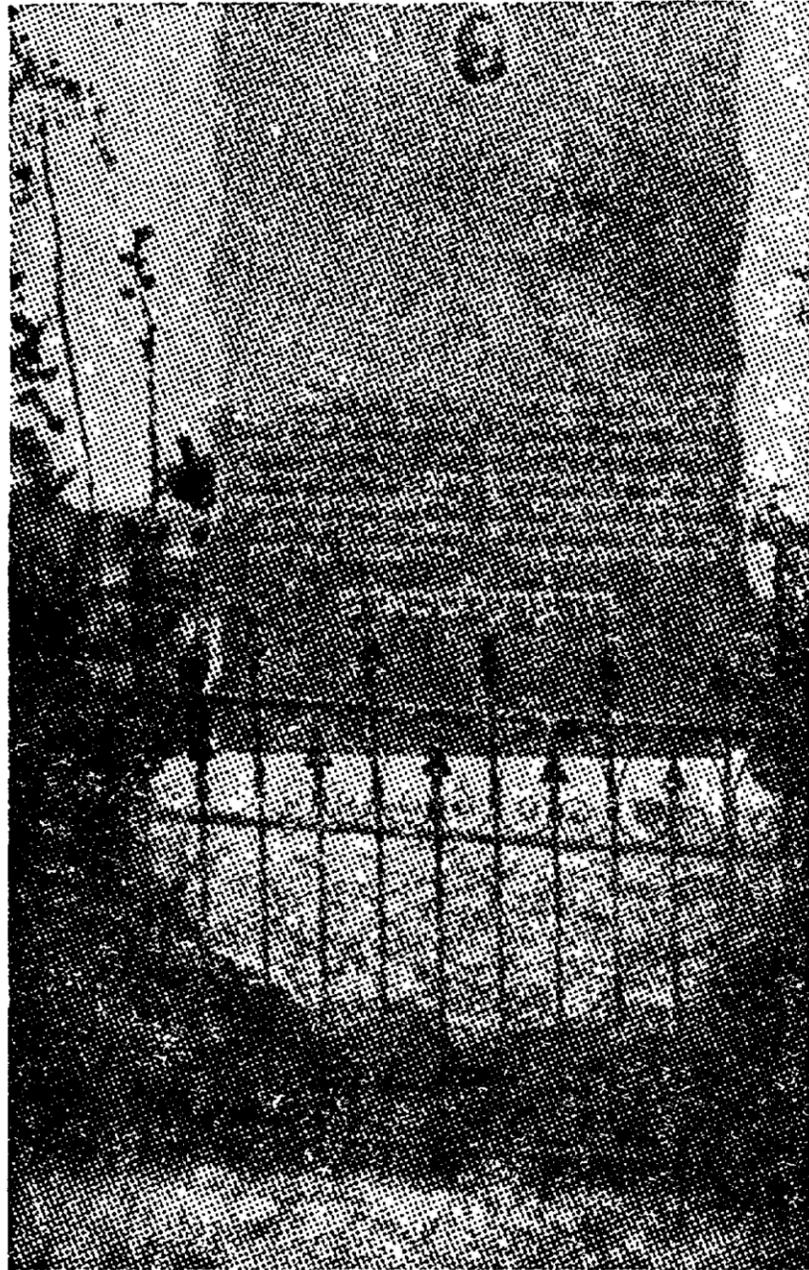
Tsum folk vel ikh fun keyver zingen
Un vel bagaystern zayn harts
I will sing to the people from the grave
And inspire their hearts

¹²⁴ Howe, *World of Our Fathers: [The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made]*, 16.



דוד עדעלשטאַט

Dovid Edelshtat



דוד עדעלשטאטס קבר מיט מצבה
(אויפֿן בית-עולם פֿונעם אַרבעטער־רינג,
אין דענווער)

Dovid Edelshtat's grave (Workman's Circle Cemetery in Denver)



A few years after coming to America

(קאמף-לונדסיק)

נאך זון-בליי איר וועט לאנג ווי א לאנג ווי

כט - לע - סטנד די גן - פרא און פון - סקלא

דע - צנ - גלעג איר וועט לאנג ווי קיים

זא - וועט דעם פאר פון - שא סער - סי - רייב

ברזיס קר - איי ברזיס

EXAMPLE 9: "Vakht oyf!" from Bialostotzky (1952:406)

Bra - cia, roczni - ca, więc po zwycza - ju niech ka - ży to - a - stem sple - ci.

Ten pierwszy pu - char świę - cim dla kra - ju, dru - gi za le - gnych współ - bra - ci.

Ten pierwszy pu - char świę - cim dla kra - ju, dru - gi za le - gnych współ - bra - ci. unis.

EXAMPLE 10: "Bracia, rocznica..." arranged by Józef T. Klakowski (from Prosnak 1979:151-52)

Examples from Robert Rothstein, "On the Melody of David Edelstadt's 'Vacht Oyf'" (1981)

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