

Under the Red Banner

Yiddish Culture in the Communist Countries in the Postwar Era

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2008
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 1431-6757
ISBN 978-3-447-05808-7

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Introduction

Since the Ashkenazi Jews had settled in Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages, Jewish culture there developed gradually and flourished. In the middle of the 19th century, modern Yiddish culture came up in this area and was later popularized almost in the entire world. During the Second World War, the majority of Jews living in this part of Europe were murdered, their cultural realm was destroyed. In addition, after the war, the political influence of the Soviet Union in this region isolated the remaining Eastern European Jews from the rest of the Jewish world and from Jewish culture for many years. Despite postwar mass emigration of the Jewish survivors to the Western countries and Israel, small Jewish communities continued to exist in most of the Communist countries. Jews supporting the Communist system made efforts to revive Yiddish culture in the new political reality. Thus, Jewish organizations, clubs, and cultural societies arose, Jewish theatres were founded. Due to this activity during the postwar era, also a great number of Yiddish books were printed, despite political pressure and a climate of hostility and persecution. The cultural activity which developed “under the red banner” in post-war Communist countries cannot of course be compared to the immense impact the Yiddish culture experienced before the Second World War. Nevertheless, it is necessary that it should be known and remembered.

Unfortunately, for a long time this era in the history of Yiddish culture remained uninvestigated and has not been described in a proper way until today. Therefore the editors of this volume, who within the frame of a bilateral agreement between the Department of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and the University of Potsdam have been cooperating for several years, decided to organize an international conference on *Yiddish Culture in the Communist Countries in the Postwar Era*. This volume of seventeen essays is a collection of papers delivered by scholars from Sweden, the USA, Israel, Germany and Poland at the conference which took place at the Department of Jewish Studies at Jagiellonian University, from 6th to 8th November 2006. It focuses mainly on the following topics:

- Circumstances in which Yiddish culture in Poland, Romania, Lithuania and the USSR was developed after the Second World War;
- Activity of cultural institutions which supported its development like Yiddish theatres in Poland and Romania, the Warsaw Yiddish publishing house Yidish Bukh, Yiddish Society for the Encouragement of Fine Art in Poland, Yiddish press in Poland (*Folks-shtime*, and *Nasz Głos*), and in the Soviet Union (*Sovetish heymland*);
- Exodus of some Yiddish writers from postwar Poland;
- Main motifs of Yiddish literature in the first postwar years in Poland, as well as in the Soviet Union in the 1950ties and later on;

- The impact of Communism on Yiddish language (on the sample of Russian-Yiddish dictionary);
- Efforts of Yiddish writers and cultural activists in the Soviet Union, and in Lithuania to maintain and revive Yiddish culture in the Communist environment.

We hope that this volume can narrow the gap in the newest research on the history of Yiddish culture and literature in postwar Eastern Europe.

All Yiddish personal names in the essays have been transcribed according to the YIVO transcription system. As there is no rule how to pronounce and spell Yiddish personal names and very often some authors use totally different spelling while mentioning the same person, the editors had to make a difficult decision as to which spelling could be accepted. They finally decided not to change the way authors pronounce and spell individual names (e.g. *Shlomo Strauss-Marko* vs. *Shloyme Shtraus-Marko*), taking into consideration the fact, that the same person was often known under different names in different cultural environments, e.g. *Ber Mark* in the Yiddish-speaking world vs. *Bernard Mark* in the Polish-speaking world, *Shloyme Belis* in the first one vs. *Salomon Belis* in the latter one... Thus, instead of correcting the authors' versions we prepared an index of names where the reader will find the various forms used in the volume.

Last but not least, we have the honor and the pleasure of thanking the following persons and institutions for their financial support of the conference as well as for preparing this volume for publication: the Dean of the Faculty of History at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Prof. Dr. hab. Andrzej Banach; the Director of the Department of Jewish Studies at Jagiellonian University, Prof. Dr. hab. Edward Dąbrowa and his deputy Dr. hab. Leszek Hońdo; the Director of the Department of Jewish Studies of the University of Potsdam, Prof. Dr. hab. Karl E. Grözinger; further the Centre for Studies of the Culture and History of East European Jews in Vilnius and Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung in Köln. We are also indebted to Dr. Edyta Gawron, Dr. Michał Galas, Beata Gawlik, Ewa Węgrzyn, Anna Gulińska, Ewa Nowogrodzka, and many other colleagues and students who helped us to organize this conference. We also wish to thank Karen Auerbach who proofread most of the English texts and translated all Polish essays into English, Patrick L. Lahey for proofreading of Th. Soxberger's article, August Grabski who provided the illustrations, Grzegorz Ruta for his patient collecting and preparing the index of names and Dr. Sigrid Senkbeil for helping us with the layout. We further thank Prof. Dr. hab. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska for her suggestions and all the contributors for their collaboration.

All illustrations are reproduced by courtesy of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland.

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