

CHAPTER 8

Hersh Smolar: A Polish Personage in the Soviet Jewish Cultural Scene, 1940s–1960s

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*Communists are reared as people with two souls,
one for themselves, the other for the outside [world].
(Hersh Smolar)¹*

It is a recorded history of a person who for more than fifty years struggled for a better world, of a person with a reverent attitude to Jewish people, to their wellbeing and salvation.

Unfortunately, it was the *oylem-hatoye*, the world of confusion with shadowlike beings shifting and drifting, where Smolar, like so many others, sought the routes to this goal.²

A Soldier of Revolution

Following the post-1917 decline and disintegration of the Russian Empire and the establishment of the communist state on its ruins, Ukrainian and Belarusian Jewry made up the bulk of the Soviet Jewish population. The resulting geographical and dialectal peculiarity affected Soviet Jewish cultural policy, including the Yiddish language planning and construction of a literary canon with Sholem Aleichem, a “Kyivan” (rather than Y. L. Peretz, a “Varsovian”), as the top

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- 1 All quoted translations made directly from non-English sources are mine. Bernard Mark, “Dziennik (opr. Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow),” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2008): 166.
 - 2 Abraham Baraban, “Der nekhtn fun Hersh Smolyar,” *Zayn* 22, no. 78 (1975): 12.

classic author. Still, Jews from the territories making up the interwar Republic of Poland, or Rzeczpospolita, never stopped playing a palpable role in various domains of Soviet Jewish life. In fact, some cultural and political activists defied the categorization as “Soviet” or “Polish.” One of them was Hersh/Grzegorz/Grigorii Smolar (also rendered Smolyar, 1905–1993), a “Polish and Soviet Yiddish writer and editor,” as I described him in an encyclopedia article.³

Smolar was indeed a person of a literary bent who left a legacy of several insightful books, mainly of an autobiographical nature, making it easier, sometimes deceptively so, to write about him. Nevertheless, the narrow definition of him as a man of letters leaves out important phases in his eventful life, namely his activities as a professional revolutionary, resistance fighter, and Communist Party functionary. The following analysis focuses mainly on the late 1940s through the late 1960s when Smolar, a Communist functionary in the Polish People’s Republic, tried and somewhat succeeded in exerting influence on Jewish life in the Soviet Union.

Smolar was born in the town of Zambrów northeast of Warsaw, Poland, and while still a teenager joined local socialist circles, influenced apparently by his elder brother, Nathan, an active Poale (Labor) Zionist and a committed Yiddish educator.⁴ Hersh, however, transformed from being a young Poale Zionist into an ardent devotee of Bolshevism, which was a rather widespread political evolution at that time.⁵ A leader of the local branch of the Jewish Socialist Youth Association, he belonged to a revolutionary committee formed in Zambrów when it fell under Red Army control during the 1920–21 Polish-Soviet War. Following the retreat of the Red Army, he wisely fled Poland and, as a consequence, found himself among the Jewish left-wingers from various countries, including re-emigrants who came to the nascent Soviet Union to build the beckoning bright future of communism. Such “foreigners” formed a visible contingent in the Jewish, essentially Yiddish-speaking, sections that functioned in the Communist Party from 1918 to 1930.⁶

3 Gennady Estraiikh, “Smolar, Hersh,” *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1764–1765.

4 *The Zambrow Memorial Book: In Memory of a Martyred Community That Was Exterminated* (Mahwah, NJ: Jacob Solomon Berger, 2016), 109, 222–223. In the Warsaw ghetto, Nathan Smolar belonged to the circle of Emanuel Ringelblum—see Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 119.

5 *The Zambrow Memorial Book*, 302–303.

6 Smolar’s *Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Farlag, 1975) and *Fun iveveynik: zikhroynes vegn der “yevsektsye”* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Farlag, 1978) give an excellent insight

From Kyiv where he initially settled, Smolar moved to Moscow in 1923 to study in the Yiddish Department of the Communist University for the Peoples of the West, known in Yiddish as *Mayrevke* (from *mayrev*, “west”). That university, named after its first rector, the Polish communist Julian Marchlewski, trained cadres, in particular, for the Communist International, or Comintern, established in 1919 to ignite and coordinate the pro-Soviet revolutionary movement worldwide.⁷ 1928 was the year when Smolar began a new role as a Comintern agent operating in the underground of the Communist Party of Western Belarus, outlawed by the Polish authorities.

When World War II broke out in September 1939, Smolar served a prison sentence in the town of Łomża after being caught during his second clandestine mission in Poland. Liberated in the turmoil of the war, Smolar came to the Soviet-controlled territory where he, a person without any documents proving his identity, endured intense interrogation. It happened, though, that an officer recognized and vouched for him as a comrade from the early 1920s. In a private conversation the old friend told Smolar, hinting about the purges in recent years, “You were lucky to be sitting [in prison] here. In our country you would have been lying [in a grave].”⁸ Indeed, numerous Polish Jewish activists had vanished during the wave of repression unleashed across the country following the August 1937 secret directive targeting “Fascist insurgence, espionage, sabotage, defeatist and terrorist activities of Polish intelligence in the USSR.”⁹ Later, Smolar learned that his file at the Communist Party archive in Minsk contained a 1937 telegram saying that the Soviet secret police were looking for the “well-known Polish spy” Smolar.¹⁰

Being, however, deemed reliable and efficient, Smolar became a significant figure in Białystok, which now, following the German-Soviet partition of Poland in September 1939, functioned as the administrative capital of Western Belarus. He worked as the secretary of the regional chapter of the Soviet Writers’ Union and the managing secretary of the Yiddish newspaper *Byalistoker shtern* (Białystok star), established by the Soviet authorities soon after taking the city

into the work and atmosphere of the Jewish sections.

7 For this and similar universities, see Evgenii V. Panin, “Sozdanie i funktsionirovanie vysshikh uchebnykh zavedenii dlia natsional’nykh men’shinstv, 1920–1930-e gg.” (Kandidat diss., Moscow State University, 2012).

8 Smolar, *Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?*, 156.

9 See, for example, Nikita Petrov and Arsenii Roginskii, “The ‘Polish Operation’ of the NKVD, 1937–8,” in *Stalin’s Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, ed. Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 153.

10 Smolar, *Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?*, 253.

under their control.¹¹ In the fall of 1940, Smolar was elected or, given the nature of the one-candidate “elections,” appointed to the city council in Grodno, then a town in the Białystok Province.¹² He wrote and lectured about both Yiddish and Belarusian literature.¹³ In Białystok he met and married Walentyna Najdus (1909–2004), also a seasoned, prison-hardened communist. A sister of the Yiddish poet Lejb Najdus, she wrote poems and stories but in Polish, and worked as a staff writer on local Polish newspapers. In his report to the authorities, mainly to the Writers’ Union, on the literati brought by the war to Białystok, Smolar placed Najdus in the group of “young or beginner” authors.¹⁴ Hersh and Walentyna’s son, Aleksandr, was born in 1940. His younger brother, Eugeniusz, would be born in Minsk in 1945.

In June 1941, when World War II engulfed the Soviet Union, Smolar did not join the evacuees, though Walentyna and Aleksandr left the city before it fell to the Germans on the fifth day of the warfare. Together with David Richter, a literary critic and a Party supervisor of the Białystok literary milieu, Smolar prepared the last issue of *Byalistoker shtern* and plastered copies on the walls around the city.¹⁵ The beginning of the war in June 1941 might have saved him from being persecuted: the arrests of several Yiddish writers in Minsk on the very eve of the war could probably have been the first step in an interrupted Soviet secret police operation targeting Yiddish literati.¹⁶ Against all odds, Smolar survived (Richter did not) the war in German-occupied Belarus. A leading member of the resistance in the Minsk ghetto, he later fought as commissar of a partisan group operating in Belarusian forests. From July 1943 to July 1944, he edited one of the newspapers published in the areas controlled by the partisans.¹⁷

11 Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, *Obywatel Jidyszlandu: rzecz o żydowskich komunistach w Polsce* (Warsaw: Neriton, 2009), 113–114; Gennady Estraiikh, “The Missing Years: Yiddish Writers in Soviet Białystok, 1939–41,” *East European Jewish Studies* 46, no. 2 (2016): 176–191.

12 “Kandydaty v deputaty sovetov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, November 24, 1940, 1.

13 “Internatsional’nyi vecher,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 20, 1941, 1.

14 Wojciech Śleszyński, “Białostockie środowisko pisarzy sowieckich (1939–1941),” *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* 13 (2000): 108.

15 Smolar, *Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?*, 165.

16 See Gennady Estraiikh and Oleg Budnitskii, “From the Great Terror to the Terror in 1941: The Case of Yiddish Writers in Soviet Belorussia,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 50, no. 3 (2020): 292–308.

17 Sofia A. Pavlova, “Podpol’naia pechat’ Baranovichskoi oblasti v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny,” in *Biblioteki i muzei v sovremennoi obrazovatel’noi i sotsiokul’turnoi srede*, ed. V. P. Iazykovich (Minsk: Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts, 2019), vol. 2, 156–157.

By the end of the war, Smolar settled in Minsk, working there at the Belarusian-language weekly *Literatura i mastatstva* (Literature and art). He also had established contacts with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) headquartered in Moscow. In 1946, his wartime Yiddish memoirs, *Fun Minsker geto* (From the Minsk Ghetto), were published in 10,000 copies by Der Emes (Truth), the Moscow publishing house for Jewish literature which bureaucratically was not subordinate to the JAFC but operated de facto, at least partly, under its control. A year later, the same publisher printed 50,000 copies of the Russian translation of Smolar's book, entitled *Mstiteli geto* (Avengers of the Ghetto). Whereas *Fun Minsker geto* was one of several Moscow-published Yiddish books written by Jewish resistance and partisan fighters, *Mstiteli geto* was unique as a Russian-language publication of this kind. Characteristically, in April 1962, Vladlen Izmozik, later a well-established Soviet historian, shared his thoughts with the writer Ilia Ehrenburg, whom many Jews (including Smolar) saw as a figure of moral authority. Izmozik, who complained, in particular about the lack of literature on the Holocaust, wrote: "How many years has the book *Avengers of the Ghetto*, about the Minsk ghetto, remained out of print?"¹⁸

The JAFC, conceived as nothing more than a propaganda unit of the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo), increasingly and, as it turned out, self-destructively, fulfilled functions of a public organization, concerned in particular with preservation of Yiddish culture. In Minsk, where all influential Yiddish cultural figures (notably the writers Izi Kharik, Moyshe Kulbak, and Zelig Akselrod) perished during the Stalinist purges between 1937 and 1941, Smolar, given his status of a decorated war hero and party veteran, led the attempts to revive Yiddish cultural activities. However he met insurmountable resistance with, as he believed, distinct antisemitic undertones from top functionaries of the Belarusian republic including Panteleimon Ponomarenko, the head of the republican Communist Party organization.¹⁹ While the Belarusian State Yiddish Theater could return to Minsk from evacuation, no Yiddish periodical was relaunched in the city, and the June 1944 decision to establish an academic unit for studying Jewish culture "from Middle Ages to our days" apparently led to nothing.²⁰

18 Yad Vashem Archives, P. 21. 3, File 45.

19 Smolar, *Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?*, 235–247.

20 "V Akademii nauk BSSR," *Izvestiia*, June 7, 1944, 2.

In 1946, Smolar was summoned to the Party's Central Committee in Moscow where Jan Dzerzhinsky (born in the Warsaw Pawiak prison to Zofia Muszkat, the Jewish wife and Party comrade of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet repressive apparatus) told him about a plan to dispatch him to Palestine to work there among local communists. As a disciplined Party veteran, Smolar felt he had no choice but to agree to take on such a mission, though, in reality, he and his wife preferred to return to Poland. Ultimately, following an intervention of Smolar's influential contacts in Warsaw, they were allowed to repatriate.²¹ By leaving the Soviet Union, in all likelihood, he once again inadvertently rescued himself from being imprisoned by the Stalinist secret police when it began a campaign against the JAFK and its associated people.²²

Retrospectively analyzing his life, Smolar identified two categories of Polish Jewish communists among those who survived the war in the Soviet Union: first, former members of illegal Party groups, mainly from Muranowska Dzielnica (or Murdziel for short), a poor Warsaw district, who usually cared very little about preservation of Jewish culture; second, cultural activists who before the war worked in legal Jewish organizations. Smolar did not belong to either of the two groups. In the Polish underground he had little to do with Jewish organizations, but he knew very well and partly belonged to the Soviet Jewish cultural milieu, which made him close to the second group.²³

Once in Poland, Smolar actively participated in shaping the *nusekh Poyln*, or the "Polish style," developed for Jewish social and cultural life in the newly communist country. This was a model of ostensibly autonomous, albeit in reality state-supervised governing over a range of cultural, educational, and publishing institutions working predominantly in Yiddish.²⁴ Significantly, the model also

21 Hersh Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Farlag, 1982), 12–17.

22 See, for example, Shimon Redlich, ed., *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995); Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov, eds., *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, trans. Laura Esther Wolfson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

23 Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 8–9. Jakub Wasersztrum, a veteran of the Polish communist movement who worked with Smolar in Poland, criticized Smolar's classifications as oversimplified—see *Der tsadik in pelts: zamlung fun artiklen* (Tel Aviv: Fraynd tsum shuts fun mentshn-rekht fun lebedike un fun varfn geshtorbene fun kvorim, 1985), 10–14.

24 According to Kamil Kijek, "on the level of official politics, independently of internal Jewish matters, there was no Jewish autonomy in postwar Poland, even in its first years. Jewish committees were fully subjugated to the policies of the state." See "Aliens in the Lands of

had a socioeconomic foundation, mainly in the form of producers and other cooperatives, established with the help of foreign Jewish organizations. Smolar held key positions in the Jewish bureaucracy as chair of the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CCPJ, or *Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce*) from 1949, and of its new weaker incarnation—the Jewish Social-Cultural Association (JSCA, or *Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów*)—from 1950. The latter was fully controlled by the communist party known as the Polish United Workers' Party. From 1950 Smolar also edited the Yiddish newspaper *Folks-shtime* (People's voice) appearing four times weekly in Warsaw. Characteristically, *Folks-shtime's* design, structure, and approach to presenting international, domestic, and specifically Jewish material was initially modeled on the Soviet prototype—the JAFc's newspaper *Eynikayt* (Unity, 1942–1948). In general, it seems that at the beginning Smolar and people in his circle, mainly returnees from the Soviet Union, considered themselves, to an extent, Polish-based counterparts of the JAFc.

Pain and Little Consolation

Before returning to Poland, Smolar spent some time in Moscow where he became a member of the CCPJ formed in 1944. He was appointed to head the Culture and Propaganda Department and act as a member of the committee's presidium. Evidently it was important for him to work in close coordination with the JAFc though it is unclear the degree to which it stemmed from his personal initiative. In any case, he suggested, for instance, cultural exchange by sending to Poland a group of Soviet writers and actors. The JAFc could not accept Smolar's plan without getting permission from its overseers in the Communist Party's Central Committee. Mikhail Suslov, then the head of the Foreign Policy Department at the Central Committee and later known as the Kremlin's "grey cardinal" in charge of ideology, reacted to this suggestion negatively. In the same year, Solomon Mikhoels, chairman of the JAFc, and Itsik Fefer, the JAFc's secretary, were not allowed to participate in a conference on Jewish culture in Poland.²⁵ To all appearances, the nature of the *nusekh Poyln* with the inclusion in the early stages of non-communist activists in the CCJP and other Jewish bodies worried Soviet ideologues. Moreover, by the end of

the Piasts: The Polonization of Lower Silesia and Its Jewish Community in the Years 1945–1950," in *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe: Shared and Comparative Histories*, ed. Tobias Grill (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 245.

25 Redlich, *War, the Holocaust and Stalinism*, 84–85.

1946 the future of the JAFK looked very bleak. The committee had even to prepare a plan for its phasing out, but ultimately was allowed to continue its work.²⁶

In 1948 Smolar was charged with maintaining contact with Viktor Lebedev, Soviet Ambassador to Poland and formerly a functionary of the Sovinformburo, to ensure that a delegation of the JAFK would come to the unveiling of the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters' monument. He also remained in constant touch by telephone with Fefer. Smolar would call one week, Fefer would call the other—usually midday Friday. Smolar sought Fefer's advice, for instance, in his fight against the Bundists, the representatives of foreign Jewish relief organizations, and the Zionists reviled as "the agents of Anglo-Saxon reaction in Poland."²⁷ In the beginning of 1948, however, Smolar and Fefer spoke mainly about organizing the Soviet delegation's visit. Ultimately the unveiling took place on April 19, the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, but, disappointingly, with no Soviet Jewish representatives present at the ceremony.²⁸

Seven months later, in November 1948, a stranger responded rudely to Smolar's routine Friday telephone call: "There is no Itsik nor Fefer here." Smolar immediately understood that something really calamitous had taken place in Moscow. The liquidation of the JAFK and all Soviet institutions for Jewish culture had a devastatingly demoralizing effect among Polish Jewish communists and their sympathizers. In addition to worrying about their friends and colleagues, they feared that a similar situation could arise in Poland. Some diehard veterans such as Smolar's comrade-in-arms Joel (Julian) Łazebnik, then the Secretary General of CCJP, tried to calm his comrades, arguing: "The Party knows what it is doing." Still, according to Smolar: "The deep, dark shadow of the events in the Soviet Union followed me at every step. The suspicion drilled into my brain that the 'Moscow practice' might affect us, too; that nothing would come out of our hope that our extensive and diverse Jewish

26 Gennady Estraiikh, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee," *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2018): 143.

27 Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (New York: Random House, 2006), 219. In the post-Stalinist climate, Smolar deplored the suspension of contacts with relief organizations in 1949 and 1950 and welcomed their return to Poland in 1957. See Gennady Estraiikh, "ORT in Post-Holocaust Poland," in *Educating for Life: New Chapters in the History of ORT*, ed. Rachel Bracha et al. (New York: ORT, 2010), 214–215.

28 Michal Mirski and Hersh Smolar, "Commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: Reminiscences," *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 3, no. 1 (1973): 100; Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 103–117; Redlich, *War, the Holocaust and Stalinism*, 85.

work could change the attitude of the Soviet Union toward millions of its Jews and their needs.”²⁹

Two things must be said about this statement. First, by the end of the 1940s, the Jewish autonomous structure in Poland, created for a broad field of economic and cultural activities, had lost many of its “extensive and diverse” functions. In 1949 Smolar himself reported the communists’ opposition to the “nationalist theories of Jewish autonomism,” while Łazebnik explained that: “The only justification for all organizations in Poland . . . is that they serve to translate into deeds the ideological principles in which the reality of Poland is built today.”³⁰

Second, more important for us here, the aforementioned statement implies that Smolar was unhappy all along with the Soviet experience and sought a new formula for Jewish life in communist society. We read in his memoirs that at the time of his repatriation he already wanted to create in Poland a pattern that should also ultimately help rebuild Jewish life in the Soviet Union. According to Smolar, “In Poland, after the war, we laid the foundation for ‘being different’, for becoming an example for Soviet Jews, to [encourage them to] demand their elementary ethnic civil rights.”³¹ We don’t know if these words, written many years later and carrying a heavy burden of disillusionment, reflected his idealism, naivety or simply retrospective wishful thinking.

Meanwhile, in mid-December 1948, Panteleimon Ponomarenko suggested an “explanation” of what had happened with the JAFC. Ponomarenko led the Soviet delegation to the joint congress of the Polish Workers’ Party and the Polish Socialist Party, the congress that resulted in the formation of the governing Polish United Workers’ Party. According to the head of the Belarusian government and party apparatus (in 1955–57, when his star declined, Ponomarenko would serve as the Soviet ambassador to Poland), the Kremlin had sound reasons for closing down the JAFC. First, it became functionally obsolete following the end of the war. Second, the committee included many “nationalist elements.” Third, no decision had been made concerning a different body dealing with Jewish-related issues.³²

Lack of reliable information about the events of 1948–52 gave rise to rumors and fabrications. One came from the pen of Bernard Turner, a journalist and former inmate of Stalinist prison camps. His misleading “memoirs”

29 Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 163–164.

30 Leon Shapiro, “Poland,” *American Jewish Year Book* 52 (1951): 339.

31 Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 445.

32 *Ibid.*, 162–164.

appeared in 1956 in the Tel Aviv Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt* (Golden chain).³³ The truth was further blurred by the writings of Léon Leneman, a Parisian journalist and also a former inmate of the Gulag. Leneman based his story of the 1948–52 persecutions on various tidbits, including Turner’s “evidence.” He even fictionalized farcical courtroom antics and details of the Yiddish writers’ appearances during the trial in July 1952.³⁴

A good deal of disinformation was fabricated and spread by the Soviets. In April 1949, at the World Peace Congress in Paris, the novelist Aleksandr Fadeev, chairman of the Soviet Writers’ Union, told the following deceptive story: Itsik Fefer, recruited to work for American agent during his 1943 visit in the United States as a representative of JAFC, later lured almost all members of the committee in his anti-Soviet cell.³⁵ In September 1955, Leonid Ilyichev, the head of the Press Department of the Soviet Foreign Office, who came to New York as a member of the Soviet United Nations delegation, reassured American journalists that the Yiddish poet Perets Markish was alive in Moscow.³⁶ In October of the same year, several Soviet literati visited New York where they denied all the rumors about executions of Yiddish writers.³⁷

The truth soon began to catch up. In March 1956, Leon Crystal, a special correspondent of the New York Yiddish daily *Forverts* (Forward), brought information from Moscow about the August 1952 executions of leading figures in the JAFC including the top Yiddish writers David Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, David Hofshiteyn, Leyb Kvitko, and Perets Markish.³⁸ This tragic fact had become known to the Israeli embassy in Moscow, but the Israelis preferred to leak it using a source that could not be traced directly to them. Therefore Crystal’s trip had been planned in such a way that he could claim gleaning the information on his own initiative. Nevertheless, his sensational publication could not convince everyone, especially in the leftist camp, because *Forverts* was reputed as a newspaper holding strongly biased views on the Soviet Union.

33 For more on Turner, see Leib Rochman, “Di Yisroel-ambasade in Moskve hot aroysgeratvet a yidishn zhurnalst,” *Forverts*, December 10, 1955, 2, 5. See also the chapter by Miriam Schulz in this volume.

34 Léon Leneman, *La tragédie des Juifs en U.S.S.R* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1959), 74–78, 89–100; Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–67: A Documented Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 214–217.

35 Papers of Paul (Pesach) Novick, YIVO Archive, RG 1247, File 55, “Fast, Howard.”

36 Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–67*, 50.

37 Y. Khaimson, “Literaturnaya gazeta shtelt-fest az der poet Perets Markish iz toyt,” *Forverts*, January 28, 1956, 1, 10.

38 See also the chapter by Miriam Schulz in this volume.

The moment of shocking clarity came on April 4, 1956, when a *Folks-shtime* article entitled “Undzer veytik un undzer treyst” (Our Pain and Our Consolation) provided revealing information of how Stalinist repressions had devastated the Yiddish cultural circles. The article, which did not carry a byline but was written or at least drafted by Smolar, essentially repeated what Crystal had reported from his fact-finding trip. This was no coincidence. On his way back from Moscow, during a stopover in Warsaw, Crystal briefed Smolar about the results of his investigation. Significantly, however, “Our Pain and Our Consolation” did not contain any reference to Crystal and could not be easily dismissed as a hoax because it appeared in the newspaper of Polish communists. The permission of Smolar’s party overseers to publish the exposé reflected the contemporary tumultuous atmosphere in Polish society and in the party establishment. Smolar, and not he alone, was emboldened by the atmosphere of change created in the Soviet Union after the 20th congress of the Communist Party which launched the process of de-Stalinization.³⁹

The Impact

“Our Pain and Our Consolation” was widely redistributed and interpreted in the world press as the first semiofficial source of information on the liquidation of Soviet Yiddish cultural institutions and their leading personalities between 1948 and 1952. Some people even imagined that the Warsaw newspaper had published it for the benefit of the Soviets. While Nikita Khrushchev, the new First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, did not mention the Stalinist suppression of Jewish institutions in his “secret speech” in February 1956, delivered in the end of the 20th Communist Party congress, the *Folks-shtime* article inadvertently played the role of a supplement to that.⁴⁰ The impact of the article was felt in many corners of the world, consequentially triggering a decline in the number of Jewish organizations, groups, and individuals unconditionally supporting Soviet politics. At the same time, the article remained almost unknown in the Soviet Union where any information about the August 1952 executions could not be published or otherwise publicly discussed until as late as December 1989, when, in the atmosphere of Mikhail

39 Gennady Estraiikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (Oxford: Legenda, 2008), 18–21.

40 Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Khrushcheva: vlast', intelligentsiia, evreiskii vopros* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2012), 237.

Gorbachev's glasnost (openness), the authorities finally admitted it as a historical fact.⁴¹

On May 2, 1956, Smolar wrote to Paul Novick, editor of *Morgn-frayhayt* (Morning freedom), the Yiddish daily of American communists, emphasizing that the article only reflected the newspaper's understanding of the situation rather than aimed to be an official declaration. Like Novick and many others, Smolar was waiting in vain for a statement emanating from the Kremlin with a condemnation of what had been done and a plan for rebuilding the destroyed Yiddish cultural landscape.⁴²

Instead, the appearance of the *Folks-shtime* article irritated Soviet propaganda officials. Leonid Ilyichev called it "slanderous and anti-Soviet" and accused the Warsaw newspaper of picking up facts and distorting them "according to a certain tendency." According to Ilyichev, the principal mistake was that the article presented the tragic fate of the JAFK as an "isolated anti-Semitic drive," whereas the Soviet ideologists insisted on universalizing it as "a part of an anti-intellectual campaign which brought a similar fate to many nationalities—Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Belarusian, and Armenian."⁴³

The Warsaw editors wrote to Ilyichev asking him to be more specific in clarifying what he had found fallacious in the article. He, however, never favored them with an answer. In November 1956, Smolar and his comrades, apparently feeling insulted by his not responding, published "An Open Letter to Comrade Leonid Ilyichev."⁴⁴ Over three months later, in February 1957, the newspaper returned to the issue of Ilyichev's accusations, quoting Joseph Gershman, editor of the Toronto communist Yiddish newspaper *Kanader vokhnblat* (Canadian weekly newspaper). Gershman visited Moscow and met with Ilyichev's deputy who admitted that Ilyichev was not authorized to discuss the *Folks-shtime* article.⁴⁵

Meanwhile the top brass of the Soviet contingent stationed in Poland read a Russian translation of "Our Pain and Our Consolation." It was rumored that the article had also been discussed in the Kremlin during a Politburo meeting and that Anastas Mikoyan, the First Deputy Chairman of the Soviet Council

41 "O tak nazyvaemom 'dele Evreiskogo antifashistskogo komiteta,'" *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* 12 (1989): 34–40.

42 Papers of Paul (Pesach) Novick, YIVO Archive, RG 1247, File 264, "Smolar, Hersh."

43 Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–67*, 59–60.

44 "An ofener briv tsum kh' Leonid Ilyitshov," *Folks-shtime*, November 3, 1956, 4.

45 "Nokhamol vegn Leonid Ilyichovs intervyyu mikoyekh der Folks-shtime," *Folks-shtime*, February 17, 1957, 4.

of Ministers, said during the meeting he could not see anything wrong in it.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the grievances of Soviet ideologists—and, probably, of Polish ones as well—had consequences. In the beginning of 1957, *Folks-shtime* lost its status as an organ of the United Polish Workers Party and was downgraded to an organ of the JSCA.⁴⁷

The French Communist Yiddish writer Chaim Sloves, who visited the Soviet Union in 1958, described his conversation with several Yiddish speakers in the periodicals reading room of the Moscow Lenin Library. All of them were keen to read the available foreign communist Yiddish newspapers, published in Paris, New York, and Tel Aviv.⁴⁸ Sloves, however, did not mention the Warsaw Yiddish newspaper. It seems that in the aftermath of its April 1956 sensational publication *Folks-shtime* at least for some time did not appear in the general reading room. Its issues went to the “special preservation” department whose collection was inaccessible to the general reader.

A few months after the publication of the article, during a visit to Bucharest, Smolar had a chance to speak with Yakov Shternberg, a Soviet (formerly Romanian) poet and theater director. In 1956 Shternberg, recently liberated from the Gulag, was allowed to visit Romania as a consultant for organizing a jubilee performance dedicated to Abraham Goldfaden, the founder of Yiddish theater. He told Smolar about the arrests and interrogations of Yiddish writers.⁴⁹ Smolar could also speak with other survivors of the Gulag. One of them was Moyshe Broderson, a well-known Yiddish poet and playwright in pre-1939 Poland. Freed in September 1955, Broderson arrived in Warsaw in June 1956 and died of a heart attack a mere three weeks later.⁵⁰ In fact, Smolar certainly had already heard stories about the Gulag from those who were lucky enough to be liberated in the late 1930s or in the 1940s.

“Our Pain and Our Consolation” was a cathartic reaction of Smolar and his circle to the events in the Soviet Union. For years they remained under heavy psychological pressure, trying to understand and justify the repressive nature of the Soviet regime. Now they found healing in turning to “unblemished”

46 Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 217.

47 Itche Goldberg and Yuri Suhl, eds., *The End of a Thousand Years: The Recent Exodus of the Jews from Poland* (New York: Committee for Jews in Poland, 1971), 35.

48 Chaim Sloves, “Jewish Culture in the Soviet Union,” *The New Leader*, September 14, 1959, 17–20.

49 Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 221.

50 Hersh Smolar, “Azoy moyredik umgerikht, azoy paynlekh umgerekht,” *Folks-shtime*, August 25, 1956, 4.

Leninism, to Lenin's "positive program concerning Jewish workers and popular masses," the program distorted by "the creators of the anti-Leninist system of [Stalin's] personality cult."⁵¹ From the mid-1950s onward, "Lenin," "Leninism," and "restoration of Leninist norms" were invocations reiterated by communists in many countries in an attempt to draw a line between their beliefs and the Soviet reality. In 1957 Smolar marked Lenin's eighty-seventh anniversary by pointing out that it was "contrary to Lenin's tradition" to keep silent about crimes committed against Soviet Jewish culture and cultural leaders and to refuse to renew Jewish activities in the country.⁵²

In March 1958, Smolar and David Sfar, the leading Yiddish writer and editor in Poland, requested—and to all appearances did not get—their Party leadership's permission to send a letter to Khrushchev. They still wanted to learn what the Soviet leader had in mind concerning Jews and their cultural needs.⁵³ Joshua Shindler, president of the Federation of Polish Jews in England, reported after his visit to Poland that some local Jews expressed concern about the still existing ban on Yiddish publications in Soviet Union, which in the long run could have an adverse effect on Yiddish cultural activities in their country.⁵⁴

Contacts with Soviet Readers and Writers

The press distribution agency Souzpechat, which operated as a monopoly under the Soviet Ministry of Communications, did not include foreign Jewish periodicals in its catalogues, even if they were, like *Folks-shtime*, communist outlets. It meant that a Soviet citizen normally could not subscribe to such publications. Meanwhile, in the second half of 1956 the Soviet censorship agency, or Glavlit, confiscated 44,000 copies of *Folks-shtime*.⁵⁵ Indeed, according to an American communist Yiddish journalist who met with his Warsaw colleagues in the summer of 1956, close to 2,000 copies of each of the paper's four weekly issues would go to the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ Apart from some "difficult" periods, censors regarded *Folks-shtime* as a periodical that a Soviet citizen could receive

51 Hersh Smolar, "Lenins zorg un lere far di yidishe arbeter un folks-masn," *Folks-shtime*, April 21, 1956, 3.

52 Hersh Smolar, "Vegn eynike leninishe normes," *Folks-shtime*, April 20, 1957, 3.

53 Nalewajko-Kulikow, *Obywatel Jidyszlandu*, 235–236.

54 Joshua Shindler, "A Visit to Poland," *Jewish Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1958): 32.

55 Timur A. Dzhailov, "TsK KPSS o pol'skoi intelligentsii (1953–1958 gg.)," *Problemy slavi-anovedeniia* 2 (2000): 180.

56 Chaim Suller, "Jewish Culture in the USSR Today: Another Look One Year Later," *The New Leader*, September 14, 1959, 12.

through mail. As a result, the editorial office of the newspaper became inundated with letters from Soviet Jews asking for the paper.

The paper's editorial staff sponsored subscriptions for a number of their Soviet colleagues, and many Poland-based readers participated in raising funds to cover the expenses incurred from printing additional copies and mailing them to the Soviet Union. From 1955 when the Soviets simplified and eased their requirements for visitors from satellite countries, thousands of Polish tourists went to the Soviet Union, and many of them were Jewish.⁵⁷ As a result, relatives, friends, and colleagues could renew their contacts. The editors would receive from various Soviet locations parcels with salami, stoned fruits, and caviar as barter payment. The most significant contribution, however, came from the American Federation of Polish Jews.⁵⁸ An additional readership was important for the survival of the Warsaw newspaper, too. Interestingly, a Leningrad-based Zionist group, formed in the late 1950s, disseminated literature received through the Israeli embassy as well as letters from Israel, and articles from *Folks-shtime*.⁵⁹ Also in Leningrad, an amateur Yiddish troupe organized language classes using, for lack of a textbook, an alphabet cut from copies of *Folks-shtime*.⁶⁰

In 1954, Smolar made attempts to start getting copies of the newspaper *Birobidzhaner shtern* (Birobidzhan star), the only surviving Soviet Yiddish periodical, published in Birobidzhan, the administrative center of the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR).⁶¹ Smolar had visited Birobidzhan two decades earlier between his two missions to Poland. Although many people knew him personally, he came there under the name of Joseph Brin, a representative of

57 Y. Berger, "Toyznter poylishe yidn zaynen in 1956 geforn bazukhn kroyvim in sovetsn-farband," *Morgn-Frayhayt*, February 4, 1957, 5; Krzysztof Podemski, "The Polish Tourist Abroad: From Stalinism to Schengen and Wizz Air," *Folia Turistica* 25, no. 1 (2011): 211–230; Dariusz Stola, "Opening a Non-Exit State: The Passport Policy of Communist Poland, 1949–1980," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 1 (2015): 106.

58 Smolar, *Oyf der letster positsye mit der letster hofenung*, 256–257.

59 Yaakov Ro'i, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewish Emigration 1948–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 278–279. A former Moscow Jewish activist would get *Folks-shtime* from an Israeli diplomat—see Barukh Podolskii, *Besedy ob ivrite i o mnogom drugom* (Tel Aviv: Sefer Israel, 2004), 220. In the early 1970s, I was a "second-hand reader" of *Folks-shtime*. An old friend of my father, who settled in Novosibirsk after his liberation from the Gulag, would get the newspaper and send it to us after reading it.

60 Alexander Frenkel, "Iz istorii evreiskoi kul'tury v SSSR epokhi 'otpepli': Leningradskii evreiskii muzykal'no-dramaticheskii ansambl," in *Idish: iazyk i kul'tura v Sovetskom Soiuze*, ed. Leonid Katsis et al. (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2009), 319.

61 Nalewajko-Kulikov, *Obywatel Jidyszlandu*, 209–210.

Polish communists sent to welcome the establishment of the Jewish region in the Far East of Russia.⁶² Like other provincial Soviet newspapers, *Birobidzhaner shtern* had (until 1970) only local distribution. Beginning in August 1955, the Warsaw newspaper became the only foreign recipient of complimentary copies of the Birobidzhan paper and began to reprint some material, including poems by Aron Vergelis whose literary career started in Birobidzhan.⁶³ In the summer of 1956, after learning that the foreign press cited material published in Birobidzhan, local functionaries raised alarm and reported the problem up the chain of command to Moscow, zeroing in on *Folks-shtime* as the source of the information leak. In fact, Smolar and his colleagues meant well: their reprints from *Birobidzhaner shtern* and the reproduction of the postmark bearing the official stamp of the JAR were meant to refute the claims that the Birobidzhan area had lost its Jewish definition. To local officials' surprise and relief, Moscow's ideological overseers issued an instruction that *Birobidzhaner shtern* should expand contacts with "progressive Jewish newspapers."⁶⁴

Smolar tried to establish direct contacts with Soviet writers. However, the first attempts were unsuccessful. Emmanuel Kazakevich, a friend from Smolar's youth, rejected his invitation to publish something in the Warsaw newspaper. A promising Yiddish author in the 1930s and a heroic frontline officer during the war, Kazakevich reinvented himself as an accomplished Russian prose writer and never returned to writing in Yiddish. An attempt to engage Iakov Rives, a veteran communist writer, also came to nothing.⁶⁵ Gradually, nevertheless, Soviet authors began to send their works for publishing in Warsaw in the pages of *Folks-shtime* and the Warsaw literary journal *Yidishe shriftn* (Yiddish writings), especially as—apart from the obscure *Birobidzhaner shtern*—they did not have an outlet for their poems, stories, and essays. Similarly to Smolar, they, or at least some of them, had grown bolder after the February 1956 20th congress. In some cases, a publication in *Folks-shtime* was the first sign of life received from a survivor of Stalinism.

Meanwhile, the JSCA focused its efforts on facilitating the repatriation of writers and other cultural figures who had been living in the Soviet Union since

62 Smolar, *Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?*, 126–136. See also Shifra Lipshitz, *Khaloymes un virklekhkayt: Biro-bidzhan un arbets-lagern* (Tel Aviv: Egns, 1979), 71–72.

63 Aron Vergelis and David Bronfman, "Lirishe lider," *Folks-shtime*, October 30, 1955, 5; Aron Vergelis, "Tayge un dzhunglyes," *Folks-shtime*, January 14, 1956, 5.

64 See Gennady Estraiikh, "Birobidzhan in Khrushchev's Thaw: The Soviet and the Western Outlook," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 1 (2019): 61.

65 Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung*, 204–205.

1939. Some of them were directly untouched by the repressions and did not suffer imprisonment, whereas the less fortunate ones were not liberated until after, albeit not immediately after, Stalin's death. In addition to the newspaper *Folks-shtime*, the *nusekh Poyn* infrastructure included a literary journal, a publishing house, a theater, clubs, summer camps, and schools. Yet these institutions lacked a sufficient cadre of journalists, writers, editors, actors, and educators. The majority of those who returned to Poland from the Soviet Union in the wave of repatriation in the second half of the 1940s sooner or later emigrated to Israel or elsewhere. When the new repatriation agreement between the Soviet Union and Poland made emigration of former Polish Jewish citizens once again possible in 1956–59, Smolar and his associates saw it as a chance to supplement their thinned-out ranks. In reality, only a few of the repatriated intellectuals settled permanently in the country.⁶⁶ In 1961, Smolar once again complained about the dearth of intellectuals.⁶⁷

It would be an exaggeration to say that the emigration of several cultural activists seriously affected the Soviet Yiddish cultural milieu. In the 1950s the main problem was not the size of the circle of Yiddish writers, journalists, and actors. The Soviet Writers' Union still had among its member about seventy writers, critics, and translators associated with Yiddish literature.⁶⁸ The real stumbling block was the lack of infrastructure for Jewish creative activity. By 1958 American historian Leon Shapiro who closely monitored the situation in the Soviet Union, wrote that Soviet writers effectively had no other way to publish their works in Yiddish than to send them to the foreign communist press, particularly *Folks-shtime*.⁶⁹ For Yiddish contributors, writing in Yiddish was often a sort of therapy, as poet Moyshe Teyf, who was imprisoned twice, in 1938 and 1951, and fought as a soldier during World War II revealed. In his 1960 poem "I Sing" he wrote: "I sing . . . in order not to cry, / in order not to go out like a light, / if not my song, my bloody-clean one, / I would have lost my mind."⁷⁰

In 1959 Itsik Kipnis, also a recently freed Gulag inmate, serialized in the Warsaw newspaper his autobiographical novel, *Mayn shtetl Sloveshne*

66 See Gennady Estraiakh, "Escape through Poland: Soviet Jewish Emigration in the 1950s," *Jewish History* 31, no. 3–4 (2018): 291–317.

67 "Gekirtster protokol fun dem tsuzamentref mitn hoypt-redaktor fun der Varshever tsaytung 'Folks-shtime' Hersh Smolyar," *Di yidishe gas* 4 (1995): 64–65.

68 Estraiakh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 51–52.

69 Leon Shapiro, "Soviet Union," *American Jewish Year Book* 59 (1958): 320.

70 Moyshe Teyf, *Lider, balades, poemes* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1985), 16.

(My shtetl Sloveshne). In 1961 the Warsaw publishing house Yidish Bukh (Yiddish book) brought out a collection of stories, 33 *noveln* (33 novellas), by Shira Gorshman, and the next year a children's book by Kipnis, *Zeks epl; di kluge binen* (Six apples; the wise bees), came out under the same imprint. In 1965 they printed the Yiddish version of Masha Rolnik's autobiographical story *Ikh muz dertseyln* (I must tell). Rolnik (or Mariia Rolnikaite) wrote it in the form of a diary of a teenage inhabitant of the Vilna ghetto which has often been compared with Anne Frank's diary. The Lithuanian and Russian versions came out in the Soviet Union while the Yiddish version was published in Warsaw in cooperation with the Novosti Press Agency, successor in 1961 to the Sovinformburo. Its Jewish specialist Semen Rabinovich, also a former Gulag inmate, coordinated this joint venture.⁷¹

Apart from publishing stories, poems, and articles by its Soviet authors, *Folks-shtime* chronicled developments in Soviet Jewish life. Judging by the geographical distribution of its Soviet contributors, the paper had readers in many cities and towns, most notably in the Baltic republics. It also had permanent correspondents in the Soviet Union such as Itshok Katsnelson in Moscow, Joseph Pertsovski in Leningrad, Yona Rodinov in Riga, and Shmuel Kolanski in Vilnius.

Sovetish heymland

In August 1956, Joseph Baruch Salsberg, a popular Jewish political activist, came to Moscow with several other leading Canadian communists. He was included in the delegation because Jewish party membership insisted on Salsberg's participation in searching for the truth about anti-Jewish repression and the post-Stalin Soviet leaders' plans concerning Jewish life in Soviet society. The delegation held a series of meetings with high-ranking Soviet functionaries including Mikhail Suslov, now a member of the Politburo. Khrushchev took part in their last meeting. During the meetings, Salsberg raised the question of the status of Soviet Jews, particularly whether they were regarded as a community entitled to have their own press, theaters, and schools. He argued that Soviet Jews should be given a chance to decide what kind of institutions they needed. For this purpose, he proposed opening local Jewish workers' clubs and creation of a ruling body—the All-Union Jewish committee. Clearly,

71 Mariia Rolnikaite, *I eto vse pravda* (St. Petersburg: Zolotoi vek, 2002), 523, 555–567.

Salsberg's suggested borrowing the model of Jewish communal organization implemented in post-war Poland.

In their response, the Soviet representatives explained that only Birobidzhan-based Jews qualified to be considered a special community, whereas in all other parts of the country Jews were treated "like all other Soviet citizens."⁷² Nevertheless, five years later, in August 1961, it was in Moscow rather than in Birobidzhan that the first issue of a new Yiddish journal appeared. Entitled *Sovetish heymland* (Soviet homeland) and based in the capital, the journal effectively undermined the Birobidzhan-centered model of Soviet Jewry. Aron Vergelis, editor of the journal, became the voice of the Soviet policy towards Jews. And this was quite an unpleasant voice to many people in the country and abroad.

Vergelis and Smolar, two abrasive characters, had a confrontation in November 1961 when Smolar visited the office of the Moscow journal. They knew each other from the time when both were associated with the JAFK. In fact, Smolar knew all or almost all the participants of the meeting. He had worked with some of them in the 1920s. During this "friendly" meeting, with many fine words said about *Folks-shtime's* role in "saving" Soviet Yiddish literary culture, Vergelis and several other Moscow writers sharply rebuked Smolar for "indiscriminately" publishing materials without approval from the Moscow-based Yiddish editors. For example, they resented the publication in *Folks-shtime* of an article by Odessa writer Irme Druker who claimed that poet Shmuel Halkin, a highly respected figure in the Yiddish literary community, had passed the baton to veteran writer Joseph Rabin.⁷³ This was a particularly sensitive issue for Vergelis and his supporters whose opponents (falsely) maintained that the launch of *Sovietish heymland* was purposefully delayed in expectation of Halkin's death. According to Vergelis's detractors, Halkin was the most obvious person to edit the Moscow journal.

From the very beginning, Vergelis kept a jealous eye over the authors who were in a "non-exclusive relationship" with his journal. He sought to re-establish the conditions of the 1940s when no direct contacts existed between Soviet authors and non-Soviet communist periodicals. Manuscripts would be

72 Gennady Estraikh, "Metamorphoses of Morgn-frayhayt," in *Yiddish and the Left*, ed. Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 151–156; Gerald J. J. Tulchinsky, *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 104–108.

73 "Gekirtster protokol fun dem tsuzamentref mitn hoypt-redaktor fun der Varshever tsaytung 'Folks-shtime' Hersh Smolyar," 62–71; Smolar, *Oyf der letster positsye mit der letster hofenung*, 261–262.

sent only through such official channels as the Sovinformburo. Although the Novosti Press Agency played a similar role in the post-Stalinist period, many poems, stories, and essays would reach Warsaw bypassing Soviet censorship.⁷⁴ Significantly, when the writers or their widows sent a text for publication in Poland, a socialist country, they did not regard themselves as dissidents.

Push came to shove. Smolar saw himself as a custodian of *real* Leninism and an “elder brother” for the surviving Soviet Yiddish literati. He was thirteen years older than Vergelis and, like many Soviet Yiddish writers, looked at him as an insolent upstart with an arguably murky reputation concerning his conduct in the 1940s, particularly during the Stalinist repression. Smolar met separately with those writers who opposed Vergelis. The alternative meeting took place at the apartment of Vergelis’s archenemy, Moyshe Belenky, who headed the Yiddish Theater School before the repression of 1948 and also was editor-in-chief of the publishing house Der Emes. Belenky enjoyed support among the group opposing Vergelis and believed that he, rather than Vergelis, deserved to edit the Moscow journal. Smolar promised the writers he would publish their works, disregarding Vergelis’s complaints.⁷⁵ Ironically, the Warsaw newspaper became a kind of “dissident periodical”—not, of course, in terms of communist ideology but of Vergelis’s “domestic policy.”

On November 29, 1962, Konstantin Fedin, a prominent Russian writer, chaired a meeting called by the Writers’ Union in response to a letter from a group of Yiddish writers who wanted to remove Vergelis from his editorial post. In particular, he was accused of ignoring the 19th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. In protest, “the Polish comrades” sent back the March-April issue of the journal.⁷⁶ Vergelis kept the job, but learned the lesson: in 1963 some fifty pages of the journal’s March-April issue were devoted to the 20th anniversary of the uprising. This material included an article by Hersh Smolar. In April 1965 Vergelis visited Warsaw. However, his travel notes contained little traces of personal contacts with local Yiddish literati.⁷⁷

It seems that Smolar had much better relations with Semen Rabinovich, a veteran Soviet Yiddish journalist, who, after his release from the Gulag, worked

74 Hersh Smolar, “Zikhroynes fun gevezene redaktorn fun yidish tsaytungen in Poyln,” in *Yahadut Be-Berit ha-Mo’atsot ba-aspaklaryah shel ‘itonut yidish be-Polin*, ed. Mordechai Altshuler (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975), lamed-giml, lamed-tes.

75 Smolar, “Zikhroynes fun gevezene redaktorn fun yidish tsaytungen in Poyln,” lamed-zain.

76 Stenogramma zasedaniia sekretariata ot 29 noiabria 1962 g., Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 631-30-952.

77 Aron Vergelis, “Rayzes: Poyln,” *Sovetish heymland* 11 (1965): 122.

at the Sovinformburo and, then, the Novosti Press Agency. (Novick, whose relations with Vergelis turned sour by the end of the 1960s, wrote to Smolar on December 28, 1971, following Rabinovich's death, that the deceased was "a decent person, not like the Red-Haired"—Vergelis's nickname.)⁷⁸ Rabinovich was also the Moscow correspondent for the New York *Morgn-frayhayt*. His main responsibility at the Novosti Press Agency was preparing material recommended for publication in the foreign Jewish press. This was a source of income for Yiddish writers because the Agency paid them honoraria.⁷⁹ As editor of one of the Agency's partners, Smolar received an invitation to come to Moscow to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.⁸⁰ However, the invitation was cancelled following Smolar's trip to Israel in March 1967.

The problem was that Smolar went to the twentieth jubilee of *Kol-Haam* (meaning in Hebrew the same as *Folks-shtime*—"People's voice"), which was a communist newspaper, but since the 1965 split in the Israeli communist movement it had been an organ of the "revisionist" New Communist List (Rakah) formed in opposition to the dogmatically pro-Soviet Israeli Communist Party (Maki). During a meeting with a group of Israeli journalists Smolar posited that, in the current political climate, his newspaper remained for Polish and Soviet Jews the only link with the outside world.⁸¹ In the end, the trip, initially approved by the Polish authorities, was denounced as an ideologically harmful act that revealed Smolar's Zionist mindset.⁸² The atmosphere created after the June 1967 war in the Middle East made Smolar's "wrongdoing" more consequential, especially as in the first days of the conflict *Folks-shtime* did not rely on the Polish and Soviet news agencies and reported Israel's decisive victory and its acclaim by the world Jewry. This disobedience provoked condemnation from the Polish authorities.⁸³

78 Papers of Paul (Pesach) Novick, YIVO Archive, RG 1247, File 265, "Smolar, Hersh."

79 See, for example, Mordechai Altshuler, *Briv fun yidische sovetshe shraybers* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1979), 433.

80 Smolar, "Zikhroynes fun gevezene redaktorn fun yidish tsaytungen in Poyln," lamed-zain.

81 "Hersh Smolyar, redaktor fun Varshe 'Folks-shteme' bagrist in Yisroel," *Forverts*, March 13, 1967, 8.

82 Anatol Laszczyński, "Sprawa redaktora naczelnego 'Folks-Sztyme' Grzegorza Smolara na tle wydarzeń lat 1967–1968," *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 3, no. 2 (July 1995–June 1996): 131–152.

83 Anat Plocker, "Zionists to Dayan": *The anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland, 1967–1968*. Ph.D. dissertation (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2009), 41, 69, 75–76.

1968 and Later

Polish Jewish life, recreated in the first years after the liberation from German occupation, looked like an oasis compared with the Soviet wasteland. Significantly, the organizational structure of Jewish life in communist Poland resembled that in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and early 1930s. This contrasting picture between the post-Stalinist Soviet Union and Poland on the one hand and between Poland before and Poland after 1968 on the other hand helped create a separate mythology for Polish Jewish communist activities.

According to that narrative, such people as Smolar followed Leninist norms in their work in national policies, whereas Josef Stalin and Poland's postwar Communist leader Władysław Gomułka formed hostile, anti-Leninist environments.

In 1968, in the wave of the Polish authorities' sweeping removal of "Zionist" intellectuals and apparatchiks, Smolar found himself being punished by the authorities. In March he lost his job, and in April lost his party membership.⁸⁴ He wrote to Gomułka recalling sentimentously his experience of writing to Lenin nearly half a century earlier when as a young worker in Kyiv he had faced a time of great personal difficulty—and Lenin's secretary had answered him.⁸⁵ Adoration of Lenin and Leninism remained an important part of his outlook even after the collapse of the Polish experiment of Jewish life and the dramatic changes in his own life.

In 1970 he was allowed to go to Paris on the invitation of Dora Teitelboim, a Yiddish poet. His sister Esther, married to the Yiddish writer Benyomin Shlevin, also lived in Paris. Smolar's wife, a well-established historian in Polish academia, did not follow him nor their sons, active participants in 1968 student protests who were arrested in Poland and later settled abroad. In 1971, Smolar moved to Israel and lived there until the end of his life, working tirelessly on writing books which recounted his rich experiences.⁸⁶ He also made changes to his previously published works. Thus, in his revised book, *Sovetishe yidn hinter geto-tsoymen* (1985, called *Fun Minsker geto* in 1946),⁸⁷ he deleted the reference to the inspiring and leading roles of Stalin and Ponomarenko in organizing the

84 Piotr Smolar, *Mauvais juif* (Paris: Équateurs, 2019), 123–128.

85 Marci Shore, "If We're Proud of Freud . . .: The Family Romance of 'Judeo-Bolshevism,'" *East European Politics and Societies* 23, no. 3 (2009): 307–308.

86 Łaszczzyński, "Sprawa redaktora naczelnego 'Folks-Sztyme' Grzegorza Smolara na tle wydarzeń lat 1967–1968," 134.

87 It was translated into English as *The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet-Jewish Partisans Against the Nazis* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1989).

anti-Nazi resistance.⁸⁸ Some of his former comrades were unhappy with the version of the events in his memoirs and even compared him with “a righteous person in a fur coat” referring to a Hassidic parable about things one can do in freezing cold: build a fire to warm many people or wrap oneself in a fur coat.⁸⁹ No doubt, the memoirs are self-serving and not always reliable. For all that, his literary legacy provides a unique informative insight into, and a hindsight evaluation of, the bygone world of Jewish communists in the Soviet Union and Poland.

In December 1969, not long before leaving Poland, Smolar wrote a letter to the editors of the Parisian communist Yiddish newspaper *Naye prese* (New press) reassuring them of his loyalty to communism.⁹⁰ Publishing the minutes of the November 1961 meeting, Vergelis added a footnote to Smolar’s words “We will not make any ideological compromises.” The footnote read: “In the coming years, following his moving from Poland to Israel, H. Smolar backed off from his extreme ideological position and went to the other extreme of anti-communism.”⁹¹ In reality, he remained loyal to communism *as he understood it* and, at the same time, rejected the ideology practiced in the Soviet Union and its Polish satellite.

All in all, despite leaving the Soviet Union in 1946, Smolar remained a significant presence in Soviet Jewish life for over two decades. The newspaper under his editorship had a relatively sizable readership in the Soviet Union and functioned as an important, sometimes sole outlet for Soviet authors. He also played a historical role in exposing Stalinist crimes against Jewish cultural figures. It was painful for him to learn that some Soviet authors of anti-Zionist books described him as a profiteer in the ghetto rather than a resistance fighter. However, later publications gave his heroic reputation back to him.⁹² Contemporary historians recognize Smolar’s paramount role in the resistance

88 Franziska Exeler, “Reckoning with Occupation: Soviet Power, Local Communities, and the Ghosts of Wartime Behavior in Post-1944 Belorussia” (PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2013), 362.

89 See *Der tsadik in pelts*.

90 “Farvos mir hobn nisht gemakht far im keyn reklame...,” *Naye prese*, July 29–30, 1975, 3–4.

91 “Gekirtster protokol fun dem tsuzamentref mitn hoypt-redaktor fun der Varshever tsaytung ‘Folks-shtime’ Hersh Smolyar,” 65. See also Aron Vergelis, *A vort afn ort: polemische notitsn* [Supplement to *Sovetish heymland*, nos. 6–7, 1984] (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1984), 47–48.

92 See, for example, Emanuil Ioffe, “Eto bylo v Minskom getto,” *Belaruskaia dumka* 10 (2018): 45–51.

groups formed in the Minsk ghetto.⁹³ His three books written and published in Israel—*Vu bistu khaver Sidorov?* (Where are you, comrade Sidorov?, 1975), *Fun ineveynik* (From inside, 1978), and *Oyf der letster pozitsye, mit der letster hofenung* (On the last position, with the last hope, 1982)—are a must-read (in original Yiddish or in Hebrew translation) for students of Soviet and Polish Jewish history in the twentieth century.

93 See, in particular, Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto 1941–1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Evgeny Finkel, “The Phoenix Effect of State Repression: Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust,” *The American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): 339–353.