

## Secular Yiddishkait: Left Politics, Culture, and Community

Ester Reiter

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# Secular *Yiddishkait*: Left Politics, Culture, and Community

Ester Reiter

Shnel loyfn di reder  
Vild klapn mahshinen  
In shop is shmutzik un heys  
Di kop vert fartumlt  
In oygn vert finster  
Finster fun trenn un shveys

Wheels turning so swiftly  
Wildly pounding machinery  
The shop is dirty and hot  
My head how its aching  
My eyes see the darkness  
Darkness from tears and sweat

Loyft um der mayster  
A chaye, a vilde  
Er traybt tsu der sh'chite di shof  
O, vi lang vet ir vartn  
Vi lang vet ir duld'n  
Arbeter brider vacht oyf

All around runs the foreman  
A beast, a wild one  
He drives to the slaughter, the sheep  
Oh, how long will you wait  
How long to be patient?  
Wake up, working brother, wake up!<sup>1</sup>

THE WELL KNOWN YIDDISH POET, David Edelstadt, came to the United States in 1881, worked in sweatshops where he contracted tuberculosis, and died in 1892 at the age of 26. The song called "Sweatshop" eloquently expresses why Jews found left politics so compelling. For many of my parents' generation who arrived in the new world after the turn of the 20th century, first hand experience with the bloody pogroms in eastern Europe and the contemptuous treatment meted out to "green-horns" in the new world taught them that to be a Jew, to be a Jew with dignity and with hope, meant to be a socialist, a communist — someone who had the courage

<sup>1</sup>From Jerry Silverman, *The Yiddish Song Book* (New York 1983), 168. Note: the English translation is not a literal one, but provides a sense of the mood Edelstadt conveys in Yiddish. Thus, e.g. "Shnel loyfn di reder" is translated as "wheels turning so swiftly" rather than "wheels running quickly." It is not clear whether Silverman himself did the translation.

Ester Reiter, "Secular *Yiddishkait*: Left Politics, Culture, and Community," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 121-46.

to dream (in Yiddish) of a better world for Jews, and for all the world's downtrodden. I grew up in this milieu in New York, attending the Yiddish Sholem Aleichem Shule in the early 1950s and later the Mittlshul, originally part of the Jewish People's Fraternal Organization (JPFO) of the International Workers Order (IWO). I spent summers at Camp Kinderland in upstate New York, a place that supported a secular, socialist, pro-Soviet Jewish point of view at a time when the world of my Brooklyn neighbourhood, the media, and the public schools were dominated by the virulent red baiting of that period. Kinderland, celebrating its 75th anniversary in 1999, was investigated by McCarthy in the House Un-American Activities Committee Hearings in the early 1950s. I still remember the craziness of some of the allegations: an early lesson in how the media can misrepresent and distort.<sup>2</sup> As a child learning Yiddish, the full cultural package was part of the experience. We learned about Yiddish culture and politics through performing plays in Yiddish, singing Yiddish songs, and dancing Middle Eastern and eastern European folk dances. Brighton Beach in Brooklyn had its own mandolin orchestra; my mother's best friend, Rose Friedman, worked in a garment factory and sang soprano in the Jewish Philharmonic Choir. Suspect left-wingers such as Harry Belafonte, Paul Robeson, and black-listed actors such as Howard DaSilva and Morris Carnovsky, performed in our modest venues. When I came to Canada in 1968 I discovered the Canadian version of a community that I thought existed only in New York.<sup>3</sup>

This paper explores the history of the Canadian experience of the pro-Soviet-socialist-Jewish-left from the vantage point of an insider/outsider in this community.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the community refers to a collectivity that, while sharing a common history with other Jews, had developed a particular cultural and political outlook that united them.<sup>5</sup> The boundaries of who was considered a member of this community involved both exclusionary and inclusionary practices. While my

<sup>2</sup>One of my memories is the accusation that we had hammers and sickles on the tablecloths. I thought that was very funny, as we ate in a very primitive building and barely had silverware, let alone tablecloths. Less humorous were the stories my "boyfriend" Davey told, describing how he and his little sister were hounded by the FBI going to and from school to reveal the whereabouts of their Communist father, who was in hiding, as it was illegal under the Smith Act to be a member of the Communist Party.

<sup>3</sup>The Canadians were much more familiar with the New York community than the New Yorkers with Canada — a familiar story. Many of my Yiddish teachers had given workshops in Canada, two had even been directors of the camp, and many of the musical arrangements of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir were done by my choir leader in New York, Maurice Rauch.

<sup>4</sup>There is a broader constellation of left-wing Jewish organizations that included groups such as the Jewish Labour Committee and the Labour Zionists, which had co-existed along with the Bolsheviks in the pre-1925 *Arbeiter Ring* and remained active in the post World War II years.

<sup>5</sup>This definition is adapted from discussions of racial/ethnic divisions in Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries* (London 1992).



"Camp Kinderland, N.Y., 1949." Author is third from left, second row. The flag says "Raynkait Fon" (Cleanliness Flag) for Group 4.

personal history is south of the border, and as Tulchinsky points out the Canadian experience is distinctive, there are many similarities.<sup>6</sup> I use interviews, archival materials, and a literature review to explore this community, focussing on the 1920s to the 1950s. Several themes emerge: Jewish identity as a contested terrain; the formation of a non-religious, socialist, Jewish identity at odds with a Judaism defined by religious practice; why people were attracted to this community or the rich personal and cultural opportunities created through these bonds with other left wing Jews; a history emphasizing the *shules*, the camp, and the chorus as examples of the cultural life; and finally factors leading to the decline of this milieu and some comments on its legacy.

### *Jewish Identity As Contested Terrain*

Jewish leftists sympathetic to the Communist Party (CP) played important roles as union activists, holders of political office, and contributors to the cultural life of the Jewish community, yet, with some important exceptions, many of the historians of Jews in Canada writing in English either omit mention of this community or marginalise its significance. Indeed, Stephen Speisman describes the Labor League as "an embarrassment to the community."<sup>7</sup> "Who's Who" books listing prominent citizens from the Jewish community leave out leftists such as Joe Salsberg, the Communist MLA from Toronto, or Joe Zuken, the Winnipeg Communist alderman, both of whom held office for many years.<sup>8</sup> Contributions of the Jewish left to union organizing have in recent years received more attention from labour and feminist historians such as Joan Sangster, Ruth Frager, and Mercedes Steedman.<sup>9</sup>

Who is a Jew is not a simple question. The answer depends on who you ask.<sup>10</sup> Some, for example Isaac Deutscher, would include Jewish heretics such as Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, and Sigmund Freud as part of the Jewish tradition. Stuart Hall speaks of how culture comprises the terrain for producing

<sup>6</sup>Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: the Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto 1992).

<sup>7</sup>Stephen A. Speisman, *The Jews of Toronto* (Toronto 1979), 317.

<sup>8</sup>Edmond Y. Lipsitz, ed., *Canadian Jewry Today: Who's Who in Canadian Jewry* (Downsview, Ontario 1989).

<sup>9</sup>Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women in the Canadian Left, 1920-1980* (Toronto 1989); Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto 1992); and Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto 1997).

<sup>10</sup>Jewish identity, like that of other ethnic groups, is not a static entity, but will have varying claims and assertions as to content. As Stephen Cornell notes, the basis of group attachment may vary within a group as well as across groups, and a single ethnic population may embrace an assortment of different communities. Stephen Cornell, "The Variable Ties That Bind:

identity and the constitution of social subjects as a continuing struggle.<sup>11</sup> A cultural community with shared meanings contains an element of tradition, but, the identity that is formed is also transformed. The Jewish secular radicals that are the focus of this paper were socialists and communists, but simultaneously identified strongly as Jews and lived in a community that was largely Jewish. They challenged orthodox Jewry in the early years, even organizing Yom Kippur "feasts" to flaunt their opposition to the rule of the synagogue.<sup>12</sup> Thus, these radical Jews, breaking with Jewish orthodoxy and a traditional life, created a new home for themselves. Their dream of a classless society was a Jewish dream, conceived in Yiddish as a better world, not just for Jewish workers, but for all. It was nevertheless shaped by a secularized group identity.<sup>13</sup>

Where chroniclers of the Canadian Jewish experience tend to use terms such as the "Canadian Jewish community" as self-explanatory, in the sociological literature, what is meant by ethnicity, culture, identity, and community have been dominant sources of inquiry, as these terms are central in exploring social organization, social existence, and social experience.<sup>14</sup> Ethnicity may include the bonds of religion, language, or race, as well as a common culture. Community implies connection: shared beliefs, circumstances, priorities, relationships, and concerns.<sup>15</sup> This left-Jewish community, particularly in the early years, formed a *gemeinschaft*; an intimate, familiar, and sympathetic human association. While they had relationships with similar groupings in other parts of Canada and the United States, people in each city tended to live within the confines of a shared physical territory; around College and Spadina Avenues in Toronto. Thus they were neighbours, friends, co-workers, as well as fellow Jews and comrades with a strong sense of solidarity. The unique culture these eastern European Jews developed is termed *Yiddishkait*, a devotion to cultural values associated with Yiddish, the language that was at its centre. It had a class component as well. *Yiddishkait* was largely proletarian, stemming from its usage by workers. Formal or respectful greetings in these circles were *Chaver* or *Chaverte* instead of Mr. or Mrs. *Chaver* and *Chaverte* are the Yiddish words for friend.

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Content and Circumstances in Ethnic Processes," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 19 (April 1996), 265-289.

<sup>11</sup>"The Problem of Ideology," in Wahneema H. Lubiano, ed., *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, And Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (New York 1998), 289-299.

<sup>12</sup>Personal communication, Ben Shek, February 2001. All interviews and correspondence will be available at the UJPO Archives in the near future.

<sup>13</sup>Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements 1871-1917* (New York 1977), xi.

<sup>14</sup>For example, Gerald Tulchinsky in his book *Taking Root*, uses the term interchangeably with the history of Canadian Jewry. On the other hand, the essay "Community," in Edgar Borgotta and Rhonda Montgomery, eds., *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, (New York 2000), 362-369, describes the range of literature exploring what is meant by community.

While members of this left community would maintain that *Yiddishkait*, the devotion to social justice, a Jewish secularism that created a rich and coherent culture with its own language, manners, and values, was what a Jewish identity *really* was, the claims for legitimacy in what constitutes an "authentic" Jewish identity were and continue to be contentious. What is an "authentic" Jewish identity? Some maintain that only the Orthodox are *real* Jews, and they declare their superiority based on descriptive claims of religious observance in the Jewish past. Authenticity is often associated with loyalty to a homogenous tradition located in an idealized past. The traditional practices are glorified and everything else is seen as fake, corrupted, and alienating. The boundaries there are clear, with no ambiguity or fuzziness. In contrast to this essentialist model is the construction of identity as fluid, consisting of shifting, overlapping, and intersecting boundaries, without the shelter of tradition.<sup>16</sup> Jewish culture and identity can be described as a "complex struggle of historical situations."<sup>17</sup>

In the eyes of the religious majority, these socialists who questioned Jewish orthodoxy were *apikoorsim* or heretics, and considered very threatening. When a coalition of Poale Zion, Socialists, Anarchists, Territorialists, and Bundists organized *di radikaler shuln* (the radical schools) in the years just preceding World War I, offering a secular Jewish education, the religious community reacted with alarm. In Winnipeg, the teachers were dubbed "Christian missionaries," put under *cherem* (excommunicated), and forced out of the Aberdeen Public School in 1914. In 1916, 19 rabbis and 69 others in Montreal signed a resolution warning that

A great danger hovers over our heads! We are being robbed of our children! Our holy religion is being uprooted from amongst them. The danger is very great for these robbers are masked. They do not show themselves in their true colours ... We refer to the National Radical and Jewish People's Schools. The term 'national' misleads you into believing that the schools are Jewish schools (Chadorim), whereas in fact these schools are against the Jewish religion; they practice the desecration of the Sabbath and our Jewish religious commandments.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Robert J Chaskin, "Perspectives on Neighborhood and Community: A Review of the Literature," *Social Service Review*, 71, 4 (Dec 1997), 521-2.

<sup>16</sup>The ideas here borrow from Stuart Z. Charme, "Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity," *Jewish Social Studies*, 6 (Winter 2000) 133-4. I am taking his dichotomy of a tradition-based authenticity versus an individualistic search for meaning and applying it to a secular-left identity as a Jew.

<sup>17</sup>Efraim Shueli, *Seven Jewish Cultures: A Reinterpretation of Jewish History and Thought* (Cambridge, Engl 1980). As quoted in Charme, "Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity," 2.

<sup>18</sup>David Rome (compiler), "The Education Legacy of the Migration," *Canadian Jewish Archives*. New Series #45 (Montreal 1991), 114.

For the religious majority, these socialists had no place in the Jewish community. But in the first decades of the 20th century, Jewish emigration included a large number of Jews inclined to radicalism to Canada.

*The Attraction of Socialism — Class and Ethnicity*

The number of Jews in Canada grew rapidly in the first three decades of the 20th century, at a rate comparatively greater than that of the population as a whole. Canada had 16,401 Jews in 1901, a number that increased to 75,681 by 1911, and then almost doubled again to 126,196 in 1921. By 1931, there were 156,726 Jews in Canada, an 872 per cent increase in just 30 years.<sup>19</sup> They settled primarily in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg. They came from eastern Europe, driven from their homes in Russia, Poland, and Romania by pogroms and poverty. Beginning in 1882, the May Laws in tsarist Russia created a pale within the Pale. Jews were forbidden to leave where they had already settled, could not own land, and were hounded and expelled by local *kulaks*. These upheavals led to an intense search for how to ensure Jewish survival and different strands of Jewish-Socialism emerged.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the Jews who arrived after the 1905 revolution were people who had been radicalized in the old country in the dying days of the old tsarist empire. On "Bloody Sunday," 9 January 1905, crowds of workers from St. Petersburg gathered to present a petition of their grievances to the tsar and were fired on by troops guarding the tsar's winter palace, killing over 1,500 people. This unleashed a wave of anti-tsarist strikes, demonstrations, and social unrest in Russia. A constituent assembly, the Duma, was set up, but both the Bolsheviks and the Bund (Jewish workers movement) rejected the moderate reforms proposed as too limited and boycotted the elections. The reaction to the worker unrest was terrible, as the right-wing opposition reassembled and targetted Jews. By the end of October 1905, the Black Hundreds instigated a ferocious wave of pogroms; murderous mobs attacked Jews inside the Pale, and intellectuals and students throughout Russia. As the revolutionary momentum collapsed there was widespread political disillusionment as well as economic depression. Many left for the United States and Canada.<sup>21</sup>

The socialists, or social democrats, including the Bundists, were convinced that a *nayer frayer velt* (a new freer world) was not just an idle dream. The resolution of anti-Semitism would come with emancipation for all people. A world free of oppression and hunger would be a world free of hatred. Some believed that in this new world Jewish separateness would disappear, heralding the Bolshevik Revolu-

<sup>19</sup>Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews: A Social and Economic History of the Jews in Canada* (Montreal 1939), 10.

<sup>20</sup>Nora Levin describes the major groupings as the Yiddish-oriented Jewish-labour movement located primarily in North America, the Bund movement in Russia that sought Jewish cultural autonomy, and the socialist-Zionist movement. Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 18-19.

<sup>21</sup>See Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 301-335.



tion in 1917 as presenting exciting possibilities for Jews and for workers. The first coalition of socialist-Jewish groups in the new world was the *Arbeiter Ring* (Workman's Circle), organized at the turn of the century in New York, a Toronto branch started in 1908.<sup>22</sup> It was an attempt to construct a non-sectarian organization to meet needs that neither the unions nor political parties addressed — a fraternal organization based on class rather than home community, as in the *landsmanshaftn*, where workers would receive medical and funeral benefits, credit, and participate in a social community. The idea was that all those opposed to the existing economic system would join together without taking sides among any of the political factions — Bundist, anarchist, labour-Zionist, or social-democrat.<sup>23</sup> However, the divisions within the *Arbeiter Ring* became increasingly bitter after the Russian Revolution and the formation of the CP.

In Toronto, the pro-Bolshevik women were the first to withdraw from the *Arbeiter Ring*, and in 1923 they formed their own organization, the *Yiddisher Arbeiter Froyen Farein* (Jewish Working Women's League). When it was clear that control of the organization would stay in the hands of those critical of the Revolution, the men also withdrew and formed the Labour League (LL) in 1926. In 1945, the Toronto Labour League joined with sister organizations in Hamilton, Windsor, Calgary, Vancouver, Montreal, Winnipeg, and Vancouver and became the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO).

Most of the leaders of the organization were Communists, although Morris Biderman, president of the organization from 1942 until he left in 1960, estimates that only five per cent of the LL membership actually were CP members.<sup>24</sup> Until the 1950s, when the revelations of the 20th party congress made public the vicious anti-Semitism of the Stalin regime, members saw their participation in a Jewish organization, which identified with the Soviet Union, as promoting Jewish interests through working for an international transformation of society. In an early history of the IWO, written in Yiddish by M. Olgin, the relationship between the party and the Order is laid out. In it, Olgin explains that while members of the IWO were not under party discipline, the CP was the only true party of the working class. The alliance, however, is not such a simple one. Olgin cautions that while the IWO had the right to establish policy independent of the CP, a *modus vivendi* had to be established at the local level. "One can't allow an opposition from a local branch to a local committee of the Communist Party."<sup>25</sup> This tension between the attempt of Party members to control the Jewish organization, and member insistence on

<sup>22</sup>Stephen A. Speisman, *The Jews of Toronto: A History to 1937* (Toronto 1979), 109.

<sup>23</sup>Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (Toronto 1979), 285.

<sup>24</sup>Morris Biderman, *A Life on the Jewish Left: An Immigrant's Experience* (Toronto 2000), 60.

As I describe later in the paper, Biderman and most of the UJPO leadership left over the Krushchev revelations of 1956.

<sup>25</sup>M. Olgin, *Der Internationale Arbeiter Ordn* (New York 1931), 15.

their own priorities was paralleled in other ethnic communities in Canada, in particular the Finnish and Ukrainian organizations.<sup>26</sup>

In Canada, the ethnic federations — The Finnish Organization of Canada (FOC) and the Ukrainian Labour Farmer Temple Association (ULFTA) — were formally recognized in 1922 as the language sections of the Workers Party of Canada (the public face of the CP). These language groups accounted for 3,000 of the 3,500 members of the new organization, and provided 77 per cent of the dues income. The *Arbeiter Ring* would not affiliate, but the party created a Jewish section of the CP, the National Jewish Propaganda Committee. The editor of the Yiddish language newspaper, *Der Kampf* (*The Struggle*), was a Communist and the paper, which began publication in 1924, became the voice of the Jewish Communists. In all the ethnic communities, there was a tension between the Communist International's model of centralized control in a Party organized along Leninist principles and the mass organizations whose members remained committed to preserving a cultural and ethnic heritage. In 1929, the Executive Committee of the Comintern ordered the Canadian party to reorganize. Membership in the language organizations was no longer to be considered the equivalent of CP membership. Rather the directive indicated that the mass organizations were to be recruiting grounds for party membership.<sup>27</sup>

According to Deutscher, in the early years of the post-revolutionary era under Lenin, despite Bolshevik opposition to Zionism or any form of nationalism, a monolithic party was unthinkable. The *Poale Zion* (Socialist Zionist Party) existed legally in Russia until 1925. In those early years, there was a deliberate attempt to eradicate Great Russian chauvinism and grant all small nations and national minorities equality. Jews published in Yiddish, developed Yiddish theatre, and indeed the first great Hebrew theatre, the Habima, was developed on the initiative of Lunacharsky, the commissar of education.<sup>28</sup>

Itche Goldberg, a teacher of Yiddish and later Cultural Director of the JPFO (the American version of the UJPO), was born in Russia in 1904 and arrived in Toronto in 1920. The turn left made sense to him because of the worldview a revolutionary perspective offered. This was reinforced by personal connections — his personal friendship with Philip Halperin who had become a Communist and, later, his marriage to Joe Salsberg's wife's sister. Salsberg was a left-labour-Zionist

<sup>26</sup>See Norman Penner, Chapter 11, *Canadian Communism* (Toronto 1988) 268-284, especially 273-274. See also Peter Krawchuk, *Our History: The Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Movement in Canada, 1907-1991* (Toronto 1979). Krawchuk was in the leadership of the ULFTA, which in 1945 became the Association of United Ukrainian Canadians (AUUC) for many years.

<sup>27</sup>Penner, *Communism*, 273-274, and Krawchuk, *Our History*.

<sup>28</sup>Isaac Deutscher, "The Russian Revolution and the Jewish Problem," in *The Non-Jewish Jews and other Essays* (London 1968), 60-83.

who later became a prominent Communist, and from 1943 to 1955, a member of the provincial legislature from the Spadina riding.<sup>29</sup> Itche recalls:

The split in the Socialist ranks was very powerful, and harmful and it was about attitudes to the Soviet Union. There was no question about our Jewishness or Jewish consciousness and the Jewish consciousness led us very naturally to the Soviet Union. Here was Romania, anti Semitic; Poland, which was anti Semitic. Suddenly we saw how Jewish culture was developing in the Soviet Union. It was really breathtaking. You had the feeling that both the national problem was solved and the social problem was solved. This was no small thing. It was overpowering and we were young.<sup>30</sup>

For others, such as Bella Shek, socialism meant sharing; she drew upon family traditions to explain why a radical organization made sense to her. Interviewed in her nineties, she traced her development as a "left winger" to the "big hearts" of her grandparents. Her grandmother would cook and bake for *Shabbos* (the Sabbath) every Friday and her grandfather would collect wood to share with people who did not have sufficient heat. Each *Shabbos*, she and her sister would be sent by their grandmother to collect food and other things: "this one would give a piece of fish, this one would give a challah, and we would bring it home." People would come to the door to take what they needed so that they would be able to make their *Shabbos* meal a joyous occasion.<sup>31</sup> Bella's version of socialism could be viewed as Judaism secularized.<sup>32</sup> Along with learning (*Torah*), another fundamental value in Judaism was the notion of *Tsedakah*, which Bella assimilated from her grandparents. Linked to *tsedek*, or justice, this Jewish emphasis on *tsedakah* was easily turned to a socialist purpose.<sup>33</sup>

The difficult living and working conditions of newly arrived Jewish immigrants also contributed to the appeal of a radical organization. The majority of Jews

<sup>29</sup>Erna Paris, *Jews: An Account of Their Experience in Canada* (Toronto 1980), devotes the greater part of chapter 10, "The World of the Jewish Communists," to Salsberg. His activities are also discussed in Biderman's memoirs, *A Life on the Jewish Left*.

<sup>30</sup>Itche Goldberg, interview with author, Summer 1995, New York City. Krawchuk, *Our History*, describes the appeal of the Soviet Union in what they saw as its support of the national aspirations of Ukrainians in the old country.

<sup>31</sup>Bella Shek, interview with author, April 1996, in the Baycrest, Toronto.

<sup>32</sup>See Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 4-11, for a description of this particular theory.

<sup>33</sup>Examples of those who have posed this relationship include the historian Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* (New York 1970), 166; the Russian marxist Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor 1961), 69-70; and Lawrence Fuchs, "Sources of Jewish Internationalism and Liberalism," in Marshall Sklare, ed., *The Jews* (Glencoe, Illinois 1966). They are referred to in Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 4. This relationship is expressed in the names chosen by current Toronto Jewish-left groups critical of Israeli government positions on the Middle East — one group active in the 1990s called itself "Tsedek"; and a recently organized Toronto coalition chose to name themselves "Yoisher," or justice.

arriving in Toronto from eastern Europe in the first decades of the century settled in a small and crowded area around Kensington Market. In these congested conditions, the public arena was where one "lived." As Joe Gershman described it: "The movement, no matter which movement you belonged to — left or right — became a second home."<sup>34</sup> While many Jewish Communists would describe their politics as an expression of their ethnicity, there is no single explanation for the disproportionate contribution of Jews to left politics. It is also important to bear in mind that while many radicals were Jews, most Jews were not radicals. Even at their strongest in the 1930s and 1940s, they formed a minority of the community.<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that two of the most prominent Communists in the late 1920s and 1930s were women — Becky Buhay and Annie Buller — Buller was married to Harry Guralnick, editor of the Yiddish newspaper, and later a principal in the Morris Winchevsky Yiddish *shule*. While they considered themselves supporters of women's rights, this commitment was within their conviction that the struggle for a socialist revolution would bring about true equality for women.

What marked the Jewish radicals, who are the focus of this paper, are the ways in which their identity as Jews and their understanding of themselves as workers framed their view of the world in politics and in culture. The common critique of the capitalist system and support for all victimized people was shared with other left-wing ethnic organizations in Canada.<sup>36</sup> There were close associations between the Jewish LL (later the UJPO), the FOC, and the ULFTA.<sup>37</sup> They visited each others summer camps, sang and played in each other's choirs and orchestras, and inter-married.<sup>38</sup> Particular emphasis was placed on solidarity with African Americans.

<sup>34</sup>Rosemary Donegan, *Spadina Avenue* (Toronto 1985), 150.

<sup>35</sup>Lita Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band: The Clashes Between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishments in Canada, 1928-1932* (Ottawa 1982), 10. Paris, *Jews*, 145, estimates that in the 1940s, approximately 30 per cent of CP members were Jewish. These 300 people in Toronto were part of a Jewish population numbering 50,000. There were of course many more who considered themselves sympathizers.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Krawchuk, in *Our History*, 154-5, notes that early support for Ukrainian language and national culture in the Soviet Union as well as the Canadian CP's defence of Ukrainian workers in Canada produced strong pro-Soviet views among many Ukrainian immigrants. Krawchuk describes the tensions between the mass organization, the ULF Temple, and the CP that attempted to have more direct control over the organization. There are undoubtedly parallels between the Ukrainian mass organization and the Jewish LL, later the UJPO.

<sup>37</sup>Betcherman, *The Little Band*, 8, notes that the leadership of the CP was almost entirely British born, while the financing came primarily from ethnic organizations, in particular the FOC and the ULFTA. However, she describes prominent leaders of the time, which include Becky Buhay, Annie Buller, Sam Carr, Fred Rose, J. B. Salsberg, all of whom were Jewish.

<sup>38</sup>This knowledge is so familiar as to be considered "common knowledge" in these communities. For example, at a recent Naivelt reunion, two former Naivelt campers still played in the Ukrainian Shevchenko Ensemble. Conversation with author, 6 August 2000. Lil Himmelfarb's husband was Max Ilomaki; she told me that he built one of the bridges at

Paul Robeson, a black-listed singer, visited Toronto often and sang with the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir (TJFC) in Massey Hall, and was adored on this side of the border, as well as by the Jewish-left in the United States.<sup>39</sup> Merrily Weisbord, described Robeson's prominence in the Jewish left of the 1940s and 1950s as follows: "Everyone knew the Spanish Civil War songs and everyone knew Paul Robeson. More than any other people's artist at that time, Robeson was spokesman, legend, bard."<sup>40</sup>

These left-wing Jews, through literature, poetry, and song, all in Yiddish, their *mame loshn* (mother tongue), sought a revolutionary transformation in society. They formed a subculture that unified their ethnic and class identities, and was marked by values and cultural patterns in opposition to the dominant society. The LL, like the *Arbeiter Ring*, which it broke away from, was a fraternal as well as a cultural organization. It provided hospital, sick and death benefits, and credit for its members. The League, and later the UJPO, maintained Jewish *shules* where Yiddish was taught; a Jewish folk choir gave concerts in venues such as Massey Hall, a drama group performed, a dance group toured the country, and sports leagues were organized.<sup>41</sup> A children's camp was organized by the women from the *Yiddishe Arbeiter Froyen Farein* in 1925, which eventually attracted hundreds of campers and many more visitors each summer to what became Camp Kinderland for the children and Camp Naivelt for the adults.<sup>42</sup> These cultural and recreational

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Naivelt. When he died, the memorial service was held in the Ukrainian hall on Bathurst Avenue. One of the singers associated with the UJPO, Honey Novick, sang at the events. Personal observation, February 1996.

<sup>39</sup>Programs from two concerts in the late 1940s and early 1950s show Robeson performing with the Choir. There are also pictures taken at banquets given in his honour, and personal correspondence with Emil Gartner, the director of the Choir with whom Robeson had a personal friendship. Pictures and Gartner correspondence available at the UJPOA.

<sup>40</sup>Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, The Spy Trials, and The Cold War* (Toronto 1983), 85.

<sup>41</sup>Roni Gechtman, "Sports in Yiddish: The Bundist Sport Organization Morgnshtern in Interwar Poland," *Outlook*, 39 (July/August 2001), 20-21 and 38, describes how this socialist sport organization articulated an ideal of a collective, non-competitive model of support to practice free of any manifestation of violence or brutality. The political outlook of a non-nationalist, secular-Jewish organization are very similar to that of the Canadian groups.

<sup>42</sup>Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds* (New York 1999), describes the CP's emphasis on the importance of the left-wing camps in developing a radical political culture and the role of the ethnic organizations, such as the UJPO (the Canadian equivalent of the JPFO) in this effort. These efforts were successful, but not in the sense that the children and staff tried, or were able, to implement party directives. The political culture was in the air, in the songs, rather than in direct propagandizing of the children.

activities were embedded in union activism and a political outlook that was influenced by the CP.<sup>43</sup>

There are numerous examples of how members of this community reached out to other left-wing ethnic organizations, as well as attempted to teach the children about solidarity with other victimized people. Toronto in this period was divided between "Anglo Saxons" and "others," and so it was not much of a stretch to understand that not only Jews were being treated poorly. Johnny Lombardi recalled being turned away from a pool on a hot summer day in the late 1920s. Protesting that the "No Jews or Dogs" sign did not apply to him because he was Italian, made no difference. The guard at the gate responded: "Same thing ... Get the heck out of here," and pushed him away.<sup>44</sup>

The concerns of the organization included international events that exemplified injustices based on political beliefs, ethnicity, and racism. These were effectively communicated to the children in the summer camp. Four of the campers recalled how sad they felt on the day of the execution of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. It was a day of mourning for the children at the LL's Camp Kindervelt.<sup>45</sup> The children were also taught about racial equality and injustices to African Americans, again with a focus on the US. One camper described a re-enactment in the 1930s of what happened to the "Scottsboro boys," nine young African American men charged with rape on a freight train in Alabama in 1931.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup>There is a marked discrepancy between the common characterization of the left-wing ethnic organizations in the Jewish, Ukrainian, and Finnish communities as "communist front" organizations by authors such as Penner, *Canadian Communism*, and Paris, *The Jews*. While the CP sought to use these organizations as recruiting grounds for Party membership, as noted previously, most people were not Party members. People who belonged to these organizations were quite aware of the difference between their favourable views of the Soviet Union as a socialist society and the discipline of not deviating from CP policy.

<sup>44</sup>Johnny Lombardi, "Cab Gold Ribbon," Speech, 15 May 1989, Johnny Lombardi files, CHIN Radio/TV International, Toronto. Provided by Enrico Cumbo, PhD candidate, University of Toronto.

<sup>45</sup>Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian immigrants and anarchists who were charged with armed robbery in which two people were killed. There is a great deal of evidence that indicates that their political beliefs were on trial, as the documentation for their participation in the robbery was dubious, and the judge, Webster Thayer, had made a number of deeply biased comments. Sacco's and Vanzetti's executions were protested throughout the world, and eminent figures, such as Felix Frankfurter, then a law professor at Harvard, expressed what he thought was a miscarriage of justice. See Robert P. Weeks, ed., *Commonwealth vs. Sacco and Vanzetti* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1958); Felix Frankfurter, *The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti* (Boston 1927); Osmond Fraenkel, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case* (New York 1931); and Paul Aurich, *Sacco And Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton, NJ 1991).

<sup>46</sup>Bessie Grossman, interview with author, April 2000. In this case there is evidence that the men were on trial for their race. The nine young men were charged with rape and originally sentenced to death. They were defended by the International Labor Defense League, which

Delegates to the opening session of the 1947 convention of the JPFO of the IWO in the US were reminded by their president, Albert E. Kahn that, "We must fight for the unity of labor, for unity between the Jewish people and the Negro people. Let us always bear in mind our responsibility."<sup>47</sup>

The connection between Toronto's immigrant ethnic minorities, in particular the Jews, Finns, and Ukrainians, and left-activism was so pronounced that as early as the autumn of 1928 a special police edict attempted to curtail left-wing organizing by prohibiting the use of any language other than English in any public gathering. Representatives from 55 different organizations including churches, social services, and trade-union organizations gathered in Alhambra Hall, home of Jewish-left groups such as the LL and the Workers Sports Association. This venue was a forum for protest, hosting an early "Free Speech Conference to protest the police edict."<sup>48</sup>

### *Cultural Life*

Izzy Fine, a cloakmaker, was active in the UJPO and the needletrades' unions all his life. He described the range of activities available:

The Labour League wasn't just an organization of left-wingers. People from the unions used to come in because it was a cultural organization. They had lectures, the choir was part of the Labour League; at that time our choir was the only choir in the city. It was politics too. When it was elections naturally we were working for the Communists or left-wingers who were around. The organization as such was a progressive, cultural organization. That was the main thing. But at the same time, if there was a strike for instance, the cloak and dress makers used to have a strike every year, the members from the Labour League came to the picket line to help out. The women did the same thing. That's what was progressive...to help people who need help!<sup>49</sup>

Politics, narrowly defined as electoral or party activity, was only one element of this left community. For most it was a way of life — a rich and varied cultural life. The opportunity to participate in cultural activities meant a great deal. This was the

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mounted an international campaign on their behalf. One of the two women later recanted her testimony, but the nine young men nevertheless served lengthy prison terms. See Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge 1969).

<sup>47</sup>"Minutes of the 7th National Convention of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, I.W.O. Camp Kinderland, June 12-15, 1947." Available at the American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts.

<sup>48</sup>Rosemary Donegan, *Spadina* (Toronto 1985), 156. The incident is described in great detail in Betcherman, chapter II, "Draper's Edict."

<sup>49</sup>Izzy Fine, interview by Michelle Cohen, Naivelt, August 1994.

place where many Jews were fully themselves, where they rose above being defined by the difficult struggle for survival.<sup>50</sup>

Ben Shek was born in 1927 and came to Canada with his family in 1934. He described what the "organization" meant to him as a child:

It was like heaven to go into the organization. My mother worked in the back of a dress shop. I remember one place, Yonge near Shuter. It was a very dingy room. I used to drop in to see her sometimes on Saturdays when I went to the movies. You finished school you went to shule, Monday to Friday. On Sunday there were clubs. We put on a show for the shule in the Victory Theatre. It was the Strand then it became the Victory.<sup>51</sup>

Pearl Blazer's mother came to Toronto in 1932, a widow with three children. She found her way to the LL and with her sister and brother went to the *shule*. Pearl recalled how poor they were, sharing a small apartment with their landlord and his wife. At *shule*, she made friends she still has; summers were spent at the camp. A way was found for poor children in the organization to attend the camp. At *shule*, Pearl discovered a love of dance and recalled dancing in the Victoria Theatre. Pearl went on to study dance quite seriously, eventually becoming a member of the New Dance Theatre, organized in 1943. In 1949-50, the fee for the children's classes was \$5 for a term of 16 weeks. Teachers included Betty Oliphant, prominent in the Toronto dance community, and Marcel Chojnacki, who later danced with the National Ballet. As Pearl described it, "the political was cultural and the cultural was political." This was reflected in the programmes that included works such as: "That we may live," describing persecution in tsarist Russia and emigration to Canada, "A Bund mit a Shtachke" (a union with a strike); and the Peretz poem, "Tsvay Brider," about two brothers whose love for each other is corrupted by one sibling's greed.<sup>52</sup>

The Choir was perhaps the most prominent of the cultural entities associated with the LL and the UJPO. It began as the Young Socialist Choir, led by Hyman Riegelhaupt before World War I, but disbanded during the turbulent years of 1914-18. When the progressive movement reorganized in 1925, the *Freiheit Gesangs Farein* (Freedom Choral Society) was born, with a group of twenty-five people. From 1925 to 1933, the choir, at first small in numbers, featured folksongs — songs that told of the lives of workers. The choir grew, both in numbers and popularity, and was renamed the TJFC in 1934.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Peter Krawchuk, *Our History*, Part III, "Enlightenment...Entertainment...Education...", describes the cultural and educational activities in the Ukrainian Labour Temples, which reads like a close parallel to what took place in the left-Jewish community.

<sup>51</sup>Ben Shek, interview with the author, February 1996.

<sup>52</sup>Pearl Blazer, interview with author, September 2001.

<sup>53</sup>J.S. Chaikoff, "Past and Future of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir," in *Twenty Fifth Anniversary Program of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir* (Toronto 1950), third page (unnumbered).



Bella Shek, Ben Shek's mother, described membership in the choir as the fulfillment of a dream: "I used to think if I could sing in a choir, I would give anything." She worked long hours in a dress shop all week, and Sunday afternoons were spent with the Choir. She sang soprano in the Choir for 56 years, 1934-1990. Bella sat next to Rose Field, who joined the singing group when she was fifteen-years-old. For Rose, the choir, which met at 7 Brunswick Avenue, was "a way of life." Rose Field met her husband when he and his sisters bought tickets for a Paul Robeson concert, and he too joined the choir. She brought all her girlfriends to the choir, and they brought their friends as well. For Rose, the choir was "everything." "Everything you wanted was in the choir."<sup>54</sup>

Molly Myers, another long time choir member, described her love of singing, the friendships, and the interconnection between the choir and the other parts of the UJPO. For Molly, the songs brought back memories of her mother's lullabies and life in the old country:

When I first joined the choir, with Emil, and even later on, it was an ideology and a way of life. We felt like it was OUR ORGANIZATION with capital letters and we had to do the best for it. This comradeship will remain in my memory forever. I loved the choir. If you look in every program going back, my name is mentioned as a fund raiser, or doing something because I didn't just come to sing.<sup>55</sup>

Emil Gartner, a classically trained musician from Vienna, took over the musical leadership of the Choir in 1939, and directed it until his death in 1959. Under his leadership, the TJFC grew into an organization of over 100 members, performing in Massey Hall with soloists that included Paul Robeson, Jan Peerce, Jenny Tourel, and Regina Resnick.<sup>56</sup>

During the summer, many of the children went to the summer camp. Naivelt, the UJPO summer camp in Brampton, Ontario began as Kindervelt in 1925, a creation of the *Yiddisher Arbeter Froyen Farein*, established as a "Workers Children's Camp." Described in Yiddish in the pages of *Der Kampf*, a flavour of the integration of a political vision with the project of building an autonomous culture is given: "We will explore all avenues in order to create a summer home for workers' children so that they don't have to go to the rich charity institutions who with one hand take the skin from our bodies, and with the other throw us a bone and humiliate." The camp grew in popularity and eventually was located in a park just outside of Brampton. The Brampton site was known as Eldorado Park and was originally owned by the Canadian National Railway (CNR).<sup>57</sup> According to the

<sup>54</sup>Rose Field, interview with the author, April 1996.

<sup>55</sup>Molly Myers, interview with Michelle Cohen, August 1994

<sup>56</sup>Murray Tate, "Twenty Five Years of Cultural Growth," in *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Program of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir* (Toronto 1950), fourth page (unnumbered).

<sup>57</sup>A number of public sites of the mainstream culture at the time overtly discriminated against Jews. Jews were not welcome on the Toronto Islands (Shek interview 2001), Victoria Beach



"Paul Robeson, Guest Artist with the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, Massey Hall, Toronto, 1948."  
Standing, L to R: Robeson and Emil Gartner, Conductor. Seated: Fagel Gartner, Pianist and Yiddish Teacher.



"Labour League Camp. Rouge Hills, Toronto, late 1920s." Sign reads "Roite Kemper Kolonia" (Red Campers Colony).

camp's oral history, Jack Cowan, who was part of the LL leadership, had to arrange for a Ukrainian sympathizer to buy the camp for the Jewish organization, as the CNR would not sell the property to Jews at that time. It was said that a sign posted by the CNR restricted entry to the park, announcing an ugly and all too common anti-semitism at the entry-point: "*No Jews or Dogs Allowed.*"<sup>58</sup> Soon after the children's camp began, adults gathered as well, forming what was called "*Di Roite Kolonia*," (the Red Colony). At first they lived in tents, and in the 1940s members of the organization began building small cottages.

Morris Biderman described in his memoirs how Naivelt was visited by thousands of people; both children and adults enjoying a chance to spend some time in the beautiful surroundings. "In the early years people would gather at 7 Brunswick Ave on Sunday morning to take a truck ride to the camp for 35 cents. (There were not too many car owners among the members and friends in the Labour League in those years.)"<sup>59</sup> His son, Ron Biderman, who spent summers at the camp from the age of six until his teenage years, nurtured fond memories: "Younger people especially remember the summers they spent there. The intensity which grew out of the concentration of so many young, dedicated, energetic and enthusiastic people in their teens, twenties and thirties was remarkable. The camp was a magnet drawing people into the ambit of the organization who would otherwise never have approached it."<sup>60</sup>

Rita Bergman recalled the beauty of the place from her first year in 1936; an opportunity to be in the country was a joyous privilege. "I loved the tent, especially when it rained. The nicest thing was to have your head hanging out of the tent watching the stars fall. Oh that was gorgeous."<sup>61</sup> Rachel Orlan, who met her husband while singing in the Choir, described the Friday night campfires, with readings and parodies in Yiddish, and the Saturday night dances and concerts. "We would gather under the "*Dach*," sometimes with members of the The Travellers and sing choir songs and songs of the day, and share stories till the wee small hours." "My home, my heart" described what the camp meant to many young people who spent summers in Kinderland in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>62</sup> Jim Laxer recalled how he tried to explain to mystified friends that this camp with no horseback riding, no canoes, no lake, little hiking, and quite basic facilities was the best camp ever.<sup>63</sup>

in Manitoba (Roz Usiskin, correspondence with author, August 2000), the Muskokas in Ontario (Shek interview), and ski resorts in Quebec (Evelyn Shapiro, correspondence with author, January 1969), for example.

<sup>58</sup>Myers interview. Emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup>Morris Biderman, *A Life on the Jewish Left: An Immigrant's Experience* (Toronto 2000), 70.

<sup>60</sup>Ron Biderman, quoted in Morris Biderman, *A Life on the Jewish Left*, 71.

<sup>61</sup>Rita Bergman, "The Most Beautiful Memorial," *Unzer Zumar Haim* (Toronto 2000), 11. Camp Naivelt Souvenir Booklet.

<sup>62</sup>Rachel Orlan, "Naivelt Memories," *Unzer Zamer Haim*, 12.

<sup>63</sup>James Laxer, conversation with author, 20 April 2001.

Sherri Bergman, who spent almost every summer at Kinderland from 1948 to 1955, located the coming of age activities of her generation within the camp and its activities — one's first love, games, sports, campfires, and hikes. She also recalled learning through songs, and how the activities at the camp developed an appreciation for socialist values and for Yiddish. Two of her three camp directors were Yiddish teachers in the winter.<sup>64</sup> The slogan describing the connection between the Yiddish language school the children attended in the city in the winter, and their summers in Naivelt, was "fun kemp tsu shul, fun shul tsu kemp."<sup>65</sup>

The glue for this radical culture was *Yiddishkait*, a love and respect for the Yiddish language, the *mame loshn* of the eastern European Jewish-proletariat. The establishment of the *shules*, where a new generation of children were exposed to Yiddish culture, was most important. There were of course tensions and divisions in the Jewish-left on the question of culture. Some, such as Itche Goldberg, were attracted to the pro-communist Jewish-left because of its strong emphasis on a Jewish working-class cultural heritage. In both the camp and the *shules* there was a struggle between those who opposed any form of Jewish nationalism and sought to use the *shules* primarily for political education, and those who were concerned with imparting *Yiddishkait*, a knowledge of Jewish history, literature, and culture.

Many of the students' first language was Yiddish in the early years. A Yiddish school and camp was an extension of how people lived at home. In later years, the tension between the internationalist politics and the emphasis on Yiddish was more apparent, as Yiddish was not the *mame loshn* of this new generation. Itche Goldberg remembered his colleague, the Toronto teacher, Label Basman, for many years as a man who embodied the successful integration of these two ideals. "Label Basman was essentially a yiddisher mentsch."<sup>66</sup> Chaver Basman is also fondly remembered at Naivelt, as he was the director of the children's camp for many years.

### *The Community's Decline and Erasure of Its History*

A number of factors contributed to the decline in the vitality of this community. The Cold War environment, expulsion from the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) in 1951, and the disillusionment with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of Stalin's death, were all major factors. In 1959, a good part of the leadership, and about one third of the organization, left to set up a new organization, the New Fraternal Jewish

<sup>64</sup>Sherry Bergman, "My Home, My Heart," *Unzer Zumer Haim*, 18-19.

<sup>65</sup>Ben Shek, correspondence with author, February 2001. Ben taught in the *shule* for many years.

<sup>66</sup>Itche Goldberg interview with author, May 1995. Itche Goldberg moved to New York in the late 1920s, and for many years was the cultural director of the JPFO of the IWO. He himself taught Yiddish in the *mittlshul* (high school) and *hechere kursn* (higher course) in New York in the 1950s. Itche was also the director the Camp Kinderland in New York in the 1930s. Although already in his 90s at the time of my interview, he was very articulate when I interviewed him in New York. He often came to Toronto to visit, and to give lectures.

Association. Those departing felt that the UJPO had not sufficiently disassociated itself from pro- Soviet policies, despite the evidence of anti-semitism and Stalin's despotism. Those who remained in the UJPO vehemently disagreed with this assessment, but the departure of most of the leadership and about one-third of the membership was a devastating blow. All of these events warrant careful review, as over 40 years later they continue to evoke strong feelings.<sup>67</sup>

Economics played a role as well. While proudly identifying with the working-class and committed to transforming the world, many of the UJPO members wanted the "best" for their children, and their children did succeed. When one of the Travellers collapsed on stage at the 75th reunion of Naivelt in August 2000, there were, as Molly Myers commented, more doctors instantly available than could be found at Toronto General Hospital.<sup>68</sup> The children got an education and prospered, and their children were sent to more expensive camps with lakes to sail on and horses to ride.

In the early years, the left-Jewish community was truly a *gemeinschaft*. People were not only bound by common language, culture, and political ideals, they were also geographically concentrated in a clearly delineated area around College and Brunswick Avenues, and the activities of the Order were central to people's lives. The UJPO building was not only a meeting place for activities, but was a focus for one's entire social life. Molly Myers described her friendships from the Choir:

Rae, Rose Field, Brina. Brina's son is a little older than my son and we used to spend the days together with the carriages going around. This was my life, you know. — mainly around 83 Christie, in the beginning it was 7 Brunswick Ave ... There wasn't such a thing as taking a bus. We used to walk. She lived on one side of Delaware and I lived north of there and we used to meet... I adopted Solly Hermolin's mother, Lucy, who used to sing in the choir. We became so close, that sisters couldn't be any closer.<sup>69</sup>

Gradually this cohesion was broken; people were more geographically dispersed, and cultural activities were no longer as important in peoples' lives. Ben Shek commented on the change:

I think there is a general cultural problem that doesn't just affect the Jewish community. With VCR's, hi fis, all this, people tend to be less involved , more individuals stay at home with their private comforts. You don't even have to step out of the house anymore. I think

<sup>67</sup> Morris Biderman, in his memoirs, *A Life on the Jewish Left*, describes the heated debate at the time that he left the UJPO. In Ben Shek's review of the book, *U.J.P.O. News*, (Winter 2001), Shek takes issue with Biderman's description of events surrounding the setting up of the New Jewish Fraternal Association, and Biderman's description of UJPO's subsequent history.

<sup>68</sup> Molly Myers, Conversation with author, 6 August 2000, at Camp Naivelt.

<sup>69</sup> Myers conversation.

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"Toronto Jewish Folk Choir Program Cover, 1944." Eaton's and Simpson's took out full page ads each year.

that's been a factor. My mother would go from work, late, direct to choir rehearsal. How many people are willing to do that? Many fewer than before.<sup>70</sup>

The community declined, but why the eclipse of its history? Yuval-Davis and Anthias, following the work of Fredrik Barth, remind us of the fundamental importance of boundary group formation to an ethnic group. Boundaries are a social construction and can vary, depending on context.<sup>71</sup> Who can and who cannot belong may be either internally decided or externally imposed — thus there is a political dimension to who is a member of an ethnic group. With the expulsion of the UJPO from the CJC in 1951, the role that this community played in the wider Jewish community in the 1930s and 1940s was minimized.<sup>72</sup> Despite the large and active membership in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, the thousands that flocked each summer to visit the camp and fill Massey Hall for the Choir's concerts, many in the mainstream Jewish community chose to ignore that the left had ever existed. Indeed, in my experience, many non-Jewish Canadians find it difficult to understand that there is an identity as a Jew that is not linked to religious practice. When there is reference to this history, the vision of this community is obliterated by the cruel facts that emerged about how life in the Soviet Union failed to present a more humane alternative to capitalist society. It is as if this part of the Jewish-left has been defined away. They were dismissed as pariahs, not really Jews at all.

However, the members of this community participated in spiritual, cultural, and personal lives motivated by high ideals — a concern for social justice, equality, and decency. It provided a home in the profoundest sense of the term. Molly Myers, active all her life in unions, as a Communist, in Camp Naivelt, and in women's peace organizations, reminds us of a time when the left played a more central role in the wider Jewish community: "If you scratch any bigshot nowadays on the street, you know, he had some connection with the choir, or with the Labour league, or with the *shule*, or whatever it is..... It was a time when it was popular. The Soviet Union was an idol of everybody ... The idea was this was going to be good for the working man."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Shek interview.

<sup>71</sup>Polya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-racist Struggle* (London 1992).

<sup>72</sup>Faith Jones, "Between Suspicion and Censure: Attitudes Towards the Jewish Left in Postwar Vancouver," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 6 (1998), 1-24, describes the expulsion of the Vancouver UJPO from the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council causing the Peretz Institute to lose its funding from the United Jewish Appeal. Although the school was independent, many members of UJPO participated in the school.

<sup>73</sup>Myers interview.



*Is There a Future?*

By its nature, this is a speculative question, although in the author's view one worth asking. Jewish identity is a different matter for Canadians, born generations removed from their immigrant roots, without the bond of Yiddish, and no longer confronting the overt anti-semitism that those immigrants arriving earlier in the century faced. For those younger people currently active in the UJPO, identity as a Jew is a choice they make. Often, this is one of many commitments, and one of many ways of how people see themselves. Identifying as a secular-left-Jew no longer involves a *Yiddishkait* that integrates one's experiences as a person concerned with social justice, or labour rights, or feminism, as comfortably as it did for earlier generations whose entire lives were lived within this community.

There remains interest in a Jewish-secular identity, although the close connection with Yiddish has diminished, and some participants in the activities sponsored by the UJPO know little about its history. There is something of a revival of interest in Yiddish, although few are optimistic that it is possible to make the new generation into fluent speakers.<sup>74</sup> *Shules* in Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver continue as once-a-week Sunday schools, offering children's classes emphasizing a secular-Jewish approach. Particularly in smaller communities outside Toronto they are linked to a secular-Jewish community that includes, but is broader than, the members of the UJPO. In Toronto, the *shule*, located at the Winchevsky Centre, remains part of the UJPO. The Peretz Institute in Vancouver, organized in 1945, was always a free-standing organization. The overlap in the active membership with the UJPO, however, was considerable and perceived as close enough that the Peretz School lost its funding from the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council when the UJPO was expelled from the Council during the Cold War years.<sup>75</sup> The Peretz School survived those difficult years, and in September of 2001, opened a new building renamed the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture. The leadership of the UJPO from Toronto and Winnipeg travelled to Vancouver to help celebrate the occasion. In Winnipeg, where the Jewish community is smaller, the Sholem Aleichem *shule*, affiliated with UJPO, formally closed in the late 1960s, but there too, a secular Jewish school for children holds classes with the help of UJPO members. When the Izzy Asper Centre opened in the 1990s, a group of parents and interested people organized secular Jewish classes for the children.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup>In Toronto, there are a number of Yiddish *Kraizn*, (Jewish Circles), where people gather to speak Yiddish, and Yiddish language classes at the University of Toronto. There are Yiddish institutes in a number of places; the largest is sponsored by YIVO in New York where a college credit course is taught each summer at Columbia University. Most of the students are young people. Author's personal observation, July 2001.

<sup>75</sup>Faith Jones, *Between Suspicion and Censure*, 1-24.

<sup>76</sup>Ussiskin, who is an active UJPO member and the president of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, sits on the *shule* board along with two other active UJPO members. Roz Ussiskin, conversation with author, 22 September 2001.

The TJFC, reduced in numbers, is now in its 77th year and gives annual concerts. It is now more of a community choir and participates in events such as the annual joint performances of all the Jewish choirs in the city and *Ashkenaz*, the festival of Jewish music held biannually. Supported in part by arts grants, the choir sings at events such as the annual UJPO Warsaw Ghetto memorial. In November 2001, the choir sang at the UJPO sponsored programme to celebrate the Toronto opening of a travelling exhibit of a Peace Quilt, with squares contributed by Palestinians and Jews.

Camp Kinderland, the children's camp, closed its doors in 1971, but Camp Naivelt, near Brampton, is now attracting new people — artists, writers, and musicians whose children enjoy a freedom they can not find in the city. There is now a waiting list to rent one of the tiny, ramshackle (and quite inexpensive) cottages. Amil Shaul perhaps represents the future — a child with an African and Jewish heritage. His Jewish father is a union activist, and his Trindiadian mother works in anti-racist education. He enjoys playing “with all my friends and going to the swimming pool ... I like to learn about Jewish dances and songs ... My dad and my mom have friends to talk to at Camp Naivelt.”<sup>77</sup> The recent Naivelters value the intergenerational connection with the few old timers that are left and enjoy their discovery of a community where they can relax, their children can have fun, and where they can combine their social activism with being Jewish. “Camp for me means living in each others lives for the summer — sharing food, parenting and political debate. It's the cultural programming of all sorts on Saturdays, and the meetings and discussion (planned and ad hoc) about social justice, equity, peace and being Jewish. And the water situation!”<sup>78</sup>

This community's history is an example of the construction of a social world outside the increasingly commodified life most of us lead.<sup>79</sup> Thus, questions about a future are more than just nostalgia for a lost past. We need to think about how to construct alternatives to the McWorld that dominates, and where better place to look than at what a bunch of poor, not formally educated immigrant Jews were able to create. One reading of this history is that it is about the creation of a community that enhanced and enlarged one's creativity and one's sense of oneself within a context of responsibility for one's fellow human beings.

<sup>77</sup> Amil Bain-Shaul, nine years old, *Camp Naivelt, 1925-2000: Unser Zumer Haim*. (Toronto 2000), 38.

<sup>78</sup> Barb Linds, “Memories,” *Unser Zumer Haim*, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, Chapter 13, “The Universal Market,” (New York 1974) 271-283, is a classic exposition of this transformation.

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