

Introduction

Colleges around the country offer a course called “Literature of the Holocaust.” I am one of the teachers who present this material to earnest students, as they seek to make sense of a time and events they can scarcely contemplate. But I teach it with ambivalence. I believe that students should be exposed to this literature, and should grapple with the moral, historical, and literary problems it raises, but I also believe that it is the wrong entrée into Jewish studies. I fear that it may remain all my students will know about the modern experience of European Jews. I work assiduously in my teaching against the view of the Holocaust as ineffable, inexpressible, and beyond imagination, or metaphor, or understanding. Yet I work just as hard to dispel the notion that students will find what they are so often looking for in these texts: an explanation, enlightenment, some insight into the human psyche. I want them to be *unable* to identify with these characters. I do not want them to think they can “get it,” no matter how familiar with the material they may become.

Somewhere in the tension between the demystified and the uncanny lies the genesis of this book. I have long thought of myself as living my life *after*—after World War II, after “the War” became “the Holocaust,” after my parents stopped being refugees and became survivors, after too many words replaced the silence. But it is time to change tenses. I can only do so by trying to make the past present, by enlivening it.

It is certainly true that, like my students, I want to understand something about the Holocaust, but I also know that I cannot yet take part in the nostalgic, ever popular magical mystery tours to Lodz

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or Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen or Dachau in search of a more authentic experience. My parents saw these places much too closely. I cannot choose to go there primarily because their tour through Europe had been no choice at all. The War (*Di milkhome*, as it was always called in my Yiddish-speaking home—on those rare occasions when it was named at all, and always in a tone that capitalized it) cannot—thank God, I still feel compelled to say—be experienced vicariously. I fear the ground now so widely described as hallowed would reveal nothing to me but blood or, worse still, a ghostly emptiness. I mean by this that I imagine the barracks—and not the streets—of Poland and Germany. I imagine unmarked graves instead of monuments. There is, as my students might express it, no *there* there for me. I have come to see the terrible injustice in imagining Germany, and most of Eastern Europe, as blood-soaked, endless, or empty, but I still cannot take the tour. I need to go elsewhere, where the future is imaginable and the present secure, somewhere that contains none of the ghosts in which Jews do not believe.

Place, exile, displacement, home. These have long been central tropes of my imagination and, of course, of the imaginary and historical Jews. I should acknowledge that, in my own case, this centrality may well be the result of having been born a Displaced Person. The order of the words matters here. I was, as it were, *always* already displaced. Like too many others whose lives have been marked (and marred) by the upheavals of the twentieth century, I was displaced *before* I was a person. Grammatically, chronologically, and ontologically, “displaced” is a marker that precedes identity. Like many of the writers considered in this book, I understand displacement primarily as a historical and political category rather than a figurative one. As a family, we—even those of us born after the War—were exiles from a Poland that had, in any case, never felt welcoming. We had sojourned in Germany, stateless, refugees, cast as survivors or (in the case of the children) redeemers. Europe as a whole seemed hardly more hospitable. Palestine and then Israel was, to many, a political or messianic ideal made too frightening by the threat of ongoing wars and economic instability. For twelve years after the War, my parents were denied visas to

the United States, accused (falsely, as so many) of having been Communists because of their early commitments to socialist Zionism. Other places to consider: Australia? South Africa? Lands that lay beyond the powers of imagination and pronunciation. Having traversed the globe from the insecurity of their homelessness, my parents joined those who focused on the magical-sounding America, to which they were eventually granted entry.

So I have become an American, firmly grounded in the American academy and culture, and yet I remain a member of the displaced. Not surprising then, that I have tried to go elsewhere. But my travels have not been via any contested land, or by touring through the events, the memorials, or the statues that have been the subject of much excellent analysis in recent years.¹ My travels have taken me into the realms of literary creation. And they have shown me the enormous, oft-forgotten Jewish world that existed simultaneous with the Holocaust. In this book, I explore the nuances of cultural negotiations through the literary, religious, and artistic controversies of the period as they were revealing themselves. The result is an examination of several texts in different genres—literary symposia, poetry, novels, journalistic essays—that unearths Jewish culture in the United States during World War II. The work reveals the essential role of Yiddish in the broader Jewish culture, and places Yiddish culture in America where it belongs: at the center of discussions of literary modernism and cultural modernity.

Despite the attempt to describe and analyze in dispassionate terms what I have found, it has been an intensely personal quest. Knowing that I could not go *there*, I yet wanted to enter that forbidden land, to see it up close, to make some sense of it, and to know that I could leave. I wanted to encounter Jewish culture at the end of one period and beginning of another, and so I have explored the American home that was relatively new both to Yiddish and to my own family. It is, in part, a nostalgic quest: it looks back at a period that has determined much of my life but that I have not lived. Its broader significance, I trust, will emerge in two ways: first, in exploring how the culture of American Jewry has become so dependent on the Holocaust, a dependency that is first evident even before the extent of the Holocaust

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was revealed; and, second, in understanding how that culture has been utterly distorted by the omission of the Yiddish context.

A major part of the story I seek to tell here concerns the historical relationship between Yiddish and English-language Jewish culture in America, the myths that have been made of it, and the reasons those myths have taken hold. Yiddish and English are generally seen on a continuum, inhabiting different, occasionally overlapping, but basically sequential spheres. In the popular imagination, first there was Yiddish. (Of course, this is a fallacy: the immigration of Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jews to the United States followed the presence of the first Jews in America by more than a century. But so the story goes.) Then, Yiddish was replaced by English and a major connection between Jews and their Judaism was severed. This simplified and incorrect story of Yiddish tells us very little about the language or culture of Yiddish and a great deal about the ways in which Jewish history is mapped. It is a story of assimilation and of inevitable, organic dilution.

Yiddish and English, in this story, are a bit like Matthew Arnold's division of the cultural world into the Hellenic and Hebraic: although they may inhabit the same time frame for a while, they represent fundamentally different strands of cultural life. In its own way, this book is as implicated in the making of myths as are any of the authors and critics it considers. My stories of origins and antecedents have less to do with sentimentality or reification of the Eastern European past and more with attempts to establish a different canon of American Jewish letters, a more dynamic understanding of Yiddish and Jewish culture. I will argue that Yiddish and Anglo-Jewish culture are, indeed, often remarkably different but that they overlap more frequently and more significantly than is commonly supposed.

Ever since the Holocaust, we have either tried to let the dead speak or, more commonly, in their terrible absence we have tried to speak for them. In the completely commendable—or at least legitimate—urge to let the past speak for itself, we run the risk of thinking we have been successful. No cultural moment, least of all our own solipsistic one, exists as a *tabula rasa* upon which the past can write itself. We are not responding to the past brought to life, but to our own imaginings,

which the past is now made to address. One of the lesser tragedies of the Holocaust has been that the dead cannot be allowed to rest in peace. We are forever trying to listen to them, to hear the dreadful wisdom they have presumably gained from their experiences. Most of the time, their cries are even more muted by a lack of comprehension that is partly historical, partly cultural, partly linguistic. They are presumed to be calling out to us in Yiddish (unless they are calling to us from Hollywood), and Yiddish is presumed to have died with them. So how, indeed, can they be understood?

Yiddish has suffered terribly from and in the twentieth century, but part of its suffering at the beginning of the twenty-first century results from this turn to anthropomorphizing it, seeing it as an entity that can feel pain, die, rise phoenix-like from literal ashes. Yiddish comes metonymically to stand for the people whose tears we cannot see, perhaps because, unlike them, it may be imagined to have a future. The debates about its fate in this next millennium carry an intensity that would be inexplicable if not for these associations between Yiddish and the dead. The energy that failed to save the people is sometimes being used to save the language, as if rescuing one could somehow make losing the other less awful. Those who say that Yiddish, as Jews have known it, is at an end are attacked with the kind of venom more appropriately reserved for collaborators; those who work for its preservation are lauded with the kind of sentiment more appropriately reserved for the righteous. (I have been on the receiving end of both positions and can attest to just how disheartening each one is.) Even as the horror of the Holocaust was unfolding, Yiddish was alive and well—in America. Rarely is the culture of Yiddish seen in its vibrancy, when it was celebrated rather than mourned, or at least when it was known and read and even sometimes reviled as the *lingua franca* of a major portion of European and American Jewry.² I seek here to replace the rhetoric of loss associated with Yiddish and with Jewish culture in America more generally with a rhetoric of transformation, one that recognizes changes in the culture without viewing them as leading to an inevitable demise.

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In this study, I consider two loosely constituted groups of writers who were contemporaries, Jews, and modernists, and who wrote in different languages: Yiddish writers, and those who wrote in English. The latter group is easily recognizable. But, though largely unfamiliar today, the Yiddish writers I examine were among the most prolific, widely read, cited, and criticized writers of the twentieth century. These authors earned a respectable livelihood from their Yiddish publications. The prose writers were translated into English almost as soon as the ink dried on their Yiddish stories. They were in constant, often combative interaction with a reading public known for its willingness to take a stand on cultural and political issues and for its zest in taking issue with its writers. Despite their visibility, those who wrote in Yiddish are rarely included in the history of Jewish American literature, which is generally told through English texts. It begins with such immigrant writers as Anzia Yeziarska or Abraham Cahan, progresses through the Bellow-Malamud-Roth postwar triad and the alienation they seemed to proclaim, and moves on to contemporary writers.

This traditional story imagines a past that, if not golden, had at least the security of community and tradition. In this masterful narrative, Jews who knew Yiddish, had once practiced rituals, and observed commandments are understood to have come from Eastern Europe seeking economic and political freedom, found it, gradually weakened their ties to Yiddish, rituals, and commandments and—with some notable exceptions—made themselves one with the surrounding American environment. In this version, traces of the past are manifest in the Hannukah lights that stand next to Christmas trees in many American malls, in the victory of the bagel throughout the land, in the enormous presence of such figures as Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and Steven Spielberg, and, perhaps, in the revival of klezmer music. But, in sum, it is a story of gradual dissipation. If there are any Yiddish chapters in this story, they are short and largely elegiac. But if we examine the past more closely, this becomes an embarrassingly skewed perspective.

I would like to look instead primarily at Yiddish writers, with English-language writers providing a kind of counterpoint or commentary on the vigorous and controversial Yiddish story. Such contextualization

of American Jewish culture during this period revises the generational perspective of American Jewish cultural development and restores a more dynamic, and accurate, view of an undisputable period of transition. Some might say that this insistence on hearing the producers and consumers of American Jewish culture speak in their own idiom is a form of historicizing and see it in relation to current work in cultural studies, new historicism, or materiality. Some might call it hubris. In any case, this new perspective puts a number of observations into sharper focus. Primary among them is the sense of community—fractious, even antagonistic though it certainly was—that emerges from a consideration of Yiddish writers.

In the 1930s and '40s, Yiddish writers were increasingly united not only by an intimate relationship to a threatened and finally obliterated Eastern European world and by their own acute consciousness of that relationship, but also by their revived memory of that world. Anglo-Jewish writers (American Jews who wrote in English), as I shall illustrate, shared a more amorphous sense of the social barriers in their American way and a belief that these barriers could be overcome. Another way of describing this is to say that for Anglo-Jewish writers, homelessness, alienation, and discrimination were a psychological state; for Yiddish writers in America, it was the reality they escaped by leaving Europe.³

One could, with very little exaggeration, write a kind of meta-biography of almost every well-known Yiddish writer in America in the first half of the twentieth century. It would read something like this: born in Eastern Europe; traditional *heder* education (by which we would also know that the writer is male); began reading secular books in secret around adolescence; rebelled; became a socialist; fled to America, probably for economic or political reasons; struggled through the familiar exigencies of being an immigrant, all the while struggling as well with artistic desires; petrified by the rise of the Nazis and being cut off from family left behind. Of course, such generalizations obscure the individual lives and tremendous variety of these writers. There is no such thing as a “typical” Yiddish writer. But the commonality of this story does underscore the sense of radical, physical displacement they shared. Their English-writing peers—American-born or young

immigrants—had a more metaphoric sense of displacement, focusing on psychic disjunction and alienation. The Yiddish writers formed a community living in something like a parallel universe. The distance between the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village is not great; the offices of the Yiddish daily *Forverts* were a short bus ride, an even shorter subway ride, away from those of the *New York Times*. Yiddish writers necessarily looked uptown and read their neighbor's journals and aspired to their schools but remained, willingly or not, a distinct group. In language, personal history, and public sensibilities they remained unassimilated or perhaps even unassimilable.

For Yiddish writers, the emerging Holocaust was their first real encounter with exile, both as an existential state and a political one. Many of these writers had not so much come to America as left Eastern Europe, fleeing its poverty, its politics, its Jewish traditions. Certainly, they had experienced displacement, the loss of home, even nostalgia for the past, but, as Sidra Ezrahi has most eloquently shown, now the contemporary condition of exile resonated with biblical force. Now that home was no longer accessible to them, first forbidden to them by wars and legal restraints, and then by its physical destruction, they were, for the first time, truly in *goles*, that particularly Jewish sense of radical, cosmic displacement, which is at once exile and also accompanied by a hope for messianic redemption.⁴ This, however, was *goles* without redemption. They were not alienated from home; they were radically, irrevocably separated from a home they had left but to which they could never again even imagine returning because it no longer existed. Neither the discrimination they had endured in their first homes, nor their secular distance from the biblical, exilic longing of their forbearers, could lessen the intensity of this new sense of *goles*.

Anglo-Jewish writers might have felt, after the war, that all Jews are survivors, or some version of “there but for the grace of my grandparents’ steerage go I,” but as Americans they did not have to confront exile in this way. Yiddish writers returned, imaginatively, and often quite ambivalently to a past they had believed it was possible to transcend. Transcendence, however, requires a place, and this place was now gone. The Anglo-Jewish defining term of the period is alienation, also

no doubt aggravated during and after the war by their families' Eastern European origins. In contrast, the Yiddish defining terms of the period are exile and, also, ambivalence—ambivalence about looking back toward Eastern Europe and Jewish tropes, ambivalence about being safely Americans. But alienation and exile are starkly different problems and in this difference we begin to define the different cultural orbits in which Yiddish and Anglo-Jewish writers dwelt.

The various symbolic readings of the Jew are another area in which these Jewish writers differed. Within the English literary world, the Jew as parvenu, the Jew as capital, the Jew as sexuality or impotence were familiar and, indeed, inescapable. They were supplemented by the modernist view of the Jew as Every-alienated-man, and more recently by the postmodernist view of the Jew as the sign of indeterminacy.⁵ These constructions of the Jew were certainly familiar to the Yiddish writers considered here, but they were largely irrelevant, overwhelmed by the material reality of the ocean and conditions that separated them from their origins. The fact that many at the forefront of such symbolic appropriations of the Jew have themselves been Jewish should tell us very little indeed about the accuracy or usefulness of such tropes. No one's authority to speak of the symbolic meaning of Jewishness or Judaism can rest either on personal ritual observance or on an affinity for certain foods or quirky relatives, though some are eager to share such autobiographical details. The symbolic uses of group identities have serious stakes, not the least that they contribute to a culture of atrocities of which the Jew is one breathtaking victim. To object to such dangerous symbolic readings need not, indeed cannot, lead us to seek some essentially Jewish quality, or to adjudicate among the various constructions of Judaism and Jewishness as a religion, a history, a set of folkways, and Jews as a people, a race, a nation. Constructions of the Jew as "a symbol of" or as "the thing itself" are equally limiting.

Similarly, the claim that Yiddish is somehow more authentically Jewish than is English—which we will hear Yiddish writers imply in the following chapters, and which we hear increasingly today—is equally flawed, equally a search for the essential, the truly Jewish. In contemporary culture we are, regrettably, not engaged in a battle over Jewish

books—how to identify the canon, how to interpret it—but rather over authenticity and authority.⁶ The authority to speak of or for the Jewish past, to predict its future, to analyze its cultural presence is increasingly based on just how authentic the speaker’s voice is considered to be. Though etymologically linked, authority and authenticity have suffered different fates in postmodernist thought. Authority is associated with political and social power, often of a ruthless kind, and not with knowledge or agency. Authenticity has fared better in the quest for what is true or original since it has been increasingly linked to the power of the self, to individual perceptions and reactions. But both terms share a notion of the author and authorship, the ability to create, to make something come into being and give it shape. This connection may be a useful reminder of the extent to which claims to authority and authenticity are narrative gestures, an assertion that something is true because the author of them has established some personal stake in asserting it.

Authenticity in our own time and place is increasingly based on personal claims to experiences that might, in Jewish terms, best be thought of as liminal. Those who can avow that they have *been there and done that* (I mean it literally), or that they at least have close relatives who *suffered that*, cannot easily be disputed or ignored. Similarly, those who claim various sorts of conversion experiences—“I wasn’t a practicing Jew, but now I am”; “I never read a Jewish text, but now I want to study seriously”; “I discovered Yiddish and, with it, a way into Judaism”—also speak in ways that cannot be dismissed. Nor should they be. But suffering and conversion are surely liminal Jewish experiences, even if they have been present throughout Jewish history. Sartre may have identified them as the primary reason for Jewish continuity in the modern era, but while this powerful view has taken imaginative hold of the image of the Jew in culture and even politics, it remains a relentlessly external view. It objectifies the Jew, and is remote from Jewish practice, law, customs, and culture.⁷

There is no agreement nowadays about what we mean by “normative Judaism,” but at the same time there can be no reasonable definition of “normative” that defines the Jewish people in terms of repeated attempts at annihilation, or conversion; nor can there be a

definition of Judaism as a series of responses to destruction from without or indifference from within. As a corollary to the distinction that should be maintained between authority and authenticity, we should maintain careful distinctions between authenticity and personal experience. No experience is *inauthentic* (unless it is simply untrue, as in the case of Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*).⁸ The testimony of personal experience is unquestionably compelling. But by constructing it as a guarantee of authority and authenticity we privilege the self over the text, the law, and the tradition, however interpreted.

The authority of Yiddish writers is no more or less than that of their English-writing contemporaries; nor is one group's authenticity greater than the other's. Changing the terms with which we consider Jewish American culture from Yiddish and English writing to Yiddish and English writers—that is, replacing the object of the text with the subject of the writer—may help make this point more clearly. It serves to remind us of the different circumstances in which these writers worked—individually and collectively—and of the varying literary, political, and social choices open to each of them. Neither group, in any case, can claim closer proximity to authentic Jewish expression. If I privilege one over the other in this study, it is in order to right the imbalance between them that has consistently gone the other way.

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At various points in the research and writing of this book I have been struck by the juxtapositions it has made manifest. In 1939, as Europe entered into war, *Gone With the Wind* swept the Academy Awards. In 1940, *The Grapes of Wrath* won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1941, as America entered the war, Disney offered America the character of Dumbo. In 1944, Smokey the Bear replaced Bambi as the symbol that would urge Americans to keep their forests from going up in smoke. On the one hand, these juxtapositions are meaningless, illustrating only the hackneyed observation that those not directly under fire are able to go about their business. On the other, they highlight the different milieus in which I place Yiddish and Anglo-Jewish writers. They inhabited and debated about the same time and place, peopled with followers of Trotsky, eventually disenchanting Stalinists, Communists left bereft by the Hitler-Stalin pact, Zionists, and diasporists. They were all shaped

by World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, the economic crises of the 1920s and '30s. Yet for all their affinities, their cultural loyalties varied, especially during the war years. Textual evidence suggests, not at all surprisingly, that Yiddish writers were fully aware of American mass culture and its influences but were looking to Europe, to their hometowns and their families during these years; English writers, while equally aware of the news from Europe, were at a greater remove from it. (This was not new. Only a few years earlier, Yiddish writers had been more strongly affected by the Russian Revolution than by the Great War.) In the 1930s and 1940s, Yiddish writers continued the political and often petty disputes of earlier decades, but they now asserted their connections to their recent past in geographical and temporal terms more consistently than their Anglo-Jewish contemporaries tended to do.

What is more surprising is that the paths of Jewish cultural exchange were more open at this time than is usually supposed, with cultural periodicals in both languages aware of one another, commenting on one another's cultural and political stances, and even publishing authors who wrote in both Yiddish and English. The war years thus constitute a crucial, but largely unacknowledged, transitional period for Jewish culture in America.

During this period, the United States unquestionably emerged as the center for Yiddish culture, even as Yiddish was ceding its privileged position in Jewish culture to English. These pivotal years reveal the complex dynamics of cultural production and change. Examining both Yiddish and English materials gives us a considerably more nuanced version of the multicultural and hybridity debates at the center of our current discussions about identity and culture. Jewish culture during these war years offers a dynamic model of identity formation within a linguistically hybrid culture. It was not simply a culture divided against itself, with English and Yiddish spheres of influence, but a peculiarly American Jewish mix: a bilingual, multivalent, untidy array that challenges the more familiar linear view of Yiddish decline and growing English dominance.

Today there are fewer distinctions made between "Jewish languages" and "languages Jews use," but there is an important Jewish

history of tension between literatures written in the former and those written in the latter (*la'az* or *loez*, a Hebrew acronym for “a language of a strange people”). Despite the best efforts of Zionists and Yiddishists, English may now be competing as a public language used by Jews, but it cannot be mistaken for a Jewish language. Theories of hybridity and hyphenated cultures alike demand equal attention to a range of influences and sources. The Jewish or Yiddish parts of this mix have most often carried adjectival qualifiers: traditional, past, obscure. They may come first in discussions of Jewish American culture, but they do not last, pointing the way instead to the present, however construed. I privilege the Yiddish part of the mix in this study in order to undermine the teleology of attenuation and assimilation that we now accept without hesitation; my work insists that English texts tell less than half the story, even if it is the only story we have been hearing.

In the chapters that follow I have taken as my point of departure controversies inspired by literary texts—poems, novels, critiques, declarations—produced by some of the most influential writers of Yiddish. These cultural controversies reveal much about the interlocked questions of Yiddish literary production, American cultural formations, and the looming presence of the Second World War. In some cases, I have compelled English and Yiddish writers to appear to be talking to one another. Thus, “Cultural Questions, Jewish Answers” examines questions about Jewish culture and continuity—and the varying responses offered in both languages—that seemed inescapable in this period. Included in these questions is the problem of the new relationships among secular, modern, and Jewish cultures that were being imagined for and by Jews after the rise of Hitler. Part of this imagining, as the second chapter illustrates, demanded redefinitions of Jewish concepts of chosenness and faith, understood not in terms of God or traditional religion but rather in Enlightenment ideals and European cultures. A related question—the subject of the third chapter—concerns how certain images, symbols, or themes might resonate for English and Yiddish readers and, specifically, whether the figure of Jesus had any place in the newly forming Jewish imagination of the war years. And, finally, I consider various attempts to find a vocabulary for mourning, a grammar of commemoration, a syntax for the future.

Central to all these considerations are multiple understandings of identity formation. Despite all the ethnic tensions to which Jews were subject in the United States, neither ideologies of the melting pot nor of cultural pluralism challenged the multiculturalism and bilingualism that flourished during the period.

Throughout this study, I seek to demythologize Yiddish as *mame-loshn* (mother tongue), as the language of the home, the old, and the past. I examine it at a period of great, if ironic, vibrancy, a period during which Yiddish writers explicitly confronted the very nature of their existence in unprecedented ways. Under increasing pressure of news from the war front and silence from home, Yiddish writers re-imagined modernism, the Enlightenment, political engagement, literary conventions, and symbolic language. The destruction of European Jewry was called by its Yiddish name, *khurbn*, before it was known as the Holocaust, before the numbers of dead were revealed, even before the concentration camps were built.⁹ What Yiddish-speaking Jews meant by *khurbn*, as David Roskies has authoritatively argued, was a long history of disasters into which the rise of Hitler, the Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht, and a host of other disastrous events could fit.¹⁰ The particularities of Nazism's rise were not, at the time, perceived as unique, unparalleled, or apocalyptic by the people against whom they were directed. On the contrary: this was one more terribly difficult moment in a history that began in biblical time and, like those other moments, it would be endured.

For Yiddish writers in America, this sense of the *longue durée* was tempered by a humbling awareness of having been spared. They were an ocean away. Most of them were decades removed from Europe. But they had been there and their relatives often remained. And where, they could not avoid asking, would Yiddish culture live if not in Europe? Despite their well-established cultural life in the United States, despite decades of arguments about whether Poland, Russia, or the United States was the most appropriate center for Yiddish, despite demographic and economic successes here, Yiddish culture was still unimaginable without its European beginnings. The Jewish tourist trade to Eastern Europe since the fall of Communism is just the latest expression of the tenacity of this perception. It seems appropriate to

take another look at such views now, when American scholars have to be imported to teach Yiddish in Poland, when Israeli high school students no longer go to the ancient Judean fortress of Masada but to the theme park that has been made of the concentration camp at Majdanek, when the fear of anti-Semitism is used as a fund-raising strategy.¹¹

In our age, we take it as a given that we encounter history and culture through many filters of time and space. Some of us call these “filters” narratives. My own narrative about the years examined here is based on the critical and imaginative narratives of Yiddish speakers. I find myself, still, unwilling or unable to make the trip to Europe, but equally unable to resist the war years. Europe in some form is still there to be visited and contested; the past, of course, cannot be visited in quite the same way. It seems impossible to take a tour to find it. But perhaps I am wrong. There is always the counter-example of the Washington, D.C., Holocaust Museum, which, it was feared, would allow visitors to spend a couple of hours and check it off their “been there, done that” list. Part of the power of that museum (like the Jewish tours through Holocaust sites and the American quest for such sites on our own ground) is, no doubt, the illusion of entering a different place and time and the exhilaration of leaving it. The highly contested concentration-camp-like architecture, the identity cards handed out at the door, the railroad cars one can enter: all of these rely on the myth of identification, and the power it still has in our own time and place.¹² Nonetheless, it is one thing to imagine that your plane ride to Warsaw has transported you elsewhere and quite another to think that this has been accomplished by your time machine. As David Lowenthal has written, the past is, indeed, a foreign country, but I do not think our passports permit us entry.¹³ We can, at best, recall the walls around Warsaw (and, later, Berlin) that have come down, but whose traces are still discernable. We peer over the borders they represent, into the place and time that has shaped our own.

And it is my peering over the borders that has revealed to me not the mysteries of a foreign place, but the mysteries at home. In my own search for meaning, I have found the extraordinary efforts of Yiddish writers to create meaning in a time we have come to think of as unimaginable. It is to the power of their imaginations that I now turn.