Introduction Why Meir Wiener?

In a utopian alternative history, where the Jews of Eastern Europe were spared the Holocaust and the Stalinist terror, Meir Wiener might have become one of the celebrated Jewish intellectuals of modernity along with Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem. His studies of Yiddish literary history would have been taught in universities, his fiction would have provoked debates among Yiddish intellectuals, and his life story would have served as a source of pride and inspiration for later generations of Yiddish scholars and writers.

In the real world, however, Wiener's name is remembered only by a small circle of Yiddish scholars, and mostly for his studies of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature. His fiction is nearly forgotten, and his magnum opus, the 450-page novel set in post-World War I Vienna and Berlin, remains unfinished and unpublished. Yet there was probably no other Jewish intellectual in interwar Europe with such a wide and diverse circle of contacts as Wiener. He personally knew Lenin and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, Martin Buber and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Hayim Nahman Bialik and Walter Benjamin; he was close friends with the Soviet Yiddish writers Leyb Kvitko, Der Nister, and Perets Markish, as well as with the Hebrew authors David Vogel and Avraham Ben Yitzhak (Sonne); he engaged in polemics with Gershom Scholem, Max Weinreich, and Georg Lukács. Wiener wrote and published his works in German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian, dealing with a wide range of topics, from mystical poetry and its interpretation to the theory of socialist realism.

The events of the mid-twentieth century have fundamentally changed not only the course of Jewish history, but also the way in which it is

interpreted. As the historian Moshe Rosman observed in his insightful analysis of current Jewish historiography, "the modern period of Jewish history ended some time ago. We are now in a new period that began in the wake of the Shoah and the establishment of Israel."[1] Today, in the age that Rosman describes as "post-modern," our vision of Jewish modernity is largely shaped by the perspectives of American and Israeli scholars, most of whom are children or grandchildren of European immigrants. The voices of pre-war European Jews, especially those who wrote in languages other than English, German, or Hebrew, have been moderated by, and adapted to, various ideological and intellectual agendas, and sometimes silenced altogether. As a result, our picture of the past has become fragmented, with past connections and relationships severed, and the separate pieces being reassembled into different, and often conflicting, narratives.

To understand and appreciate Meir Wiener's achievements, we must take a mental leap into the world before the Holocaust and Israel, where millions of Jews in Eastern and Central Europe were having to cope with the pressing issues of their day: the rise of anti-Semitism, the fierce ideological battles both inside and outside the Jewish community, and the increasingly volatile political and military situation in the region. But all their problems, conflicts, and differences notwithstanding, the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe formed a community that shared a common cultural background, historical memory, and linguistic repertoire. In that world, a communist, a Zionist, and a traditional religious Jew had more in common with each other than with their respective soul mates of our "post-modern" age.

We can attain a deeper understanding of that world if we listen carefully not only to those voices that are in tune with contemporary agendas, but also to those who speak differently. One of the aims of this study is to question the accepted truth that, due to the Stalinist regime, Soviet Jewry lived in intellectual and cultural isolation from the rest of the world.[2] The Cold War belief that communism and *Yidishkeyt* ("Jewishness" in the broader cultural, rather than the narrower religious, sense) are mutually exclusive has recently been revised by the younger generation of scholars, who avail themselves of previously inaccessible archival and oral history sources.[3] These works tend to focus on the

social aspects of Soviet Jewish culture, such as institutions, publishing, and education, leaving to one side the theoretical discourse. They rightly point out that the centralization and consolidation of the Soviet party-state during the 1930s sapped the ideological and institutional strength of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia.[4]

However, these works do not address the issues of literary theory and aesthetics. Any attentive reader of Soviet Yiddish writing, such as Wiener's studies of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature or Der Nister's magisterial novel *Di mishpokhe Mashber* (*The Family Mashber*, 1939–41), will be impressed by the originality of their ideas, the depth of their knowledge of Jewish culture, and the power of their artistic imagination. Was it possible, after all, to be a loyal Soviet citizen, even a card-carrying communist, and an original Jewish thinker or artist at the same time? Were these figures "internal émigrés" who tried to resist the dominant ideological paradigm or, perhaps, "bipolar" personalities split between their loyalties to communism and Judaism; or were they committed to a larger cultural project of creating a new Jewish culture within the Soviet Marxist framework as they interpreted it? As I hope to demonstrate, using Meir Wiener's work as a case study, Soviet Jewish intellectuals and writers were as much a part of Jewish modernity as their counterparts in Europe, America, and Palestine; and their ideas and artistic taste were rooted in the same European Jewish discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This does not mean that Soviet Jewish intellectuals shared many (or indeed any) views with their colleagues abroad. Here, again, Meir Wiener's case is exemplary. Anything but a timid personality, he often expressed his views in the most abrasive terms and engaged in the most aggressive polemics against his ideological opponents both in the Soviet Union and abroad. His sincere and enthusiastic embrace of the Soviet ideology would certainly appear excessive today even to most radical leftist intellectuals. Some conservative critics might even label him a "self-hating Jew" because of his radical rejection of nationalism in any form. But this raises an interesting question: how could Wiener and his Soviet colleagues conceptualize Yiddish culture other than in terms of cultural nationalism, an ideology so popular in interwar Eastern and Central Europe?

As I interpret Wiener's intellectual evolution, it was his rejection of post-World War I nationalist politics that drove him from the orientalist utopia of the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am and Martin Buber to the Marxist-Leninist internationalist utopia of communism—and from Austria to the Soviet Union. His reading of the political situation in interwar Europe convinced him that the only way for Jews to avoid the danger of the total "nationalization" of Jewish culture—a process he believed was well under way in many Central European countries—was to come under the protective wing of the Soviet multinational "affirmative action empire," to use Terry Martin's term. In some respects the Soviet Union could even have reminded Wiener of the old Habsburg Empire, which required loyalty to the Emperor but not to any particular nation. Moreover, the course of events during the 1930s convinced him that any form of nationalism would eventually deteriorate into fascism, as had happened in Germany and to various degrees in Romania, Hungary, and Austria, and that Jews were not immune to this either.

To understand better the thinking of Soviet Yiddish intellectuals, it is useful to keep in mind the semantic difference between the English words "people" and "nation" and the Yiddish *folk*, which is close to, but also different from, the German *Volk* and the Russian *narod*. For Wiener, as for many East European Jewish intellectuals, *folk* was a category *both* material and ideal. It consisted of the working masses—as opposed to the middle and upper classes—but it also had a transcendental meaning, as the indestructible eternal core of any form of historical existence of the Jews. From this point of view, the concept of a uniform political nation—which took shape in Central Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was also adopted by political Zionists—was a danger to the Jewish *folk*, because it implied the subordination of the East European working masses to the interests of the Western capitalist elite. This subordination, not the elite, threatened the transcendental, eternal essence of that *folk*. Wiener's concept of *folk* is clearly contradictory. On the one hand, as a Marxist, he believed that the working class was the primary motivating force of historical progress, and the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe played as great a role in the class struggle as those of other peoples. On the other hand, he regarded the Jewish *folk* as a Kantian transcendental thing-in-itself, contrary to the Hegelian

notion, in its materialistic Marxist guise, of a nation as an agent of historical action. It was the *folk*, not the nation, that took part in the class struggle—and yet the *folk* also transcended historical reality.

With hindsight, of course, it is easy to see the theoretical inconsistency and practical implausibility of attempts to reconcile Jewish cultural folkism with Soviet Marxism-Leninism in its Stalinist form. Yet if we make an effort to look at the world through the eyes of Soviet Yiddish intellectuals of the interwar period, we can not only gain a better sense of the reality of that time, but also learn some important lessons. Although the deterministic Marxist notion of class struggle as the driving force of the historical development of the Jewish people is not shared by mainstream contemporary scholarship, social historians today do pay increasingly more attention to all kinds of conflicts, contradictions, and tensions within the Jewish community at different historical moments. An important, but rather neglected, tool of such analysis is the critical reading of literature along the lines suggested by Wiener and other Soviet scholars, who explored the texts of the major Yiddish authors as a reflection of the socio-economic dynamics.

Parts of Wiener's analysis, of course, now seem outdated. Indeed, he himself would sometimes renounce his earlier views and provide a different interpretation of the same text. His Marxist rhetoric was often bombastic, his arguments one-sided, and his conclusions unbalanced, particularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Living as he did under Stalin, Wiener naturally refrained from sharing his true thoughts even with his closest friends, let alone commit them to paper, and we do not know the extent to which he, despite his sincere commitment to Marxism, had to censor his views to conform to the official doctrine of the day. But Wiener also left a substantial corpus of fiction, some of it unpublished, which, as I suggest, reflected his mood and his view of the world, and might therefore offer clues as to what he actually thought and felt about his age.

Reading Wiener's ironic, gloomy prose—preoccupied with fate, violence, and death—against the story of his own life, one cannot help seeing parallels between fiction and reality. It seems that Wiener foretold his own death more than once in his own works—or, perhaps he tailored the final chapter of his life story to the mood of his fiction. As

a volunteer in the Soviet Writers' Battalion, aged forty-seven, and devoid of military experience, he had no real chance of surviving the fierce battles in the autumn of 1941. And yet the death he chose for himself was probably the best that was possible under the circumstances. Had he survived the war, he most certainly would have been persecuted during the anti-Semitic campaign of 1948–53 that destroyed Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. As a war hero, his name was spared posthumous defamation, and his family was left in peace.

This book is an attempt to explore Meir Wiener's thought and imagination in all its depth and complexity. It analyzes, sometimes in great detail, various aspects of his intellectual and artistic creativity and places them within the relevant intellectual, cultural, and political contexts of interwar Central and Eastern Europe. As I hope to demonstrate, Wiener can be seen as a link between cultural movements and phenomena that from our perspective might seem antithetical or even mutually exclusive, such as Yiddish and Hebrew, Soviet Marxism and German expressionism, Kabbalah and Haskalah. The structure of the book largely follows Wiener's biographical timeline, each chapter dealing with a certain period of Wiener's life, as well as with the theoretical and artistic issues that preoccupied his imagination during that period.

Chapter 1 tells the story of Wiener's youth and education in Cracow, Vienna, and Switzerland and analyzes his changing attitude to expressionism and Jewish writing in German. Chapter 2 focuses on his political and scholarly ideas during the early 1920s, looking at his Zionist polemics, his studies of medieval Hebrew literature, and his philosophical essays in the context of Viennese Jewish culture in the aftermath of World War I. Chapter 3 turns to the Yiddish literary scene in Vienna, Berlin, and Kiev during the same period and establishes some connections between those cultural centers by analyzing modernist poetry and criticism, thus setting Wiener's early Yiddish writing in its relevant contexts. Chapter 4 follows Wiener to the Soviet Union and focuses on his adjustment to Soviet conditions in Kiev. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 analyze in some depth Wiener's historical and critical studies on Yiddish literature and the evolution of his ideas during the 1930s, and situate his work in the intellectual milieu of the time. Wiener's historical fiction and his ideas on Jewish history are discussed in Chapter 8, whereas Chapter 9

deals with his memoirs and the unfinished magnum opus, set in the Berlin of the early 1920s. The Conclusion weaves together the threads of Meir Wiener's intricate life and fits them into the intellectual and cultural pattern of the age. It brings together the various themes and concerns of his artistic and intellectual pursuits and makes a case for the relevance of his legacy today.

This book should have been written at least ten years ago when some of Wiener's students, and others who knew him well, were still alive. Now there are significant gaps that cannot be filled in and questions that cannot be answered with the help of the available sources. The revival of interest in Wiener began in the early 1960s when his student Moyshe Notovich published a brief memoir in the Moscow Yiddish magazine *Sovetish Heymland*, establishing a cultural link between the newly established Soviet Yiddish periodical and the pre-war Soviet Yiddish culture.

The most important contribution to this revival in the Soviet Union was made by the literary scholar Eliezer Podriatshik, who began working on Wiener's papers in the 1960s and published some of his previously unknown works in the same magazine in 1968–69. At the same time, Max Weinreich, the academic director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York (and a target of Wiener's virulent critical attacks during the 1930s), began to collect biographical materials about Wiener. Unfortunately, this project was cut short by Weinreich's death in 1969. A monograph on Wiener by the American scholar Elias Shulman, based on the available published sources and some archival materials, appeared in 1972. In Israel, the prominent Yiddish scholar Dov Sadan published Wiener's letters to the Prague rabbi Heinrich (Hayim) Brody concerning their collaboration on an anthology of Hebrew literature and promised to publish more material—a promise that was never fulfilled. Most recently, Marcus Moseley has brilliantly analyzed Wiener's memoirs in the context of his magisterial study of Jewish autobiography, paving the way to a broader literary interpretation of Wiener's oeuvre.[5]

This volume, which took nearly fifteen years to write, would not have been possible without all these important contributions by eminent scholars. No less important were the efforts of Meir Wiener's

daughter, Julia Wiener, who brought her father's papers—over fifty boxes—to Israel and donated them to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. Initially, my interest in Wiener was sparked by Chaim Beider, the deputy editor of *Sovetish Heymland*, where I worked from 1989 to 1991. Before I left for New York to pursue a doctoral degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), Beider handed me two volumes of Wiener's *History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, with the words: "Take them now—you will understand later why you need them." When studying Yiddish literature in New York with David Roskies and Dan Miron, I realized, to my great surprise, how highly my teachers regarded this Soviet Marxist scholar. My interest in Wiener's enigmatic personality was deepened by reading his pre-Soviet writings in German and discovering his important, but forgotten, role in the European Jewish cultural life of the early 1920s. I finally was able to devote time to research on Wiener during my stay at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the summer of 2003, which I spent working with his archives.

The destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the 1940s spelled the end of a vibrant and multifaceted Yiddish culture, rooted in the European Enlightenment, Judaism, and Russian literature. Yiddish has gradually lost its intellectual élan, its cultural breadth, and its artistic depth, often degenerating into "Just say nu" frivolities. On the evidence of some recent publications, it is clear that familiarity with Yiddish culture is no longer regarded as necessary for writing about Soviet Jewry—indeed, sometimes even for writing about Yiddish! It is my hope that this study of Meir Wiener demonstrates that the Soviet Jewish past was more complicated than is frequently believed.

I owe thanks to many individuals and institutions for their encouragement, help, and support. As I mentioned above, it was the late Chaim Beider who sparked my interest in Wiener, and I also benefited greatly from his unpublished "Lexicon of Soviet Yiddish Literature." I began to engage with Wiener's ideas seriously in graduate seminars with David Roskies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and with Dan Miron and Rachmiel Peltz at Columbia University, who generously shared with

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