ARTISTIC VOICE AND IMPLICIT SOCIAL THEORY IN THE EARLY YIDDISH FICTION OF MENDELE MOYKHER SFORIM

BY

© AARON LANSKY

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ENGLISH ABSTRACT

ARTISTIC VOICE AND IMPLICIT SOCIAL THEORY IN THE EARLY YIDDISH FICTION OF MENDELE MOYKHER SFORIM

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Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim) underwent a dramatic literary and ideological transformation during the first ten years of his Yiddish career. He came to regard Yiddish less as a tool for propaganda and more as an artistic medium in its own right. Concomitantly, he renounced bourgeois idealism and committed himself to the Jewish poor in their struggle against economic exploitation and political reaction. This thesis traces the course of Abramovitch's transformation through his first three Yiddish works: Dos kleyne mentshele (1864), Dos vintshfingerl (1865), and Di takse (1869). Part One is a sociological investigation of the diverse influences in the author's biography. Parts Two and Three provide detailed textual analysis, focusing on a dialectical interplay between artistic voice and implicit social theory within the literary process itself.

La Voix artistique et la théorie sociale implicite dans les premières oeuvres littéraires en yiddish de Mendele Moykher Sforim

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Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim) se transforma dramatiquement dans les domaines de la littérature et l'idéologie pendant les dix premières années de sa carrière de écrivain yiddish. Il en vint à voir dans le yiddish moins un outil de propagande qu'une véritable voie artistique. En même temps il reconça à l'idelisme bourgeois, et s'engagea dans la lutte des juifs pauvres contre l'exploitation abuse économique et la réaction politique. Cette thèse suit la transformation d'Abramovitch à travers ses trois premières oeuvres en yiddish: Dos kleyne mentshele (1864), Dos vintshfingerl (1865), et Di takse (1869). Le Première Partie est une étude sociologique des diverses influences sur la vie de l'auteur. Les Deuxième et Troisième Parties, par un analyse textuel en détail, examinent le jeu dialectal entre la voix artistique et la thérie sociale implicite dans le procédé littéraire même.

ייִדישער מיצור

„קינסטלעריש שטים און סאציאלע טעאריע אין די ערשטע ייִדישע שריפטן פון מענדעלע מוכר ספרים"

פון אהרון לאנסקי
ייִדיש שטודיעס
מעגיל אוניווערסיטעט

אין משך פון די ערשטע צען יאר פון זיין ייִדיש-שרייבענדיקער קאריערע, האט שלום יעקב אבראמאוויטש (מענדעלע מוכר ספרים) ליטעראריש גענג זיך געפונדערט, סיי עסטעטיש, סיי אידעאלאגיש. ער האט געקוקט אויף דער ייִדישער שפראך נישט נאר ווי א פראקטישן בילדונגס-מיטל, נאר אויך ווי א קינסטלעריש מדיום פאר זיך. גלייכצייטיק האט ער זיך אפגעזאגט פון דעם בורזשואזן אידעאליזם פון דער השכלה און האט זיך איבערגעגעבן צו דעם ייִדישן ארעמאן אין זיין עקאנאמישן און פאליטישן קאמף. דער הינטיקער מענטש קוקט איבער אבראמאוויטשס טראנספארמאציע, ווי זי לאזט זיך דערקענען אין זיינע פאסע ערשטע ייִדישע שריפטן: „דאס קלייַנע מענטשעלע" (1864), „דאס חינטשפיגעל" (1865), און „די מאקסע" 1869). דער ערשטער טייל פון דער דאזיקער שטודיע באקוקט פון א סאציאלישן קוקווינקל די פארשיידענע השפעות פון דעם מחבר לעבנס-געשיכטע. די צוויטער און דריטער טיילן נעמען זיך צו די כתבים גופא, פאקוסירן אויף דעם אויסבייט צווישן קינסטלעריש שטים און סאציאלער טעאריע.

The Poem
The Song
The Picture
is only water
drawn from the well
of the people
and it should be given back
to them in a cup of beauty
so that they may drink
and in drinking
understand themselves

-- Frederico Garcia Lorca

מים דעם דאָרשט פון דורות אי׳ז מענדעלע
צוגעפאלן צו יעדן חן־גריבעלע פון ״דישן
לעבן, שפּענדיק פון דאָרם די אוצרות פון
בילדעריסקיים, וואָס דאָס אנאָנימער ״ייִדל״ האָט
שוין געהאט אין זיין שפּראך אנגעזאמלט.

With the thirst of generations Mendele immersed himself in every dimple of ~~Jewish~~ life, bringing forth from there those treasures of vivid portraiture which the anonymous "little Jew" had already garnered within his language.

--Nokhum Oyslender, Gruntshtrikhn. fun yidishn realizm, p. 44

PREFACE

Modern Yiddish literature was born in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its first great writer, Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim), was an accomplished Hebrew author who turned to Yiddish for reasons of propaganda, seeking to disseminate Englightenment ideas among untutored East European Jews. His first Yiddish work, Dos kleyne mentshele, appeared in 1864; it was openly didactic, upholding the premise that hard work, clean living and rational thinking would be enough to effect material amelioration among the Jewish masses. As he continued to write in Yiddish, Abramovitch underwent a dramatic transformation, both artistically and ideologically. Within the past ten years, he came to regard Yiddish less as a tool of propaganda and more as a rich artistic medium in its own right. At the same time, he came to renounce idealist social solutions and to enlist himself as a champion of the poor in their struggle against economic exploitation and political reaction.

This paper traces the course of Abramovitch's transformation, through his early biography and his first three Yiddish works. It is my contention that change was inherent in Abramovitch's literary process, through a dialectical interaction of artistic voice and implicit social theory. My thesis is presented in three parts. Part One, "The Writer and His Worlds," examines the diverse formative influences of Abramovitch's youth: Rabbinism, Hasidism and the Haskala. I explore the social basis of each, and attempt to locate Yiddish literature within a broader historical context. Part Two, "The Bourgeois Propagandist," offers detailed textual analysis of Abramovitch's first two Yiddish works: Dos kleyne mentshele (1864) and Dos vintshfingerl (1865). I consider elements of narrative structure, language and style

in relation to plot and implicit social theory. Part Three, "The People's Artist," is a study of Di takse, a five act play published in 1869. Here I focus on the semi-autobiographical protagonist, Shloyme Veker ("Solomom Awakener"), and try to discern Abramovitch's own literary and ideological progress in the "awakening" of his hero.

** ** **

There is no paucity of critical studies on Mendele. Since his debut, literally thousands of biographical and critical pieces have appeared, both in the popular and scholarly press. Early Yiddish critics were generally content to praise Abramovitch's literary sophistication vis a vis his contemporaries, and offered little to uncover his process of transformation. In 1928 Dr. Max Weinreich published the chapter "Mendeles onheyb" as part of his Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte.[1] Here he provided structural and linguistic analysis of variant editions of Mendele's work. A similar line of criticism was pursued by Soviet literary historians working out of the newly formed Yiddish academies in Minsk and Kiev, notably M. Erik, A. Gurshteyn, Y. Nusinov, N. Oyslender and M. Viner,[2] Of particular note was Oyslender's Gruntshtrikhn fun yidishn realizm,[3] which offered a dialectical investigation of Abramovitch's own biography, the model of which is incorporated in the present study. The Soviet critics did much to illuminate aspects of language and structure, but in the end were too intent on proving Abramovitch's folk origins and credentials to do justice to the truly synthetic nature of his work.

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[1]Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1928.

[2]See Dalia Kaufman, "Mendeli Mokher Sforim b'Brit Hamoatsot, 1917 - 1948" (unpublished dissertation, The Hebrew University in Jersalem, 1975).

[3]Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1928.

The definitive study of Abramovitch appeared in 1973 under the title A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century,[4] written by Professor Dan Miron of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Through meticulous documentation, Miron establishes Abramovitch within the aesthetic context of the Haskala, where Yiddish was denigrated as a jargon, a "half bestial tongue" unsuited for "civilized" discourse. Miron shows how this attitude engendered an "aesthetic of ugliness," which in turn shaped Abramovitch's own literary maturation. He unravels Abramovitch from Mendele, his folksy "persona," and offers a penetrating analysis of the function of this narrative device.

Notwithstanding its enormously seminal contribution, I believe that Professor Miron's study remains limited in one crucial regard. He analyzes the development of artistic form and voice in Abramovitch's fiction, but fails to analyze the concomitant transformation of implicit social theory. He accepts aesthetic criteria at face value, unconcerned with an underlying social context.

In the present study I argue that aesthetics are conditioned by class and culture, and that the transformation of the one cannot be fully understood without reference to the other. I am indebted to Professor Miron's work as a point of reference, but endeavor to widen its scope through broader socio-economic considerations. I cannot begin to duplicate the exhaustive depth of his research, and aim instead at a more synthetic product based in part on a fresh evaluation of his data.

This paper draws on a wide range of disciplines, from social and intellectual history to political theory and literary criticism. I have

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[4] New York: Schocken Books, 1973.

made reference to secondary sources where appropriate, but for the most part have relied on my own critical reading of the texts. The edition of Dos kleyne mentshele examined here was discussed previously in Weinreich's "Mendeles onheby." Dos vintshfingerl was examined with reference to later editions by Weinreich, and in greater depth by Y. Nusinov, "Di ershter oysgabe fun 'Vintshfingerl.'"[5] To my knowledge no specific study has previously been made of Di takse.

This thesis has entailed a number of logistical problems. In the case of Dos kleyne mentshele and Dos vintshfingerl, I have relied on photostats of the original editions, which employed archaic orthography and were not always legible. In the case of Di takse, I worked with a more recent edition published by the Hebrew Publishing Company of New York (1920), which regrettably, was not always reliable. As with any study of this sort, transaction has posed a considerable challenge I have attempted to balance my translations between literal rendition and stylistic coherence; in some instances I have resorted to English idiom to approximate the subjective "flavor" of the Yiddish. Because language is of such crucial importance to my overall thesis, I have provided the Yiddish original of all textual citations. In such cases I have generally standardized outmoded or haphazard orthography with the modern spelling prescribed by the YIVO, as given in Uriel Weinreich's Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary.[6] Transliteration of Hebrew words conforms to common usage, such as "Haskala" (not

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[5] In Shriftn, v. 1 (Kiev: Farlag Kultur-lige, 1928), pp. 199-218.

[6] NY: McGraw Hill Book Company and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1968.

haskole), "Hasidism" (not khasidizm), and so forth. English spelling follows the American form.

** ** **

This paper has been in various stages of research and production for the past two years, and reflects my own intellectual transformation during that period. I am indebted to a great many special people, without whose assistance and support the work would never have been possible.

I was first introduced to Mendele in a systematic manner by Professor Ruth Wisse, during a seminar on "The Classicists" given at McGill University in the fall of 1977. As my thesis supervisor, Professor Wisse has shown remarkable patience. She is a warm, sensitive teacher with a keen critical eye. She has been generous with her encouragement and advice, and has kept me mindful of the ultimately human dimension of my subject. Many of the ideas incorporated in this paper were formulated in the course of our seminar and subsequent discussions.

During my two years at McGill I also studied closely with Professor Eugene Orenstein. He read earlier drafts of this paper and provided valuable corrections and suggestions. I have learned a great deal from him, both through the breadth of his erudition and the intensity of his dedication.

I must acknowledge my debt to other teachers, past and present. Professor Jules Piccus of the Univeristy of Massachusetts at Amherst was my first teacher of Yiddish and has offered his continued support. Professor Dov Noy of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has shown me great kindness and provided materials and advice. Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter of Columbia University imparted to me a lasting love of Yiddish as a living language. I owe thanks above all to Professor Leonard Glick of Hampshire College. He

discussed this work with me in various stages of production, delighting me with clear criticism and fresh perspectives. Leonard remains my teacher, colleague and friend, a constant source of encouragement and inspiration.

Research for this paper was conducted primarily at the Jewish Public Library (Yidishe Folksbibliotek) in Montreal. My special thanks to Mrs. Serlin for her warm smile and able assistance. I am also grateful to the Library of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, which provided me with photostats of rare materials unavailable elsewhere.

Mrs. Sylvia Gross, secretary of the Jewish Studies Program at McGill University, provided indispensable assistance and encouragement.

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My thanks to Shlomo Jaacobi, Mona Roskies and my students at Bialik High School in Cote St. Luc, Quebec, for a year of welcome distraction and support while this work was in progress.

I want to acknowledge many other wonderful friends who have given their love, support and confidence in this and other struggles: especially Valerie Goldrick, Hana Harris, Dr. Charles and Rachel Harris, David Kudan, Roger Mummert, Paul Novak, Laurie Radovsky, Sheindl Rothman, Nechama Sataty and Edith and Steven Siegel. My housemates, Mr. Scott Bolotin and Jewel, Laura and Tik Nelson, kept the woodstove burning as I rode out the last frenzied months of writing and typing. Laura Nelson shared her humor and vision, through good times and bad.

Finally, this paper is dedicated to my brothers, Philip and Yale, and to our parents, Sidney and Edith Lansky of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, who had the strength to raise us as Jews.

Amherst, Massachusetts
February 29, 1980
12 Adar, 5740

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INTRODUCTION:
THE "ZEYDE" AND HIS FORBEARS

> Mendele is not only the oldest among the living [Yiddish] writers, he is also, and far more significantly, the first. In building a literature, it was he who laid the cornerstone. He is the first who began writing art for art's sake [l'shmo]; . . . he is also the first who realized and proclaimed to his generations of maskilim: 'You speak of reform, of Enlightenment, but the people need bread.'
>
> -- Y. L. Perets, "On Mendele's 75th Birthday [1910]," cited by Nakhman Mayzl, "Mendele der ershter," Dos Mendele-bukh, p. 284.

Mendele Moykher Sforim, "Mendele the Bookpeddler," is the zeyde, the grandfather of Yiddish literature. Though neither well known nor readily accessible to the present day reader,[1] he is recognized alongside Sholem Aleykhem and Y. L. Perets as one of the three classical masters who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, brought modern Yiddish literature to birth. Mendele was, in the words of Perets, "the first";[2] it was he who first realized the artistic power of the denigrated Yiddish medium,

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[1] While Sholem Aleykhem, Perets and others enjoy widespread popularity among present day readers of Jewish literature, Mendele remains virtually unknown. This is due in large measure to the intensely Jewish social and linguistic context of his writings, which often defies translation. As Dovid Frishman observes, "If one tries to translate Mendele into another language, the reader will first of all not know what world he's in. Everything will strike him as new and foreign, not only the content but also the presentation, the entire form and manner of narration" (In Kritik, p. 13; cited by Nakhman Mayzl, Dos Mendele-bukh (NY: Ikuf, 1959), p. 284). Very few translations of Mendele exist in English, and virtually all are unsatisfactory. For a complete listing see Dina Abramowicz, Yiddish Literature in English Translation (2nd ed.; NY: YIVO, 1968). Only one English translation, The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin III (NY: Schocken Books, 1968), is still in print as a separate volume. Apart from the Yiddish original, Mendele seems to survive best in Hebrew, in translations prepared by the author himself. See Haim Ormian, "The Attitude of Israeli High School Students Toward Mendele Moykher Sforim," YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science, vol. V (1950), pp. 292-312.

[2] Yiddish writers and critics almost universally concur in Perets's

and who prepared the linguistic, stylistic and theoretical ground on which subsequent Yiddish literary endeavor would take root and flower.

It was Sholem Aleykhem who first dubbed Mendele with the honorific "zeyde."[3] There is much truth and fitting tribute in the title, and yet at the same time it is deliberately misleading, reflective of the self-conscious design of Sholem Aleykhem, and Mendele himself, to establish a mythology and geneaology for the emerging "new" Yiddish literature. Contrary to popular impression, the folksy Reb Mendele was neither a real-life bookpeddler nor a zeyde. Mendele in fact was but the pseudonym, or more appropriately the "literary persona," of Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, a Russified Jewish intellectual who had already gained considerable renown as a spokesperson of Hebrew Enlightenment before his literary debut in Yiddish in 1864.[4] Moreover, if Mendele was a grandfather--a title he

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assessment. See the remarks by Z. Rejzen, N. Shtif, Bal-Makhsoves, M. Y. Berditshevsky, Kh. N. Bialik, A. Vayter, H. D. Nomberg, M. Viner, M. Erik, Sh. Niger, Y. Tsinberg et al. in Mayzl, "Mendele der ershter," ["Mendele the First"], Dos Mendele-bukh, pp. 283-289.

[3]Sholem Aleykhem coined the title in his 1888 novel Stempenyu, which he dedicated "In honor of my beloved grandfather, Reb Mendele Moykher Sforim."

[4]It is difficult to know how many contemporary readers subscribed to the Mendele myth, unaware of Abramovitch as the real author. Title pages of most early editions read only "Mendele Moykher Sforim," with the name Abramovitch relegated to the Russian language publishing data. Early historians of Yiddish literature, writing from the distance of France or the United States, accepted Mendele at face value and were apparently unaware of the author's real identity. See for example Meyer Pinès, Historie de la Litterature Judeo-Allemande (Paris, 1910) and Leo Weiner, The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century (NY, 1899). Nonetheless, East European Yiddish critics were certainly cognizant of the real author and careful to distinguish between Abramovitch and "his main character, Mendele." See the remarkably insightful 1910 article by Sh. Niger, "Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (Fun a referat tsu zayn 75-yerign yubileum)," in Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher Sforim (NY: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1920), v. 10, pp. 87-134. In his authoritative Leksikon fun der yidisher.

received at the ripe old age of fifty-two--then this was more relative to his literary progeny than his forbears; Mendele can be viewed against a long line of great and great-great grandfathers, literary contemporaries and predecessors who dated back at least to the sixteenth century.[5]

Mendele was "the first" in that he opened a new chapter in the history of Yiddish literature. Prior to the nineteenth century, literary work in Yiddish was very limited. Yiddish was the spoken language of Ashkenazic Jews in Europe.[6] Referred to as "mame loshn," "mother tongue," it fit into a deeply dualistic culture which reserved most literary and

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literatur, prese un filologie, v. 1 (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1926), Zalman Rejzen places his lengthy entry under the heading "Abramovitch," and not Mendele. (Sholem Aleykhem, on the other hand, appears under his adoptive name and not as "Rabinovitch.") Mendele himself made the distinction clear in his 1899 autobiography Sholyme Reb Khayms, in which Mendele and Abramovitch actually meet. Nonetheless, the distinction was blurred somewhat by certain later critics intent on a myth-making of their own. Soviet literary scholars, among them M. Viner, M. Erik, A. Gurshteyn, Y. Nusinov, and N. Oyslender tended to ignore the "bourgeois" intellectual Abramovitch behind the Mendele mask, in order to legitimize early Yiddish literature as a genuine expression of the Jewish folk. The exact nature of the Mendele persona has been definitively analyzed by Dan Miron in his recent study A Traveler Disguised (NY: Schocken Books, 1973). Miron shows that the Mendele persona fills a specific literary function, which is the key to understanding Abramovitch's art. The development and function of the Mendele persona will be discussed in greater detail as it pertains to the present study.

[5]Herein I will present only the broadest sketch of the history of Yiddish literature, in order to establish a framework against which to appreciate Mendele's seminal contribution. For a concise but more comprehensive survey see Yudl Mark, "Yiddish Literature," in L. Finkelstein, ed., The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion (NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949), pp. 859-895. The sketch presented here draws on a number of standard sources: Maks Erik, Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di eltste tsaytn biz der haskole tkufe (Warsaw: F"g Kultur-lige, 1928); Zalman Rejzen, Fun Mendelzon biz Mendele (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1923); Yisroel Tsinberg, Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn (10 vs.; NY: Moyshe Shmuel Shklarsky, 1943); Meyer Viner, Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19-tn yorhundert (2 vs.; NY: Ikuf, 1945); Max Weinreich, Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte (Vilna: B. Klekstein, 1928).

[6]"Ashkenazic" refers to the Jewish population of the Rhineland, which

scholarly function for ancient Aramaic and especially Hebrew, the "loshn koydesh" or "holy tongue."[7] Among the few literary works which did appear in Yiddish the most popular were archaic tales of chivalry dating back to the Italian Renaissance (Bove bukh, 1509), and moralizing translations or explications of traditional Jewish lore intended, primarily, or at least ostensibly, for women (Shmuel bukh, 16th century; Tsene urene, ca. 1590; Mayse bukh, 1602). Notwithstanding certain intriguing exceptions, these words were written in an ossified "Western Yiddish," largely out of step with the spoken language, particularly as it evolved in Eastern Europe.

Traditional Jewish society was never exactly static, but for many centuries it did adhere to a strict continuity of Rabbinic law and custom, bolstered by far reaching communal autonomy afforded to Jews as a corporate middle class in an otherwise feudal economy. As long as this condition prevailed, Jews would continue to use Yiddish as their spoken vernacular, and would continue to relegate serious literature and scholarship to

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later migrated eastward into Poland. Yiddish was born in the Rhineland some one thousand years ago. It is a "fusion" language, binding Romance, Germanic, Salvic and Semitic lexical elements into an essentially Germanic grammatical structure with a decidedly Jewish cognition. A brief survey of the history of Yiddish can be found in Uriel Weinrech, "Yiddish Language," Encyclopedia Judaica, v. 16, pp. 789-798. The definitive cultural history of the Yiddish language is Max Weinreich's magnum opus, Di geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh (4 vs.; NY: YIVO, 1973).

[7] The dualistic relationship of Hebrew and Yiddish, what Max Weinreich terms "internal bilingualism," was characteristic of Jewish settlements throughout the Diaspora. Yiddish is only one of at least seventeen "Jewish vernaculars," which include Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Provencal, Judeo-Greek and others. A dualistic structure between "sacred" and "profane" underlies much of Jewish thought and practice. Hebrew/Yiddish fits into a cultural system which includes Shabes/week, Milk/meat, Israel/diaspora. For an attempt at an anthropological analysis of this system see Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl (NY: Schocken Books, 1962).

Hebrew. It was not until the later eighteenth century, in the rapidly developing countries of Western Europe, that this status quo was finally shaken. The German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn introduced Enlightenment ideology to the Jewish world, facilitating--or else facilitated by--the Jewish push for civil and political emancipation. An ascendant Jewish bourgeoisie sought admission to expanding markets, and readily traded the social "peculiarities" mandated by Jewish law for a more promising civil equality guaranteed by the law of the State.[8] Social integration reduced Jewishness to a Konfession, a sterile theology of "ethical monotheism" devoid of more apparent social, cultural or linguistic distinctiveness. The Western Yiddish vernacular was abandoned in favor of German, French, Dutch or another prevailing language of the land. While Hebrew was at least nominally retained in the sanitized religious realm of prayer and scholarly research (Wissenschaft des Judentums), Yiddish was actively, indeed vehemently, combated. Moses Mendelssohn maintained that Yiddish "contributed not a little to the 'impropriety' of the common Jew," and that it was "a language of stammerers, corrupt and deformed, repulsive to those who are able to speak in a correct and elegant manner [ledaber tsakhot]."[9] The Enlightenment movement in Western Europe produced only two minor Yiddish writers: Isaac Euchel and Aaron Wolfson. Both wrote

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[8]This formula was explicitly expressed on the floor of the French Assembly shortly after the Revolution of 1789, during debate on the question of Jewish Emancipation. The nobleman Clermont-Tonnerre proclaimed, "To the Jews as a nation--nothing; to the Jews as individuals--all." See, inter alia, Arthur Herzberg, French Enlightenment and the Jews (NY: Schocken Books, 1968): Howard Morely Sachar, The Course of Modern Jewish History (NY: Delta, 1958); Salo Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," Menorah Journal, June 1928; Michael Meyer, The Origins of the Modern Jew (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967).

[9]From the Introduction to Mendelssohn's Biur (Berlin, 1783); cited by Miron, A Traveler Disguised, p. 43.

didactic comedies in which the "bad guys," denizens of obscurantism and tradition, speak Yiddish, while the "good guys," proponents of Enlightenment, speak High German. These plays were artistically suicidal, denigrating and urging the extinction of their own linguistic medium.

The Enlightenment movement in Eastern Europe was of a manifestedly different character than that of the West, and yet it began with very similar attitudes toward Yiddish. The maskilim, or proponents of Enlightenment in Eastern Europe, drew their original sustenance from Mendelssohn and his circle in Berlin, but were soon forced to adapt their message and means to the very different social reality of Eastern Europe. There was no large scale capitalization in the East in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries;[10] there was no indigenous Enlightenment movement, no immediate possibility of trading social and cultural individuality for civil emancipation. Moreover, native ethnic multiplicity worked against cultural and linguistic assimilation. As a result, the Haskala in the East took a more decidedly Jewish character. While some maskilim emulated the Western model, writing in German (and later Russian), most tried to

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[10] A. Yuditsky, in his Yidishe burzhuazye un yidisher proletaryat in ershter helft 19-tn yorhundert (Kiev: Melukhe farlag 'Proletar,' 1932), adduces evidences that Jews were involved in industrial production in Russia since the first decade of the nineteenth century. It is important to remember just how limited this involvement was, however. Russia was still overwhelmingly feudal in the early nineteenth century. Early industrialization was actually initiated by the landed gentry, who sought to convert local agricultural surplus for exchange. There was as yet no significant industrial bourgeoisie, Jewish or otherwise. The Jewish bourgeoisie which stood behind the Haskala in Russia and Galicia comprised mostly large scale merchants, who engaged in trade with foreign markets. They imported manufactured goods from West to East, and simultaneously imported Enlightenment ideology. They were an authentically "modern" bourgeoisie, isolated within an essentially feudal native economy. See Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, A History of Russia, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), particularly Chapter XXVII. The relationship between the Haskala and an

introduce rationalist elements into the native Jewish sphere. They turned to Hebrew, a "pure" language untainted by centuries of exile and dispersion. Hebrew was classical, aristocratic by birth and usage, with a biblical lexicon and strictly defined grammar. From it the maskilim fashioned an obtuse literary style called melitse, a stilted transplantation of verbatim biblical phraseology stretched and shuffled to convey contemporary ideas. The new literature was pretentions and self-serving, functionally inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of less-tutored, Yiddish-speaking, East European Jews.

The maskilim in Eastern Europe maintained a deprecating attitude toward Yiddish. Like their colleagues in the West, they considered Yiddish a "jargon," a chaotic, ungrammatical babble which encapsulated everything that was backward and indecorous about the Jewish masses. The use of Hebrew was itself a means by which the intellectual maskilim asserted their distance from the common people.

Yet for all their carefully cultivated distance, the East European maskilim were forced into a peculiarly ambivalent relationship toward their "less fortunate" brethren. Unlike Western Europe, where acceptance of Enlightenment ideas and manners meant entrance into the broader society, Eastern Europe was still predominantly agrarian and feudal, leaving little room for social integration. With whom would the intellectual assimilate--the illiterate, Ukranian-speaking peasant next door? Meanwhile the Tsarist government was predicating civil emancipation on the enlightenment and

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ascendant Jewish bourgeoisie is of considerable relevance to the present thesis, and will be examined at greater depth in Part One, Chapter 3.

"productivization" of the Jews as a whole.[11] The lot of the maskilim was thrown in with that of all Jews; they had no choice but to write and advocate the message of Reason among their own people.

The maskilim took to this didactic function with neophyte zeal, often broaching open complicity with the reactionary, autocratic regimes of Russia and Austria. Their didactic efforts in Hebrew, however, soon engendered a fundamental anomaly: How could the Jewish masses be converted to the teachings of Enlightenment, when those teachings were conveyed in a highfalutin melitse Hebrew which the masses could not understand in the first place? Very reluctantly, a few maskilim, already accomplished Hebrew writers, condescended to the use of the "jargon" for the utilitarian purpose of reaching the masses in the only language they could understand.[12] This tactical maneuver introduced a new phase of Yiddish literary activity. Mendel Lefin (1749-1826), a prominent maskil living in the Galician trade center of Tarnopol, believed that Yiddish could be used to wean the masses from the corruption of their folk culture. He proposed a Yiddish translation of the Bible after the model of Mendelssohn's German Biur, and

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[11] Both the Russian and Austrian regimes tried to force "Enlightenment" on the Jewish masses. This was, of course, a sham; enlightenment was in fact synonymous with amalgamation into the Christian mainstream. See Simon Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, v. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1918), pp. 13-87. On Galicia see Raphael Mahler, A History of Modern Jewry, 1780-1815 (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

[12] Virtually all of the Yiddish writers of this period, with the notable exception of Mordkhe Spektor, also published in Hebrew. Miron, op. cit., p. 9, presents a model whereby Yiddish writers comprise a small circle set within a larger circle of Hebrew writers. The two circles remained concentric well into the nineteenth century, gradually diverging during the twentieth century until only fringe writers were left sharing an overlapping circumference in both literatures.

demonstrated considerable artistic achievement in his completed translation of the Book of Psalms. Yet Lefin was something of an exception, and notwithstanding his artistic results he never openly challenged the ideological position of the Mendelssohnian Haskala. Other writers were more forthrightly didactic. The anonymous Di genarte velt, "The Duped World," which appeared in 1816 (probably written by one of Lefin's students), was a biting satire attacking a Hasidic kherem (excommunication) recently issued against maskilim in Lemberg. Yoysef Perl (1773-1839), a wealthy Tarnopol merchant, wrote trenchant parodies of Hasidic tales which for many were indistinguishable from the originals. Yisroel Aksenfeld (1787-1866), an Odessa lawyer who had himself been a dedicated Hasid as a youth, attacked the world of his childhood with both skill and venom. Other prominent maskilim, including Isaac Baer Levinson (1788-1860; known as the "Russian Mendelssohn") and Avrom Baer Gotlober (1810-1899) occasionally employed Yiddish in their didactic efforts. Only one writer of this period, Shloyme Etinger (1801-1856), evidenced any genuine artistic commitment to Yiddish art for its own sake. His play Serkele portrayed a domineering businesswoman and her bookish, mild-mannered husband. Yet Etinger's works could not pass the Tsarist censor and so remained in manuscript, virtually unknown, until after the author's death.

Ultimately censorship proved a major obstacle to all Yiddish writing of this period. The draconic anti-Jewish legislation of Nicholas I--often perpetrated with the naive endorsement of the maskilim themselves[13]--

[13]Isaac Baer Levinson suggested a censorship policy to the Tsarist regime as a means of stifling the flood of Hasidic literature. This resulted in the edict of 1836 which closed all Jewish presses but three, where resident censors were available. Yoysef Perl went one step further;

exerted stringent censorship in all spheres and closed most of the independent Jewish presses. Though the early maskilim had condescended to Yiddish as a way of "reaching the masses," most of their Yiddish efforts were in fact never published, circulating only among themselves in manuscript editions.

This situation changed drastically by the early 1860s, with the general liberalization and relaxation of censorship which followed Nicholas's death in 1856.[14] Yiddish writers suddenly had direct access to large numbers of people, and the literature assumed very large proportions. Clandestine manuscripts gave way to widely read serial novels and story books, distributed throughout the countryside by wandering bookpeddlers. Ayzik Meyer Dik (1814-1893), a maskil of moderate persuasion, wrote endless installments of gently moralizing tales which became "best sellers" in the Jewish world. Publication statistics for 1857 show that the romantic Hebrew novels of Abraham Mapu (the most popular contemporary Hebrew writer) sold twelve hundred copies, while in the same year Dik's books sold more than one hundred thousand copies.[15]

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he advocated to the Austrian regime that all "impermissible" books be seized, fully aware that seized books would then be burned. Fortunately, the Austrian regime did not act on his suggestion. In Raphael Mahler, Der kamftsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsie (NY: YIVO [Historishe sektsie], 1942), pp. 165f.

[14]Russian letters in general entered a new phase following the death of Nicholas. The early 1860s saw the emergence of Chernishevsky, Belinsky, and others who addressed themselves to social themes. In the Jewish sphere, the new liberalization allowed the establishment of a Russian and Hebrew periodical press, which included Ha'carmel (Vilna), Ha'melits (Odessa) and Razvet (Russian language, Odessa). See Riasanovsky, A History of Russia, Chapters XXVIII and XXXIII; Sh. L. Tsitron, Di geshikhte fun der yidisher prese, v. 1 (Warsaw: F"g "Akhisefer," 1920 [?]); Israel Zinberg, A History of Jewish Literature, tr. by Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978), v. XII, esp. Chapters One and Two.

[15]Cited by Miron, A Traveler Disguised, p. 3; see also Sh. Ginzburg,

Such then was the literary context in which Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim) debuted in 1864, and against which he is recognized as "the first," the zeyde. Abramovitch himself acknowledged neither contemporaries nor antecedents. "In my time the Yiddish language was an empty vessel," he wrote in retrospect twenty years later.

> There was not a single good, beautiful thing in her, except for mockery, foolishness and babbling, the work of foolish people who were unable to speak like human beings and who had no name.[16]

> The Hebrew stylists still concerned themselves with the holy language and were not interested in the common people; they looked at Yiddish with great condescension, with great derision. And if one out of ten did write something in the language, they would hide it under seven locks, they would hide it under their holy prayer shawl, in order that their disgrace should not be uncovered and sully their good name.
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> But the love of being useful triumphed in me over empty honor and I decided, come what may, I will involve myself with Yiddish, the denigrated daughter, and will be of service to the common people.[17]

For all his dramatic pronouncements of seminal self-sacrifice, Abramovitch entered the new literature with precisely the same prejudices and intentions as did his unacknowledged colleagues. Abramovitch too was an accomplished Hebrew writer, who recognized in Yiddish the only realistic means of conveying the message of Enlightenment to the Jewish masses. As he wrote in an autobiographical piece for a Hebrew lexicon in 1889:

"Tsu der geshikhte fun yidishn drukvezen," Historishe verk, v. 1 (NY: 1937), pp. 60-61.

[16]Mendele Moykher Sforim, "Shtrikhn tsu mayn biografie," (originally published in Hebrew in Nakhum Sokolov's Sefer zikharon, 1889), in Mayzl, ed., Dos mendele-bukh, pp. 17-32. The present citation is from page 27. See also Y. Tsinberg, "Abramovitch--Mendele (Tsum tsentn yortsayt)," Kultur-historishe shtudies (NY: Morris S. Sklarsky, 1949), p. 346, where Mendele is cited: "Yiddish literature was an empty, neglected garden when I made my debut: there were no flowers, no fruit, all was hollow and wilted."

[17]Mendele, op. cit., loc. cit.

> Then I communed with my heart, saying, Here I am, observing the ways of our people and striving to write novels for them on Jewish subjects in the holy tongue, which most of them, as they speak only Yiddish, do not understand. What hath the writer of all his labor and of the vexation of his heart, if he is of no use to his people? The question, For Whom do I labor?, gave me no rest and greatly embarrassed me. . . .[18]

It is difficult to know how much of Abramovitch's recollection reflects actual fact, and how much is part of the deliberate effort to construct the genesis myth of a new literature. His purported ignorance of contemporaries may well be feigned, in order to emphasize the originality of his own contribution. In any event, it is clear that Abramovitch began his literary career in Yiddish in a most inauspicious manner. He shared the contemporary prejudice that Yiddish was ugly, illegitimate, or at least undesirable. At the same time he shared the liberal premise of the contemporary Haskala that the dissemination of "good ideas," the message of Enlightenment, would be enough to "earn" civil and political emancipation and assure material amelioration. Like others of his time, he proved himself ready to subordinate aesthetic sensibility to social theory, and to employ Yiddish as a "necessary evil," a temporary means toward the end of universal enlightenment.

This particular amalgam of ends and means was to work its magic on Abramovitch. Once he made the break and agreed to write in Yiddish, there was no turning back. He made his Yiddish debut in 1864; by 1873, with the publication of Di kliatshe ("The Nag"), both his de facto aesthetic evaluation of Yiddish and his social theory itself had been radically

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[18] Mendele, op. cit., p. 27. The present translation is from Miron, A Traveler Disguised, p. 13. This passage is often cited as Mendele's "turning point"; see for example Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 1, p. 14.

transformed. The writer who started as a Yiddish propagandist for bourgeois Enlightenment had become a social materialist, a champion of the poor and a committed, self-conscious Yiddish artist. What happened?

The present thesis argues that Mendele's transformation was already latent in the paradoxical nature of his first steps. Once he began writing in Yiddish with an avowedly "social" purpose, a dialectic of ends and means had been set up which would lead him to the literary and theoretical coup of Di kliatshe. This paper therefore focuses on the literary process itself, tracing the actual mechanism of this dialectic through sequential textual analysis. Part Two, "The Bourgeois Propagandist," is a study of Dos Kleyne montshele (1864) and Dos vintshfingerl (1865). Part Three, "The People's Artist," examines the five act play Di takse (1869).

Before we approach these texts, however, an important preliminary question presents itself: Why Mendele? Abramovitch began his literary career at the same time and with the same intentions as a number of other Haskala writers, perhaps most notably Yitskhok Yoyl Linetski.[19] If a transformational dialectic was indeed inherent in the juncture of Enlightenment ends and Yiddish means, then why, of all the contemporary maskilim who also involved themselves in Yiddish writing, did Abramovitch alone see this dialectic through to its synthetic fruition?

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[19] Linetski made his debut in 1865 with Dos poylish yingl ("The Polish Lad"), a work which enjoyed great contemporary popularity. Linetski was a writer of considerable skill; he later complained bitterly of the "genesis myth" created by Sholem Aleykhem, from which he was conspicuously excluded. On Mendele and his contemporaries in the 1860s (Linetski, Dinezon, Bernshteyn et al.), see N. Oyslender, "Mendeles mitgeyer in di 60'er un 70'er yorn," in Mendele un zayn tsayt (Moscow: Melukhe-farlag 'Emes,' 1940), pp. 92-171; A. Gurshteyn, "Der yunger Mendele in kontekst fun di 60-er yorn," Shriftn, v. 1 (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1928), pp. 180-198.

I hasten to say that I am not trying to impose deterministic models on the process of literary creativity. Abramovitch was undeniably a genius; his own special psychic make-up and sensibility enabled him to perceive connections and traverse literary and theoretical ground where lesser writers could not follow. Yet for all that, he still came to the "latent dialectic" of modern Yiddish literature with a unique background, which in and of itself clearly distinguished him from his contemporaries. If his starting point in Yiddish was the same as for other Hebrew writers (who for the sake of a social end employed a Yiddish means), then he had arrived at that starting point from a very different route. Even before he began the dialectical journey of Yiddish literature, he had already traveled a "dialectical journey" of a more personal sort, through the formative influences of his own youth and adolescence.

There were three main currents which vied for dominance in Jewish life in the nineteenth century: Rabbinism (as held by the misnagdim), Hasidism and Haskala. If Abramovitch began his Yiddish career within the immediate context of the Haskala, it was only after he had been exposed to both Rabbinism and Hasidism. If synthesis was built into the Yiddish literary process, as this paper argues, it was first and foremost built into Abramovitch's own biography. For that reason it is necessary to begin with Abramovitch's youth and explore the world--or rather the worlds--in which the zeyde came of age.

PART ONE: THE WRITER AND HIS WORLDS

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1. Kapulye: Rabbinism and Nature

Sholem Yankev Abramovitch was born December 20, 1836, in Kapulye, a shtetl in the province of Minsk, White Russia.[1] Kapulye was a small town set amid great natural beauty, where, as Abramovitch tells us, "virtually everyone was a scholar."[2] There may be a touch of romanticization in Abramovitch's recollection of his hometown, but contrasted with the towns

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[1] Abramovitch's family name at birth was "Broyde"; as we will see, the name "Abramovitch" was not adopted until some time later. Some confusion pertains as to the exact data of Abramovitch's birth. According to Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 1, p. 9, Abramovitch had confided to Bialik that the real date of his birth actually predated the generally accepted 1836 date by seven or eight years. As always, it is difficult to distinguish between myth and reality: Abramovitch may simply have been trying to bolster his "grandfather" image by making himself seem older.

Biographical information incorporated in this study is drawn primarily from the following sources: Rejzen, "Abramovitch," Leksikon, v. 1, pp. 8-37; Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur (NY: Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1956), v. 1; Nakhman Mayzl, Dos Mendele-bukh (an important anthology of letters, autobiographical, biographical and critical writings); Sh. Niger, Mendele Moykher Sforim: zayn lebn, zayne gezelshaftlekhe un literarishe oyftungen (Chicago: L. M. Shteyn, 1936); Memoirs by Perets, Berdishevsky, Sholem Aleykhem, Dinezon, Dubnov et al. in Shmuel Rozhansky, ed., Masoes Benyomen hashlishi: der zeyde un zayn epokhe (Musterverk ed.; Buenos Aires: Yoysef Lifshits Fund, 1973); selected critical and biographical essays appear in Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher Sforim, ed. by N. Mayzl (Warsaw: Farlag Mendele, 1928), vols. I, XX-XXII.

Thousands of memoirs, articles and scholarly studies dealing with Mendele have appeared over the past Hundred years, particularly in Poland, the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, Argentina and Israel. As yet, no definitive Mendele bibliography exists. Preliminary attempts at a comprehensive bibliography are Y. Anilevitsh, "Naye Mendele-literatur," in Bikher velt, 1925, no. 5, pp. 29-33 and no. 7, pp. 38-41, which covers works appearing in the first ten years after Mendele's death; also Yefim Yeshurin, "Bibliografie: Mendele Moykher Sforim--Sholem Yankev Abramovitch," in Rozhansky, ed., Masoes Benyomen hashlishi, pp. 215-252. An excellent bibliography of the most significant critical and biographical works is found in Dan Miron, A Traveler Disguised, pp. 312-327. An authoritative edition of Mendele's complete works in Hebrew and Yiddish is currently under preparation at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

[2] Cited by Mayzl, Dos Mendele-bukh, p. 396. Much has been written on

and cities of Southern Russia and Poland where he was to sojourn most of his life, there is also a solid grain of truth. Since the mid eighteenth century southern Russia had been in a state of general decline, suffering economic displacement and caught up in the anti-intellectual fervor of Hasidism. Kapulye, on the other hand, was located in the Northwest of the Jewish Pale, where the old economy remained more or less stable and the traditional communal structure intact. The revivalist populism of Hasidism met strong resistance in the Northwest, and the region entrenched itself as the center of the misnagdim, "opponents" of Hasidism who were deeply committed to an older sort of Rabbinic scholarship. Because of the greater internal stability of the region, the Northwest was able to integrate rational thought and some elements of "worldly" knowledge without jeopardizing the overall social status quo.

Kapulye was a shtetl typical of the Northwest region, in that its elaborate Jewish communal structure remained fundamentally intact, at least through Abramovitch's childhood. As a corporate middle class in a region which remained overwhelmingly agrarian and feudal, Jews were accorded far reaching autonomy in their cultural and communal affairs. Particularly after the expulsion from the villages of White Russia in 1808, most Jews of the region lived concentrated in towns and cities, where they fell under the tight-knit control of the kahal, the local Jewish communal government. The Kahal administered a wide scope of public institutions, ranging from schools and synagogues to a bathhouse, "hospital," poor house,

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Kapulye. See Mendele in Shtrikhn, p. 17f; Mayzl, op. cit., pp. 395-398; Sore Makovsky, "Fun der amoliker Kapulye," Yivo bleter, XI (1937); Yoysef Morgenshtern, "Mendeles Kapulye," Yidishe kultur, 1955, no. 10.

free loan society and ritual slaughterhouse for kosher meat. Abramovitch's own father was a part of this communal apparatus: he worked in Kapulye as a tax collector, a position which brought him considerable prestige.

Though Kapulye represented a relatively stable society, it was hardly without its cracks and fissures. The communal administration was based on suffrage of the rich, which excluded the masses of artisans and day laborers. Since the 1770s there were sporadic popular uprisings against corrupt communal administrations in the Northwest, notably in Vilna, Minsk and Vitebsk.[3] The struggle of poor against rich often manifested itself as a conflict between Hasidim, who were mostly displaced and petty-bourgeois, and misnagdim, who were largely propertied and well to do. Though Hasidism was not able to make a significant foothold in the Northwest; its struggle with Lithuanian misnagdim in the later eighteenth century was marked by particular ferocity. The misnagdim resorted to bans of kherem (excommunication), denunciation to the police, harrassment and outright violence.[4] At the same time a significant Jewish proletariat was slowly establishing itself in the cities, concentrated in secondary production and Jewish owned textile factories. For the time being this only reinforced the existing communal hierarchy, but a new sort of class struggle was clearly in the making. The nineteenth century was punctuated by sporadic

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[3]Bernard Weinryb, The Jews of Poland (Philadelphia: JPS, 1973), pp. 284-294. As we will see, these often successful popular uprisings may well have inspired Mendele's Di takse of 1869.

[4]On the struggle of Hasidism in the Northwest see Weinryb, op. cit., and Wolf Zeev Rabinowitsch, Lithuanian Hasidism, foreword by Simon Dubnow (NY: Schocken Books, 1971). Hasidism established itself mainly in the South (Podolia, Volhynia and Galicia) where, as we will see in the following chapter, it unleashed cultural energy which would have a profound influence on Mendele.

strike activity among Jewish workers, finally culminating in the birth of the Jewish socialist movement in the Northwest cities of Vilna, Minsk and Bialystok during the 1890s.[5] It is doubtful whether the fierce struggle against Hasidism or the challenge of a nascent proletariat had a significant impact on the Kapulye of Abramovitch's youth. Hasidism had been pretty well defeated by the 1830s (though scattered Hasidic enclaves did exist in nearby towns), and the strike movement in the workshops and factories had only tentatively begun. Nonetheless, undercurrents of discontent and social upheaval, if not yet fully manifest, were already being felt. Abramovitch learned this first hand as a young boy, when his father was ousted from his position as tax collector after a run-in with the corrupt local administration.

"My father, Reb Khaym," Abramovitch tells us in his semi-fictional autobiography of 1899, "was, as they say, both for God and for people."[6] He lived in strict accordance with Rabbinic law and immersed himself in Talmudic scholarship, yet at the same time he explored modern sciences and even engaged in stylized Hebrew verse. This particular amalgam of strict tradition flavored by modern learning was indicative of a cultural and

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[5] An excellent study of class struggle in nineteenth century Russian Jewish society is A. Menes, "Di yidishe arbeter-bavegung in Rusland fun onheyb 70er bizn sof 90er yorn," in E. Tcherikover, ed., Historishe shriftn, v. III (NY: YIVO, 1939), pp. 1-59. See also Yuditsky, Yidishe burzhuazye un yidisher proletaryat in ershter helft 19-tn yorhundert.

[6] In Shloyme Reb Khayms, p. 15, cited by Mayzl, Dos Mendele-bukh, p. 396. See also Mendele, Shtrikhn, pp. 17-18; and Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 1, p. 3. On Abramovitch's family see Max Weinreich, "Pesye Abramovitch kharaktizirt fun ir zun," Yivo bleter, XIV (1939), pp. 335-338; Idem., "Mendeles eltern un mitkinder," Yivo bleter, XI (1937), pp. 270-286. A comprehensive study of Abramovitch's childhood is U. Finkel, Mendele Moykher Sforim: kindhayt un yugnt (Minsk, 1937).

religious ethos which was prevalent in the Northwest since the time of Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman in the later eighteenth century. Rabbi Elijah, better known as the Vilna Gaon (the "Genius of Vilna"), was a scholar of extraordinary erudition, whose iron-willed pronouncements were to shape Jewish society, especially in the Northwest, well into the twentieth century. He believed that Rabbinic law was inviolable, but insisted that it would actually benefit from exposure to outside learning. "All knowledge," he wrote in the preface to a Hebrew work on Euclid,

> is necessary for our holy Torah and is included in it. . . . To the degree a man is lacking in knowledge and secular sciences, he will lack one hundred fold in the wisdom of the Torah.[7]

The Gaon himself was the author of a significant Hebrew treatise on geometry which, it is said, he penned during his indisposed moments in the bathroom.

The model of rationalist Rabbinism introduced by the Gaon managed to defuse for a time the social impact of broader European Enlightenment. Some currents of Mendelssohnian thought did filter into Lithuania and White Russia during the later eighteenth century, channeled through the German trade centers in Prussia and Posen. But the bearers of this Enlightenment were, for the most part, large scale merchants dealing in the surplus of a feudal economy. They had no stake in upsetting the established social order. Even those Jews who owned large scale textile factories were of an old-style bourgeoisie; they employed mostly Jews, and readily applied the sanctions of traditional Jewish law to maintain order in the new workplace. Enlightenment therefore lacked any real economic push in the Northwest.

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[7] Preface to Borukh of Shklav, Euclid (The Hague, 1780), cited by I. Klausner in Encyclopedia Judaica, v. 6, p. 655.

The revitalized Rabbinism of the Gaon was enough to safely absorb currents of European thought, and to stave off any real upheaval of religious practice or social organization.[8]

Abramovitch grew up under the intellectual shadow of the Vilna Gaon. From his earliest childhood he was given over to traditional learning, which his father supplemented with scientific knowledge and the study of Hebrew grammar.[9] He enjoyed the privilege, rare among his contemporaries, of having an excellent melamed (elementary school teacher).[10] The young Abramovitch proved himself a precocious student. By the age of nine, he tells us, he had committed to memory all twenty-four books of the Bible. Bible study soon gave way to study of the Babylonian Talmud. At first he was overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of the work: "I was like a Jew at the fair for the first time," he writes.[11] But under the private tutelage of his father (from the age of twelve) Abramovitch found his way through the Talmud's winding dialectics and compelling logic. The halakha, legalistic discourse which makes up the bulk of the Talmud, engaged the young mind and imparted a sharp analytic sense, rooted in dialectical

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[8] On the Haskala in Lithuania see Jacob Shatzky, Kultur-geshikhte fun der haskole in Lite (Buenos Aires: Tsentrale-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1950).

[9] Until the time of the Gaon, Hebrew grammar, or dikduk, was considered a heretical subject which threatened the sanctity of traditional tests. Its study is still proscribed by many traditional Jews, particularly those whose ancestry stems from regions beyond the Gaon's influence. Philology was an important academic pursuit of general European Enlightenment. Abramovitch maintained a keen interest in the workings of language throughout his life.

[10] His teacher, Yosi Reubens, was later immortalized as the melamed Lipe Reubens in Shloyme Reb Khayms.

[11] Shtrikhn, p. 18.

reasoning. The agada, or homiletic component of the Talmud, nourished a growing literary sensibility.[12] Thus was Abramovitch well grounded in traditional Jewish scholarship before venturing forth to new worlds.

Abramovitch was only fourteen when his father died, leaving the family in difficult financial straits. His mother remarried to a rural miller, a dorfsyid or "village Jew" who lived out in the countryside, beyond the immediate confines of the organized Jewish community. Abramovitch, meanwhile, dedicated himself to Talmudic scholarship, moving through a succession of famous Lithuanian yeshives, including that founded by the Gaon himself in Vilna. After a few years of intensive study he had had enough: "I was still young in years, but I was full to the brim with troubles [zat mit tsoris]."[13] He left his studies behind and joined his mother at the mill.

Here at the mill, deep in the country, Abramovitch was set free to romp and explore amid the magnificent splendor of the natural world. "Nature," he observed, "smiled upon me."[14] In later years he wrote of the profound influence of this exposure:

> In that lonely, distant corner my muse revealed herself to me. She enticed me with her magic, beckoning me to follow her into the forest, under a green tree where it was quiet and peaceful. She bound me forever to the trees of the forest, she bound me to the birds of heaven and the swarming creatures of the earth, teaching me their language. . . .[15]

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[12]The formulation of this dual influence is presented by Abramovitch himself. Ibid., p. 20.

[13]Mendele, Shtrikhn, p. 21.

[14]Ibid., loc. cit.

[15]Cited by Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 1, p. 10.

This "muse" informs all of his subsequent writings, from Toldot Hateve, a massive Hebrew compendium on Natural History, to countless lyrical descriptions of natural beauty which find their way into even the most didactic of his Yiddish stories. The critic N. Oyslender suggests that love of nature was of untold significance in the makeup of Abramovitch's artistic character; not only did it enhance his aesthetic sensibility, but it also set in him a mode of direct, empirical observation of the physical world, an objective appreciation of all living things which would one day manifest itself in his realist style.[16]

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Abramovitch was first and foremost a product of the old Jewish world, versed in Rabbinic scholarship and exposed to a sort of home-grown rationalism which integrated easily with traditional observance. He also grew up amid nature, and thus cultivated a keen empiricism coupled with a heightened aesthetic sensibility. He was appreciative of good literature during his youth, and even tried his hand at Hebrew melitse. But the idyllic world of the rural mill was soon clouded by growing tension with his stepfather. After a short while Abramovitch quit the mill and moved back to Kapulye, where he resumed a regimen of traditional yeshive

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[16] Nokhum Oyslender, Gruntshtrikhn fun yidishn realizm (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1928). While Oyslender gives much credit to the influence of nature, he maintains that Abramovitch first became enamoured of nature during his travels with the beggars' band [infra] and not during his time at the mill. He cites a conversation between Abramovitch and Ben Ami, in which Abramovitch supposedly confided that the account he had offered in his autobiography was untrue. The entire matter is difficult to evaluate. Having placed such great importance on the formative influence of nature, Oyslender might have wanted to "proletarianize" the influence by setting it in the context of travels among the common people. Whatever the case, I believe that Oyslender remains correct in his emphasis on the importance of nature in the development of Abramovitch's realist style.

study. But he was not cut out for the life of a Rabbinic scholar; endowed with a growing empirical perspective and artistic vision, he saw too much to sit still. Now seventeen, he was fired by a healthy adolescent rebelliousness and an irrepressible curiosity. One day a band of shnorers, wandering beggars, pulled into town, led by a certain charismatic cripple named Avrom der Hinkediker (Avrom the Lame). Abramovitch was apparently taken with the exotic flavor and earthy camaraderie of the troupe. He packed his bags and climbed aboard, leaving Kapulye and heading into the great world beyond.[17]

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[17] Oyslender, op. cit., suggests that Abramovitch joined the beggars in order to accompany his aunt, who was searching for her husband in Volhynia. I have found no mention of this motivation in other sources. Most biographers seem in agreement that Abramovitch joined the beggars as a youth in search of adventure. It should be noted that Abramovitch's travels coincided with a general pattern of demographic shift during the 1840s. Many Lithuanian Jews headed south in search of greater economic opportunity. Young students, trained in the yeshives of Lithuania, were in great demand in Southern cities and towns. Many Lithuanian Jews migrated to the regions of "New Russia," i.e., the provinces of Yekaterinoslav, Kherson, Taurida and Bessarabia, which had been annexed by Russia early in the nineteenth century. Jewish disabilities and economic restrictions were not as severe in these areas as elsewhere in the Pale. For example, compulsory military service, the bane of all Russian-Jewish youths, was not enforced in Bessarabia until 1852. Between 1836 and 1867 the Jewish population of Bessarabia swelled from 43,062 to 94,045. "Bessarabia," Encyclopedia Judaica, v. 4, p. 704. See also Yankev Leshtsinsky, Dos yidishe folk in tsifern (Berlin: Klal-farlag, 1922), pp. 31-38.

2. On the Beggars' Wagon: Hasidism and the Folk Culture

> And God wanted me to acquaint myself with the customs of my people and to look upon their deeds. Therefore he commanded me: 'Wander, little bird, over all my world, be a misfortunate among the misfortunates, and thus will you be a Jew among Jews upon the earth.'
>
> --Mendele, Shtrikhn, pp. 22-23

Abramovitch's travels with the beggars' band brought him far from his native Kapulye. He traveled the length and breadth of the Jewish Pale, bouncing along from Minsk to the Ukraine, from Poland to Bessarabia. The world he discovered was vastly removed from the stability of his childhood. Traveling through the South, he found a Jewish community in the throes of momentous social upheaval. Traveling as a beggar he slept on study house benches and poor house floors, begging his food from door to door, in intimate proximity to the lowliest elements of Jewish society.

Abramovitch set out on his travels in 1853, a trying time for the "common Jews" with whom he made acquaintance. These were the waning days of Tsar Nicholas I, when the Jews of Russia were suffering under unprecedented legal persecution and economic hardship.[18] Demographic restrictions and expulsions had left large segments of the Jewish population poor and destitute. Brutal conscription legislation set special quotas for Jews, forcing boys of twelve years into special "cantonist" regiments; here they would be severed from their families, made to abandon all Jewish practices (their peyes shorn and pork forced upon them), and then required to serve twenty-five years in the Tsar's army. Both in Russia and in Austria

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[18] For a good historical overview of this period see Simon Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, v. II.

(Galicia), reactionary regimes seemed determined to eradicate Jewish culture. Communal autonomy was officially abolished in Russia in 1844, and kahal structure now suffered de facto demoralization and disintegration as communal elders were forced to round up children to fill conscription quotas. Rich Jews were usually able to bribe their sons out of military service, leaving the heavy onus to fall on the poor and further exacerbating the injustice.

Persecution and social disintegration weighed heaviest upon the Jewish populations of the South: southern Poland, Volhynia, Podolia, the Ukraine, Bessarabia and Galicia. Jewish settlement was not as concentrated here as in the Northwest; many Jews lived scattered through the countryside, and the already strained communal institutions were not strong enough to withstand the new legislative assaults. The economy of the region had been in general decline since the collapse of Polish suzerainty and the Partitions of Poland (1772-1796). With the decline of the Polish nobility, many Jews were forced from their livelihoods as lessees of Polish estates, tavern keepers and distillers. The old feudal economy stirred enough to force Jews from their traditional occupations, but provided no new industrial base which could absorb this displaced petty-bourgeoisie. Modest industrialization in the South began with textile production, but was soon dominated by the processing of beet sugar. Jews were excluded from working in the new sugar factories which were located next to the beet supply, in rural areas prohibited to Jewish settlement.[19]

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[19]Though Jews were excluded as workers, many of these factories were owned by Jewish capital. Yuditsky, op. cit. Jewish rich and poor were not in direct employer-employee relationship in this region until the end of the nineteenth century, a factor which delayed the spread of a native Jewish socialist movement for many years.

Social upheaval and displacement were not unprecedented for the Jews of the South. More than a hundred thousand Jews were massacred in this area in 1648, during a peasant uprising against the Polish nobility led by the Ukrainian hetman Bogdan Chmielnicki. Haidamek pogroms ravaged the region in 1768, and Jews were further jostled by intermittent Turkish rule of some regions. All of this had resulted in social disintegration, which in turn gave rise to an intense "spiritual" response. The late seventeenth century saw pervasive messianic fervor centering around the person of Shabbatai Zvi. A century later this fervor became a cult of licentiousness and debauchery under the leadership of Jacob Frank. Both movements expressed the despair of the common people with an unbearable political condition, and also reflected popular disaffection with unresponsive Rabbinic and communal institutions.[20]

Popular dissatisfaction with the Rabbinic mainstream culminated in the second half of the eighteenth century with the rise of Hasidism. Introduced by the Baal Shem Tov, an itinerant preacher and faith healer, Hasidism taught a doctrine of experiential religion, predicated upon a direct "I-thou" relationship between man and God. Emphasis was placed on song, dance and celebration, in contradistinction to stringent legalistic observance and arid scholarship.

Hasidism found a wide following among the displaced petty-bourgeois Jews of the South.[21] Its mysticism was attractive to persons in deep

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[20]This view is presented in the definitive work by Gershom Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah, trans. by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[21]Raphael Mahler, Der kamf tsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsie (NY: YIVO, 1942), provides ample evidence that Hasidism was an essentially

material despair, and its anti-intellectualism fanned popular discontent with the dominant hierarchy. A spirit of brotherly camaraderie gave new dignity to a downtrodden population. In later years the movement became ossified, shifting its emphasis to strict religious practice and often degenerating into sectarian worship of "wonder-working" tsadikim. Nonetheless, by the mid nineteenth century, when Abramovitch set out on his travels, it is estimated that more than half the Jews of the Southern Pale were Hasidic.

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the social impact of Hasidism.[22] The Soviet historian Max Erik argues in his Etyudn tsu der geshikhte fun der haskole[23] that Hasidism was a reactionary movement which usurped popular discontent but failed to engender any lasting social transformation. It replaced the old communal hierarchy with a new hienarchy of tsadikim; it preached experiential religion but maintained the old stricture of Rabbinic law; and above all it maintained the status quo of petty bourgeois economy, complete with unquestioning fealty to the regime.

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petty-bourgeois movement at its inception. For example, a memorandum from the Lemberg Police to the Austrian government in 1838 notes that "among the Hasidism there are very few businesspeople. The majority consists of vagrants, drunks, hypocrites and indolent fanatics." p. 14.

[22]Jewish historiography has been widely divergent in its treatment of Hasidism. Early historians, such as Graetz, regarded the movement as a degenerate aberration hardly worthy of consideration. Martin Buber ignored the social dimension, the lives of Hasidim, and focused instead on the philosophical verities of Hasidic teachings. An early attempt at a comprehensive social and cultural history is Simon Dubnov, Geshikhte fun khasidizm (3 vs.; Vilna: YIVO and B. Kletskin, 1930). For a bibliography of more recent works see "Hasidism," Encyclopedia Judaica, v. 7, pp. 1426-1427.

[23]Minsk: Melukhe-farlag fun Vaysrusland, 1934.

Objectively, Erik is correct in his evaluation. Hasidism effected little in the way of direct social transformation. A somewhat broader view of its impact, however, is presented by Raphael Mahler in his seminal Der kamf tsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsie. Mahler argues that Hasidism was an expression of class struggle, the ideology of the poor against the pressures of an ascendant bourgeoisie. He acknowledges that Hasidism did indeed essentially retrench the old social forms. Like other fundamentalist doctrines Hasidism regarded all wealth as a gift of God, and therefore refrained from questioning the distribution of that wealth.[24] Its mystical framework accepted injustice in the here and now as a necessary precondition for messianic redemption, asserting that "the hasid had to make peace with the existing class divisions in Jewish society."[25]

But despite its social conservatism the movement unleashed a tremendous flood of populist energy. Abstention from class struggle had as its corollary a de-emphasis of the material. Rather than promising the poor material reward in heaven, Hasidism denigrated material wealth altogether and insisted that the poor could find spiritual fulfillment here on earth. Social stratification based on wealth was minimized among the Hasidim, giving way to a strong sense of group solidarity. A report by the Commisar of Brody observed in 1827, "The Hasidim are bound to one another heart and soul."[26] Competitiveness was replaced by mutual support in a united front of the poor and disaffected. As Bernard Weinryb writes in The Jews of Poland:

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[24]On Hasidism in relation to other (non-Jewish) fundamentalist movements see Bernard Weinryb, The Jews of Poland, pp. 271-275.

[25]Mahler, op. cit., p. 26.

[26]Cited by Mahler, op. cit., p. 29.

> Hasidism was the expression of people discontented with the kehilla oligarchy and the prestigious classes in Jewish society. . . . It was nourished by the existence of masses of village Jews, lessees and other such groups disregarded by the ruling elite. The opposition by these disaffected groups found expression not only in sharp criticism of the existing order, . . . but also in an attempt to create a counter-culture.[27]

This "counter-culture" found only limited political expression. Mahler documents cases in the early years of collective tax resistance, draft evasion and harboring of political refugees.[28] The more the movement grew, however, the more it attracted adherents from the wealthier classes and the more it tempered its political radicalism.[29] In many regions Hasidism itself became the new "kehilla oligarchy." The lasting legacy of the Hasidic "counter culture" was not so much social and political as it was cultural. Hasidism tapped expression among the common people which for many generations had lain silent.

Perhaps the counter-culture found its most significant manifestation in a new status accorded to Yiddish. "Mame loshn," which was previously relegated to the role of a "weekday" vernacular, was now celebrated precisely because it did represent the aspirations of the common Jew. Yiddish was regarded as a bulwark against assimilation. "The redemption will come

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[27] P. 282.

[28] Mahler deals only with Hasidism in Galicia, but the experience there was closely analogous to that in Russia. Tax resistance became an increasingly effective device of Hasidic protest in the early years. A boycott of kosher meat in Lemberg in 1830, for example, finally resulted in a reduction of the meat tax. Mahler points out that at one time the only areas in Galicia without tax revolts were those areas without Hasidim. Op. cit., pp. 31-32. This model of tax rebellion might well have inspired Mendele in Di takse.

[29] Mahler, op. cit., observes that "wealth increased proportionate with moral decline," p. 37.

through loyalty to Yiddish," taught Hasidic doctrine.[30] The Hasidic leader Tsvi Elimelekh of Dinov defended Yiddish in response to an Austrian decree that all Jewish marriage contracts be written in German:

> Therefore, my beloved brothers and friends, . . . speak only the language which was carried down by our forefathers in exile, with its Hebrew admixture, in order that this Jewish tongue shall remain recognizable as a separate [language], distinct from the languages of other nations.[31]

Homiletic tales, related in Yiddish, became the central device for disseminating Hasidic teachings. Rebbe Nakham of Bratslav, a great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, composed Yiddish stories in which mysticism and humanity are skillfully balanced, and which are notable to this day for their stylistic precision.

Perhaps most of all, Hasidism imparted to the poor, everyday Jews the self-awareness and confidence with which to speak for themselves. Women dealing in the marketplace, men sweating together in the bath house, grey bearded grandfathers huddled by the study house stove--all found expression in homespun Yiddish stories, songs and proverbs. Nokhum Oyslender, in his seminal Gruntshtrikhn fun yidishn realizm ("Fundamental Characteristics of Yiddish Realism"), maintains that the folk culture which Abramovitch encountered in the course of his travels proved a key ingredient in his later Yiddish writings. The more Abramovitch moved from propaganda to art, the more he was compelled to draw on the artistic wellspring of the folk. And, as the present thesis contends, the more he drew on linguistic and literary models fashioned by the common people, the more he imbibed their homegrown social theory as well.

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[30] Ibid., p. 20.

[31] Ibid., p. 21.

What then was the nature of the folk art? According to Oyslender, in the nineteenth century the common Jew found expression for the first time. Pent up social disaffection, camaraderie of the poor, and other grass-roots sentiments suppressed or left unvoiced by the Rabbinic mainstream now burst forth in a flood of popular creativity. Unfortunately, Oyslender does not adequately document his sources; he does not prove that given expressions date back to a given time (the early nineteenth century).[32] Moreover, he fails to analyze the specific social circumstances which called the new creativity to birth, conspicuously overlooking the simultaneous (or causative) expression of popular sentiment engendered by Hasidism.[33] Nonetheless, Oyslender does offer a trenchant analysis of nineteenth century Jewish folk art. He cites songs, proverbs and idioms which Abramovitch would have likely encountered in the course of his

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[32]Oyslender eschews the standard folklore collections of his time (such as Ignats Bernshteyn), believing that they romanticized the folk expression and so censored out its social radicalism. Instead, he draws his sources "directly from the people." Folkloristics was an important scholarly discipline in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and '30s, for obvious political reasons. See Susan A. Slotnick, The Contributions of the Soviet Yiddish Folklorists, Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies, no. 20 (NY: YIVO, 1976), and Paul E. Soifer, Soviet Jewish Folkloristics and Ethnography: An Institutional History, 1918-1948, Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies, no. 30 (NY: YIVO, 1978).

[33]It is not surprising that Oyslender overlooks the context of Hasidism. As a social movement Hasidism has been characterized as petty-bourgeois and reactionary by Erik and other Soviet historians. (Supra, p. 33, and note 22). This evaluation had been based on the movement's class composition, in accordance with strictly Marxist criteria. Soviet scholars, particularly during the Stalinist years, were unable or unwilling to consider more "subjective" factors of consciousness or culture as independent from class. Hasidism was summarily dismissed as reactionary, with no recognition that it derived from the same population which had produced the "progressive" folk culture cited by Oyslender.

travels, and which seem to exert a definite stylistic (and ideological) influence on his later literature. It is worthwhile to give at least cursory consideration to Oyslender's evidence, in order to then evaluate its formative impact on Abramovitch and his art.[34]

Perhaps the salient characteristic of the folk art was that, like Hasidism, it represented the needs and aspirations of a displaced petty-bourgeoisie. It removed focus from the "Sabbath" sphere of otherworldliness and messianic promise, and insisted instead upon redemption in and of the everyday. To cite a popular expression,

ד׳ וועלט איז אויך א וועלט.
This world is also a world.

And likewise,

פון יענער וועלט איז נאך קיינער נישט נעקומען.
So far no one has returned from the "other world."

These were downtrodden people concerned with the pressing problems of their immediate environs. They worried every day about where the next meal would come from. They were forced into pre-occupation with the conditions of "this world." With an ironic awareness they sought improvement in everyday life:

די גאנצע וועלט איז א חלום, נאר בעסער איז א
גומער חלום איידער א שלעכטער.

The whole world is a dream, but a good dream is better than a bad dream.

Focus on the here and now discredited the traditional palliative of prayer and supplication:

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[34]All of the proverbs and expressions cited below are taken from Oyslender, Gruntshtrikhn, "Folk Consciousness and Folk Creation," pp. 17-44.

תהילים זאל זיין א רפואה, זאלט מען עס געקויפט
אין אפאטיק.

If prayer was a remedy, you'd be able to buy it in the drugstore.

Religious piety was too often the hypocritical guise of social and economic injustice:

וואס נעענטער צו שול, וואס ווייטער פון גאט.

The closer to the synagogue, the farther from God.[35]

The needs of the material world, feeding and clothing a hungry family, superceded all other claims:

אלץ קאן דאס מענטש פארגעסן, נאר נישט דאס עסן.
A man can put everything out of his head,
Except for the need to be fed.

The foregoing examples, all culled from Oyslender's study, give some indication of the grass roots disaffection which informed the popular "counter culture." Such stirrings had, as yet, little social impact; that would come with the rise of the Jewish labor movement in the 1890s. Not unlike other cultures, Jewish folk expression constituted more a whispered undercurrent of complaint than a direct assault on the status quo. Nonetheless, these examples do indicate that the poor were conscious of class differentiation, and were developing a decidedly materialistic view of society. The folk Jews were cultivating a grass roots social critique which would one day find expression in Abramovitch's writing.

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[35]This expression is particularly telling of class differentiation within shtetl society. One's place in the synagogue was telling of one's social status. The closer to the "Eastern Wall," the higher the esteem. It was, of course, the rich who could afford to purchase such coveted seats. In an inverse sense, the expression above seems to recognize the shady or exploitative business dealings ("The farther from God") which enable one to come "Closer to the synagogue."

But meanwhile Abramovitch was influenced by the folk culture in a more immediate manner. It was not so important what "social theory" underlay the outpouring of Yiddish proverbs; it was more important that Yiddish expression existed at all. In a structural sense, the folk art manifested a self-conscious commitment to its Yiddish medium. One of the most ubiquitous forms of folk expression juxtaposed quotations in classical Hebrew with ironic translation/explication in everyday Yiddish. Consider, for example:

אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים: וואם האסטו גיוואלם פון
אונדז יידן?

THOU HAST CHOSEN US FROM AMONGST THE NATIONS: So why did you pick on us Jews?[36]

אמרו לאלוהים: אבער שרי צו דער וואנט.

SPEAKEST THOU UNTO GOD: But go scream at the wall.

Hebrew, the lofty language of scholars (and their supporting hierarchy of rich men), is deflated by Yiddish, the language of "undz yidn," us Jews, the poor and dispossessed. When Abramovitch begins writing in Yiddish for the purpose of propaganda, he is employing a medium which has already been claimed by the common Jew. An art form already exists in Yiddish, alive in the folk tales, songs and sayings which Abramovitch encountered on the beggars' wagon. The more he shifts, through an irrepressible artistic sensibility, from Yiddish propaganda to Yiddish art, the more he will draw upon this precedent, this well of the people. He will imbibe the style and idiom of the common Jew, and, eventually, his social theory as well.

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[36] In my translation I use upper case letters to indicate the Hebrew original.

In later years Abramovitch explicitly acknowledged the influence of the Yiddish folk culture in his literary style. He wrote that the best Jewish artists

> will come from the homes of the Jewish artisans, where songs are sung, expressions spoken, and naive and heartfelt stories and legends are told.[37]

But in the meantime Abramovitch himself was hardly a native of the "homes of the Jewish artisans." He was born in a well-to-do family in the anti-Hasidic Northwest, and served his literary apprenticeship (as we will soon see), under the bourgeois Haskala. Travels with the beggars in fact comprised but a brief episode of his adolescence. One can only guess that the poverty and Hasidic fervor of the South were, at the time, disquieting to a youth raised in the relative stability of Kapulye. But therein lay the key to Abramovitch's uniquely dialectical development. In the beauty of Kapulye's natural setting he had nurtured a strong empirical perception. As a lover of nature he could regard all natural phenomena dispassionately, and so could survey the world of beggars with an open mind.[38] Whether or not he understood the artistic merit and potentiality of this new world, he was nonetheless possessed of a marvelous ethnographical curiosity, which enabled him to store away endless details of native lifestyle and language. Dovid Eynhorn, who in later years served as Abramovitch's personal secretary, reports that whenever Abramovitch was stuck for the proper Yiddish word or phrase, he would project a "little Jew" on his desk and ask,

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[37] Cited by Oyslender, op. cit., p. 17.

[38] I am indebted for this observation to Oyslender, Ibid., who constructs an elaborately dialectical model of Abramovitch's stylistic development.

Yidele, little Jew, what do you have to say?[39]

This visualized "Yidele" was a holographic embodiment of the Yiddish idiom and lifestyle which Abramovitch had come to know intimately during his travels with the beggars, so many years before.

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Though not yet a "lover of Yiddish" or a committed champion of the poor, Abramovitch at age seventeen was at the least a person with an insatiable curiosity and a fine memory for linguistic and ethnographic detail. His travels would serve him well in later years. But meanwhile his adventures with the beggars' band were coming to an end. When the troupe pulled into Lutzk, Avrom der Hinkediker tried to marry off his young charge to a local woman for the profit of a tidy dowry. This was a bit much for Abramovitch. He quit the beggars' band for good, making his way to Kamenets, the capital city of Podolia, where he encountered Abraham Baer Gotlober, a prominent leader of the Haskala. The Haskala would prove the final ingredient in Abramovitch's dialectical progress; it would provide the immediate springboard for his literary career. But he would never shake free of the lessons he learned with the beggars. He had slept with the common Jew on cold dirt floors, he had learned the native idiom of Yiddish in endless jokes, proverbs, songs and stories which whiled away long hours on the wagon. At least in some nominal sense, Abramovitch must have already appreciated the importance of what he had learned. Upon arriving in Kamenets and entering the more staid world of the Haskala, he was required to adopt a formal surname. He decided upon the name "Abramovitch,"

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[39] Eynhorn, "Mendele bay der arbet," Ale verk fun Mendele, v. XX, p. 59, cited by Miron, op. cit., p. 67.

Russian for "Son of Avrom." According to Zalman Rejzen, this was a lasting tribute to Avrom der Hinkediker.[40] Son of Avrom, son of the poor, everyday Yiddish-speaking Jew, Abramovitch carried a unique legacy indeed as he left the world of Hasidism and the folk culture and, under the tutelage of Gotlober, entered the very different world of the Haskala.

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[40]This fact is mentioned by a number of biographers, but seems to be offered first by Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 1, p. 9. Abramovitch paid further tribute to Avrom der Hinkediker in later years, with the publication of his masterful novel, Fishke der krumer ("Fishke the Lame").

3. Kamenets: The Haskala and the Spirit of Capitalism

> The Haskala was the exact antithesis of Hasidism, both in its social basis and its political and cultural program.
>
> --Raphael Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskala in Galicia," p. 64.[41]

Abramovitch fared well in Kamenets. Fresh off the beggars' wagon, he was taken in by the noted maskil Abraham Baer Gotlober.[42] Gotlober recognized great talent in the ragged youth. He engaged him in lengthy discourse on Hebrew literature and Enlightenment thought and entrusted him to his daughters for instruction in Russian and German. Abramovitch remained in Kamenets for several years. He married (only to divorce and remarry three years later), passed the government teaching examinations and secured a position as an instructor in the local Jewish Realschule.

Gotlober's circle in Kamenets stood in stark contrast with the world of Hasidism and the folk culture. This contrast operated on two levels, both of which left their mark on Abramovitch. On one level was an

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[41] YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science, v. 1 (1948), pp. 64-85. This article is a translation of Chapter 2 of Mahler's Der kamf tsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsie. The analysis of the Haskala provided in the present chapter draws heavily from Mahler. It should be noted that Mahler limits his study to Galicia. For our purposes it is still appropriate, however, since the Haskala in Southern Russia filtered in directly through Galicia. Most of the prominent Russian masklim (including Gotlober) had studied in Galicia. Moreover, Russia and Galicia were in similar social and political circumstances in the early nineteenth century: both were feudal areas under autocratic imperial monarchs. See Erik, Etyudn tsu der geshikhte fun der haskole, p. 127.

[42] On Gotlober see Ayzik Fridkin, Avrom Ber Gotlober un zayn epokhe, loyt farsheydene kveln (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1925). On Kamenets (Kamenets-Podolsk) see Ab. Rosen, ed., Kamenets-Podolsk u'sevivetah (Tel Aviv: Survivors of Kamenets-Podolsk, 1965).

"objective" clash of social and economic class. Hasidism, as we have seen, was a revivalist religious movement appealing to "the impoverished, suffering, retarded lower middle class and proletarian masses"; the Haskala was a Jewish version of broader Western Enlightenment, finding its support among "the rising Jewish bourgeoisie and the intellectuals associated with it."[43] On another level, and perhaps more significantly, the folk culture and the Haskala clashed on a more "subjective" cultural and aesthetic level. Hasidism emphasized spontaneity, experientialism and celebration through song and dance; the Haskala professed worldly education, neat appearance, propriety and decorum. The folk culture found expression in Hasidic stories, folk songs, proverbs and sayings, all in native Yiddish; the Haskala vehemently attacked Yiddish, fashioning its literature in Hebrew, German, and Russian.

The present thesis argues that Abramovitch's literary transformation was the product of a dialectical interaction of implicit social theory and artistic voice. Theory and voice were, in turn, the respective products of a clash between the Haskala and the folk culture, as experienced by Abramovitch in his early years. We will therefore evaluate the Haskala as both a socio-economic and literary-aesthetic movement, in order to show its "antithetical" relation to the folk culture. By completing this picture, we will understand the ingredients of the broader dialectic of theory and voice, as it then plays out in Abramovitch's literary process.

The Haskala which Abramovitch encountered in Kamenets derived from the Mendelssohnian Enlightenment in Berlin, by way of Galicia. The trade

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[43] Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskala in Galicia," p. 83.

cities of Tarnopol, Lemberg and particularly Brody, located in close proximity to the Russian border, were the portals through which the new ideas of the West made their way into the Russian Pale. (Similarly, the trade cities of Odessa on the Black Sea and Danzig on the Baltic were also important seats of the Haskala.) The fact that the centers of commerce were also centers of Enlightenment is hardly coincidental. The Haskala found its appeal among the new merchant class, those who engaged in large scale trade with foreign markets. Enlightenment served the same function as it had a hundred years earlier among the ascendant bourgeoisie of the West: it broke down clerical domination, allowed freedom of movement, introduced worldly learning and the study of languages, and, in propagating rationalism. challenged the feudal hierarchy of the ancien regime and paved the way for an expanding free market economy. The relationship of commerce and Enlightenment was amply clear to the masklim themselves. The noted scholar Nakhman Krokhmal wrote in a letter of 1822 that the Haskala center of Brody was a city "where wisdom and wealth, Torah and understanding, commerce and faith are united."[44] The cause and effect relationship was made even clearer by Samson Bloch, in the introduction to a Hebrew volume published in 1828:

> Since God has taken pity on us and brought us under the rule of our lord, the Emperor [of Austria] . . . trade with foreign lands has begun to flourish in our parts . . . and since then the few brave ones have attempted to cast off the disgrace of ignorance, and they teach their children the vernacular [German] and other languages and disciplines that men live by.[45]

[44] Nathan Krokhmal to Isaac Erter, in the preface by M. Letteris to Erter's Hazofeh L'bet Yisael (Vienna: 1864), p. 7, cited by Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskala in Galicia," p. 65.

[45] Shebile Olam, v. II, Introduction, cited by Mahler, Ibid., p. 65.

The program of the Haskala clearly reflected the needs of its haute-bourgeois constituency.[46] Emphasis was placed on social integration with the mainstream in order to facilitate trade. Maskilim shaved their beards and wore short coats, after the German fashion. Great emphasis was placed on education, particularly the study of sciences and geography. A central concern was the mastery of foreign languages, a pre-condition for international trade. Yuditsky points out that the early East European Haskala turned to German; after the military expansionism of Tsar Nicholas I created an increased demand for textiles for uniforms, the language of the Haskala shifted to Russian, as the Jewish bourgeoisie concerned itself with local markets.[47]

We have already noted that Jewish Enlightenment found itself peculiarly isolated in Eastern Europe. Borne by a bourgeoisie engaged in trade with the West, it was essentially an "imported" ideology, finding no indigenous analogue. The maskilim were, for the most part, lone voices of Reason in an economy which remained overwhelmingly feudal. This isolation forced the East European maskilim into certain glaring contradictions. In the West, the ascendant bourgeoisie, both Jewish and non-Jewish, had been able to openly attack such feudal "vestiges" as clerical privilege and

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[46]The program of the Haskala reflected the needs of a new Jewish capitalist class. It was supported, however, by a broader professional intelligentsia, including bookkeepers, clerks, teachers, physicians, court stenographers and writers. Mahler, Ibid., p. 67, writes: "On the whole, the number of the poor among the Maskilic intelligentsia . . . was quite large. . . . But just as the humanist scholars and poets had represented the interests and strivings of their protectors, the princes and patricians, so the Maskilim in their writings expressed the interests and the outlook of the rising class of wealthy Jewish merchants, who were their material protectors and their social ideal."

[47]Yuditsky, op. cit.

absolutist monarchy.[48] Religious deism and political republicanism both gained ground. Maskilim in the East, however, were too few in number to challenge such powerful institutions. Despite a superficial religious reform, the maskilim had to keep up a guise of traditional observance, since Judaism was far less threatening to the status quo than aetheism. Politically, the maskilim were rendered impotent, making peace with reactionary regimes which they were unable to change.

Allegiance to the ruling powers was no small matter. The maskilim subscribed to the notion of "enlightened absolutism." They knew where the wind blew. Since republican revolution was seemingly unrealizable within feudal economy, they steadfastly abstained from revolutionary struggle.[49] Instead, they supported gradual legal reform and economic modernization. Actually the status quo served them well. Enlightened absolutism assured continuing political stability, yet still allowed for the expansion of commerce and industry under the rubric of "progress."

There was only one flaw in this cozy relationship. The same "enlightened" autocrats to whom the maskilim pledged such unbounded fealty were also the initiators of brutal anti-Jewish legislation. On one level

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[48] In Western Europe wealthy Jews were often split over the issue of alliegiance to the crown. See for example Zosa Szajkowski, "Internal Conflicts in French Jewry at the Time of the Revolution of 1848," YIVO Annual for Jewish Social Science, v. II-III, pp. 100-117.

[49] Mahler, op. cit., pp. 79-80, cites Galician maskilim who criticized the French Revolution of 1789 as unjustifiable. There was little chance for revolutionary activity in Russia until the populist movement of the 1860s. Galicia, however, was located in the Austrian Empire, where revolutions broke out in 1830 and again in 1848. The maskilim avidly refrained from both struggles, even though the Revolution of 1848 was directly tied to the issue of Jewish emancipation. See Salo W. Baron, "The Impact of the Revolution of 1848 on Jewish Emancipation," Jewish Social Studies, XI, pp. 195-248.

this was of little personal consequence. The maskilim were generally free to pursue their financial enterprises, and were little affected by the special legal disabilities. As Mahler observes:

> The Maskilim represented that class of the Jewish population which felt practically no burden of national oppression, which benefited by the general economic expansion, . . . and was even partially linked through its interests with the government machinery (tax farmers, officials, teachers, etc.).[50]

Still, the terrible disabilities which afflicted the less privileged Jewish population, such as cantonist conscription in Russia, could not be overlooked. Rather than compromise their allegiance to the government (and so jeopardize their own economic advantage), the maskilim accepted the notorious premise that legal disabilities against Jews were the fault of the Jews themselves. If Jews would only listen to the message of Enlightenment--clean themselves up, learn German or Russian, abandon obscurantist practice--then surely the Emperor or Tsar would reward the effort by relaxing anti-Jewish legislation. Emancipation would come when the Jews proved themselves worthy.

The maskilim thus proceeded with great zeal to "enlighten" their brethren, in order to pave the way for their own emancipation. Being numerically few against the masses of poor, mostly Hasidic Jews, they readily turned to the government for support. At the height of cantonist conscription, Isaac Baer Levinson dedicated a book to Nicholas I and was rewarded with a gold medal. Josef Perl, the influential maskil from Tarnopol, did him one better: he received gold medals not only from the

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[50] Mahler, op. cit., p. 77. Mahler cites letters from contemporary maskilim who, through connections or money, were able to keep their sons out of military service.

Tsar of Russia, but also from the Emperor of Austria.[51] Perl petitioned the Austrian authorities to establish a censorship policy, and proposed that forbidden books be seized and, it was understood, burned. He also asked that all traditional Jewish schools be closed, but the government backed away from such an extreme measure, ostensibly fearing for Perl's own safety.

A foremost proponent of cooperation with the ruling powers was Abramovitch's mentor, Gotlober. Gotlober was a Hebrew writer of considerable repute, who was distinguished by his social conservativism. E. Tcherikover, in his study of early Jewish revolutionaries in Russia, mentions Gotlober as epitomizing the hyper-patriotism of the bourgeois Haskala. Gotlober, says Tcherikover, urged absolute allegiance to the regime and "struggle against the Jewish folk population."[52]

As Tcherikover illustrates, hostility toward the folk was the necessary corollary of allegiance to the government. These were the most reactionary of times. Jews were being made destitute by domicile restrictions and economic displacement. Children were being ripped from their families at the age of twelve, as the heavy onus of conscription fell disproportionately on the poor. Nicholas was considered worse than Pharoah of old: at least Pharoah had stolen only the first born. And then came along

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[51] On Levinson see Simon Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, v. II, pp. 125-132, who writes that Levinson's policy "would have been ignoble had it not been naive" (p. 130). On Perl see Mahler, Der kamf . . . ., particularly Chapter 5, "Yoysef Perls kamf kegn khasides in likht fun ofitsiele dokumentn" ("Josef Perl's Struggle Against Hasidism in the Light of Official Documents"), pp. 164-202.

[52] E. Tcherikover, "Yidn-revolutsionern in Rusland in di 60-er un 70-er yorn," Historishe shriftn, v. III (NY: YIVO, 1939), p. 62.

Levinson and Perl, who accepted gold medals from this new Pharoah and plotted further restrictions and decrees against the people. If the maskilim meant well, the poor Jews were too hungry and beaten to know it; they understood intuitively that Enlightenment was the program of the rich, of no apparent benefit to themselves.

Confronted with the treachery of governmental complicity, the common people came to equate all "Enlightenment" with betrayal and political oppression, and so retreated ever more deeply into their traditional forms. It was thus that Hasidism picked up such enormous momentum, offering a religious revival which spoke directly to the poor and outcast. Hasidism regarded the maskilim as arch enemies, issuing bans of kherem and engaging in active persecution.

The maskilim, for their part, enjoined battle against the Hasidim with great fervor. They readily enlisted the government as an ally in the struggle. The maskilim attacked ruthlessly, resorting to every manner of subterfuge and denunciation. Attack against the old world became the Haskala's central preoccupation. Why were the maskilim so vehement in their attacks against the common Jews?

The most obvious answer is that the maskilim honestly believed that they were right. They were a modern bourgeoisie, rational and economically progressive; they wanted to share the truth of their way with the Jewish masses, who were still obscurantist and economically unproductive. They genuinely believed that if the masses could be persuaded to accept the "good ideas" of Enlightenment, they too could enter a modern economy and so escape from their crushing poverty. Liberal ideology taught that the dissemination of ideas could produce material amelioration. The maskilim

extended the principle of "enlightened absolutism" to the manner in which they went about their didactic effort; they insisted that they and they alone knew what was good for the common Jews:

> The Maskilim . . . defended staunchly the absolutist motto: 'All for the people, nothing by the people.' The people are, in the eyes of the Maskilim, an ignorant mob that has to be trained and enlightened to come to sense.[53]

Still, such well-intentioned paternalism by itself can hardly account for the vehemence or ruthlessness of the maskilim's attacks. Another factor is what we have already noted: the mistaken belief that by enlightening the masses they would render all Jews, themselves included, deserving of emancipation. In this sense Hasidism posed a serious obstacle, since it disgraced Jews before the broader population and counteracted the enlightened image by which the maskilim hoped to win emancipation. The maskil S. J. Rapoport wrote in a letter of 1815 that the Hasidim

> have made us a disgrace among our neighbors, a scorn among the nations about us.[54]

Likewise, Perl wrote to Gotlober in 1828:

> The Hasidim . . . bring us harm in every land, and because of them we have become a disgrace among the nations.[55]

The "disgrace" went even further than the issue of emancipation. The maskilim were afraid that the populist spirit of Hasidism would transgress too far against the government, and therefore bring down further reaction against the Jews. This would endanger their own aspirations of upward

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[53] Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects . . . ," p. 80.

[54] In "Ner Mitzvah," Nahalat Yehudah (1868), p. 14, cited by Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects . . . ," p. 84.

[55] In Fridkin, op. cit., p. 144, cited by Mahler, ibid., loc. cit.

mobility and social integration. In an open denunciation of Hasidism, submitted to the Austrian authorities in 1838, Perl writes:

> The objective observer, who glances in the most casual manner at Galician Jewry, must eventually pose the important question: What is the reason that the Jews here obey almost none of the laws of the State which apply to them?[56]

I offer here only a cursory view of the class basis of the Haskala, and refer the reader to the authoritative studies by Raphael Mahler and Max Erik for further documentation.[57] It is clear that the political and social program of the Haskala spoke for the needs of an ascendant merchant class, and thus came into sharp conflict with the Jewish masses. The maskilim believed in the good intentions of the government and the power of Enlightenment ideas to effect legislative reform and material amelioration. The Jewish masses, by contrast, were more realistic about social conditions and more innately hostile toward the reactionary regimes under which they suffered so directly. Under the tutelage of Gotlober, Abramovitch was well schooled in the Haskala's side of this conflict. He accepted its social theory as progressive and universal truth, oblivious to its underlying class interests. He made his literary debut thoroughly informed by, and as a propagandist for, bourgeois liberalism. It was only in the course of his literary process itself, as we will observe, that the

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[56] Cited by Mahler, Der kamf . . ., p. 32. Mahler includes full texts of Perl's denunciations, in their original German, in the Appendix, "Archive Documents," pp. 205-250.

[57] I.e., Mahler, Der kamf tsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsie; Idem., "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskalah in Galicia," (Translation of Chapter II of Der kamf . . .); and Erik, Etyudn tsu der geshikhte fun der haskole.

grass-roots social and political theory which he had learned on his travels among the folk Jews would also come to the fore.

I have stated that the Haskala conflicted with the Jewish masses not only on the "objective" level of social and political theory, but also on the "subjective" level of culture and aesthetics. It was perhaps this latter level of conflict which Abramovitch more readily synthesized, shaping not his social theory but his more immediate artistic proclivities.

As the pioneers of capitalism in an essentially feudal society, the maskilim introduced not only a new economic order but also its cultural and cognitive superstructure, what Max Weber has termed "the spirit of capitalism."[58] This "spirit" meant the replacement of traditional religion with a new "work ethic"; labor had to be presented, in and of itself, as the purpose and validation of human existence, rather than as a simple means toward material accumulation. As Weber writes,

> Labor . . . must be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling. But such an attitude is by no means a product of nature. It cannot be evoked by low wages or high ones alone, but can only be the product of a long and arduous process of education.[59]

Moreover, capitalism inculcated the virtues of self-discipline, sobriety, neat appearance, and respect for authority, in order to render "unbridled" human beings fit for the requisite hierarchy and discipline of industrial production. In the West, the Protestant Church challenged the hierarchy of Catholicism, only to replace it with a far more exacting social code,

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[58]Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, translated by Talcott Parsons (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

[59]Ibid., pp. 61-62.

"a regulation of the whole of conduct which, penetrating to all deportments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced."[60]

Social historians since Weber have examined in great detail the "subjective" web whereby capitalism exerted its control over society.[61] The "regulation of the whole of conduct" came to shape all aspects of everyday life. Schools taught discipline and demanded that students "work" at studies in which they had no personal interest. Emphasis shifted from the collective to the individual, and in time even furniture styles reflected this change, as benches were replaced by armchairs. Watches became an omnipresent acoutrement, reinforcing the new idea that "time is money." In "all deportments of public and private life" the new economic order left its mark. Step by step, the new bourgeoisie erected the cultural and aesthetic superstructure which would perpetuate its new modes of production.

As an ascendant capitalist class, the maskilim in Eastern Europe had no less stake in this new superstructure than did their counterparts in the West. Through the trade centers of Germany, they imported the "spirit of capitalism" as much as they did capitalism itself. They eagerly embraced the new "work ethic," preaching "productivization" of the Jewish

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[60] Weber, op. cit., p. 36.

[61] Pioneering work in this field was done by E. P. Thompson. See, for example, "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," Past and Present, Spring 1964. Other important studies are Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom (NY: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1941); Eli Zaretzky, Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life (NY: Harper and Row, 1976). In the American context see Herbert Gutman, Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America (NY: Knopf, 1976).

masses. They accepted the notion of conformity and "propriety," and willingly discarded their traditional dress, long coats and beards in deference to Western fashion. They accepted the need for discipline, and introduced stiff seating, German sermons, non-participational cantorial music and a stringent sense of decorum into their religious services. They tried to wrestle the concept of "ethics" from Talmudic legalism and establish it as a "code of conduct" in business dealings. Like the founders of Protestantism in the West, they were unyielding in their insistence on religious affiliation; it is said that Josef Perl expelled a teacher from his "modern" academy in Tarnopol on the charge of Sabbath violation.[62]

Viewed from the perspective of this subjective superstructure, the intensity of the clash between the folk culture of Hasidism and the high culture of the Haskala becomes much more understandable. The Haskala represented the rising bourgeoisie, Hasidism the displaced petty-bourgeoisie of the old order. It hardly matters that the maskilim of the Southern Pale were rarely in direct economic relationship with the Jewish poor. Jewish capitalists were not yet training a Jewish proletariat to serve in their factories. Most of the maskilim were merchants, and those who did own factories were often prohibited (as in the case of Ukrainian sugar beet refinement) from hiring Jewish workers.[63] Nonetheless, they did feel an almost religious mission to indoctrinate their brethren to the new cultural values. This was by no means unusual. Weber points out that in colonial

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[62]Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskala in Galicia," p. 71. On Perl and his school see Philip Fridman, "Yoysef Perl vi a bildungs-tuer un zayn shul in Tarnopol," Yivo bleter, v. XXXI-XXXII (1948), pp. 131-190.

[63]Yuditsky, op. cit.; see note 19, supra.

Massachusetts "the spirit of capitalism was present before the capitalist order."[64] The spirit of capitalism was regarded as universal truth, the product of Reason, and therefore warranted universal dissemination and acceptance.

The spirit of capitalism came into direct conflict with the spirit of the folk culture. At a time when the Haskala was trying to extend religious (ethical) authority to "every deportment" of life, Hasidism was loosening the stricture of observance. While the Haskala introduced a "work ethic," Hasidism denigrated material accumulation and sought only means enough to get on with the real business of prayer and celebration. Maskilim preached sobriety and asceticism, while hasidim drank and turned somersaults. The Haskala introduced formality to religious services, while Hasidism strove for direct, experiential "i-thou" communion with God. The Haskala emphasized the importance of neat, conformist personal appearance, while hasidim adopted the outmoded dress of a century earlier in order to set themselves apart from others. The Haskala sanctified individualism, while Hasidism sanctified community and the kinship of all Jews. Not only was Hasidism a retrenchment of the old order, but, at least in a subjective sense, it was moving in precisely the opposite direction than was the Haskala. Contrast, for example, mealtime among maskilim and hasidim: The maskilim sit in separate chairs in a heavily appointed parlor, the large clock ticks, ticks, food is served on covered plates, people eat with etiquette and poise amid cultured conversation. And then we see the hasidim--packed onto long benches by the Rebbe's tish (ritually set table), they rock to

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[64] Weber, op. cit., p. 55.

wordless songs, the rhythm swells, their eyes burn with devotion as they wait to drink wine from the Rebbe's glass or share food from a common plate.

The maskilim perceived themselves as antithetical indeed to the culture of the common Jews. They feared that they would be tainted by the stigma of such indecorous behavior. Both in their eyes and the eyes of the authorities, the objective class conflict and the subjective conflict of culture were equally threatening. An official Austrian government report of 1827 lumped the culture and economy of the Hasidic population, writing:

> It is very easy to recognize this type of Jew. He goes around with an open neck and with rolled up sleeves, he is, for the most part, very dirty and tattered. The common Jew belongs to this sort. . . . They are engaged in no craft, are usually tavern keepers, swindlers and soothsayers.[65]

Certainly the maskilim were afraid that the stigma of Hasidic "regression" would foil their own hopes for emancipation. But the vehemence of their attacks suggests that their fear went further still. Modern sociologists show that upwardly mobile populations usually harbor great contempt for the lower classes whom they leave behind.[66] They suggest a psycho-analytic explanation for this attitude, which says in essence that the upper class is insecure in its mastery of new social norms, and so attacks all the deficiencies which it fears in itself by projecting them on the lower classes. If this is true, then it would go far in explaining the

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[65] Report to the Commisar of Brody, cited by Mahler, Der kamf . . . , p. 14.

[66] See T. W. Adorno, The Authoritarian Personality (NY: Harper, 1950).

ferocity with which the maskilim attacked the common Jews. Jewishness was, after all, an enormously pervasive ethos. For all their new found wealth and respectability, the maskilim could hardly discard all the behavioral and cognitive baggage of centuries of exile in one easy sweep. For all their trimmed beards and Western clothes, the image of a Hasidic father or grandfather was never far behind. Perhaps it was fear of a lingering presence within themselves which caused the maskilim to term the common Jews "a many-mouthed and eyeless beast."[67]

Because of this underlying fear, the maskilim strove to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the folk culture. It was this factor, perhaps more than all others, which shaped the literary sphere of the Haskala and determined the "literary aesthetic" in which Abramovitch was trained by Gotlober. We have already mentioned the commitment of the maskilim to Hebrew, and their antipathy toward Yiddish. While Hasidism legitimized the vernacular, the Haskala attacked it with unrelenting venom. It is true that some maskilim, including Perl, Levinson and Gotlober, sometimes condescended to write in Yiddish in order to communicate with backwards persons who knew no other language. But for the most part the

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[67]The term is attributed to Frederick the Great, and was quoted verbatim by both Rappoport and Krokhmal. Cited by Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects . . . ," p. 80, note 57.

The conflict between bourgeois and petty-bourgeois or proletarian Jews took on many forms in intervening years. The dynamic was particularly pronounced in inter-war Germany, where many Yiddish speaking Polish Jews found refuge. Everything which German Jewry had sought to suppress in itself was suddenly personified by these East European brethren. As Peter Gay writes in "The Berlin-Jewish Spirit," "Thousand of Berlin Jews, well educated, impeccably German in their accent and connections, thought themselves superior to these invaders from the East, and conducted an intermittent war with their fellow Jews." In Freud, Jews and Other Germans (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978).

maskilim avoided the "stigma" of Yiddish at all costs. They accepted the premise that "the medium is the message," and believed it was impossible to convey "good" and "beautiful" ideas by means of a "deformed" and "ugly" language.

The literary aesthetic of the Haskala has been examined in considerable detail, notably by Z. Rejzen in his Fun Mendelson biz Mendele ("From Mendelssohn to Mendele")[68] and Simon Dubnov in Fun'zhargon' tsu yidish ("From 'Jargon' to Yiddish").[69] It has never been treated so exhaustively, however, nor with such sophisticated tools of modern literary scholarship, as by Dan Miron in A Traveler Disguised. Miron analyzes, piece by piece, the writings of contemporary maskilim, to show that virtually all were possessed of an aesthetic aversion to Yiddish. His evidence is indeed compelling. We have already quoted Moses Mendelssohn, who wrote that Yiddish was "a language of stammerers, corrupt and deformed, repulsive to those who are able to speak in a correct and elegant manner," and that it "contributed not a little to the 'impropriety' of the common Jew."[70] Others of Mendelssohn's circle vehemently rejected a proposal that Enlightenment schools be established in Yiddish, arguing that

> since Yiddish lacked rules and grammar and was under no formal discipline, no one educated in it 'could have a true concept of anything whatsoever. . . . All rational understanding, true piety, and genuine morality rest on clear and precise concepts' and those could not be attained without a 'methodical study' of a disciplined and regulated language.[71]

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[68] Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1923. [69] Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1929.

[70] Miron, A Traveler Disguised, p. 43, citing Or lanetiva (Berlin, 1783).

[71] Ibid., p. 37, citing David Friedlander, "Sendschreiben en meine Mitbruder," in the Auserordentliche Beilage to Hamae'asaf (1788).

The Russian maskil I. B. Levinson wrote a lengthy defense of Hebrew and Russian, in which he complained that Yiddish is

> completely corrupt, for it is mixed with cripped words adapted from Hebrew, Russian, French, Polish, etc., and even its original German words are 'scattered and peeled' and 'there is no soundness in them.'[72]

The German Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz refused to allow translation of his monumental History of the Jews into Yiddish, characterizing the language as a "halb tierische Sprache," a "half-bestial tongue."[73] Perhaps Miron summarizes the position of the Mendelssohnian (and in turn, the East European) Haskala best when he writes that for the maskilim, Yiddish

> was not a language at all; it was only a 'mixture' of Hebrew and German, and as such it lacked the unity and harmony without which the use of a language could not be conducted according to aesthetic norms. As 'a mixture,' it could not strive for any linguistic stability and was doomed to remain chimerical, barbarous and repulsive.[74]

Miron offers careful analysis of his evidence and succeeds in his goal of defining the literary aesthetic of the Haskala. He leaves little doubt about the attitude of the maskilim toward Yiddish. But he seems too willing to accept the maskilim's statements at face value when he concludes:

> The Jewish 'enlightened' intellectuals of eighteenth-century Germany objected to Yiddish on many grounds: educational, cultural, social, [. . .] even economic. Their antipathy, however, was primarily an aesthetic revulsion.[75]

It is true enough that the maskilim expressed their aversion in aesthetic terms. They genuinely believed that Yiddish was ugly. But where did this aesthetic derive from?

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[72] Ibid., p. 46, citing Te'uda bayisra'el, 4th ed. (Warsaw, 1901), pp. 33-38.

[73] Ibid., p. 36. Graetz accorded Yiddish only scant attention in his History, and always portrayed it in the most derogatory manner.

[74] Miron, op. cit., p. 43. [75] Ibid., loc. cit.

Miron acknowledges the legitimacy of the question, but insists that it is outside the purview of his own study. "Such a phenomenon must have had its roots deep in the social and cultural history of European Jews," he writes,

> and to extricate them from their subterranean past is not an easy task. Nor is it the proper goal of this study, since it calls for the analytical methods and scholarly equipment of sociolinguistics and the history of ideas, while the aims and methods of this study are those of literary history and criticism.[76]

Miron traces the aesthetic prejudices of early Yiddish authors back to the Haskala, seeking explanation in "the conception of literature and in the linguistic-aesthetic assumptions which these authors shared with all the adherents of Jewish Enlightenment."[77] He does not see fit, however, to offer sociological anslysis of the Haskala itself, to consider whether its "aesthetic," its contempt for Yiddish, was in any way determined by its class basis.

As a study in literary history, Miron's work stands well enough by itself. He traces an aesthetic concept as it manifests itself in the language and style of early modern Yiddish literature, and legitimately ignores sociological concerns. The self-professed limitations of his study

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[76]Miron, op. cit., p. 35. Despite his assurances that the aesthetic position of the Haskala has "roots deep in the social and cultural history of European Jews," Miron still persists in accepting aesthetic categories at face value. He writes about Mendelssohn, for example: "It goes without saying that this [aesthetic] reaction was conditioned by social and cultural factors, but that does not change the fact that Mendelssohn, for example, . . . recoiled from the language with that spontaneity which reflects a genuine revolt of the aesthetic sensibilities." (P. 43). I do not understand how Mendelssohn's spontaneity somehow mitigates the conditioning factors of society and culture.

[77]Ibid., p. 35.

become apparent, however, when he applies his strictly aesthetic criteria to aspects of literary theme and content. He notes correctly that most of early Yiddish fiction, at least through Sholem Aleykhem, concerned itself more or less exclusively with "social" issues. He then concludes, however, that this was the product of a tenacious "aesthetic of ugliness," whereby Yiddish writers were unable to shake free of the lingering literary prejudices of the Haskala and so considered Yiddish unfit for anything but mockery, satire and social portraiture.[78]

In this conclusion Miron reveals his own modernist prejudices, i.e., that any literature which sets a social purpose for itself is necessarily bad, or at least not fully realized, art. "[Social function] caused Yiddish literature to be written without the possibility of realizing the writer's full imaginative powers; it shrunk them to fit a limited capacity."[79] Whatever the merit of Miron's observation, the modernist relish with which he presents it causes him to lose sight of a crucial dynamic: that the social function which these writers assign themselves does not remain static. In fact, the implicit social theory of early modern Yiddish literature undergoes a continual transformation, every bit as dramatic and significant as the concomitant development of a literary aesthetic.

It is my contention that the artistic form and implicit social theory of early Yiddish literature developed hand in hand, the one working upon the other and each of equal importance. I accept the premise that Yiddish literature derives most directly from the Haskala. But I believe that it

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[78] See Miron's discussion of the "aesthetic of ugliness," op. cit., esp. pp. 67-75.

[79] Ibid., p. 72.

is impossible to divorce the aesthetic of the Haskala from its objective class context. From this point of view, the antipathy of the maskilim toward Yiddish cannot be taken at its face value of "aesthetic revulsion." Why does Yiddish appear ugly, what are the social roots of that aesthetic, and why is Yiddish so fiercely combated?

Let us return to Miron's evidence, with these questions in mind. Yiddish is most frequently characterized by the same stock adjectives: "ugly," "deformed," "disorderly" and "undisciplined." It has been called "half-bestial," a language which "contributed not a little to the 'impropriety' of the common Jew." What do such epithets mean in the context of bourgeois society? "Ugly" is deviant. "Deformed" means won't conform. "Disorderly" means can't get to work on time. "Undisciplined" means resistant to the hierarchy of industrial production. "Half-animal" is a refusal to be constrained by the neat man-made boundaries of class. "Contributes to impropriety" flouts the entire superstructure of bourgeois manners and conventions. The maskilim may indeed have felt "aesthetic revulsion" toward Yiddish. But wasn't that aesthetic itself newly fashioned? Were the maskilim simply expressing contempt for attributes which they had inherited from their own families, and which they had barely managed to suppress within themselves?

One complaint against Yiddish is repeated with more persistence than all others. Yiddish is called a "bastard" language, a jargon, "completely corrupt [to quote Levinson], . . . mixed with cripped words adopted from Hebrew, Russian, French, Polish, etc." There is a patent absurdity in this accusation. It is of course true that Yiddish comprises diverse linguistic stock. But so too did other European languages, perhaps most notably

English. Why then was Yiddish alone stigmatized as "corrupt"? Perhaps Yiddish was attacked not just because it borrowed words from various sources, but rather because of what it did with the words it had absorbed.

In his magnum opus, Di geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh ("The History of the Yiddish Language"), Max Weinreich offers a penetrating linguistic and cultural history of the Yiddish language.[80] He presents Yiddish as a "fusion language," a merger of various lexical and grammatical elements which Jews acquired in different countries of exile. Linguistic absorption followed a unifying principle which Weinreich terms "derekh ha'shas," literally "The Way of the Talmud," whereby Jews "judaized" foreign linguistic stock into their own cultural and cognitive frame. Weinreich offers compelling linguistic and cultural evidence, which is too complex to present here. Of greatest significance, however, is the consequence of this linguistic development in the evolution of Jewish society. Yiddish became a living catalogue of Jewish experience, determining a unique world view rooted deep in the Jewish past. "The derekh hashas plays havoc with our notions of time," writes the linguist Shlomo Noble in a review of Weinreich. "As early as the Gemara we find . . . 'In the Torah there is no earlier or later.'" By absorbing elements from diverse times and climes, Yiddish introduces a temporal relativity:

> A new temporal direction is introduced which goes not only 'forward' but 'backward' too. Present day conditions are thus projected backward two thousand years and on the other hand, present day conditions and behavioral norms are maintained by reference to the Talmud. Moses can thus meet Rabbi Akiba and both of them can meet Israel Bal-Shem Tov and understand one another very well.

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[80] 4 vs.; NY: YIVO, 1973. The work is scheduled to appear this year (1980) in English translation from the University of Chicago Press.

> This, then, is the theoretical basis for the derekh hashas. In its practical aspect Weinreich sees the derekh hashas as an accumulation of hundreds of years of energy, a fire that burned so intensely that it melted every element that it came in contact with, making into a Jewish value, a Jewish substance.[81]

Yiddish was a quintessential expression of Jewish specificity, and no mainstream culture has ever been favorably disposed toward minority divergence within its midst. Linguistic domination is a pattern which runs throughout history. Bourgeois culture was particularly intent on "leveling" it population. Capitalist production required a homogeneous work force which accepted "work" as an end in itself, willing to suppress personal needs while engaged in wage production alienated from consumption. The "Spirit of Capitalism" intruded into "every deportment of private and public life," from religion and architecture to education and sexual mores. Nonconformity on any level was intolerable. . . . And then came along Jews, who not only looked, prayed and acted differently, but, by virtue of the cognition embodied in their language, thought differently as well. If Yiddish was a "bastard" language, it was because its essence was diversity, temporal and geographical relativity and historically conditioned ambivalence. The maskilim could assimilate in all externals, they could reduce Jewishness to a system of sanitized theology, but as long as they spoke Yiddish they could not escape the inheritance of their collective past. Not only were they perceived as "different" in the eyes of others, but their language told them that they were different, that they always had been different, and that that difference was a virtue. Unlike Hebrew, which was classical, unspoken and unthreatening, Yiddish was the living

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[81] Dr. Shlomo Noble, "A Morphology of Ashkenazic Culture," News of the YIVO (Yedies fun yivo), no. 128 (Winter 1973/74).

expression of a living culture. It did not assimilate with the mainstream, but "melted" the mainstream into itself. Its structure and lexicon so determined the ways Jews viewed the world that only by eradicating the language itself could the common Jew ever be made to conform to the bourgeois norm.

Thus we see that the "aesthetic revulsion" of the maskilim toward Yiddish derived directly from the socio-economic dictates of an ascendant bourgeoisie. Yiddish was simply not compatible with the "Spirit of Capitalism." This fact is of crucial importance to the present thesis. We know that Abramovitch accepted the premise that Yiddish was "ugly," but agreed to write in the language anyway in order to propagate Enlightenment ideas. If he then began, for whatever reason, to appreciate Yiddish artistically and transform his aesthetic, then he would necessarily come into conflict with the very "capitalist spirit" which he sought to disseminate. Likewise, if he began to change his social theory and move away from the class interests of the bourgeoisie, then he would no longer have cause to feel "aesthetically repulsed" by Yiddish and could begin to intentionally fashion Yiddish art. Literary aesthetic and social theory were bound as subject and object; the transformation of the one necessarily affected the other. This is a central dialectic which we will trace through Abramovitch's early Yiddish works.

4. Berdichev: From Hebrew to Yiddish

Sholem Yankev Abramovitch was a product of three worlds. He was born in Kapulye, where he mastered traditional Jewish texts and was imbued with a strong artistic and empirical sensibility. He traveled as an adolescent with the beggars' band, making acquaintance with the life style and native Yiddish expression of the common Jew. And he came of age in Kamenets, where he learned foreign languages and Western thought and absorbed the capitalist theory and bourgeois aesthetic of the Haskala. All three worlds would find synthesis in the course of his Yiddish writing. But first he had to begin writing in Yiddish. For a young, up-and-coming maskil in Kamenets, that was no small matter.

Not surprisingly, Abramovitch's first literary efforts were in Hebrew. In 1857 he wrote a "Letter on Education," in which he advocated liberal pedagogic reform.[82] Gotlober discovered the letter and published it, without its author's knowledge, in the prestigious Hebrew periodical Hamagid. In 1858 Abramovitch moved to Berdichev, where he joined a larger circle of maskilim and immersed himself in the study of Hebrew literature. In 1860 he issued a volume of Hebrew literary criticism under the title Mishpet Shalom ("The Judgment of Sholem" or "The Peaceful Judgment"). The work firmly established the reputation of its young author, and showed that he was already parting company with the literary--though not yet the sociological--program of the classical Haskala.

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[82] The "Letter" appeared under the title "Mikhtav al d'var hakhinukh" in Hamagid, v. 1, no. 31. It is reprinted in Yiddish translation in Mayzl, Dos Mendele-bukh, pp. 43-47.

Mishpet Sholem was a critical attack on the melitse style which characterized much of contemporary Hebrew letters. According to Abramovitch, the obtuse melitse was a self-serving indulgence of stale writers, devoid of real social value. It floundered in biblical language and distant settings, and did nothing to teach the common Jew about Enlightenment and the need for economic productivization. Now the time had come, said Abramovitch, for maskilim to abandon their literary fantasy and address themselves to the world of the living. They must "come down to earth, take a look at the life and society of the common man, and then portray all this for the people themselves."[83]

Abramovitch moved from literary critique to practice two years later, with the publication of his first work of fiction, a short Hebrew novel entitled Limdu hetev, "Learn to Do Well!"[84] The work told a story of generational conflict, prescribing the social values of the Haskala. The exhortation of its title attests to its unabashedly didactic character.

Still, the complaints against melitse which Abramovitch had raised in Mishpet Sholem were in many ways no less applicable to his own novel. Even though he wrote in a more supple Hebrew laced with a modern idiom (usually translated directly from the spoken Yiddish), his language remained as inaccessible as melitse to the untutored reader who knew only Yiddish. Abramovitch was caught in the same contradiction as were other maskilim.

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[83]Mendele, "Shtrikhn tsu mayn biografie," Dos Mendele-bukh, p. 25.

[84]The novel was reprinted in a critical edition edited by Dan Miron. Limdu hetev (NY: YIVO, 1969). See Miron's excellent introduction, "Der onheyb fun aktueln hebreishn roman--historishe un kritishe bamerkungen tsu Sh. Y. Abramovitches 'Limdu hetev.'" Limdu hetev is an important work in the history of modern Hebrew literature.

He wanted "to write for the common man, to strive to refine his taste, his desire to speak in a finer, more aesthetic language."[85] The common man could only be reached in Yiddish. But Yiddish itself was ugly (as Abramovitch had learned in Kamenets). How then could one use an ugly medium to convey a lofty message, how could one employ a coarse language to exhort the people to speak in a more refined manner?

Abramovitch found a way out of this paradox through a Berdichev acquaintance, Yehoshue Mordkhe Lifshits. In later years Lifshits would be called the "father of Yiddishism," noted as the author of pioneering studies in Yiddish lexicography.[86] For now he was a young maskil living in Berdichev, and he and Abramovitch developed a close rapport. Lifshits did not yet defend the "intrinsic worth" of Yiddish. To do so, as we have suggested, would have been to challenge the fundamental "spirit" of the Haskala. Instead, Lifshits developed a mildly revisionist position. He acknowledged that Yiddish was customarily used to convey "ugly" ideas. But that association with "ugliness," he maintained, was of no consequence, since language was a neutral category which was unrelated to the ideas it expressed. As he wrote in 1863:

> The truth is that one cannot refer to a language as corrupt at all, for language is only a sign which stands for thought. [. . .] The Jews must be humanized, and the means for that can be found not in

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[85] Mendele, "Shtrikhn," p. 25.

[86] Lifshits prepared the first modern Yiddish dictionaries, beginning in the late 1860s. See Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 2, pp. 180-189; Emanuel Goldsmith, Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century (Rutherford, Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), pp. 46-48; Miron, A Traveler Disguised, pp. 50-51. The first to emphasize the significance of Lifshits's activities was Y. Tsinberg, "Der Kol Mevaser un zayn tsayt," Yidishe velt, 1913.

> language but in concepts. A million corrupt words cannot do as much harm as the least corrupt concept, and a million correct words are not as useful as the least concept, provided it is clear and distinct.[87]

It followed that one could convey Enlightenment ideas in Yiddish with impunity, since the ideas expressed were in no way determined by the medium used.

In retrospect it appears that Lifshits was wrong. Modern sociolinguistics demonstrates the intimate link between language and cognition,[88] and the proof of that seems borne out in Abramovitch's own artistic development. But neither Lifshits nor Abramovitch could have known that at the time. Notwithstanding his error, Lifshits provided a viable rationale for a Haskala literature in Yiddish.

Early in 1862 Abramovitch joined with Lifshits and another friend, Leyb Binshtok, to propose the establishment of a regular Yiddish press.

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[87] Miron, A Traveler Disguised, pp. 50-51, citing Lifshits, "Di fir klasn," in Kol mevaser, v. 1, no. 21-23, and "Di daytsh-yidishe brik," Kol mevaser, no. 31.

[88] This connection functions not only through lexicon but also through grammatical structure and syntax. Pioneering work in this field was done by Edward Sapir, who wrote: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression of their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." Language, Culture and Personality, Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir, edited by Leslie Spier (Menashe, Wisconsin: Sapir Memorial Publication Fund, 1941), pp. 75-93: See also Benjamin Lee Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language," Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, edited by John Carroll (NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1956), pp. 134-159.

They approached Alexander Tsederboym, editor of the respected Hebrew paper Hamelits, for support. Tsederboym was a maskil of the old school, with a strong antipathy toward Yiddish.[89] But his "aesthetic revulsion" was tempered by two important considerations. On the one hand, he believed that Yiddish was so ugly that once readers were exposed to even a semblance of Enlightenment thought they too would find the ugliness intolerable and would run out to learn other languages. On the other hand, Tsederboym was a practical man. He understood that few people read Hebrew and that many, many read Yiddish. More readers, more sales. And so he agreed. At first he tried to establish a separate Yiddish newspaper, but could not get the project past the Russian censor. So he decided to publish a regular Yiddish supplement to Hamelits, under the title Kol mevaser, "The Voice of the Messenger."[90] The first issue appeared on October 11, 1862. Shortly thereafter Abramovitch made his literary debut in Yiddish, with the serial publication of Dos kleyne mentshele, "The Little Man." Modern Yiddish literature was ready to unfold.

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Abramovitch was "the first." He was the product of diverse historical currents, and was in a unique position to effect lasting synthesis. The critic N. Oyslender has discussed Abramovitch's biography in dialectical terms, and concluded that "even before he began writing in Yiddish,

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[89] On Tsederboym see Rejzen, Leksikon, v. 3, pp. 325-350; Miron, op. cit., index; Zinberg, A History of Jewish Literature, v. XII, index. Tsederboym, incidentally, was the grandfather of Julius Martov.

[90] Tsinberg, "Der Kol mevaser un zayn tsayt"; Sh. L. Tsitron, Di geshikhte fun der yidisher prese, 1863-1889 (Warsaw: Farlag 'Akhisefer,' n.d.).

Abramovitch had become Mendele."[91] While I accept Oyslender's model, I believe his conclusion is overstated. Abramovitch was still very much the maskil at the time of his Yiddish debut in 1864. His social theory was consistent with emerging capitalism, and he agreed to use Yiddish only as a vehicle of propaganda, under the mistaken belief that language was unrelated to cognition. His life had indeed exposed him to divergent socio-historical forces. Avrom der Hinkediker and Avrom Baer Gotlober were teachers with very different lessons. The "thesis" of the folk culture met its antithesis in Kamenets--and Kapulye provided the method of Talmudic discourse with which to balance them both. But though the dialectic was firmly established, synthesis was not yet at hand in 1864. Abramovitch's biography had provided all the ingredients for a modern Yiddish literature, but only in the literary process itself would they blend and take form. Only by textual analysis, therefore, may we properly understand the interaction of Abramovitch's social theory and artistic voice, the synthesis of which modern Yiddish literature was born.

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[91] Oyslender, Gruntshtrikhn fun yidishn realizm, p. 4.

PART TWO: THE BOURGEOIS PROPAGANDIST

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I. Dos Kleyne Mentshele (1864)

Abramovitch made his Yiddish literary debut in 1864, with the publication of the first installment of Dos kleyne mentshele, oder eyn lebensbashraybung fun Yitskhok Avrom Takef ("The Little Man, Or A Life Story of Isaac Abraham Takef").[1] Comprising a total of only twenty-four pages, the work was a preliminary effort in every sense. It possessed little of the literary sparkle which would distinguish Abramovitch's later opus. For our purposes, however, it remains of enormous significance. On the one hand, it provides a revealing picture of Abramovitch's social theory and artistic voice at the time of his debut, providing a base line from which to measure subsequent developments. On the other hand it represents the diverse elements of Abramovitch's own biography and introduces, tentatively but discernibly, the creative dialectic between theory and voice which I have postulated in the preceding section. This is most clearly manifest in the story's narrative structure, particularly in opening and closing "frames" introduced by the bookpeddler Mendele. In the following chapters, I will analyze the text in considerable detail, examining in turn its narrative structure, implicit social theory, and style and language. In this

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[1] The work appeared in Kol mevaser: 1864, nos. 45-51; 1865, nos. 1-4, 6. It was republished as a book, with certain editorial modifications, in Vilna in 1866. In later years Dos kleyne mentshele was reworked into a full fledged novel, with variants appearing in 1879 and 1907. There is little similarity, however, between the 1864/65 edition analyzed here and its later permutations. An English translation of the 1907 edition appeared under the title The Parasite, tr. by G. Stillman (NY: 1956).

way I will begin to define the internal dynamic which would, over the next ten years, lead from such self-avowed propaganda to great Yiddish art.

1. Narrative Structure

Dos kleyne mentshele is an openly didactic work, presented as the "Ethical Will" of one Itsik Avrom Takef (Isaac Abraham Bigshot). Takef recounts the story of his life: the misadventures of an impressionable orphan, socialization into a corrupt society, a ruthless, life-long quest for riches, and a final death bed denunciation of economic exploitation and acceptance of Enlightenment. The dramatic crux of the work is Takef's changing perceptions of the ambiguous concept of the "Little Man." In the retrospect of his Will he is able to affirm his intrinsic human goodness, show where and how he had been led astray and offer his own sad story as a lasting example to others.

Whatever its literary merit, Dos kleyne mentshele was clearly intended as propaganda. It attempts to reach the common people in their own language and through models culled from their own experience, in order to convince them of the great truth of Enlightenment. The Ethical Will becomes a clever literary device, as narrative form is made to follow social function.

As a time-honored literary form, the Ethical Will is, by its very nature, didactic. Moreover, it finds broad precedent in Jewish tradition. From the biblical Book of Proverbs through the Talmud and Rabbinic writings, Wills are employed to convey ethical instruction through practical example. The Vilna Gaon left a widely acclaimed Ethical Will to his sons, with which Abramovitch was most probably familiar. Many of the basic

teachings of Hasidism were passed down through the pseudopigraphic Will Zavva'at ha-Rivash (1793), written by Dov Baer of Mezhirech and attributed to the Baal Shem Tov. The Ethical Will was one of the few literary forms which was even marginally narrative or autobiographical, within a Rabbinic tradition dominated by legalism, textual exegesis or open moralizing. As Joseph Dan writes in the Encyclopedia Judaica, Ethical Wills offered a marked stylistic counterpoint to the ethical literature of a more conventional sort:

> Whereas ethical literature usually gives a lengthy theoretical basis for behavioral requirements, ethical wills ordinarily only point out the right way, disregarding the ideological foundations. Thus they are a more practical, behavioral type of literature.[2]

This distinction between "ideological" and "behavioral" literature fits Abramovitch's own shift from Hebrew essayistic to Yiddish belles-lettres. Both forms were equally didactic, but the Will, the belles-lettres, promises to be more comprehensible to untutored readers, since it reduces ideological pronouncements to readily recognizable real-life terms. We recall that Hasidism had already struck upon the story as the best means of conveying its teachings to a broad-based readership. Now Abramovitch does the same, choosing a narrative form which enjoys long standing precedent and structural acceptance among the people he seeks to reach. It is, after all, imperative that his story find structural familiarity and credibility among traditional Jews before his less conventional didactic content can be considered at all.

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[2]Dan, "Ethical Wills," Encyclopedia Judaica, v. 16, p. 530. See also Israel Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills (2 vs.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976 [1929]).

Abramovitch accepted Lifshits's premise that language was a neutral category and agreed to write in Yiddish only to communicate with readers who knew no other language. But already, in his first Yiddish work, he had made an important realization: adoption of a Yiddish medium demands more than simple translation from the Hebrew. As a popular linguistic expression, Yiddish seemed as a matter of course to conjure up a popular literary expression. Writing in Yiddish entailed not only lexical translation, but also translation of literary form and style--the shift from the essay to the Ethical Will and the story.[3]

Abramovitch had the innate artistic intuition to recognize how far reaching this "structural translation" would be. Just as the Yiddish language engendered a "story" structure, so must the story structure engender a new narrative voice. As long as he was writing didactic essays (or novels, for that matter) in Hebrew, Abramovitch could speak as himself--a maskil, a man of the world. But now that he had entered the folk world of Yiddish, such a voice became wholly incongruous. Could a young, Russian-speaking Hebrew stylist, dressed in short coat and trimmed beard, convincingly reel off Yiddish idiom and spin rambling tales of everyday life, like some bearded grandfather at the study house stove? For all his propagandistic intent, Abramovitch was possessed of too much stylistic integrity to allow for such glaring incongruity. Thus was a new narrator tailored for the new Yiddish medium: Mendele Moykher Sforim.

Yiddish critics have long been confused in their understanding of the Mendele narrator. Many early critics accepted Mendele at face value (his

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[3]As far as I can determine, Abramovitch did not write didactic essays in Yiddish.

name appears as the author on the cover pages of editions after 1865), and simply ignored Abramovitch altogether.[4] Others regarded Mendele as a pseudonym, oblivious to his special narrative function. Still others, notably Soviet scholars of the 1920s and '30s, deliberately obfuscated the distinction between Mendele and Abramovitch, in order to enhance the purity of Mendele's folk image and thus redeem his work as "proletarian" art. The issue was not definitively resolved until 1973, in Dan Miron's A Traveler Disguised. Drawing on the work of Wayne Booth,[5] Miron argues that Mendele functions as a literary "persona," a mask behind which the maskil Abramovitch disguises himself before his Yiddish readership. In this way the voice of the narrator is made consistent with its medium and context.

Mendele presents himself to us in the opening frame of Dos kleyne mentshele. He is a wandering bookpeddler who travels about the Pale with a tired horse and broken wagon, peddling his wares. At the start of the story he has just arrived in Glupsk, the fictional "Fools Town," where he hopes to do a bit of business before Hanukah. As Miron points out, Abramovitch did well to choose a bookpeddler for his narrator. The bookpeddler enjoyed a unique status in traditional Jewish society. He was assuredly part of the Jewish world, living by Talmudic law, bound by language, appearance and life style to the common people. Mendele is dressed in a long ragged kapote (caftan), replete with grey beard and peyes (ritual side curls). He prays three times a day, washes before eating, recites the

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[4] See Introduction, note 4, supra.

[5] Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). Booth's pioneering study of Henry James and others raised the issue of narrative voice into a central concern of modern literary criticism.

innumerable daily blessings, observes Shabes and the dietary laws, and spices his speech with a native Yiddish idiom and cadence. Yet at the same time he was a step beyond his fellows, for he enjoyed the rare opportunity of travel. He was exposed to various regional dialects and customs, knew all the latest news and was generally in touch with the march of events. In short, he was a traveler who had seen the world. He stood squarely between the world of scholars (represented by the scholarly books he sells) and the world of everyday Jews (represented by the religious articles and Yiddish prayerbooks he peddles to housewives, and the news he exchanges with hangers-on in the marketplace and by the synagogue stove). The bookpeddler provided the perfect mask, a character who was expected to be both wordly and traditional, open minded and observant, scholarly and one of the people.

In his self introduction, Mendele does all he can to assure his narrative credibility and win the allegiance and identification of his readers. The story begins (with my enumeration):

[1] אליין בין איך א געבוירענער פון צביאטשיץ, איך
הײס מענדעלע דער מוכר ספרים. [2] יארנלאנג בין
איך כמעט אונטערװעגנס, דאָ אהין, דא אהער, [3] מען
קען מיך אומעטום. [4a] איך פאָר ארום אין גאנץ פוילן
מיט אלערליי זשיטאָמיר ספרים. אחוץ דעם האָב איך
טליתים, טלית־קטנס, כפול־שמונהדיקע ציצית, שופרות,
רצועות, הײלעך, מזוזהלעך, װאָלפֿ־צײנדלעך, און א מאָל
קריגט מען בײ מיר אויך מעש און קופּערװארג; [4b] יאָ
פּראַחדע, זינט דער „קול מבשר" איז ארויסגעקומען, פיר
איך א מאל פון אים מיט מיר עטלעכע נומערן. [5] נאָ
מילא גארנישט, נים דאס בין איך אויסן.

[1] Myself I am a native of Tsviatshits, my name is Mendele the Bookpeddlar. [2] Practically all year I am on the road, heading this way and that. [3] I am known everywhere. [4a] I travel throughout all of Poland with all sorts of holy books printed at the Hasidic press in Zhitomir, in addition to which I carry prayer shawls, fringed undergarments, extra special ritual fringes, rams horns for the High

> Holidays, phylactery straps, good luck charms, mezuzes, wolves' teeth, and sometimes you can even get tin and copperware from me. [4b] And oh yes--it's true, since the Kol mevaser has come out, sometimes I'll carry a few copies of that too. [5] But that's all beside the point.[6]

This opening paragraph speaks volumes. Not only does a dialectic exist within Abramovitch's own biography and between Abramovitch and his literary persona Mendele, but Mendele himself is shown to embody a creatively paradoxical composition. The introduction provides a structural juxtaposition, in which each sentence is pitted against the one previous to suggest a full picture of Mendele's range and possibilities. A sentence by sentence analysis of the cited text, following my enumeration, will prove very revealing:

[1] Mendele starts out by telling us his name and place of birth; he himself is a native of the fictional shtetl Tsviatshets ("Hypocrisy-ville"). Hence he is a neighbor to all his readers, fully party to their mores and foibles.

[2] In the next sentence he tells us that he spends all his time on the road, thus affirming his "worldliness," his familiarity with places and ideas beyond the immediate ken of the common Jew.

[3] But lest we think that Mendele is somehow tainted by worldly heresy, he assures us in the next sentence that he is "known everywhere." His universal acceptance implies that despite his worldliness he is still firmly within the confines of the traditional Jewish community.

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[6] I am working from a photostat of the original Kol mevaser text. Because the original follows no systematic pagination, I have ignored the given page numbers completely and simply renumbered the entire story in sequential order, page by page. The present citation is from p. 1.

[4a] Mendele's assurance that he is universally accepted then leads to a catalogue of his wares. Here Mendele tells us two things: First, that he deals in all the trappings of the old Jewish world. His mention of "wolves' teeth" and other superstitious accoutrements tells the reader that he, Mendele, is himself not infallible. Indeed, precisely because something like wolves' teeth was not a part of the textual Jewish tradition but a superstition no doubt borrowed from the local peasantry, the reader could laugh at the custom and at Mendele. By inviting self mockery, Mendele tells the reader that "we're all friends, all in this together, taking a few common, good-natured pokes at some of our more obvious foibles." On the other hand, such a detailed catalogue suggests that Mendele is above all a businessman, who can't resist pushing his wares. This puts him into the same system of values and concerns as his petty-bourgeois readers, and so raises him above suspicion. Though he assures us that this "is beside the point," he has succeeded in convincing us that he is no professional preacher or writer, that his first concern is really his business. He is genuinely one of the people after all, on the most basic level--making a living.

[4b] Having established himself as a businessman concerned above all with business, it comes as no great shock that he should carry, along with all his other wares, a copy of Kol mevaser. Beside the obvious inside plug (how could Abramovitch resist?), we see that Mendele is no heretical maskil but rather a plain pragmatist; he knows where the wind blows and is willing to make concessions to inevitable changes. He can carry a Haskala paper, or, as develops, Haskala ideas, and yet

in no way jeopardize his own credibility as one of the common people.

[5] Mendele's final disclaimer, "But that's all beside the point," is clearly belied by all that comes before. It actually focuses attention on what he has just said, while at the same time scoring himself points for humility. As Miron writes,

> The 'this is beside the point' dismissals are his means of drawing attention to an ironic point that has just been made. Whenever we are asked to consider something he has told us as immaterial, we are in fact alerted to look for its hidden meanings.[7]

Structually, through his own disavowal, Mendele focuses attention on himself.

Mendele's introduction does much to set the tenor of the story. The story itself is not about Mendele, but it does raise questions about some of his most basic values. Mendele presents himself (and affirms his identification with the reader) above all as a businessman. When he arrived in Glupsk he is summoned to the rabbi. He is greatly disappointed to learn that the rabbi is not interested in his merchandise, but has called on him as a witness to the reading of Takef's Will. Mendele would much rather get on with his business. As well he must.

גלייבט מיר [שרייבט מענדעלע], די גאנצע וועלט איז
א מארק, אימלעכער וויל ענעם זאל פארלירן און
ער זאל געפינען. אימלעכער זוכט מציאות.

Believe me [writes Mendele], the whole world is a marketplace; everybody wants to make money off of someone else. Everybody is chasing after bargains.[8]

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[7] Miron, A Traveler Disguised, p. 160.

[8] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 3.

Even as a propagandist, Abramovitch has too much stylistic control to allow Mendele to pass judgment on this passing observation. Mendele is the mask which disguises the real propagandist Abramovitch; he cannot afford to blow his own cover. Thus Mendele can only take note of things as they are and ask, "Is this as they must be?" He provides a focus, a question; the story itself will provide the answers.

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Thus it is, in the introductory frame of Dos kleyne mentshele, that Mendele makes his first appearance. He is born of a basic paradox, the need for the maskil-Abramovitch to speak convincingly in the voice of the people. So far Mendele is but a mask, firmly under Abramovitch's control. But the need for narrative congruity has brought him to birth, and similar artistic considerations will have the power to transform him further. Mendele represents a narrative concession in a work of propaganda. He is the focal point of the tension between social theory and artistic voice, which becomes more fully manifest as the story goes on.

2. The Course of Socialization

The story itself comprises the first person testament of Itsik Avrom Takef. Takef is not a well developed character. He is much more a foil for various social currents than a full fledged human being in his own right, motivated by personal psychological dictates. This is made clear at the opening of the Will, when Takef presents himself as an orphan. The orphan need not be complicated by the psychological demands or influence of his own parents. He is raised by the community at large, and assumes the mold of the community. As the Yiddish proverb coins it,

א קינד תעמ און טערם.

What a child hears is the course he steers.[9]

Takef is the soft clay which will be shaped by the society in its own image and through which, in the medium of this Will, the society will catch a glimpse of itself. Of course the implicit corollary of all this is that individuals, be they good or bad, are the product not of some inalterable "human nature," but rather of their immediate socialization. Change that socialization, change that society, and the individual too will be redeemed. In terms of the present story, the fate of Takef will be the fate of all.

With this initial premise, the story traces the course of Takef's socialization, exposing the corruption or obscurantism of each of the society's cherished institutions. The first and most obvious target of criticism is the traditional Jewish school. The young Itsik Avrom is sent away to kheyder, where he sits day after day in a dark musty room, shared not only by a teacher and a dozen or so poor students, but also by the

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[9] I am indebted for this observation to Professor Wisse.

teacher's family. As the smell of cooked onions mingles with the cries of a diapered baby, Itsik Avrom is expected to direct all his attention to the intricacies of ancient Jewish texts. Of course all is taught by rote, the students understand nothing, and the slightest mistake or infraction is dealt with by beating. Such teaching is less intent on imparting knowledge than on breaking the spirit of its students. The young Itsik Avrom highlights the absurdity of the system when he mistranslates a biblical passage in front of a visiting stranger and is expelled for his failure.

In this critique, Abramovitch makes it clear that Itsik Avrom's failure is in fact the failure of the school, and that the school itself is one of the central agents of a foul socialization. Such criticism was common to Haskala literature of the time; it was evident in Dik and Linetsky, and, in a certain sense, can be seen as a common pre-occupation of Enlightenment ideology since the days of Rousseau.[10] Indeed, Abramovitch himself had expressed the same critique seven years earlier in his Hebrew essay, "A Letter on Education." At that time he analyzed the failures of the traditional khedorim, and advised the well meaning teacher on what he should and should not do:

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[10]An excellent bibliography on traditional Jewish education is Diane Roskies, Heder: Primary Education among East European Jews, A Selected and Annotated Bibliography of Published Sources, Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies, no. 25 (NY: YIVO, 1977). A characteristic literary critique of the kheyder is Linetsky, Dos poylishe yingl (1867). Educational reform and compulsory schooling are considered necessary prerequisites for modern production, and are universal concerns of industrial societies. See Michael B. Katz, Class, Bureaucracy and Schools (NY: Praeger Publishers, 1971), and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gentis, Schooling in Capitalist America: Education and the Contradictions of Economic Life (NY: Basic Books, 1976).

> Don't get angry, don't scream, don't hit. It is not through anger or bad temper, not through beating or shaking that you will rid a child's heart of its wildness and make another person out of him.[11]

In that essay Abramovitch had insisted that children are basically good, and are merely waiting for the right teacher to cultivate that goodness. Thus Itsik Avrom is now presented as a literary personification of the effects of bad teaching. Abramovitch's critique of the traditional schools is little changed from what it was in 1857; the only difference now is that it is presented not in Hebrew but in Yiddish, and not as an abstract essay but as a "real life" story. The literary form has changed, but the basic theory has--so far--remained constant.[12]

Following his expulsion from kheyder, the young Takef finds a position as a tailor's apprentice. Here too the old Jewish world comes in for attack. The apprentice system is seen as thoroughly exploitative, hardly concerned with "teaching a trade." Itsik Avrom's master forces him to do all manner of demeaning chores unrelated to sewing. The youth makes out no better in other trades. One master orders him to carry out buckets of slop, chiding,

> טראָג, איציניו, טראָג, איך אין דײַנע יאָרן האָב איך אויך א סך פּאמעיניצעס געטראָגן.
>
> Carry it, Little Itsik, carry it. I carried out plenty of slops myself when I was your age.[13]

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[11] "Mikhtav al hakhinukh," Dos Mendele-bukh, p. 46.

[12] Abramovitch would maintain a life-long interest in educational reform. He prepared a study of traditional khedorim in Volhynia in 1870; the study was misplaced in government files and presumed lost. Mendele, "Shtrikhn," Dos Mendele-bukh, p. 32. Abramovitch spent most of his later years as principal of a Jewish school in Odessa.

[13] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 6.

The system is shown to perpetuate itself, each generation exploiting the next. In the meantime production remains primitive, paternalistic and unmechanized, far from the modern modes sought by an ascendant bourgeoisie. In this economic critique Abramovitch remains consistent with the classical Haskala. Not only does he attack backward economic institutions, but his prescription for change reflects the political conservativism of the East European maskilim. He does not question the legal disabilities or social patterns which force Jews into distasteful economic roles. Instead of advocating Jewish emancipation or modernization of the broader economy, Abramovitch blames the entire backward economy of the Jews on the relatively innocuous fault of poor vocational training. In the end the repentent Takef leaves money for the establishment of a modern Jewish trade school, as though better vocational training for Jews is the sole key to economic modernization.

Given such a corrupt system, Itsik Avrom can hardly be expected to fare better as an apprentice than he did as a kheyder student. After a comical mishap he is "fired" by the tailor, and wanders off again in search of his place in society. This time he finds a position as a choirboy with a traveling cantor. Here Abramovitch vents his anger at a pet complaint--these itinerant synagogue performers, whose cheap emotional excess made a mockery of the "dignity" of religious worship. Abramovitch seems to share the striving for "propriety" characteristic of the Haskala, perhaps emulating the decorum of Protestantism and German Reform Judaism. He went so far as to found a modern cantorial school in Berdichev, in order to train persons who would introduce a proper atmosphere to the East European synagogue. All this was, however, a rather specific and time bound issue.

It may be that Abramovitch's cantorial "aesthetic" changed along with his literary aesthetic. In any event, this entire episode of Itsik Avrom's youth was deleted from subsequent editions of the same story.[14]

[14]For a comparative analysis of variant editions of Dos kleyne mentshele see Max Weinreich, "Mendeles onheyb," Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte.

3. A Tactical Divergence

If Takef's irrectitude is the product of a corrupt society, then Abramovitch's overall prescription for social amelioration is implicit from the start: it is the story itself. As much as Dos kleyne mentshele diagnoses the social roots of Itsik Avrom's personal malady, it must also offer self-legitimization to its implicit remedy: the need for didactic Enlightenment literature in Yiddish. Thus the "doctor," Abramovitch, is as much a presence in this story as is the "patient," Itsik Avrom. Clearly the dramatic structure of Dos kleyne mentshele revolves around Itsik Avrom. It is he who undergoes personal changes--born an orphan, socialized to corrupt institutions, and finally accepting the "cure" of Enlightenment on his death bed. But though Itsik Avrom is the protagonist, the story also presents a sub-structure revolving around its author, the doctor who comes up with the right prescription and so in a sense is the story's real hero.

After his unfortunate stint with the traveling cantor, Itsik Avrom is left dejected and alone in a strange town. There he is taken in by a local maskil named Gutman. Gutman, a literary representative of Abramovitch, is the "doctor" par excellence. His very name, "Good Man," leaves little doubt as to his character, or the author's predisposition toward him. Gutman is presented as an altruist, concerned only with the welfare of Itsik Avrom and society at large. Though dressed in a short coat and trimmed beard, he alone is kind to the abused child. Unlike the kheyder teacher, the tailor and the cantor, he will not take advantage of a defenseless youth. For the first time in his life Itsik Avrom is treated with genuine kindness and greeted as an equal:

דו ביסט דאָך אזא מענטש ווי איך.
You are every bit as much of a human being as I.[15]

Everything about Guman's personal life contrasts with the squalor and obscurantism of the traditional Jewish world. When Itsik Avrom first comes to Guman's house, located in the "forbidden" non-Jewish section of town, he stares in wide-eyed amazement at a neat little cottage on a tree lined street:

> אפנים אז אין דעם געסל זענען ניט געזעסן קיין
> ייִדן, זיינט וואָלט דאָך דאָרטן ניט געוועזן קיין
> ביימער און אויף דער ערד וואָלט דאָך ניט געוועזן
> [...] קיין בלעטער.

> Apparently no Jews live on this street, because if they did there would be no trees and no leaves on the ground.[16]

Gutman, we are assured, is very, very poor. His house is tiny, crowded with a wife and small children. There is barely enough food to go around. But despite the press of poverty the house is neat and clean. Potted flowers are perched on the windowsill, Gutman and his family are impeccably groomed.

Abramovitch's description of Gutman reveals the essential tents of his own ideology. First, despite Gutman's "Germanic" appearance, he is shown to be profoundly moral. His life style and attire stand in sharp contrast with the orthodox manner of the teacher, the tailor and the cantor, and yet he alone is good to Itsik Avrom. Secondly, Enlightenment imparts to Gutman a far more attractive aesthetic sensibility. He lives on a tree lined street where most Jews fear to tread, and brightens a poor dwelling with colorful flowers. Abramovitch himself came to Enlightenment through empirical observation of nature, and thus Enlightenment can lead back to

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[15] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 11.

[16] Ibid., p. 8.

nature as an aesthetic category. Lastly, though Gutman is poor he is not crushed by his poverty. He lives with dignity, clean and decorous. This is a crucial point. It is not poverty but ignorance and obscurantism which underlie material suffering. Gutman's "good ideas" are enough to impart cleanliness and proper deportment, irrespective of financial standing. Material amelioration is predicated on the idea of Enlightenment; poverty can be made livable by hygiene and propriety. The ideal of a better life becomes the social panacea for the ill of poverty. There is no demand to eliminate poverty in and of itself, no program to challenge the social and political institutions which allow poverty to exist in the first place.

Thus does Gutman embody the aesthetic and social-theoretical premises of the classical Haskala. He is the maskil par excellence, the Haskala's spokesperson within the context of the story. He is, as his name tells us, the "good man"; Abramovitch seems in full accord with both his aesthetic and his theory. Yet for all that, Abramovitch is not Gutman. Unlike Gutman, Abramovitch is not the "maskil par excellence," for he has already broken from the Haskala's norms in one crucial regard: he has written a Yiddish story. While he accords Gutman every literary courtesy (down to the last detail of his name), he takes issue with the classical maskil on the single question of tactics, and uses the story to present his case.

Gutman is a "Daytsher," a maskil of German origin and style. His Yiddish is heavily laced with Germanisms, the effect of which is at best comical and at worst incomprehensible. But Germanic speech is the least of his communicative problems. Gutman is a Hebrew essayist, churning out volume after volume of Haskala literature. His home is overflowing with

unsold books, stacked in the corners, piled under the bed. The problem is not what he writes, but the language in which he writes it. As he complains to a friend (in his Germanized Yiddish):

שאנד נור דאס אין דער גאנצען [sic] שטאדט וועניג
מענטשן זינד, וועלכע העבראאיש לעזען.

It is a shame that in the entire city there are so few people who are able to read Hebrew.[17]

Itsik Avrom is hired to go door to door peddling Gutman's volumes (in exchange for which work he receives an honest wage of room, board and education). Day after day Itsik Avrom trudges through the city, only to be met with slammed doors, mockery and derision.

We understand that somewhere in Gutman's books lie the good ideas which can cure a decrepit society. Written into the books is the prescription for material amelioration: clean up the house, dress neatly, exhibit human kindness. But the prescription is penned in cipher, locked away in Hebrew melitse, unintelligible to the Yiddish speaking Jewish masses who need it most. The prescription itself is correct; only the packaging is wrong.

Abramovitch's tactical divergence is thus far only an incidental criticism, relative to the "sub plot" of the "doctor" rather than the central story of Itsik Avrom the "patient." Yet it presages far reaching consequences. Abramovitch shows the ineffectuality of Hebrew and legitimizes his own medium of Yiddish. On the one hand this self-legitimization will give polemical momentum to Abramovitch--himself an accomplished Hebrew stylist--to continue with his Yiddish writing. On the other hand, the

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[17] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 9. I have given the Yiddish orthography as it appears in the original in order to emphasize its German character.

question of tactics bears directly on the larger issue of aesthetics. Abramovitch has been approving of Gutman's aesthetic sense: his flowerpots, trees, neat house, trimmed beard and short coat. But Gutman's preference for German and Hebrew over Yiddish is equally an aspect of that aesthetic sense. Melitse Hebrew is the pot of flowers, Yiddish the mundane, treeless streets of everyday discourse. By challenging Gutman's tactics, Abramovitch also challenges an important aspect of the accepted aesthetic sense of the Haskala. Social function has been allowed to predominate over literary form. We have demonstrated how the aesthetic of the Haskala derives from its socio-economic base. Consider then how intimately connected Gutman's aesthetic sense is with his social theory. The prescription for the amelioration of poverty and material deprivation is fundamentally an aesthetic one: don't eliminate the crowded cottage but spruce it up, put flowers on the windowsill; don't address the issue of hunger in children but dress them neatly and teach them Enlightenment. Thus Abramovitch's tactical divergence from Gutman, tentative and insignificant as it may appear at first glance, ultimately threatens to challenge basic aesthetic values of the Haskala and the social structure on which they rest.

4. A Big "Little Man"

The starkest evidence of Gutman's tactical failure comes vis a vis Itsik Avrom. Day after day the boy treds through town with Gutman's Hebrew books. But though he carries the trappings of the Haskala, their substance remains closed to him. He doesn't understand Hebrew; he can't read the prescription which alone can cure him of the ills of his socialization.

Itsik Avrom leads a good life with Gutman. He is treated with respect, and begins a slow process of modern education. But the illness of his youth remains untreated at its root; dormant but never eradicated, it resurfaces over the phenomenon of the "Little Man." As a child in his mother's kitchen, Itsik Avrom first encountered the folk concept of a "little man," the human soul which dwells within. He had a childish fascination with this idea, which he never clearly understood. Now, years later, he one day overhears a conversation between Gutman and an enlightened friend, in which the two are speaking of "kleyne metshelekh," "little men." Unable to fully understand Gutman's German speech (again, an indictment of the methods of the Hebrew/German Haskala), Itsik hears only that Little Men are persons who become rich and powerful overnight. He fails to understand that Gutman is actually condemning the Little Men, and he leaves with the somewhat confused impression that being a Little Man is a very good thing. Still shaped by his earlier conditioning in a society which prized money and power, anxious to make his own stake in the world and still unable to comprehend the real meaning of Gutman's words. Itsik Avrom decides that he will devote the rest of his life to the single aspiration of becoming a Little Man.

Itsik Avrom's new obsession is a peculiar one, and at this point the narrative stream becomes a bit choppy. But as the story soon develops, Itsik Avrom sets out from Gutman's house to find apprenticeship as a Little Man. After further misadventures he settles in with a certain Reb Iser Varger ("Mr. Iser Strangler"), a Little Man of legendary success.

Itsik Avrom's apprenticeship reads like a primer in the stiled workings of the pre-capitalist Jewish economy. Itsik Avrom learns that a Little Man is really a parasite, a "blood sucker," one who lives off the money and reputation of a gevir, a genuine rich man. Varger has attached himself to one of the pillars of the community, holding the wealthy man "af arende," a lessee arrangement whereby Varger acts as an intermediary in the gevir's business dealings. Varger, of course, well compensates himself for his services. The "brokerage fee," exacted through chicanery and extortion, proves handsome, and he grows fat and prospers on the rich man's "blood."

Varger teaches Itsik Avrom all he knows. Money has no relation to production. The only way to accumulate wealth is to take it from another. Itsik Avrom learns his lessons well:

גלויב מיר, מים אמח וועסט דו אויף דער וועלט גארנישט
מאכן און מים ארבעט וועסט דו נים קיין סך פארדינען.

[...] אין וועלט, ברודער, באשטימט די גאנצע חכמה,
האסט דו וועלט האסט דו די וועלט און ישנע וועלט. נאר
אבער בי דער צים האבן וועלט חיסט זין א קלין
מענטשעלע, און א קלין מענטשעלע היסט חנפינען,
צביאמשן, וואס אין דער קארם.

Believe me, you will accomplish nothing in this world if you rely on truth, and you'll earn nothing by working. . . .

. . . The whole trick, brother, depends on money; if you have money, you will have both this world and the world to come. But nowadays, to

have money means to be a Little Man, and to be a Little Man means to suck up, to practice hypocrisy, and whatever else you can think of.[18]

In the phenomenon of the "Little Man" Abramovitch brings us to the crux of the present social critique. The Little Man is presented as a metaphor for the old, petty bourgeois Jewish economy. What we are witnessing is not an attack on wealth per se. To the contrary, we are told, in refutation of the foregoing complaint, that

דער גביר [...] האט געלט און איז דאך א מענטש.

The gevir [. . .] has money and is still a fine person.[19]

The gevir, we are supposed to infer, has come by his money honestly, proving his nobility through generous philanthropy. It seems reasonable to conclude that this "legitimate" rich man represents some sort of modern haute-bourgeois, one who has made a "fair" profit in the open market. This corresponds with the sort of new Jewish bourgeoisie--the large scale merchants and factory owners--who were themselves the moving force behind the Haskala. This point is well verified in the original Kol mevaser edition, where Abramovitch's text runs side by side with advertisements from banks, stores, coffee importers, linen factories and more.

What then is being objected to? Not the modern capitalism of the large scale merchant or manufacturer, but rather the old style, petty bourgeois huckstering of the common Jew. The Little Man makes his living from middle class parasitism, beyond the sphere of productive trade or manufacture. Of course the gevir did not become rich solely through the work of his own hands. The use of capital to make money is fine; what is wrong is remaining within a closed system, where money flows through

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[18] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 16. [19] Ibid., loc. cit.

intermediaries and nothing is produced. To quote an aphorism of the Haskala, "Honest trade, but no swindle or robbery."[20] What is being attacked here is not wealth but greed, not capitalist exploitation but pre-capitalist "parasitism," not rich men but Little Men. In short, this is an attack of modern capitalist economy on the vestiges of the old feudal Jewish middle class. In tracing Itsik Avrom's socialization, the story had taken issue with aspects of the old Jewish world which violated the "spirit of capitalism." But now, in the "title" complaint, the story attacks the Little Man, the person who stands outside the system of modern production and so violates the economic basis of capitalism.

Itsik Avrom, the orphan raised by Jewish society, succeeds well in his apprenticeship as a Little Man. His early socialization contributes to his rapid mastery of the new ethic. Soon he becomes a Little Man himself, not living off the gevir directly, but rather becoming an intermediary to Varger. Here the folly of a self-enclosed economy, of wealth removed from production, reaches its ultimate absurdity: even the Little Man has a Little Man. Through skillful manipulation and a cold heart, Itsik Avrom (now known as Takef, "Big Shot") fattens and prospers until he becomes very rich and powerful in his own right. He becomes a very big Little Man.

As a Little Man Takef does many bad things, hurting a great many people. It stands to reason that in the closed economy of the pre-capitalist Jewish world, in which there is no production, wealth becomes finite. For one person to get rich, another must become poor. Yet for all his accumulated wealth, Takef himself cannot find happiness. According to

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[20] Tekunat Harabbanim, p. 31, cited by Mahler, "The Social and Political Aspects of the Haskala in Galicia," YIVO Annual, v. 1, p. 82.

the capitalist ethic, one finds fulfillment in work, not in the money earned. Takef learns his lesson the hard way. He loses his wife and children, who cannot tolerate his single-minded greed. He is hated by the community, he is without friends, without the respect of others or himself. It is only at the end of his life that Takef understands the final futility of his quest, recognizing how little a Little Man really is.

5. Reason and Repentance

Takef learns his lesson a bit late for it to do him much good. Lying on his deathbed, he reviews the story of his wretched life and decides that all was in vain. He has chased ruthlessly after money, only to hurt others and gain nothing for himself. Sadly, he thinks back to Gutman, who had tried to instill in him the proper values of Enlightenment:

אונדז אי׳ז בעסער פון אלע ריכע, מי׳ר זענען דאך
ערלעכע מענטשן.

We're better off than all the rich, for we are, at least, respectable people.[21]

But Gutman spoke with strange words and wrote in a language which the young Takef could not understand. It took the sorry experience of his own wasted life before Takef could be convinced that Gutman was right.

Now Takef decides to be of service to other lost souls like himself. If Gutman's melitse is not readily accessible, then he'll use his own story to make the point clear. He writes his long Ethical Will, hoping that others will learn from his mistakes. At the end of his life story Takef allows himself a more explicit summary and moral.

He, Takef, was not evil. His fault was in being born an orphan and accepting uncritically the values of the society in which he was raised. Still, he had no one to blame but himself. He was a Little Man because he accepted the world as it was given and failed to make his own moral judgments. In what amounts to a marvelous catalogue of old time Jewish folk lore, Takef tells us that his real crime was his failure to distinguish for himself between right and wrong:

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[21] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 22.

אן אבירה האָט בײ מיר געהײסן קוקן אויף כהנים
בשעת דאוונען, נים שלאָגן כפרות, נים ווײַן צו תשליך;
נים גלײבן אין א בעל שם; נים גלײבן אליהו הנביא
גיט ארום פסח צום סדר איבער די חיזער אפטרונקען די
כוסות; נים גלײבן אז אין דער גרויסער שול דאוונען
בײ נאכט מתים; נים גלײבן אן עולם התוהו, דאָס חיסם
נים גלײבן אז א סך מענטשן ווײַן ארום צוישן אונדז,
זיי האנדלען, דאכט זיך, זיי סאכן געשעפט, זיי פאָרן,
זיי קויפן אוון פארקויפן, אוון באסה זענען זיי מתים,
אויף דער עולם התוהו. בײ אזעלכע איז פסול א ציצה,
אוון זיי זענען נים גולה הורה. נים גלײבן אז די
חיליק נשמה פון א מענטשן חערם מגלגול אין א שוואַרצן
קאַטער, אין א חזיר, אין א קעלבל, אין א האָן, אין
אן אָגער אוון אין א קאָנעראק. נים גלײבן אז צום
[...]רב פלעגט קומען מתים צום משפט, אוון דער מלאך-
המבוח האָט זיי אהינגעפירט חי רעקרומן. נים גלײבן
אז א שטריימל איז חיליק, אוון נאָך אין מצרים זענען די
ייִדן געגאנגען אין שטריימלעך אוון בזכות זה זענען
זיי אויסגעלייזט געוואָרן.

קורץ אָט אזעלכע זאכן האָבן בײ מיר געהײסן אבירות,
אבער חנפ'נען, צבי'אשן, זיין א קליין מענטשעלע, דאָס
איז נים געשטאנען אין מין צעטל.

To me a sin meant looking where I wasn't supposed to while praying, not swinging a chicken over my head to atone for my sins, not throwing rocks into the river at the New Year to rid myself of wrongdoing; not believing in faith healers; not believing that Elijah the Prophet goes around from house to house on Passover to drink up the glasses of wine; not believing that corpses gather at midnight to pray in the large synagogue; not believing that there are many persons who pass among us, trading, engaging in business, traveling, buying and selling, who in reality are dead men from the 'other world,' sentenced to eternal exile because one fringe on their ritual garments was not quite right; not believing that the holy soul of a man transmigrates into a black mosquito or a pig, a calf or a chicken, a stallion or a canary; not believing that corpses used to come to the rabbi for judgment, led there like recruits by the Angel of Death; not believing that a shtreimel [a fur hat fashionable among Hasidim since the late eighteenth century], is holy, and that even in ancient Egypt Jews used to wear such hats, for which reason they were redeemed.

> In short, all these kinds of things were sins for me. But sucking up, being a hypocrite, being a Little Man--these were not reckoned among my list of sins.[22]

Here then is the base line of Abramovitch's social critique. What was Takef's greatest sin? Being a parasite in a non-productive economic system. And what led him to this sin? His acceptance of long standing ritual and superstition in lieu of personal moral responsibility. Had Takef approached his world rationally, he would have seen the folly of a closed economy where wealth is circulated but not produced. Had he viewed his actions empirically and weighed their consequences, he would not have become a Little Man, wasting his life and hurting others. Morality derives from Reason, and Reason would never allow for an irrational economy where Little Men live off of Little Men. Religious obscurantism, superstition and irrationalism thus lay at the root of Takef's economic sins.

Yet for all the espousal of Reason, Abramovitch himself fails to posit a logical causation between religious obscurantism and economic corruption. Takef is both superstitious and corrupt, but what comes first? According to the story, a superstitious culture fosters irrationality, and irrationality is the root cause of Takef's parasitic economic role. One need only make Takef rational in order to make him economically productive. But how is this causation established? Isn't it just as plausible to

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[22] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 17. The lasting ethnographic value of Abramovitch's critique is obvious. Ethnography would prove a central motif in his later opus.

In my translation above I have simplified some concepts which would require too much explanation. For more information on these somewhat unusual Jewish observances see Simkhe Pietrushka, Yidishe folks-entsiklopedie (2 vs.; NY and Montreal: Farlag "Gled," 1949), and Joshua Trachtenberg, Jewish Magic and Superstition (NY: Atheneum, 1975).

reverse the sequence, to say that a marginal economic role engenders a seemingly obscurantist, self-enclosed culture? After all, the Christian governments of Europe had systematically persecuted Jews for hundreds of years. Jews were excluded from all the mainstream institutions. As Weber writes:

> National or religious minorities which are in a position of subordination to a group of rulers are likely, through their voluntary or involuntary exclusion from positions of political influence, to be driven with peculiar force into economic activity.[23]

In the rigid hierarchy of feudal society, where Jews were generally prohibited from land tenure and guild membership, there was little left to do but engage in "parasitic" petty middle class dealings. Isn't it then possible that Jews would have responded to their imposed economic isolation by buttressing their own cultural identity? All the "superstitious" sins which Takef enumerates above, though ostensibly irrational, do have an anthropological reason all their own: seemingly meaningless practices are the adaptive means whereby an oppressed people maintains its communal cohesiveness and integrity.

But notwithstanding its dubious logic, there is a definite convenience in believing that economic corruption results from an irrational culture. It is easy for the Haskala to preach rationalism as a way to eliminate the masses of Jewish "Little Men." But it is quite another matter, given the reactionary nature of the Tsarist regime, to demand an end to economic restrictions and legal disabilities. Abramovitch prescribes the dissemination of Reason rather than an open attack on the broader political

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[23] The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, p. 39. Weber cites "the Jews for two thousand years" as a prime example of this universal phenomenon.

and economic order. But even at this early point he seems tacitly aware of the inadequacy of his solution. Takef accepts Enlightenment and Reason only on his deathbed. How convenient. It saves him the trouble of implementing his new ideal in praxis. Because given a feudal economy backed by an elaborate system of anti-Jewish disabilities, there just aren't many other ways to make it (apart from the relatively few large scale merchants and factory owners who stood behind the Haskala). If Takef is not a Little Man, then exactly what else can he do? Now that he's accepted Reason and repented, he has no choice left but to die.

It comes then as no surprise that Takef should apply the fruit of Reason not in his own life story but in the provisions of his Will. Believing the ultimate cause of his economic perversion to lie in his crooked socialization, Takef now determines that others should be spared the "irrational" institutions of his own youth. He divides his considerable wealth between three causes: modernization of the local talmud toyre (traditional school for poor children), establishment of a shkole, a secular school for vocational training, and creation of a fund to pay the old-style cantors for their troubles so they'll never have to perform again. Never is it suggested that Takef's money be redistributed to the persons from whom it was extorted. The economic crime has no economic rectification, but will rather be reversed through the liberal device of education. When all is said and done, the spread of "good ideas" will prove the panacea for the economic ill. Given the broader context of feudal economy and political autocracy, the placebo of Reason is the only remedy which the Jewish doctor is allowed to prescribe.

6. One More Chance for Gutman

Abramovitch's social theory was consistent with the classical Haskala, party to all its inherent contradictions. It attacked the old petty bourgeois Jewish economy, but offered no new system to take its place. It spoke for a modern bourgeoisie, but made no provisions for the proletarianization of the masses. It criticized corruption and exploitation in the Jewish sphere, but studiously avoided criticism of the broader feudal economy or autocratic regime. These contradictions in themselves might have transformed Abramovitch's social theory, just as the Haskala in general was eventually transformed, particularly after the government-instigated pogroms of 1881-1882. But Abramovitch did not have to wait so long. Not only was his social theory fraught with internal contradictions, but it came to contrast more and more sharply with his concomitant artistic development. The dynamic pivoted on the tactical divergence with Gutman, and found at least partial resolution at the story's end, in a closing frame narrated once again by Mendele the Bookpeddler.

As a condition of his Will, Takef asked that his estate be jointly executed by Gutman and the local Rabbi. These two would assume responsibility for carrying out his philanthropic program: modernizing the talmud toyre, setting up vocational training and eliminating traveling cantors. This was a somewhat unusual request. Gutman was a maskil, terribly suspect in the eyes of the common people. Abramovitch therefore does all he can to win acceptance for Gutman, to prove that he is no enemy or heretic but genuinely concerned with the good of the community. As Takef tells the Rabbi:

גומאן איז, ח'לעבן, אויך א צדיק א גומער מענטש, כאטש ער גיט אן א היטל און צוגעפוצט די בארד, ער האט אייער טיערן כאראקטער. איך בעט אייך, רבי, האט אים ליב, ער אייך וועט זיכער ליב האבן, וואורום ער האט ליב אלע מענטשן און ער איז אן אוהב עמו.

Gutman is, on my word, also a tsadik, a good person, even though he goes about without a hat and trims his beard. He has your previous character. I prevail upon you, Rabbi, to love him, for he will surely love you. He loves all human beings, and is a Lover of His People.[24]

The Rabbi listens to Takef's Will with an open mind. He is convinced of Gutman's sincerity and agrees to work together with him. The Rabbi's blessing goes far toward enhancing the credibility of the maskil in the eyes of the people. Yet that hardly resolves the issue, for Abramovitch himself is not without ambivalence toward Gutman. He does all he can to enhance Gutman's credibility, yet he is not convinced that Gutman is suited for the task to which Takef has assigned him. Gutman will be given full reign to bring modernization to the community. But we will remember that he had also had full reign with young Itsik Avrom, and because of his German speech and Hebrew melitse he was unable to reach even this impressionable youth under his own roof. Will he now be able to speak to and redeem an entire community?

We don't know whether Gutman can do the job or not. The town desperately needs his message, but may or may not understand his voice. Meanwhile many years have passed since Takef last encountered Gutman. No one is sure of his exact whereabouts, and the Rabbi sends out messengers to find him. In this way the entire issue is left precariously unresolved. Until now Gutman has been tactically ineffectual. He knows what to say, but not how to say it. Now he's been given another chance. He's been

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[24] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 24.

invited to step to the fore of the community, under the aegis of the Rabbi himself. The Rabbi is willing to overlook his unorthodox appearance and listen honestly to his message. More is at stake here than just Gutman and Glupsk. We recall that the story is being published in Kol mevaser, a supplement to the respected Hamelits. While Abramovitch purports to be writing for the common people, he is also being read by his fellow maskilim. It is to these colleagues that he poses his challenge. The Rabbi has sent out messengers in search of Gutman. The community needs the maskil. It is now up to Gutman, and to all maskilim who read the story, to decide whether they will make the necessary tactical concession with which to answer the call.

While this resolution waits (making a sequel inevitable), Abramovitch offers an implicit suggestion of his own. Gutman is not the only personage involved in the question of tactics. The same issue crystalizes in the role of the present narrator, Reb Mendele. The closing frame not only encharges other maskilim to find a way to reach the people, but it also legitimizes Abramovitch's own solution: writing in Yiddish.

Other maskilim had, of course, engaged in Yiddish propaganda. But none seemed so intent on building and defending the narrative structure necessary for an ongoing literature. At the end of the story, Mendele has been visibly shaken by Takef's woeful tale. We recall that in the opening frame Mendele was the quintessential petty-capitalist; he felt greatly put upon to suspend his business dealings long enough to listen to the reading of the Will. Now we see what an impression the Will has made on him. The real transformation, the real character development within the story has been that of Mendele himself. And, we can safely assume, the reader who

was made to identify with Mendele has been similarly affected. Unlike Gutman, Mendele remains "one of the people." He wears the clothes of the common Jew, recites his prayers and speaks his language. His voice identifies him as án insider. At the end of the story, when the Rabbi asks him for his frank assessment of Gutman, Mendele replies humbly:

> רבי, [...] גוטמאן גייט מיט א צוגעפוצטער באָרד,
> נאָר אן ערלעכער מאן איז ער.
>
> Rebbe, Gutman may go with a trimmed beard, but he is still a decent person.[25]

Mendele's assessment carries much weight. What's good enough for Mendele is good enough for the Rabbi (and, by extension, the reader). Satisfied with Mendele's assurances, the Rabbi concludes that as long as Gutman is a decent person he will not be bothered by his trimmed beard:

> מען זאָגט: בעסער א ייד אָן א באָרד ווי א באָרד
> אָן א ייד.
>
> As they say, 'Better a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew.'[26]

The Rabbi is persuaded not by fancy melitse but by Takef's story and Mendele's plain Yiddish. He justifies his acceptance of Gutman's unorthodox appearance not by elaborate reasoning or Talmudic dialectics, but by a simple folk saying culled directly from the people ("As they say . . ."). The message of Enlightenment is embraced most readily when conveyed in the people's own idiom and voice.

And who is the final master of that folk voice? None other than the narrator Mendele. At the close of his Will, Takef asks that his story be published and distributed throughout the Pale, so that all Jews may learn from his mistakes. He asks that Mendele be assigned the task:

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[25] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 24. [26] Ibid., loc. cit.

דער בריוו וועט איר מוחל זיין ·געבן רב מענדעלען דעם
מוכר ספרים, וואָרין ער ווייסט שוין הלכות הדפסה, אחוץ
דעם פאָרט ער אַרום אין גאַנץ פּוילן. וועט איר אים קענען
אָפּזעצן; פֿאַר זיין טרחה זאָלט איר אים אָרענטלעך
באַצאָלן, ער איז דאָך נעבעך אַן אָרעמאַן.

Please be good enough to pass this letter [Will] on to Reb Mendele the Bookpeddler, because he is already familiar with the business of printing, and besides that he travels around throughout all of Greater Poland [Eastern Europe], so he'll be able to market it. You should compensate him adequately for his troubles, because he is, nebekh, a poor man.[27]

More than by Gutman's melitse, the message of Enlightenment has been conveyed by Takef's story, and Takef's story will now be conveyed by Mendele. Where Gutman and Abramovitch are restricted by their high language and foreign appearance, Mendele is free to travel. Mendele has been affected by Takef's story and is at least partly won over to its moral. He has no qualms about distributing it throughout the Pale. But he doesn't fail to mention that he'll be adequately compensated for his labors. He is, after all, a bookpeddler, not a maskil. "He is, nebekh, a poor man." He can find no better way to identify with his readers.

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[27] Dos kleyne mentshele, p. 24.

7. Notes on Language and Style

Mendele has been assigned the task of narration. He is a persona who can speak for Abramovitch on his "mission" to the common people. But he embodies a fundamental contradiction, for he strives to convey the social theory of bourgeois maskilim in the language of the common Jew. Abramovitch purports to be writing propaganda, and yet he seems inordinately concerned with the stylistic integrity of Mendele's voice.

It may be argued, of course, that Abramovitch concerns himself with the authenticity of his folk language in order to mimic his subjects. Gutman, for example, speaks in a highly exaggerated German Yiddish, which becomes comical against Itsik Avrom's bewilderment. It follows that many of the traditional characters should speak a Yiddish laced with religious idiom and Slavic loan words, in imitation of the local Volhynian dialect.

It is fascinating, however, to look at an edition of Dos kleyne mentshele issued in book form only one year later (1865).[28] There Abramovitch has executed a number of seemingly trivial editorial modifications, the most notable of which is a reduction in the Slavic component of his characters' speech. This fact has been variously interpreted. Some critics, such as Y. Nusinov, maintain that Abramovitch was moving "closer to the people," since, as they believed, Slavicisms were a lexical holdover from the Russian Haskala (in the same way that Germanisms pervade Gutman's speech).[29] The critic A. Gurshteyn, however, has demonstrated quite the

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[28] For a comparative analysis of this and other variant editions see Max Weinreich, "Mendeles onheyb," Bilder fun der yidisher literaturfeshikhte.

[29] Y. Nusinov, "Fun bukh tsu bukh (tsu der geshikhte fun di Mendele

opposite. He shows that a Slavic admixture was actually characteristic of the local folk speech of the time.[30] Why then the deletions?

The answer seems to lie with Abramovitch's own evolving literary aesthetic. He was moving away from simple mimicry and beginning to fashion a genuine literary voice. By eliminating regional peculiarities the language became more "pure" and universal. Yiddish was raised from a spoken vernacular to a distinct, stylized literary medium.

A growing concern with language and style can be seen in other areas as well. Abramovitch makes an effort to standardize Yiddish orthography. He tries to eliminate gratuitous German spellings and cultivate indigenous Yiddish forms. For example, he employs the conjunction "און" ("un" = and) while other texts and editorial notes in the same issues of Kol mevaser use the German form "אונד" ("und").

Abramovitch was too much the innate artist to function as a narrow propagandist, unconcerned with the stylistic integrity of his medium. Granted, stylistic improvements also made for better propaganda. But the more Abramovitch perfected his medium, the more supple and versatile it became, then the less ugly, objectively, it would appear. Abramovitch had assigned his narrative voice to the folksy Mendele, and had begun to transform spoken Yiddish into a stylized literary language. Would bourgeois-social theory be somehow modulated in the mouth of the people?

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variantn)," Tsaytshrift (Minsk: White Russian Academy, 1928), v. II-III, p. 433.

[30] A. Gurshteyn, "Der yunger Mendele in kontekst fun di 60-er yorn," Shriftn, v. 1 (Kiev: Farlag Kultur-lige, 1928), pp. 181-182.

II. Dos Vintshfingerl (1865)

The tactical irresolution raised in Dos kleyne mentshele figured in Abramovitch's own literary career. It is true that he had given greater attention to narrative and stylistic concerns than did most Yiddish writers of the Haskala, but that did not yet make him a professing Yiddish artist. His primary literary endeavor of these years was in Hebrew, where he distinguished himself as an innovative stylist. Yiddish writing was only an ancillary activity, a concession for propaganda and no more.

Meanwhile Abramovitch was coming under the influence of Russian Positivism and becoming increasingly drawn to the idea of Science. He believed that progress was inexorable, that new technological inventions (announced almost daily in the American, British and West European press) would fundamentally transform human experience. There was no need to press directly for political change, since Science was an irresistable force which would sweep outmoded social and political institutions along in its wake. Abramovitch wanted to share his Positivist enthusiasm with the Jewish world, and beginning in 1862 undertook a Hebrew translation of the massive Russian compendium on Natural History by Professor H. A. Lenz. Active translation continued over a period of years, appearing under the title Toldot hateva, "Natural History." Successive volumes included "Mammals" (1862), "Birds" (1867), and "Reptiles and Amphibians " (1872).

Abramovitch believed that the progress of Science depended on the universal dissemination of knowledge. It was only a matter of time, therefore, before he began to consider translating Toldot hateva into Yiddish. Such a proposal was entirely unprecedented. The Haskala had traditionally

maintained that Yiddish was incapable of conveying "good" or modern ideas. The Jewish masses, on the other hand, were fundamentally inimical to secular learning, particularly that which threatened the Biblical view of creation and the sanctity of life. Abramovitch needed considerable financial resources to underwrite his project, and in 1865 penned a Yiddish proposal to convince both maskilim and common Jews alike of its necessity. The proposal took the form of a short novel, appearing as a separate volume under the ambitious title, Dos vintshfingerl, vos mit dem ken itlikher mentsh dergreykhn alts vos zayn harts vintsht un bagert, un ken durkh dem nitslikh zayn zikh un der velt, "The Magic Ring, With Which Each Person Can Attain All That His Heart Desires and Longs For, and Through Which He Can Be Useful to Himself and the World."[31]

Like Dos kleyne mentshele, Dos vintshfingerl was avowedly didactic. Purportedly the autobiographical account of one Hirsch Rothman of Russia, the story is presented in the format of traditional musar, or moralistic literature. Its publication is credited to Mendele Moykher Sforim ("The author of Dos kleyne mentshele"), who offers the book "l'toyves haklal," "for the good of all." The story tells of a wayward youth named Hershele, born and raised in Kabtsansk ("Pauperville"), who devotes his life to the pursuit of a vintshfingerl, a "magic ring." The search proves elusive until he comes into contact with "The Litvak," a Germanized maskil. Under the Litvak's tutelage he begins a regimen of modern study, packs off to

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[31] Warsaw, 1865. Some controversy surrounds the actual date of publication of this work. No date is given in the book itself. Gurshteyn, op. cit., p. 181, note 3, offers a summary of debate until 1928 and concludes from internal evidence that the book appeared in 1866. More recent scholars, however, are in agreement on the 1865 date given here.

university in Germany, and finally discovers Science, the "real" vintshfingerl through which everything can be attained.

The story line and social theory of Dos vintshfingerl are so similar to Dos kleyne mentshele that I will not dwell on them at great length here. In later years Dos vintshfingerl would be completely reworked and become one of Mendele's enduring masterpieces. This first version, however, was artistically primitive. It is noteworthy more for what lies latent than for what is actually accomplished.

The work has been the subject of two important critical studies. Max Weinreich analyzed the story in "Mendeles onheyb" (1928),[32] offering a general survey of its structure and artistic significance. The Soviet critic Y. Nusinov approached the story in the Kiev Shriftn (1928),[33] going beyond Weinreich to provide a trenchant analysis of its socio-historical context, relative to later versions. Both these studies discuss the story's structure at some length, and I will not duplicate their efforts here. Instead, I will look at those aspects of the story which relate directly to the interplay of social theory and artistic voice, relative to the analysis of Dos kleyne mentshele in the preceding chapter.

According to Nusinov, Dos vintshfingerl has three central characters: the Litvak, the collective shtetl Kabtsansk, and Hershele, the protagonist who represents a synthesis of the two. Nusinov's model has much merit and will provide a basis for our own analysis. Nusinov, however, overlooks an important fourth character: the narrator Mendele, who once again makes his

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[32] In Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte.

[33] Nusinov, "Di ershter oysgabe fun 'Vintshfingerl,'" Shriftn, v. 1 (Kiev: Farlag Kultur-Lige, 1928), pp. 199-218.

appearance in opening and closing "frames." We will therefore begin our discussion with Mendele, and proceed from there to social theory and artistic voice, as they are manifested in the Litvak and Kabtsansk, respectively.

8. "A Story About a Story": Gutman and Mendele

Dos kleyne mentshele raised the question of tactics--how can the maskil best reach the people?--and interwove it throughout the story, revolving around the character Gutman. In Dos vintshfingerl the same question is dealt with in a more neatly compartmentalized fashion. The story opens with a frame introduction narrated by Mendele entitled "A mayse iber a mayse," "A Story About A Story." Here Abramovitch sets up the issue of tactics and offers summary resolution, providing self-legitimization to his Yiddish medium. Only then does he proceed to "Di mayse aleyn," "The Story Itself," where Hershele's story is told.

Mendele greets us in "A Story About A Story" in a far more confident manner than we have seen him before. He is more talkative, more friendly, more sure of his ready identification with his readers. He proceeds to tell a long story about how he came to publish Dos vintshfingerl. He was traveling with his horse and wagon along the open road one fine sunny day when he suddenly "bumped into" Reb Senderl, another bookpeddler. A comic scene ensures as the two bearded bookpeddlers try to disentangle themselves and their horses. The scene is doubly funny, since "Senderl" is a friendly dig at Alexander ("Sender") Tsederboym, the editor of Kol mevaser.[34] Dos vintshfingerl is still intended as propaganda, but even in its first few paragraphs we see that other elements are surfacing as well. Narrow didacticism expands to include a lyric description of summer fields,

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[34]Abramovitch had originally submitted his manuscript of Dos kleyene mentshele under the name "Senderl Moykher Sforim." Tsederboym either regarded this as a personal insult or else was afraid that he would be mistaken as the author. In either case he used his editorial perogative to change the name from "Senderl" to "Mendele," and thus it remains.

philosophical musings on man and nature, a slapstick description of Mendele's collision, and an inside joke about Tsederboym which can be appreciated only by other maskilim. Abramovitch is using Yiddish for the amusement of himself and his colleagues as much as to educate readers who understand no other language.

Mendele continues the story. After his hapless collision with Senderl he just couldn't resist engaging in a little business. The two bookpeddlers brush themselves off and get down to some serious trading. Among other deals Mendele exchanges "several [Hebrew] Haskala texts" for a battered German copy of Dos vintsthfingerl. Reb Senderl is delighted, as Mendele muses:

א שיינע ריינע כפרה, אלע השכלה ספרים פאר אײן מעשה.

Quite a deal [a sheyne, reyne kapore], all these Haskala texts for one story.[35]

Already the relative worth of Dos vintshfingerl vis a vis the melitse of the Haskala is established. We're on Mendele's side, and we're confident that he got the better half of the bargain.

Once again Mendele disavows his own responsibility for the dissemination of Haskala ideas and reaffirms his identification with the common Jew. He tells us that he picked up Dos vintshfingerl strictly as a commercial venture, hoping it would yield him a tidy profit. But first he needed to have it translated from German to Yiddish. Being a simple Jew, "one of the people," Mendele could not undertake the translation himself. Therefore he looked up "my old friend, Herr Gutman" for assistance.

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[35] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 5.

The mention of Gutman comes as no surprise. Continuity with the previous study had been established on the title page, where Mendele was billed as "The Author of Dos kleyne mentshele." The question of Gutman's tactics, which had been raised but left unresolved in the earlier story, is now dealt with directly. We recall that at the end of Dos kleyne mentshele the Rabbi had sent messengers in search of Gutman, beseeching him to return to Glupsk and join in the execution of Takef's Will. It was to be Gutman's task, Mendele now reminds us, to put Takef's money to good use, to "improve the Talmud toyre, make people out of orphans, and teach good trades to poor children."[36] Messengers succeeded in contacting Gutman, and he willingly moved to Glupsk with his whole family. After a short stay, however, he was lucky to get out alive:

> גוטמאַן האָט אפילו נים מוצא שנהו געװעזן אין גלופּסק,
> און איז פון דאָרט נים טױם ניט לעבעדיק אנטלאָפן.
>
> Gutman didn't even finish out a year in Glupsk, and fled more dead than alive.[37]

Despite all his selfless efforts on behalf of the people of Glupsk, Gutman found himself relentlessly persecuted. The traditional Jews could not see beyond his trimmed beard, Western clothes and Germanized Yiddish, and stood in the way of all his reforms. Mendele expresses an insider's anger against his fellow Jews as he explains:

> חסידים איז נים געפעלן פאַר װאָס גוטמאַן טראָגט זיך
> דײַטש. און אַז מען האָט אפגעװאַשט דעם פּאָל אין דער
> תלמוד תורה, איז זײ פינסטער געװאָרן אין די אױגן.
> סטײַטש, סטײַטש. מען זאָל אזױנס טאָן אין א תלמוד
> תורה! סטײַטש, סטײַטש. מען זאָל אָפּװאַשן די בלאָטע
> װאָס אונדזערע אבות־אבותינו האָבן אָנגעמאַכט! ...
> אזעלכע טום טאָקע נאָר א גױ.

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[36] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 7.

[37] Ibid., loc. cit.

> Gutman did not please the righteous citizens [Hasidim] of Glupsk. Why? Because he dressed in the German fashion. They saw black when he washed the floor in the Talmud toyre. Unheard of! Unheard of! To do such a thing in a Talmud toyre! Unheard of! Unheard of! How can someone wash away the mud that was left by our fathers' fathers? . . . Only a goy [non-Jew] would do such a thing![38]

Mendele tells us that he has neither time nor space to recount all the indignities and persecutions which the noble Gutman suffered. In the end, the maskil had no choice but to flee the city.

Mendele clearly sides with Gutman, placing the blame for his failure squarely on the ignorance of the masses. But even so, the final verdict in the question of tactics has been passed. Despite his good intentions, the maskil is unable to reach the people that he needs to reach. His language and his appearance cut him off from the community; his listeners block their ears before he can begin to speak. As long as he persists in approaching the people from the outside, the maskil will be persecuted and scorned, dismissed without so much as a hearing.

Mendele is plenty angered by the behavior of his fellow Jews toward Gutman:

> גלײבט מיר, מײנע ליבע ייִדן. אײך בײַ אויף מײַן לעבן
> אויסגעזען א חעלם. אײך האָב אײַערגעהאנדלט מיט
> אלערלײ מענטשן. דער אמח אײז ניטא בײ קײנעם, סײדן
> נאָר בײ נאראנים און משוגעים. חאָרום באמת מאקע דארף
> מען דען נים זײן א נאר א משוגענער, היינטיקע צײטן
> זאגן דעם אמח? ...נאָר נים דאָם בײַ אײך אויסן.

> Believe me, my dear Jews, in the course of my life I've seen all the world, I've dealt with all sorts of people. The only guardians of "The Truth" are fools and madmen. Because really, you've gotta be either a fool or a madman nowadays in order to speak "The Truth." But that's beside the point.[39]

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[38] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 7.

[39] Ibid., p. 8.

Mendele's disclaimer, "But that's beside the point," only serves to underscore the severity of his attack. Yet for all his anger at the people, it is clear that his attack is aimed in two directions. Not only does he criticize the xenophobic ignorance of the Jewish masses, but he also exposes Gutman's tactical inefficacy. By virtue of their hostility toward Gutman, the common Jews prove how badly they need to be enlightened; and by virtue of his outsider's appearance and language, Gutman proves that he is simply not the person for the task.

Who then can tell the people what they need to hear? The answer is already in front of us. Mendele has just criticized the old order without mincing a single harsh word. "But that's beside the point," he hastens to add, and so salvages his own credibility. Meanwhile he has delivered a diatribe more direct than anything Gutman could dream of, and pulled it off with complete impunity. Why? Because, unlike Gutman, Mendele wears the right clothes and speaks the right language. His voice came from the inside. Abramovitch may be expressing his own social theory, but at least he knows enough to disguise himself before speaking to the people.

Thus the tactical question raised in Dos kleyne mentshele is resolved once and for all. It is not enough to write Hebrew melitse, or even to simply translate from Hebrew into Yiddish. One can reach the people only on and through their own terms. Gutman has been forced to flee Glupsk, and Mendele will take his place. The Yiddish work establishes its own legitimacy, and now "The Story Itself" can begin.

9. "The Story Itself": The Litvak and the Magic of Science

The plot structure of Dos vintshfingerl is strikingly similar to that of Dos kleyne mentshele. An impressionable youth, Hershele, grows up in a corrupt society, chases blindly after a false goal, is taken in by a kind maskil, and finally accepts the truth of Enlightenment. Because the two stories are so much alike, Dos vintshfingerl will be presented here only in its broadest contours, skipping the elaborate (and often confusing) twists and turns of plot. Emphasis will be on points of theoretical and artistic innovation rather than on the story line per se.

The narrator, Hirsch Rothman of Russia, now a prominent German maskil, recounts the story of his youth. He grew up as "Hershele," an everyday Jewish boy in the Polish shtetl of Kabtsansk. The name of his birthplace, "Pauperville," was appropriate, since poverty was the salient formative influence of his childhood. Day after day he used to hang around the shtetl elders, listening to their fantastic tales of superstition and miracles of days gone by. Pushed on by his own grinding poverty, Hershele becomes obsessed with a local legend about a "vintshfingerl." The vintshfingerl was a magic ring, through which all one's wishes would be granted. Desperate to get rich quick, he devoted all his energies to the pursuit of this elusive ring. Just as Dos kleyne menthsele focused on Itsik Avrom's changing perception of the "Little Man," Dos vintshfingerl bases its dramatic continuity on Hershele's changing perception of the Magic Ring.

Hershele's obsession with the Vintshfingerl is of course no more than a reflection of the broader society. Hershele has no understanding of

productive labor as the source of wealth, and so assumes that a Magic Ring can create riches out of thin air. In this he is reinforced by the economic detachment of the entire community. Day after day the old men sit around the bathhouse, where they intersperse their hoary folktales with serious discussions about the problems of the world. Fierce arguments rage over European politics--the shtetl wisemen defend their favorite world powers, with no understanding of the issues involved. More poignantly, the bathhouse crowd is constantly discussing matters of international finance.

דאָרם פּלעגט מען אויפצאָלן צען מאל אין טאָג דאָס
געלט פון אַ סך גרויסע...

Ten times a day they used to count up the money of all the different financial giants . . .[40]

Once again Abramovitch pinpoints economics as the most serious aberration of the traditional Jewish world. The shtetl economy is completely removed from modern production. Kabstansk views money as nothing more than abstract subject of bathhouse banter, with no relation to work or capital. When Hershele believes that a Magic Ring will make him rich, he is only echoing the socialization of his youth.

Hershele reaches his teens and enrolls in yeshive, the Jewish academy of higher learning. Here he suffers poverty and deprivation, sleeping on hard wooden benches in the synagogue, often hungry. Day after day he commits himself to study, mastering the intricacies of Talmudic law. But here too the traditional education is shown to be inadequate, for its stringent scholasticism fails to instil any social consciousness of genuine morality. In the course of his studies Hershele comes across an esoteric reference to a Kabbalistic formula whereby one can become invisible. He figures that if

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[40] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 18.

he were invisible, he would be able to steal at will from the "rich men" and so become rich himself. Traditional religion not only fails to teach him "morality," but itself becomes the tool by which he seeks to exploit others. Yeshive study only reinforces the shtetl's perverse values.

Like Itsik Avrom, Hershele has been misled but is not bad at heart. He too is ripe for redemption through the power of "good ideas." Redemption comes in the person of "The Litvak," a rational, enlightened Jew from Lithuania (not unlike Abramovitch himself) who willingly shows Hershele the folly of his designs. With great patience, the Litvak asks Hershele what he hopes to accomplish by becoming invisible. Hershele replies:

סמ״מש, האב איך געענטפערט. איך וויל אזוי׳ף אזוי׳ אן
אופן קענען מאן אלץ וואס איך וויל. איך וועל אלצדינג
נעמען וואס מיין הארץ גלוסט; מיינע שונים וועל איך
הארגענען, שלאגן, און וועל מיר לעבן אזוי׳ ווי א
פריץ, ניט טאן קיין שום ארבעט.

How can it be otherwise?, I answered. [By becoming invisible] I'll be able to do whatever I want. I'll be able to take whatever my heart desires. I'll murder and beat my enemies, and I'll live like a porits, a feudal landowner, doing no work whatsoever.[41]

The simile "like a porits" is particularly significant. The great crime of the old Jewish world is economic, that of detachment from modern production. The Jewish economy is a feudal vestige, as exploitative as the feudal landowner who lives off his serfs. Both the Jew and the landowner ultimately live off the labor of the peasants, who are the only real producers of wealth in feudal economy. Like Itsik Avrom's "Little Man," Hershele's wish to be "invisible" is also metaphorical for the broader Jewish economy. Jews deal in fictional commidities (money and exchange

[41] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 31.

values), and are hidden from the realities of production and capital. The metaphor is not much different from Marx's disparaging characterization of the Jewish economy, in which he said that "Jews live in the pores of Polish society," out of sight of the actual productive process.

Hershele, we understand, is basically good; his crooked economic sense is but the inevitable product of his upbringing, a personal expression of his petty bourgeois community. The Litvak tries to reverse the course of Hershele's unfortunate socialization through the power of rational argument:

חיינט באטראכט זיך נאר, הערשעלע לעב, האט דער ליטוואק
געזאגט, וואס פאר א קרומער שכל דו האסט. סט"ס.
דו האסט געפאסט תעניתים, דו האסט געזאגט תהילים.
דו ביסט געגאנגען אין קאלטע מקוואות. וואס איז?
גאט זאל דיר הערשעלע העלפן דערגרייכן אזוי א
קונץ וואס דעראויף זאלסט דו זיין א גנב, א רוצח,
א לי"ג ג"ער, א הולט", און א בעל תאוה!

'But just think, dear Hershele,' said the Litvak, 'what a crooked logic you have. How can this be? You've fasted, you've recited psalms [at midnight], you've dunked in cold ritual baths. So what is this? Do you really expect God to help you, Hershele, to perform such a trick, to become a thief, a murderer, a vagrant, a rascal and a hedonist?[42]

Abramovitch repeats the argument advanced in Dos kleyne mentshele. Traditional religious observance, and even ascetic excess, do not necessarily impart morality. The only real key to ethical behavior is rationalism. Only through empirical observation of the consequences of one's actions can a person really distinguish between right and wrong. As the Litvak phrases it:

א שט"גער, הערשעלע לעב, וואס וואלט געווארן פון דער
וועלט וען מענטשן זאלן קענען אזעלכע קונצן?

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[42] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 31.

Consider for example, dear Hershele, what would the world come to if everyone knew such tricks [as becoming invisible]?[43]

Hershele tells us that at the time he did not fully comprehend what the Litvak was trying to tell him. But a few pages later, the Litvak makes his message amply clear:

הערשעלע לעב, אז אלע
מענטשן וואלטן געוועזן טונקי־אדצעס, קיינער וואלט
ניט געוואלט ארבעטן. מען וואלט ניט געאקערט,
ניט געזייט. מען וואלט ניט געמאכט פאבריקן פון
לינוואנט, פון געוואנט, פון נאך אנדערע זאכן.
עס וואלט ניט געוועזן קיין שניידער, קיין שוסטער,
קיין קאוועל, קיין סמאליער, קיין בעקער וכדומה.
מען וואלט ניט געהאט וואס צו עסן, וואס אנצוטאן,
אי־ן וואס צו פארן. מען וואלט פשוט געשטארבט
פון הונגער, פון קעלט.

It's time you understood, dear Hershele, that [if people could have unlimited wishes] they would become loafers, no one would want to work. No one would plow, no one plant, no one would set up factories for the production of linen, textiles and other goods. There would be no tailors, no cobblers, no blacksmiths, no carpenters, no bakers, and so forth. There would be nothing for people to eat, nothing to wear, no means of travel. People would simply die from hunger and cold.[44]

Thus does Abramovitch advance an explicit "work ethic" as his challenge to the non-productive traditional Jewish economy. He suggests a modern division of labor: one will grow crops, another fix shoes, and still another bake bread. The role of each is of crucial importance, since together they propel the social whole. Production serves the good of all, is rationally self-sustaining and therefore moral.

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[43] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 31.

[44] Ibid., p. 34.

Abramovitch reaches the bottom line of his social theory, and leaves two important factors to consider. First, his "work ethic" derives from a rational concern with the society at large, and not necessarily with the individual. This is a switch from Dos kleyne mentshele, where petty bourgeois parasitism was proven irrational because it failed Takef within his own, private life. It is also a departure from the work ethic of classical Western Protestantism, which signals labor as an end in itself, discharged at the pain of individual damnation in the hereafter. According to the Litvak's reasoning, productive work is necessary not for personal salvation or betterment, but for the welfare of the society as a whole. It is understood, of course, that the individual stands to gain from a whole society; but that gain is not nearly so great as what Hershele would net personally were he the only invisible person in the world, free to rob and plunder at will. The Litvak is quite correct in pointing out that Hershele's wish would be bad for the society; but the fact is that it'd be pretty good (by a materialist criterion) for Hershele himself.

This is a key point. For the time being Abramovitch espouses a work ethic which is consistent with ascendant capitalism. But his ethic derives not from the capitalist's concern with creating a disciplined and subservient labor force, but rather than utilitarian concern with the society at large. In the context of feudal or semi-feudal economy, capitalism was indeed a force of social progress. But if and when capitalism should diverge from the interests of society at large and begin to serve the exclusive interests of a select class, then Abramovitch's rationale would become a determining factor. He was an empiricist, not a capitalist. His concern was with social good, not individual profit. His "work ethic" would be

consistent with capitalism only as long as capitalism was consistent with the overall good of society.

A second latently transformational dynamic was also present in the social theory of Dos vintshfingerl. As in Dos kleyne mentshele. Abramovitch believed that rational argument (in this case tuned to the broader social good) would be enough to guarantee economic productivization. Presumably, both Takef and Hershele need only be shown the inherent irrationalism and folly of their economic aspirations in order to be converted into productive members of society. We have seen that Takef, however, was trapped without opportunity in an economy squeezed by anti-Jewish restrictions; rather than find a productive job he died. Now Hershele was trapped by the same contradiction. The Jewish bourgeoisie insisted on the productivization of the Jewish masses. But the sorry fact was that a Jewish bourgeoisie effectively predated a Jewish proletariat in Russia by several decades. Where was Hershele to go, what could he do?

Abramovitch does not yet explicitly acknowledge this dilemma. He is still in accord with the hyper-patriotism of Gotlober and others, and is unwilling to challenge the government-enacted disabilities which so severely limit Jewish economic opportunity. But for all his loyalty, he is too much the empiricist to ignore the social reality. Presumably he could pack Hershele off to some textile factory in Warsaw or a carpenter's bench in Kabtsansk. But that could be too inconsistent with the kind of opportunities realistically open to the vast majority of his readers. There just weren't enough proletarian positions to go around for that to be a valid option for Hershele. Moreover, for all his dedication to productivization, Abramovitch was still an intellectual; he probably couldn't even conceive

of a character of his creation sitting on a factory bench. He maintained his artistic integrity by bowing to the social reality. Hershele gives himself over to the Litvak, who agrees to aid him in his quest and guarantees that the key to the Vintshfingerl is study. Night after night Hershele studies in the Litvak's home, until he masters German and other Western knowledge. And then he tacitly acknowledges the social and political limits to modernization in Russia: he packs his bags and moves to Germany.

At this point the social contradictions of the Haskala take their toll on the story's narrative pace. Unable to be too explicit about his motivations, Hershele moves to Germany, enrolls in German university and finds his Vintshfingerl, all in a few short paragraphs. Predictably, the Vintshfingerl turns out to be knowledge, which alone can assure a viable social order:

אין אוניווערסיטעט האב איך צום סוף געפונען דאס
חיינטשפיגערל. נישט דאס פוסטע, כימעריש
חיינטשפיגערל, חאס דורך אים חאלם די וועלם קיין
קיום נישט געקענט חאבן, אזוי וי מיין קלוגער
לימחאק חאם עס שוין לאנג דערקלערט; נישט דאס
אויסגעטראכטע פיגערל, חאס דורך אים חאלט
געמוזם אויפהערן אלע נאטורגעזעצן. דאס היסט
עס חאלט בטל געחאלטן נאטם גרויסער און קלוגער
פלאן איז דער נאטור צוליב די מענטשנס נאריש
חיינטשע.

In university I found the Vintshfingerl. Not this empty, chimerical Vintshfingerl, through which the world could not endure, as my clever Litvak has already explained at length. Not the make-believe Vintshfingerl, through which people would become debauched, lazy, uncultured and hedonistic, [. . .] through which all natural laws would come to an end, which means that God's great and wise plan of Nature would be disrupted because of people's foolish wishes.[44]

[44] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 37.

Hershele goes on at some length describing all the troubles which would befall the world through supernatural solutions. Supernaturalism, he tells us, runs contrary to Nature, and Nature alone can assure a good existence for all:

מײן פינגערל איז עפעס װאס אנדערש. דאס איז די
ח כ מ ה ! מיט חכמה קען דער מענטש דערגרײכן
אלצדינג װאס ער װינטשט. די חכמה, זי איז דאס
נאטירלעכע װינטשפינגערל, װאס מיט אים פילט זיך
דער מענטש שטארק צו באקומען אלע זײנע באדערפענעש
על פי דרך הטבע.

But my ring is altogether different. It is Reason![45] With Reason mankind can accomplish all that it wishes for. Reason--that is the natural Vintshfingerl, through which mankind has the power to realize all its wishes, in accordance with the Law of Nature.[46]

Through Reason one can learn to master the limitless wealth which nature provides. Not through supernatural magic but through Science can one become rich and powerful. Hershele envisions a day of great scientific advance. He foretells "speedy travel without horses," telephones whereby one "will speak from far away to a friend at the corner of the world [a fraynt in ek velt]," and even hot air balloons and air travel. By mastering Science, by manipulating nature to his own advantage, a person may achieve all he can wish for:

און נאך א סך אזעלכע זאכן קען דער מענטש מאכן
מיט דעם מײערן װינטשפינגערל. א. לערען און
גיב דיר מי דער װעלט נוצלעך צו זײן מיט דײן

[45] The word is given in the Yiddish as "khokhme," which means literally "wisdom" (or "witticism"). I render it here as "Reason" because I feel that best approximates Abramovitch's sense. Reason would indicate a modern incarnation of "wisdom," as opposed to the Talmudic scholarship which might have been the embodiment of wisdom in earlier times.

[46] Dos vintshfingerl, pp. 38-39.

חכמה. דענסטמאל וועלן דיך אפילו בת־מלכות,
פרינצעסינס בארינען, אפילו מלכים וועלן דיך
ארומטראגן אויף די הענט!

A person will be able to attain [these and] many more such things with this priceless Vintshfingerl. Oh, learn, put your energy into being useful to the world with your Reason. Then even princesses will serve you, even kings will carry you about in their arms![47]

Abramovitch echoes the ideology of pre-revolutionary Russian Positivism. Science, and not direct political intervention, will assure social transformation. Science holds out the promise of unlimited wealth for all, and so assures the downfall of the old order. The image of princesses becoming servants and kings becoming porters heralds the collapse of the ancien regime and feudal economy. Science provides the crowning rationale and means for abolishing the old order. Abramovitch's social theory has become more utilitarian. Not only will rationalism cure the economic ill by exposing its intrinsic immorality (the argument advanced in Dos kleyne mentshele), but we now see that it will go a step further: it will create ever increasing wealth. In a society already completely tied up with the idea of "making a living," what better argument could there be for modernization than limitless increase in the standard of living for all?

Of course, no matter how rational Abramovitch can be, he still believes in a "Vintshfingerl," a magic ring which will solve all the problems of society. Science is the wizard's wand which will create machines to end the drudgery of work (and keep Hershele off the factory bench), and which

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[47] Ibid., p. 39.

will create enough wealth to satisfy everyone's wishes. This faith was wholly consistent with the prevailing Positivist ideology. Science itself would precipitate social change, establishing its own rational political and economic order. The change was inevitable, and one was therefore absolved from challenging the status quo directly.

It was only a matter of time, however, before most Russian Positivists came to disavow this view, recognizing that technology was not an absolute force but only a tool which could be owned and manipulated by capital. Positivism gave rise to Populism, and eventually to Social Democracy and Revolutionary Socialism. Abramovitch had declared his commitment to society at large, and he too would become politicized once the magic of Science failed to effect social transformation.

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At the end of Dos vintshfingerl, Abramovitch, through the mouth of the Litvak, showed himself still committed to the social theory of the Haskala. But that social theory itself was already showing internal signs of collapse. It was caught between the "good of society" and capitalist class interest, and between a liberal economic program and a Judeophobic, autocratic regime. Other maskilim would be caught up in these same contradictions, pushed by the rush of historical events, and eventually would abandon the Haskala program, opting instead for Proletarian Zionism, Bundism, Diaspora Nationalism and other later ideologies. But Abramovitch diverged from the Haskala sooner than most. That was due in part to his sociological perspicacity, born of an uncompromising empiricism. But it was also the product of his concomitant development as a Yiddish artist. If

seeds of change were present in the social theory of Dos vintshfingerl, they were present all the more so in the story's artistic voice.

10. The Voice of Kabtsansk

As Nusinov points out, Hershele is influenced by two characters: the Litvak and the collective shtetl Kabtsansk. As we have seen, Hershele's social theory is imparted by the Litvak. But Kabtsansk also leaves its mark, not so much on his theory as on his literary voice.

Needless to say, Kabtsansk comes in for its share of attack. It is a small shtetl, epitomizing the isolation and backwardness of the traditional Jewish world. Its inhabitants are uneducated, unproductive and indecorous. Abramovitch brings all the indignation of the Haskala to bear in his critique. Yet, somewhat incongruously, he consistently berates Kabtsansk in its own terms. Although the narrator is supposedly an enlightened scholar living in Germany (Hirsch Rothman, the grown up Hershele), he persists in telling his story in the language of the people (no mean trick for a work purportedly written in German and translated by another maskil). The critic A. Gurshteyn, in a study of artistic development in Abramovitch's early opus, notes an increased use of such traditional interjections as onaynhore ("May no evil eye befall him"), alev hasholem ("May he rest in peace"), and nebekh ("He's to be pitied").[48] Is this the language of a modern maskil? Such idiomatic speech may well be designed to heighten the story's authenticity in order to make for better propaganda, but it also bespeaks a growing sensitivity to stylistic detail.

According to Miron, Abramovitch's careful rendition of the folk voice is a form of mimicry.[49] It reflects a lingering "aesthetic of ugliness"

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[48] Gurshteyn, "Der yunger Mendele in kontekst fun di 60-er un 70-er yorn," p. 183.

[49] Miron's discussion of the lingering presence of mimicry as a motif

whereby Yiddish was regarded as unfit for any literary function beyond "comic mimesis." By blanketly condemning mimicry as a limiting factor, however, I believe that Miron overlooks its potentially transformative nature. The closer the writer draws to the language of the people--whether through mimicry or not--the more his social theory may be influenced by his new found voice. For example, early in "The Story Itself" one character tries to persuade another to enter the mikve, the ritual bath notorious throughout Haskala literature for its unhygenic conditions. The Jew is afraid of the water, but his cohort assures him:

קומט. נשקשה. אונדזער מקוה וואסער איז שטארק
געדיכט. מען קען זי שנידן מיט א מעסער...

Come on. Nothing to worry about. Our mikve water is very dense--you can cut it with a knife![50]

Clearly Abramovitch is criticizing the filth of this traditional institution. But to do so he borrows from the folk voice, citing a stock joke which must have enjoyed wide currency among the shtetl Jews. He is indignant about the unsanitary bath, but he seems rather amused by the joke he uses to criticize it. Until now the bourgeois aesthetic of the Haskala would have attacked the bath and the language equally. But Abramovitch parts from this norm. He wants to clean up the people's bath, but not necessarily their language. In so doing, the "ugly" bath becomes less significant than the entertaining language.

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in Yiddish literature (and theatre) can be found in Chapter Three, "The Mimic Writer and His 'Little Jew,'" A Traveler Disguised, pp. 67-94.

[50] Dos yintshfingerl, p. 15.

The story is full of such rich and often humorous language. Not only does Abramovitch seem to revel, aesthetically, in the people's language, but he also enjoys the myriad details of their physical world. He provides lengthy ethnographic catalogues, as for example when the Jews of Kabtsansk board a wagon to travel to a neighboring town for the High Holidays. Hershele narrates:

איך געדענק היינט אין פריידן מיין ערשטע נסיעה. די מאמע האָט אויף א לאנגע וואנען אין דער הייך אנידער־געשטעלט א שטייג מיט עופות און א קאָדקע אייער אין פאַלאַווע. דער וואגן איז געווען ענג און געזעצט מיט פארשוינען, כמעט א פערטל שטעטל. דאָרט האָבן זיך געפונען מיידלעך, ווייבלעך, וואָס זענען זיך געפאָרן שטעלן פאר דינסטן. פאר אמען דאָרט זענען געווען אויסגעזעצט אלערליי ייִדן: שיינע ייִדן, כשרע ייִדן, זיידענע מענטשן, גילדענע מענטשן, מיט גילדענע־אָדער ייִדן, גלאט אבי אַט ייִדן. איך מיט די אלע וואָס זענען געזעסן אין מיטן האָבן געשוויצט. די זיידענע מענטשן האָבן געשוויצט ווי א ביבער, די פנימלעך זייערע זענען געווען אויסגעפרעגלט ווי א צימעס.

I think back with pleasure on my first trip. My mother placed a cage full of chickens high up on a bench, and stowed a basket of eggs in the wagon's boot. The wagon was narrow and crowded with people--almost a quarter of the shtetl. There were girls and married women setting out to look for jobs as servants. . . . In addition there were seated all sorts of Jews: refined Jews, kosher Jews, satin-clad people, gold-clad people, Jews with gilded veins--but of course all Jews. I, along with all the other people who were sitting on the wagon, was sweating. and I mean sweating! The rich Jews decked out in satin were sweating like beavers, their faces were beaded with perspiration and looked like carrot stew.[51]

The full bodied ethnographic images and the aesthetic of the language itself come together a page later, when a fight breaks out on the same crowded wagon:

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[51] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 22.

דא האָט זיך אָנגעהויבן א מחלוקת. לײזער מיט בערלן
האָבן זיך שוין אָנגעכאַפּט בײ די נעז. א טײל האָבן
געהאַלטן מיט לײזערן, א טײל מיט בערלן. מען האָט
נאָר געהערט שטינקער דריסקער. דריסקער שטינקער.
א געשרײ. א ליארום. א טומטאכע. א געשטופּערײ.
א געקװעטשערײ. דער שרײט אױ, מײנע פּיס. יענער
אױ, מײן קאָפּ. אײנער זוכט דאָס היטל, דער אנדערער
די יארמעלקע. מײן מאמע האלט מיט בײדע הענט די
קאטרע מיט אײער און שעלט, די הענער
קרײען. דער בעל־עגלה שרײט, פּלוכט.

Then a dispute broke out. Leyzer and Berl had already grabbed each other by the noses. Some sided with Leyzer, some with Berl. Then nasty epithets were heard: 'Stinky finky!' 'Finky stinky!' A scream. An uproar. A commotion. Then a push-for-all. A kvetsh-for-all. Someone yells, 'Oy, my feet!' Someone else, 'Oy, my head!' This one's looking for his hat, this one for his yarmelke. My mother holds onto the basket of eggs with both hands, cursing, while the chickens cluck. The wagoneer screams and flails his whip.[52]

Surely this description is not high art. But neither is it narrow propaganda. Abramovitch may be dutifully mouthing the social theory of the Haskala by criticizing the disorder of the wagon, but his critique is belied by the verve and tempo of his description. Along with Hershele, Abramovitch seems to "think back with pleasure on my first trip." The language captures the slapstick excitement. Short, staccato, present-tense sentences capture the rhythm of mounting chaos. The language builds up too much momentum to slow down for etiquette. The writer suddenly seems far removed from the propagation of propriety. Language and description go hand in hand to create an image so packed with vitality and soul that the staid norm of the bourgeoisie pales by comparison. Very tentatively, a new aesthetic--rooted in the folk language and the folk culture--is beginning to emerge.

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[52] Ibid., p. 24.

11. Portents of Change

Thus ends the first period of Abramovitch's Yiddish literary career. He made his debut in 1864 with Dos kleyne mentshele, followed one year later by Dos vintshfingerl. Both works were intended as propaganda, utilitarian vehicles with which to convey the message of Enlightenment to readers who knew no other language. But seeds of literary transformation were already gestating.

For one, by the very act of writing in Yiddish Abramovitch had made a tactical divergence from the classical Haskala. In the introductory frame of Dos vintshfingerl he has sent Gutman packing and assigned narrative responsibility to Mendele. Mendele's permanent role in the literature is secured; as he bids us farewell in the closing frame:

הינט זײַט מיר געזונט, ייִדן. מיר זאָלן זיך נאָך א
מאָל געזונטערהײַט זען. אמן!

For now, be well Jews. We'll be seeing each other again, in good health. Amen![53]

Secondly, Abramovitch's social theory is strained by internal contradictions. He preaches that "good ideas" will save, that rationalism will bring economic rectification. But he cannot overlook the semi-feudal nature of the broader Russian economy and the repressive regime which render his ideal unrealizable. He is not yet willing to challenge the government directly, but he does express his tacit acknowledgement by having Gutman die and Hershele move to Germany. How many more protagonists can be disposed of so neatly without explicitly confronting the broader sociopolitical context? Moreover, by Dos vintshfingerl Abramovitch has based

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[53] Dos vintshfingerl, p. 42.

his rational argument for economic productivization not on the advancement of individual needs, but on the betterment of society at large. It stands to Reason that morality means that which is good for everyone. He believes that Science will create enough wealth for all and presumably end economic exploitation. But if and when he discovers that the concentration of capital prevents the universal application of Science, then he will logically side with the people, not the capitalists.

Lastly, Abramovitch has made enormous artistic strides. He had made his debut accepting the bourgeois notion that Yiddish is "ugly," but persuaded by Lifshits that this was of no consequence since language and cognition were unrelated. By 1865 it is already becoming obvious that Lifshits was wrong. Abramovitch tries to describe and berate the people in their own terms. But he knows the people intimately (as a result of his travels), and the precision with which he captures their life style and language makes his work more notable for its ethnography and artistic voice than for its social critique. Earlier maskilim had maintained that Yiddish "contributes not a little to the 'impropriety' of the common Jew." If that statement is true then the more Abramovitch commits himself to a Yiddish linguistic and ethnographic aesthetic, the more he will depart from the bourgeois norm. We see, for example, how his joke about the ritual bath softens the bite of his sociological attack.

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Here then were the portents of change discernable in Abramovitch's earliest Yiddish works. Perhaps the most tangible evidence of Abramovitch's new direction can be inferred from the character Hershele. Hershele embodied a synthesis between the social theory of the Litvak and the artistic

voice of Kabtsansk. According to Nusinov, Hershele presaged a "new type" of maskil, home-grown and organically East European, of the sort that would later break free of German influence and figure in the Hovevi Zion and other native nationalist and populist movements.[54]

Nusinov's point should not be overdone. Hershele, after all, is supposedly writing in German. Even if he proudly identifies himself as "Hirsch Rothman of Russia," he still chooses to reside in Germany. The political climate in Eastern Europe was hardly hospitable to Jewish populist or nationalist sentiment. Hershele's predicament was shared by Abramovitch. Abramovitch too was a synthetic character, shaped not only by Gotlober and other maskilim (hence the Litvak), but also by Avrom der Hinkediker (Kabtsansk). By creating the character of Hershele, Abramovitch expressed an awareness of his own synthetic possibilities. He had already proved Gutman's failure; now he was suggesting a home grown replacement, legitimizing Yiddish literature and carving a niche for himself.

The best indication of Abramovitch's new literary direction can be seen in the fate of Dos vintshfingerl. The work was originally written as a prospectus for Toldot hateve. The translation was never begun. But Dos vintshfingerl was reworked into a full novel in 1888, and eventually became one of the enduring masterpieces of Yiddish literature.[55] The transformation from propaganda to art was a complex process spanning many years. But the portents of change were clearly manifest. A dialectic had been set up between the social theory of the bourgeoisie and the voice of the people; in the accelerated historical drama of the later 1860s, a more complete synthesis would not be long in coming.

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[54]Nusinov, op. cit., p. 217.

[55]Ibid., loc. cit.

PART THREE: THE PEOPLE'S ARTIST

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Di Takse (1869)

The synthesis of social theory and artistic voice latent in Abramovitch's first two Yiddish works needed time and the stimulus of imminent historical events to come to fruition. Dos vintshfingerl was completed in 1865; Abramovitch abstained from Yiddish writing for the next four years, immersing himself in ongoing literary and polemic work in Hebrew, where he continued to grow in both reputation and achievement. It was not until 1869 that he appeared again in Yiddish, with the publication of a five act play entitled Di takse, oder di bande shtot baley-toyves, "The [Meat] Tax, or the Band of Communal Do-Gooders."[1]

Di takse is not a great work of literature. Its focus is narrow, its didacticism heavy handed and its dramatic structure unbalanced. Nonetheless, it represents an important transformation of social theory vis a vis earlier works. Moreover the play can be viewed as a laboratory piece in which Abramovitch self-consciously explores his own role as a Yiddish writer.

Di takse is curiously overlooked in the volumes of Yiddish literary criticism. No published book or monograph addresses the work specifically. This may be attributed to a number of factors. First, Di takse is a play; both it and Abramovitch's only other play, Der priziv (1884) are largely

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[1] The original version appeared in Zhitomir in 1869. It was translated into Russian in 1884 by Y. M. Petrikovsky, although the translation did not meet with Abramovitch's approval. As far as I can determine the play has not been translated into English. The edition cited in the present study is from Ale shriftn fun Mendele Moykher Sforim, v. 1 (NY: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1920), pp. 1-99.

ignored by critics interested in the genre of prose fiction.[2] Secondly, Di takse was never reworked into a later edition. Though the first versions of Dos kleyne mentshele and Dos vintshfingerl were of equally dubious literary merit, they were considered noteworthy insofar as they afforded variant comparison with later permutations. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, Di takse did not fit into the generally accepted scheme of Abramovitch's literary development. Critics tend to divide Abramovitch's opus into two distinct phases: that of the "young Mendele" or "maskil Mendele," ending with the publication of Dos vintshfingerl in 1865, succeeded by the more mature "post-Haskala Mendele," beginning with the publication of Di kliatshe in 1873.[3] This dichotomy does have a certain validity. As we have seen, through 1865 Abramovitch professes the social theory of the bourgeois Haskala and, at least ostensibly, regards Yiddish as no more than a vehicle of propaganda. By contrast, Di kliatshe is a mature literary work with a highly refined style and a social theory which explicitly refutes the simple social palliatives of classical Enlightenment. Perhaps Di takse is generally overlooked because it stands so squarely in the middle of the two literary phases. Yet for the purpose of the present study, which examines the process of transformation between the

[2]See for example A. Gurshteyn, "Der yunger Mendele in kontekst fun di 60-er yorn," Shriftn, p. 181, note 4, who writes: "We are intentionally excluding Di takse from our analysis [of Mendele's early works], because of the specific nature of its 'dramatic' form, in order to remain within the boundaries of one genre."

[3]Max Weinreich, for example, in his important study, "Mendeles onheyb," affords Di takse only two paragraphs of discussion. Khone Shmeruk, writing in the Encyclopedia Judaica ("Yiddish Literature"), v. 16, p. 810, observes: "The allegorical work Di kliatshe . . . marks a turning point in the writings of Mendele."

early and later Mendele, it is precisely this medial limbo which renders Di takse so enormously significant.

Upon closer textual examination, it becomes clear that the schism between "early" and "later" Mendele is not so black and white as many critics would have it appear. We have seen that literary aspects of Dos kleyne mentshele and Dos vintshfingerl, though ostensibly utilitarian, in fact occupy a great deal of the author's attention and undergo constant refinment. Similarly, the "materialist" social theory which is hailed as such a seminal stride in Di kliatshe hardly burst forth overnight. Even in his earliest works Abramovitch tacitly acknowledged the limits of Enlightenment ideology when he allowed Takef to die and packed Hershele off to Germany. A more significant transformation occurred in 1867, when he published a Hebrew essay in Hamelits in which he called for political equal rights for all Jews in Russia.[4]

To the present day reader, the call for political equality may not seem particularly daring or original; it echoed similar demands voiced in Western Europe seventy-five years earlier, and fell far short of the radical tenor of Jewish groups in Russia in the later 1890s, which insisted not only on political but social, economic and national equal rights. But even so, Abramovitch's article in Hamelits did constitute an explicit break from the classical Haskala. It contradicted the long accepted dogma that Jews were responsible for their own suffering and could expect equal rights only after they had proved themsleves "worthy" through internal reform along Enlightenment lines. Jewish society was now perceived in a broader

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[4]"Mishpet ayney ami," Hamelits, 1867, nos. 30 and 31. See Weinreich, "Mendeles onheyb," p. 346.

political context; the economic backwardness of the Jews was not entirely their own fault. Amelioration of the Jewish condition therefore necessitated far more than the simple prescription of "Reason," which Abramovitch had so eagerly endorsed only two years earlier.

But if Abramovitch had indeed undergone such a pronounced conversion from the social theory of the classical Haskala in 1867, then why was it not until the publication of Di kliatshe in 1873 (according to the critics' general scheme of things) before that new theoretical stance found full literary expression? The question is a compelling one, and points to the inextricable relationship between social theory and artistic form. If a new theory was ready in 1867, that hardly meant that it had yet found the literary voice with which to express itself. Abramovitch had never denied that Yiddish was somehow intrinsically undesirable. He had condescended to its use only to teach "good ideas" to the common people. If now, in his Hebrew essay of 1867, he decides that the cause of Jewish backwardness goes beyond self-imposed irrationalism and obscurantism and instead resides in legal disabilities imposed by the government, then why should he continue to propagandize to the people themselves, why should he continue to write in Yiddish? It is as though the carpet of self-legitimization has been pulled out from under the nascent Yiddish literature. If Abramovitch is really no more than the utilitarian propagandist he professes to be, then it seems more logical that he now target his propaganda where it is needed most: berating fellow maskilim (in Hebrew) to challenge governmental policies, and addressing the government itself (in Russian).

But here Abramovitch's literary pretexts are exposed. For the fact is, as we've already suggested in our analysis of Dos kleyne metshele and

Dos vintshfingerl, Abramovitch is a great deal more than a simple propagandist: he has already awakened, however inadvertently at first, to the artistic possibilities inherent in Yiddish. Now, when the utilitarian function of Yiddish as a vehicle of propaganda has been rendered inadequate by an expanding social theory, what other justification can there be to continue writing in Yiddish? (This of course precludes the possibility that Abramovitch would simply continue in the old mode: even though the focus of struggle was now shifting to fellow maskilim and the government, the common people were no less in need of rationalist instruction. It is true that a didactic tone, a critique of the old Jewish order, can be found in all of Abramovitch's subsequent works, even in the nostalgic and ethnographic stories of his old age. But surely he was too much the seminal thinker, too much in the vanguard of social and intellectual change, to allow his creativity to stagnate in simple didacticism. The essay of 1867 shows that only three years after his Yiddish literary debut he is already questioning former assumptions and looking for new answers, never content to rest on past laurels.)

It is then precisely at this juncture, where a new-found social theory seems to negate the justification of a supposedly utilitarian literary medium, that a new synthesis must be worked out, in order for Yiddish literature to move on. The critics are indeed correct in seeing Di kliatshe as the culmination of this dialectic, the next "plateau" of Yiddish literature and the first full work of the "mature" Mendele. What is often overlooked, however, is the working of the dialectical process itself. Di kliatshe may be the final product; but Di takse is the "middle"

work in which the dialectic plays itself out and the exact process of transformation becomes manifest.

Abramovitch himself seems to have been aware of the transformational significance of Di takse in a way that most critics fail to notice. In the frame introduction to Di kliatshe, Mendele tells us that he had promised the Jews of Glupsk (the fictional site of Di takse) that he would write a sequel to Di takse. He sent a manuscript of Di kliatshe to the Glupsk wise men for their approval, and they sent back this reply:

> הקליאטשע הזה [sic], די דאָזיקע קליאטשע, חשובה
> לכם, איז אייך גערעכנט כאילו קיימתם, גלייך ווי איר
> וואָלט געהאלטן וואָרט און אַרויסגעגעבן החלק השני,
> דעם צווייטן טייל מהטאקסע בכל פרטיו, מיט אלע
> פּיטשעווקעס.

> THE PRESENT KLIATSHE, This here Kliatshe, MAY BE REGARDED BY YOU, you can rest assured, AS THOUGH YOU HAVE FULFILLED, just as if you'd kept your word and published THE SECOND SEGMENT, the second part, OF DI TAKSE WITH ALL THE MINUTIAE PERTAINING THERETO, with all its odds and ends.[5]

This is not the place for an in-depth review of Di kliatshe, but an obvious question does present itself: How can Di kliatshe be construed as a sequel to Di takse? After all, the story lines and narrative structure seem completely removed from one another. Di takse, as we will see, is a play which tells of a bitter struggle between rich and poor in Glupsk. Di kliatshe, on the other hand, is a semi-confessional allegory in which a would-be maskil learns to accept the common Jews on their own terms. What is the commonality, what the continuity?

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[5] Di kliatshe, in Ale shriftn fun Mendele Moykher Sforim, v. 1, p. 7. In my translation above UPPER CASE letters are used to denote Hebrew in the original, which is juxtaposed with the Yiddish represented by lower case letters.

It is here, I believe, that Abramovitch tips his hand. Abramovitch was unusually self conscious of his own literary process. (He once complained to Sholem Aleykhem that for the latter writing stories was like a hen laying eggs, whereas for himself, the "grandfather," the process was more akin to "an old man with hemorrhoids.") He was an explorer, deliberately pioneering new literary ground, and he took great care to mark his own progress. Like the author of a great travelogue, he portrayed not only his destination but also his route and means of conveyence. If Di kliatshe indeed represented the culmination of a dialectical journey, then Abramovitch had not arrived there overnight. He had first diverged from the straight course of the Haskala in 1864, when he agreed to write in Yiddish. He had then raised doubts about the limits of Enlightenment in Dos kleyne mentshele and Dos vintshfingerl, and explicitly challenged the social theory of the Haskala in his Hebrew essay of 1867. If Di kliatshe was the final synthesis of an alchemy of theory and voice, then Di takse was the marriage bath in which the thesis and antithesis were brewed. If Di kliatshe recounts the conversion of a certain would-be maskil, then Abramovitch begins the tale by directing the reader to his own conversion, discernible under the surface of Di takse.

In the following chapters, I will try to show that the real dramatic structure of Di takse provides both the staging ground and chronicle of Abramovitch's personal literary maturation. The element of continuity to which Abramovitch alludes in Di kliatshe is no less than his autobiography. If this premise is correct, then we will have a unique opportunity to establish, through internal, textual evidence, the exact dynamic of transition from the "young Mendele" to the "post-Haskala Mendele," from the

primitive propagandist to the mature Yiddish artist. It is my contention that this transformation derived from an interaction of social theory and artistic voice. In the unexplored territory of Di takse, we will look for the self-revealed literary cartography which can definitively prove or disprove this thesis.

1. An Interim: 1865-1869

The synthesis which was to brew in Di takse was first seasoned and fired by the rush of literary and historical developments in Russia during the intervening years. What was happening in Russian politics, in Russian letters, in the Jewish sphere and Abramovitch's own life? All are crucial ingredients which warrant brief consideration before we proceed to the text itself.

Though it was four years before Abramovitch published again in Yiddish after the appearance of Dos vintshfingerl in 1865, he hardly remained idle. He had poked gentle fun at Gutman in Dos kleyne mentshele and questioned the efficacy of Hebrew melitse as a means of speaking to the common people. Yet there was no question that Hebrew remained his own vehicle of personal expression, the literary language in which he continued to address his fellow maskilim. He brought enormous energy to the task of modernizing Hebrew, loosening it from the ossification of Biblical and Rabbinic usage and providing a directness of expression to replace the boroque melitse. The literary style pioneered by Abramovitch became a touchstone for subsequent Hebrew authors, and earned for him the title of "Father of Modern Hebrew Literature." Abramovitch engaged in Hebrew literary criticism, deftly attacking the stilted style of the modern Haskala writers. His Misphet Sholem of 1860 was followed by a new edition of critical essays, Ayn mishpet ("The Critical Eye") in 1868. Abramovitch's concern with Hebrew style bespeaks his innate sensitivity to matters of language and style in general, which he would one day openly apply to Yiddish writing as well. Meanwhile he continued with his own didactic Hebrew belles-lettres,

issuing a reworked version of Limdu hatev in 1868, under the new title Avot v'hàbanim "Fathers and Sons."

It is not surprising that the title of Abramovitch's novel should have rung so similar to the great work by Turgenev which had appeared just six years earlier. The 1860s were a time of enormous creative ferment in Russian letters, and Abramovitch was certainly conversant with these broader developments. The young intellectuals of Russia had taken full advantage of the new freedom of expression which came with the accession of Alexander II, and enormous pent-up frustration was unleashed. Pisarev, at the age of twenty-one in 1861, issued a passionate call for the "destruction of the old order." Nihilism, the indiscriminate rejection of every value associated with Russia's Orthodox, feudal past, emerged as the dominant intellectual current early in the decade, finding eloquent expression in the fierce generational conflict embodied by Turgenev's Bazarov.

By the mid 1860s, Russia's political and intellectual upheaval had picked up new momentum. Russia was a land of enormous contradictions. Alexander had initiated the "Great Reforms," freeing the peasants, establishing institutions of local self government and more. Yet he was hardly prepared to carry his reforms to their logical conclusion: the abolition of autocracy, passage of a democratic constitution and agrarian reform. He opened up Russia just enough for it to polarize itself. The newly liberated peasants were displaced, and the intellectuals, who looked to the model of Western democracy, were disillusioned. Capitalization continued, but was hindered by a shortage of liquid capital in this overwhelmingly agrarian country, and by autocratic political forms inconsistent with free market economy. As the decade wore on, the limits of Alexander's much

touted reforms became increasingly clear. The intellectuals felt abandoned and betrayed, and turned to an idealized view of the peasantry as the real source of Russia's stability and strength. Nihilism quickly gave way to Populism, and the quiet nobility of the peasant commune (mir) gained new prominence in Russian letters. A significant revolutionary movement, led by Herzen, Bakunin and others, began to emerge and entrench itself abroad. The ferment which would ultimately culminate in 1905 and 1917 had begun.

Alexander II was quick to respond to the new populist and revolutionary fervor. Tchernishevsky, the much respected author of the populist novel What Is To Be Done?, was sentenced to sixteen years of penal exile in Siberia. The disaffection of the intellectuals continued to grow. In 1866, an obscure nobleman tried, unsuccessfully, to assassinate the Tsar. That act, historians generally agree, proved the final straw and brought the "Period of the Great Reforms" to a screeching halt. A new reaction had begun. Though some Reforms did continue into the 1870s, Russian society was now sharply and irreparably delineated between the forces of political reaction and those of democracy, populism and revolution.[6]

All these developments did not go unnoticed in the Jewish sphere. Abramovitch, like many maskilim, was conversant with Russian letters and profoundly influenced. His Fathers and Sons no doubt directly reflects that literary influence; yet at the same time it gives native expression to a growing generational conflict within the Jewish community itself, for Jews were being tossed about by the same political currents that rocked all of Russia. Many Jews had greeted Nicholas's death in 1855 with great

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[6]Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, A History of Russia, 2nd ed. (NY, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969), esp. chapters xxix, xxxii and xxxiii.

enthusiasm. They believed that Alexander would bring about a "Golden Age" in Russian Jewish history. The Jewish press opened up with the relaxation of censorship, and hurried to lap its gratitude at the throne of the new Tsar. The premiere edition of the Russian language Jewish periodical Razvet (appropriately, "Dawn"), editorialized: "Thank God that we live in such times." In 1862 the Jewish community of Vilna sent a special letter to Alexander, proclaiming that

> the last eight years [sic] have been for us, the Jews of Russia, absolutely the happiest in our history.[7]

But all the gratitude and optimism turned out to be a bit premature. The Jews never did score much of a bargain with the "Great Reforms." True, cantonist conscription was eliminated and the draft equalized. But beyond that it was only the rich who benefited, as with the issuance of "right of domicile" beyond the Pale to Jewish "merchants of the first guild." The poor continued to suffer under the old disabilities of restricted trade, domicile and political expression, and at the same time faced the consequences of two new developments. The liberation of the serfs in 1861 had put an end to the middleman position of many Jews (tax farmers, lessees, tavern keepers), and Jews were further displaced economically by the unchecked influx of homeless peasants into the cities. Moreover, the Jews had suffered a personal defeat with the collapse of the Polish Revolution of 1863. Jews in ethnic Poland, fed up with the oppression of Russian occupation, were quick to respond to the generous promises made by Polish intellectuals and noblemen and enlisted on the side of the

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[7] In Tcherikover, op. cit., p. 75.

Revolution.[8] When the Revolution failed, Jewish middlemen were left economically destitute following the collapse of the Polish nobility, and at the same time the Jewish community had cast upon itself the aspersion of treason in the eyes of the Russian regime. With the advent of official reaction in 1866, Jews were readily targeted for new repression and disabilities.

As a consequence of these political developments, a wedge was driven between proponents of the Haskala and the masses of poor Jews. I have already argued that Enlightenment ideology is, historically, the property of an ascendant bourgeoisie, and that the Jewish Haskala in particular made its way into Russia through the expansion of trade in Galicia and Lithuania. Despite open collaboration with the Russian authorities (even during the brutal reign of Nicholas I), most maskilim maintained, and no doubt honestly believed, that their ultimate goal was to enlighten the masses "for their own good." As long as things went well and political liberalism was on the upswing, the interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie and those of the people ran more or less parallel; the maskilim faced no contradiction. Now, however, with the advent of a new reaction, the priorities of the bourgeoisie and those of the people began to part company, and for the first time the maskilim were forced to choose which side they would serve.

The ascendant Jewish bourgeoisie in Russia was of a distinct character. Concentrated increasingly in large scale, capital intensive industry

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[8] Dubnov, History of the Jews, v. 5 (South Brunswick, NY and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1973), pp. 328-330. In Warsaw the Rabbi Berush Meisels led the local Jewish population in support of the uprising. Only in Vilna and other areas without a strong presence of ethnic Poles did the Jews oppose the Revolution and side with the Russians.

such as railroad construction and textile production for military production,[9] the new Jewish plutocrats had a very real stake in the maintenance of the overall status quo and the continued good favor of the Tsarist regime. The Revolution of 1863 proved a watershed of sorts, for the bourgeoisie continued to side loyally with the Tsar, in contradistinction to the masses of Polish Jews who sided with the Revolution's progressive promise.[10] Though there was as yet little direct economic relationship between Jewish rich and poor, it was clear that the rich prospered from their support of the regime, while the poor only got poorer under a displaced economy and increasing political reaction. It became more and more difficult for the intellectual maskilim to ignore this rift; in 1863 most aligned themselves with the patriotic stance of the bourgeoisie.

Abramovitch came up against this growing polarization of Jewish society at first hand in the years immediately following his enthusiastic ode to Enlightenment in Dos vintshfingerl. He had been supporting himself through contracts with Mefitse Haskala, "The Society for the Propagation of Enlightenment Among Jews," a small group comprised of very rich Jewish merchants in St. Petersburg. Abramovitch had been commissioned to prepare a Hebrew translation of a classic work on Russian history. When the first

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[9] Yuditsky, op. cit.; Menes, op. cit.

[10] Historians raise some question as to the exact nature of the Polish Revolution. Because Polish noblemen were prominent in the movement's leadership, many consider it a reactionary manifestation. Within the context of its own time, however, the Revolution was generally regarded as a progressive force, since it challenged the imperialism of the Russian Empire, which was considered far more oppressive than the remnants of Polish feudalism. The Revolution received the contemporary endorsement of Marx, Engels, Garibaldi and others. Engels believed that it would weaken the Russian Empire and therefore prove a necessary precondition for revolution in Russia proper. See Tcherikover, op. cit., p. 75.

volume was finally completed, however, the translator was informed that he had "taken too many liberties" and his contract was terminated. It is difficult to know how Abramovitch regarded this affront; he doesn't mention it in any of his known memoirs. But whatever his response, it was definitely a portent of things to come. The same tensions soon emerged in another context: Abramovitch was flatly refused when he applied for financial assistance to launch a new, regular Yiddish newspaper, Ben ami, "Son of My People."

Abramovitch must have been understandably naive when he first approached the Jewish plutocrats of St. Petersburg for support. They were, after all, the most prominent and influential proponents of the Haskala in all of Russia, and it seemed only fitting that they would support Abramovitch in his well intended, and capably executed, attempt to reach the common people in their own language. But Abramovitch had failed to take notice of the social roots of Enlightenment ideology. The Mefitse Haskala had itself been founded in 1863. Its original members were all large scale merchants, who had been granted the right of domicile in St. Petersburg (the capital city, located outside the Pale) in 1859, after petitioning the government for special privileges "commensurate with their wealth and position." When people like the baronial Ginsburg family (who had initiated the original petition for special privileges) and certain apostate Jews (who had converted to expedite their business dealings) joined together to "propagate Enlightenment," personal considerations of the most crass sort were never far beneath the surface of philanthropic rhetoric. These merchants needed the freedom of domicile, movement and political expression appropriate to the scale of their economic enterprise. Yet as Jews, they

were hindered by many of the disabilities and prejudices which afflicted all Jews. Since the government maintained that "special" Jewish legislation was necessary because of the backwardness and obscurantism of the Jewish masses, the plutocrats could see no other way of altering that legislation beyond committing themselves to the "education" of the masses. The "propagation of Enlightnment" was no more than a necessary precondition for their own economic success. As L. Rosenthal, one of the founders of Mefitse Haskala, expressed it forthrightly:

> From high ranking persons whom we meet, we heard time and again their rebuking Jews for being segregated, fanatical and alien to everything Russian. We were assured that with the abolition of these peculiarities, the situation of our brothers in Russia would improve, and that all of us would enjoy equal rights on a par with the other citizens. That fact impelled us to establish an association of educated persons, with a view to eradicating the above mentioned shortcomings by means of teaching Russian and useful knowledge to Jews.[11]

Abramovitch himself had little stake in such blatant class interests. He was committed to the spread of Enlightenment because he honestly subscribed to the liberal premise that "good ideas" would affect social amelioration. He had no qualms about using Yiddish as a pragmatic vehicle in the service of Enlightenment cause. The plutocrats of St. Petersburg, however, were a good deal more perspicacious and a good deal more calculating in these matters. When Abramovitch appeared in St. Petersburg with a proposal for a Yiddish newspaper, the plutocrats promptly refused any assistance. No doubt they understood how threatening Yiddish could be to the political status quo which they sought to preserve. At a time when Tchernishevsky was languishing in Siberian exile and the Populist champions of Russian literature were under attack, it would hardly have been

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[11] Cited by Dubnov, A History of the Jews, v. 5, p. 344.

appropriate for the Jewish haute-bourgeoisie to support a "populist" literary endeavor within its own camp. As the new reaction took root, the leaders of the Mefitse Haskala grew more and more cautious. They restricted their efforts to mild political lobbying and the commissioning of Hebrew translations of non-controversial Russian scientific works. They saw to their own business, and did everything in their power to keep the Jewish masses in check. The "propagation of Enlightenment" meant that their "poor brothers" should not find literary (or any other) expression, should not embarrass them or jeopardize their precarious financial security.

By the late 1860s it had therefore been made clear to Abramovitch that he was not dealing with a simple conflict of well-meaning Reason vs. ill-willed Obscurantism. Throughout all of Russia and Galicia the Haskala was showing itself to be rank with timidity and bourgeois self-interest. Abramovitch didn't need to read Marx to perceive the class basis which underlay much of the ideology of Enlightenment. But even as this new realization slowly dawned, Abramovitch hardly found surcease from his ongoing struggle with the old Jewish world. The contradictions of Russian economy and politics had produced a whirlpool of opposing historical forces, and Abramovitch was sucked into the fray. Yet it was precisely out of such contradictions and diversity that he would apply his intuitive dialectical genius and open a new phase of Yiddish literature.

Abramovitch settled in the late 1860s in Berdichev, a large city in the Ukraine well known as a bastion of Hasidism and tradition against a toehold of the Haskala. According to an 1861 census, the city had a Jewish population of 46,683, fully 80 percent of the total, making it the

second largest Jewish center in Russia.[12] Since the liberation of the serfs and the decline of the Polish nobility in 1863, the feudal economy of the city has been in great disorder. Poverty and indigence were rampant among a population consisting largely of unemployed middlemen and semi-skilled artisans working in tiny shops of primitive secondary production. Against this backdrop of economic decay, the wealthy communal leaders clung ever more desperately to a weakening structure of traditional religious authority. Thus when Abramovitch entered the city with his reputation as a maskil already well known, he was met with widespread opposition and persecution. He was unable to find gainful employment as a teacher, and was forced to support himself and his family solely by his writing: a tenuous livelihood at best.

The longer Abramovitch remained in Berdichev, the more acutely aware he became of the poverty of its citizens and the ineffectuality of traditional communal institutions in responding to their needs. As was the case in many cities of the Pale at the time, the communal administration of Berdichev was demoralized and corrupt. The old Kahal (communal council) which once oversaw a vibrant, "autonomous" Jewish government, had been weakened by the official abolition of Jewish communal autonomy in 1844 and the subsequent horror of cantonist conscription. The "old" bourgeoisie, the rich of the city, were fighting an uphill battle for the preservation of their wealth and station amid pervasive economic chaos, and they did not hesitate to manipulate the machinery of communal administration as a tool for their private gain. Funds raised through obligatory

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[12] "Berdichev," Encyclopedia Judaica, v. 4, pp. 589-591.

communal taxes on kosher meat, candles, burial and other essentials were chaneled into private coffers, precisely at a time when traditional communal services (such as free loans, poor houses, nominal medical care, old age homes and orphanages) were needed more than ever by an increasingly indigent population. The rich got richer, or at least struggled to hold their own, while the poor suffered from disease and malnutrition. Berdichev sat in a sort of no man's land between feudal and capitalist economy, with the rich squeezing the last drops from a rotten system and the displaced poor suffering indignity upon indignity, with no new industry or economic system yet prepared to absorb them.

Abramovitch could not remain silent in the face of the intense human suffering which festered all around him. As he had shown in Dos vintshfingerl, his Enlightenment ideology derived from concern with the society at large, not with individual class interest. He was genuinely committed to a better world for his poor fellow Jews, and was ready to come to their aid in a time of such overwhelming need, regardless of the consequences. A contemporary report tells of a public meeting in Berdichev in 1865 or 1866, at which Abramovitch was present. The report, published in Hamelits, calls the meeting a "scandal," because Abramovitch "failed to guard his words." He attacked the rich of the city for their corruption, speaking with such ardor that he

> incensed the city's Hasidic majority, . . . and even among the enlightened minority all were not with him.[13]

Abramovitch had inadvertently entered upon a two sided struggle. He knew the common people at first hand, was committed to their welfare,

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[13] Yosef Yehuda Lerner in Hamelits, 1866, no. 39. Cited by Weinreich, "Mendeles onheyb," p. 351.

moved by their suffering and prepared to do all in his power to help. Toward that end, he had previously contravened the literary aesthetic of the Haskala by writing in Yiddish. Now he was moving toward a more materialist understanding of the predicament, and would be willing to contravene the Haskala's social theory as well. He was up against his fellow maskilim as much as against the hostile hasidim of Berdichev, and was compelled to speak to both. Di takse was his response. On the surface, the play would be an expose of the corruption of the communal officials of Berdichev, who ruthlessly exploited the poor Jews. But at a time of such momentous historical upheaval and personal transition, Di takse could not help but convey Abramovitch's own story as well.

2. Mendele's Introduction: Setting the Dialectical Stage

Di takse differed from its predecessors in many respects: language, imagery, style, characterization and of course implicit social theory. But its first and most obvious point of departure was that of literary genre: Dos kleyne mentshele and Dos vintshfingerl are stories, Di takse is a play. The use of dramatic form signaled two intriguing possibilities. On the one hand, it tied in with indigenous popular artistic expression. Though no formal Yiddish theatre yet existed in Russia, wandering minstrel troupes such as the accomplished Broder Zinger ("Singers of Brody") had begun to wend their way through the Jewish towns of Galicia and Russia, performing rhyming tales of familiar joys and sorrows.[14] Though Abramovitch's play more closely resembled Yiddish Haskala antecedents such as Wolfson and Euchels, Israel Axenfeld and Shloyme Etinger, it nonetheless drew on popular associations, and could be convincingly presented as the work of poor Jews of Glupsk (Berdichev). Moreover, dramatic form allowed for greater flexibility of narrative structure. The Glupsk Jews were the play's purported authors; they were uneducated and inarticulate, and it would have been inconsistent for them to assume the function of omniscient narration. A spoken Yiddish vernacular was appropriate to the dialogue of a play, not to narration or lyric description. In short, Di takse's dramatic form makes it literarily possible for the people to do the talking.

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[14] On Yiddish theatre in Russia in the 1860s see A. Gurshteyn, "Der yidisherteater in di 60-er yorn funem XIX yorhundert," Mendele un zayn tsayt, pp. 179-220.

The message imparted by the form is confirmed in the play's introduction, a narrative frame presented by Reb Mendele. Mendele, the literary persona of Abramovitch, promptly sets up a narrative maze of his own. He tells us that the play was written by poor Jews of Glupsk, and came into his hands quite inadvertently. He was minding his own business one day when a large package arrived. Always concerned with making a living, he assumed that the package contained "talesim, yarmelkes" or other ritual merchandise. When he opened it, however, he was surprised to find a pile of disheveled papers, accompanied by a letter. The letter, which Mendele proceeds to share with us, is a desperate plea by a group of poor men of Glupsk. They tell Mendele that they are hungry and sick, oppressed almost to death by a corrupt communal administration, a "band of 'do-gooders' [baley-toyves] who have thrown their favors upon the unfortunate city and are leading people around by the nose."[15] The people have tried every possible recourse for redress, from pleading to petitions, but all to no avail:

> נאָר וואס הערט א וועלט? זיי זענען רייך, זיי זענען גבירים .ג.
>
> But do you think the world listens to us? They're rich, they're gevirim [. . .]
>
> They exploit us, suck our blood, and
>
> באגראבן אונדז נאָך צען איילן אין דער ערד.
>
> then bury us ten cubits in the ground.[16]

The poor are despondent and powerless, and have no place left to turn. They've written a play to tell their story, but are too afraid of

[15] Di takse, p. 3.

[17] Ibid., loc. cit.

personal retribution to publish it themselves. And so they turn to one person whom they can trust--Mendele, the itinerant bookpeddler:

מיר װילן נאָך פּרוּװן אײן מיטל אָפּדרוקן די דאָזיקע
מעשה... מיר פֿאַרזיכערן אײַך אַז אַלצדינג װאָס שטײט
דאָ איז אמת, מיר קענען אַפֿילו שװערן אין טלית און
קיטל. [...] מיר בעטן אײַך, ר׳ מענדעלע, טוט א מצוה
און דרוקט אָפּ די מעשה.

We've still gotta find some way to get our story published. . . . We assure you that everything which is written here is true--that we'd swear to in our prayer shawls and solemn white shrouds. [. . .] We beseech you, Reb Mendele, do a mitsve, a good deed, and bring our story to print.[17]

Mendele is suddenly thrust into a very different role than we have seen him in previously. Until now he was just a simple bookpeddler, a Jew trying to make a living like all others. He was after a fast ruble, and claimed no other commitment to the material he published. Now he is clearly asked to take a stand. There is no money to be made from the publication of Di takse. It depicts a fierce struggle, and Mendele knows he will make many enemies by getting involved. But by the same token people are hungry, they are counting on him for help, and he cannot bear to remain silent. Assuming great personal expense and sacrifice, Mendele agrees to edit and publish the work:

איך דאַנק און לויב גאָט, װאָס ער האָט מיך באַהערצט
און מיר געהאָלפֿן אָפּצודרוקן די דאָזיקע שרעקלעך־
שײנע מעשה. איך האָב נישט געזשאַלעװעט קײן מי, נישט קײן
געלט און האָב נישט געקוקט דעראױף װאָס א טײל װעלן
אױף מיר שטאַרק ברוגז זײַן. די מעשה איז ח׳לעבן
אמת. איך האָב קײן אָסור נישט אױסגעטראַכט פֿון דעם
קאָפּ, הערט נאָר ײדן, הערט נאָר װאָס עס איז געשען.

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[17] Ibid., p. 4.

> I thank God and sing His praises, for he has granted me courage and helped me to bring this wonderously moving story to print. I have spared neither exertion nor money, and have not been dissuaded by the fact that many will be very angry with me. The story is, I swear on my life, true. I didn't make up a single word of it. So just listen, my fellow Jews, just listen to what has happened.[18]

In Dos kleyne mentshele and Dos vintshfingerl Mendele went to great lengths to assure the reader of his non-partisan relation to the material he published. Why does he now feel free to make his own identification clear? No doubt Abramovitch felt personally besieged in Berdichev and wrote the play in a surge of enormous passion. He may have been carried away by the urgency of the moment and lost artistic control over his persona. Indeed, in subsequent works Mendele returns, at least for a time, to a position of greater detachment toward his subjects.[19] It is also possible, however, that Abramovitch felt more confident about the authenticity of his persona. Mendele is arelady a familiar literary figure, his folksiness well attested. In earlier works he talked so much about "making a buck" in order to emphasize his identification with the value system of his readers. Now he feels that his reputation and acceptance are secure, and so can jump right into the story, skipping the more patronizing overtures. Moreover, his literary language has been greatly refined: Mendele's speech serves in and of itself to affirm his folk origins. For example, in Di takse's opening paragraph (immediately preceding the passage cited above), Mendele steps forth and announces his undisguised support for the people in their struggle against the communal officials.

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[18] Di takse, p. 3.

[19] In his next few works (Di kliatshe, 1873; Masoes Benyomin Hashlishi, 1878), Mendele restricts himself to narrow frame introductions and offers only ironic allusion to his own opinion of his subjects. In later

Even as he does so, his language and cultural references somehow mitigate the radical tenor of his position:

אַמר מענדעלע מוכר ספרים. זאָגט מענדעלע מוכר ספרים. געלויבט איז דער בורא וואָס האָט באשאפן גרויסע ימים, זייער פיל מיכן, [...] די הרי חושך, די מדברי ות, פוסטענעס, א סך וויילדע מקומות און די גרויסע יידישע שטאָט גלופסק. געלויבט איז זיין ליבע נאָמען, וואָס האָט אונדז ירן אויסגעוויילט פון אלע אומות און האָט אונדז געלייטזליגט מיט א מאסע, מיט א קעסטעלע, מיט פאפעטשימעלעס, מיט גבאים, מיט קהלס ליים, מיט פאחיערענעס, מיט בוררים, ישרנים, שחדלנים און מיט זייער פיל בטלנים...

THUS SPAKE MENDELE MOYKHER SFORIM. So says Mendele Moyker Sforim. Praised be the Creator who has created huge seas, countless rivers, [. . .] the Mountains of Darkness, the deserts, tundras, innumerable wildernesses and the great Jewish City of Glupsk. Praised by His Beloved Name, Who chose us Jews from among all the nations, and bestowed his favor upon us with a Tax, with a collection box, with worries, with synagogues trustees, with community council members, with attorneys, with arbitrators, administrators of justice, lobbyists and with all sorts of hangers-on. . . .[20]

The paragraph continues in the same vein, after which Mendele adds:

נים דאס אבער בין איך אויסן.

But that's all beside the point.

Except of course that it's precisely the point. Mendele has challenged the most basic institutions of the traditional Jewish establishment. Yet he has done so with such a friendly tone and rambling cadence, a first hand familiarity with God and an easy humor, that rather than alienating his readers he has reinforced his comradery with them. Indeed, the structure of his social critique seems directly inspired by the native folk

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works (Fishke der krumer, 1888; Shloyme Reb Khayms, 1899), however, Mendele becomes a full fledged character in his own right, freely interacting and openly siding with other characters in the story.

[20] Di takse, p. 3.

expression which Abramovitch had encountered on the beggars' wagon. Compare, for example, Mendele's line, "Praised by His beloved Name, Who chose us Jews from among all the nations, and bestowed his favor upon us with a Tax . . .," with the previously cited Yiddish saying, "THOU HAS CHOSEN US FROM AMONG THE NATIONS: So why did you pick on us Jews?"[21] His disclaimer notwithstanding, Mendele's opening lines say exactly what he wants them to. By adopting the language patterns of the people he reinforces his identification and gains entry into their world; his linguistic medium is itself an important part of his message.

Still another, and perhaps most significant factor is indicated by Mendele's explicit espousal of his cause. As much as his language has changed, so too have his politics. In earlier works the implicit social theory was that of classical Enlightenment. Since the proponents of Enlightenment were openly complicit with the reactionary regime, they were considered heretics and traitors in the eyes of the people. Mendele therefore let his own proponents of Enlightenment (Gutman and the Litvak, and their respective protegees Takef and Hershele) speak for themselves. He offered his tacit approval, but was careful to keep his distance. If now, in Di takse, he can overtly identify with the cause of his characters, it is largely because that cause itself has changed. In his Hebrew essay of 1867 Abramovitch had intimated a definite ideological break from the classical Haskala. His goal now is not the simple "propagation of Enlightenment," but rather defense of the poor in their struggle against wealthy communal officials. The new struggle, though intrinsically more

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[21] Supra, p. 41.

radical, is nonetheless more acceptable in the eyes of the people. It is not a heretical program imposed on the people from the outside "for their own good," but rather addresses an immediate issue which the people themselves regard as important. It champions their own cause, attacks their own enemies. Mendele is able to bring his social theory out into the open because it now corresponds with that of the people, expressed in their own language and on their own terms.

A much broader question, however, is raised by Mendele's overt political identification. If Mendele now sides directly with the people, then to whom is he speaking, whom is he trying to convert? If he no longer feels it necessary to prowl about as a "traveler disguised," hiding his own sympathies while slipping a dose of alien Enlightenment to the common people (wrapped in their own language), then for whose benefit is the Mendele mask now intended? On one level, of course, Mendele merely continues his didactic harangue to the unenlightened Jews. If he is not exposing the folly and hypocrisy of their religious obscurantism, then at least he is exhorting them to action in the new struggle. But in a broader sense, Mendele's new found honesty implies that the whole thrust of the didactic message has now shifted. After all, in 1867 Abramovitch made it clear that he did not consider the people solely responsible for their lot, but instead took cognizance of a broader political context. That being so, he now addresses not only the people, but also those who are in a position to influence and improve their condition. He addresses not only the Jewish masses but also his fellow maskilim, who until now have remained blind to the people's real struggle. Mendele is no longer, or at least not only, the persona designed to speak the maskil's words to the

people; the mask has taken on a Janus-like configuration, speaking not only to the people but for them. If Mendele no longer need reiterate his concern with "making a living," if he no longer need shore up his identification with the values and life style of the people, it is as much due to the fact that he addresses a different audience as it is to the refinement of language or transition of theory per se. Mendele is asked by the Jews of Glupsk to publish their own words and carry their story to the world beyond; it is therefore the "outside world" which is designated as the new audience, and for whom Mendele, that master of disguise, must now refine his language and reposition his mask. It is true, of course, that Mendele's actual audience may not have changed all that much. He was writing in a supplement to Hamelits and read by maskilim all along. But until now the maskilim were colleagues with whom Abramovitch shared his professional tips and techniques; now they themselves are being spoken to.

Thus we return to a central question: if Abramovitch now directs the thrust of his writing to his fellow maskilim, if he now speaks ideas less to the people than for them, then why should he continue to write in Yiddish? As I have already suggested, this dilemma provides a large part of the play's underlying dramatic tension. The first inkling of resolution may already be apparent in Mendele's introduction. Mendele tells us that the play has been written by the people themselves. He is obviously moved by their predicament. He assures us that the story "is, I swear on my life, true," since he has seen as much with his own eyes in the course of his travels. Yet Mendele is a person of wide learning, conversant with Hebrew and friendly with many German-speaking maskilim (such as Gutman and the translator of Dos vintshfingerl). If he really wanted to offer the

play to a wider audience, to bring the plight of the Glupsk poor to the attention of the world, then why would he not prepare or commission a Hebrew or German translation of the work? The answer, we may infer, resides in the strength of the original. The play is the work of common people; it derives its power precisely from the authentic imagery and idiom of their native speech. As the Glupsk Jews characterize their voice in their cover letter to Mendele:

נאָר איר זאָלט וויסן אז אין אונדזער בריוו שרייט צו
אײַך א קול פון א סך צעבראָכענע הערצער, פון א סך
אומגליקלי׳כע ייִדן, דאָס איז א קול פון ארעמע לײַט
פון נויט באדרפענישׂ, פון בעלי־מלאכות, און פון
דערשלאָגענע מענטשן. [...] דאָס איז א קול פון
פארחיסטע חיבער און קינדער, וואָס מען האָט זייערע
מאנען נעבען פארשיקט אוֹן אײַנגעזעצט אין די
טורמעס, דאָס איז א קול פון א סך דערשלאָגענע,
פאַרוואָגלטע ייִדיש קינדער, הערט ר׳מענדלע דאָס
קול. [...]

Please be aware that from our letter there cries out to you a voice of many broken hearts, of many unfortunate Jews. This is a voice of poor people in dire need, of artisans and of downtrodden men. [. . .] This is a voice of wretched women and children, whose husbands, nebekh, have been sent off and locked up in prison. This is a voice of disheartened, homeless Jewish children. Listen, Reb Mendele, listen to this voice. [. . .][22]

Yiddish and Yiddish alone expresses the voice of the poor. The language therefore assumes a different function, a different "aesthetic" than it has previously. It is no longer employed as a "necessary evil," a utilitarian concession to readers who understand no other tongue. To the contrary, Abramovitch wants to bring the message of Glupsk to the world, and he considers Yiddish the most effective medium for so weighty a task. Only through Yiddish (or, later, a Yiddishized Hebrew) can one accurately portray the world of the common Jews as they themselves live and see it.

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[22] Di takse, pp. 4-5.

The merit of Abramovitch's new aesthetic will be born out in the play itself, as well as by all his subsequent Yiddish writings. For now he is determined to give the language a fair trial. If he is assigning Yiddish a new function, he wants to make sure that it will muster all its latent power, that it will weather the transition from a spoken vernacular to an effective literary language. It is this function which he now turns over to Mendele at the close of the frame introduction.

Mendele tells us that the manuscript he received was in a terrible state, with pages out of order, torn, tattered and spattered with ink spots:

> א גאנץ פאק פאפירן, פארשריבן פון אלע זייטן [...]
> דער כתב יד איז ניט געחען ריין געשריבן, ערטער־
> חייז פארפלעקט מיט טינט, פיל סצענעס זיינען
> געחעזען פארחענט ניט געשטאנען כסדר, היינט אין
> א פאר ערטער האט גאר געפעלט עטלעכע בלעטלעך...

> [I received] a big bundle of papers, scribbled on all sides. [. . .] The manuscrpt was not very neatly written. It was spattered in places with ink, many of the scenes were mixed up and out of order, in a few places some of the pages were missing altogether . . .[23]

He had no choice but to take the liberty of editing and polishing, rustling the play into presentable form.

Here, I believe, Abramovitch presents a precise metaphor for the predicament of any author who seeks to mold a literary language out of a pre-literate or semi-literate vernacular. Until now Yiddish had embodied a linguistic "L" or "Low" function,[24] perceived as an imprecise,

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[23] Di takse, pp. 3, 5.

[24] "L" and "H" are standard linguistic terms. I first heard them applied to Yiddish during a lecture by Joshua Fishman on the Tchernowitz Language Conference. McGill University, March 7, 1979.

grammatically and syntactically disordered spoken language, full of "ink spots" hiding essential words and concepts. Rather than dismissing the language, or the manuscript, as unredeemable, Abramovitch sets Mendele to the task of refashioning the "L" into a new "H," a "High" or literary function. The task was by no means easy, as Mendele informs us:

> חכלל עס איז מיר גענוג די אויגן ארויסגעקראכן
> ביז איך האב אלצדינג צונויפגעשטעלט. איך האב
> מיר נים געקענט איינהאלטן אין ערטערווייז אריינ-
> מישן מיינע א פאר ווערטער פון דעם וואס איך האב
> געזען געהערט אויף מיינע נסיעות...

> To make a long story short, my eyes had practically fallen out of my head before I had gotten everyting whooped into shape. I couldn't resist sticking in my own two cents worth every now and again, based on what I had seen and heard in the course of my travels.[25]

Mendele allows himself generous editorial license, dropping and adding scenes, polishing the language and adding a table of personae dramatis at the play's start. We can assume that these editorial tasks constitute the "two cents worth" ("mayne a por verter") which Mendele cannot resist interjecting, based on the experiences of his travels, i.e., literary conventions and devices which Abramovitch is "bringing back home" after his own "travels" as a reader of foreign literatures. Thus Di takse stands self-consciously as an experimental work, where Abramovitch will try to fashion a new Yiddish aesthetic, a literary "H" out of an inarticulate "L." It is the work's genius, as we shall presently observe, that the linguistic experiment is intimately bound to the play's story line and dramatic structure. Mendele meanwhile is unable to conceal his pride in what he perceives to be an artistic success; he constantly intrudes himself in the text through explanatory footnotes, ostensibly to set straight

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[25] Di takse, p. 5.

the play's crooked chronology and corroborate its facts, but more to the point to remind us of his constant presence, taking credit for his commensurate skill in fashioning a viable "H" out of the torn and tattered "L" with which he began.

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Thus at the end of Mendele's frame introduction we know of two important changes: The social struggle which necessitates the literary work is no longer that of simple Reason vs. Obscurantism, but is now a material struggle between rich and poor. And secondly, the primary designated audience of the play includes not only untutored Jews who speak only Yiddish, but also fellow maskilim. That Abramovitch gives us this information in the opening frame implies that the real dramatic development of the play will lie elsewhere, perhaps synthesizing the two. The maskil who has read thus far will marvel, "Whew, Abramovitch has gone through big changes. I wonder how he got there?" and the play will be able to relate that story. But the more perceptive reader will ask, "Abramovitch sure has gone through big changes. But how can he continue to write in Yiddish now that he has transcended his original didactic function of speaking to the masses?" That is the paradox which Abramovitch himself must face, and which will constitute the final, underlying dramatic line of Di takse. The dialectical stage has been set between a materialist social theory which addresses the outside world and a Yiddish voice which seems inappropriate to the task; it is time for the play to begin.

3. Rich and Poor

Di takse is structured in five acts of four, five, nine, six and nine scenes respectively. The action spans sixteen years, from 1856 (the ascension of Alexander II) to 1870 (the present, more or less), and focuses on the administration of the communal Meat Tax in Glupsk. Amid great platitudes of "public service," the rich have conspired to establish a monopoly over communal governance. As the years go by the rich get more and more greedy. "The main thing," the self righteous Reb Itsik Volf Spodik tells us as he pores over an open Talmud in the first scene, "one must have money. One must have money, money, money."[26] The rich "do-gooders" heartlessly raise the Tax time and time again, driving many poor Jews to destitution and then embezzling the collected funds into their own coffers. Any hints of public opposition are met with by extortion, bribery, religious denunciation and, as the play progresses, outright violence.

The salient feature of the play is the division of Glupsk into two sharply defined and mutually hostile camps: the rich and the poor. "Who is the city?," one of the wealthy communal officials asks, "us or the paupers, the artisans?"[27] The lines are drawn by crude stereotypes: the rich are hypocritically pious, devious and above all greedy, while the poor (ostensibly the authors of the play) are indigent but good-hearted. The rich cut each other's throats; the poor share a mutual support and camaraderie which could rival any peasant commune of contemporary Russian Populist literature.

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[26] Di takse, p. 7. [27] Ibid., p. 41.

By drawing such sharp lines between rich and poor Abramovitch announces an important departure from the social theory advanced in earlier works. In Dos kleyne mentshele he attacked the "little men" who live off the wealth of the gevir, the "legitimate" rich man. "The gevir," we were assured, "has money and is still a fine person."[28] Now no such distinctions are made. All rich are lumped together, as we have seen in the introductory letter:

זיי זינען ריך, זיי זינען גבירים...

They are rich, they are gevirim . . .[29]

All poor are similarly lumped and labeled; they are characterized as hard working or unemployed artisans, "cobblers, tailors, carpenters" and the like.

It would be anachronistic to suggest that Abramovitch was depicting a class struggle in the strict Marxist sense; Marxist categories were not widely accepted in Russia until their introduction by Plekhanov twenty-five years later. If anything, Abramovitch reflects the influence of Russian Populism, the idealization of the poor predominant in contemporary works by Tchernishevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy and others. If Russian writers could sing the praises of the peasant commune, then Abramovitch could turn to his own poor; it was only incidental that the Jewish poor were often urban workers who happened to fit the Marxist criterion of "proletarian" production.[30]

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[29] Di takse, p. 3; supra, p. 161.

[30] It was only after the failure of peasant Populism in the 1870s and '80s that Russian (and most Jewish) intellectuals began to turn their attention to the urban poor, thus opening the way for the acceptance of Marxist ideology in Russia. Since Jews comprised a disproportionate percentage of this urban "proletariat," they quickly became a prime focus of Social-Democratic agitation. Jews played a leading role in Jewish and non-Jewish Marxist parties through the 1917 Revolution and beyond.

As for the polarization of rich and poor which Abramovitch portrays, this was wholly consistent with historical fact. We have already noted the pervasive economic upheaval of the 1860s. Though Jewish rich and poor generally were not engaged in a direct employer-employee relationship, they were in daily contact in the synagogues and on the streets, and their lifestyles came to contrast more and more sharply. Add to this the fact that the rich had pretty well monopolized the institutions of communal administration, were often corrupt and at the very least were unwilling or unable to meet the needs of unprecedented numbers of poor who were accustomed to turning to the community for support, and the situation appears explosive indeed. In his history of the early years of the Jewish socialist movement, Ab. Menes cites many examples of open revolt by poor Jews against communal officials, and sees in this a direct precursor of the full fledged class struggle which was to erupt three decades later.[31] The rise of Hasidism among poor Jews often provided a focal point for communal revolt.[32] Mahler indicates that tax resistance was so widespread among Hasidic populations in Galicia that areas without some form of resistance could be assumed to be non-Hasidic areas. In one well known case, the solidarity of Hasidim in Lemberg in 1830

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[31]Menes, "Di yidishe arbeter-bavegung in Rusland fun onheyb 70er bizn sof 90er yorn," Historishe shriftn, III, esp. pp. 1-8. After the Holocaust Menes began to romanticize a lost world; he reversed his position of the present essay and depicted the shtetl as a place of great harmony between rich and poor. See "The Jewish Socialist Movement in Russia and Poland," The Jewish People Past and Present, II (NY: CYCO, 1948), pp. 355-368.

[32]Weinryb, The Jews of Poland, pp. 284-294, mentions sporadic popular uprisings against corrupt communal officials since the 1770s. Supra, p. 18.

actually prevailed over a special government-sponsored Rabbinic commission and resulted in a reduction in taxes.[33]

Both the rich and poor in Di takse are more than composite stereotypes, with only superficial differentiation of individual characters. The story line is clearly dominated by the rich. Act One goes back sixteen years and describes the self-serving "sacrifice" with which the rich assumed control of the Tax. Act Two tells in further detail of the growing greed of the do-gooders, as they manage to channel more and more public money into their own pockets at the expense of the poor. Act Three is entitled "Acts of Rebellion," but in reality offers only one scene to the rebels and spends the rest of the time recounting the perfidy of the rich in suppressing opposition. It is not until Act Four that the play's action is brought to the present and active dramatic struggle begins. In the Fifth and final Act the conflict of rich and poor climaxes in direct confrontation.

Why is so much of the play's attention given over to the rich? This is surely not intended to impart depth or understanding to the individual characters. Each rich man is a self-contained stereotype, whose disposition is fully predetermined by his name: Reb Itsik Volf Spodik ("Fur Hat," a traditional garment of piety worn by rabbis and scholars), the self-righteous hypocrite; Moyshe Bal Takhlis, the master of "practical details"; Arn Knekhtbarg ("Slave Mountain"), the perennial lackey of the others. No attempt is made to understand or curry sympathy for the rich. The text intends no more than to expose hypocrisy and ill will: since the purported authors are poor, then it is obviously the rich who

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[33] Mahler, Der kamf tsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsie, pp. 31-32.

are under attack. But a certain amount of the disproportionate portrayal may also be attributable to the literary language itself. Abramovitch had honed Yiddish to a fine edge, but it was still most effectively employed for satire. The sharpest, and funniest, language of the play comes as blatant hypocrisy and self-deception in the mouths of the rich. As Miron points out, Abramovitch is bound to an "aesthetic of ugliness"; he still perceives Yiddish as an "ugly" language which, though enormously expressive, is still best suited for "comic mimesis." Thus in a diametrical conflict between hypocritical rich and suffering poor, the language can't help but impart the brunt of attack, and hence the bulk of the dialogue, to the rich.

But if an "aesthetic of ugliness" still prevailed in Di takse, it was itself an object of transformation. Meyer Viner points out that later in 1869, immediately after the publication of Di takse, Abramovitch issued the first edition of Fishke der krumer, in which emphasis shifted from attack on the rich to sympathetic portrayal of the poor.[34] As we have suggested, the evolution of this aesthetic itself constitutes the real dramatic crux of Di takse. This is best evidenced by the poor who, in contrast to the rich, are afforded only a fraction of the play's dialogue. They do not even appear until the Third Act, where they are presented as good, simple folks bound in silent camaraderie by a common poverty and suffering, yet unable to muster the unity or voice with which to defend themselves. The poor actually speak in only eight of the play's thirty-three scenes, and in each case this is done with great

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[34] Viner, Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19-tn yorhundert, v. II (NY: IKUF, 1945), pp. 139-140.

hesitation and difficulty. For example, a typical stage direction, given parenthetically before a poor man speaks, reads:

(שטארק מיט הכנעה, מיט א ציטערדיק קול.)

(With great humility, with a trembling voice.)[35]

If the dramatic development of the rich traces their growing greed and connivance, then the dramatic development of the poor depicts their ongoing but futile attempt to find an effective voice of self-expression. At one point, the "pious" Spodik deprecates the poor as

> [...] בעלי־מלאכות, שניידער, שוסטער און עמי־הארצים,
> װאָס קענען אפילו ניט קיין פרק משניות.
>
> [. . .] artisans, tailors, cobblers and illiterates, who don't even know a single line of the Hebrew commentaries.[36]

The poor are uneducated. They have no functional knowledge of Hebrew. Whatever expression they do find must therefore come in Yiddish.

But here Abramovitch steps beyond his earlier tactical recommendations, for we see that the use of Yiddish, in and of itself, is not sufficient. Even in their native language the poor remain inarticulate, trembling and groping for words. The rich view the inarticulateness of the poor as their own greatest weapon; as long as the people are unable to speak, they are unable to organize and oppose the crooked administration of the Tax. As Nosn Shifres, a particularly despicable communal functionary, boasts to the gevir and his crony:

> װער הערט ייִדן אז זיי שרייען? ייִדן, װע, װע, װע, װע,
> קען איך. זיי זײַנען נאָך װי די קאַמערן, זיי נעמען
> זיך סונויף זושען; זושען דאכט זיך גאָר שרעקלעך.
> פרוח נאר א מאך מאַן מיט דער האנט, צופליען זיי
> אין אלע זייטן.

35. Di takse, p. 62.

36. Ibid., p. 67.

> Who listens to Jews when they cry out? I know my Jews, ha ha ha. They're just like mosquitoes. They get together and start buzzing about, buzzing something terrible. But all you've gotta do is flick your hand and they scatter in all directions.[37]

Here the conflict of rich and poor reaches its bottom line: the poor are oppressed because they lack the self-expression with which to defend themselves. Until they are able to speak--or find a spokesperson to speak for them--the dramatic conflict set up between rich and poor can have no resolution.

Thus the play turns back to the underlying question of voice. If the people cannot speak themselves, and if liberation depends on articulation, then someone must do the talking for them. The stage fully set as the spotlight shifts to one Shloyme Veker ("Solomon Awakener"), a semi-autobiographical German maskil living in Glupsk who inadvertently finds himself smack in the middle of the conflict between rich and poor. Veker, the only full-bodied character in the play, is a protagonist who wanders in and out of the action, surveying the opposing ranks of two-dimensional rich and poor. As the "man in the middle," the literary projection of Abramovitch, he alone will be able to intervene in the vocative stalemate, finding resolution for both Glupsk and himself.

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[37] Di takse, p. 67.

4. Shloyme Veker: The Transformation of Voice

Shloyme Veker is the protagonist of Di takse. In each of Abramovitch's previous works a single protagonist has served as the dramatic focus, the character in whom broad social and intellectual currents can converge and, through dramatic tension, effect personal transformation. Itsik Avrom Takef of Dos kleyne mentshele was buffeted between the oppressive childrearing and parasitic economy of the old world and the kindness of the maskil Gutman, finally finding resolution on his deathbed by accepting the truth of Reason and renouncing the exploitative economic role which made him rich. Likewise Hershele of Dos vintshfingerl sets off in search of personal fortune, moving from the superstitious magic of the old study house to the "real magic," the power of Science and rational thought imparted to him by the Litvak. Each story ends just at the point where the protagonist comes to accept the message of Enlightenment preached by the maskil: Itsik Avrom dies, and Hershele settles abroad. In both these stories the maskil was only incidental, a single-faceted character who presented the "ideal" toward which the protagonist would grow. The maskil underwent no growth or transformation of his own. Though Abramovitch did make occasional allusions to the tactical inefficacy of his maskilim (particularly Gutman), that critique remained more a part of the "Story About a Story" than the "Story Itself." He was writing propaganda for common Jews, and was unwilling, except in a tangential manner, to use Yiddish to discuss his personal predicament as a maskil in Russia.

In Di takse, however, the designated audience has changed. Abramovitch now addresses his fellow maskilim. It is therefore only

appropriate that he picks up where he left off in Dos vintshfingerl, recounting the story of the maskil himself. Unlike Itsik Avrom and Hershele, Shloyme Veker begins the play already "converted" to the dogma of Enlightenment; his dramatic course must therefore carry him through a very different odyssey of personal growth, exposing him to widening social and intellectual horizons and, ultimately, telling the author's own story. We recall that Abramovitch broke from the classical Haskala in two separate stages: first by changing his voice from Hebrew to Yiddish, and then by changing his social theory from bourgeois Enlightenment to populist materialism. Veker too must pass through each successive stage of transformation, in order to convey Abramovitch's story and open the way to a broader synthesis.

Veker's first transformation, that of voice, comes in the First Act. The time is the late 1850s, a few years after the start of the play's action. Veker sits in a comfortable armchair in the well-appointed home of Reb Itsik Volf Spodik, waiting for the latter to return from one of the interminable religious functions at which he officiates (for due pecuniary compensation, of course). At this point Veker is the classical maskil: well meaning but naive, unaware of the greed and corruption of Spodik and others in the communal administration. Most significatnly, he is still committed to the medium of didactic Hebrew: as he waits, he leafs through a book of melitse poetry.

While Veker reads, the door suddenly opens and in walks Gedalye Pikholts ("Gedalia Woodpecker"), a fellow maskil who has just arrived in Glupsk from Veker's hometown of Tunyadevke ("Droneville"), where he

had been working as a government rabbi.[38] Veker and Pikholts are close friends. They greet each other with warm hugs and kisses. But it's obvious that there is a great deal of distance between them: Veker is soft spoken and naive, Pikholts has the hardened tone of someone who has "been there and back" and knows better. Veker innocently inquires about the state of affairs in Tunyadevke, poking fun at the local "Little Men." Thus he demonstrates that his social theory is at exactly the same place as Abramovitch's was ten years earlier: he condemns the parasites, but assumes that the economic organism itself is fundamentally sound.

Pikholts for his part has learned differently. He is filled with anger and frustration, and cannot restrain himself from a passionate monologue in which he portrays the real state of affairs in Tunyadevek. He says that not only are the Little Men, the "parasites," at fault, but that the gevir and the "legitimate" rich are also to blame. None are engaged in productive enterprises. The rich get richer through their crooked administration of communal funds, while the common people go hungry.

Veker is wide-eyed with astonishment at Pikholts's fury. To attack the rich en masse is to admit to a material conflict which undermines the maskil's view of a world divided along the simple lines of Enlightenment and Obscurantism. Veker is prepared to dismiss it all as an isolated phenomenon, until Pikholts lashes back:

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[38] In an attempt to assert greater control over the Jewish community, the Tsarist regime established its own "enlightened" rabbinical seminaries. Graduates, known as rabiners, were sent to various towns where they would presumably effect the modernization, and eventually the assimilation, of the Jewish population.

און בײַ אײַך אין גלופּסק איז דען בעסערע פּאַראַדקעס?
איך מײן, כ'לעבן, ניט! קוק זיך נאָר גוט צו, װעסט
דו זען, װי בײַ אײַך טאַקע און נאָך אין אַנדערע ייִדישע
שטעט ליגן די אָרעמע נעבעך נאָך צען אײלן אין דער
ערד. עס זײַנען שױן דאָ אַזעלכע גוטע און פֿרומע
מענטשעלעך װאָס פֿאַר פֿרומקײט, פֿאַר גוטסקײט ליגן זײ
אַװעק אַלע געשעפֿטן און גיבן זיך אָפּ נאָר מיט
שטעטישע זאַכן און זאָרגן זיך נאָר לטובֿות הכּלל.
אײנער איז אַ בעל־טאַקסע, אײנער איז אַ פּאַװיערענע,
אײנער איז אַן אַרענדאַר, אײנער איז, אַ גבאי, אײנער
איז אַ בעל־עצה, אײנער איז אַ תּקיף, אײנער דעם רבס
קרובֿ, אײנער דעם גבֿירס בן־בית, אײנער מאַכט באַם,
אײנער איז אַ מיוחס, אײנער אַן אײניקל, אײנער האָט
אַ באָבע אין ארץ ישׂראל, אײנער טאַנצט אױף אַלע
חתונות, אײנער איז אַ שטאָט פֿאָטער, אײנער קהלס
יורש און אײנער גלאַט אַ שײנער ייִד.

So you think that in Glupsk you've got it any better? I think, on my life, not! Just take a look--you'll see that in your city, as well as in other Jewish cities, the poor, nebekh, lie buried ten cubits in the ground. Oh, sure, there are all sorts of good, pious men, who with protestations of altruism and religiosity set aside all their business dealings and devote themselves only to communal affairs, worrying only about the common good. One of them is an administrator of the Tax, one is a pavierene [?], one is a lessee, one a trustee, one is a professional advice giver, one a big shot, one is the Rabbi's relative, one a member of the gevir's family, one toots his own horn, one is of aristocratic descent, one is a favored grandchild, one has a grandmother in Erez Yisroel, one dances at every wedding, one is a town father, one is an heir apparent, and one is just a high type Jew.[39]

I quote Pikholts at such great length for two reasons. On the one hand he sets the story line of the play, looking to the corruption of the sundry communal officials who live off the community and sink the poor ever deeper into poverty. On the other hand, his tirade is funny. The explicit message here is a critique of the traditional communal structure. The implicit message is that Yiddish is the most effective means of portraying that structure. What other language can convey

[39] Di takse, p. 16.

such a rainbow spectrum of communal big shots? It stands to reason that the world of East European Jews is best understood through their own terms, and in this case Pikholts provides a marvelous catalogue of those terms. We remember, by contrast, the Gutman and the Litvak spoke a highly Germanized Yiddish, which often times was barely comprehensible. Now both Pikholts and Veker are given a language of enormous authenticity and expressiveness. I have suggested that the underlying dramatic theme of Di takse is its justification of Yiddish as a literary language with which to carry the plea of poor Jews to the world beyond. Thus Pikholts's monologue sets the story line in two ways: It points up the schism of rich and poor through the corruption of the communal administration, and at the same time it points to the vocative possibilities inherent in Yiddish. Veker's challenge will be to recognize and synthesize both dimensions of Pkholts's speech.

Pikholts himself, in the meantime, is unaware of the potential power of his language. His eloquence merely follows from his anger, as he continues his attack against the corrupt rich. We have inferred from Abramovitch's 1867 essay in Hamelits that Jews alone are not responsible for their suffering. Pikholts, reaching a crescendo of outrage, now spells this out in vivid terms:

מען שרייט אלץ אויף דעם נאראַד ייִדן, נעבעך, זיי
זיינען פויל, זיי זיינען נים געזונם, זיי זיינען
עקשנים, זיי חילן זיך נים בילדן וכדומה נאָך אזעלכע
פארברעכן. געוואַלט! וועל איך שרייען וואָס זיי נעבעך
שולדיק, וואָס זאָלן זיי נעבעך טאָן, אז זיי זיינען אונטער
אזא פינסטערער אפיקעס? ... ייִדן זיינען כּלעבן נים
שולדיק, זיי האָבן גוטע הערצער, זיי האָבן גוטע שכל
און געפיל, זיי פארשטיין אן עסק, זיי זיינען פאַקאַרנע
און קענען זייער פיל אַראָפּשלינגען, נאָר וואָס העלפט

עס אז זיי האבן נעבעך נים קיין מזל, אז זיי זיינען
נעבעך אומגליקלעך, אז פון כמה שניים שטיקם מען
זיי צוגיף אלע אין איינעם אין אין ארט ווי די שאף,
אז זיי זיצען פאר זיך נים קיין וועלם און קענען נים
אטעמען קיין פריש לופט.

א מענטש מוז דאך אבער עסן, מוז דאך זיך ערנערן
און אונטערהאלטן זיין לעבן כל זמן ער זשיפעם, סל זמן
עס שלאגם זיך אין אים אן ארער. [...] מען טראכט אויס
כל א מיני חתבולות חי אזוי צו דערטאפן א שטיקל ברויט,
חי אזוי צו דער האלטן די נשמה. די נאטור איז שטארק,
זי פארלרם אירס, זי סטארעם זיך, זי זוכם כל א מיטל
זיך צו דערהאלטן. אט דערא־בער זיינען דא בי אונדז
אין טוני־אדעחקע די באנצע כאפטע פארשוינען וואס מיר
האבן פון זיי גערעדט... דערצו נאך זייער א סך זיידענע
יידן, גאנצע פאלקען שדכנים, מלמדים, גאטס סטראפצעם
וכדומה אזעלכע משיגאזניקעם. זיי אלע חילן עסן, זיי
אלע האבן א נשמה און סטארן זיך צו דערהאלטן, זיי
האבן אלע חושים א טבע פון מענטשן, זיי וילן לעבן!

אקעגן דער טבע העלפט זיל נים צו בארגן, אקעגן
איר העלפט נים קיין אצות, קיין חכמות, זי איז אלצדינג
גובר! אך נים גום שלומה! א רחסונות כ'לעבן אויף
אונדזערע ידעלעך. עס וואלט שוין צייט געוועזן מען זאל
זיי לאזן א ביסל אטעמען, א ביסל דיכן!

People are always yelling and complaining about the Jewish masses, nebekh: they're lazy, they're unhealthy, they're stubborn, they've got no desire to educate themselves, and all sorts of other offenses. Gevalt! I'll scream back. What are they guilty of? What are they supposed to do, when they're stuck under such an oppressive administration? . . . Jews, I swear to you, are not guilty, they have good hearts, they have common sense and sensitivity, they understand what's up, they're obedient and can swallow loads of crap. But of what use is it if they have no luck, if they're just downright misfortunate, if for years on end they've all been cramped together in one place like sheep, if they've been cut off from other worlds and have no fresh air to breathe?

A person has to eat. He must nourish and sustain his life for as long as he breathes, for as long as the blood courses within him, . . . People come up with all sorts of ways to keep the soul alive. Nature is strong, she demands her due, she'll use any means to perpetuate herself. That's why we have that whole collection of persons [the communal officials] about whom we've just spoken. . . . In addition to them there are many hotsy-totsy Jews, whole packs of professional matchmakers, teachers, God's self-appointed right-hand-men, and all sorts of other persons of rank. They all want to eat, and they all have a soul which they must keep alive, they all have natural human instincts, they all want to live!

> Against Nature [i.e., the Will to Live] protest is of no avail. Against her, advice and witticisms won't help; she is omnipotent! Akh, it's no good, Shloyme! It's a pity, I swear, upon our poor little Jews. It's high time that they were allowed to breathe a little, to snatch a breath of air.[40]

Pikholts's speech breaks enormous ground. He postulates a clearly defined materialist understanding of the Jewish experience. If Jews are backward or economically parasitic, it is because they must adapt and survive amid hostile conditions. Survival is the inalterable "Law of Nature"; it is therefore the hostile conditions themselves which must be attacked and transformed. Pikholts reiterates Abramovitch's essay of 1867, maintaining that as long as governmental disabilities persist, as long as Jews are restricted to the narrow, overcrowded social and economic borders of the Pale, they cannot be blamed for their limited intellectual horizons.

The broader implication of Pikholts's materialist analysis is that simple idealist palliatives are no longer viable. Good ideas alone are not enough to transform social realities; rather, those social realities must be transformed before Jews can begin to think about good ideas. Pikholts is led by his materialism to a seemingly irresolvable paradox. His role as a maskil was to convey the "good ideas" of Enlightenment. Since he now realizes that the people are materially unprepared to listen to his message, there is no longer any need for him to speak. Pikholts has arrived at a dead end. True to his name, he can "peck away" at the problem, but is incapable of a radical assault at the root. And so, he confides to Veker with a heavy heart, he has resigned his rabbinical post in Tunyadevke.

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[40] Di takse, pp. 17-18.

Pikholts's words weigh heavy on Veker. Just as Itsik Avrom and Hershele underwent long personal odysseys before they could understand and accept the explicit message imparted by Gutman and the Litvak. so too does Veker need time to assimilate all that Pikholts has just told him. At first he can't quite believe his ears. He asks naively why the people don't rebel. Pikholts answers, in the tone of one instructing a schoolboy in the ABCs of Jewish history:

> ײדן זײנען נעבעך דערשלאגן, זײ מײנען אז אזוי דארף
> טאקע זײן. װער אונטער אלע אומות קען נאך אזוי
> פיל לײדן און ש ו ײ ג ן װי ײדן?

> Jews are downtrodden, they think that this is the way that things must be. Who among all the peoples of the world can suffer and <u>remain silent</u> like Jews?[41]

For Pikholts there is no way out of the impasse: Jews are backward because they're hungry; they're hungry because they're oppressed and exploited; and they're oppressed and exploited because they remain silent, they have no voice with which to fight. Pikholts sees no possible resolution; he resigns his rabbinical post and gives up.

Veker, on the other hand, is very confused, but still too naive to quit. Pikholts has made the bottom line dependent on language, on the Jews' silence. If the Jews could only be made to speak they could rebel, and the impasse would be broken. Veker (and the reader) seems to intuitively understand that which Pikholts does not: that <u>voice</u> is the key to the entire social conundrum. All the while that Pikholts has been speaking, Veker has sat with the <u>melitse</u> book still in his hands. Now, at the end of Pikholts's lengthy monologue, at the exact moment of stalemate, Veker looks down and sees the book. The contradiction

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[41] <u>Di takse</u>, p. 19. My emphasis.

of material reality and Haskala methodology swirls inside of him, the pressure builds. Suddenly Veker jumps to his feet. With uncontrollable anguish he rips the book! "What are you doing, Shloyme?" Pikholts asks with alarm. Veker answers, "with a touching voice":

אי‌ך טו דאס וואס אונדזערע עלטערן האבן געטאן א מאל
בשעת חורבן דארטן אויף די טייכן בבלס. אויף די ווערבעס
דארטן האבן די משוררים אויפגעהאנגען זייערע פידלן, זיי
האבן סער נים געוואלט זינגען, שפילן, נאר קלאגן,
יאמערן און מרו‌ירן. געגוג זינגען, גדליה! גענג
שרייבן שירים מליצות בשעת אונדזער פאלק, אונדזער ארעם
פאלק ליידעם. אויף דער טייך גנילאפיאטקע [לעבן גלופסק]
צעדרים אויך סטרונעס פון דער יידישער פידל. (ער רייסט
מים אימפעט). יידן זיינען נים געבוירן געוואָרן צו זינגען,
צו שפילן... מען מוז האבן אין זינען ערנסטערע זאכן.
בליב היץ, גדליה: מיר וועלן פרוון ביידע היץ עפעס
טאן, עפעס ווירקן, פאר אונדזערע ארעמע יידן. דא,
גדליה, דא איז דער ארט צו טאן, דער איז דער ארט
צו ווירקן.

I'm doing that which our ancestors did a long time ago, during the debacle of exile by the rivers of Babylon. On the willows there the choirsters hung their lyres; they had no more desire to sing or play, they wanted only to lament, to wail, and to give vent to their sorrow. Enough of singing, Gedalye! Enough of writing verses of melitse, while our people, our poor people, suffers. By the River Gnilapiatke [near Glupsk] I too will rip the strings from the Jewish lyre. (He rips [the pages of the book] impetuously.) Jews were not born to sing and play. . . . One must have more serious matters in mind. Remain here, Gedalye. Together we'll try to do something here, to accomplish something for our poor Jews. Here, Gedalye, here is the place to do something, this is the place to act.[42]

Thus does the play reach its first moment of climax. The maskil Veker has been transformed, he has rejected the melitse voice of the classsical Haskala. From here on he is committed to action, to "more serious matters," to effecting change and helping the poor Jews of Glupsk in their material struggle. Pikholts listens to his friend's excitement

[42] Di takse, p. 20.

with the air of one who knows better. He responds patiently that he wants no part of Veker's plans. "You want to work among Jews?" Among Jews, he explains, you can expect nothing but derision and failure. You will do no more than engender the hatred of the people you are trying to help. The drowning man always tries to drown his would-be rescuer, the sick man always resents his doctor. Pikholts reiterates a tragic dilemma: as long as the rich remain in control, the poor will be hungry. As long as the poor are hungry they will remain closed to the message of Enlightenment. And as long as they are unenlightened, they themselves will persecute the maskil who tries to help them:

עס פעלט בײ דיר א האר אין בארד, נו דא העלפט שוין
אויך אלצדינג, מען מאכט דיר מים דער בלאטע גלײך.

You're missing a hair in your beard and the jig is up, your name becomes mud.[43]

Where does one go from here? Pikholts seems justified in leaving the scene of struggle, in opting out of a battle in which he is doomed to failure. He goes the way of Itsik Avrom and Hershele, by leaving the contradictions of Russian Jewish society behind him. But despite Pikholts's admonitions, Veker decides to remain. He is confronted with a fundamental paradox, which Pikholts himself cannot resolve. But because he doesn't yet fully understand all that Pikholts has tried to tell him, he is not yet troubled by the latter's paradox. He is therefore willing to apply Pikholts's teachings to the social reality of Glupsk. Just as Takef needed his own life story before he could fully understand Gutman, Veker will need to explore Glupsk before he can understand the social dynamic portrayed by Pikholts. And just as Hershele fused the

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[43] Di takse, p. 21.

explicit teachings of the Litvak with the native voice of Kabtsansk, Veker might yet find synthesis between aspects of Pikholts and aspects of Glupsk, and so find a way out of Pikholts's impasse.

If Veker cannot yet understand Pikholts's angry social theory, he has at least been transformed by his pronouncements regarding voice. Veker stands up and rips the book of melitse. As he does so he indicates that he may already be a step beyond his mentor. Pikholts had discarded melitse and assumed that further communication with the people was impossible. Veker hasn't yet found a new medium, but he does hint enigmatically at the possibilities. His analogy of the Babylonian exile is very telling. It was in Babylon that the "melitse" of more ancient Hebrew poetry came to an end. Jews were outcast and suffering, and there was no room for lyrical verse. But even though the poets and choirsters "ripped the strings from their lyres," they hardly remained silent. They did turn to "lamenting, wailing and expressions of sorrow," to "more serious matters." But in so doing they produced some of the greatest art that the Jewish world had known. "By the waters of Babylon we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion." So too does Veker pass from one artistic stage to the next. He has rejected the melitse of the classical Haskala and awakened to the social reality in which he lives. Out of the condition at hand, "by the waters of the River Gnilapiatke," he too may fashion a new aesthetic, a new voice to console, sustain and champion his people.

5. Sholoyme Veker: The Transformation of Social Theory

I have suggested that the course of Veker's personal transformation runs almost exactly parallel with that of Abramovitch himself. Abramovitch abandoned the melitse of the classical Haskala early in his career and began writing in Yiddish in 1864, but it took him at least until 1867 before he underwent the "theoretical" transformation which led him to a materialist understanding of Jewish experience. Thus is Veker made to traverse a similar course. In his encounter with Pikholts Veker's "eyes are opened" and he dramatically rejects the voice of Hebrew melitse. He is a good deal slower, however, in catching up with Pikholts in terms of a rejection of classical bourgeois social theory. As we have seen, when the two friends first met in Spodik's house, Veker inquired after the kleyne mentshelekh, the "Little Men" of Tunyadevke, thus attacking the parasites while assuming the economic organism itself to be sound. Pikholts did much to dispel this assumption, saying that all Jewish rich are corrupt, that even the gevir makes his wealth at the expense of the poor. Veker, however, remains naively optimistic; he is too much the empiricist to accept Pikholts's analysis at face value; he needs to find out the truth for himself. Thus when he prevails on Pikholts to remain in Glupsk, he assures his friend that he can secure him a rabbinical post through the offices of Reb Yudele Shtandhaft, the local gevir. Pikholts responds with contempt:

דענסטסאל וועל איך זיין א רב וועז דער נאראר וועם
מיך וועלן, וועז אלע ארעם אוז ריך גליך וועלן מיך
מאבן אוז מיר שענקען זיער צומרויען. [...] נאר
עס איז נאך אבער דערצו זיער ווייט צו וואנען.

> I'll be a rabbi here only at such time as the masses want me, when I am appointed and win the confidence of all the rich and poor equally. [. . .] But that's still a long way off.[44]

It should be pointed out that even Pikholts's militantly voiced social theory is severely circumscribed by a liberal frame. His ideal is political democracy, a free election in which rich and poor can participate equally. He as yet has no vision of social or economic democracy, of a society in which class disctinctions between rich and poor are eliminated altogether. Yet Pikholts was nonetheless radical in the context of his time; even the Narodya volya, the most extreme of the anti-Tsarist terrorist groups of the 1870s, held out constitutional democracy as its chief demand.

Veker, for his part, is hardly prepared to accept so seemingly radical a social theory. He still views the Jewish struggle as ultimately one of Reason vs. Obscruantism, in which the exploitation of the poor by the rich is not the cause but rather a serious consequence. Much of the play must therefore focus on the dealings of the rich in order to convince Veker differently, i.e., that the material struggle is itself at core. Veker's transformation of social theory is a long process, which builds from the point of his "transformation of voice" and does not reach its own transformational climax until well into the final Act.

The pivotal factor in Veker's growing social awareness is the cause-and-effect relation between obscurantism and economic exploitation. Great effort is made to fault the rich for their irrationalism and religious pretentions. The rich are the defenders of religious observance

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[41] Di takse, p. 21.

and the old status quo. "Jews must remain what they are," says the Hasid Spodik. The rich constantly profess a "self-less" concern with the religious virtue of the community.

Suspicion of religious hypocrisy was already prevalent in the folk consciousness. We have observed the sort of proverb which Abramovitch had likely encountered during his travels with Ayrom der Hinkediker:

חאָם נעענטער צו שול, חאָם חיטער פון גאָט.

The closer to the synagogue, the farther from God.[45]

This same realization slowly dawns on Veker. There is an inherent immorality in the dealings of the rich, disguised in the robes of religious piety. The entire communal administration rests on a base of religious sanction and coercion. Jews must pay a Meat Tax because they need kosher meat, they pay a Candle Tax because they need candles for light and ritual purposes. Abramovitch would not have gone so far as to advocate the abolition of basic religious practices such as kashrut (dietary laws) and Sabbath observances. As far as is known he kept kósher in his own home. What he does attack is the way in which these practices are exploited by the rich for their own profit. A good example comes in the Third Act, when a simple hand-worker leads a delegation of other poor Jews before the communal council to beg mercy for himself and his children. He says that the Tax on candles is too prohibitive. What's more, the person licensed with the candle concession has been saving money by mixing the tallow with pig fat, which causes the candles to spit and sputter. Since only the poor rely on the candles in the first place (the

[45] Supra, Part One, p. 34.

rich have oil lamps), the poor must bear the full brunt of the burden. The worker pulls out a candle to prove his point, whereupon Spodik yells out, "Treyfenik!", (user of unkosher products), and chases him out the door. The rich then resolve the matter by raising the Tax even higher. As Spodik concedes,

פרומקייט איז אויך א סחורה.

Piety is also a commodity.[46]

Thus does Veker slowly realize that the issue is not Reason vs. Obscurantism per se. Religious observance and superstition are not problems in and of themselves, but rather the tools which the rich employ to facilitate their exploitation of the poor. This represents a marked shift from the classical Haskala, and therefore Abramovitch takes time to support his case with many vivid examples. The focal point of this dynamic is the gevir. Class struggle was postponed in Dos kleyne mentshele because not all rich people were corrupt: "The gevir has money and is still a fine person." Even in the present story, when Pikholts complained about the futility of working among Jews, Veker tried to convince him otherwise by assuring him of the good intentions of the local Glupsk patriarch Shtandhaft. Pikholts had responded:

אי, שלומה, דו ביסט נאך נים ערפארן, דו קענסט
נים קיין גביר, קיין היגן ירישן גביר, דו קענסט
נים שטאנדהאפטן. בי אים איז ניטא קיין פריינטשאפט,
קיין געוויסן, ער ליבט נאר זיך, ער זוכט נאר זיין
נוצן. אי, היט זיך שלומה, היט זיך פאר אים.

I tell you, Shloyme, you're still a novice in these matters. You don't really know any gevir, any local rich man. You don't really know Shtandhaft. For him there is no friendship, no conscience, he loves only himself, he only looks out for his own needs. Aye, Shloyme, watch out, watch out for him.[47]

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[46] Di takse, p. 41.

[47] Ibid., p. 21.

The test of the materialist social theory set forth by Pikholts will therefore depend upon the behavior of Shtandhaft; if the issue is indeed one of class struggle, then the gevir himself must be proven corrupt.

Shtandhaft gets his chance in the Fourth Act, which brings the action up to the present time (ca. 1870). Here all the threads of dramatic conflict begin to converge. A rumor circulates that the government is considering abolishing Jewish communal taxes altogether. At the same time, public opposition in Glupsk is slowly beginning to mount. Shtandhaft sees in all this his big chance. He plans to take over the Tax for himself by installing his own front man. This would assusage popular discontent by showing a "change" in administration, and at the same time would give Shtandhaft the chance to force out the "lesser" rich men and reap all the profits of exploitation for himself. Veker, in the meantime, knows nothing of this trechery. He is still naive--though growing rapidly more conscious--and so seeks out Shtandhaft as his last resort for help in the impending crisis. He makes a passionate plea for the starving children crushed under the yoke of excessive taxation, and then unwittingly plays right into Shtandhaft's hand by asking to take personal responsibility for the Tax "for the good of all." This is Veker's last chance, his final scrap of hope in the personal disinterest and philanthropy of the gevir. When he leaves, Shtandhaft and his cronies just laugh derisively.

In the very next scene we are given final proof of Shtandhaft's utter corruption. A poor man, a yoyred who has lost everything,[48]

[48] A yoyred is a poor person who was once well off. According to the traditional Jewish reckoning, this is the most dismal form of poverty. The sense of betrayal felt by the yoyred, who was once rich, echoes Veker's own feeling of betrayal by his imagined "ally."

appears before Shtandhaft and begs for mercy. It is very difficult for the man to speak. He assures Shtandhaft that he is not accustomed to begging, but anything is better than having to watch his own children starve before his eyes. Shtandhaft remains unmoved, unwilling to get involved. He finally gets mad and chases the poor man out the door, screaming after him, "Go, go to Veker." He then sits down with his cronies and plots the last details of his takeover. It is decided that all opposition will be ruthlessly crushed. As Shifres sarcastically puts it:

> װען א שעפעלע שפארט זיך אײַן, מעקעט, דריגעט
> מיט די פיסלעך, דארף מען עס נאָר געבן א שמיצל, הע,
> הע, הע! װעט עס זיך גײן װײטער גאנץ שטיל; אויב עס
> שרײַט װידער, נאָך און נאָך א שמיצל, ביז די כּחות
> װעלן אים אויסגײן און עס װעט אנידערפאַלן, אויסגע־
> צויגן מיט דעם פּיפּיק ארויף, הע, הע, הע!

> When a little sheep begins to tug at its tether, baas and kicks its heels, all you've gotta do is give it a quick spanking, ha, ha, ha! After that it'll become good and quiet. And if it cries out again, then keep on spanking it, until it's sapped of all its strength and collapses in a heap with its belly button to the sky, ha, ha, ha!

To which Shinder chimes in:

> עס פארשטײט זיך, אז מען קען ניט מיט גוטן, מוז מען
> מיט בײזן...

> Of course. If you can't get by with good, then get by with evil.[49]

The gevir and his cronies gloat over their new plan. They light up Havana cigars, order imported herring, and prepare to reap the full bounty of corruption for themselves. Of all the "do-gooders," it is the gevir, the "legitimate" rich man, who is the very worst of all.

Thus does the play set the tone of ideological conversion and progress toward its next climax. It is on this note that the Fifth and final

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[49] Di takse, p. 68.

Act begins. Until now, Veker has insisted that wealth itself is not at issue, that the only problem is one of corruption and parasitism. Until now there has been an implicit faith that wealth "justly" accumulated could be moral, proving itself by paternalistic philanthropy. Now we are implicitly told that wealth itself is corrupt. Even the gevir, the patriarch, comes to his wealth by illicit means. Wealth is gained only at the expense of others; in order for some to prosper, others must be made poor. Even more poignant is the fact the Veker himself has been betrayed. Until now, Veker defended the gevir, believing him to be a philanthropist and a "rational" man. Now the gevir shows his true colors, laughing at the respect and trust with which the maskil regards him. Veker has been suckered into the role of the rich man's apologist. He has been made to pick up the pieces, to assuage the casualties. Now he can no longer remain blind. He knows that he's been duped. The old battle lines between "rational" and "irrational" are no longer applicable. Obscurantism is but a tool in the conflict between the traditional rich and the traditional poor. The only struggle now is the class struggle between those who have money and power and those who do not. Confronted with an empirically observed social reality, Veker finally accepts the lines of conflict suggested by Pikholts. He recognizes the absolute polarity of rich and poor on which the play is structured.

In the first scene of the final Act, Shtandhaft's takeover is already underway. He wants to assert his control over the religious institusions, and instructs the shoykhtim, the "ritual slaughterers," to call certain chickens unkosher. A poor man, Ayzik Zaike ("Isaac Stutterer") submits his hen to the slaughterer and has it rejected. Things have gone

too far, and Ayzik is unwilling to accept this injustice lying down. He persists, demanding a ritual explanation. The shoykhet rudely dismisses him, so he brings his case to the synagogue, where he demands an answer from the dayan, the local judge. The dayan is an employee of the "do-gooders"; he fumbles about, tries to worm his way around the Law, but in the end can't come up with an answer to satisfy the crowd in the synagogue. He backs off, and promises an acceptable explanation by that afternoon.

The dayan in turn submits the case to the do-gooders. They too are stumped. They realize that they've been caught and decide to let Zaike's chicken pass, though they instruct Spodik to boycott any event at which such a hen may be served. Meanwhile they have bigger problems in the making. It seems that the governor will be visiting the city, and they are afraid that someone will slip him a petition protesting their crooked administration. Suspicion naturally falls on Ayzik, who has been raising such a row, and on Veker, the naive fool who refuses to be corrupted. They contemplate violence and other means for dealing with Ayzik. As for Veker, Shtandhaft is willing to pay a bribe of 20,000 rubles to be rid of him. But the others tell him to save his money; if Veker decides to cross them, then they'll simply denounce him as an apikoyres, a religious heretic. His German appearance and accent effectively discredit his protest.

They still must deal with Ayzik, who refuses to be scared or bought off. They go out and manage to extort a promissory note signed by Ayzik, issued against a loan which was long since repaid. They plot to use the bogus note to frame Ayzik and get him arrested as a debtor.

Veker meanwhile is still reeling from his disillusionment with Shtandhaft. He decides to come to the defense of the poor, enjoining struggle himself against the crooked rich. All night long he stays awake, reviewing the communal accounts. By daybreak he has uncovered conclusive evidence of gross embezzlement. Just then, in runs Toybe Leye, the wife of Ayzik, who blurts out the news that Ayzik has been framed and arrested. This is the last straw for Veker, the ultimate proof of the perfidy and ruthless greed of the rich. The class struggle is inescapable. Here then comes the second climax of the play, the point of Veker's ideological conversion. So devastating is this shift in ideological posture, this abandonment of the bourgeois idealism of the Haskala, that Veker has no conceptual framework within which to accept the new ideology. He underscores the magnitude of the transition by contemplating suicide:

> קויפט א שטריק! זאָג איך, עס קומט אונדז איצט
> אויס, טאקע זיך נאָר א מעשה אַנצוטאָן! בעסער
> דער טויט איידער צו זען אַזעלכע צרות, איידער
> צו ליידן פון דעם שווערן יידישן גלות!

> Someone buy me a rope! I'm telling you, we're done for, it's just too painful! Better to die than to see such troubles, than to suffer under the heavy yoke of the Jewish exile.[50]

The play reaches its second point of climax. Veker sinks to the pit of despair, but it is not he who dies but the social theory of the classical Haskala. The transformation is complete. Abramovitch, more and more the artist, sets the scene at dawn, when the grey is dispelled and a new day bursts forth. Materialism has replaced bourgeois idealism, class struggle has replaced the struggle of rational vs. irrational ideas. All that remains is to implement the new social theory in praxis.

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[50] Di takse, p. 83.

6. A Final Climax: From Theory to Praxis

Veker has finally accepted the social theory shared with him by Pikholts in the First Act. He has now passed through two climactic transformations: he has rejected first the voice, and now the social theory of the classical Haskala. He now faces an enormous challenge. How does one defend people who are too ignorant to appreciate outside help? And how does one implement a materialist social theory and defend the common people in the face of an omnipresent reactionary regime? Pikholts had no answers to these dilemmas, and so abandoned the Jewish sphere. Now Veker finally faces the same impasse as Pikholts. But the moment is too urgent, and his dedication too great, for him to consider leaving. Just as he passes his second climax, when he rejects suicide and embraces a materialist theory, a new and final drama begins to unfold.

As the sun rises, the door bursts open and a poor Jewish woman runs in to beg help for her sick husband and starving children. Veker, now fully aware of the context of class struggle, is at first incensed:

גײט צו די נגידים! גײט צו די בעלי־טובות!

Go to the rich! Go to the do-gooders![51]

he screams. But the poor woman responds with equal passion. She says that she'd rather die than go before the rich men:

[זײ] לאָזן ניט אויסרײדן קײן װאָרט און שרײען מיט
כעס: װאָס װילט איר פֿון אונדז האָבן? גײט אײך!
װאָס װילט איר פֿון אונדז האָבן?

They don't let you get a single word in, they just scream with anger: 'What do you want from us? Get out of here! What do you expect from us?'[52]

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[51] Di takse, p. 84. [52] Ibid., loc. cit.

The woman goes on with a wrenching appeal, telling of her cold, damp house, her hungry children, her poor husband who is dying of tuberculosis yet who tries to force a smile so his family will not know how much he suffers:

> עָר איז נעבעך געבליבן אָן כוחות, עָר איז נעבעך
> שלאַף פאר הונגער פאר צרותן אוי, וואָס טוט מען?
> ווי קומט מען ליידיג אהיים?

> Poor thing, he lies there without strength, he is weakened by hunger and troubles! Oy, what is to be done? How can I return home empty handed?[53]

Veker is deeply shaken by the woman's words. There is no abandoning the struggle now. He reaches into his pocket, but hasn't a penny. He searches through the house and finally finds a small sum that his wife Basye has hidden away for food for the family. He takes the money and gives it to the poor woman. "Here," he says,

> נאָט אייך! וועט איר קויפן פאר אייער מאַן א הון.
> אט האָט איר אויף א הון, און דאָס אויף שחיטה
> געלט.

> Here's enough money to buy a chicken for your husband and to pay the fee for ritual slaughtering.[54]

The woman takes the money as her due. Leaving, she adds:

> שחיטה געלט איז היינט דאָפּעלט טייערער...

> The slaughtering fee is now twice as much as it was . . .[55]

There is great pathos, and great significance, in this scene. Veker has rejected the voice of Hebrew melitse and recognized the open class conflict between rich and poor. He wants to help the poor in their struggle. The big question now is "How?" The encounter with the poor

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[53] Di takse, p. 84.

[54] Ibid., loc. cit.

[55] Ibid., p. 85.

woman underscores the futility of individual solutions. Philanthropy, a palliative in which Veker once believed, is now shown to be bankrupt. Veker was able to help the poor woman only at the expense of his own family. Now his wife and children have nothing to eat, and what's more he has nothing left to offer the next poor woman who comes along. He is forced to acknowledge the social scope of the problem of poverty; he is thus politicized, forced to seek a more far reaching and lasting solution.

The search for that solution, the need to translate a new theory to praxis, will constitute the remaining drama of Di takse. The praxis will be found at the juncture of Veker's dual transformations: theory and voice. The poor woman herself issues the challenge of synthesis when she says that she can expect no help from the rich because "they don't let you get a single word in." She corroborates Pikholts's analysis, that the poor are unable to defend themselves because they lack the wherewithall with which to speak. This time Veker "wakens up" to the hint. If he is to help the poor in their material struggle, then he must step to the fore and chide them to protest. The time for action, the time for praxis has come:

ני!\ די גאל חערם צעזעצם, מען קען זיך שוין נים
מער איינהאלטן! פארפלוכט זאל זיין דער חאס זעם
אזעלכע עחלות און שחיגעט! פארפלוכט זאל זיין דער
חאס איז א מרום, חאס חאס מורא צו זאגן דעם אמת!
פארפלוכט זאל זיין דער חאס פארשטופט די אוירן נים
צו הערן די יללות און דאס קרעכצען פון די אומגליק-
לעכע, פון אבידעמע און נויט בארעמטיקע. פארפלוכט,
פארשאלטן אלע, חאס פארקויפן זיער מאחעמס, זיער
גיחיטן, אלע חאס זיינען אין שמאנד צו העלפן מיט
א חארם, מיט דער פרן און שטיין פון חיטן, מאמער
חעם זי חלילה עפעם דאס מינדמע שאדן! ... חאס

זאל אי"ך מי"ך באהאלטן! אי"ך האב א האַרץ, אי"ך האב
געפי"ל, אי"ך קען זי"ך נים מער.אי"נהאלטן. אי"ך קען
נים שוויגן! אי"ך מוז גיין ארויס זאגן דעם אמת
גאנץ פרי", זאל כאטשע די וועלט חיסן!

No! My gall is ready to burst, it's too late for self-restraint. Damned him who sees such injustice and remains silent! Damned him who's too busy or too scared to speak the truth! Damn him who blocks his ears and remains deaf to the wailing and moaning of the unfortunates, of the exploited and of those in dire need. Damned and cursed are all who sell their conscience, their moral responsibility, who are in a position to help with a word or a pen and instead stand detached, afraid, God forbid, of getting hurt a little. Why should I hide? I have a heart, I have feelings, I can't keep it all to myself anymore. I cannot be silent! I must go out and proclaim the truth without restraint, no matter if the whole world knows![56]

Veker resolves to carry his struggle to the street. There he will forge his synthesis. So far Veker has undergone a transformation of voice and theory which has brought him up to par with Abramovitch's own pronouncements. In the balance of the play, in the search for praxis, Veker and Abramovitch will break new ground together. This is a heroic course for both the author and his protagonist, frought with much self-sacrifice and the danger of attack from all sides. As Abramovitch had written to his friend Leyb Binshtok in 1866:

> I have become so obsessed with being of service to my people that I have forgotten to worry about my own small children. And now, when I am vividly aware of the great sin which I have perpetrated against my own household, I am struck with the fear that despite all my energies and all my work no one will come to my aid.[57]

Abramovitch underscores the autobiographical element of the present work by interjecting a poignant scene between Veker and his wife Basye, just before Veker heads out to the street for his final confrontation. Basye

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[56] Di takse, p. 85.

[57] Cited by Weinreich, "Mendeles onheyb," p. 350. Originally published in Sh. Ginzburg, "Mendele un zayne briv," Tsukunft, no. 1 (1923).

berates her husband for his self-neglect and self-sacrifice, for his obsessive concern with the welfare of the whole city while his own family goes hungry. Veker answers in a humble tone, addressing his sleeping children in words that ring remarkably similar to Abramovitch's letter above:

שלאפט מײגעלעך! שלאפט מײנע טײערע קינדערלעך!
איך בין שולדיק וואס איר שלאפט נעבעך אלע אין
איינעם, אין איין ענגער ספאלנ׳ע! [...] איך בין
שולדיק פאר וואס איר יוגנט איז נים חי דער חודש
מײ, שיין, לוימער, פרײלעך, מים בלומען און רויזן!
[...] חעך איך זאל נים האבן קיין הארץ, קיין געפיל,
חאלם איר א סך בעסער געקענט לעבן חי איצט. חעך איך
זאל קענען צוזעך עלחוח, זיך נים מישן און שוחיגן,
חאלם איר גאלעבט א סך ראזקאשנער חי חיינט! [...]
זיים מיר מוחל מיינע קינדערלעך! שלעכט, זייער שלעכט
צו חאבן א טאטן מים הארץ, מים געפיל, מים אזא
כאראקטער!

> Sleep, little birds. Sleep, my beloved little children. It's my fault that you all have to sleep crowded together, in one little cot. [. . .] It's my fault that your childhoods are so far from the month of May--beautiful, bright, happy, with flowers and roses. [. . .] If only I didn't have a heart and feelings then you'd be able to live a lot better off than you do now. If I could only overlook injustice, mind my own business and keep quiet, then your lives would be a lot rosier than they are today. [. . .] Please forgive me, my children. Oh, it's bad, very bad indeed to have a father with a heart, with human feelings, with such a character as I.[58]

For the first time Abramovitch openly employs Yiddish to portray his personal predicament, to tell his own story. Perhaps therein lies a clue to the synthesis which Veker will find as he heads into the street and prepares finally to speak.

Veker takes his walking stick in hand (a reminder of his "outsider's" appearance) and walks out into the main street of Glupsk. There the poor Jews are all astir; bunched up in tight little groups, they

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[58] Di takse, p. 87.

whisper and gesticulate frantically. The news of Ayzik's arrest has spread rapidly, and all are aghast at how far the criminality of the do-gooders has gone. But despite the feverish agitation of the crowd, no one speaks out, no one acts: if Ayzik was arrested today, then who will be next? Veker looks upon this scene of pathetic inaction and is outraged. "What are you afraid of?" he asks,

וואס האָט איר מורא? שאָן! ביז וואַנען, אך, וועט איר
זיך לאָזן פֿארפֿירן, מען זאָל מיט אייך טאָן וואָס מען
וויל?

What are you afraid of? How much longer will you let yourselves be misled, allowing people to treat you as they please?[59]

Veker plunges into the struggle with all his might. He speaks to the people in their own tongue, trying to arouse them from their conditioned fear and silence.

Veker recognizes the fierce struggle between rich and poor. He understands that the poor must speak out in order to shake free of the yoke of oppression. And, so far, he believes that the silence of the poor is their own fault. He screams at the assembled crowd:

וועָר איז דען שולדיק? וועָן נים איר מאַקע אליין!

Who then is guilty if not you yourselves?![60]

He rises to full stature and harangues the people with all the eloquence, passion, reason and conviction he can muster:

זיט איר בלינד? [...] זיט איר טויב? הערט איר
נים די קולות פון דעם בית־עולם, די קולות פון
טויזנטער אַרעמע פאמיליעס, מענער, ווייבער און
קינדער, וואָס זיצען אויסגעשטאָרבן, גענאַלן וויי די
פֿליגן, ערשט אין דער כאַלערע, פאר הונגער און פאר

[59] Di takse, p. 90. [60] Ibid., p. 91.

קעלט? הערט איר נים די קולות פון אומגליקלעכע,
װאָס האבן נעבעך נים געװוסט דעם טעם פון פלײש
[sic], האבן אין זײער לעבן שטילערהײט געהונגערט,
געדארט, געקרײנקט, געליטן, ביז די ביטערע שלאפ-
קײט האט מיט זײ אן עק געמאכט? זײט איר בלינד,
זײט איר טויב?

Are you blind? Are you deaf? Don't you hear the voices calling to you from the cemetery, the voices of thousands of poor families, men, women and children, who have died out, fallen like flies, the first to perish in the cholera epidemic because of hunger and cold? Don't you hear the voices of the unfortunates, who, a pity upon them, had never known the taste of meat [sic], who in the course of their lifetimes quietly went hungry, withered, became sick and suffered, until their bitter torpor finished them off? Are you blind, are you deaf?[61]

Veker's words sear through the docile crowd. Some of the people, with great trepedation, begin to stir. Veker forges on. What we need, he tells the people, are not more crooked charitable institutions but rather "a means to reduce the number of poor in the first place. . . ."

שוין צײט צו װיסן דעם ריכטיקן, דעם אמתן זין פון
צדקה, שוין צײט צו װיסן אז דערמיט װאָס מען װארפט
אונטער פאר א מענטשן, פון צײט צו צײט, א ביסן ברויט
מאכט מען אים טאקע פאר א הונט, פאר א בטלן, פאר
אײן לאָ יוצלח, מען ערנידעריגט אים.

. . . It's high time to recognize the just, the true sense of charity. It is high time to realize that paltry handouts of a little bread from time to time only serve to reduce a person into a dog, a beggar, a n'er-do-well, just humiliating and demeaning him.[62]

Veker's words seem radical indeed. He has given up hope in the benevolence of the gevir. He rejects the simple palliative of bourgeois philanthropy and exhorts the people to active struggle. But the "populist" uprising which he envisions has its definite limits. Even as he urges the people to throw off the yoke of the rich, he preaches a new allegiance to the Tsarist regime:

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[61]Di takse, p. 91. [62]Ibid., p. 93.

זעם, די רעגירונג איז גום, איז בארעמהארציק, זי
האם באפרים עמליכע און צחאנציק מילאן פוירן,
זי חינטשם איטליכן גליק, אויך אונדז ירן חינטשם
זי גליק. זי זוכם אלץ מיטל צו פארבעסערן אונדזער
צושטאנד, זי וויל יירן נעבעך זאלן עסן, זאלן געזונם
זין, זאלן אפנים האבן חי מענטשן.

See here, the Government is good and merciful. She liberated twenty-some-odd million peasants, she wishes happiness for everyone, even for us Jews. She seeks every means to improve our lot. She wants Jews, nebekh, to be able to eat, to be healthy, and to attain their due as human beings.[63]

For Veker, the Government is the people's last ally against the oppression of their communal officials. He ends his speech with a dramatic crescendo:

שמים זשע אויף ירן, שמים אויף פון דעם לאנגען
שלאף! [...] זים מענטשן מים שכל, מים מום, חי
גאם און די מ"ערץ רעגירונג האם געבאמן. ...
געגוג צו שלאפן, גענוג חלומות, פאלגם די
רעגירונג און שמים אויף ירן, שמים אויף!

Rise up Jews, rise up from your long sleep! [. . .] Be people with common sense, with courage, as God and the dear Government have commanded. [. . .] Enough of sleeping, enough of dreams! Obey the Government and rise up Jews, rise up![64]

What are we to make of such an absurdly equivocal battle cry? "Obey the Government and rise up!" At first glance it appears that Abramovitch is simply falling back on a last bastion of liberal faith. Patriotism was a central tenet of the bourgeois Haskala as preached by Gotlober and others. Having rejected faith in the benevolence of the rich, the support of the Government is the last hope Abramovitch can cling to. It is true, of course, that the regime of Alexander II was a liberal one, ushering in the period of Great Reforms. As Veker tells us, it seems reasonable that the same Government which

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[63] Di takse, p. 90. [64] Ibid., p. 94.

liberated twenty million peasants would help the Jews out as well. And it is true that Alexander did loosen many of the draconic laws of his father. But by the same token, 1869, when Di takse was written, was not 1861, when the serfs were emancipated and the Great Reforms initiated. The intervening decade witnessed mounting reaction. While some of the Great Reform measures continued into the 1870s, Abramovitch could hardly have remained blind to the overall darkening of the political climate.

From this perspective the equivocation of Veker's battle cry might itself be interpreted as a tacit acknowledgement of, or concession to, the new reaction. Abramovitch was presenting a radical view of Jewish society, and had enough enemies as it was. Not only was he attacking the establishment of Berdichev, but he was also chiding his fellow maskilim. The sheer act of writing in Yiddish was sufficiently suspect to warrant caution. The only way he was going to squeeze his book through the Russian censor was to cloak his radicalism in a guise of effusive patriotism. Indeed, the play itself was dedicated to a government official in Odessa. But the protestations of allegiance are almost too effusive. In the work of a stylist as precise as Abramovitch the equivocation of "Obey the Government and rise up!" rings a note of such hearty reassurance that it borders on the satirical. The Government, for its part, was apparently blissfully unsuspecting of overstatements of alliegance--the book passed the censor intact.

Abramovitch himself used the story line of the final scenes to push the play on to a less overtly stated, but more ideologically tenable, conclusion vis a vis the Government. When Veker makes his appearance on the street he has passed through two important stages of transformation. He speaks to the people in their own voice, and he preaches a

cause which addresses their own immediate social struggle. One may think, then, that the masses would rally around him in a triumphant procession and reclaim Glupsk as their own--loyal to the Government or not. But Abramovitch was not disposed toward such a simple and improbable solution; and so he pushes the play on to its final climax and synthesis.

Despite expectations, Veker does not meet with resounding support. As he speaks, two strong-arm cronies of the do-gooders appear upon the scene. The poor Jews, who have been wavering indecisively during Veker's speech, moved yet not yet willing or able to act, now fear only for their own lives. They don't want to be implicated in open opposition to the communal administration. And so just as Veker finishes his passionate harangue, the ranks of his supporters thin out. The "strong man" Mendel der Geler ("Mendel the Yellow") steps to the fore, denouncing Veker as an apikoyres, a heretic:

הערט ירדן דאס עזות! הערט חאס דער אפיקורוס זאגט, חאס
ער חילו!

Listen, Jews, to his impudence! Listen to the apikoyres, listen to what he wants![65]

Veker's "enlightened" appearance is turned against him, and he is abandoned by the frightened crowd.

Veker stands all alone in the middle of the street. A new, thoroughly hostile crowd begins to gather 'round. Egged on by the do-gooders' men, the new crowd attacks Veker for his unorthodox appearance and ideas:

עס איז דאך א חאזק צו ריידן אויף אזעלכע גומע און פרומע
מענטשן אויף אזעלכע בעלי־צדקות, חאס זארגן זיך למובות
הכלל און זינען זיך נעבעך מקריב תמיד פאר ירדן! ...
חו איז ער, דער אפיקורוס?

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[65] Di takse, p. 94.

> It's sheer impudence to talk this way about such good and pious men [as the rich communal officials], about such princes of charity, who concern themselves only with the good of us all and always make sacrifices for the sake of the Jews! . . . Where is he, that apikoyres, that heretic?!![66]

The crowd presses menacingly. Veker is in physical danger. Just then, as the end seems near, a dashing Russian officer--a representative of the "dear Government"--pushes his way through the crowd. The masses who are so ready to attack Veker cower and back off at the sight of a uniform. The officer reaches a hand to Veker; he is none other than Gedalye Pikholts! The crowd disperses in fear, and Pikholts and Veker are left alone.

Standing there in the street, the two friends look each other over. The play has come full circle. In the First Act Pikholts already knew that you couldn't reach Jews through melitse. And he already knew that the gevir was not to be trusted, that an irrevocable schism prevailed between rich and poor. It has taken Veker the first four acts of the play to come to this same consciousness.

Yet Pikholts had been led by such awareness to a point of total despair. He believed that the Jews were beyond hope, and that whoever tried to reach out to them would himself be drawn under. He now reiterates that point:

בײַ ייִדן, זאָג אײַך נאָך א מאָל, בײַ ייִדן וועסטו גאָרנישט
מאַכן. [...] ייִדן שלעפּן אויף זיך אליין אַרויף דעם
דלות, דעם גלות!

> Among Jews, I say to you once more, among Jews you will accomplish nothing. [. . .] Jews bring upon themselves their poverty, their exile [dem doles, dem goles].[67]

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[66] Di takse, p. 95.

[67] Ibid., p. 96.

Veker, on the other hand, had tried to steer a different course. He steadfastly insisted that he could help the Jews, if only he could devise the correct tactis. When Pikholts saw the inefficacy of melitse, he concluded that there was no other way to speak to the people. Veker, on the other hand, was willing to keep looking. When Pikholts saw the corruption of the gevir, he concluded that liberal solutions were bankrupt and the Jews were beyond salvation. Veker, on the other hand, persevered to a more radical social theory, not content to wait for some distant day when rich and poor would have "equal rights," but pressing for broader social amelioration, for the elimination of class distinction between rich and poor, for an end to poverty altogether. He had spoken to the people directly, rousing them to action. Now, however, Veker seems defeated. He has come up with the right "voice" and the right "theory," yet he is still ineffectual, he still meets with the derision of the masses. Pikholts has left the Jews behind and at least found an answer for himself. He has aligned himself with the government and become a doctor. As he tells Veker:

אין נוץ איצט פאר מיר, פאר מינע קראנקע מענטשן
נעבעך, און פאר מין מיערער פאטערלאנד. מען האט
מיך ליב כאטש איך בין א ייד

I am useful now to myself, to my sick patients, nebekh, and to my beloved Fatherland. And in turn I am loved and respected, even though Iam a Jew.[68]

It looks like Pikholts was right all along. Yet even as he proves his point, he belies his own success. For all the protestations of faith in the Government, neither Veker nor his reader could have failed to take cognizance of one of the important political issues of the day: the new

[68] Di takse, p. 96.

reactionary climate had imposed an unstated numerus clausus which effectively cut off the universities to most Jewish students. Even if he wanted to, neither Veker nor any other maskil stood much of a chance of entering Russian university and becoming a doctor anymore. Furthermore, there was something intrinsically despicable, though understandable, about Pikholts's position. The entire play had underscored the terrible exploitation and suffering of the poor Jews. By what moral standard could Veker now follow Pikholts's example and abandon these poor people, when he had seen their suffering at such close hand and when they needed him more than ever? To leave now, to worry about his own future and abandon the people in their hour of need, would be no more defensible than the actions of the rich plutocrats of the Mefitse Haskala in St. Petersburg, who were petitioning the Government for equal rights for themselves alone, letting the rest of the Jews be damned. As long as the Mefitse Haskala, or Pikholts, could remain convinced that Jewish suffering was the fault of the Jews, that "Jews bring upon themselves their poverty, their exile," then they could rationalize their abandonment of the people by calling the cause hopeless. Yet in the context of the story, even as Pikholts is vindicated by Veker's apparent defeat, he is condemned by the implicit value structure as a traitor who cuts out on his people when they need him most. According to the internal judgment of the story, there are no rationalizations, no personal solutions.

And so Pikholts's personal success only bespeaks his social failure and betrayal, and further enhances the heroic posture of the protagonist Veker. Veker stands in the street confused, facing a seemingly irreconcilable quandry: he is more committed than ever to helping the people,

yet for the first time he seems to have exhausted all his means for doing so. He is caught in the nexus between theory and voice: he recognizes the class oppression of the poor at the hands of the rich, yet is unable to communicate with the poor in order to help them. He had berated the people for their silence but could not move them to action. Is Pikholts right, do Jews really bring their suffering upon themselves?

Standing forlorn at this dramatic juncture, contrasted on stage with Pikholts--the "woodpecker," the easy way out--Veker looks up in time to see Ayzik Zaike being led by in chains. Guarded by Russian gendarmes, Ayzik is being dragged away to Tsarist prison. See how the stage belies Veker's patriotic overtures! Two sorts of representatives of the "dear Government" now stand on the set: one, Pikholts, has left his people behind to save his own skin; the others, the soldiers, are leading an innocent poor man to prison at the bidding of the rich. It is difficult to know exactly how conscious Abramovitch was of the link between social and political power, between the rich and the government. Certainly one look at the stage shows that his <u>implicit</u> political theory is as radicalized as his social theory.

Veker, meanwhile, is left in the lurch on two fronts. Despite his Yiddish voice he is unable to rouse the masses. And despite his avowed patriotism he is unable to halt the complicity of the Government soldiers in abetting the criminality of the rich. The final climax has come. Just at that moment Zaike raises his head and, above the hostile jeers of the gathered crowd, manages to spit out in his stuttering voice:

בע-בע-בעסער כ'לעבן אין דער טורמע אידער אז
שטיין דא [...]

B-b-better, on my life, to go to jail than to remain here [. . .][69]

The crowd screams back with anger and insults, the do-gooders' men denounce Zaike as a "Sheyegets!," a non-Jew. He is led away by the soldiers, and the scene comes to a close.

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In the last instant of despair the dialectic of theory and voice finally works itself out. Standing smack in the face of a seemingly irresolvable paradox, Veker looks up and sees the quiet, homegrown nobility of the gentle Ayzik. Stuttering, illiterate, Ayzik is unable to move the crowd. They look at him with derision. Yet he is the sacrifice for Veker's education, the catalyst for a final dialectical leap.

Until now Veker has spoken to the people in their own language, urging them on to protest and struggle. Frustrated by their unresponsiveness, he has ultimately blamed the people themselves for their silence. "Who then is guilty if not you yourselves?" He had tacitly accepted the position of Pikholts, that Jews bring their suffering upon themselves. But the accusation was unwarranted. We recall that in every scene where the poor appeared they had had difficulty in expressing themselves. Only now, when Ayzik is led by in chains, does the truth become clear. It is not that the poor do not want to speak, nor even that they are afraid; the final truth is that they are unable to speak! When Zaike walks by stuttering, a champion of popular rebellion, we know that his politics are right. But because of his stuttering he is unable to express those politics. Pikholt's appearance seemed to bring the play full circle from the First Act to the last; now Zaike's stuttering brings the larger,

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[69] Di takse, p. 97.

"framed" play full circle, from Mendele's introduction to the denoument. Ayzik's stuttering is directly analogous to the torn manuscript received by Mendele. The manuscript had represented the linguistic "L," the "low" or spoken Yiddish which, by itself, was not yet suitable for literary function. Zaike's stuttering is likewise metaphorical for the voice of the common people, the "L" of the Yiddish vernacular which cannot yet speak for itself. In the frame introduction Mendele had realized the limits of the people's self-expression and assumed for himself the editorial responsibility of rendering the "L" into a literary "H." Now, in the final scene of the play, Veker seems to make the same realization and commitment.

The common people are not at fault; they are simply unable to speak. The task which Mendele assumed in the introduction--helping the people to tell their own story--is now also assumed by Veker (the autobiographical Abramovitch). It is simply not enough to use Yiddish to speak <u>to</u> the people, even if to berate them for their silence and urge them on to material struggle. Instead, the outsider has a responsibility to speak <u>for</u> the people, to help them to cultivate their tattered, disheveled, stuttering vernacular into an effective literary medium. Only the intellectual can help the people bring their message to the world, and so save them from the vocative impasse of their oppression.

7. A Farewell to Glupsk

Here then is Veker's resolution in the closing scene. In the final analysis, the course of his transformation has related Abramovitch's own story. At first, Veker wanted to bring Enlightenment ideas to the people. That theoretical stance necessitated a change in "voice," causing him to rip up the melitse book and address the people in their own language. Yet the more time Veder spent preaching to the people, the more acutely aware he became of their very social predicament. The more Veker saw of the people, the more he was forced to abandon his bourgeois idealism, his perception of a conflict between Reason and Obscurantism, and to take note of the base line of social struggle, the material conflict between rich and poor. He sided with the poor and tried to aid them in their cause. At first he believed that it was enough to simply exhort the people to speak. It was not until the very end of the play, when the stuttering Ayzik was led by in chains under the guns of the Government's soldiers, that Veker reached the final stage of his synthesis: He must use Yiddish not only to speak to the people, but also to speak for them. He must assume responsibility for fashioning a literary "H" from the people's "L."

How exactly he will refashion this literary language--on which all else depends--is hinted at in the play's final scene. Veker has been expelled from Glupsk for his radical agitation. He stands with his wife and children at the gates of the city, all their worldly goods--a broken desk, an old bed--piled high on a rickety wagon. With tears in his eyes, Veker bids Glupsk farewell:

זײ געזונט, גלופסק, דו גרויסע ײדישע שטאט, פון
דעם גאנצן חינקל! זײט מיר געזונט דו אומגליקלעכע
שטאט! וואס אין דיר זינען דא א סך חברות, א סך
פישקעס, א סך גבאים, א סך מיוחסים, א סך בעלי־
טובות, און א סך ידן קבצנים! [...] זײ געזונט
אויך דו חלק שטאט, וואס דארטן זיצן די ארעמע לײט
אין קלינע, נידעריקע חזרבות, אין לעכערס, אין
קעלערס, ביז דעם האלדז אין בלאטע! זײ געזונט
דו ווייטער חלק שטאט, וואס דארטן פלעג איך עפטער
גיין צו זען, חי אזוי מענטשן קומען דארטן א בי־סל
אפ, ערגער נאך אפשר ווי אין גהנום! צו זען די
בי־טערע לאגע פון דעם ארעמאן, חי אזוי נעבעך ער
זיצט, חי אזוי ער שלאפט, וואס ער עסט. חי אזוי
זיך וויב ליבט אין קימפעט, חי אזוי זינען קינדער
וואלגערן זיך, חי אזוי זײ גייען אנגעטאן און
חי אזוי זײ חערן אויפגעצויגן!

Farewell Glupsk, you great Jewish city, renown in all these parts! Farewell you unfortunate city, in which there are many communal agencies, many collection funds, many trustees, many persons of distinguished ancestry, many do-gooders, and many Jewish paupers! [. . .] Farewell to that section of the city where the people live, stuck in run down slums, in holes-in-the-wall, in cellars, up to their necks in mud! Farewell you forlorn section of the city, where I used to visit so often to catch a glimpse of the way people languish in conditions worse than Hell! I used to observe the bitter lot of the poor man, how, nebekh, he sits, how he sleeps, what he eats, how his wife behaves in pregnancy, how his children wander about, how they're dressed and how they group up![70]

In his farewell Veker assesses the meaning of his time in Glupsk. Above all else his sojourn has provided an ethnographic education. He has met the common people in their own element and on their own terms, in much the same way that Abramovitch did aboard the beggars' wagon. He has learned the everyday details of the people's lives: how they eat and how they sleep, how they dress and how they bear children. Such knowledge will serve him well in future travels.

From Glupsk Veker heads out into the world, where he will continue to champion the poor against the oppression of the rich. He has learned

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[70] Di takse, pp. 97-98.

his lessons well. Next time he enjoins the struggle he will draw on his accumulated ethnographic observations. Rather than speaking to the people as a German maskil who is too easily denounced as a heretic, he will be able to disguise himself and travel among the people as one of their own. Thus Abramovitch justifies his own use of the Mendele persona. Moreover, Veker realizes that the suffering of the Jewish poor results from outside political and economic oppression. Next time he enjoins struggle he will speak not so much to the people as for them. By drawing on the details of their language and life style, he will be able to tell their story with all the artistic authenticity and power it deserves.

Thus has the play told Abramovitch's own story and affirmed his lasting commitment to Yiddish writing. The more he champions the people's cause, the greater will grow the eloquence of his artistic voice.

The play ends with a rather heavy-handed finale. As Veker looks back with tears in his eyes, the "wicked" city of Glupsk, like Sodom of old, is consumed in flames. The ending reminds us of the supposed folk-authorship of the play, as the people revert to the native literary form of the biblical story. But the excess of the ending merely reiterates the play's central premise: the need for outside literary intervention and artistic control. While the city burns Veker joins his wife and children and sets out down the road from Glupsk. Much work awaits in other Jewish cities, where the poor suffer and are in desperate need of assistance. In Glupsk Veker learned why and how to speak in the people's voice; in other cities he will pick up the people's story for them, and carry their struggle to the world.

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Meanwhile Abramovitch has told his own story better than he himself could have known. After the publication of Di takse, he was permanently expelled from Berdichev. Now it was he who brought "poverty and exile" upon himself. He has bound himself with the people's struggle, adopted their voice and enlisted as their spokesperson. His own story was now organically bound with the story of the people. He was now a Yiddish artist.

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has limited itself to the first five years of Abramovitch's Yiddish career. It has examined his development from simple propaganda to self conscious art, and concomitantly, from bourgeois idealism to populist materialism. I have presented Abramovitch's transformation in terms of a dialectical interplay of sociological and literary factors, beginning with the diverse influences of his youth, fueled by intervening historical events and finding final synthesis in the literary process itself. It is regretable that I must conclude my study with Di takse. The three works considered in this paper--Dos kleyne mentshele, Dos vintshfingerl and Di takse--are all quite primitive, significant more as literary process than product. The seeds of transformation sown and cultivated in these works would come to full literary fruition only in the later opus of Abramovitch and his successors.

When all is said and done, the key to Abramovitch's achievement rests in two unique personal features. On the one hand he was possessed of an innate artistic sensibility. He was keenly atuned to details of native lifestyle and language, and strove for stylistic perfection in his rendition of the Yiddish vernacular. On the other hand he was a profoundly conscious human being. He refused to be trapped in ideological dogma; he saw people for what they were and recognized their inalienable right to survive. He enlisted himself in the ongoing struggle of the downtrodden Jewish poor. He berated the people for the faults and, at the same time, helped them to speak out against their oppressors. His weapon was his pen. By bringing the people to voice he created great

art; in so doing he intensified his commitment to their struggle. His art and politics were inseparable.

Di takse had told Abramovitch's own story, explaining and affirming his determination to continue writing in Yiddish. He moved to nearby Zhitomir in 1869, following his expulsion from Berdichev. There he issued the first edition of Fishke der krumer, "Fishke the Lame." Only a short pamphlet of some forty-five pages, it told the story of a crippled beggar who wandered through the netherworld of the Jewish Pale. As Mayer Viner points out, the work gave notice of a shifting artistic focus; Abramovitch had turned from a condemnation of the inhumanity of the Jewish rich to a sympathetic portrayal of the humanity of the Jewish poor.[1] His protagonist was not manipulated into some misfitting corset of Enlightenment; Fisheke was allowed his own language and lifestyle, patterned after Avrom der Hinkediker rather than Avrom Baer Gotlober.

In 1871 fierce pogroms broke out in the Russian port city of Odessa. The Jewish rich were able to buy themselves protection, leaving the wrath of an angry populace to fall on the poor. For four days Government troops did nothing to interfere. A Commission was later convened to study the "incident," and cynically concluded that the Jewish victims were themselves to blame. Abramovitch was now confirmed in his worst misgivings; the last vestiges of hope in the generosity of the rich or the beneficent designs of the Government were shattered. His commitment to the Jewish poor was complete.

In 1873 Abramovitch published Di kliatshe, "The Nag," his first really mature work. Here he explicitly denounced the obtuse self-interest

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[1]Viner, Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19-tn yorhundert, v. II, pp. 139-140.

of the Haskala and affirmed the people's absolute right to bread and sustenance, regardless of their level of "Enlightenment." As the battered Kliatshe, an allegorical representation of the Jewish people, makes clear to a would-be maskil:

> איך װיל גאָרנישט הערן קײן רחמונות, קײן נוצן,
> איך בין װי אלע אנדערע א לעבעדיקע באשעפעניש
> און האָב װי זײ א פּראװע, דאס רעכט צו לעבן.
> [...] איך װיל אבער לעבן גלײך װי אנדערע,
> גלאט װײל איך בין אויך א באשעפעניש פאר מיר.
> פארשטײסטו מיך, מײן מליץ יושר, מײן בארמהארצ-
> עדיקער האר?

> I don't want to hear about pity or "social usefulness." I am a living creature like all others, and like them I have a right to live. [. . .] I want to live as much as others, for I am also a being in my own right. Do you understand me, my eloquent intercessor, my merciful lord?[2]

Abramovitch accepts the Kliatshe's challenge. For the rest of his life he would embrace the Jewish people on their own terms, not only sociologically and politically but also ethnographically, linguistically and artistically. Two years later he issued his Zemires Yisroel, a collection of traditional Hebrew prayers and songs translated into Yiddish in order that "each and every Jew should be able to understand their precious worth, how beautiful they really are, the wonder of God."[3] The denegrated vernacular of the people was now deemed appropriate for the expression of such beauty.

It is true that Yiddish maintained a distinct aesthetic function for Abramovitch. It was never a neutral category, a language like all others. It represented the historical experience and cognition of the

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[2] Di kliatshe, in Ale shriftn fun Mendele Moykher Sforim (NY: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1920), v. I, p. 80.

[3] Zhitomir, 1875. The present citation is taken from the work's full title.

Jewish people in exile, and as such dictated a narrative style and implicit social theory all its own. According to Miron this so-called "aesthetic of ugliness" proved a liability, limiting Abramovitch to social issues and satirical motifs. As early as 1888 Y. L. Perets had already complained about the limited scope of Mendele and his "grandson" Sholem Aleykhem, complaining that

> you write for the people, while I write for myself, for my own artistic pleasure. I write in a modern language, consistent with European literature.[4]

Abramovitch made no claims to literary "modernism." He wrote in times of enormous historical turmoil, and chose to merge his own identity with the historical experience of his people. His writings are devoid of psychological drama, sexual tension, mysticism or impressionism. He was a realist, for which he makes no apologies. But though he did limit himself to a social canvas, his social theory by no means remained static. He understood that the Yiddish language had developed beyond the mainstream institutions of wealth and power, and he drew on its unique cognition to challenge those institutions. In 1878 he published the novel Kitser masoes Benyomen hashlishi, "The Abridged Travelogue of Benjamin the Third," a loose parody of Don Quixote. Its hero, Benyomen, is a shtetl Jew who ventures out into the world for the first time. After a long series of misadventures, he and his sidekick Senderl are waylaid and inducted into the Russian army. The pair come in for their faire share of criticism. They are completely inept at the "ways of the world"; they plot an unsuccessful escape and are finally hauled up before a military court-martial.

[4]At the time Perets was a newcomer to Yiddish literature, and confused Mendele with Sholem Aleykhem. The letter was published in Sholem Aleykhem's Yidishe folks-bibliotek.

Here the "ugliness" of Yiddish is somehow twisted around as Benyomen steps to the fore:

,חאשע בלאגאראדיע! האם בנימין אויסגעשאפן אויף
א קול, ,כאפן מענטשן אין מיטן העלן טאג און פאר-
קויפן זיי ווי היינער אויפן מארק, דאס מעג מען, און
אז זיי, נעבעך, חילן ניצול ווערן, דאס רופט מען א
שולד! אויב אזוי, איז דאס טאקע ספקר א חעלם.
און איך פארשטיי שוין, אסור, נישט, חאם היסט
אזוינס סעגן און נישט מעגן! [..] מיר זינען אייך
מוסר מודעה, אז פון טכסיסי־מלחמה חאבן מיר נישט
גארנישט, מיר ווילן נישט און מיר חילן נישט וויסן.
מיר זינען, ברוך השם, באשעפטע, האבן אין זינען
עפעס גאר אנדערש, און מיט אזעלכע זאכעניש
קענען מיר לחלוטין זיך נישט אפגעבן, זיי ביטן
אונדז אפילו גאר אין קאפ נישט. היינט, מילא,
חאס טויגט מיר אייך? מיר דאכט זיך, אז איר
באדארפט אליין חעלן אונדזערע פטור צו ווערן.'

'Your honor!' Benjamin vociferated. 'Trapping people in broad daylight and then selling them like chickens in the market place--that's permissible? But when these same people try to escape, you call it a crime? If that's the case, the world must be coming to an end and I fail to understand what you call "permissible"or "not permissible!" [. . .] We want to tell you that we don't know a thing about waging war, that we never did know, and never want to know. We are, praised be the Lord, married men; our thoughts are devoted to other things; we haven't the least interest in anything having to do with war. Now then, what do you want with us? You yourselves ought to be glad to get rid of us, I should think!'[5]

The officers of the court-martial conclude that the two are crazy and let them go free. But who is really crazy? The cognition of the Yiddish world is indeed different. To quote Benyomen literally, "Such matters [as warfare] won't even go into our heads." Yiddish flouts the norms of bourgeois propriety and fails to comprehend the accepted "logic" of political power and warfare. But, objectively, does that make it crazy, does that make it ugly?

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[5] Masoes Benyomen hashlishi, ed. by Shmuel Rozhansky (Musterverk edition; Buenos Aires: Yoysef Lifshits Fund, 1973), pp. 162-163. The translation given above is taken from Moshe Spiegel, The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third (NY: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 123.

Abramovitch's genius lay in his ability to synthesize. He was an accomplished Hebrew writer, versed in Russian and European languages, who turned to Yiddish by conscious design. He began as a spokesperson for bourgeois Enlightenment, using Yiddish to speak to the masses of poor Jews who understood no other language. But the more he spoke Yiddish the more he awakened to the real social struggle of the people, and as he did so he came to understand the potential of Yiddish as a weapon in that struggle. He took on first the rich and then the Government, using the people's language to deflate the rhetoric of economic exploitation or military-political immorality. By virtue of its historical perspective Yiddish exposed the lies and absurdities of the mainstream culture. Abramovitch drew from the well of the people to defend the people, and the result was great Yiddish literature.

Abramovitch himself did not go much further with his sociological innovation after the publication of Benyomen hashlishi in 1878. He was profoundly demoralized by the brutal pogroms and reaction which followed the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Distraught over personal problems as well, he remained silent for the next six years. His output after this period is characterized by a lingering pessimism, noteworthy less for social criticism than for rich ethnographic detail. Abramovitch was intent on chronicling and eulogizing a world which he perceived was doomed to destruction. He spent much of his time reworking earlier writings into expanded versions and translating a large part of his Yiddish opus into Hebrew.

Perhaps the final fruit of Abramovitch's literary process came not in his own work but in that of his successors. Sholem Aleykhem, who

debuted in Yiddish in 1883, hailed Mendele as "the zeyde," the grandfather. Abramovitch's influence is manifest throughout his work. Like Abramovitch, Sholem Aleykhem also concerned himself with social issues, championing the common people against enemies of class and politics, through the power of their own language. By reinterpreting the outside world into their own cognitive frame, his characters were able to win out, morally if not physically, against immense power and insurmountable odds. Sholem Aleykhem's influence extended in turn to a long line of Jewish writers, both in Yiddish and other languages. The Russian master Isaac Babel and the American Saul Bellow both translated or edited Sholem Aleykhem, and incorporated many of his motifs into their own works. It is in this way that Abramovitch's literary accomplishment lives on.

From his inauspicious beginnings in 1864 Abramovitch lived to see the flourishing of a vibrant modern Yiddish literature. He was hailed as the "grandfather" well within his own lifetime, and the anniversary of his birth became a major literary event. But for all that, he died with a heavy heart. He outlived many of his "grandchildren," including Perets and Sholem Aleykhem. He remained most of his life in Odessa, where he worked as a school principal and lived to see the cataclysmic events which ushered in the twentieth century. He greeted the springtime of Revolution in 1905, only to see it dashed in an orgy of Jewish blood. He witnessed the pogrom in Kishinev in 1903, and then saw hundreds of thousands of defenseless Jews massacred in the Ukraine during the First World War. In 1917, just before his death, he embraced the March Revolution. As he wrote to a gathering of revolutionary Jewish workers:

> I raise my glass from afar and offer my blessings. I drink as though I were an inlaw to you all.[6]

But he had bound his own fortune to that of his people, and had seen too much already to have much cause for hope. He had used Yiddish to reinterpret and so challenge the institutions of mainstream power; but deep in his heart he knew that the ruthlessness and brutality of ruling classes and nations were just too big, bigger even than words.

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Leon Trotsky once wrote, "that literature is revolutionary which is true to itself." Abramovitch fulfilled this adage. He refused to become ossified, to shackle himself to a single ideological dogma. He remained sensitive to the artistic dictates and potentialities of his Yiddish medium, moving from the bourgeois Haskala to materialism to his own brand of Jewish nationalism. He was a revolutionary. He took on, in turn, irrationalism, feudal economy, the Jewish rich, bourgeois maskilim, the Tsarist Government and mainstream consciousness. Quite intuitively, through the dialectic of his own literary process, he moved from liberal idealism to social materialism to a final concern with the issues of consciousness and cognition which underlie the mainstream power.

I regret that I am not able to end this paper with an in-depth analysis of those works which constitute the fruition of Abramovitch's literary development. Today his writings are all but forgotten. His cultural context is wonderously rich in the peculiarities of East European Jewish life, and doesn't fare well in translation. Still, Abramovitch was indeed "the first." He was the first to turn to the people in

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[6] "Der zeyde tsu di idishe artistn," Der yidisher artist, no. 1 (Kiev, August 29, 1917), p. 4.

their own language, identify their struggle, master their voice and carry their message to the world. He was the first to present Jews as human beings with an irrevocable right to survive, and to celebrate the style with which they did so. He was the zeyde of modern Yiddish literature, and of a new generation of Jews.

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