

## A Critical View of Waten on Yiddish

The draft resolution on the Jewish question and the projected conference is a welcome and important development toward defining a Marxist approach to the Jewish question in the United States as well as abroad. The question has too long been permitted to bob up and down with the waves of expediency, differing interpretations and attempts even to nullify its existence.

It is vitally important that the resolution finally adopted reflect the reality of the Jewish situation in our country and abroad, is accurate in its analysis, and is vigilant in its avoidance of national nihilism on the one hand and bourgeois nationalism on the other. It seems to me that from this point of view Paul Novick's article, "Nihilism, Bourgeois Nationalism and Assimilation," is a valuable and trenchant contribution to the discussion of the resolution.

I am afraid that the same cannot be said of Judah Waten's article, "Yiddish Culture in West and East," which followed Novick's article in the October issue of *Political Affairs*. It is difficult to see why Waten's article was published at all, doubtless meant to be a contribution to the discussion on the draft resolution.

It is replete with factual errors, inaccuracies and distortions, and displays a fairly high degree of ignorance as to the past and the present status of Yiddish. Let us point to some of the most glaring instances:

*Waten*: "Yiddish literature is at a very low ebb in the USA and is virtually extinct in Britain, but in the Soviet Union there is still considerable creative activity in the Yiddish language."

*Facts*: While it is true that Yiddish literature and cultural life are by far not on the up-grade in the United States they are nonetheless vastly more extensive than in the Soviet Union at the present time. Although Waten writes that "Yiddish literature and culture resumed again after Stalin's death in 1953," the fact is that the first Yiddish books after Stalin's death did not appear until 1959, when one volume each of the three Yiddish classicists (Mendele Moicher Sforim, I. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem) was published. The magazine *Sovietish Haimland* started publication in 1961. From 1959 to the present—seven years—around a dozen Yiddish books were published in the Soviet Union. In the six year period of 1959-1965, approximately 300 Yid-

dish books were published in the United States.\*

There is probably "considerable creative activity in the Yiddish language" in the Soviet Union in the sense that there are more than 120 Yiddish writers, many of them of high caliber and great talent, who are "creating." But "creativity" must see the light of day through books or frequent publication under other formats to be of any value to the writer, the reader and society.

The United States has three Yiddish daily newspapers, the Soviet Union none; the United States has around 20 Yiddish periodicals, the Soviet Union two (*Sovietish Haimland* and *Birobidzhaner Shtern*). Then one must take into account the considerable cultural activity in a number of mainly Yiddish-speaking organizations, as well as the secular schools, a research organization, YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research), cultural and book publishing organizations such as CYCO (Central Yiddish Cultural Organization) and the YKUF (Yiddisher Kultur Farband).

*Waten*: "In none of the countries of migration has Yiddish

\*The actual figure of Yiddish books printed in the USA in 1959-1965 is approximately 240, but many American Yiddish writers and publishers print their books, for budgetary reasons, in Israel, Poland, Mexico and France. For instance, in 1964, 41 Yiddish books were printed in the USA and 12 more, by American writers, in the countries just mentioned, making a total of 53.

blossomed forth into works of prose, poetry and drama to the extent that it did in Russia and still does."

*Fact*: It is true that Yiddish culture blossomed in old Russia and had developed tremendously in the twenties and thirties, thanks to the assistance of the Soviet government. But the United States was also the locus of a rich, varied and in large measure vitally progressive Yiddish culture. From 1890 to 1920 Yiddish poetry reached its zenith in this country and the United States attained a degree of creativity surpassing all other lands.

The first Yiddish daily newspaper (*Freind*) appeared in Russia in 1904. But 19 years earlier, in 1885, the United States had a Yiddish daily—the *Tageblatt*. The first Yiddish Socialist daily started publication in the United States—in 1894.

The accepted birthplace of the Yiddish theatre was in Eastern Europe, Rumania in the first instance. However, it reached its pinnacle and began its most fruitful era in the United States during the nineties and for a long period was one of the most significant and vital manifestations of the American theatre as a whole.

*Waten*: "... The American Jewish community, which had been the world's largest since 1918, has not produced a Yiddish writer of stature, although many Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem emigrated to New York."

*Fact*: Of course, Yiddish writers in the USA reflected the same

condition as did almost all the Jews in this country, namely, the fact that they were immigrants. But does their place of birth negate the fact that most of them made their greatest literary contributions and grew in stature as American Yiddish writers?

A glance at a few statistics of some of the giants of American Yiddish literature will show that Waten's literary history is weak, to put it mildly. Most of these writers came to the United States during their young manhood, and spent most of their creative lives and achieved their highest stature here. Even Joseph Opatashu (1886-1954), one of the three writers mentioned by Waten as someone "American propagandists . . . do not hesitate to lay claim to," came to the USA at age 21 (in 1907) and created thereafter as an American Yiddish writer for 47 years. Sholem Asch (1880-1957) came to the USA at age 30 and created as an American Yiddish writer for over 45 years. And what of the considerable number of outstanding writers not mentioned by Waten?

Morris Rosenfeld, the poet of the sweatshops (American sweatshops, by the way), came to the USA at the age of 24 and wrote here for 37 years. Abraham Reisen arrived here at age 28 and was an American Yiddish writer for 39 years. Leon Kobrin came here at age 19 and worked for 54 years as an American Yiddish writer.

The Yiddish proletarian poets, Joseph Bovshover and David Edelshtat, were distinctly American Jewish writers. So was the great

poet and playwright, H. Leivick, and many others. The list could be considerably expanded. Of course, a number of American Yiddish writers came to this country with a reputation already established in old Russia, Poland, etc., but this does not render suspect the claim that they were American Yiddish writers after having spent the majority of their creative years here and written on American themes as much as any other.

*Waten:* "Morris Winchevsky . . . took part in the foundation of the American Communist Party, and in 1927 visited the Soviet Union. . . ."

*Fact:* Morris Winchevsky—certainly an American—was chiefly a Yiddish poet and essayist, the first of the American classics of proletarian Yiddish poetry. He was *not* a founder of the Communist Party of the United States. His name is not even mentioned in William Z. Foster's *History of the CPUSA*. Winchevsky came to the Workers' Party, as a member, only after the *Freiheit* was established, in 1922. Also, he did not visit the Soviet Union in 1927, when he was paralyzed, but in May, 1924.

*Waten:* "There is not one permanent Yiddish theatre in New York."

*Fact:* The Folkbiene, a repertory group, has functioned as a permanent Yiddish theatre for more than 50 years. The Yiddish theatre on Second Avenue in New York has been on the decline but it never ceased to exist, as can easily be proven by a visit to the

"Avenue." Within the last five years there have been experimental groups in Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and other cities. This is no attempt to claim that the Yiddish theatre is flourishing in the United States, but Waten errs when he says that there is *no* theatre. Also, it is of interest that in the past few years there has been a slight *upsurge* in Yiddish theatre in New York, notably the Ben Bonus *kleinkunst* theatre, which played successfully on Second Avenue for a few years and now has moved to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.

*Waten:* ". . . Shortly before the war Russian was seriously challenging Yiddish, due to the Jewish parents sending their children to Russian schools in preference to Yiddish ones, with the result that the latter closed."

*Fact:* Even though it is doubtless true that many Jewish parents preferred not to send their children to Yiddish schools, the fact is that the schools were arbitrarily and administratively closed down during the 1937-38 Stalin purge, when the Yiddish press and all Yiddish institutions (with the exception of the theatres) were forcibly closed down. Does Waten mean to peddle the fantasy that the parents of over 100,000 Jewish children who attended the Yiddish schools suddenly in one brief period decided in unison to remove their children from these schools?

*Waten:* "This (the "appearance for the first time of a large group of Jews in Russian literature . . .") was in part an expression of the

waning Jewish separatism as was in another field the failure of the experiment of Birobidjan."

*Fact:* Waten's use of the word "separatism" in this and other instances is scientifically unsound. Is it possible that the Jews wanted to avoid what he calls "separatism" while the Soviet government and the then President Kalinin, who championed Birobidjan as a future Jewish republic, were advocating "separatism"? It is true that great numbers of Jews were not interested in settling in Birobidjan, but the failure of Birobidjan was due to a *number* of factors, not the least of which were the 1936-37 purges when I. Liberberg, chairman of the Birobidjan Soviet, and A. Chavkin, Secretary of the Birobidjan Communist Party were arrested. "Separatism," by the way, was the charge hurled at many Jewish writers and leaders in the post-war purges as well, and now discredited as Stalin-Beria crimes. Isn't it just possible that many Jews decided it was the better part of wisdom to stay out of Birobidjan?

*Waten:* "Most of them (Yiddish writers who were executed in the purges) have been posthumously rehabilitated and republished since the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956."

*Fact:* Most of these writers may have been "posthumously rehabilitated" but only one of them has been "republished" in the Yiddish language, the language in which they wrote their works. This was David Bergelson, (*Selected Works*). Many writers were re-

published in Russian and other Soviet languages, a *welcome* and *positive* form of rehabilitation. But failure to republish Yiddish writers in Yiddish is still a serious negative aspect of the situation.

A number of other errors appear in the article but let the above suffice to indicate Waten's loose handling of the facts in regard to the Yiddish past and present.

The draft resolution speaks of the process of language assimilation, of the decline of the Yiddish press, and the growth of the Anglo-Jewish press. But it is one thing to recognize a gradual decline and another to imply an almost moribund state, which is clearly not the case as I have indicated above.

It is misleading to compare the status of Yiddish in the Soviet Union with that in the United States, without recognizing that in the United States there are innumerable educational, cultural and philanthropic institutions mainly organized and led by American Jews who do not use or know Yiddish. These Jews are *linguistically* assimilated, but can one say that they are assimilated as a *nationality*? As a matter of fact, most of the institutions just mentioned are under nationalistic leadership, and the essence of the draft resolution, the way I understand it, is to persuade progressives to be more active in the Jewish community in order to build *progressive* Jewish culture.

It seems one must not tire of repeating that progressive Jewish

culture must be built both in Yiddish and in English, and, in speaking of the USSR, in Yiddish and in Russian. Soviet Jews who do not know Yiddish read the Jewish writers in Russian translation. The same applies to mass work. In the 20s and 30s there were the Yiddish Communist clubs, the Yiddish press, choruses and dramatic groups; the Jewish State theatres (of which there were about a dozen prior to liquidation by the cult) and theatre studios were instruments of mass activity. In Russian, there was the magazine *Tribuna* dealing with Jewish problems; there was the *Ozet* (society to help settle Jews in the colonies in the Ukraine and the Crimea, subsequently for settlement in Birobidjan) where many thousands of Jews, both Yiddish speaking and Russian speaking, were active. There is no mass work as yet—Communist, of course—whether in Yiddish or in Russian. There should be institutions for mass activities, the press, etc. There should be the facilities for parents who want to teach their children Yiddish to be able to do so. That means either schools, or supplementary courses and—of course—textbooks, an alphabet.

As things stand now, in the United States, if Yiddish organizations and institutions (press, schools, etc.) disappeared (and I don't think that Yiddish is disappearing from the world stage quite with the rapidity and completeness that Judah Waten implies), Jewish communal life would *not* disappear; in the Soviet Union, as things are set up at

present, should the relatively small (although very vital and important) activity in Yiddish disappear, non-synagogal *Jewish* life would disappear. That is why you cannot place Yiddish culture in West and East on the same scale. Yiddish culture has a partner (Jewish culture in English) in the West, but in the Soviet Union whatever has been restored (*Sovietish Haimland*, Jewish concerts and traveling ensembles) stands at present as the sole representative of a rich history, progressive tradition and national yearning of many Jews living there.

Waten writes that "Jewish life in England (and the USA) has gradually found expression in an expanding Anglo-Jewish literature precisely because English has become the only language of the English Jews. . . . Some of the best known (writers) are Arnold Wesker, Alexander Baron, Gerda Charles, Frederic Raphael, Wolf Mankowitz and Harold Pinter, all of whom have been understood and accepted by the non-Jewish public as well as the Jews, a significant fact which underlines the break-up of Jewish separatism in England (and the United States—M.S.)." What Waten says here is that "separatism" is determined by language, not ideology or program. If the writers write in English then they contribute to the "break-up" of "separatism." *Ipsa facto*, if they write in Yiddish they contribute to "separatism." In the United States and England the overwhelming majority of Zionists speak English, not Yid-

dish. Do the nationalists and religionists who speak English symbolize the break-up of separatism and those progressive and Communist Jews who speak and write in Yiddish to advocate unity of the workers regardless of nationality, who use Yiddish to call for full participation in the freedom struggle of the Negro people and other minorities—are these progressives the separatists? Ben Hecht was a popular Jewish writer who wrote in English. He supported the Irgun rightists during the Israel struggle and advocated not only separatism but extreme chauvinism. Paul Novick, editor of the *Morning Freiheit*, wrote in Yiddish for unity of the working people in Israel's struggle against imperialism, for unity with the Palestinian Arabs to establish a viable state, for cooperation with the socialist countries and the peoples of the democratic states, against chauvinism and extreme nationalism. If we accept Waten's thesis, Ben Hecht, the extreme chauvinist, contributed to the "break-up" of separatism since he wrote in English, and Paul Novick, the internationalist and fighter for unity of all peoples in behalf of progress, contributed to separatism since he wrote in Yiddish. Nonsense.

The article "Yiddish Culture in West and East" is of no help to the Soviet Union when it distorts the picture of the status of Yiddish both in the East and the West by gross carelessness with facts. Waten may be right when he writes at the end of his article

that "It would seem then that only in the Soviet Union has Yiddish literature a better chance of survival than anywhere else." That can be true (though I think that Yiddish literature has a good chance of survival in a number of other countries as well), only if one has the potential in mind. The potential *is* there; of this there is no doubt. The writers are there, the inspiration of Soviet life and brotherhood are there, the goals and ideals are there and we are confident that the audience is there. But the program, the means, the policy is still not there. In light of this situation the following paragraph in the draft resolution can be more helpful to our Soviet comrades than a distorted comparison of Jewish

culture in the USSR and the USA:

"While emphasizing these advances (*Sovietish Haimland*, books, concerts, translations), we look forward to the continuation of the process now under way and its progress toward full restoration of the administratively suppressed Jewish cultural institutions. We support the approach expressed in the editorials in *Political Affairs* of June and July 1964 with reference to combatting remnants of anti-Semitism in the USSR, the approach to religion and anti-religious propaganda, and for the restoration of such institutions as a Jewish state theatre, Yiddish newspapers, education and other means of Jewish culture."

It is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people. The enemies of the workers are the capitalists of all countries. Among the Jews there are working people, and they form the majority. They are our brothers, who, like us, are oppressed by capital; they are our comrades in the struggle for socialism. Among the Jews there are kulaks, exploiters and capitalists, just as there are among the Russians, and among the people of all nations. The capitalists strive to sow and foment hatred between workers of different faiths, different nations and different races. Those who do not work are kept in power by the power and strength of capital. Rich Jews, like rich Russians, and the rich in all countries, are in alliance to oppress, crush, rob and disunite the workers.

V. I. LENIN, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, pp. 252-253

#### To Our Readers:

Starting with this issue, our readers will note a change in our masthead. The post of Editor is now held by Betty Gannett, the former executive editor. The former editor, Hyman Lumer, has relinquished this post to assume national responsibilities for the Communist Party in the field of educational and ideological work. He will continue his association with *Political Affairs* in the capacity of associate editor.

We shall continue to work for the improvement of the content of *Political Affairs* and for an increase in circulation. We look forward toward continued cooperation and support from our readers.

THE EDITORS