Yiddish Writing in South Africa: Leibl Feldman's Radical History of Johannesburg Jewry

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Abstract

Leibl Feldman's Yiddish history of the Jews in Johannesburg to 1910, *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen, 31 May 1910*, published in 1956 by the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation in Johannesburg, is part of the body of Yiddish literature produced in South Africa after the Second World War. It is a Marxist Yiddishist polemic that describes the establishment of Johannesburg and its Jewish community from the point of view of the thousands of eastern European Jewish immigrants, who were streaming into Johannesburg in the 1890s. Drawing heavily on the early Yiddish press, it describes the immigrant neighbourhood in Ferreirastown: its personalities, social, cultural, and workers' organisations, and its social and political concerns. Unfortunately owing to its polemical nature, it fails to present the "complete picture" of the community that it claims, but nonetheless it brings much new material to light.[1]

The Yiddish Language

Yiddish, the former Jewish vernacular of the western, central and eastern European Jews, is the quintessential minority language, a stateless language, which was marginalised even in the Jewish State. Today Yiddish is no longer spoken as "a language of the street", except in certain ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in Israel and the United States (Katz 2004: 379–397). Yiddish first emerged about 1000 years ago, in the Rhinelands (ibid: 20–44). It is made up of a mixture of Middle High German, Hebrew-Aramaic, as well as Slavic elements ab-

sorbed as the Jews migrated eastwards into Poland and Russia. Yiddish is only one of a number of Jewish vernaculars which developed when the Jews were exiled and dispersed into Asia, Europe, and Africa.[2] Of all the vernaculars, however, Yiddish was the most widespread, being the language of the largest concentration of Jewry, in western, central, and eastern Europe. It is also the only Jewish vernacular to be recognised as a national language of the Jewish people, at the Czernowitz conference of 1908 (Katz 2004: 267–271; King 1998: 41–50), and which developed a substantial body of literature.

In the Jewish world, however, Yiddish has always had to take second place to Hebrew, the elite Jewish language—the language of the Bible, the synagogue, and of religious literature—akin to Latin in the Christian world. Hebrew was adopted as the language of the late eighteenth century Jewish Enlightenment and the language of the Zionist Movement of the late nineteenth century. Yiddish, on the other hand, the language of the masses of Jewish workers in the Russian Pale of Settlement, was the language chosen to disseminate the secular humanitarian ideals of the Jewish Socialist movement—the Marxist orientated *Algemeyner Arbeter Bund in Poyln, Lite un Rusland,* known as the Bund, which was established in Vilna in Lithuania in 1897. Thus the Hebrew and Yiddish languages came to represent opposing ideologies in Jewish life: Zionism and Socialism (Katz 2004: 257–271; Goldsmith 1998: 41–50). The ensuing rivalry between Hebrew and Yiddish, in competition to be chosen as the national language of the Jewish State, found its most virulent expression in the State of Israel just after its establishment (Rojanski 2004: 46-59), but was also echoed in the Jewish diaspora communities.

The South African Jewish Community

In South Africa, by 1890, there was already a small community of approximately 4000 Jews of English, German, and Dutch origin. However the main body of the community came over from eastern Europe in two waves of immigration before and after the First World War. The formative wave occurred between 1890 and 1914, when the small community of 4000 swelled to nearly 50 000 (Shimoni 1980: 5). The immigrants were traditional, inspired by the Zionist movement which was strong in their hometowns and villages in Lithuania and White Russia. Very few of the secular *Bundist* intelligentsia from the cities of Vilna and Warsaw came to South Africa in those days. Despite the fact that the eastern European immigrants soon far outnumbered the original small Anglo-German Jewish community, the leadership of the community remained in Anglo-German hands. In the early twentieth century the divide between the Anglo-German Jews and the eastern European Jews was not just one of language and culture, but was accentuated by class divisions between rich and poor, which caused considerable friction. The Anglo-German Jews, fearing that the poor and unacculturated

eastern Europeans would arouse anti-Semitism, and harm their own position in South African society, encouraged them to shed their foreign ways, and particularly the Yiddish language, as quickly as possible. On the other hand, the eastern European Jews resisted the Anglo-German style synagogues and institutions which possessed a formality to which they were unaccustomed, and broke away to form their own.

South African Yiddish Literature

From 1890, a series of Yiddish newspapers was published in South Africa to help the immigrants to adapt to their new lives, and to bring them news of the old country. The first Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner Israelit* (Grosman 1973: 134–140), pre-dated the first English Jewish newspaper, the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, by 12 years. By 1911, a weekly Yiddish press was established, which continued without a break until 1981 (Poliva 1960: 19–26). Despite poor printing facilities, the first Yiddish monograph, *Sefer ha-Zikhroynes* by Nehemiah Dov Hoffman, was published in Cape Town in 1916, and between 1920 and 1948 six books of short stories and four volumes of poetry were published in South Africa. A similar number were sent over to the presses and publishing houses in Lithuania at that time. After the Second World War, with the establishment of the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation as well as a Yiddish Press and Publishing House, South Africa became a small but important international centre of Yiddish creativity. Between 1949 and 1983 thirteen collections of essays and short stories, twenty-one volumes of poetry, and two novels were published, as well as a monthly, and later quarterly, literary periodical, which continued until as late as 1991. Themes include memories of life in the old country, the life and struggles of the early immigrants in South Africa, relationships between Afrikaner and Jew in the farming communities, black-white relationships, including the terrible hardships suffered by the African population, as well as descriptions of traditional African tribal customs (Sherman 1984: 152–157). Besides poetry and short stories, five significant historical works were also published, namely, a general historiographical essay (Feldman 1967), a history of the Indians in South Africa (Feldman 1961), as well as three Jewish communal histories. The communal histories include: *Yidn in Dorem Afrike*, a general overview of South African Jewry published in 1937, *Oydtshorn, Yerusholayim d'Afrike*, a history of the small Jewish community of Outdshoorn in the western Cape published in 1941, and *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen, May 1910*, the history of Johannesburg Jewry to 1910 published in 1956—the most ambitious work, and the subject of this article.

These histories are the work of an eastern European immigrant, Leibl Feldman. Born in 1896 in Lithuania, Feldman emigrated to South Africa, together with his family, in 1910 at the age of 14. Although born into an observant Jewish

family, Feldman had abandoned strict religious faith by his teens, adopting a radical Socialist approach to life, and an antipathy to formal Jewish worship and to Zionism, which is clearly evident in all of his writings (Sherman 1989: 1–74).

Scope, Sources, Content, Style

Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen, 31 May 1910 was published by the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation in Johannesburg in 1956. It is 303 pages in length, with 23 illustrations, and is divided into ten chapters with 114 subheadings. The book was compiled from a range of shorter articles which had previously been published in the Yiddish press. This method of compilation tends to give the account the quality of materials collated for the writing of future history, rather than of a finished history in itself. Six sections deal, chronologically, with the founding of the city of Johannesburg; the establishment of its Jewish community; the history of that community before, during and after the South African War (1899–1902); in the year 1910; and after 1910 to approximately 1930. Another four chapters are thematic, dealing with personalities, organisations, the Jewish press, and the Jewish attitude to Africans. At the end of the book there is a statistical supplement of funerals and marriages to 1910. Feldman, as the title of his book indicates, originally intended his history to go up only to 1910. However, as he states in his introductory comments, owing to the limited materials available for this period, he has devoted one tenth of the book to the period after 1910 to approximately 1930 (1956: 3). We are fortunate in his decision as his analysis of this later period successfully integrates the events of this time which was so crucial in the lives of the eastern European Jewish immigrants: the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Balfour Declaration, and the Jewish War Victims Relief and Reconstruction Fund.

Feldman's sources, which are not always cited, are both Yiddish and English. For his information about Johannesburg, he has utilised the popular histories, *Payable Gold* and *The Discovery of the Witwatersrand Goldfields*, by James and Ethel Gray, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick's richly detailed polemic, *Transvaal From Within*, Fred Jeppe's *Transvaal Almanac and Directory for 1889*, as well as unspecified Government statistics, and newspapers, such as the *Star*, the *Transvaal Argus* or the *Standard and Diggers*. His main sources for the Jewish community, are the English and Yiddish press, particularly *Ha-Kokhav* for the year 1903/1904, *Der Afrikaner* from 1911, and primary materials which he obtained from the historian, S.A. Rochlin, which include Morris Abrahams' then unpublished manuscript, *The Jews of Johannesburg, 1886–1901*. Secondary sources include Marcia Gitlin's history of South African Zionism (1950), Rabbi Dr Joseph Hertz's *The Jew in South Africa* (1905), and the South African Jewish Yearbook of 1929. His use of English sources impacts on his style, which is at times clumsy, as if he were translating from English into Yiddish. On the other hand, when he is writing

freely, his descriptions can be poetic, as when he is describing the dusty wind that rises from the mine dumps, or the long Transvaal winter, and the arrival of the first spring rains. He quotes at length from the Yiddish press, to which he devotes the longest chapter in his book, giving his work a sense of raw immediacy. At least two of the newspapers from which he quotes at length, *Ha-Kokhav* and *Di Yudishe Fohn*, are no longer extant.

Feldman was not a professional historian. His work is targeted at a readership of Yiddish speakers, in South Africa and abroad, who left eastern Europe without the privilege of a formal education. His style is simple, clear, colloquial, and anecdotal, and contains a wealth of detail. He creates a unique picture of the immigrant neighbourhood of Ferreirastown in downtown Johannesburg, at the turn of the last century—at a time when the more established were already moving away to Doornfontein, which would become the well known Jewish immigrant neighbourhood in the 1930s. He describes the Palmerston Hotel, the Zionist Hall, the *Grinem Besmedresh* (the synagogue of the greenhorns), *Shames* Yard (where the very poorest immigrants live), the Yiddish theatre, the Yiddish press, the popular bookshops, restaurants and the Plungyaner Boarding House, the charitable organisations, workers' organisations, the personalities, and the social and political concerns, both local and abroad. While *Yidn in Yohanesburg* might not be quite in the same league as Irving Howe's scholarly and meticulously researched, best selling study of Jewish immigrant New York, *World of our Fathers*, it still provides a remarkable description of the world of the early eastern European immigrants in Johannesburg.

In content, style, and method of compilation, this history has many qualities in common with another Yiddish immigrant history: that of Israel Medres' *Montreal fun nekhtn—Montreal of Yesterday*, *Jewish Life in Montreal, 1900–1920*, published in Yiddish in 1947, in French translation in 1997, and in English translation in the year 2000. Both Medres and Feldman left Lithuania and Belorus, respectively, as teenagers, in 1910, for Montreal and Johannesburg, and both their histories deal with the same time period. However, in contrast to Medres' fair-handed approach, Feldman has a very strong political bias. The differences between the two histories serve to illustrate the difference between the two communities, Montreal and Johannesburg. Whereas Hebrew and Yiddish existed in harmony among the Jews of Montreal (Roskies 1990: 22–38), in the more conflicted community of Johannesburg, the Zionists virtually excised Yiddish at an early stage. However, the parallels between these two Yiddish community histories, each unique in their genre, deserve to be more fully explored.

Political and Ideological Background

While the writing of South African Jewish history in Yiddish made sense in 1937 and 1940 when between 15 and 20 percent of the South African Jewish commu-

nity was still Yiddish speaking, writing in Yiddish 15 years later is not as easily explained. Eastern European immigration to South Africa had been reduced to a trickle, with the Immigration Quota Act of 1930 and the Aliens Act of 1937. The majority of the immigrants had mastered English, Yiddish was not being passed on to a second generation, while the Holocaust had destroyed over 50% of potential speakers, and the State of Israel was doing its best to suppress Yiddish. Why then did Feldman choose to write in Yiddish, and what can his Yiddish history of Johannesburg Jewry still have to offer us today?

Feldman's history of Johannesburg Jewry was published only a year after the first major work of South African Jewish historiography, *Jews in South Africa*, edited by Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (1956) was published with the blessing of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies in Johannesburg; and is described by Mendelsohn and Shain in these terms:

> The image it represents is of an industrious, upwardly mobile, respectable classless, civic-minded, loyal and uniformly Zionist community, contributing energetically to the Commonwealth, and generally welcomed by the host society. Written out of this account or minimized … are anti-Semitism, class struggle within the Jewish community, non- and anti-Zionism, the struggle between the Yiddishists and Hebraists, and Jewish criminality. (Mendelsohn and Shain 2005: 29-32)

Even though Feldman had not actually read this work at the time of writing—he was aware of its imminent publication (Feldman 1956: 3)—it is exactly this image and these oversights that Feldman's history seeks to redress. In the introduction to *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen, 31 May 1910*, Feldman writes: "I have concentrated on the eastern European Jews, because they and their descendants are the founders of Jewish life as a national group in South Africa"(ibid: 3). All three of Feldman's histories focus on the plight of the eastern European immigrants, rather than on that of the Anglo-German Jewish elite, the leaders and founders of the community. Feldman specifically intended to provide an antidote to existing communal history which focused on the social and political achievements of the Anglo-German Jews, while the majority of the eastern European immigrants remained voiceless.

Feldman's work is informed by strong ideological and political preferences, both Jewish and general. Even though he has abandoned the Soviet Yiddish orthography[3] for the standard Yiddish orthography, he makes no pretence at striving for historical objectivity, and writes anti-establishment, alternative history. His criticism is directed both at the Jewish establishment in Johannesburg and at the government of the Transvaal. He is concerned both with the class struggle

between the established Anglo-German Jews, the leaders of the Jewish community, and the poverty stricken working class eastern European immigrants, as well as with the political struggle between the privileged whites and the disadvantaged and disenfranchised non-whites. However, in the context of the South African conflict of 1899–1902, in line with his fervent anti-English stance, Feldman comes out solidly on the side of the Boers, whom he portrays extremely sympathetically.

Together with the class struggle, Feldman is also concerned with the aforementioned Jewish language struggle between the "aristocratic" Hebrew, the language of the synagogue and of the Zionist movement, and Yiddish, considered an inferior dialect— a *jargon*—by its Zionist detractors. For Feldman, the very act of writing in the Yiddish language is an act of cultural defiance, directed both at Hebrew the language of the State of Israel and the Zionists, and at English the language of the acculturated Anglo-German Jews in South Africa. Feldman's history constitutes a plea to the Jews in South Africa to cultivate and to preserve their own language and literature—Yiddish. His work thus contains topics, both cultural and ideological, that cannot be found elsewhere, such as Yiddish cultural and social organisations, the Yiddish theatre, and the Yiddish press.

Feldman's ideological stance most resembles that of the Jewish Socialist writer, Haim Zhitlowsky (1865–1943). Committed to Socialism and simultaneously proud of his Jewish identity, Zhitlowsky espoused a theory of Jewish diaspora nationalism which was anti-capitalist and anti-clerical, calling on Jews to unite under the umbrella of the Yiddish language and its emerging secular literature (Sherman 1989: 28). Added to this is Feldman's affiliation to the pre-State, anti-Zionist, Jewish colonisation schemes, and territorialism; dwelling on the missed opportunities for settling Jews in Uganda on the African continent (Weisbord 1968), or even on the land in the Transvaal where, he firmly maintains, they would have been far happier, healthier, and more successful than mouldering away in a little shop (1968: 118-120). Feldman never misses an opportunity to have a stab at the "fanatical" Zionists, and their love of the "holy tongue" and dislike of Yiddish. He depicts the local Johannesburg Zionists as social climbers, who are donating money to Zionist funds as a means to obtain social status, and not from any true empathy or identification with the Zionist cause (1956: 198-200). He quotes from the Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner* (12.7.1912), contrasting the negative attitude of the Anglo-German Jews towards Yiddish to that of the Afrikaners' or—as Feldman refers to them—Boers' positive attitude to Afrikaans:

> I look at the fight, which is being waged between the Boers and the United Party about the language question. I respect General Herzog and General Smuts for their courage in supporting their own language. This word "own"–"*eygene*" is

> sufficient, for them to win everyone's sympathy. They, the Boer leaders, know full well, that the English language is richer and more beautiful than their language – "die taal". But "die taal" is still their own. No person in the world would want to exchange his mother. But us? We with our clever ideas…! (1956: 233)

Feldman lauds radical Socialism, white trade union activity, and the work of Jewish radical leaders. His two chapters which deal with the history of Johannesburg, both before the South African War, and in 1910, contain a very strong indictment of the Transvaal government's treatment of the Africans; describing the appalling conditions under which they live and work, and the total lack of even-handedness in the allocation of facilities and resources between whites and blacks (1956: 32-33). In 1955, after the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, it is doubtful that such an indictment would have been published by the Johannesburg Jewish community had it been written in English. Feldman even includes a chapter on the Jewish attitude to Africans, which would have been a very sensitive subject in 1956. Feldman maintains that Jews do not differ substantially from the rest of the white population in their attitude to Africans. Nonetheless he observes that the Anglo-German Jews are more active in philanthropic work than the rest of the white population. For the penniless east European Jewish immigrants, the most common first place of employment was in the concession stores on the mines, and in the *Kaffereatniks*, the canteens where food was served to the Africans (Sherman 2000: 505-521). Living and working in such close proximity to Africans, a friendly relationship often developed between the lonely Jews and the lonely Africans. Both had left their families behind to seek work in Johannesburg, both were alienated from the foreign environment and neither could speak English. With the result that the Jew would start to speak a pigeon Zulu, and there were quite a few Africans who could speak a very passable Yiddish. Feldman observes that, unlike the English, Germans and Dutch, Jews did not have an aristocratic missionary approach to Africans believing that they were chosen by God to civilize them, and were thus not inclined to regard Africans as inferior beings (1956: 241-246). Strangely, while indignant at the unfair treatment of Africans, Feldman totally dismisses their culture, characterising their beliefs as "primitive superstitions", saying that, aside from their national dances, they have nothing to offer (ibid: 254).

His chapter on personalities includes Sammy Marks, Max Langerman, Emanuel Mendelssohn, Samuel Goldreich, Barney Barnato, Rabbi Dr Hertz, and Rabbi Dr Landau whose negative attitude to the Yiddish language is largely blamed for the demise of Yiddish in South Africa. However, by far the most space is devoted to the leader of the Social Democratic Federation (Pike 1985: 67-69), one of the precursors of the Communist Party of South Africa, Yeshaya Israelstam, a person-

ality, who would never have found a place in any respectable Jewish communal history of that period, written in English. He quotes from a letter written by Israelstam to *The Star* on 15 November 1905, protesting about "The anti-Asiatic agitation" which decries both government policy and his own community in particular:

> It is rather disgusting to find persons in the present so-called civilised 20th century, who are so ignorant, so unthinking, and so intolerant, as to come together at a Convention, and pass resolutions restricting certain people from trading and residing amongst the rest of the population, because they happen to be a shade darker, or because they belong to a different religion than themselves; and I cannot find enough words to condemn the action of some of the delegates, themselves belonging to a persecuted race, who are even now restricted and excluded from many countries with the same restrictions and accusations as are used here against the Asaitics. The agitation against the Asiatics, like Anti-Semitism, is the outcome of the competitive system. The competition and jealousy for trade, and the race for wealth, produced by the sweat of the working class, creates race and national hatred. (1956: 139-140)

Feldman also quotes from the Yiddish newspaper *Ha-Kokhav* (6/5/1904), to illustrate how the Jewish establishment dissociated themselves from the radical Jews:

> Brothers in South Africa! Open your eyes and regard the new danger, which threatens us from a few Jews in the Social Democratic movement in this country… Jewish leaders! Get together and make it clear to the government and to the people that the few Jewish voices that they hear are those of individuals who make more noise, than they are important. Forbid the youth from taking part in the movement. Declare publicly that the few Jewish Socialists do not belong to the Jewish nation, as they themselves admit. What they utter are only Socialistic ideas. They are cut off from Jews and Judaism." "Jews take heed of the new danger!" (1956: 185)

Feldman, however, is not only conscious of black–white discrimination, he also highlights discrimination against eastern European Jews on the part of some of

the early white Trade Unions, dominated by British immigrants, which excluded Jews and often forced them out of their professions into petty trading (ibid: 61–62). On the other hand Feldman, citing one of the early Johannesburg pioneers, complains equally bitterly about the Anglo-German Jews, who refuse to give work to their eastern European co-religionists (ibid: 62). Allegations such as these, which illuminate the early immigrant experience, are unknown in any other work of South African Jewish history. Feldman depicts a community divided not only by class but by religion. He cites *Ha-Kokhav* of 13 May 1904:

> Only quarrels wherever you turn or go! The Federation against the Board of Deputies. The rabbis with each other. The old and the new synagogues against each other. Everyone is fighting for the common good, not for their own benefit, God forbid, all quarrels are for the sake of heaven!"(ibid: 185)

Feldman writes that despite these quarrels, ironically, the majority of the community has become estranged from religion:

> From the whole Torah all that remains is the name. Sabbath and Holidays virtually don't exist at all. *Treyf* and *kosher* are remembered as something which belonged to one's childhood. Marrying gentile women is a phenomenon that one encounters very often in the colonies…On the whole the synagogues in most communities are shut from *Rosh Hashanah* to *Rosh Hashanah*. (*Ha-Kokhav*, 3/6/1904; Feldman 1956:186)

And, although he does not elaborate, Feldman acknowledges the presence of criminal elements in the community (Bristow 1982: 204-211), quoting briefly from *Ha-Kokhav*, 8/10/1904: "No nation bears the stain of driving the white slave trade, more than the French and the Jews, and particularly the Polish and Galician Jews" (Feldman 1956: 182).

Conclusion

Thus, in contrast to Saron and Hotz's image of "an industrious, upwardly mobile, respectable classless, civic-minded, loyal and uniformly Zionist community, contributing energetically to the Commonwealth, and generally welcomed by the host society" (Mendelsohn and Shain 2005: 29); Feldman has depicted a community that is divided by class, religion and politics, is not uniformly Zionist nor unilaterally loyal to the Commonwealth, has abandoned strict religious observ-

ance, contains criminal elements, and is not always welcomed by the host society. The truth no doubt lies somewhere between these two poles. Feldman's judgement of Anglo-German Jewry, in particular, is unrealistically harsh and biased, neglecting to place sufficient emphasis on the role that Anglo-German charitable organisations played in the lives of the eastern European immigrants. For this reason his history does not present the "complete picture" that he claims in his introduction. In 1956, Feldman's extreme Yiddishist stance was unrealistic, especially as he himself acknowledged that it was the eastern European Jews themselves who were most at fault for abandoning their language. Feldman, the wealthy Socialist, simply refused to acknowledge that not ideology but economics was the motivating factor in the issue of language – the need to make a living as quickly as possible made the immigrants abandon Yiddish for English so soon. It is also debatable how accurate Feldman is at times, particularly as he does not always cite his sources. Nonetheless what this history lacks in objectivity, accuracy and scholarly footnotes is made up for in passion, and a feisty Jewish spirit. It is a rare example of Jewish immigrant writing inspired by Jewish ideologies that have been long forgotten, and constitutes authentic and unsanitised alternative history. Moreover, it contains a wealth of material that will be invaluable for future historians. Once contextualised in a more balanced way, these materials will be most useful in helping to fill out the picture of Johannesburg Jewry.

Notes

1 All the English translation from Feldman's text, as well as from the Yiddish newspapers cited by him, is by the author, Veronica Belling. The English translation of Feldman's Yiddish translation of an excerpt from a letter published in the Johannesburg English newspaper, *The Star* (15 November 1905), however, uses the original English cited in that newspaper.

2 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Jewish languages".

3 Shortly after the revolution in the former Soviet Union, Hebrew publications, together with religion and Zionism, were banned. An official Soviet orthography was adopted for the Yiddish that is written in Hebrew letters, in which Hebraisms, that comprise 15 percent of the Yiddish language and which are unvocalised, were to be spelled phonetically in the Yiddish way, to obscure their Hebrew derivation.

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