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A YIDDISH NEWSPAPER AT WAR WITH YIDDISH: ABRAHAM CAHAN AND THE 1931 LANGUAGE DEBATE IN THE NEW YORK *FORVERTS*

by Gennady Estraikh

Abstract: *The article focuses on the paradox of the negative attitude articulated by a Yiddish newspaper toward using Yiddish as the educational medium of instruction in American Jewish schools. Abraham Cahan, the editor-in-chief, and many, if not the majority, of the staff writers (all of them socialists of various shadings) contended that Yiddish was detrimental to American children's educational achievements. Such attitude stemmed from their opposition to Yiddishism, which they considered as a form of nationalism and a hindrance to Americanization. In addition, they disapproved of what they saw as an unjustifiably reformed language, used by "Yiddishist" teachers. Following vociferous protests among its readers, including functionaries and activists of Jewish organizations, the Forverts was forced to revamp its stand on Yiddish education.*

Throughout the twentieth century, the *Forverts* (Forward), a broadly socialist newspaper that was the most successful Yiddish daily worldwide, founded in April 1897, sustained an exceptionally strong, symbiotic relationship with the Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle (now The Workers' Circle), a socialist-leaning mutual-help society. Although the Workmen's Circle (WC), founded in 1892 and morphed into a

national order in 1900, acted primarily as an economic support group, it also paid much attention to the cultural and intellectual enrichment of its members, thus continuing the Russian Jewish socialists' quest to educate so-called *bavustzinike*, “[politically] conscientious” workers. In Imperial Russia this was done through illegal *krayzlekh* (“circles”) led by better-educated activists.¹

From 1906 onwards, the WC developed educational programs for children of its members modeled on Sunday schools established by British socialists. These were English-language classes with no Jewish content in their curricula, focused on imparting socialist ideas. The tone-setting members were devoted internationalists and considered everything specifically Jewish as nationalistic and everything traditional as religious, and therefore subjects they should eschew. Leaders of the WC and editors of the *Forverts* shared a view that Americanization was a strategy with a sound ideological (internationalist) and practical rationale, and encouraged their constituency to abandon “obsolete” forms of Jewish life.²

Four developments prepared the ground for a changing attitude toward children's Yiddish education among leaders and rank-and-file members of the WC. The first was concern among many Yiddish-speaking parents about growing intra-family cultural and linguistic estrangement.³ The second was the arrival, following the defeat of the 1905 Russian revolution, of thousands of Bundists and other left-wingers, often Yiddish devotees, many of whom joined the WC. (Characteristically, for six years, 1905-1911, the entire WC membership voluntarily paid a quarterly tax collected to

¹ A. Litwak, *Geklibene shriftn* (New York: Arbeter Ring, 1945), 201-210.

² Harry Garfinkle, *Ideological Elements in the Development of the American Yiddish School Movement*. Ph. D thesis (Columbia University, 1954), 131-132. See also Abraham S. Sachs, *Di geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring, 1892-1925* (New York: Arbeter Ring, 1925), vol. 2, 504-512.

³ As late as 1939, Jacob Lestschinsky, a leading Jewish social scientist, wrote about an “abyss” that lay between the first and the second generations of Jewish immigrants in New York – see his article “Ershte ayndruk fun amerikaner yidntum,” *Der yidisher kemfer*, 16 June 1939, 8-9.

benefit the Bund in Russia.⁴) The third was the June 1910 decision of the organizational conference of the Jewish National Workers Alliance – the Labor Zionist analog of the WC – to establish Yiddish schools, later known as National Radical schools, which began to materialize several months later.⁵ The fact that some of the WC members began sending their children to religious or National Radical Schools was the fourth factor that signaled to the leadership of the WC the need to make additional efforts toward educating the next generation to look at life through a desirable ideological prism.⁶

1917 marked the first year that the WC began to allocate funds for opening an afternoon Yiddish school in New York. Beginning in 1918, the membership fee included a levy to sustain such schools, which were supplementary in the sense that their pupils attended public schools during the regular school day.⁷ By 1921, New York had five WC schools: in the Bronx, Harlem, downtown Manhattan, Williamsburg, and Brownsville.⁸ Similar schools emerged in other places, including Detroit, whose WC Branch 156 was at that time the largest in the nation.⁹ Despite ideological differences amid the members (many of whom found the organization attractive primarily as a provider of insurance benefits), the issue of schools had effectively turned the WC into a movement preoccupied with the future of Jewish life in America.¹⁰

In 1930, on the occasion of the seventieth birthday of Abraham Cahan, the opinionated editor of the *Forverts* and a towering figure in American Jewish life, the WC's journal *Fraynd* (Friend) characterized him as “one of the best friends the

⁴ Nathaniel Zalowitz, “The Past of the Workmen’s Circle and Its Future,” *Forverts*, 14 February 1926, English section, 3. See also Frank Wolff, *Yiddish Revolutionaries in Migration: The Transnational History of the Jewish Labour Bund* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 256-262.

⁵ Joseph Chaikin, *Yidishe bleter in Amerike: A tsushtayer tsu der 75-yoriker geshikhte fun der yidisher prese in di Fareynikte Shtatn un Kanade* (New York: M. Sh. Shkliarski, 1946), 354-357.

⁶ Garfinkle, *Ideological Elements in the Development of the American Yiddish School Movement*, 133.

⁷ Chaikin, *Yidishe bleter in Amerike*, 360.

⁸ “Tsu ale yidishe radicale eltern,” *Forverts*, 3 July 1921, 10.

⁹ Patricia Cousens Becker, “Workmen’s Circle in Detroit,” *Michigan Jewish History* 58 (2018): 29-35.

¹⁰ Judah J. Shapiro, *The Friendly Society: A History of the Workmen’s Circle* (New York: Media Judaica, 1970), 103-104.

Workmen's Circle has ever had." The congratulatory note also stated that "we do not take it unkindly at all that he does not approve of everything that takes place among us. For his attitude toward us is always as sympathetic and friendly as possible."¹¹ Behind the niceties of jubilee greetings, Cahan and the WC were at odds on issues of language and educational politics.

Cahan was among the intellectuals whose decision to write in Yiddish did not correspond with a desire to champion its preservation and development.¹² His views on the role and prospects of Yiddish in America remained unchanged even after he shifted away from rigid adherence to internationalism.¹³ Yerakhmiel Lazarson, a Yiddish educator, described how he and several other pedagogues of the WC came to Cahan and urged him – with no success – to publish, at least once a month, an article about the Yiddish schools. When one of the educators told the editor about his wish to see his children growing up as Jewish socialists, Cahan retorted: "Before anything else, take your children out of the Yiddish schools."¹⁴

Among the topics under heated discussion in the *Forverts* was whether Yiddish schools, including the schools run under the patronage of the WC, facilitated or hindered achieving the goals of the Jewish socialist movement. To a considerable degree, this was a debate between those who sought to cast off their immigrant identity and those who continued to cherish their cultural heritage. The following focuses on a

¹¹ "Abraham Cahan Seventy Years Young," *Der Fraynd* (August 1930): 2 (the English-language section). Cahan never became a member of the Workmen's Circle – see Judah J. Shapiro, *The Friendly Society: A History of the Workmen's Circle* (New York: Media Judaica, 1970), 126. "Friend" was how WC members were supposed to refer to each other – see Jacob (Shiye) Kaminsky, *Fertsik yor Arbeter-Ring: geshikhte in bilder* (New York: Workmen's Circle, 1940), 73.

¹² Cf. Tony Michels, "'Speaking to Moyshe': The Early Socialist Yiddish Press and Its Readers," *Jewish History* 14.1 (2000): 68.

¹³ Cahan vented his view on internationalism in three articles published in the last days of 1915: "Der internatsional," *Forverts*, December 27, 1915, 5; "Far vos ken nokh nit zayn keyn emeser internatsional?," *Forverts*, December 29, 1915, 5; "Iz di gantse milkhome a trik?," *Forverts*, December 31, 1915, 5.

¹⁴ Yerakhmiel Lazarson, "Undzere yidish-radical shuln," *Fraye arbeter-shtime*, 11 December 1931, 4. For Lazarson, see also his "A Life in Peril," translated by Josh Parshal, *In Geveb*, 24 June 2021. <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/scenesfromthesouth>

1931 episode in the history of the discussion, which laid bare the opposing views on language policy strategies, and Cahan's role in all these controversies.

Anti-Yiddishism

Cahan never disguised his distaste for Yiddishists, or people who considered Yiddish and Yiddish culture as the principal elements guaranteeing preservation and further development of the modern Jewish nation. In 1916, when Moyshe (Moissaye) Olgin, then a *Forverts* journalist and later a leading figure among American Yiddish-speaking communists, took the American banker and philanthropist Jacob H. Schiff to task for advocating assimilation and disparaging Yiddish as “not a modern language, if a real language at all,” an editorial comment stated disagreement with Olgin's inclusion of Yiddish and Yiddish culture into his characterization of modern Jewishness.¹⁵

In July 1920, Cahan characterized the movement for Yiddish schools in the United States as a form of raw nationalism, or chauvinism.¹⁶ A 1921 editorial, probably written by Cahan, condemned the Yiddishists' endeavors to “*makhn fun der yidishe shprakh a nayem sort idealizm*” (make of Yiddish a new kind of idealism), which resulted in turning their schools into places where children fell out of the frying pan of religious education into the fire of another harmful ideology.¹⁷ At the end of 1922, an editorial note informed the readers that the newspaper opposed Yiddishists — described as “impractical people” — on almost everything. “We reckon that they create a gap between written Yiddish and spoken Yiddish. We reckon that they try to construct an artificial language which is not Yiddish anymore.”¹⁸

Cahan himself contributed to language-planning in the opposite direction of Yiddish preservationists by promoting colloquial and plain registers of Yiddish as ways

¹⁵ Moyshe Olgin, “Dzsheykob Shif un di yidn frage,” *Forverts*, 23 May 1916, 6. See also “Schiff Attacks Use of Yiddish,” *Jewish Advocate*, 25 May 1916, 1; Naomi Wiener Cohen, *Jacob H. Schiff: A Study in American Jewish Leadership* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 220.

¹⁶ Abraham Cahan, “Natsionalizm un shovinizm,” *Forverts*, 10 July 1920, 8.

¹⁷ “Der Arbeter Ring un di yidishe shuln,” *Forverts*, 3 May 1921, 4.

¹⁸ “Notitsn fun ‘Forverts’ redaktsye: enderungen in yidishe speling,” *Forverts*, 29 December 1922, 5.

of attracting little-educated readers to his newspaper.¹⁹ Significantly, Cahan had matured ideologically under the influence of the Russian Populist movement, with its program of “going to people” in order to educate them.²⁰ It was in keeping with this ideological background that he instructed his staff that, if they really wanted “the public to read this newspaper and to assimilate socialism,” they should write in an understandable language.²¹ In 1922, a *Forverts* announcement of a search for novice journalists caustically explained that the editors expected potential applicants to write in “a smooth, light, clear, and confident” manner, avoiding Yiddishist linguistic “tricks” of using “half-Yiddish words, iced with Hebrew and tinted with Turkish pepper.”²²

In 1924, Cahan assigned Harry (Hertz) Lang, a journalist and writer with a good grasp of the immigrant scene, to write a series of articles on the future of Yiddish and Jewish life in the United States. Lang’s journalistic investigation “revealed” that a new type of Jew had emerged from the process of Americanization of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, which included, in particular, a decline of Yiddish as a spoken language. Lang contended that the activists of the Yiddish school movement sought to hinder this process of cultural integration, preferring to keep immigrants and their offspring in isolated ghettos. He believed, however, that

Yiddishism with its schools and seminaries constitutes a weak instrument for restraining the stream of life which must flow into the melting-pot. It constitutes a weak force to counteract the “Americanization” of the Jewish masses. We are doomed to abandon our immigrant modes of life, our Yiddish, and everything that goes with it.²³

¹⁹ Jacob Magidoff, *Der shpigl fun der ist sayd* (New York: J. Magidoff, 1923), 22-28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²¹ “The Career of Abraham Cahan: How He Built Up the Most Successful Yiddish Newspaper in the World,” *The American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger*, 2 August 1912, 366.

²² “Notitsn fun der 'Forverts' redaktsye: naye kreftn,” *Forverts*, 6 December 1922, 4.

²³ H. Lang, “Vos vet zayn mit yidn in Amerike, oyb es veln nit araynkumen naye imigrantn?,” *Forverts*, 14 December 1924, section 2, 1; “Sees Demise of Yiddishism,” *The American Israelite*, 29 January 1925, 7. In April-December 1931, the *Forverts* serialized Lang’s *Di umglikleke kale fun sofolk strit*, arguably the most successful novel to appear in the paper – see Ellen Kellman, “The Pregnant Bride from Suffolk

Around the same time, Mordecai Soltes wrote in *The American Jewish Year Book* about

a splendid opportunity for consciously utilizing the foreign language newspapers to Americanize some of their readers linguistically. For, however desirable it may be that in our democracy all groups should be encouraged to retain and to foster a knowledge of the languages which they have brought with them from their old homes, it is of still greater importance that they may not impede the progress towards a greater and more wholesome solidarity among the diverse races and groups, who have voluntarily chosen our country as their new, permanent home.

²⁴

Cahan, who claimed to have a deep love for Yiddish, insisted at the same time that the Yiddish education of American children did a disservice to their career advancement, particularly because a Yiddish accent formed a barrier to entry into some professions and social circles.²⁵ His main mission was that of helping the readers, or at least their offspring, to forge a post-immigrant identity and integrate into the English-speaking Jewish community. By that time determinately anti-Soviet, he also apparently worried about the influence of communists who -- inspired by the

Street: Intraethnic Class Conflict in a Yiddish Serial Novel (1931),” in *Transnationalism and American Serial Fiction*, ed. by Patricia Okker (New York: Routledge, 2012), 200-221.

²⁴ Mordecai Soltes, “The Yiddish Press – the Americanizing Agency,” *The American Jewish Year Book* 26 (1924-1925): 189. On 17 May 1923, a note in the *Forverts* front page, “Yidisher yungerman krigt doktor-titul far a bukh iber yidishe tsaytungen,” informed that Soltes, 29, had received PhD degree from Columbia University.

²⁵ Abraham Cahan, “Zionizm, yidishizm un nokh a por izmen,” *Forverts*, 1 June 1921, 5; idem, “Yidish un yidishizm,” *Forverts*, 2 June 1921, 5; see also Deborah Dash More, *At Home in American: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 100, 104, 105.

achievements in the Soviet Union -- enthusiastically supported development of Yiddish culture and education.²⁶

Starting a Debate

The October 1930 issue of the *Fraynd* featured an article entitled “Grievances and Joys of Our Schools,” by Philip Geliebter, Educational Director of the WC. By that time, the organization operated a hundred schools, attended by about 6,000 children. The author played up the difference between the secular Yiddish schools in Poland and the USA: in the former, children usually came from more traditional backgrounds than the majority of their American counterparts, who were, in Geliebter’s words, “Jewish *goyim*.” Furthermore, in Poland they studied at Yiddish day schools, whereas the American schools provided only from four to seven hours a week of afternoon classes in Yiddish. Geliebter complained about lack of attention paid by the Yiddish press to the schools.²⁷

In a few months, the issue of Yiddish schooling would emerge as one of the central debates in the pages of the *Forverts*. The debate was triggered by a letter published in the February 1931 issue of the *Fraynd*. Sam Gelber of Waco, Texas, shared his impression from attending a lecture by H. Leivick, who came on the invitation of the local WC Branch 242 (established in 1912). While Gelber enjoyed the literary event, he at the same time felt distressed seeing that only a minority of the audience could fully understand the Yiddish poet. This experience prompted him to wonder if the time might perhaps come when English had to supplant Yiddish as the language of the WC activities. In the same breath, he criticized the WC schools: “Only a small number of our children who study Yiddish continue to use it, while the vast majority of them forget the language very soon.”²⁸

²⁶ See Maximilian Hurwitz, *The Workmen’s Circle: Its History, Ideals, Organization and Institutions* (New York: The Workmen’s Circle, 1936), 74, 111; Shapiro, *The Friendly Society*, 126.

²⁷ Philip Geliebter, “Tsores un nakhes fun undzere shuln,” *Der fraynd* (October 1930): 5-8.

²⁸ Sam Gelber, “Undzer tsukunft ligt in der shprakh fun undzere amerikaner kinder,” *Der fraynd* (February 1931): 27.

Cahan used Gelber's letter for his article, "Jewish Immigrants and Their American Children," which came out in two installments.²⁹ It concluded a series of his articles on the changes occurring in the immigrant community after World War I. According to Cahan, American Jews had become more enthusiastic about building a national home in Palestine. His own attitude to the Zionist project had undergone significant changes in the 1920s – from negative to cautiously positive.³⁰ Now he argued that what the Zionists were doing in Palestine was no more nationalist than the development of Yiddish education and the efforts to preserve Yiddish.³¹

In "Jewish Immigrants and Their American Children," Cahan focused on the question of Yiddish schools, though Gelber's comment about schools had little foundation in reality, because Waco did not boast a WC school. Moreover, it seems that the situation looked strikingly different in such Texas cities as Dallas and Austin, where children *could* attend Yiddish schools.³² Cahan, however, used Gelber's letter as a straw man to criticize Yiddish education writ large. He expressed skepticism that Yiddish schools could be effective in narrowing the cultural gap between immigrant parents and their American-reared children, and agreed with Gelber that the parents should make strides toward using English, rather than educating their children to use Yiddish, in order to advance linguistically and culturally in the direction of the younger generation.

Cahan confirmed his earlier expressed scorn of "Yiddish culture,"³³ characterizing this notion as an eastern European innovation with a negative impact on American Jewish life. He considered Yiddishists' ideas not only utopian, particularly in the American context, but also harmful for the parents' integration into American life,

²⁹ Abraham Cahan, "Yidishe imigrantn un zeyere amerikaner kinder," *Forverts*, 21 and 28 February 1931, 4.

³⁰ See, e.g., Albert Waidinger, "Abraham Cahan and Palestine," *Jewish Social Studies* 39.1/(1977): 75-92; Daniel Soyer, "Abraham Cahan's Travels in Jewish Homelands: Palestine in 1925 and the Soviet Union in 1927," in *Yiddish and the Left*, ed. by Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 56-79.

³¹ Abraham Cahan, "Der yidisher gefil nokh der velt-milkhome," *Forverts*, 7 February 1931, 4.

³² Yerakhmiel Lazarson, "Di yidishe shuln zaynen a vikhtiker teyl fun dem Arbeter Ring," *Forverts*, 8 April 1931, 1.

³³ A similar attitude shaped the editorial footnote to Yakov Levin, "Tsum tsuzamenfor fun di Arbeter Ring shuln," *Forverts*, 30 April 1920, 5.

which was the life of their children. Cahan ridiculed the newfangled product of Yiddish language planning, the “bookish Yiddish,” which — he argued — had many “raw” elements and was oversaturated with Hebrew and Aramaic words and phrases understandable to only a fraction of men and, given the gender differences in traditional Jewish education, incomprehensible to virtually all women. To his regret, the schools had nevertheless chosen what he called the “artificial Yiddish” as the medium of instruction, instead of teaching in the vernacular of their students’ parents — the *heymishe muter-shprakh*, idiomatic mother tongue (Cahan often called it *yidisher yidish*), employed by Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Asch, and Abraham Reisen. Cahan ridiculed the teachers’ purism, their dismissive attitude to Americanisms, even those words that became commonplace in an English-dominated environment. In his opinion, such words as *korner* (street corner), *butsher stor* (butcher store), and *kendi* (candy) were more natural for American Yiddish than the corresponding Slavicisms *rog*, *yatke*, and *tsukerke*. He wrote:

Yiddish is dear to me as it is my mother tongue. This language is not one iota less precious to me than to a passionate Yiddishist. Yet, it is not the mother tongue of American-born children. I have a feeling that someone humiliates a thing that is sacred to me as a memory of my mother, when I hear how such children twist their tongues speaking a *pripetshik* Yiddish,³⁴ which they cannot fully understand, and pronounce it as if they have a potato lodged in their mouths...

As early as 1907, Cahan stated that the Yiddish of eastern European journalism and literature was “not at all the Yiddish to which we are accustomed here,” in America. The changes in the language reflected the fact that Jews in Russia began to treat Yiddish “as a *refined, cultured language for cultured people*” (emphasis in original). This was “the new stage in the life of Yiddish.” In America, however, the majority of readers were

³⁴ Mark Warshawsky’s song “Oyfn pripetshik” (On the cooking stove) was a staple of music classes in Yiddish schools.

not competent in this high language. Because such people as Cahan saw Yiddish, first and foremost, as “a *popularization tool*” (emphasis in original), it was therefore important to use this language in its raw state, one that a little-educated person could understand without any effort. In Cahan’s words: “To avoid polishing, developing, cultivating – this is our aim.”³⁵

In February 1931, Cahan announced that his two-part article “Jewish Immigrants and Their American Children” signaled the opening of a discussion about Yiddish schools. At the same time, he warned that, given the limitation of newspaper space and predicting a significant influx of articles and letters, contributions by members of the WC would be prioritized for publication. Characteristically, the *Forverts* also published articles and letters expressing critical, and even sharply critical, views about Cahan’s standpoint.

Criticism of Cahan’s Stand

The first article published in the debate came from the pen of Nathan Chanin, President of the WC and a committed Bundist from his youth in Russia.³⁶ Chanin categorically disagreed with Cahan and asked him to be more specific in defining the *heymishe muter-shprakh*. If this meant the language spoken in Vilna (where Cahan grew up and came of age) thirty or forty years ago, then this meant ignoring the fact that Yiddish, like any language, had undergone changes over the years. Furthermore, Chanin surmised that Cahan knew little about the situation on the ground, in the schools. Otherwise, he would have known that the teachers as a rule spoke and taught the language of such writers as Asch and Reisen, whose works were part of the curricula. Although Chanin admitted that students of afternoon schools usually could not attain full fluency in Yiddish, he was certain that teachers had success in instilling them with a love and respect for their heritage language.

³⁵ Abraham Cahan, “How Should Yiddish Be Written?,” in Steven Cassedy, ed., *Building the Future: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and the Making of Tsukunft* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 2000), 153-160.

³⁶ Nathan Chanin, “Vegn yidisher dertsung in Amerike,” *Forverts*, 7 March 1931, 4.

Chanin sarcastically invited Cahan to be consistent in showing an example of Americanization by changing the language of the *Forverts* from Yiddish to English. In fact, Chanin did not see any reason to worry about the Americanizing aspect of Jewish children's upbringing. "We often think that our children are too Americanized, and that the Jewish immigrant children embrace tawdry elements of American life stronger than the American children whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower." He asserted that the WC schools also Americanize the children, teaching them "to love the America of [the Socialist leader Eugene V.] Debs and Lincoln, the America of idealism."

Jacob Kreplak, a (predominantly) children's writer who worked as the managing secretary of the socialist monthly *Tsukunft* (Future) and vice-chairman of the WC's Educational Committee, also expressed disagreement with Cahan's view on Yiddish education.³⁷ Kreplak maintained that children benefited from multilingualism: students of Yiddish schools usually thrived in all public-school subjects, including English.³⁸ Yiddish classes, in his view, were particularly important for radical circles, where the language gap between parents and children grew broader than among more traditional segments of the American Jewish immigrant population. To support his argument that children educated at Yiddish schools looked at the world differently, Kreplak cited an alumnus of a WC school, who said at a recent reception: "The main point is not only that I was taught how to read and write from right to left. ... The school gave me a worldview, a national and Socialist ideal. It made me intrinsically happy."

According to H. Siegal, Chairman of the WC's Central School Board in Philadelphia, who also stepped into the debate, Yiddish schools were now rectifying the mistake made by the immigrants who came to America at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁹ Those immigrants' American-reared children were lost entirely to Jewish life or their Jewishness was very eclectic due to neglect of their proper education. Siegal

³⁷ Jacob Kreplak, "Tsulib vos zaynen neytik yidishe shuln?," *Forverts*, 10 March 1931, 4.

³⁸ Most probably, he referred to a small survey whose results appeared in the August 1930 issue of the *Tsukunft* – see David E. Fishman, "From Yidishism to American Judaism: The Impact of American Yiddish Schools on Their Students," in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 273.

³⁹ H. Siegal, "Vos di yidishe shuln tuen oyf far undzere kinder," *Forverts*, 16 March 1931, 3.

believed that Cahan, who had done so much for Yiddish, was misinformed about the situation in the schools. Siegal's two children attended a Yiddish school, which did not preclude their becoming bona fide Americans.

On 15 March 1931, the WC's Central School Board organized a mass meeting in New York, which turned into an angry anti-Cahan rally. It was "the unusual phenomenon of a Yiddish editor being attacked at a Yiddish conference for his anti-Yiddish views."⁴⁰ Speakers accused the editor of betraying socialist ideas, of being ashamed of Yiddish, and of devoting forty years of his life to struggle against Yiddish literature.⁴¹ Chanin, in his column of *Der veker* (Alarm), the journal of the Jewish Socialist Farband (a constituent of the Socialist Party of America), hurried to dismiss these essentially unfair accusations, arguing that there was nothing in terms of evidence to suggest a lack of Cahan's wholehearted commitment to socialism.⁴²

Cahan's views were also met with criticism by the *Forverts* staff writer Ben-Zion Hofman, or Tsivion (also Zivion), as he usually signed his newspaper columns. Tsivion had a history of disagreeing with Cahan; twice, in 1909 and 1921, he slammed the door of the *Forverts* but returned some time later.⁴³ An early stout supporter of Yiddish education and the first editor of the journal *Fraynd* (launched in 1910), he opined in 1920 that socialists' anti-Yiddishism had roots in *maskilic* ideology, assimilationism, and bourgeois practicality rather than in socialism.⁴⁴ Ironically, Tsivion, who was ordained as a rabbi in his youth and for a while had edited the New York Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Yom*, personally never embraced Yiddishism and still could detect in himself residues of his snobbish attitude towards Yiddish. Nevertheless, a couple of years before the 1931 debate, Tsivion, a holder of a German university doctorate in

⁴⁰ "Yiddish Editor Attacked for Anti-Yiddish Views," *The Jewish News of Northern California*, 1 May 1931, 18.

⁴¹ "Miting vegn der shul-debate in 'Forverts'," *Forverts*, 18 March 1931, 3.

⁴² Nathan Chanin, "Farbaygeyendik," *Der veker*, 1 April 1931, 4.

⁴³ See Gennady Estraiikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness: Ideological Voyages of the Yiddish Daily Forverts in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 84-87.

⁴⁴ Tsivion, "Yidish un natsyonalizm," *Forverts*, 29 July 1920, 4; David Fishman, "Yiddish Schools in America and the Problem of Secular Jewish Identity," in *Religion or Ethnicity?: Jewish Identities in Evolution*, ed. by Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 71.

engineering, painted a futurist vision of technological progress as a facilitator of the language's survival: planes and radio would link New York, Vilna (Wilno in interwar Poland), and other places highly populated by Yiddish speakers.⁴⁵

Tsvion's position was a pragmatic one.⁴⁶ Like a fair few other secular socialists, he hoped that such schools could outcompete the Talmud Torahs and help keep "a distance between us and the *kippah*." While he had no doubts that teaching children in English would give good results, he realized that no campaign for English-language education had so far generated anything close to the enthusiasm of WC members for Yiddish education. He contended that the quantitatively significant presence of Yiddish speakers among American Jews made Yiddish schools worthy of aid. Especially as, despite the restrictions on immigration imposed since the early 1920s, thousands of Jews continued to arrive from Europe.⁴⁷

Other Yiddish newspapers ran articles and printed readers' letters reacting to the *Forverts* debate.⁴⁸ James (Ayzik) Globus, a columnist(-cum-dentist) on the anarchist New York Yiddish newspaper *Fraye arbeter-shtime* (Free Labor Voice), did not mention Cahan's or any other name explicitly, but in fact voiced his disapproval of Cahan's attitude to Yiddish schooling. According to Globus, Yiddish schools represented Jewish workers' "protest against spiritual slavery," acted as conduits for European humanism and radicalism, and protected children from the "bourgeois moldiness," which was, according to him, characteristic of the 20th century American society.⁴⁹

In Sync with Cahan

Baruch Charney Vladeck, Manager of the *Forverts* and a prominent figure in the labor movement (he was virtually legendary in Bundist circles), remained lukewarm at best on Yiddish education in America, despite his own dabbling in Yiddish poetry and literary

⁴⁵ Paul Dembitzer, "A vort vegn tsukunft fun yidish in Amerike," *Forverts*, 7 April 1931, 5.

⁴⁶ Isaiah Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," trans. David G. Roskies, *YIVO Annual XVI* (1976): 365-367.

⁴⁷ Tsvion, "Ven vet yidish untergeyn in Amerike," *Forverts*, 31 March 1931, 4.

⁴⁸ Shmuel Charney [Niger], *In kamf far a nayer dertsung* (New York: Arbeter Ring, 1940), 203.

⁴⁹ James Globus, "Yidish un yidishe shuln," *Fraye arbeter-shtime*, 10 April 1931, 3, 6.

criticism.⁵⁰ Above all, he held that Yiddish schooling did not show any promising efficacy, because even those students who had learned to speak and write well in the language of their parents still could not *think* in Yiddish. At the same time, Vladeck asserted that the vast majority of children respected their parents regardless of whether they attended Yiddish schools or not, and that they remained Jewish even if they could not read works by Yiddish writers. Their Jewishness was based on their attachment to the religion and traditions, their worries about the conditions for Jewish life in eastern Europe, or other interests and anxieties. The main thesis of Vladeck's article was that (as the title of his article said) "Yiddish does not define fully Yiddishkayt." As Vladeck explained,

Who has the right to say that I. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Asch and Reisen form the living part of our culture, whereas the Bible and the Talmud, Yehuda Halevi, Solomon ibn Gabirol, the Vilna Gaon, Baal Shem Tov, Moses Mendelsohn and Simon Dubnow don't belong to our Jewish culture?

The person who decides to study the life of Jewish immigrants and, generally, Jewish life in America, will have to peruse not only Zalman Libin and Leon Kobrin, but also Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Ludwig Lewisohn's *Up Stream*, and other works written in English.

Although Vladeck was at loggerheads with Cahan on many issues, he nevertheless shared the editor's negative attitude toward Yiddishists, whom he described as fanatical and "ersatz nationalists" with a blinkered mind. In his view, they posed more danger to Yiddish and Yiddish culture than assimilationists.⁵¹ On the other hand, it is not clear if Vladeck really worried about assimilation. As early as 1911, he wrote that if "Jews should stop existing as a nation and in about 100 years there weren't in America any Jewish

⁵⁰ Cf. Jacob Lestschinsky, "Vladek der harmonye-mentsh," in *B. Vladek in der opshatsung fun zayne fraynd*, ed. Yefim Yeshurin (New York: Forverts, 1936), 71.

⁵¹ Baruch Vladeck, "Yidish iz nit di gantse yidishkayt," *Forverts*, 28 March 1931, 4.

newspapers, any Jewish schools, nor any Jewish writers, it would not bother me.”⁵² Vladeck essentially echoed what Cahan said in 1925:

After all, the language is not of supreme importance. The important thing is what you teach, not the language of instruction. If I would have children I would not teach them Yiddish. If I should desire them to understand Judaism, I would teach them Hebrew. Isaiah is a much greater and more important personality than Mendele Mocher Seforim.⁵³

Alexander Kahn acted as the lawyer of the *Forverts* and would replace Vladeck as the newspaper’s manager following the latter’s death in 1938. In 1931, Kahn shared Cahan’s skepticism that artificial measures could seriously contribute to maintaining a language. In his view, Yiddishists overplayed the fact that some number of American-born children learned Yiddish, while understating another fact, namely that only five or six thousand, a small minority of the about 120 thousand school-age children of WC members, attended Yiddish schools. Kahn argued that these schools had been draining the organization of money, which could be better used on English-language education, with a much higher number of students diverted from religious schooling.⁵⁴

The matter of financial rationality was raised also by Sol (Shabsi) Bulgatch, once a leading figure in the WC. He stressed that the organization invested too much energy and money in its schools, although only a small minority of its members sought such education for their children. He also felt that the schools pulled the WC membership to their pre-immigrant past rather than led them forward. Bulgatch had nothing against

⁵² Franklin L. Jonas, *The Early Life and Career of B. Charney Vladeck, 1886-1921: The Emergence of an Immigrant Spokesman*. New York University, Ph.D, 1972, 85.

⁵³ S. Felix Mendelsohn, “Topics of the Week,” *The Sentinel*, 24 July 1925, 7.

⁵⁴ Alexander Kahn, “Di frage fun yidishe shuln in Amerike,” *Forverts*, 1 April 1931, 3.

giving support to Yiddish school, but did not see any reason why the WC had to carry full responsibility for a burdensome educational network.⁵⁵

Abe Hirshkowitz, a labor movement activist, who had a disheartening experience of sending his child to an afternoon Yiddish school, believed that any efforts to educate in America a new generation of Sholem Aleichem's readers were useless. He compared Yiddish educators to the humorous characters in Sholem Aleichem's story "Fires," from his *Kasrilevke* series: the firemen who cannot fight the blaze because they come equipped with an unplugged – and therefore empty – barrel.⁵⁶ An admirer of Meyer London, he quoted the American socialist leader saying at a WC convention that the Yiddish schools represented a competition between tallow candles and electric lamps (public schools). Yiddish was dear and even holy to Hirshkowitz, but he argued that it was the "garb" of his generation, not suitable for the youth."⁵⁷

The newspaper published letters from readers who supported Cahan's arguments or gainsaid them. Some of the readers' opposition was qualified. H. Liptzin, for example, a member of a Los Angeles branch of the WC, conceded that the Yiddish schools were of little use for the children. Nevertheless, he maintained it was important to keep them running since they provided income to hundreds of teachers and served as hubs of activism.⁵⁸

Summing Up the Debate

No information is available as to whether the newspaper published all articles and letters written in response to Cahan's debate-opening article and to what extent those items that were published reflected the "spirited" contest between various groups of WC

⁵⁵ Shabsi Bulgatch, "Di yidishe shuln un der Arbeter Ring," *Forverts*, 30 March 1931, 3. See also "Levaye fun Shabsi Bulgatsh haynt fri fun Forverts bildung," *Forverts*, 19 November 1933, 1, 6.

⁵⁶ Cf. Sholom Aleichem, *Inside Kasrilevke*, translated from the Yiddish by Isidore Goldstick (New York: Schochen Books, 1965), 92-95.

⁵⁷ Abe Hirshkowitz, "Undzer yidishe shprakh un undzere yidishe kinder," *Forverts*, 24 March 1931, 4. See also Abe Hirshkowitz, *Ot azoy lakht a shnayder* (New York: n.p., 1947), 65.

⁵⁸ "Briv tsu der debate vegn di yidishe shuln," *Forverts*, 25 March 1931, 5.

members.⁵⁹ Moreover, it was a men's debate, despite the fact that women played a significant role in running the schools.⁶⁰

What we do know, however, is that Cahan opened the newspaper's pages only to debates that, in his words, "created an atmosphere [*shtimung*] for our point of view, for our stand."⁶¹ Summing up this particular 1931 debate, Cahan made it clear that in his understanding the rationale for publishing a Yiddish newspaper was not the same as the rationale for giving children a Yiddish education. The Yiddish press served the existing readership, whereas Yiddish education of American children was irrational at best: the WC sponsored schools attended by a small minority of their members' children. He reiterated his claim that he loved Yiddish, but stressed that this sentiment did not induce him to turn the *Forverts* into a forum for spreading and preserving the language. It was first and foremost a forum for socialist ideas.

In Cahan's view, Yiddish schooling was some kind of ideological "madness" purveyed by well-organized activists and teachers.⁶² He surmised that, apart from their ideological motives, the teachers protected the schools as the main or only source of their income. Their weekly salaries of \$45 were better than the salaries of young teachers working at public schools, though their workload was much less demanding. Cahan wrote:

Only those who use socialism as a ground for Yiddishism can insist on teaching American-born children socialism in Yiddish rather than in the language spoken by the children. As a rule, the Yiddishists are people who continue to live in their old country even after moving to America. To be precise, they live somewhere in the air, in the world of empty wisdoms, high above the hard land and the hard reality of life.

⁵⁹ Marius Hansome, *World Workers' Educational Movements: Their Social Significance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 451.

⁶⁰ Cf. Mary McCune, "Creating a Place for Women in a Socialist Brotherhood: Class and Gender Politics in the Workmen's Circle, 1892–1930," *Feminist Studies* 28 (2002): 585–610.

⁶¹ Abraham Cahan's letter to Raphael Abramovitch, April 26, 1934. YIVO Archive, The Papers of Abraham Cahan, RG 1139, box 2, folder 38.

⁶² Abraham Cahan, "Der fundament un di gebayde," *Forverts*, 18 April 1931, 4–5.

The summer camps, where children are indoctrinated in Yiddishism, is another example of how Yiddishists are ready to sacrifice the interests of children for the sake of their sect's interests.⁶³

He did not find it surprising, moreover, that the Yiddishist variety of the language differed from regular Yiddish: Yiddishists represented a sect, and as such needed their own parlance.⁶⁴ He feared that the spirit of Yiddishism permeated the WC and the Jewish Socialist Farband. As a result, the schools had become an obstacle for socialist activities, because the majority of the parents did not want anything to do with the fanatical Yiddishists and, therefore, often sent their children to Talmud Torahs. Cahan, who at that time sharply criticized the Bund, especially the Polish Bund,⁶⁵ praised such people as Vladeck for leaving their Bundism on the other side of the ocean, and ridiculed those socialists who carried on living as if they still were in their old country — in Russia circa 1905 or 1906 — and effectively pulled their constituencies back to the bygone days.

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Time and again, Cahan repeated the idea that educators were making a mistake by trying to transfer to America the experience of their colleagues in eastern Europe, where Yiddish still enjoyed a strong position. (During his visit to Vilna in 1923, he pledged support to local Yiddish schools, and remained committed to this course a decade later.)⁶⁷ At the same time, he did not forget to note that even in Poland only five percent of Jewish children attended Yiddish schools, while 87 percent studied at Polish schools and eight percent at Hebrew schools.⁶⁸ Addressing those who questioned his socialist credentials, Cahan explained that for him Marxism was not an objective science

⁶³ Abraham Cahan, "Vuhin firt di virklekhkayt?," *Forverts*, 21 April 1931, 4.

⁶⁴ Abraham Cahan, "Imigrantn-yidish un yidish far amerikaner geboyrene," *Forverts*, 22 April 1931, 7.

⁶⁵ See Gennady Estrakh, "The Bund and Ab. Cahan." *Yiddish/Modern Jewish Studies* 15. 3 (2008): 97-99.

⁶⁶ Abraham Cahan, "Lomir kukn dem emes in di oygn," *Forverts*, 25 April 1931, 4.

⁶⁷ "Gen. Ab. Kahan farshprekht Forverts hilf tsu yidishe shuln in Vilne," *Forverts*, 22 July 1923, 1; "Konferents fun hige Vilner organizatsyes vegn Vilner shuln," *Forverts*, 11 November 1933, 10.

⁶⁸ Cahan, "Vuhin firt di virklekhkayt?"

with its theory of social evolution leading to revolution. He argued that revolutions owed more to serendipity than to some historical regularity, and believed that events in Russia exemplified his argument.⁶⁹ Although he professed to have an immense intellectual and political respect for Marx, he judged him as a human being who, for all his genius, was fallible.⁷⁰

Small wonder then that doctrinaire socialists did not consider Cahan belonging to their ideological camp. Indeed, it seems that he always had in his socialist outlook a *maskilic* ingredient, which was hardly surprising for a graduate from the Jewish Teachers' Institute in Vilna, the successor of the Rabbinical Seminary, set up in 1847 by the Russian government as part of its program which chimed with the *maskils'* drive for modernization and harmonization. His program of Americanization reveals many features, which can be described as neo-*maskilic* ones. Like *maskilim* of the 18th and 19th century, he saw Yiddish as a provisional linguistic medium for modernization rather than a core constituent of the modern Jewish nation. In this context, any serious language and culture planning efforts appeared counterproductive to progress.

At the same time, Cahan had a conflicting agenda: he was also interested in attracting more readers, whereas linguistic "harmonization" of American Jews led to a detrimental effect on his newspaper. Significantly, America's entry into the economic crisis severely affected the finances of the *Forverts*, with a thirty-five percent drop in income between 1929 and 1936, and contributed to the decline from its late-1920s record daily circulation of 275,000 to 170,000 in the late 1930s. The newspaper could continue to operate only by cutting the editorial staff's wages in the 1930s and using the reserve fund accumulated in the 1920s.⁷¹ It seems that financial problems caused it to discontinue, as it was announced in January 1931, the "English Section" in Sunday issues of the newspaper.⁷² Meanwhile, some of the thousands of the supplemental

⁶⁹ Cahan, "Imigrantn-yidish un yidish far amerikaner geboyrene."

⁷⁰ See Estraikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness*, 45.

⁷¹ Baruch Vladeck, "Der Forverts durkh di krizis-yorn," *Forverts*, April 25, 1937, 2; Chaikin, *Yidishe bleter in Amerike*, 295; Brian Dolber, *Media and Culture in the U.S. Jewish Labor Movement: Sweating for Democracy in the Interwar Era* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 121.

⁷² "Important announcement," *Forverts*, 11 January 1931, 13. See also Chaikin, *Yidishe bleter in Amerike*, 321-322.

Yiddish school graduates, especially those of them who grew up in Yiddish-speaking families, did become readers of the *Forverts*.

Cahan could see that his biting comments on Yiddish schools did not find real traction among Jewish immigrants. The Yiddishist ideology may have meant little to them, but the loss of Yiddish as a cultural system resulted in emotional misgivings on the part of many Jews who demonstrated, in particular, their demand for secular Yiddish education.⁷³ In fact, 1931 marked the beginning of a new period in Yiddish education. All of the non-communist school organizations, including the WC schools, drew closer to one another, and “managed to establish themselves, a little weakened numerically, but in a stronger position qualitatively.”⁷⁴ In the end, Cahan and his co-thinkers apparently realized that they had lost the argument.

Tellingly, critical attacks at the Yiddish afternoon schools stopped after 1931,⁷⁵ and the tone of the newspaper’s coverage became noticeably positive. In 1935, the *Forverts* wrote about former students of WC schools who had built successful careers in various walks of life, but at the same time remained devoted to Yiddish and Yiddish culture.⁷⁶ In 1936, Sunday issues of the newspaper began to feature a new column, “*Kultur un shul tetikayt in Arbeter Ring*” (“Culture and School Activity in Workmen’s Circle”), authored by Chanin. The *Forverts* editorial, published in March 1939, eulogized the school movement activists who worked “in very difficult, unfavorable conditions, in the hard landscape of America, where foreign cultures are being fused in her huge, powerful melting pot.”⁷⁷ The practicality of the present won over the theories and visions of the future. In May 1939, Philip Block, chairman of the WC’s Educational Committee (and later the head of the Boston bureau of the *Forverts*), thanked Cahan for

⁷³ Cf. Eric L. Goldstein, “The Struggle over Yiddish in Postimmigrant America,” in *1929: Mapping the Jewish World*, ed. by Hasia R. Diner and Gennady Estraiikh (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 147.

⁷⁴ Yudel Mark, “Changes in the Yiddish School,” *Jewish Education* 19.1 (1947): 32-33. In fact, the communist schools had the highest number of students – see Wolff, *Yiddish Revolutionaries in Migration*, 330-331.

⁷⁵ Charney [Niger], *In kamf far a nayer dertsijung*, 207.

⁷⁶ “Vos hert zikh in Arbeter Ring,” *Forverts*, 1 June 1935, 10.

⁷⁷ “Der tsvantsik-yoriker yubiley fun di Arbeter-Ring shuln,” *Forverts*, 4 March 1939, 8. See also “20 yor Arbeter Ring shuln,” *Forverts*, 25 February 1939, 7, and Chaikin, *Yidishe bleter in Amerike*, 361-362.

the “broad and substantive” coverage in the newspaper of the Yiddish educational activities.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ “Arbeter Ring konvenshon,” *Forverts*, 4 May 1939, 7.