

The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe

Peretz, Yitskhok Leybush - by Ruth Wisse

(1852–1915), Yiddish and Hebrew poet, writer, essayist, dramatist, and cultural figurehead. Yitskhok Leybush Peretz was born to a prominent family in Zamość, a multiethnic Polish city ruled by Russia during his lifetime, and a stronghold of Jewish Enlightenment. Peretz's father, Yude, was a merchant; his mother Rivke, who shared the running of their shop, bore nine children of whom Leybush, the second, was the oldest of three who survived into adulthood.

A precocious child, Peretz was given an accelerated, largely private education in Talmud and commentaries; from tutors, he acquired Hebrew and Russian and a reading knowledge of German and Polish. He later taught himself French. Peretz credited his parents with setting him an example of Jewish moral behavior. His unsystematic reading as an adolescent included Maimonides, Jewish mysticism, and Hebrew Enlightenment literature. He described his adolescent discovery of European literature, law, and social thought as entry into “their” *besmedresh*, the study house of the gentiles.

In 1870, Peretz's parents arranged his marriage to Sarah, daughter of the *maskil* Gavriel Yehudah Lichtenfeld, with whom Peretz copublished his first book of Hebrew poetry, *Sipurim be-shir ve-shirim shonim* (Stories in Verse and Selected Poems), in 1877. The couple lived briefly in Grabow, Apt [Opatów], and Tsoytmir [Sandomierz], where Peretz tried his hand at various business ventures. The marriage was dissolved after five years, and Peretz took charge of their son Lucjan. Peretz's second, happier, though childless, marriage to Helena Ringelheim, daughter of a well-to do merchant, prompted him to seek a profession.

After a two-year stay in Warsaw from 1876 to 1877, where he tutored in Hebrew, Peretz returned to Zamość to study independently for the attorney's exam. He became a “private lawyer” (as opposed to those entitled to plead in Russian courts) and ran a thriving legal practice for the next decade, representing prominent Polish and Jewish clients. He was active in civic affairs, cofounded the volunteer fire department, helped establish a modern Jewish secondary school, and lectured in a workers' evening school. In 1887, he was stripped of his license for allegedly promoting Polish nationalism and socialism. Unable to resume his legal practice, he moved to Warsaw the following year.

Naḥum Sokolow recommended Peretz to join him on a statistical survey of Polish Jews that was sponsored by philanthropist Jan Bloch to counteract allegations of Jewish parasitism. Peretz's fictionalized “*Bilder fun a provints-rayze in tomaszover poviat um 1890 yor*” (Impressions of a Journey through the Tomaszów Region in 1890; 1891) remains the only published testimony to that project. In 1891, Peretz became a functionary of the Warsaw Jewish community council, the *gmine*, assigned to the department of burials.

For the rest of his life, Peretz divided his days between his bureaucratic job and writing, and kept regular visiting hours in his home for writers and cultural activists. He skirted tsarist censorship in a series of Yiddish publications that he edited: the anthologies *Di yudishe bibliotek* (The Jewish Library; 3 vols., 1891–1895) and *Literatur un lebn* (Literature and Life; 1895); the *Yontev bletlekh* (Holiday Issues; 1894–1896), an irregular periodical that camouflaged its social reformist intentions as Jewish holiday material; and a single issue of the Hebrew *Ha-Hets* (The Arrow; 1894). Himself the major contributor, Peretz used these publications to promote younger Yiddish and Hebrew writers.

In the absence of Jewish cultural institutions, Peretz turned each of his apartments, first on Ceglana Street, then Jerozolimskie Street, into a literary hub, sparking the careers of writers Sholem Asch, S. An-ski, Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister (Pinkhas Kaganovitch), Alter-Sholem Kacyzne, Hersh Dovid Nomberg, Yoysef Opatoshu, Dovid Pinski, Avrom Reyzen, Lamed Shapiro, Itshe Meyer Vaysenberg (Weissenberg), Yehoyesh (Solomon Bloomgarden), and many others. Yekhiel Yeshaye Trunk typically recalled that his first approach to Peretz’s apartment was “the most decisive walk in [his] life,” and it still made his heart beat excitedly whenever he retraced that route three decades later.

At the Crossroad of Languages

Peretz differed from Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim) and Sholem Aleichem—who together form the “triumvirate of Yiddish classic masters”—in his primary relation to Polish rather than Russian coteritorial culture. Raised in the sphere of Polish, Peretz modeled his idea of Jewish cultural renaissance on Poland’s struggle for independence, which compensated for the Poles’ political dependency by promoting national language and culture. At age 22, he composed a collection of Polish verses. Though he later dismissed these poems as an unfortunate “international moment” (Peretz, *Briv un redes* [1944], p. 321), he remained alert to developments in Polish literature.

The example of Polish ethnographers inspired Peretz to encourage the collection of Yiddish folklore and its integration into contemporary art, music, and literature. He undertook and encouraged translation of Polish positivist writers. Peretz also championed the ideal of a culturally autonomous Polish Jewry against proponents of assimilation and those who called for emigration, including to Palestine. Although he became increasingly disillusioned with Polish politics at the turn of the century, he upheld *doikayt*—the continued *presence* of Jews in Poland—while polemicizing vigorously against antisemitism.

A decade after *Sipurim be-shir*, Peretz resumed publishing in Hebrew and thereafter alternated between Hebrew and Yiddish, often rewriting the same or versions of the same work in both languages. Dissatisfied with the hard rationalism of the Haskalah, he developed a more frankly personal expressive style. In the series of verses *Manginat ha-zeman* (The Melody of the Epoch; 1887), the poet registers shifting states of mind as he reflects on the moral strengths and liabilities of his people. The confessional poems of a lover and artist in the small Hebrew collection *Ha-‘Ugav* (The Harp; 1894) were attacked

by David Frishman on charges of plagiarism and hailed by Yosef Klausner for bringing fresh themes into Hebrew verse.

Controversy similarly greeted his formal debut in Yiddish in the first volume of Sholem Aleichem's *Di yidische folks-bibliotek* (1888), with "Monish," a modern ballad about a model Jewish youth who is coaxed by a Christian siren into betraying his religion, family, and God. Knowing nothing of modern Yiddish writing when he took up the language, Peretz said he wrote to please himself and equally sophisticated readers. Critics Simon Dubnow in *Voskhod* (1889) and Y. H. Ravnitski in *Ha-Melits* (1889), ignoring the poem's self-referential ironies, deemed it incomprehensible, a judgment that later often resurfaced in relation to Peretz's most innovative works. Among his early admirers, Yankev Dinezon hailed Peretz as the "new sun rising on a clear morning after a terrible dark night" (Letter to Sholem Aleichem, 26 May 1889). On the strength of this judgment, Dinezon became Peretz's literary manager, and reissued his first short stories in a separate publication, *Bekante bilder* (Familiar Images; 1890).

While modern scholars try to identify differences between Peretz's fiction in Hebrew and Yiddish, their author seemed to regard it as thematically interchangeable, distinguished largely by the artistic opportunities of the two languages. His early stories provided a new cultural vocabulary for an audience accustomed to grappling with moral dilemmas. He dramatized tensions between Jew and gentile, and demonstrated psychological and social conflicts; among his themes was the argument over Western versus Jewish ideals of beauty, illustrated in "Venus and Shulamith" (1889). He also wrote the monologue of an eponymous "Mad Talmudist" (1890) who is torn between physical, spiritual, and intellectual urges; a critique of an unsavory husband who becomes a public benefactor at his wife's expense ("Mendl Braines"; 1891); and a portrayal of tense companionship between Jewish and Polish traveling companions ("In a Post-chaise"; 1891). Peretz used a legal framework for a number of stories, contrasting society's expectation of justice with the passions or complicating circumstances that mitigate against it.

Forging a Modern Literature

With the rise of the Jewish labor and socialist movements, Peretz's writing entered what Ayzik Rosenzweig defined as his "radical phase" from 1893 to 1899. In stories, articles, and comic fables, Peretz broadened the maskilic satire of religious hypocrisy to include attacks on economic exploitation and portrayals of proletarian life. He aired the plight of Jewish women thwarted in their personal ambitions, and the social conventions that required their subservience. Labor organizers used stories such as "Bontshe shvayg" (Bontshe the Silent; 1894) the countermyth of a suffering saint, to teach class consciousness and the need for political organization. During these years, Peretz temporarily subordinated the ideal of national unity to that of class conflict. He took special offense at Ahad Ha-Am's idea of a "spiritual center" in the land of Israel, asking derisively whether it was possible to have an artificial center far away from the life of the people (*Ha-Hets*; 1894).

At the time of his arrest and three-month imprisonment in 1899 in connection with his socialist activities, Peretz had already balked at the repressive influence of materialist ideology on personal and national self-expression. He opened a new vein of neoromantic fiction on national and heroic themes. Though he lacked first-hand knowledge of Hasidism, he contributed to the Zionist periodical *Der yud* a series of stories on Hasidic motifs later collected under the rubric *Khsidish* (In the Hasidic Manner) that identified democratic and creative impulses in the religious idealism of charismatic rabbis. **Peretz anticipated Martin Buber in freeing Hasidism from its earlier image as superstitious deception and in highlighting its psychological, social, and spiritual strengths. ... he [also] adapted traditional folk motifs to modern tales “in the folk manner,” which became among his best-known works and staples of the modern Jewish school movement. These tales explore core values of Jewish life, distinctions between true and fake piety, wisdom and sophistry, self-promotion and self-sacrifice.**

A latecomer to playwriting, Peretz took an increasingly active role in Jewish theater once the tsarist ban on Yiddish performance was relaxed in 1905. In 1903, he published in Hebrew *Hurban bet tsadik* (Ruin of the *Tsadik*'s House), the first version of a play that pits the older ideals of a Jewish moral community against the younger generation's bid for individual freedoms. From this grew the Yiddish verse drama *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain), in which a rabbi's failed attempt to force the Redemption ushers in a downward spiral of religious authority through three generations of declining faith. Yet more ambitious in conception and scale, “*Bay nakht afn altn mark*” (A Night in the Old Marketplace; 1907) brings together more than 100 characters, living and dead, from every stratum of Jewish society in a phantasmagoric review of Jewish life in Poland. Never produced in Peretz's lifetime, it was singled out by its English translator Hillel Halkin as “one of the most extraordinary stage plays I had ever come across” (*The I. L. Peretz Reader* [2002], p. 438). Peretz set up a theater studio to produce his own and others' work and tried to establish a national organization for Yiddish theater in Russia. He attempted to raise the level of Yiddish theater performance through his theater reviews and essays.

In Service of Cultural Autonomy

Peretz dominated the Czernowitz Conference of 1908, convened to raise the national status of Yiddish. Boosting the idea of multinational countries, he defended the people (*dos folk*) over the state, and distinctive national cultures over political boundaries. He helped stave off a radical resolution to declare Yiddish (as opposed to Hebrew) “the” Jewish national language, but hailed the creativity of the Jewish masses whose language was Yiddish. He warned that a deracinated Yiddish could itself become a means of assimilation unless it drew on traditional sources. In attempts to develop a holistic Jewish culture, he undertook Yiddish translations of the biblical *Megilot* (scrolls), organized the Hazomir society in Warsaw for the performance and study of Jewish music, and lectured to adults on Jewish history and heritage at the People's University, which he had helped to found. At the outbreak of World War I, Peretz threw himself into relief work. He helped establish a Jewish orphanage and wrote poems for children, one of which lay unfinished when he died of a heart attack on *hol ha-mo'ed* (intermediate days of)

Passover (3 April). His memoirs, which he began serializing in 1913, were interrupted at the point of his first marriage.

More than any other Jewish intellectual, Peretz expressed and represented the hope that Jewish cultural leaders could take over from rabbis the function of inspirational authority in a secular age. About 100,000 people attended his funeral. Numerous elegies and tribute volumes were published in his memory; schools and organizations were named for him wherever Polish Jews settled. His tombstone in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, *Ohel Peretz*, survived the Nazi occupation. Based on several such real events, an evening devoted to Peretz figures in John Hersey's novel *The Wall* (1950) as a symbol of spiritual resistance in the Warsaw ghetto.