Yiddish Secular Education:
An American Institution

Emily Lipman

Haverford College
History 400: Senior Thesis
April 2012
Professor Alexander Kitroeff
Abstract

Yiddish secular education in America, an institution evolved from the Jewish political radicalism of eastern European cities, was carefully revised and reoriented for the American environment upon its transatlantic transplantation in the early twentieth century. These Yiddish secular schools, bastions of Jewish culture and socialist politics, gained firm traction in the United States among the burgeoning eastern European immigrant population and enjoyed a fruitful fifty-year reign from 1910-1960. They stood in sharp contrast to the insular Orthodox Jewish heder schools established by the religiously traditional immigrant majority, hailing from Russia’s rural Pale region. As opposed to the rote Bible study of the heder, Yiddish secular schools self-consciously applied progressive educational methods to perpetuate a cultural Jewishness in America that complemented the national atmosphere of cultural pluralism. This thesis examines the ways in which Yiddish secular schools taught their students to cherish their ethnic heritage while emphasizing how it enhanced, not contradicted, their American lives. The schools’ core curriculum featured Yiddish language and literature, Jewish history and current events, as well as a diversity of holiday celebrations. Throughout all the subjects covered in their schools, Yiddish secularists artfully employed American themes and socialist ideology to develop dual American and Jewish identities within their students. A one-of-a-kind experimental educational project, Yiddish secular education in America not only reflected the goals of its Jewish immigrant founders, but also the dynamic, modernist, and diverse national culture of the period.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Haverford College for providing me this opportunity to pursue in-depth independent research as an undergraduate. This experience has opened my eyes to a world of academia beyond the classroom, and has taught me that a good question is far more valuable than any one correct answer. I would like to thank my thesis seminar instructor, Professor Andrew Friedman, for improving my writing and teaching me how to analyze and deconstruct primary documents. I would also like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Alexander Kitroeff, for understanding my vision for this project and mentoring me throughout the Spring Semester.

I extend my sincere gratitude to Philadelphia’s National Museum of American Jewish History for generously granting me access to their archives, and hosting me in their curator’s office as I poured over inscrutable Yiddish materials for hours on end.

Special thanks to my friends on the Haverford College cross country and track teams, for tolerating my insanity and unreasonable demand for silence in the Periodical Room of Magill Library as I wrote this paper.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, Zooz, dad, and Morris, for their undying love and support for all I do – ILYMTAITW.
### Table of Contents

**INTRODUCTION**
- A New Kind of Jewish Education .................................................. 5
- Yiddish Secular Education in the Literature .................................... 6
- This Thesis .................................................................................... 10

**HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF YIDDISHIST EDUCATION**
- Europe ......................................................................................... 12
- America ....................................................................................... 15
- Yiddish Secular Education: An American Institution ...................... 20

**SECTION 1:**
**AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION**
- Dissatisfaction with American Jewish Education .............................. 24
- John Dewey and the Yiddishists: A Marriage of Morals .................... 25
- “The Art of Teaching” .................................................................... 29
- Language and History ................................................................... 37

**SECTION 2:**
**THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**
- The Yiddish Word ......................................................................... 39
- New Ways to Teach an Old-World Language .................................. 44
- A Jewish Tongue for the American Child ....................................... 50

**SECTION 3:**
**HISTORY AND CURRENT EVENTS**
- Teaching a Social History ............................................................... 54
- The History Curricula of the Workmen’s Circle *Shuln* ...................... 59
- Informal Education and Experiential Exposure to Current Events ....... 67

**SECTION 4:**
**HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS**
- The Intentional Selection of Holidays ............................................. 69
- Jewish Holidays ............................................................................ 70
- Labor and American Holidays ....................................................... 81

**CONCLUSION** ........................................................................... 84
- Bibliography .................................................................................. 88
INTRODUCTION

A New Kind of Jewish Education:

Yiddish secular schooling, first instituted on European soil by Jewish urbanites in Russian and Polish cities at the turn of the twentieth century, gained firm traction in the United States by the 1920s. The movement's keen resonance with the American atmosphere of cultural pluralism assured Yiddish secularists that their ethnic affiliations and socialist ideology were welcome and celebrated. Though a fractured movement throughout its fifty years due to nuanced political disputes, Yiddish secular schools uniformly sought to instill a Jewish identity rooted in the Yiddish language, literature, and culture, as well as the humanitarian values of respect for hard work and love of justice. Yiddish, a language conventionally tied to the isolated and unenlightened shtetl of the Pale, was employed in European cities and in America as a vehicle for positive ethnic identity through the development of a worldly intellectual culture. Europe's political and social upheaval in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries awoke the marginalized Jewish population to the ability of Yiddish, as the ubiquitous Jewish vernacular, to rally the Jewish masses and affect positive change. Emanating from the intellectualism of eastern European Jewish urbanites, the Yiddish word bred a rich literary culture and a humanistic moral code. Among other secular and political subjects, Yiddishist schools in both Europe and America sought to preserve the Yiddishists' cherished tongue and implement their noble ideals, bestowing faith in the human spirit.

Trickling onto American shores at the turn of the century, Yiddish intellectuals disembarked to find Jewish education divided into two polar extremes. At one end, Orthodox Jewish immigrants buried their children in volumes of the ancient scripts revered by their messianic European ancestors. Unilaterally rejecting the western realities of their American
situation, Orthodox Jewish educators failed to relate the Jewish religion and culture to the lives of American students. On the other hand, apathetic Jewish arrivals, weary of the repeated trials and tribulations incurred by their religious heritage, gladly enrolled their children in the American public school systems. Completely fulfilled by their civic, secular lives, this type of Jewish immigrant made no further effort to religiously educate their children.

Though Yiddishist schools in America began as outgrowths of the various Jewish fraternal orders strewn across the urban landscape, the schools’ core Yiddish socialist curriculum remained fundamentally consistent with their European predecessors. However, subject matter aside, Yiddish secular education in America was necessarily an entirely more complex project. The unprecedentedly diverse American environment, and the democratic principles that bound its multiethnic populace, demanded that Yiddish schools prepare immigrant children for responsible civic participation and cooperative multi-cultural cohabitation. In America, Yiddishists also faced the challenges of instilling a fondness for Yiddish culture and growing their brand of Jewish socialism within the sweltering assimilating melting pot that stirred even the greenest of greenhorns into the mainstream. In spite of their many obstacles, Yiddishist schools met their multidimensional educational objectives incorporating progressive educational methodology and whole-heartedly embracing the American scene. Rife with Yiddish culture and Jewish socialism, Yiddish secular schools taught their students to cherish their ethnic identity while emphasizing how it enhanced, not contradicted, their American lives.

Yiddish Secular Education in the Literature:

In the enormous, saturated field of American Jewish history, there have been surprisingly few efforts to critically examine the historical significance of Yiddish secularism in general,
much less its educational institutions. While a substantial body of literature pertaining to the movement would have provided me with more concrete information about the schools, the goal of this thesis is not simply to summarize a quirky detour in American Jewish history. Rather, my paper aims to create both an American and a Jewish argument for the importance of a silenced chapter in both histories’ pasts – one that is articulated best by the original documents produced by the movement itself. As such, the most helpful works I consulted in my secondary readings included comprehensive American Jewish histories, narrations of the eastern European Jewish immigrant experience, and philosophies of progressive education. More primary than secondary source material, my investigation into the tenets of early twentieth century progressive education led me to John Dewey’s original texts. His exhaustive body of work is at the heart of our modern day conception of education and child psychology. In conducting my thorough secondary reading of American Jewish histories, I familiarized myself with the breadth of the field that encompasses my American Yiddishist niche. Concerned primarily with the Yiddish secularists’ interactions with the American environment and their persistent interest and implementation of progressive educational pedagogy, the secondary literature served to contextualize my primary sources, even if their content and significance eluded these cited authors.

Broadly speaking, most authors of lengthy American Jewish narratives tend to frame their discussions in terms of either Jewish religious practice in America, or the Jewish people’s relationship with American society at large. Falling under the former category are the scholarly compositions of Marc Lee Raphael and Hasia Diner. Raphael’s 2003 publication, *Judaism in America*, chronicles the institutional history of the Jewish religion as it developed in America. In detail, Rafael delineates the oppositional organization of the nation’s four core Jewish denominations – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. Perhaps to his chagrin,
Rafael recognizes that the voluntary nature of religious practice in America resists consistent ritual implementation. He concedes that in the absence of Europe’s clerical hierarchies, evolutions of observance in America are driven by populist impulses, not centralized authorities. In spite of this disclaimer, Raphael proceeds to dedicate the vast majority of his discourse to the individual influential actors involved in Jewish institutional responses to varying religious trends.

In her two thematically and stylistically similar American Jewish histories, *A New Promised Land: A History of the Jews in America* (2000) and *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (2004), Diner similarly constructs her annotation along religious lines. However, in contrast to Rafael, Diner prominently emphasizes the impact of the American environment on the shape and course of American Judaism. Fundamentally, in both her works Diner asserts that the history of Jewish people in America is best understood as the continual effort of the ethnic minority to render their religion acceptable to the dominant cultural majority and to themselves. As a result, with each passing decade, American Jews are consciously and subconsciously, indelibly transformed by their surroundings. As an overt instance of a conscious adaptation, Diner cites German Jewry’s reformation of European Orthodoxy in the mid-nineteenth century to alleviate the restrictions of their Sabbath and dietary laws, and to model their synagogue decorum after American gentile worship. On a subtler level, Diner points to the gradual modernization and professionalization of Jewish religious schooling to simulate the classroom learning styles of American schools. With examples large and small from throughout their three and a half centuries in America, Diner portrays the Jewish people as a religious body in perpetual pursuit of the perfect Judaism for America.

In contrast to the religiously oriented volumes of Raphael and Diner, other American Jewish histories draft the 350 year-old saga as a co-creation of Jewish and American civilizations.
American Judaism: A History, Jonathan D. Sarna’s 2004 encyclopedic work, neatly falls under the latter category. In tracing the country’s Jewish roots back to colonial times, Sarna convincingly characterizes American Jews as wholly distinct from their coreligionists in other countries. Repeatedly heralding the historic Jewish participation in all aspects of society, from commerce to politics to popular culture, Sarna distinguishes the societal integration of American Jews from the insular, isolated lives of Jews in Europe and other undemocratic states. Sarna argues that Jews’ sustained enthusiastic outward participation in American life transformed their Judaism and Jewish identities on both individual and collective levels.

Like Sarna, in Irving Howe’s entertaining epic World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made (1976), the renowned literary critic and prolific writer also recognizes the critical relationship between the Jewish people and their American setting. Though narrower in scope than Sarna’s project, Howe’s in-depth account of the Jewish immigrant experience in New York’s Lower East Side in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still fills over seven hundred pages. Howe organizes his chapters chronologically and by theme, weaving in the central trope, that immigrants’ specifically Jewish journeys toward becoming Americans affected their Jewish identities in specifically American ways. Ever eloquent, Howe indulges his readers in a textured illustration of this concentrated period of complex interactions between the Old World and the New. Capturing the emotional and ideological sensibilities of the multiplicity of Jewish immigrant-types, Howe explicates their various adaptations to urban American conditions.

Each of these thorough expositions attends deliberately to the issue of Jewish education in some capacity. Though not at all their focus, most at least reference the prominence of Yiddish secular education during its heyday of the 1920s-1940s. Succinctly stating the names, dates, and
numbers associated with the schools, Howe's work alone delves beyond the mere acknowledgement of their existence. In his text, Howe deals with the Yiddish secular movement and its schools with refined sophistication. He inquires deeply into the political and cultural phenomena from which Yiddish secular schools were derived, and also notes the ways in which they were reoriented in the context of the American environment.

*Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910–1960*, a 2010 publication by Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich, represents the sole volume of American Jewish history singularly concerned with Yiddish Secular education. Freidenreich’s work amounts to an impressive outline of the schools’ structure and curricula. Through grassroots research methods and admirably patient surveying, Freidenreich also includes a detailed index of every known institution of Yiddish secular education in the United States and Canada, listing their teachers as well as anecdotal comments. On a factual level, Freidenreich’s historical undertaking in *Passionate Pioneers* is unmatched by any other work in the field, and probably always will be. However, while her examination is thorough, Freidenreich’s eye towards the schools is uncritical. Having attended a Yiddish secular school in Chicago as a girl, her final product closer approximates a nostalgic summary of the educational movement’s tenure, than an analytical argument about its significance.

This Thesis:

My thesis on Yiddish secular education in America builds upon the secondary literature’s extensive documentation of eastern European Jews’ avid participation in American civil society and their internal adaptations to their new country. While there were many avenues for societal integration in early twentieth century America, this thesis introduces the site of the Yiddish
secular schools as a mediator between a treasured domestic culture and a modern, democratic, and diverse nation. The educational resources presented and interpreted in my paper demonstrate the cooperative fusion of Yiddish culture, the universalist principles of socialism, and inclusive American environment. In exploring the Jewish cultural troves in the archives of Philadelphia’s National Museum of American Jewish History, I uncovered one-of-a-kind relics of the movement’s past. Yiddish language primers, graduation yearbooks, holiday celebration programs, among other curricular materials, were donated by former students and their families or by the bygone schools themselves. Together, these buried treasures capture the Yiddish secular schools’ wide range of subjects and innovative activities as if frozen in time. My careful analysis of these sources, always with a Yiddish-English dictionary by my side, revealed the sincerity and intentionality of Yiddish secularists’ efforts to perpetuate their ethnic culture, instill their socialist values, and integrate their children into American civil society – a republic teeming with opportunity. In examining the cultural work of the Yiddishist schools, this project highlights a particular Jewish vehicle used to forge ethnic and American identities for first and second-generation Jewish immigrant children.
HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF YIDDISHIST EDUCATION

Before more closely evaluating the Yiddish secular education movement in America, it is first necessary to consider the movement’s European roots, and the contextual forces behind its transplantation and recalibration in the United States.

Europe:

Though American Yiddish secular education eventually grew into its own distinct movement, the project originated in Europe’s historic political and social upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, resulting in the mass migration of eastern European Jews to American shores. Despite their geographic and cultural isolation in the shtetls of the Russian Pale, Eastern Europe’s Jews were not immune to the sweeping tides of change across the continent. Determinedly bound for the cities, by the 1880s eastern European Jews began forging a new cosmopolitan class, thereby reforming their provincial Yiddish language into a parlance promoting positive ethnic identity and a worldly intellectual culture. Once in their adopted homeland, this politically radical Jewish intelligentsia supplied the cultural capital and qualified staff for the establishment of a Jewish socialism in America. Tweaking their socialist message and Yiddishist approach to accommodate the American scene, these secular socialist immigrants broke ground on the unprecedented undertaking of formalized Yiddish secular education in America.

Though eastern European Jews began drifting westward to American as early as the 1820s, the 1881 assassination of the benevolent Russian Czar Alexander II ignited a chain of events that placed all of eastern Europe’s Jews in grave danger. Thus commenced one of the largest mass migrations in world history, whereby over two million eastern European Jews
journeyed across the Atlantic to America. With no signs of slowing, eastern European Jews continued to flood onto America’s shores until the discriminatory 1924 National Origins Act held Jewish refugees at bay. Meanwhile in Russia, Jews were accused of masterminding the Czar’s murder, resulting in the pogroms of 1881 and 1903, which struck the homes of both Jewish urbanites and rural Jews of the southwestern Pale region. The reigning viscerally anti-Semitic Czar Alexander III unofficially sanctioned these violent mobs, which destroyed Jewish households, livelihoods, and lives. Mortal perils of the pogroms aside, the regime of Alexander III severely impacted Jews’ ability to support themselves economically. Through his implementation of the harsh May Laws, Alexander III geographically constrained the Jews into smaller regions of the constricting, overpopulated Jewish Pale, and barred them from property ownership, most professions, and from conducting business on the Christian Sabbath. As a result, Jewish paupers and beggars abounded. These bleak economic prospects were perhaps the primary cause of mass migration.¹

This new monarch’s prejudicial economic and social policies also exacerbated the already profound cultural and intellectual desolation of the Jewish Pale. These depraved conditions severed access to essential resources, suffocating any existing intellectual luxuries, and giving way to an increasingly ignorant population that sometimes resorted to corruption in order to survive. While the Jewish people always revered the virtues of serious study, their scholarship within the Pale was not of the same liberal, freethinking sort that later flourished among Europe’s urban Jewry. Rather, their studies solely consisted of intense religious scriptural analysis to gain an enhanced understanding of Jewish law. Physically and psychologically shielded from the progressive pulses of modernity, education in the shule of the Pale remained frozen in medieval times. This strict segregation perpetuated the rote religious instruction of the

*heder*, a one-room schoolhouse under the auspices of a disgruntled *melamed*, who taught nothing of the outside world and inspired little creative impulses. For some *yeshiva* students, the totalitarian and oppressive regime of Alexander III finally proved the tipping point. After having covertly acquired a taste for smuggled secular books, the *shtetl*’s archaic rabbinic authority and its untenable economic circumstances spurred flocks of young Jewish men to risk an uncertain fate outside the bounds of the Pale.²

Though knowingly facing near insurmountable discrimination, a significant cohort of Jewish youth from the Pale first opted to set roots in the eastern European cities of Warsaw, Vilna, Lodz, and Minsk, before resolving to brave the transatlantic passage. The exposure to fast-paced modern urban life, enlightenment ideals, and revolutionary social and political movements preconditioned these future American immigrants to form their own Jewish, secularist socialism upon reaching their final destination. Surrounded for the first time by a non-Jewish majority, newly intellectualized Jewish urbanites felt the need to more proactively assert their Jewish identity. Though fundamentally opposed to the traditional Judaism of the *shtetl*, this young budding Jewish proletariat still valued their ethnic heritage. As if by instinct, this group eagerly latched onto various blends of socialism and Zionism, or the Jewish return to the land of Israel. Manifested primarily through the Bund, the Russian Jewish socialist party, and their affiliated secular schools, the Jewish radicals’ ethnic identity stood in sharp contrast to the God-fearing Orthodoxy of the Pale.³ In place of Talmudic indoctrination, the Jewish intelligentsia rallied around the unifying culture of *yiddishkeit*, or Jewishness, and the Yiddish language to reach out to the disempowered Jewish masses. Without belittling the Bundist party’s ambitions and

achievements, their socialist aspirations of justice for Russia’s Jews were doomed from the onset. In addition to the palpable anti-Semitism of Russian society, the legally mandated exclusion of Jews from factory work relegated the working class to petty artisanship, and impeded efforts to sustain unified labor movements. Their political initiatives and organizational energies repeatedly thwarted, Bundists and other radical Jewish intellectuals slowly resigned their campaigns in Europe, and hoped for a brighter future in the United States.  

America:  

Between the years 1881 (the start of the first pogrom) and 1924 (the passage of America’s National Origins Quota), over two million Jews abandoned their eastern European homes in Russia, Romania, and Austria-Hungary, in search of a better life in the United States of America. Violent pogroms, oppressive discrimination, forced conscription, paralyzing overpopulation, and economic devastation prompted whole families and even entire villages to venture across the Atlantic to the fabled land of wondrous opportunity. In this historic age of massive population shifts, eastern European Jews’ migration trajectory toward the United States, specifically New York, remained remarkably consistent. Of all the Jews who escaped Russian tyranny during this period, fully 80% sought refuge in America, 85% of whom landed in New York. Though New York’s stance as the American Jewish capital is indisputable, vibrant eastern European Jewish communities also blossomed in Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago, and in time proved breeding grounds for Yiddish secular schools. While Italian, Polish, Swedish, Syrian, and other sizable immigrant groups had large percentages of single men and high return migration rates, the Jews were far more likely to come to America as families and to

---

stay as families. Once funds were secured, tickets purchased, and voyages completed, immigrant Jews had little reason to consider a return trip to their destitute and perilous homelands.⁶

Although eastern European Jewish immigrants were a diverse lot, a few generalizations can be made. By and large, the elderly and the extremely pious stayed behind, while the young, eager, and enterprising disproportionately headed for the New World. In American Judaism: A History, Sarna clearly breaks down this eastern European cohort into “three distinct immigrant-types;” the traditional old-world devotee, the “hustler” driven to make his fortune, and the “free-thinking radical” harboring an uncompromising political agenda.⁷ Most commonly however, Jewish immigrants embodied some combination of all three stereotyped immigrant personas. Such an amalgamation of ideologies, religious beliefs, and lifestyles, led to an unprecedented variety of ways to express one’s Jewishness. America opened up a marketplace of religious, ethnic, and educational institutions, and only those offering the best product would survive. Particularly in the realm of Jewish education, an unmanageable expense for many families, trumpeting a convincing appeal and maintaining high standards were critical to sustaining formal schools.

Upon disembarking in America, Jewish intellectuals emphatically attempted to invigorate the socialist spirit among the hoards of the Jewish working classes in American cities. At first, these seething, young anarchists struggled to resonate their message with their fellow eastern European Jews, already engrossed in the backbreaking pace of urban industrial life. To Jewish immigrants prioritizing employment and feeding their families, radical Jewish intellectuals’ stringent political ideology seemed overly absolutist and unrealistic. However, Yiddish socialists soon struck a chord with the immigrant population, by capitalizing on the effective adaptation of

⁶ Ibid., 151-156.
⁷ Ibid., 158.
the ancestral European landsmanshaftn system – Jewish fraternities based on familial lineage, providing life insurance, burial rights, and other social supports. Prominent among these landsmanshaftn was the Arbeter Ring (later known as the Workmen’s Circle), established in New York City in 1892 as a decidedly socialist and intellectualist fraternity. Already demonstrating a firm commitment to their new country, the 1892 Arbeter Ring boasted an American-style “constitution,” declaring the group’s democratic processes. Consolidating around their affinity for yiddishkeit and strengthening their socialist voice, by 1900 the Workmen’s Circle evolved into a national network of fraternal orders. Through the comforts of a familiar old-world institution and its ardent dedication to the Yiddish language, the Workmen’s Circle played a decisive role in popularizing the Jewish radicals’ political sensibilities.

Following the collapse of the 1905 Russian Revolution, in which Czar Nicholas II militantly suppressed peasants’ demand for constitutional monarchy and labor’s socialist upsurges, American Jewish socialism was bolstered by an inpouring of defunct Bundist party members. After reluctantly accepting their permanent situation on American soil, these loyal disciples of Jewish socialism relieved the weary “gele sotsialistn,” or “yellowed old-timer,” leaders of Workmen’s Circle outposts and Jewish unions, and reinvigorated the movement with their fresh perspective and spirit. Well-versed in the art and tact of mainstream politics from years of navigating Russia’s bureaucracy, these sophisticated “grine sotsialistn – greenhorn socialists,” were keen negotiators of the upper echelons of American politics, previously inaccessible to the Jewish masses. The Workmen’s Circle, a Yiddishist, socialist, and anti-

---

8 Sarna, American Judaism, 165-167.
10 Ibid.
Zionist organization, in conjunction with the socialist Zionists' Farband fraternal network, composed the bulk of the famed “Jewish Left,” known for their liberal block voting, union activism, and blended ethnic and intellectual culture.  

Though the target members of the Jewish radical political organizations were not particularly pious or well versed in their religion, most eastern European Jewish immigrants were inextricably emotionally attached to their cherished culture of yiddishkeit – a melding of Yiddish language, literature, music, food, and humor. Immigrants sought a connection to their Jewish folkways even while consumed by their American lives. To this end, leaders of the Workmen’s Circle and other socialist or communist orders expanded their movements by embracing the rich and dynamic culture of yiddishkeit, as it rapidly and differentially developed on American turf. Jews from a diversity of religious and economic backgrounds were drawn to the institutions’ social, cultural, and educational programming, including newspapers, lectures, dances, and charity events. The Workmen’s Circle’s nationally circulating publications, traveling Yiddish lecture circuit, and secure system of mutual aid, attracted 39,000 members by 1910, with their peak years still ahead.

As Jewish socialism and Workmen’s Circle membership rapidly spread up and down the east coast and into the American heartland, members grew dissatisfied with the educational opportunities available to their children. Uniformly rejecting the Talmudic instruction of the Orthodox heder, Jewish socialists similarly considered the traditional all-day Talmud Torah schools objectionably religious. Though enthusiastic proponents of public school education, Yiddish socialists sensed the schools’ exacerbation of the generational disconnect between immigrant parents and their American children, even when coupled with congregational Sunday

---

12 Ibid., 359.
14 Sarna, American Judaism, 159.
school. In *World of Our Fathers*, Howe summarizes that Yiddish educational visionaries contended, “neither the traditional nor modernized Hebrew instruction could reach Jewish children in America”. To fill the void, innovative and dynamic leaders, such as Chaim Zhitlovsky and Joel Entin, imagined “a cultural haven, at once Yiddish, secular, and socialist, that would survive between the Jewish past and the American future”. So began the American Yiddish secular education movement, slowly at first, and then at an astonishing pace.

Though the majority of the roughly fifty-year history of the Yiddish secular schools was marred by political and ideological disputes, during the movement’s first decade in the 1910s, the schools were actually founded through bi-partisan collaboration. In this period, multiple, slightly theoretically-divergent, Jewish radical organizations found enough common ground to co-operate single educational institutions that revolved around Yiddish literature and basic socialist ideals. In the United States, the first Yiddish secular schools, known as *shul* or *shuln* (plural), opened in New York in 1910 through the partnership of Labor Zionist, Socialist-Territorialist (a group aligned with the Bundists, advocating for Jewish territorial autonomy outside the land of Israel), and Workmen’s Circle party branches. Adopting the network title National Radical Schools (NRS), and opening additional branches in Chicago and Montreal, these *shuln* sought to resist the total assimilation of the next generation. Though patriotic and devoted to their democratic country, Yiddish secularists still feared assimilation as a threat to their movement, unchecked by prohibitive Talmudic law to keep children at bay. In 1916, the Shalom Aleichem Folk Institute (SAFI) network of *shuln* became the second of its kind to preside over a Yiddish secular school system free of divisive politics. Following in the footsteps of its NRS counterpart, the first SAFI schools opened in New York and the network soon spread.

---

16 Ibid., 204.
to Chicago, Detroit, and even Los Angeles. Soon however, this idyllic phase of apolitical association and orientation came to a close. The Workmen's Circle became the first national sponsor organization to establish a major shuln network, dispensing an explicit political platform. Enviously eying the marked perennial success of the NRS and SAFI shuln, card-carrying members of the Workmen's Circle demanded a school of their own – one that was uniquely Yiddishist, socialist, secular, and anti-Zionist.

Yiddish Secular Education: An American Institution:

In 1918, Workmen's Circle officials produced a model ideological and curricular blueprint for the Yiddish secular education movement as a whole. This document forms the crux of my argument about the activities and the philosophical convictions of American shuln as they relate to the larger society. Responding to their members' call for a nation-wide shuln network, the fraternal order appointed a Director of Education, a five-man executive Education Department, and a Pedagogical Council of cultural activists, who convened for the first time in New York to articulate the "goals" and proposed "program" of their shuln. These bright, innovative leaders took an imaginative and carefully crafted approach to ethno-religious education. Dividing their manifesto into two categories, the Education Department first pronounced the character-building objectives of a shuln education. The listed goals are seeped in the socialist sentiments of "feelings of justice, love for the oppressed, love of freedom, and respect for the fighters of freedom". Though seemingly abstract, Yiddish secularists looked upon these tenets as equally definitive as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Despite the strong

---

19 Ibid., 157-158.
socialist partisan affiliation of the Workmen's Circle, these socialist sounding concerns, including the development of a "feeling for beauty and physical and moral discipline," were not recorded simply for their agreement with the party-line. More profoundly, these stated convictions reflect Workmen's Circle educators' adherence to progressive educational theories, advocating explicit, integrated, and all-encompassing moral lessons within the school. By devoting the first segment of their founding treatise to moral educational criteria, Workmen's Circle shuln leaders demonstrate the importance of progressivist methodology in their schools.

More concretely, as sites through which to enact these socialist ideals and moral educational philosophies, the second section of the Education Department's inaugural document delineates the schools' primary curricular activities. Unsurprisingly, Workmen's Circle educators first dictate a range of Yiddish subjects and programming, including the language-learning exercises of reading, writing, and speaking, as well as more artistic endeavors, like literature and music appreciation. Second and thirdly, the Education Department specifies Jewish history and selected holiday celebrations as additional pursuits relevant to the culture of yiddishkeit and replete with ethically educative potential.

Like the Workmen's Circle shuln movement itself, this thesis builds upon the Education Department's initial 1918 document to elucidate how the schools' curricular activities and educational methods cultivated a Jewish socialist identity, in harmony with the American environment. Fleshing out the depth and the extent to which the schools implemented Dewey's progressive educational precepts, my first section exhibits how the shuln's pedagogical practices aimed to nurture moral citizens of a democratic country. In the following section, featuring the Yiddish language and literature curricula, I present and interpret the shuln's Yiddish workbooks,

20 Ibid., 158.
21 Ibid.
poetry anthologies, student compositions, and other language-learning materials. These articles illuminate how the schools’ diverse and nuanced educational approaches dispensed moral lessons and introduced American themes, even in teaching an exclusively Jewish tongue. In my third section, exploring the shuln’s history curricula and relationship to current events, I draw upon class syllabi, lecture topics and original student writing, to highlight the schools’ philosophical outlook upon history and their proactive attitude toward current events. Staunch proponents of “social history,” the shuln emphasized the history of human interaction to their students, to better prepare them for the future, with the hope of creating a more just nation and world. Holiday celebrations in the shuln, of the Jewish, American, and labor-related sort, are discussed in my fourth section through pedagogical materials and school celebration programs. The shuln’s holiday observances, while always full of joy and festivities, were nonetheless calculated, purpose-driven, and infused with meaning — glorifying only what is morally worthy, uniting of all people, and distinctly of the human world.

This thesis argues that the Workmen’s Circle shuln grounded their students in their ethnic heritage, while rooting their Jewish identities in the American environment. Their incorporation of progressive educational methods and socialist ideology worked together to inspire a love of yiddishkeit that complemented the cultural pluralism of early twentieth century America. Even in teaching a foreign tongue, Yiddish secular schools fostered a Jewish identity within their students that was naturally American. A unique educational experiment, the shuln recognized the need to make curricular activities developmentally age appropriate by incorporating modern educational methods, as well as culturally relevant to their students’ American lives. On the whole, the Yiddish secular education movement transformed the phrase “American Yiddish”
from an awkward oxymoron to an enriching, Americanizing educational experience. Through their inventive educational programming and sensitivity to the intricacies of childhood development, the Yiddish secular schools constructed dual American-Jewish identities for thousands of first and second-generation immigrant children. The schools’ fifty-year uninhibited celebration of their Yiddish and enthusiastic support of socialism, ingeniously united to integrate Jewish immigrant children into American life. That Yiddish heritage and socialist politics could combine to develop American identities, is a tribute to both the skill and dedication of shuln educators, as well as the inclusionary and pluralistic atmosphere of early twentieth century America.
SECTION 1:

AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

The Yiddish secular education movement's implementation of progressive educational methodology spanned all aspects of the curriculum. These methods are not only significant for their American origins, but also for their core precepts revolving around raising moral members of civil society. Such a civic consciousness demonstrates Yiddishists' clear concern for the larger American community to which they belonged.

Dissatisfaction with American Jewish Education:

When Yiddish secularists pivotally decided to take on the task of creating a formal system of Yiddish secular schools, they enlisted themselves among the pioneers of American progressive education. Realizing the acute dangers of assimilation that the fast-paced American lifestyle posed to their cherished culture of yiddishkeit, Yiddishists set out to establish an education system that American Jewish children would voluntarily and enthusiastically embrace.

The two prevailing modes of American Jewish education in the early twentieth century, the Orthodox heder supplementary school and the traditional Talmud Torah day school, were far too liturgical for the Yiddish secularists' tastes. However, beyond their divergent religious convictions, Yiddishists believed both systems to be misguided in method and entirely unsuited to the American environment. The heder, a maladjusted relic of old-world shtetl life, usually operated out of hazardous synagogue basements and rented rooms, teaching only rudimentary Hebrew and Bible stories.22 The rote memorization and ineffectual teaching practices of the heder were so deplorable that the 1910 "Community Survey of Jewish Education in New York

22 Sarna, American Judaism, 175.
The communally owned Talmud Torah, typically housed in a school building and staffed with slightly more capable teachers, was still deficient in educational quality and subject diversity. Providing instruction exclusively in the religious realm, the Talmud Torah was a place where young Jewish boys could study ancient scripture in Yiddish, and not much else. This narrow curriculum was firmly at odds with Yiddish secular ideology as well as with the modern world.

In 1918, shortly after the publication of the Community Survey, a similar investigation of Jewish education in New York City astonishingly concluded that at any given time less than one in four Jewish children received any religious education. Perhaps even more devastating was the discovery that most of the existing schools were unable to retain even half of their student body from year to year. With both the heder and Talmud Torah schools struggling to hold the attention and attendance of their American students, they were doomed for failure and risked the demise of Jewish religion and the culture of yiddishkeit along with it. Witnessing the only available Jewish schools go down in flames (sometimes literally!), Yiddishists concluded they must find “better ways to educate children in Jewish subjects.”

John Dewey and the Yiddishists: a Marriage of Morals:

Though at times unwittingly, Yiddishists incorporated numerous tenets of educational progressivism, as spelled out by one of the movement’s founders and foremost advocates, John Dewey. A philosopher absorbed in the world of logic, ethics, and psychology, Dewey eventually found his calling in education theory. Ironically, Dewey discovered his passion for educational

23 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 203.
philosophy following an unsuccessful stint as a secondary school teacher! After gaining admittance to the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1894, during his professorship Dewey founded the University Elementary School (known today as the Laboratory School). Beginning with just fifteen students, Dewey endeavored to model the school’s curriculum after his social and experientially oriented approach, which he did to much high acclaim.27

Dewey’s hundreds of published works on education and the spirit of educational progressivism quickly found favor with Yiddishist educators. In the earliest years of Yiddish secular education in America, though most teachers and administrators’ lacked specific training in education or child psychology, they dedicatedly “read professional literature rife with articles and essays pertaining to education and child development and their importance.”28 Dewey’s theories more closely represent a philosophical outlook, rather than empirical facts or axioms. This pedagogical flexibility granted Yiddishists the opportunity to develop their own dynamic curricula and unique style for their singular movement.29 Socialist, liberal, and intellectual, Dewey’s psychological conception of education revolving around “human nature,” gained immediate traction with Yiddish secularists. Ideas such as allowing the innate curiosity of the child to drive his path of learning, resonated with Yiddishists, and they found both philosophical validation and useful guidelines in Dewey’s works.30

The Yiddish socialists’ very decision to institute a mode of formalized schooling is itself in line with Dewey’s theories explicating the intimate relationship between the concepts of “common, community, and communication.”31 In his 1900 publication *Democracy and*

---

29 Jackson, introduction to *The School and Society*, xxii.
30 Ibid.
Education, Dewey clarifies that at its core, community is built upon common “aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge,” and “understanding.” Consequently, such “like-mindedness” is necessarily achieved through communication, and as a community grows in size and complexity, Dewey deduces that a systematic mode of communicating is necessary to sustain “common understanding.” In modern times, such organized communication is simply known as education. As they grew in numbers and in strength, Yiddish secularists in America identified with the very need Dewey cited in tracing the formation of educational systems. The Workmen’s Circle, boasting tens of thousands of members nationwide including a budding generation reared in the diverse American environment, chose to rationalize their communication of common understanding through formal schooling.

Aside from the Yiddish language, socialist values and morals were the defining characteristics of the Yiddish secularist movement, and were expressed in the shuln through efforts to dispense an explicitly moral education. Though writing mostly with the public school in mind, in his 1909 essay Moral Principles in Education, Dewey identified the “moral work of the school” as tantamount to all other educational objectives, yet grossly “overlooked and underconsidered by the public.” By contrast, due to the predetermined mission of Yiddish secular schooling, shuln founders and educators prioritized moral education from the movement’s onset, as demonstrated by the goals recorded at the Workmen’s Circle’s inaugural conference. As a socializing institution for all children, Dewey declared that the responsibilities of the school, Yiddishist or public, are not restricted to dispensing concrete facts and presenting

32 Ibid.
on subject matter. Rather, they extend to include the guiding of “impulses and activities of social life, which need training in the child.”

On the community level, Dewey and the Yiddishists considered moral education in schools particularly critical. Moral fabric, Dewey proclaimed, and its binding “identity of interest and understanding,” is the fundamental strength of a community and its ability to perpetuate itself. Moreover, Yiddishists viewed the shuln as the ideal arena for moral education, based on their trusted intuition that lessons in ethics generate the greatest impact when merged with the academic activities of the school. Later coined “confluent education” by ivory tower academics, Yiddish secularists were far ahead of most scholars in the field in registering the method’s moral potential. The Yiddish secularist movement, and to an even greater extent the Workmen’s Circle, felt that theirs was a community connected not merely by the accident of shared ethnic heritage, but by common moral principles surrounding the relationship between the individual and society. Moral education in schools then, seemed an obvious step for the Yiddishists. With educational institutions of their own, where better to teach the community’s social values than in the classroom where future community members can socialize together?

Thinking more broadly, Dewey and the Yiddishists agreed that schools in democratic nations are especially compelled to teach morals to their students. The great beauty of a democracy lies in the power of each citizen child, as a future voter, to influence her country through civic participation, in both her small hometown and the nation at large. Therefore, Dewey declared that in “the United States, a democratic and progressive society,” every American child has the potential to shape the country’s future. Embedded within these

34 Ibid., ix.
36 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 133.
inherent democratic rights is a constitutionally dictated collective consciousness, where all citizens are held morally accountable to one another to make decisions that are in the nation’s best interest. It is then essential that the social environment of the school teach moral lessons to prepare students for their future roles as democratic citizens, and acknowledge that in truth, “the school has the power to modify the social order.”38 By instilling their students with “the finest ethical and esthetic feelings,” and training them as future socialist advocates, Workmen’s Circle shulen founders believed their schools to be doing just that.39

“The Art of Teaching:”

Through Dewey’s treatises and Yiddishists’ groundbreaking individual and institutional efforts, both parties made great strides to advance the teaching profession. In framing education as a “public business,” and one of inarguable societal necessity, Dewey staunchly advocated for increased professionalization in the field and wider public appreciation for the “art of teaching.”40 Perhaps stemming from his own ineptitude, Dewey professed that despite its lack of clout, teaching has its own “special mysteries and skill into which the untrained lay man cannot penetrate.”41 He was of the opinion that “the administration of the schools, the making of the course of study, the selection of texts, and the prescriptions of methods of teaching” carry weighty societal implications, and must not be executed by “mere meddlers” in the field.42 Because effective teaching requires a honed and cultivated skill set, Dewey saw that on both the community and national level there was “a larger need for expert service.”43 This need was not overlooked by the Yiddish socialists. Freidenreich details their swift establishment of “collegial

38 Ibid., v.
39 Gartner, Jewish Education in the United States, 158.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., vi.
42 Ibid., vii.
43 Ibid., vi.
group meetings, professional seminars and conferences, and publications” for teachers and administrators, that were every bit as serious and intentional as the shuln themselves. In time, the Yiddish secular movement orchestrated a variety of regional and local summer courses to train future and current shuln teachers, and instituted a revolutionary standardized licensing program observed by all the schools.

Dewey and the Yiddishists both deemed the dominant modes of moral and behavioral discipline in early twentieth century schools, corporal punishment and superficial restrictions, ethically hollow and not morally educative. Interpreted as a result of the deficit in professional training and research, Dewey lamented such discipline and training where “stress is laid upon correcting wrong-doing instead of forming habits of positive service.” Furthermore, Dewey admonished teachers’ attention and “alertness for failures to conform to school rules and routine.” From the student’s perspective, Dewey continues, such regulations are “conventional and arbitrary,” and thus do not advance the moral development of the child. As opposed to mindless and meaningless behavioral restrictions, schools should aim to create an environment where a child can from a “positive consciousness” with regards to his actions and their consequences. Practiced with subtlety, Dewey suggested that moral direction is more effective when operating from “moment to moment,” rather than solely when teachers “find themselves resisted.” In this way, the child will gain the sense that school rules and duties are “animated by the breath of life,” and not merely codes confined to the school. When properly trained as

---

44 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 179.
45 Ibid., 164.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 16
masters of their craft, teachers and administrators guide the child by a moral compass applicable not only to the classroom, but also to the "wider social life to which he belongs." 52

In responding to a survey about her most cherished Yiddish school memories, former student Judy Traite fondly reflects upon her teachers' and principal's opposition to the enforcement of arbitrary rules. She recalls one incidence when "Khaver Levin [a mitzhlul teacher] offended one of the group of girls with whom [Traite] always hung out." 53 When Traite's friend "cut her class later in the day," Traite showed solidarity in the socialist spirit by joining her friend in the hallway. The two girls' conspicuous rebellion inevitably grabbed the attention of the farvalter, a shul principal and manager, and he casually approached the pair. Promptly declaring her demonstration a "sympathy strike," Traite marvels that the farvalter simply "smiled and left," and the two girls voluntarily "returned to the next class." 54 Traite continues, that not only were she and her friend encouraged by the farvalter to stand up for their moral principles; but in the following class Khaver Levin, the offending teacher, "extended an olive branch to [Traite's] friend, and she was no longer offended." 55 Traite's story sheds light upon a completely different teacher response to resistance. Instead of penalizing his students, Levin gave them time to reflect upon the situation. He then acknowledged his own imperfect humanity, setting a constructive example by initiating amends, which the student reciprocated. Enacting the social norms of the outside world, Levin does not demand obedience by virtue of his structural authority over his student, but rather endeavors to repair his human relationship with her through mutual understanding.

52 Ibid.
53 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 128.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
In their continued adherence to Dewey’s progressive educational principles, Yiddishists were among the nation’s pioneers in early childhood education, as well as in stratified, age-appropriate curriculum for all grade levels. Yiddish schools adapted early to the practice of dividing classrooms according to age, and drafted intellectually age-appropriate material to effectively engage and reach students on their level. Aware of the “social and psychological side of morals,” Dewey and the Yiddish secularists understood that “all conduct springs ultimately and radically out of native instincts and impulses” that are closely associated with a “particular stage of the child’s development”. In the ethical arena, Dewey warns that failing to suitably gauge a child’s intellectual level in the teaching of morals, may result in “mechanical imitation of moral conduct” that is not deeply felt or understood. By separating students by age and approaching each stage of development differently, Yiddishists ensured that moral lessons were indeed being absorbed.

In attending to the needs of the “whole child” in their shuln, Yiddishist teachers followed Dewey’s precepts in innovating alternative educational practices in nontraditional educational settings. Dewey stressed the importance of training teachers to recognize and treat “the child” as an “organic whole, intellectually, socially, and morally, as well as physically,” and promoted the school as an appropriate place to develop all of these dimensions of personhood. Dewey also recognized the child as “a member of a family” and “particular neighborhood,” as a future “voter” and “worker,” as a future parent, and most importantly as an individual deserving “independence and self-respect.” In order to enhance the teacher’s ability to understand and care for the

57 Ibid., 47-48.
59 Ibid., 9-10.
educational needs of the whole child, Dewey and the Yiddish schools emphasized “the 
informally social side of education.”

Within the shuln, such informal education was so pervasive it nearly applied to all 
aspects of the curriculum. Involving co-curricular and extra-curricular programs including 
summer camps, such activities permit the “casual and free social intercourse between pupils and 
between pupils and teacher,” so lauded by Dewey. Freidenreich outlines the shuln’s 
multidimensional education in academic, social, and recreational settings, where “by 1930, 
almost every shule” supported “children’s and youth clubs, libraries, choirs, orchestras, drama 
groups, art classes, and sports activities”. Uniquely, teachers took part in these programs not as 
instructors, but rather as “advisers” “to foster student participation and ensure the integrity of the 
groups’ decisions.” While appreciating the content of the groups’ activities, student initiative, 
direction, and leadership were the shuln’s key educational goals. By acting as advisers to these 
groups, “teachers spent many off-duty hours with their students, nurturing personal relationships” 
that would better enable them to cater to each child’s special educational needs.

In accordance with Dewey’s innumerable dissertations on education, Yiddish secularists 
were innovative not only in formulating the content of their curriculum, but also in applying 
intentional methods of instruction. Declaring “every subject” and “every incident of school life 
pregnant with moral possibility,” Dewey suggested that the educator highlight the “general 
spirit” of what is being learned over the minute facts and details of the lesson. Admonishing 
rote learning and memorization lessons as boring and unimaginative, Dewey also disparaged

---

60 Ibid., 56.
61 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 138.
64 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 21.
their lack of "opportunities for any social division of labor." Such interactions are the very essence of community life and are also the industrial framework upon which our modern society depends. Dewey contended that where the "social spirit is not cultivated," it "atrophies for lack of use," and in its place "positively individual motives and standards are inculcated." When motives for children to complete their assignments or follow school rules correlate solely with avoiding punishment or outperforming peers, the relation to the "piece of work to be done" is external, extrinsic, and "therefore liable to break down whenever the external conditions are changed." Dewey explicated that such modes of instruction are doubly damaging, as they foster "individualistic competition" in a realm where "competition is least applicable, namely, in intellectual and artistic matters." Harmfully, these sentiments serve only to promote inequality between individuals by relegating slower learners to a "position of continuous and persistent inferiority" while the faster "learn to glory, not in their strength, but in the fact that they are stronger." This dynamic markedly imposes a classist, and symbolically capitalistic society within the school, a situation proponents of socialism would surely try to avoid.

Yiddishists countered this destructive cycle by featuring cooperative and collaborative school activities that bear relevance to the outside world. When executed effectively, Dewey writes that schools and teachers can instill the child with "an appreciation, for its own sake, of the social value of what he has to do because of its larger relations to life." On both the individual and societal levels, "participating in a joint activity" is simultaneously the "chief way of forming disposition," and also fulfills the wider social goal of "binding people together in

---

67 Ibid., 22.
68 Ibid., 23.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 25.
71 Ibid., 24.
72 Ibid., 23.
73 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 34.
cooperative human pursuits," Another one of Dewey’s key methodologies in the teaching of morals dictates that the outcome of the students’ school work be tangible, applicable to the present, and not tied to some “external result, like passing an examination, getting promoted, entering high school, getting into college, etc.” Not only do these outcomes revolve around egoism and individual attainment, but the “constant impression that nothing is worth doing in itself,” over time becomes a disheartening and disempowering notion. Freidenreich edifies shuln teachers’ grasp of “the importance of personalizing subject matter and making it as relevant as possible to the students’ lives,” as they continuously aimed to contrive an atmosphere of immediate and collective purpose in their schools. To this end, Yiddish secularists favored collaborative projects, culminating in a final product or performance, such as literary journals, radio shows, concerts, and plays. In accordance with Dewey’s exhortation to implement “methods of study and recitation...to emphasize appreciation rather than power,” the project and performance-based education in the shuln fostered a love of learning rather than a culture of competitiveness.

Within the shuln, Freidenreich cites these projects and performances as “not merely ‘add-ons’” to the curriculum, but “integrated, cognitive learning and highly affective experiences.” The variety of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities sponsored by the shuln was conducted with seriousness and dedication by students and teachers, and “on a level of intensity that would have been difficult to sustain solely during classroom hours.” The sense of purpose felt in carrying out these projects is evident through accounts by teachers and students who extended

74 Ibid., 111.
76 Ibid.
77 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 134.
79 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 135.
80 Ibid.
their ambitions and stretched their time and resources. For instance, one New York shul teacher precociously booked his class’s humble show Rosenfeldyade, based on Yiddish author Morris Rosenfeld’s songs and poems, for downtown Manhattan’s prestigious Heckscher Theater. Shulamis Levin Friedman, though “only ten at the time, and had a few small parts,” credits his teacher with providing him a cultural experience he will never forget. In another case, New York mitlshuln students and their teacher transformed a journalism club project and a passion for Yiddish into a lifelong hobby. In 1945 the group founded the Yiddish periodical Youngntruf (American Yiddish Youth Journal) to much local and regional success, and is still in publication today, as a cherished labor of love. As Dewey and the Yiddishists had hoped, informal educational activities like these extended beyond the confines of school walls and resonated well beyond the bounds of school-age years.

Along with their support for informal education, Dewey and the Yiddishists also reciprocated a shared advocacy for experiential learning. Dewey’s firm belief that “the only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life” was reflected in central components of the shuln’s curriculum, involving “participatory and experiential learning activities” and real-world experiences. Defined by the shuln as “social actions,” Freidenreich lists these activities as “collecting money for Jewish schools in other countries or for union members on strike,” attending protests, and leisurely “excursions to parks and museums.” Yiddishist teachers viewed these activities and environments as particularly educationally beneficial for their authentic exposure to the outside world, though in a safe and controlled manner. Through these experiences, the Yiddish schools hoped to engender a “force of character” within their pupils, a

---

81 Ibid., 137.
82 Ibid., 136.
83 Ibid., 14.
84 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 135-138.
quality Dewey extols as a virtuous combination of “good intentions,” “initiative, insistence, persistence, courage, and industry.” Put more succinctly, simply standing up for what is right.

Language and History:

Finally, despite the seemingly narrow and niche topics covered in the Yiddish schools, Dewey and the Yiddishists were surprisingly in agreement with regards to the moral worth of various subject matter, namely, language and history. As the primary mode of communication, and therefore of education, Dewey identified language as the “chief instrument” through which one learns about the world. The significance of language for its capacity to assign meaning to objects and ideas, the basis of common understanding, did not escape the Jewish socialists as they sought to strengthen and perpetuate their community. The prominence of the Yiddish language in the rich and diverse culture of yiddishkeit was transferred into the schools through language learning, literature appreciation, and original composition.

In addition to the inherent communicative and community-building powers of language, Dewey also found unique potential to derive moral lessons through the teaching of history. Dewey explains that “the ethical value of history teaching” lies in the instructor’s ability to make “past events...the means of understanding the present,” thereby “affording insight into what makes up the structure and workings of society to-day.” Moreover, Dewey specifies that teaching history from a “social standpoint” is by definition among the hallmarks of a progressive education. Through learning about the past, students are exposed to “methods of social progress,”

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 18.
88 Ibid., 36.
how society arrived at its current state, and how it can more intelligently negotiate forward progress in the future. Dewey states that history lessons that enhance comprehension of “the main instruments ... which have initiated the great epochs of social advance,” prepare the next generation to overcome the future “chief difficulties and obstructions in the way of progress.”

To this end, a Yiddish secular education always included a thorough study of Jewish history. Analyzing past events from the aforementioned “social standpoint,” shuln teachers emphasized how the Jewish people evolved, engaged in community life, and overcame persecution. In demystifying the five thousand year-old Jewish historical patterns of survival and resilience, Yiddish secularists hoped this new American generation would carry the torch of the Jewish people, and also of the Yiddishist movement itself.

The shuln’s thorough and masterful incorporation of cutting edge tenets of progressive education is significant to the movement’s stance in history on multiple levels. As theories born in the American environment, the shuln’s eager adaptation of Dewey’s philosophies evince the Yiddishists’ perceptive eye and open embrace of their new country. More profoundly however, Yiddishist educators’ dedicated implementation of progressivist pedagogy aiming to nurture the “whole child” and rear moral members of society, illustrates their concern for their American and Jewish communities. Rather than propagating specific religious dogma, the shuln’s methods and messages encouraged students to positively affiliate with the world around them.

89 Ibid., 38.
90 Ibid., 38-39.
SECTION 2:  
THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

The Yiddish language and literature curricula of the Yiddish secular schools amounted to a unique synthesis of progressive pedagogy, moral lessons, and an American child-centered orientation. In teaching the first generation of native American Yiddish speakers, Yiddishist educators encouraged their students to take ownership over the language, and revitalize it to naturally suit their American situation.

The Yiddish Word:

Instruction in and appreciation for the Yiddish language and its literature was perhaps the most prominent and universal of the subjects taught in the Yiddish secular schools. Given the proverbial and historical characterization of the Jews as the “people of the book,” the educational emphasis placed on the written word within the schools reflects a longstanding tradition. From a theological standpoint, Jewish religious practice has always bestowed enormous faith in the authority of the written and spoken word. This deep-rooted Jewish respect for learning originally stems from the pious chanting of the Old Testament, Hebrew prayer worship, and the study of Talmud (centuries of compiled rabbinic commentary). However, this bookish orientation carried over into the non-religious lives of Judaism’s orthodox adherents as well as into the lives of their more secular descendants. As in Judaism, the culture of yiddishkeit, Jewish immigrant life, and the Yiddishist schools all harbored a disproportionately rhetorical orientation.

Subconsciously paying homage to the tenets of an ancient religion, Yiddish folk stories, songs, and witticisms, derive both their meanings and methods from parallel counterparts in the Bible, prayer and Talmud.

[91 Howe, World of Our Fathers, 246.]
A language of the diaspora, Yiddish writing has proven vital to the survival of a Jewish peoplehood over generations of migration and dispersal. Cryptically encoded in Hebrew letters unfamiliar to gentile populations, as a communicative medium there existed no better resource. For centuries, Yiddish proved indispensable in forging solidarity among coreligionists and reaching Jews near and far. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, young Jewish Russian radicals, aroused by communist and socialist ideologies, recognized the language’s potential to transmit political ideals to the downtrodden Jewish masses. Yiddish, it seemed, was the only hope for affecting Jews physically isolated and culturally severed from the modern world. After 1900, these Eastern European Jewish intellectuals began to amass a substantial presence on American shores. Sensing a similar need for community uplift, they employed their Yiddish enlightenment strategy in their adopted country, to attract a following and start a movement among the burgeoning Jewish immigrant population of East Coast cities.

Despite the Jewish radicals’ assertion that their manipulation of the Yiddish language was purely utilitarian in purpose, In World of Our Fathers, Howe complicates their claim, suggesting that the language was more a “screen masking a deeper love for the whole culture of yiddishkeit.” As secularists, Jewish left-wing intellectuals were conflicted about their lingering sentiments, and felt their affection “had somehow to be justified by ‘higher’ political or philosophical considerations.” The enduring religious connection is evident for instance, in the designation of weekly Yiddish newspaper columns dedicated to socialist lessons drawn from the Torah, pronouncing figures like Marx and Lassalle a kin to the biblical prophets. In addition, the professed secular Yiddishist writer Yohoash translated the Old Testament in its entirety into

---

92 Howe, World of Our Fathers, 505.
93 Ibid.
Yiddish, an arduous and undoubtedly spiritual undertaking. The unbroken tradition of the Jewish reverence for the written word, from religious orthodoxy to secular radicalism, has found in Yiddish a linguistic channel so historically rich and sentimentally charged that its articulation can never be fully removed from its Jewish cultural context. “At once provincial in accent and universalist in its claims,” Howe writes, the Yiddish language provided the immigrant generation with comforts of the past and hope for the future.

In America, the Yiddish written word took on even greater importance for the immigrant generation. Though thousands of miles away from their hometown, it was Yiddish alone that enabled this uprooted people to forge a web of Jewish contacts in their new city and navigate their way through their wholly unfamiliar urban environment. Even Jews arriving disheveled, penniless, and illiterate from Eastern Europe, found that learning to read Yiddish, not English, could pave the way for a new life in America. The Yiddish press and informational bulletins dispensed essential guidance for securing employment, housing, and other survival necessities. Equally critical, Yiddish literature and poetry nurtured and reassured the immigrants’ downtrodden spirits, providing hope, or at least empathy, when struggling through dire straits.

An essential lifeline to the outside world, the Yiddish papers became commodities of practical and symbolic communal importance. The Yiddish press not only provided immigrants practical information, but they also conveyed astute intellectual curiosity, so much so that Howe quips, “to not take a paper was to confess you were a barbarian.” While the Orthodox and traditional Tageblatt and the left-leaning Forward represented the two primary oppositional voices of the Jewish immigrant population, the Yiddish press grew to support papers of all social and political persuasions. Aside from mainstream Orthodoxy and Jewish socialism, labor

94 Ibid., 426.
95 Ibid., 419.
96 Ibid., 518-519.
Zionists, Marxists, populists, party Democrats and Republicans, all had their own dailies with significant readerships. For Jewish immigrants, the proliferation and diversification of the Yiddish press in America, meant that through the Yiddish word, the paper they sought out, and what they read, Jews could redefine themselves and craft a fresh identity in their new country.

Once in America, to a far greater extent than in their European homeland, Jewish immigrants relied on the Yiddish written word for their day to day material existence, as well as to cope with the profound changes in their lives and to ward off emotional delusion. More so than in other western cultures, Howe argues that the American Yiddish writer felt a “strong responsibility to the needs of his reader,” sharing a “sense of common experience, and plebian fraternity.”97 American Yiddish writers recognized this bond with their readership, born through common struggle, common fate, and the intensity of the immigrant experience. As such, even in the intimate depths of poetry, “the first-person singular” was simply a “frivolity Yiddish writers could not afford” – in these trying times, every “I” was the collective “I.”98 Together, these newspapers, poems, and stories enabled the immigrant generation to make sense of their new homeland and shake their greenhorn identities.

On a structural level, the conditions of the American environment democratized the genre of American Yiddish literature and journalism, creating a rare intellectual culture that was strictly anti-elitist. Unable to form a class of their own in America, to earn their living Yiddish writers were compelled to toil alongside former shiel dwellers in the sweatshop from dawn till dusk. “For better or for worse,” Howe recounts, “these intellectuals were thrown in with the masses of their people, sharing their poverty, their work, and their tenements.”99 By avoiding an “estrangement from popular audiences” that so clearly plagued other more established literatures,
the physical proximity and the parallel lives led by the artists and the artisans, granted an emotional accessibility to their works. While critics abound have renounced the skill and sophistication of American Yiddish writers and poets, their compositions demonstrate a spiritual kinship with their laboring readers, unmatched by other highbrow western literary cultures.

Immigrant Yiddish writers, though stripped of their aristocratic airs, still utilized their past exposure to the intellectual high culture of European radicalism, and upheld standards and quality in their work in America. Despite the countless other changes in their lives, America's Yiddish readership still maintained the traditional Jewish reverence for the word. Though usually unable to afford formal education themselves, immigrants nonetheless expected such wisdom and refinement from their writers and their reading material.\(^{100}\) Uniquely, this material was academically accessible to the breadth of the immigrant Jewish population, including laborers, housewives, students, peddlers and shopkeepers -- the formally educated as well as the formerly illiterate. The latter group, so headstrong in their belief that "but a half hour of serious reading everyday for several years can provide an excellent education," that one garment factory worker reminisces that lunch break in the "littered, unswept loft had the air of being miraculously turned into a library."\(^{101}\) Available to immigrants of all social strata and from all walks of life, the written Yiddish word amounted to no less than an internal Jewish communal conversation. From the newspapers' "Bintel Brief" (Bundle of Letters) letters to the editor, to the compassionate tone of the collective "I" in literature and poetry, it was the Yiddish word that bound this community.

Somewhat paradoxically, while Yiddish was so well loved for the nostalgia and the cultural religious memories it evokes, it was also a language treasured by the Jews for its property of perpetual evolution. As a language of the diaspora, Yiddish developed slightly new

\(^{100}\) Ibid., 441.
\(^{101}\) Ibid., 239.
inflections and new linguistic elements with each geographic transplantation. Furthermore, because the genre of Yiddish secular literature was born only in the mid-nineteenth century, its norms and conventions had yet to be firmly established. Each day American Yiddish writers had the opportunity to set and reset the genre’s unwritten rules, making the prospects of Yiddish literature and its potential forms of cultural expression seem literally endless. In America, not only was the Yiddish language evolving in the new diverse environment, but American Yiddish literature was all but starting from scratch. Much like the immigrants themselves, American Yiddish writers had the opportunity to reinvent their language and its literature on the culturally ripe and rich land across the Atlantic. The Yiddish written word in America, in all its forms and usages, embodied the immigrant Jewish generation as well as the cultural life they hoped to create for their children.\textsuperscript{102}

New Ways to Teach an Old-World Language:

Yiddish secular education then, placed enormous stress and emphasis upon Yiddish fluency and the appreciation for Yiddish literature, spanning all ages and grade levels. Lessons varied from the introduction of letters and sounds in early childhood classes, to the in-depth analysis of the famed literary works of Shalom Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz. However, the sincerity and intentionality of the Yiddishists’ educational approach never waned. Through their Yiddish-heavy curriculum, teachers sought to instill a passion for the language that formed the core of their Jewish identity, steeped in its evocative emotional ties to generations of cultural history. Based on their own experiences, Yiddish secularists were convinced of the centrality of Yiddish to the survival of the Jewish people. Thus, the language and its literary culture assumed a

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 500-502.
paramount importance within the shuln to ensure its vitality among the growing cohort of American Jewish children. ¹⁰³

Throughout the Workmen’s Circle schools’ first operative decade, Yiddish was most always the home-language of shuln students, and their fluency negated the need for intensive language-learning instruction. During this period, some particularly precocious classes boasted studying eight to twelve hours of Yiddish literature per week. These students’ naturally acquired command of the language enabled them to delve into the fictive worlds of their parents’ literary heroes, and explore the unending volumes of aspiring immigrant Yiddish writers, whose names are long-forgotten. Although less objectively impressive, the 1924 agenda of a Workmen’s Circle mitshuln in New York reports dedicating two hours per week to Yiddish literature, and one hour to the Yiddish language. By contrast, just one hour was allotted to all other subjects. ¹⁰⁴ More significantly though, through their own Yiddish compositions shuln students could join adult Yiddish enthusiasts in the exciting task of pioneering a new American Yiddish whose flexible form was still in flux.

Overtime, as an increasing number of Jewish families became alrightniks, reaping the benefits of proficiency in the English language and an understanding of American sensibilities, Yiddish language learning in the shuln was forced to change course. ¹⁰⁵ Though facing rapidly slipping language skills, Yiddishist leaders in the Workmen’s Circle Education Department maintained their resolve to impart a sound Yiddish background onto their students. At the 1927 Workmen’s Circle Shuln Conference in Philadelphia, PA, the Education Department reaffirmed that “Jewish children must learn the Yiddish language, so they can be connected with the

¹⁰³ Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 107.
¹⁰⁴ “Freeing- The Journal of the First Graduation Class of the Workmen’s Circle Middle School and First Big Performance of the Children’s Operetta” (New York, 1924).
¹⁰⁵ Howe, World of Our Fathers, 138.
millions of Jews in all countries, with their parents, and with the history of their past.”

Beginning in 1931, the Workmen’s Circle Education Department published a series of guidelines for teaching the Yiddish language, detailing pedagogical approaches, time allotments, and use of specific textbooks. Additionally, Yiddish language learning in the shuln received a second overhaul in 1950, when the Education Department instituted the national Shprakh un Dertzyung (Language and Education) program. Though disappointed, Yiddishist educators accepted the end of the age of native Yiddish-speaking students, and adapted their curriculum to meet the needs of second language learners. By no means relentless Yiddish crusaders, the Education Department prioritized developing positive and meaningful relationships with yiddishkeit within their students. Through the use of progressive educational methodology, Yiddish educators’ chief objective remained merging the Yiddish language with the moral teachings of socialism and early twentieth century American life.

In Workmen’s Circle schools, Yiddish language instruction for younger shuln students represented breakthrough innovation in American progressive education. Kinder-ring, the Workmen’s Circle’s bustling children’s publishing house, churned out dozens of interactive and multifaceted Yiddish textbooks for all ages. An impressive New York based institution, Kinder-ring distributed language-learning material to both affiliated and unaffiliated shuln, due to the subject’s lack of contentious political content. In 1938, Jacob Kaminsky authored one such “first-year” textbook, titled I Learn Yiddish. A dark green hardcover volume of an impressive one hundred and twelve pages, it embodies educational progressivism from start to finish.

106 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 126.
107 Ibid., 127.
108 Ibid., 193.
109 Ibid., 145.
110 Jacob Kaminsky, I Learn Yiddish (New York: The Education Committee of the Workmen’s Circle, 1938).
In his presentation of the Yiddish alphabet, a seemingly static and immutable staple of language learning, Kaminsky manages to break from tradition. He reproduces the complete alphabet on one page in large block letters, and directs students to color groups of letters in like color, that are often linked together in words and speech. For example, the letters װ,ױ,װ,ױ are to be filled-in red, while ק,א,װ,ױ should be shaded blue. The following pages continue to teach the letters in their assigned groupings. Accompanying each set, are words containing the designated letters and corresponding pictures, in order to associate the written word and the object. On the opposite page, students practice penmanship by inscribing the words into a prefabricated chart meant to highlight phonetic connections. The process ends in a short jingle, incorporating the letter-group’s words and sounds to help commit the language to memory and to celebrate learning Yiddish as a joyous activity. Dismissing the conventional alphabet sequence, Kaminsky opted to develop Yiddish literacy through lessons imitating the language’s applied spoken and written use beyond the classroom and textbook. Gradually and subtly, the text of *I Learn Yiddish* shrinks in size, and the book’s content shifts from single-word exercises to more elaborate poems, stories, and dialogues. In this way, *I Learn Yiddish* continues to challenge the child as her language skills improve.\(^{111}\)

No doubt a satisfying achievement, the objective for Yiddish secularists was not simply for students to reach the end of the workbook. Through the progressivist methods in *I Learn Yiddish*, Kaminsky accentuated the process of language acquisition rather than arbitrary benchmarks bearing little relevance to authentic language use. Workmen’s Circle educators endeavored to formulate language lessons and pedagogical material that would familiarize students with Yiddish in its active use, instead of removed from its inherent contexts. Ultimately.

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
Yiddish secularists hoped their students would gain sufficient faculty of their mother tongue to create for it a new life in America, as well as one for their movement as a whole.

In keeping with the professed preeminence of moral education within their shuln, Yiddish secularists successfully weaved moral lessons into the Yiddish language and literature components of their curriculum. Unlike in traditional modes of Jewish education, such as the heder or Talmud Torah, the Old Testament and Jewish canonical texts were not the primary sources of the shuln's moral teachings. Convening in 1920 to officially record their opinion on the matter, the Workmen's Circle Education Department recognized the "great poetic value" and "narrative value" of "the Bible and Midrashim [religious homiletic works]." However, the representatives refused to overlook the numerous stories "permeated with a religious element which does not harmonize with the secularism" of the movement. Without compromising their ideological integrity, the Education Department decided to introduce "the legends of the Patriarch" "in which the element of God and religion is not predominant." Further stripping scripture of its sacred stature, Yiddishists recommended these ancient texts be taught alongside similarly contrived tales of Kings, Queens, and talking animals, used by all cultures to relate simple morals to children.

While ardent supporters of the time-tested fable, the creativity and ambition of Yiddish educators compelled them to innovate alternative methods of incorporating ethical content. Boldly straying from the age-old storybook format, Yiddishists engineered the "story-card" as a more interactive language-learning tool. As articulated at the Education Department's 1920 shuln conference, the story-card typifies the delegates' directive to develop students' "imagination and

---

112 Gartner, Jewish Education in the United States, 159.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
the finest ethical and esthetic feelings.” Catering to the increasingly assimilated shuln students of the 1930s and 1940s, the story-card was among the devices generated to simultaneously teach the Yiddish language and moral lessons to those not yet linguistically fluent. Story-cards, published in a series called “Small Fry,” were geared toward eight to ten year-olds, and sought to intellectually stimulate and challenge children whose ethical maturity surpassed the archetypal fairytale. Made from a three-by-ten inch cardstock folded in two, the story-card consists of a cover page, a twenty-line story on the inside, and a back cover with glossary words and a single prompt or question about the tale. This inquiry leads students to think critically about the plot, explore their own emotional reactions, or reframe the narrative from a different character’s perspective.

“The Light,” a story-card issued in 1938, serves as a typical representation of this uniquely Yiddishist pedagogical invention. The story lauds the courage of a young freedom fighter who uses cunning to expose the corruption of an unjust regime, and overthrows the ruling power. On the backside of the card, students are instructed to “Try and narrate the same story from the opposite perspective: from that of the fallen ruler, not his young rival.” Through their consideration of this role reversal, shuln students learn to balance their zeal for social justice with a constant cognizance and sensitivity to those holding opposing views. The genius of “The Light,” and other cards in the series, lies in the scope of educational objectives they successfully meet. By interacting with the story-card, students learn new Yiddish words, practice reading comprehension, contemplate complex and nuanced moral messages, and engage with their peers.

115 Ibid., 158
116 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 154.
117 The Light, Small Fry (New York: The Education Department of the Workmen’s Circle, 1938).
118 Ibid.
A Jewish Tongue for the American Child:

Though teaching a language undeniably exclusive to the Jewish realm, Yiddishist educators made consistent conscious efforts to integrate Yiddish into the context of their students’ American lives. With the benefit of hindsight, today we know that widespread use of Yiddish amounted to but a brief chapter of American Jewish history. In the early part of the twentieth century however, Yiddish secularists envisioned future American Jewish generations for whom Yiddish would be the intimate language of the home and community — the mother tongue reoriented to serve the communicative needs of a fully American ethnic minority. To this end, the Workmen’s Circle Education Department formulated language-learning textbooks rife with American themes and pictures. These textbooks ventured to merge American and Jewish linguistic and cultural environments, updating this old-world language for new-world use. In Kaminsky’s *I Learn Yiddish* textbook, early chapters teaching the Yiddish alphabet depict items found in the daily life of an American child. Categories range from the home, school, and city, as well as those significant to American cultural history. For instance, the letter ψ is represented by scissors, a boat, and a shoe, ρ by a Christmas wreath, mirror, and cat, and χ by an American Indian, a rooster, and an island. Such images span all aspects of American life in order to enable Jewish children to speak a Jewish tongue that directly addresses their American experiences.

As *shuln* students advanced in their language skills, Yiddish textbooks continued to infuse language learning with themes and situations that would socialize immigrant children into the American scene. In accordance with their dedication to progressive educational methods, Yiddishists inserted a combination of age-appropriate stories, dialogues, poems, sing-along songs, and pictures into their workbooks, to engage the intermediate Yiddish student. In *I Learn Yiddish*.

---

119 Kaminsky, *I Learn Yiddish*. 

50
Yiddish, Kaminsky features stories that mirror everyday American childhood occurrences. Titles such as “Wash-Wash, Dishes-Dishes,” and “The Moldy Coat” portray circumstances surrounding household chores, and “Erase the Ink-Blot” narrates a familiar minor mishap in the classroom. Meanwhile, stories like “The Gaiter Hunt” in Kaminsky’s book, and the poems “May Day,” “The Hudson,” and “While at Sea” from the poetry anthology and workbook Wonder of Wonders, introduce salient aspects of American culture, less accessible to the children of Jewish immigrants. With a hint of irony, these Yiddish texts acquaint shuln students with cultural references to the Wild West, ancestral traditions of northern European peoples, and the more familiar story of the immigrant Atlantic passage. Unlike the Jewish education dispensed in the neighboring heder and Talmud Torah, whose instruction in Yiddish was restricted to religious doctrine, Yiddish secularists intentionally facilitated the absorption of American influences into their Yiddish curriculum. For to them, such cultural pluralism was essential, not detrimental, to the survival of Yiddishkeit in America.

Student-composition, the remaining prominent exercise in Yiddish language within the shuln, was held in high esteem by the Yiddishists for the breadth of educational aims it fulfills. Concretely, Yiddish educators prized the sophisticated command of the Yiddish word necessary to produce an original piece. Philosophically though, they also valued student-composition for the pedagogical importance of celebrating children for the material they produce, in all its imperfection. As progressivists, Yiddish secularists appreciated student work of all types and levels, for its genuine representation of the child’s individual abilities and perspectives. This sentiment was further strengthened in relation to Yiddish, as the first generation in America explored uncharted territory through their creative use of the language in this new environment.

120 Ibid.
121 Mani Leib, Wonder of Wonders (New York: Workmen’s Circle, 1930).
Not only were many shuln hours dedicated to developing and nurturing students’ own masterpieces, but an untold amount of time was spent in writing-intensive extracurriculars, like student newspapers and literary magazines. Yiddish teachers believed strongly in legitimizing students’ authentic written self-expression by rewarding their efforts through official publication. Though many shuln networks, and even individual shuln, maintained their own magazines for and by children, collaborations were also common, such as Philadelphia’s non-partisan Y.L Peretz Youth Club’s single publication titled Yungntruf (Youth’s Call). Student-compositions were also a staple in annual shuln and mitlshuln graduation booklets, as mementos for students and parents alike. For instance, a 1924 New York graduation pamphlet titled “Freeling” (Spring), commemorating the “first graduating class of the Workmen’s Circle mitlshuln and first big performance of the children’s operetta,” showcased Yiddish stories and poems by the graduates. With topics ranging from “Snowflakes” to “A Eulogy to Freedom,” and lengths varying from six lines to several pages, Yiddishist educators demonstrated their appreciation for all forms of linguistic expression. Student composition culminated as an exposition of near mastery of Yiddish, a window into individual perspective, an outlet for personal style, and a natural adaptation of the language to America by native Jewish Americans. To Yiddishists, this integrated synthesis of feats represented the pinnacle of Yiddish secular educational achievement.

From the rudiments of teaching first-grade literacy to nourishing adolescent literary mastery and self-expression, the shuln consistently honed an educational approach to foster moral behavior in the American environment. While perpetually in pursuit of more effective educational techniques, the shuln’s Yiddish language and literature program intentionally breached the bounds of the traditional Yiddish realm, in order to envelop students in their

---

122 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 152-153.
American world. Adamantly anti-assimilationist, the *shuln*'s American themed curricular materials angled to allow students to linguistically express themselves in Yiddish, in ways relevant to their new country. The resulting American Yiddish, Yiddishist educators hoped, would survive as the Jewish link connecting millions of Americans in communities across the nation.
SECTION 3:

HISTORY AND CURRENT EVENTS

As subjects particularly poised to impart moral lessons and teach ethical responsibility, Yiddish secularists explicitly drafted the history and current events curricula of their shuln to reinforce their movement's socialist values. Continuously cognizant of their pedagogical methods, Yiddishist educators employed experiential learning activities and informal educational settings to communicate the real-world significance of the issues at hand.

Teaching a Social History:

Within the shuln, the teaching of Jewish history, general history, and the discussion of current events, was given significant time and attention. Like Dewey, Yiddishists recognized the connection between trends in social history and present political and cultural issues, and thus the two phenomena were often curricularly merged. As opposed to the Zionist issues prominent in other networks, The Workmen’s Circle shuln broadly emphasized the social dynamics of labor history, particularly in its relation to the Jewish people. Though admittedly possessing a pronounced Jewish slant, Workmen’s Circle educators nonetheless maintained that all pursuits of justice for the masses were fundamentally similar in character, and worthy of academic study and appreciation.123

From the beginning, Workmen’s Circle educators were adamant in their dedication to the social study of Jewish and general history. In their founding shuln conference of 1918, the Workmen’s Circle Educational Department and Pedagogical Council articulated their intention to familiarize students “with the history of the Jewish people, and with the episodes in general

123 Ibid., 109.
history for the struggle for freedom.”124 This stated goal, the fourth delineated in the seven-point list, is especially indicative of the Yiddishists’ Jewish secularist identity and the veracity of their moral convictions. Importantly, the pronouncement deliberately distinguished lessons in “the history of the Jewish people” from those in the history of Judaism. Through their careful wording, Yiddish secularists attributed the survival and the richness of Jewish ethnic culture to the strength of communal ties, instead of a preordained relationship with the divine. Furthermore, Yiddishists underscored their ethical principles in prescribing the study of the “general history of the struggle for freedom” in the same breath as the historical analysis of their own people. By equating the two subjects, Workmen’s Circle educators expressed their identification with their ethnic heritage as akin to their loyalty to people of all races, creeds, and nationalities who share their moral beliefs.

Though a concise three-page document, shuln founders took pains to define their educational objective as training compassionate members of the human race, rather than uniformly indoctrinating future partisan socialist supporters. To this end, the Education Department and Pedagogical Council’s sixth enumerated goal for their students sought “to develop within them feelings of justice, love for the oppressed, love of freedom, and respect for fighters of freedom.”125 Through lessons in social history and socialist politics, Yiddishist educators aimed to emotionally awaken children to their social conscience and moral compass.

Two years later in 1920, the Education Department reconvened to definitively establish a firm stance on the teaching of religious texts in their shuln, an issue delicately avoided at their initial convention. With regards to their history curriculum, Workmen’s Circle educators acknowledged that some of the “ancient legends of the Bible and the Midrashim [religious homiletic works]” do

125 Ibid., 157-158.
hold “significance as elements of ancient Jewish history.” However, the delegates further qualified that still many “are permeated with a religious element which does not harmonize with the secularism” of the Workmen’s Circle schools. The conference therefore concluded, “legends of the Patriarch shall be introduced, but only those in which the element of God and religion are not prominent.” At this early stage of the Yiddish secular education movement, shuln leaders recognized the fragile balance their schools must strike in their history curriculum. While rejecting the Bible’s supposed divine origins and religious texts’ repeated exultation of the supernatural, Yiddishist educators conceded to the ancient scriptures’ undeniable historical significance, as they were recurrently ritually consulted by the Jewish people. The two treatises combining the historical inquiry of ideological movements and the chronicles of the Jewish people, envisioned a shuln history education that, if executed properly, would produce enthusiastic cultural Jews, and righteous individual citizens of a democracy.

The social and socialist tenor of Jewish and general history within the shuln continued as the movement peaked to the height of its popularity in America. Despite the difficulty in acquiring sufficient historically knowledgeable and professionally capable Yiddish educators, Yiddish secularists retained their commitment to providing an emotionally affecting historical education for their students. History courses and lectures were to be not only factual and thorough, but also able to stimulate the socialist spirit, inspiring students to rectify parallel social problems in contemporary American society.

In 1927, having built up a thriving national shuln network, the Workmen’s Circle Educational Department conferred in Philadelphia to reinstate their curricular agenda and reaffirm their devotion to teaching socialist values. As one of only three tenets recorded,

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
delegates asserted, “Workmen’s Circle schools give children a socialist education that touches their emotions and provides relevant examples. Such an education includes a deep love for work and for the working masses, an understanding of and sympathy for their struggle in seeking a better life, and a righteous future for all mankind.” From a twenty-first century perspective, socialism, by virtue of its public derision, seems an ineffective message and means to affect change in American society. However, in the 1910s through 1930s, Yiddish secularists had high hopes for an American socialism that would bring about a transformation in national politics and the economy. Though admittedly unrealistic beyond the municipal or state level, the Yiddishists’ optimism was not unfounded. Since the turn of the century, socialism in America had made tangible progress, resulting in the 1914 and 1916 New York elections of Meyer London, the Jewish socialist candidate, to congress. To the Yiddishists, these successes proved socialism’s appeal to immigrant Jews and Americans alike. Perhaps reading too much into these marginal victories, Howe relays that Jewish socialists earnestly believed “themselves to be part of a movement that, in the foreseeable future, would sweep to victory.” Though their history curriculum remained markedly Jewish in affiliation, Workmen’s Circle educators envisioned their shuln’s socialist history lessons as pertinent to the future of American politics. A project of the Yiddish secularist community, socialist history in the shuln was designed to serve greater, extra-communal objectives.

Given the lofty goals of the shuln’s history and current events agenda, Yiddishist educators demanded the highest professionalization standards from their history teachers. When first formulating their curriculum at the inaugural 1918 Workmen’s Circle shuln conference, the Educational Department and Pedagogical Council singled out history alone in designating a

---

129 Ibid., 310.
“special teacher” for the subject. To this end, Yiddishists asserted that the art of teaching history, as a subject requiring a broad knowledge base and morally complex theoretical understanding, is an undertaking reserved only for experts. Consequently, the necessary wide range of skills – Yiddish fluency, historical expertise, a background in socialist theory, and training in progressive teaching methods – made qualified shuln history teachers few and far between. However, instead of lowering their standards, in the late 1930s the Workmen’s Circle established the Hekhere Kursn teacher-training program, to prepare mitlshuln graduates to become shuln educators. The program offered a vast array of courses that instilled future Workmen’s Circle teachers with a breadth of historical education and a sharp political cognizance to teach Jewish history, general history, social consciousness, and current events. Courses such as Demography and Jewish Customs, Jewish Economics, The American Labor Movement, History of Socialist Thought, History of Education, and Child Psychology, all enabled Hekhere Kursn alumni to teach an ethically-oriented social history complementary to the multi-cultural American environment.

In keeping with their progressivist educational approach, Yiddishists remained mindful of the phases of child development when forming their history curriculum. Recognizing the various dimensions of depth and intricacies possible in teaching social history and current events, at their 1920 conference, Workmen’s Circle shuln leaders determined that in history class “children of uniform age and development shall study together.” Sensitive to children’s evolving intellectual and maturity levels, Yiddishist educators endeavored to create history lessons that were age-appropriate in content and method. Such discretion is especially critical in teaching topics revolving around historical “struggles for freedom,” due to the nuances of national

130 Gartner, *Jewish Education in the United States*, 159.
conflicts and the unpleasantness of righteous battles lost. Embracing differing approaches for each age group, shuln teachers endeavored to truthfully present harsh realities, while regulating the intensity of their lessons from grade to grade.

Taken at face value, history lessons and the discussion of current events were the most direct moral-learning activities conducted within the schools. In studying both the injustices and the moral triumphs of the past, students emerged with a clear-headed perspective of ethical and unethical distinctions, relevant to present social and economic circumstances. More so than teachers improving language skills or perfecting dance steps, history teachers carried the responsibility for passing on a lasting world-view to their students. The history lessons and curricular activities within the shuln transparently communicated the essence of the movement’s secular intellectualism, as well as “the dreams and hopes of the Jewish people for a better world.”

The History Curricula of the Workmen’s Circle Shuln:

As with their language and literature curricula, the Workmen’s Circle Education Department felt compelled to regulate the shuln’s teaching of history as schools proliferated up and down the east coast and across the nation. In keeping with Dewey’s theories regarding the origins of formal education, Yiddishists realized that their community depended upon a common understanding achieved through clarity and consistency in communication. Thus, to stave off an impending ideological fracture, Workmen’s Circle shuln reinforced their educational structure. In an effort to centralize their message and ensure the academic rigor of all affiliated schools, in 1935 the Education Department published detailed guidelines for shuln and mitlshuln history

133 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 122.
curricula. In *mitlshuln*, the study of Jewish and general history was given high priority by both the Education Department and by individual schools. Recognizing the inherent ability of history lessons to capture the heart of their Yiddishist socialist ideology, the 1935 guidelines declared that *mitlshuln* "Jewish history was a three-year course that mandated forty lectures each year."\(^{135}\)

On the other hand, a less regimented approach was permitted in introducing students to the hot-button issues of the day. The 1935 guidelines liberally granted teachers the creative freedom to devise interactive lessons from topics covered in Yiddish and American newspapers.

Typically, the history curricula of Workmen's Circle *mitlshuln* followed a chronological path from the Middle Ages to the contemporary inter-war period, documenting the social history of labor, the Jewish people, and general power structure dynamics. In part gleaned from her own experiences as a *mitlshuln* student, Freidenreich recalls Jewish history lessons mainly revolving around "Jewish survival and economic life in a particular country and era," framing the study of Jewish communities within their national contexts.\(^ {136}\) This understanding of Jewish history enabled *mitlshuln* students to both gain insight into varying internal Jewish community structures, and analyze their relationships with society at large. In studying the histories of Jewish-gentile relations, Yiddishist educators hoped to illustrate the diversity of Jewish life to their students.

With examples ranging from provincial isolation to embedded integration, Workmen's Circle educators sought to portray positive Jewish precedents for participation in national secular political, economic, and social life. Irrefutably, the situation of American Jews is unique, due to the country's unparalleled diversity and founding democratic principles. However, through their theoretically grounded history curriculum, the *shuln* bridged historical connections to past Jewish

---

\(^ {134}\) Ibid., 127.

\(^ {135}\) Ibid.

\(^ {136}\) Ibid.
communities in foreign lands, which encouraged immigrant children to embrace the strength of the cultural plurality in their adopted home.

From the beginning, Yiddishists recognized their shuln’s status as an experiment in American education, and meticulously documented their students’ academic activities and accomplishments. Through thorough documentation, Yiddishist educators sought to assess pedagogical effectiveness, evaluate scholarly rigor, and evince student achievement to their vocal opponents in the Jewish world. Taking great pride in the advanced material covered in their shuln, Workmen’s Circle schools regularly published their curricula for all to see and admire. Graduation booklets, productions commemorating a year’s work in the shuln and honoring the graduating class, standardly featured complete accounts of the school’s academic agendas. “Freeling” (Spring), a 1924 yearbook of a Workmen’s Circle mittshuln in New York, showcases the school’s impressive distribution of courses pertaining to history and current events. Seminars in cultural history, Jewish history, social inquiry, the history of socialism, political economics, and Jewish geography, demonstrate the range of historical and political concerns Workmen’s Circle educators deemed relevant to American Jewish children of the twentieth century.137 Though not specified in “Freeling”, some Workmen’s Circle shuln were even more exacting in their curricular documentation, diligently logging topics of individual lectures for each of their courses. For instance, a 1927 Political Economics course in a New York mittshuln reported classes surveying the origins of profit, class struggle, the American scene, strikes, boycotts, pickets, cooperatives and worker fraternal groups.138

Seemingly too sophisticated for teen and pre-teen adolescents, most of the courses and lectures were unlikely as scholarly or cultivated as their titles indicate. Such prestigious

137 “Freeling: The Journal of the First Graduation Class of the Workmen’s Circle Middle School and First Big Performance of the Children’s Operetta” (New York, 1924).
138 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 127.
academic jargon was entirely characteristic of Yiddishist educational institutions, and the hallmark of the Yiddish lecture circuit. In reality, miltshuln courses, like the Yiddish lectures sponsored by the Education Alliance, Workmen’s Circle, and other charitable institutions, did introduce profound subject matter, but their presentation was rooted more in passion than refined scholarship. Forgiving the Yiddishists’ rhetorical self-indulgence, the miltshuln history curriculum reflected the schools’ desire to expose and familiarize their students with intellectual discourses impacting the world around them. Having completed their course of study, shuln students emerged with a historically grounded Jewish identity, as well as a background in significant political and social movements. Rejecting the notion of knowledge for its own sake, the foremost accomplishment of the Workmen’s Circle shuln’s history curricula, was the confidence students gained to advocate for themselves and others – believing no faction of American society impenetrable or off limits.

In the latter years of the movement, shuln teachers relied more heavily upon the historical components of their curriculum to communicate their ideology, and impart Jewish and American identities onto their students. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as Yiddish faded into obscurity and the United States shunned socialist politics, the shuln expanded their history lessons to maintain connection with their Yiddishist predecessors. In addition to the diminishing Yiddish-speaking immigrant population, the 1948 establishment of a Hebrew-speaking Jewish state made Yiddish language-learning increasingly hard to defend. The copious documentation of Yiddish secular philosophy unmistakably reveals most factions’ initial resistance to Zionism, and their disappointment in the rejection of Yiddish as the national tongue. However, the pride and optimism for a fresh start in a Jewish homeland proved overpoweringly seductive, and soon converted even the most outspoken anti-Zionists into Israel supporters. As enthusiasm for the

Hebrew language swiftly swept across Jewish America, a countrywide distain for socialism spread just as quickly. Unilaterally losing Jewish allegiances after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, Cold War tensions further demonized the socialist Soviet Union in America’s eyes. Overnight, the once idealistic social order was redefined as the axis of evil. As a result, the shuln that survived this casualty of lost cause, did so by deemphasizing or eliminating Yiddish, accentuating history, and disguising their socialism through depoliticized terminology. 140

The situation of the Jewish Children’s School of Philadelphia in 1963, the city’s last bastion of Yiddish secular education, is characteristic of the widespread decline of the shuln in communities throughout America. Though declaredly in its “37th Year,” the Jewish Children’s School was actually the product of a recent merger of The Sholem Aleichem School, The Murray Sharfritz School, and a Workmen’s Circle mitshuln. 141 All facing imminent independent demise, the three schools joined forces to conserve funds and sustain adequate enrollment. Ceremoniously following shuln tradition, the 1963 Jewish Children’s School dutifully published their own graduation booklet. Entirely in English, the booklet bears the vague but provocative heading, “Jewish History and the Right to be Different.” 142

Clearly conflicted about the changed operations of their shuln, the directors of the 1963 Philadelphia Jewish Children’s School prefaced their yearbook with a two-page disclaimer. In addressing the glaring curricular deviations from the earlier shuln, the directors explained the school’s modern challenges, its new directions, and vehemently justified its continued relevance. To be clear, they asserted that “The learning of Jewish history is the primary aim of our curriculum, and that Yiddish and Jewish literature are to be used as tools in the teaching of

140 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 187.
141 The Jewish Children’s Schools of Philadelphia: Jewish history and the Right to be Different (Philadelphia, 1963).
142 Ibid.
history, and in the implanting of values and attitudes consistent with yiddishkeit. Directors later identified these "values and attitudes" as the politically unobjectionable "secular humanist beliefs in the perfectibility of Man." Though professing their ideology "in direct line of descent from those who first formulated the ethical and social values...of the Yiddish-speaking immigrants," due to the national political climate, they were unable to call it by the same name — socialism. Despite the directors' evident frustration with their curricular limitations, as a natural narrative, they determined history the most effective means of passing on the culture of yiddishkeit, cultural pluralism, and socialist values.

Like the graduation booklets produced by the Yiddish shuln of yore, the yearbook of the 1963 Jewish Children's School featured dozens of student compositions. Sharing the progressive educational views of their earlier counterparts, the Jewish Children's School similarly valued all forms of student work. Directors published pieces ranging from short stories, to opinion articles, biographies, poems, and even single-sentence original philosophical statements. This great variety demonstrates the school's genuine appreciation for the child's individual insights, abilities, and modes of expression.

The samplings of student pieces in the yearbook, whatever their form, explicitly reflect the stress placed upon history and current events in the latter-day shuln. Appropriately, the composition section of the booklet opens with an essay titled, "Jewish History and the Right to be Different," a message so profound it doubled as the yearbook's caption. In his essay, this wise mitshuln graduate assigned dual meaning to the notion of difference. First referencing the Jewish people's historic difference from their non-Jewish neighbors, the young author then keenly articulated the inherent right of Jews to be different from one another. At a time when

143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
Yiddish secularists felt most insecure in their enterprise, this clear-headed appeal to history was surely a comfort. The Holocaust meanwhile, still a gaping wound in Jewish collective memory, was unquestionably at the forefront of the school's curriculum. As a reliable indicator of the shuln's course of study, the majority of student compositions meditated upon or explored aspects of the trauma. Debunking the mythical twenty-five year period of "Jewish silence" after the War, student pieces titled "Twenty Years After the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," "Did the Jews Resist?" and "Remember!" attest that the tragedy was in fact discussed at length. In the Post-war years, Workmen's Circle shuln leaders were upfront in their commitment to exposing their students to the realities of the "harsh fate" that befell "their cousins in Europe." Handled with intensity and compassion, one shuln teacher remarked that his students "may be said to have lived through the happenings themselves."

Additional selections of student work demonstrate the shuln's continued active interest in national current events and the pursuit of justice. Even more so than in years passed, the shuln emphasized American history and politics, expanding these subjects to replace those covering eastern European movements. To the fully American shuln students of the 1950s and 1960s, Russian revolutionary activities seemed distant and lifeless. As a result, teachers saw far greater educative potential in concentrating their energies on the equally morally righteous battles being waged on America's home front. Published during the depths of the Civil Rights Movement, "Jewish History and the Right to be Different" reveals the shuln's preoccupation with the ongoing national struggle for racial equality. Though geographically far removed from the segregated South, shuln students were not only informed of the social and political injustices, but also roused to defend the freedoms of their fellow citizens. In an essay entitled "Difference in

146 Ibid.
147 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 193.
148 Ibid.
Creed and Color,” an impassioned shuln student called upon southern states to follow in the footsteps of President Lincoln, and make strides toward racial equity. Analogously, in the short poem “Rights of Men,” one young girl sincerely, if playfully, pled for the elimination of prejudice and the spread of love and freedom. Conceivably composed while skipping rope, she rhymed,

If whites love negroes
And Christians love Jews,
Then all our friends
We'll never lose.

Though simple and sweet, the profundity of the poem’s philosophical sentiment must not be overlooked. Like her Yiddishist forefathers, the amateur poet identifies as a Jew in support of all other fights for freedom, in this case for the rights of African Americans. In the most elementary terms, the poem embodies the shuln’s un-extinguished moral calling to seek justice for all ethnicities and religions. Though empty of Yiddish, the Philadelphia Jewish Children’s School’s yearbook testifies that the shuln of the Post-war years were still rich in history and socialist ideology. These “secular humanists” were of the same mind as their Yiddishist socialist predecessors, and understood that this “golden land of opportunity” was not so christened for a racial hierarchy or religious hegemony. Rather, the America in which they believed was a nation driven by a common understanding of just, democratic ideals, creating a people united in cause.

149 The Jewish Children’s Schools of Philadelphia: Jewish History and the Right to be Different (Philadelphia, 1963).
150 Ibid.
Informal Education and Experiential Exposure to Current Events:

Devoted practitioners of informal education, Workmen’s Circle educators implemented co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that advanced the study of social issues and provided students with real-world experiences. In the shuln, teaching hours were occasionally lent to “social actions,” including raising funds for imperiled Jewish communities or for union strikers.\(^\text{151}\) Themselves often leaders of social justice and labor movements, shuln teachers and farvaltung periodically rallied their students to show solidarity with local protesters for socialist causes. In 1935, a Philadelphia photographer captured one such lively event. The photograph depicts the teachers and students of a Workmen’s Circle millshuln, spiritedly marching in pairs down the city sidewalk. Sporting official fraternal order armbands and waving its Yiddish-inscribed flag, the effectiveness of this experiential educational moment radiates from the students’ engaged expressions and general exuberance.\(^\text{152}\) These cause-oriented exercises in civic life empowered students, and awakened them to their own ability to affect positive change.

In much the same way, student youth clubs, popular throughout the movement’s duration, were beloved for their casual teaching and learning, achieved through the discussion of current events and participation in public life. Club meetings commonly consisted of animated deliberations over the day’s newspaper headlines, excursions into the city, charity events, and various cultural programming. Particularly precocious student groups also presided over mock-court trials, demonstrating substantial civic literacy and gaining experiential familiarity with their country’s legal and judicial systems.\(^\text{153}\) From a pedagogical political perspective, Yiddishists considered the independent student direction of the clubs vital to the development of future...

\(^{151}\) Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers*, 135.

\(^{152}\) *Students from the Workmen’s Circle Schools at a Rally, Philadelphia, PA, 1935* (New York: Gruss Lipper Digital Laboratory, Center for Jewish History, 2004).

\(^{153}\) Ibid.
generations of community leaders and socially conscious citizens. By engaging in self-initiated activities of real-world political and social consequence, young members of Yiddishist youth clubs positively related their Jewishness to a concern for the broader society to which they belonged.

All told, the history and current events program of the Workmen’s Circle schools amounted to a centrally standardized combination of classroom lessons, social actions, and youth clubs. Noting the subjects’ heightened capacity to impart a moral education through deconstructing power struggles and peoples movements, the shuln sought the highest professionalization standards for its history teachers. A credit to these teachers and the united message of this sprawling shuln network, the Workmen’s Circle curriculum was never wandering or without purpose. The historical events and trends confronted through academic rigor, and the social issues understood through first-hand experience, together served to prepare students, as Jews, to take action to improve conditions for all.
SECTION 4:

HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

The variety of holidays observed within the shuln reflects the American Yiddish secular education movement's full range of goals. Yiddishist educators carefully selected an assortment of Jewish, labor, and American holidays, whose celebrations complemented the secularism and socialism of their schools, and emotionally resonated with their students.

The Intentional Selection of Holidays:

Yiddish secular educators considered holiday celebrations, be they Jewish, American, or labor-oriented, critical to instilling socialist ideology and an ethnic identity within their students. From a psychological standpoint, the joyous nature of holidays provided students with fond memories and positive associations with socialist causes and their ethnic culture. Apart from the celebrations themselves, the sheer number of school hours absorbed by holiday preparations and ceremony rehearsals created lasting impressions on shuln students. As a wholly novel movement in America, Yiddishists devised their curriculum intending that the cyclical celebration of holidays would establish annual traditions for a new generation to adopt and perpetuate.

In the Workmen's Circle shuln, the balanced mix of observed holidays accurately reflected the network's multidimensional goals. From their inaugural conference in 1918, the Workmen's Circle Education Committee and Pedagogical Council recognized the crucial role of holidays in their schools. In first outlining the program of their shuln, they delineated in letter "c" that "certain Jewish and general holidays, labor holidays, and holidays of freedom will be celebrated."\(^\text{154}\) Though vague and unstructured compared to the detailed guidelines released in the following decades, this brief statement captures the essence of shuln holiday observance.

\(^\text{154}\) Gartner, *Jewish Education in the United States*, 158.
while leaving room for growth and evolution. In their declaration, founding members of the Education Department asserted that Workmen’s Circle schools must not celebrate holidays unthinkingly, or simply because they appear on the calendar. Rather, their shuln should be thoughtful and discriminating in their selections, choosing only those holidays that complement the movement’s values. Furthermore, the range of holiday types approved, Jewish, labor, and general freedom, verifies the Yiddishists’ overt ideological affiliation and support of cultural pluralism. Unlike their shtetl-dwelling predecessors, Yiddish secularists recognized that they no longer lived in an exclusively Jewish domain, and rejoiced in their ever-expanding secular, American, laboring, and global world.

Jewish Holidays:

Given their outspoken secularism, negotiating the realm of Jewish holidays was a continuous internal struggle for shuln leaders. The Workmen’s Circle Education Department, though more ideologically stringent in its formative years, self-consciously introduced their students to select traditional Jewish holidays, citing their moral and historical enrichment. At their second convention in 1920, the Education Department sought to rectify the ambiguity of their initial document, and set more explicit regulations for uniform holiday observance. After much deliberation, representatives produced a list of nine “Holidays to be observed,” just four of them originating in the Jewish faith. For each holiday, Jewish, nationalist, or labor-related, Workmen’s Circle educators issued brief explanations for the day’s commemoration.

Although individual shuln likely inserted additional Jewish holidays as they saw fit, the four specified by the 1920 guidelines, Purim, Hanukah, Passover, and Lag BaOmer, are particularly revealing selections. Disregarding centuries of rabbinic and Talmudic scholarship, 155 Gartner, Jewish Education in the United States, 160.
the Education Department did not include a single one of the Jewish “high-holidays,” religiously revered as the holiest days of the year. Moreover, radical Yiddishists factions were known to conspicuously flaunt their religious impropriety, making a mockery of the high-holiday traditions some hold sacrosanct. For instance, on Yom Kippur, the solemn day of repentance and fasting, in 1904 one anarchist group relished in their rebellion by throwing lavish balls, serving gourmet foods, and drinking fine wines. Additionally, not only do each of the sanctioned Jewish holidays defy religious authority, their accompanying explanations completely erase all mention of God and glorification of divine intervention. Underscoring *shuln* leaders’ rejection of divinity, fully three out of the four Jewish holidays occurred in the post-biblical period, fixed in the traceable chronicles of the human past. Through their careful articulation of Jewish holidays and their significance, Workmen’s Circle educators reframed religious milestones as ethnic histories carrying moral messages worthy of celebration.

By the 1930s, emphasis on Jewish holidays and customs increased significantly within the *shuln*, and rose steadily throughout the movement’s final decades. Without losing their secular socialist identity, the *shuln*’s curriculum was forced to adjust to the widespread call for Jewish consolidation around a traditional Jewish identity. American Jews, including the Yiddishists, could not help but fear for their brothers and sisters facing escalating danger and mortal peril in Eastern Europe. Horrified by the reign of terror in their former homelands, American Jewry’s push for Jewish nationalism grew stronger as the threat of annihilation seemed all but imminent. For their part, despite their religious apathy, Yiddishist educators at long last realized they had taken their European-born Jewish identity for granted, and vowed to more

---

156 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 211.
explicitly “cultivate strong connections to Jewish values and culture.”\textsuperscript{158} While maintaining their opposition to Zionism, Freidenreich confirms that even the \textit{shuln} of the Workmen’s Circle gradually concluded that “without Jewish customs, symbols, ceremonies, and holiday celebrations, students would not be able to identify as Jews or take part in Jewish communal life.”\textsuperscript{159} If only in spirit rather than faith, \textit{shuln} educators determined that observing Jewish holidays was the least ideologically corrupting method of achieving religious solidarity with their cousins overseas.

Internally grappling with the elevated role of Judaism in their \textit{shuln}, in 1935 the Workmen’s Circle Education Department was reinvigorated by the enterprising leadership of Nathan Chanin and Zalman Yefroikin. Both men envisioned a bright future for their movement’s more pronounced incorporation of Jewish cultural life. Diverging from the religious dogmatism of contemporary Jewish schools, Chanin and Yefroikin proposed a curriculum revolving around the “Jewish spirit, promoting pleasant, participatory, and identifiably Jewish experiences that would have an emotional impact on students.”\textsuperscript{160} From a pedagogical perspective, the \textit{shuln} leaders saw a direct link between such a spiritual Jewish identity and the sentimental socialist sensibilities that the schools long sought to impart. With this revived approach, Workmen’s Circle \textit{shuln} forged ahead, promoting an identification with global Jewry of all religious persuasions, without forsaking their socialist convictions.

Purim, a Jewish holiday enumerated on the original Workmen’s Circle holiday roster, was celebrated in the \textit{shuln} “as a children’s holiday (for costuming, exchange of gifts and other amusements).”\textsuperscript{161} Across all denominations, this jubilant March event typically features

\begin{footnotes}
\item[158] Ibid., 189.
\item[159] Ibid.
\item[160] Ibid.
\item[161] Gartner, \textit{Jewish Education in the United States}, 160.
\end{footnotes}
children’s carnivals, elaborate costumes, quirky dance parties, and customary sweets. Not wanting to deny their students this delightful occasion, Yiddishists saw no harm in endorsing these nonreligious traditions. Once again drawing from Dewey’s theoretical works, Workmen’s Circle educators deduced that this jovial, appealing holiday would enhance children’s emotional connection to their movement. From a historical standpoint too, the holiday of Purim posed little ideological conflict for the *shuln*. In short, the holiday commemorates the survival of the Jewish community of Shushan, a fourth century Persian kingdom. Through cunning and heroics, a young Jewish woman and her uncle exposed and ousted an evil prime minister, plotting to exterminate their race. As the event is distinctly far removed from the biblical period, the scriptural account is nearly bereft of divine intervention. Additionally, the story of Purim is historically corroborated by a number of sources produced by a diversity of cultures and peoples, bolstering the Jewish holiday’s factual credibility. Thus, for its lighthearted child-centered traditions, minimal offending religiosity, and well-documented historical accuracy, Yiddishists did not hesitate to endorse the holiday in their schools.

Over twenty-five years after the movement’s inception, Purim still held its ground as among the cardinal Jewish celebrations in the *shuln*. As one of just four holidays included in the Workmen’s Circle’s 1946 booklet series, “Good Holidays,” the Purim pamphlet highlights the annual event’s significance as a source of history and fun. Titled “The Story of Purim,” the cover of this palm-sized booklet is adorned with traditional holiday symbols, namely the *gragger*, or Purim noisemaker. 162 Singular in purpose, this cacophonous Jewish instrument is customarily employed to drown-out the name of Haman, Purim’s villain, during the public reading of the ancient text. Though entirely in Yiddish, beginning on page one, the Purim booklet commences

---

162 *Holiday Story and Song List for Purim*, Good Holidays (New York: The Education Department of the Workmen’s Circle, 1946).
to tell the traditional Jewish rendition of the holiday story. Considered in tandem, the pamphlet’s prominent depiction of the gragger, a religious accessory, in addition to its traditional holiday narrative, combine to suggest a more customary Purim observance in the latter-day shuln.

Following the providential resolution of the Purim story’s end, the booklet concludes with a short holiday jingle titled, “Today is Purim.”\textsuperscript{163} A sweet and cheerful song, the rhyming couplets recount the merry-making customs of the celebratory occasion. A few lines in particular however, hint at the increased religious orientation of the later shuln. The poem exhorts the young reader to “not forget this beloved day!” and cries out, “Descendants, remember the miracle!”\textsuperscript{164} To be sure, the Workmen’s Circle Education Department did not suddenly convert to a faith-based interpretation of “miracle,” and certainly still rejected assertions of logic-defying manifestations of the Holy Spirit. At the very least though, the Yiddishists’ use of familiar Jewish holiday rhetoric reveals their desire to more closely affiliate with their traditional coreligionists.

Hanukah, a second Jewish holiday observed by the shuln from their onset, embodies several ideological and historical aspects appealing to the Yiddishists. At their 1920 conference, representatives of the Workmen’s Circle Education Department pronounced Hanukah “the holiday of emancipation from the Greek yoke.”\textsuperscript{165} With this qualification, shuln leaders cleverly framed the holiday as implicitly Jewish, but explicitly about freedom. From a moral and historical standpoint, the story of Hanukah aptly satisfies Yiddish secularists’ high ideological and education standards. The eight-day affair glorifies the triumph of Judah and the Jewish Maccabees over the Greek army of King Antiochus IV, and the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the second century BCE. The monumental victory returned the Temple

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Garner, \textit{Jewish Education in the United States}, 160.
to the Jewish people, and restored their right to practice Judaism freely. A historically verifiable, documented event, the Maccabee’s famed fight for freedom is rooted in a worldly reality and represents a dethroning of an unjust power structure. Not surprisingly however, the Workmen’s Circle’s 1920 guidelines neglect all elements of the holiday that pay tribute to the workings of divine intervention. Utterly absent in their brief annotation of Hanukah’s celebration, is the legendary small flask of oil that miraculously lit the Temple menorah for eight days and nights — the miracle that inspired the holiday’s customary candle lighting. Yiddishists on the other hand, regarded the Maccabee’s militant pursuit of justice morally and historically meriting of celebration on its own. The post-battle events then, were principally dismissed as unnecessary, tainting interjections of the divine. Through their historically-grounded rendition of the holiday, Workmen’s Circle educators communicated to their students that the Maccabees emerged victorious not for God’s will, but for their righteous struggle in defense of the universal freedoms of mankind.

Two dozen years down the line, “The Story of Hanukah” reappears in the Workmen’s Circle’s “Good Holidays” booklet series.¹⁶⁶ The pocket-size Yiddish piece underlines the original virtues the Yiddishists appreciated in the story, but also outwardly conforms to traditional holiday symbols and imagery. In their twelve-page Yiddish text, the Education Department delved right into the holiday’s narrative sequence of events. The account however, disproportionately dramatizes the story’s moralistic components, such as Jewish suffering under Greek rule and the Maccabees’ bravery in overcoming their oppression. The two detailed illustrations printed in the packet, confirm the justice and battle-oriented slant of the rendition. While the first drawing seeks to illicit sympathy and outrage, as a distressed Jew faces public

¹⁶⁶ Holiday Story and Song List for Hanukah, Good Holidays (New York: The Education Department of the Workmen’s Circle, 1946).
physical abuse at the hands of the Greeks, the second portrays a determined Judah Maccabee atop his horse, prepared for battle. In contrast, the booklet’s front cover conveys a more conventional perception of the holiday. Framed by a border of royal blue flickering flames, the cover centrally displays a rotating dreidle — a spinning four-sided top stamped with the Hebrew initials of the phrase “a Great Miracle Happened There.” The projection of such a sentiment is rather uncharacteristic of the Workmen’s Circle. Firstly, their secularism rejects divine miracles, and secondly the miracle to which the saying refers is not the Maccabees’ victory, but the religious lighting of the menorah. Though the religious subtext of this children’s toy is clearly inconsistent with the shuln’s secularist principles, by 1946 playing dreidle had become a commercialized and relatively nonreligious holiday recreation. Seeking to remain relevant in the wider Jewish scene, the Workmen’s Circle’s Hanukah booklet demonstrates the shuln’s more relaxed ideology, allowing students to participate in and identify with the dominant Jewish culture.

In much the same way, the Hanukah booklet’s back-cover poem, “Oh, You Little Candle,” rests on the symbolism of religious holiday observance, while relating a message in line with Yiddish secular thought. Uniting the disparate Hanukah narratives, the battlefield victory on the one hand, and the miracle of the menorah’s undying flame on the other, the poem reinterprets the holiday lights as telling the story of hard-fought military strife. According to the Talmud, Hanukah candles are ignited and displayed to commemorate the miracle of the sampling of oil that lit the Temple menorah for eight days and nights. Instead, this Yiddish poet reimagined the holiday flame, as narrating the history of the moral struggle for freedom. Gazing into the light, the speaker addresses the candle,
Oh, you little candle,
You tell a story,
A tale of good luck.
You tell of blood,
Bravery and courage,
Flickering to and fro.  

Loosening the rigidity of their secularist tenets, the Workmen’s Circle’s 1946 Hanukah booklet reflects the movement’s religious compromise, made in response to the global call for widespread Jewish solidarity. While indulging in the symbolism of the religious majority, Yiddishists maintain conceptual alignment with the foundational Yiddish secular values of their shuln.

Of all the holidays celebrated within the shuln, Passover was consistently bestowed with the most time, attention, and importance. Religiously speaking, Passover is also far and away the most major Jewish holiday the Yiddish secularists observed. Ironically though, the holiday’s religious preeminence actually enhanced the shuln’s curricular objectives. Not only did Passover’s prominence in traditional Judaism guarantee its familiarity to all Workmen’s Circle families, it also granted shuln educators a rich body of cultural resources to use in their classrooms. Additionally, by seasonally falling in the spring months, Passover annually coincided with the winding-down of the school year, and naturally served as a platform to unite students, teachers, and parents in celebration of a year’s work.

Fortuitous timing and religious recognition aside, Workmen’s Circle shuln founders cited alternative reasons for honoring the holiday. Simply characterized as “the Jewish holiday of

\[167\] Ibid.
freedom,” members of the 1920 Education Department revealed much in their brevity. Unlike Purim or Hanukah, the story of Passover recalls events from biblical times that surface solely in the Old Testament. Due to their supposed divine authorship, Yiddish secularists unwaveringly treated the Five Books of Moses as works of fiction. As a result, Exodus’s story of Passover was incontrovitably understood as a mere fable among many. Acknowledging the fallacy of the story’s heaven-sent ten plagues and parting of the Red Sea, Yiddishists nonetheless valued the moral lessons in the Israelites legendary journey from slavery to freedom. As “the Jewish holiday of freedom,” the Education Department recognized Passover’s historic celebration by the Jewish people, while extending the holiday’s sentiment to include the commemoration of freedom for all people. In placing Passover distinctly in the Jewish tradition, Yiddishists still opposed the religious notion of Jewish “chosenness” as contradictory to the socialist spirit, and favored a universal celebration of freedom for all.

In their typical renegade fashion, the shuln spurned Jewish precedent by remodeling the traditional Passover Seder into a unique Yiddishist service and meal, taking place on the third night of the eight-day engagement. Unanimously renowned as the focal event of the Yiddish school year, all shuln networks in every city hosted their own Third Seder. Consistent with the universal nature of their holiday interpretation, the Third Seder was attended by students, teachers, parents, farvaltung, as well as by families unaffiliated with the shuln community. Honored guests, often distinguished orators on the Yiddish lecture circuit, also frequented these elaborate shuln productions. A bit behind their peer institutions, in 1930 the vibrant New York community spearheaded the annual Third Seder of the Workmen’s Circle shuln network. For a number of years, the service was entirely planned, written, and choreographed by mitlshuln

168 Gartner, Jewish Education in the United States, 160.
169 Ibid.
students, however as the event rapidly gripped communities near and far, the national Education Department soon assumed ceremonial control over the event. Despite its eventual bureaucratization, the shuln’s initial support for such an involved student initiative demonstrates their progressive views. Equally impressive though, is the high level of student-engagement sustained by the schools, even as pupils entered their notoriously rebellious teenage years.

Year to year, each shuln assembled their own special hagada (Passover Seder reader), incorporating artistic combinations of Yiddish readings, songs, holiday skits, and dances, as well as a sprinkling of time-honored, customary Seder prayers. The 1946 Third Seder hagada of the Philadelphia Workmen’s Circle shuln, speaks to the one-of-a-kind ritual the movement successfully cultivated over the years. The unassuming packet consists of eight stapled, standard-grade pages, economically printed for mass distribution. Forgoing the superfluous airs of a cover page, editors of the hagada dove right into the eclectic service. Undoubtedly a moving and spiritual event, the Seder was comprised of a diversity of source material, presented in an inclusive participatory manner. A tastefully compiled document, Yiddishist editors did not wish to strip their Seder of all traditional songs, and admitted cherished numbers such as “Avadim Hayinu” (we were slaves) and “The Four Questions.” Noticeably absent from the packet however, is any mention of the ten plagues brought down upon the Egyptians by God’s almighty hand. These graphic events, customarily remembered by dripping wine on a plate for each plague, are presumably neglected for their glorification of the divine spirit – and a murderous one at that.

To make their service truly their own, shuln leaders offered a great selection of Yiddish pieces, reflecting upon the moral messages of the biblical script as well as thematically similar modern historical narratives. With respect to the former, the hagada evokes the Israelites forty-

\[170\] Ibid.
\[171\] Ibid.
year journey through the desert in Mani Leib’s Yiddish “Ballad of Wandering,” performed by “a child.” On the following page, the Seder continues with the two Yiddish songs “The Birth of Moses” and “On the Nile,” composed by Abraham Rayzan and sung by the “chorus.” Though unmistakably revolving around the Old Testament’s account of the Passover story, the Yiddish pieces consciously focus their attention on the human elements of the narrative. Setting the biblical story aside, hagada editors unconventionally inserted a Yiddish reading on the maliciously reoccurring “Blood Libel.” After explaining the contrived origins behind the accusation that Jews bake their Passover matzos with Christian blood, the passage expounds upon its historic lethal consequences for worldwide Jewry. In reflecting upon the cyclical resurgence of the anti-Semitic Blood Libel at their Passover Seder, Yiddishist hagada editors remind their community that despite the Israelites’ ultimate freedom from Egyptian bondage in the book of Exodus, persecution and injustices still remain. Along the same lines, as the first Passover in World War II’s aftermath, the shuln’s 1946 Third Seder wrestled with the horrors of the Holocaust. The ordered recitation of three Yiddish numbers, “His Burned Spirit,” “The Warsaw Ghetto in the Month of Nissan” (April, on the Jewish calendar), and “Comfort,” reveals that the Yiddishists’ service was centered on the present as much as the past. At a time of global unrest, the Workmen’s Circle shuln transformed the one-dimensional homage to Moses and the Israelites into a community conversation of prior and current challenges, inspired by moral teachings of the ancient text.

173 Ibid.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
Labor and American Holidays:

In the Workmen's Circle schools and other politically affiliated _shuln_, labor holidays were celebrated with considerable gusto. In stark contrast to the guarded isolation of the _hederim_ and rabbinic schools of the Russian Pale, Yiddishist educators sought to foster national and global consciousnesses within their students. As a movement passionately immersed in socialist ideology, the Workmen's Circle _shuln_ reached out to students through the celebration of select labor holidays. Holiday celebrations, be they in the form of commemorative craftwork or mock-protests, proved an educationally attractive means of providing a political and emotional identification with the working masses. The Workmen's Circle Education Department's refined list of nine "Holidays to be observed," specifies "The First of May – as the holiday of labor brotherhood and an expression of world peace," as well as March 18th for "labor's struggle for freedom." Though more curricularly prominent in the _shuln_'s earlier decades, the holidays' core sentiments apolitically call for advocacy on behalf of all disenfranchised peoples. Despite labor's decline during the 1950s and 1960s, the movement's undying message was unproblematically fulfilled through holiday celebrations, as alternate activities promoting social justice and cultural pluralism.

"The First of May," more commonly known as International Workers' Day, was the most routinely observed and long-lived labor holiday in the _shuln_. American in origin, International Workers' Day honors workers around the world, in remembrance of the violence committed against Chicago labor protesters in 1886. However, the desire to commiserate with these Chicago strikers was not the only reason for the _shuln_'s prolonged enthusiasm for the holiday. By pure coincidence, "The First of May" also marks the historic festivities of May Day, a holiday rooted in the cultures of northern Europe, welcoming the warm summer months. Residing in a nation

177 Gartner, _Jewish Education in the United States_, 160.
whose majority traced their ancestry to these regions, Yiddish secularists were no doubt exposed to their neighbors’ May Day revelries. Embracing their adopted country, shuln leaders opted to take part in the national tradition, while infusing the holiday with their own meaning. The simultaneous celebration of these two sets of customs resulted in joint revelries of uplift and merriment. Through this seamless integration, the shuln constructed an attitude and environment that authentically united socialist ideology and American cultural pluralism.

Arriving on American shores with first-hand experience in socialist populism, Yiddish secularists endowed people’s movements and national struggles for freedom with utmost respect. Closely following Woodrow Wilson’s sober call for the “self-determination of nations,” in 1920 the Workmen’s Circle Education Department committed their shuln to celebrating the spirit of national freedom. Harboring strong Russian identities, founding members of the Education Department adamantly promoted the commemoration of the Russian Revolution within their shuln. As recent immigrants, the momentous event was so fresh they honored both March and October uprisings, leaving “to each schools the choice of day”. However, affirming their goal of educating the American child, representatives at the 1920 shuln conference additionally pronounced July 4th as the holiday celebrating “American freedom” and independence from Great Britain’s colonial rule. Further rooting their movement in American soil, shuln leaders recognized February 12th as President Lincoln’s birthday, decidedly venerating his “emancipation of the negroes,” and not the man himself. Whether recognizing national or ethnic freedoms, Workmen’s Circle educators viewed such holidays as critical landmarks, shaping students’ American, international, social, and economic consciousnesses.

178 Gartner, Jewish Education in the United States, 160.
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
Over the years however, the shuln’s need to remain relevant to their American students outweighed teachers’ lingering affections for Russian radical politics. Initiated by the invigorating new leadership of Nathan Chanin and Zalman Yefroikin, Workmen’s Circle shuln refocused their holiday curriculum. In the later shuln, nationalist celebrations mainly concerned the American experience as well as holidays secularly observed by students’ multicultural peers. Still, Yiddishist teachers unfailingly strove to invest socialist ideology and a love of freedom into their festivities.181

At a glance, the holiday observances of the Workmen’s Circle shuln represent an intentional blend of celebrations, infused with carefully crafted symbolism and meaning. Without betraying their secularism, shuln educators perpetuated holiday ties to their beloved culture of yiddishkeit, while forging solidarity with their more traditional coreligionists in a manner complementary to their socialist ideology. Never defined by their Jewishness, Yiddishist educators matched their devotion to Jewish celebrations with their endorsement of holidays honoring labor, freedom, and their American environment. On the surface, the significance of holidays within the shuln may seem minimal, for the celebrations themselves lasted only a day or a week. However, the hours spent in classroom lessons and preparatory rehearsals combine to imbue these rituals with moral messages that lasted a lifetime.

181 Freidenreich, Passionate Pioneers, 189.
CONCLUSION

The Workmen’s Circle schools and the Yiddish secular education movement in America strove to create an institution in which Jewish children and their families could have it all – their cherished Jewish culture and a national American identity. Through their devoted practice of progressive moral education, Yiddishists endeavored to engender a love of Yiddish linguistic and artistic culture, as well as an understanding of Jewish and socialist history that would flourish in the American environment. Their explicit efforts to relate the Yiddish language, Jewish history, and holiday celebrations to their new nation reveal the Yiddishists’ fervent belief in the triumph of socialist ideals and cultural pluralism in America. Such a national philosophical victory would enable Yiddish secular socialism to continue to thrive, and yet still remain characteristically American.

As we have seen in examining the four spheres of Yiddish secular education in America, the shuln’s multifaceted curriculum embodied a complementary multidimensional set of moral, social, and political goals. Dewey’s tenets of progressive education, prominently practiced in all of the shuln’s activities, evinced Yiddishists’ awareness and absorption of contemporary American intellectual discourse. In supporting an educational philosophy rooted in moral behavior and social consciousness, the shuln relayed their objective to rear ethical members of the larger civil society. Paradoxically, the shuln’s heavy curricular emphasis on Yiddish language and literature featured explicit moral messages and American themes. Though traditionally spoken and perceived as an old-world Jewish tongue, Yiddish secularists aimed to cultivate a revived Yiddish in their adopted country. To this end, shuln educators sought to teach students a practical and ethnically sentimental language, relevant to their American lives. Social history and current events taught within the shuln, infused with socialist morals, cooperated to
frame contemporary issues as continuations of past conflicts. Though devoting a significant proportion of their history curriculum to Jewish concerns, Yiddishists portrayed Jewish struggles for freedom as akin to pursuits of justice for all peoples. Lastly, the shuln’s range of intentionally selected holiday celebrations concretely identified Yiddishists’ core passions for their ethnic heritage, socialist politics, and American citizenship. The joyous holiday they produced successfully engaged young American Jewish children, while espousing socialist ideology and enthusiastically promoting cultural pluralism.

Without slighting the unique educative style and curricular content of the shuln, the Yiddishists were not the only group in America to establish ethnic children’s schools in the early twentieth century. Italians, Greeks, and Poles also founded educational institutions, tackling their own parallel projects. Like the shuln, these schools aimed to perpetuate their ethnic culture through language, history, traditions, and religion. Applying differing methods and delivering alternate messages, each institution represented a separate cultural undertaking reflective of their ethnic sensibilities. Doubtlessly aware of the existence of these similar schools, Yiddishist educators thus considered themselves and their shuln to be a part of a proud ethnic culture among many, and as such, proud Americans among many.

The success of the Yiddish secular education movement however, could not last. Over time, changes in both the Jewish immigrant population and in the national political and cultural discourse rendered the schools obsolete. Though the shuln operated in full force well into the 1940s, their decline actually began much earlier. In 1924, America’s discriminatory immigration law severely restricted immigration from Eastern Europe resulting in a dearth of Jewish immigrant wageworkers, historically the most receptive demographic to the socialist cause. The more damaging effect of the law on the shuln however, was the lack of new teachers to replace
the aging Yiddishist pioneers. Though American born shuln teachers proved equally if not more capable than their European counterparts, their numbers were few as the position paid little and was thus an undesirable career for upwardly mobile native American Jews.

As immigration restriction related problems were slow to unfold, the harshest blow to the Yiddish secular education movement came during World War II and the post-War period. Keeping tabs on their cousins in Eastern Europe, American Jews found the changing face of Soviet socialism extremely unsettling as anti-Semitic policies intensified. Following Joseph Stalin’s non-aggression pact with Hitler’s Nazi regime in 1939, Jewish socialists’ uncertainty turned to outright rejection. This effectively ended American Jewish socialism as an impassioned political entity, yet Yiddish secular education in America still may have survived. Internally, Jews could still reconcile their socialist ideals and their love for yiddishkeit even without the Soviet Union’s political model. Fittingly, what finally sealed the shuln’s fatal demise were developments on American soil. Escalating Cold War tensions in the 1950s and 1960s between the United States and the Soviet Union, irreparably vilified socialism in the eyes of the American politic and public. As a vulnerable minority, Jews were wary of supporting their socialist institutions and risking of their own demonization along with the enemy.

In a matter of decades, the socialist precepts dispensed in the shuln that once connected Yiddish students to the American scene, became points of difference to be tucked away from public scrutiny. The humanistic values of “justice, love for the oppressed, love of freedom, and respect for the fighters of freedom,” were twisted and reconceived as tenets belonging to the traitor, and opposed to America’s increasingly conformist and capitalist national creed. Faithful to their commitment to their adopted country, Yiddish secularists could not withstand such an overt contradiction, and unceremoniously allowed their shuln to fade away into the past.

---

182 Gartner, Jewish Education in the United States, 158.
From a broader historical standpoint, the rise and fall of the Yiddish secular education movement between 1910 and 1960, reveals a fundamental shift in American patriotic values. In the early part of the twentieth century, being a loyal American did not revolve around a shared culture, lifestyle, or religion. Rather, during this period of immigrant influx and national evolution, American-ness was achieved through civic participation, subscribing to democratic ideals, and recognizing that what is good for the collective is good for the individual or particular group. By closing her doors to immigration and casting a thick aura of suspicion over foreign traits during the Cold War era, America cultivated a national culture that feared “the other” as a domestic threat. It was no longer sufficient to pledge allegiance to the United States and celebrate her democratic ideals. To express patriotic fidelity one also needed to walk American, talk American, and dress American. Earnestly devoted to America, though relying upon a particular patriotism of cultural pluralism and common constitutional understanding, Yiddish secular education recalls a past when one might be raised Jewish, secular, socialist, and yet wholeheartedly American.
Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


