

## Itche Goldberg (1904-2006)

By Paul Buhle

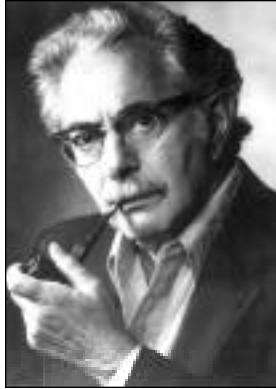
**W**ith the passing of Itche Goldberg, an era in Jewish life has truly ended. And yet the purpose of his life—the preservation of Yiddish and of a progressive Jewish secularism—has been accomplished in ways that a young Itche could not have imagined. That he contributed so vastly to these causes will remain his monument.

I hope a personal note will be forgiven. As editor-publisher of the U.S. New Left journal *Radical America* (from Madison, Wisconsin), I began to receive exchange copies of the English-language pages of the *Frayhayt* in 1970, thanks to Sid Resnick, who oversaw those pages. In the next few years, with the collapse of the New Left and my launching of the Oral History of the American Left project at New York University, I found myself, to my great surprise, on the road interviewing elderly Yiddishists to put their lives' stories on tape. A stop in Miami Beach was paid for by the Zhitlovsky Foundation, thanks to the intervention of Itche.

By the late 1970s, I had become a fast reader of *Yiddische Kultur*, along with the *Frayhayt*, and visiting Itche in his office was a great treat to me. He was so witty and cultured, he had moved beyond the “Old Left” defense of the Soviet Union and State Socialism without losing his left-wing sensibilities (as so many—if by no means all—on the social democratic side did, capitulating to U.S. policies, especially in regard to Vietnam), that I could feel as if I had found a true mentor. From then on until the current day, I have been writing for an assortment of Jewish publications on cultural subjects mostly, touring to give lectures to Jewish audiences of different ages on the subject of “Jewish continuity,” and writing or editing volumes contributing to the same continuity. Doing these things has been one of the great experiences of my life, and I owe it very largely to Itche. (I should perhaps admit here that I am a gentile, and came to Yiddish through my college German.)

Itche was born in Apt, Poland, moved with his parents to Warsaw at an early age, studied at Poznansky Teachers Seminary and by 1920 was enrolled at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. It was in the intense Yiddish world of Toronto, as a Yiddish teacher, that he attached himself to the left wing of the Workmens Circle. By the time he got to New York in the late 1920s, he had become a promising figure in the circles that percolated out from the daily, Communist-leaning *Morgn Frayhayt* into the garment district and beyond.

This world was full of contradictions, as every reader of *Outlook* knows. But I discovered in my interviews with old-timers that it was especially rich



in working-class *Yiddishkayt* because the Left attracted the young, the poor, the recently-immigrated and the ardently devoted, while their factional opponents had a wider following among the older Jewish generations and the labour bureaucracies. The *Frayhaytniks* also prided themselves upon the highest-quality Yiddish, with the fewest compromises, and if political differences drove many writers away, nevertheless some very brilliant essayists, poets and short-story writers remained. My favourite was also one of Itche's favourites and a good friend of his: Moshe Nadir.

In these decades especially, and in some ways throughout his long career, Itche was above all the hands-on (or minds-on) Yiddish pedagogue. As such, he endured the ups and downs of the Yiddish Left. The story is a complicated one because it combines global politics with generation and class differences among Yiddish-speakers, as well as important local variations. The Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle (AR/WR) had not devoted much energy to teaching Yiddish until a new generation of pedagogues, mostly “1905ers” (those who emigrated around that time), became more influential within the unions, the Socialist Party and the AR/WC. For them and for many recent immigrants, the prospect of assimilation had little charm, and the popular adoption of “Potato Yiddish” (loaded with English-language words) in the Yiddish press itself was abhorrent.

These mostly younger, poorer immigrants were also most likely to identify with the Soviet Union. And so, with the break-up of the Socialist Party and the rise of Communist Parties, the seed of discord was inevitably cast among the Yiddish institutions. It was as tragic as it was inevitable, for the older generation needed the younger and vice-versa—the first had developed the institutions, the second had more vitality. The division fragmented the Workmen's Circle, but it also spurred the development of new choral groups, new summer camps, and for a while, a new zealotry for Yiddish literature and Yiddish teaching.

Itche was one of those young pedagogues who went with the Left, but like others, he found himself in an anomalous situation. The AR/WC had a more casual identification with Yiddish, but the Communists for a few years after 1928 had a near-religious faith in near-time global revolution and a resistance to self-identification with specifically Jewish traditions, especially religious ones. Itche thus recalled to me the unwillingness in the Left even to celebrate Jewish holidays. And yet, as his friend the proletarian poet Martin Birnbaum reflected, even the most severely politicized art—of the Proletpen group, for instance—contained within it the urge to produce in Yiddish. The summer camps and the Yiddish choruses flourished, somewhat protected from the Communist hard-liners. With the abandonment of revolutionary eschatology and the announcement of the Popu-

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lar Front Against Fascism in 1935, it was almost as if the narrative film of history was being run in reverse.

Yiddish identity, as well as Jewish identity, was now anticipated to flourish in a future multi-cultural America, and somehow or other the New Deal, with all its undertones, would help bring that future closer. The International Workers Order (IWO), a combination of some eighteen ethnic groups supplying sickness and death benefits as well as cultural activities, took life and flourished. Of its various units, the Jewish People's Fraternal Order (JPFO) was overwhelmingly the most important, with 50,000 of the IWO's total 180,000 members. The JPFO earned much neighborhood support in parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx especially—it even had dental clinics serving members. Old-timers recalled to me the ways in which it brought Jewish generations together, giving youngsters a comfortable spot, not too politicized, where they could engage in activities along with parents and other adults.

The flourishing of the JPFO for a bit over a decade offered a stunning glimpse of what might be. Itche was not the charismatic Moissye Olgin, founder of the *Frayhayt*, nor his successor Pesach Novick, nor the handful of other personalities most prominent on platforms of the Yiddish left in those days, from the furriers' Ben Gold to that famous frequent visitor, Paul Robeson. But Itche was crucial behind the scenes, always teaching, always organizing, always educating within this wider circle of the Jewish Left.

The formation of the *Yiddishe Kultur Farband* in 1937 came tragically late. The call to world Jewry and its intelligentsia would be eclipsed by the murder of most of the world's Yiddish speakers. And yet, the call was still important. It reached beyond the limits of the Popular Front, and held a somewhat wider circle even with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the next round of widespread intellectual disillusionment with all things communistic. Probably it was inevitable that the editorship of the YKUF journal, *Yiddishe Kultur*, would eventually pass to Itche, along with the larger responsibility for YKUF and its publications, including a children's section, *Kinderbukh*, taken over from the JPFO when, along with the rest of the IWO, it was forced out of existence in the McCarthy Era.

A post-Holocaust surge of commitment to holding onto secular Yiddish culture was part of a post-New Deal reawakening that withered in the chill of the Cold War. Yiddish came to be viewed by many, including institutional leaders of the rightward-tilting Jewish mainstream, as a hindrance to upward mobility. During the same years, Israeli leaders decided against Yiddish as an alternative language for the Jewish State. The Soviet Yiddish poets were murdered, the revela-

tions of Soviet anti-Semitism could no longer be contained, and an end of anything like a Yiddish Left seemed to be near.

Such a desolate conclusion, held by more than a few pessimists, badly underestimated the inner strength of an aging generation that Itche did so much to hold together. The ex-Communist Yiddishists whom I interviewed in Coop City, Miami Beach and West Los Angeles in the early 1980s recalled with pride that cultural work became their post-Party (and in retirement, post-labour union) focus. On the other side of the familiar political lines, the Workmen's Circle also held on, fructified a small influx that followed the destruction of the JPFO. The old opponents began cautiously to look at each other anew, still wary but in hopes of some future possible reconciliation.

The schools, somewhat reduced, nevertheless continued, as did Kinderland. In them could be heard, especially in summertime, the sounds of the folk music phenomenon repressed from the mainstream, a renewed emphasis on civil rights that added a dimension to *Yiddishkayt*, and a preparation of a younger generation for political and cultural leadership in the 1960s ahead. In the world of Yiddish literature proper, Itche was a late-blooming rose, emerging as champion of the martyred writers (annual events in their name beginning in 1957) and the reinterpretation of the works of Perets Markish, David Hofshiteyn and Dovid Bergelson as great artists and exemplars of Yiddish capacity. Along with the greats (their work was often excerpted), came the continuing contributions of lesser but still valuable Yiddish writers in the U.S., the Soviet Union, Israel, Paris and elsewhere, in magazines like *Zamlungen* and the *YKUF Almanakh* that Itche inevitably had a hand in. Among the dozens of books published by YKUF in these years, *Amerike in Yiddishe Vort* was the most magnificent, a massive compilation of Yiddish writers on themes that most often touched Manhattan scenes. This volume will not likely ever be outdated.

In 1964, when long-time *Yiddishe Kultur* editor Nachman Maisel retired to Israel, Itche was the only possible successor. Over the amazing duration of forty years to follow, the journal faced all the dilemmas of rising print and mailing costs, office rent, and above all an aging readership, adding up to an exhausting burden for any editor. Yet its literary quality never failed. Indeed, under the editorship of a writer of what some called "Shakespearean Yiddish," its quality actually rose. Itche had made so many compromises with the demands for simple prose, diction and syntax in the past decades—he determined to make no more. *Yiddishe Kultur* became a demanding journal to read, sometimes too demanding for its veteran readers.

Itche, always younger than his years mentally and physically, took to the job like a literary personality of old. A Miami Beach Yiddish club organizer reflected to me that the point of Itche's semi-annual visits was to raise money for the journal, but at least some of that money was spent on the ocean-view hotel room that he requested (and could not be denied by his faithful). It was little enough to ask in a life of self-sacrifice. Nearly all the great personalities of the Yiddish world, lecturers as well as poets and novelists, were gone by the 1980s, or grown quiet in elderly retirement. Itche, strikingly handsome and eloquent, loomed large. His only compromise to advancing age was to give up his pipe.

He might have taken the route of honouring the Yiddish modernists brought to some mainstream prominence by the Howe-Greenberg anthology *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* and the mini-cult of Yiddish (following a long period of liberal intellectuals denying that they had ever known any Yiddish). Itche took another path. He pointed to the significance of the 1890s founding poets, Edelshtat and Bovshover, whom Irving Howe dismissed as primitives. He laid unique weight upon the folkish Sholem Aleichem and on I.L. Peretz (whom he called the "gantser yid," the complete Jew), in the inestimable work of setting the groundwork for a formal Yiddish literary culture. Most daring of all, Itche repeatedly took to task the one Yiddish writer who, in translation, had come to a higher point than all the rest: I.B. Singer.

This last stroke was done at some risk to the larger enterprise. Singer's Nobel Prize seemed to prove, to a skeptical public, that Yiddish had something to contribute after all. But Itche was not making some sectarian left-wing complaint against the big-money winner of literary sweepstakes. Singer's work, as all Yiddish readers know, lacked the humanism that has been at the heart of Yiddish culture, whatever could be said about the brilliance of Singer's writing, his devel-

opment of character, and the flashes of insight historical and otherwise. (The film *Enemies: A Love Story*, based on Singer's novel, perhaps captured it best for the ordinary American, with a protagonist Holocaust survivor who lacks any humane qualities and lives only for self-advantage.) The outstanding piece in *Essayen* (Itche's first collection of essays), a critique of Singer, was in effect a critique of the legacy that Yiddish culture must not accept as the final note.

The *Morn Frayhayt* folded in 1987, its editor Paul Novick approaching the centenary mark himself. The Yiddish anarchist paper *Fraye Arbeter Shtimme* had folded a decade earlier, and the *Forward* went weekly. As the *Frayhayt* saluted its old critic the *FAS* on its demise, so the *Forward* saluted the *Frayhayt*. Another case of "enemies: a love story," this was the shrinkage of the Yiddish world, accelerated by mortality and hardly affected, after all the generations of arguments, by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet system.

A long time ago and in another historical galaxy (perhaps an alternative reality), Itche Goldberg had seen, as a young man, "Suddenly.... Jewish culture was developing in the Soviet Union. It was really breathtaking. You had the feeling that both the national problem was solved and the social problem was solved...It was overpowering and we were young."

Outliving nearly everyone of his generation around him (everyone but his widow, Jenny, that is), Itche grew more interested in the religious or spiritual basis of Yiddish socialism and Yiddish culture. He had never been anti-spiritual in any real sense, of course. The thousand years of Yiddish European culture climaxed in an escape from the narrowness of the domination that the merchant and rabbi imposed on Jewish village life, freeing the language to express what could hardly be thought in earlier days, but also recapturing, recovering and reinterpreting the kernel of the faith that had sparked ordinary Jews across an eon. ♦

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beyond criticism. This was most explicit in Harper's statements in France in the ceremonies marking the 90th anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge in World War I, in which 3600 Canadians were killed. Harper compared Vimy Ridge to present-day Afghanistan, as a battle "against tyranny and fear," extolling the Vimy "victory" as having "affirmed our national identity and national character." It's hard to say which is more contemptible: the rhetoric about the character- and nation-building function of the slaughter at Vimy, or the use of the tragedy to puff up our current war in Afghanistan.

This sort of jingoistic posturing inhibits any questioning of the

morality of the wars in which Canadians have fought and died. World War II could be described as one of the few "just wars" of our age (in spite of the war crimes committed by the Allies), but was World War I a fight for freedom, or for the ambitions of various European powers? More to the point, is our present "campaign" in Afghanistan a heroic defense against Taliban theocracy, or a favour we're doing for the U.S. to free up their troops in Iraq? Or simply a war for oil, as Norman Spector candidly maintained, while still defending the war as legitimate (*Globe and Mail*, March 19)? All this apart from Canadian complicity in outright war crimes in Afghanistan, from the killing of Afghan civilians in NATO air strikes, to Canadian soldiers handing over captives to torture in detention (which our government

and military have recently been exposed as trying to cover up).

A good example of this attempt to hush up dissent and criticism occurred last year during the calls for a House of Commons debate on our role in Afghanistan. Columnist Rex Murphy, speaking on CBC, maintained that having such a debate, now that the troops were in the field, would undermine the morale of Canadian soldiers at the front. His argument was a form of emotional blackmail: you're letting down our troops if you ask why they're in Afghanistan or what they're doing there. On the contrary—the horrific deaths of Canadian soldiers (or soldiers of any country in any war) are made more meaningless by abandoning critical thought in favour of mindless flag-waving. ♦