

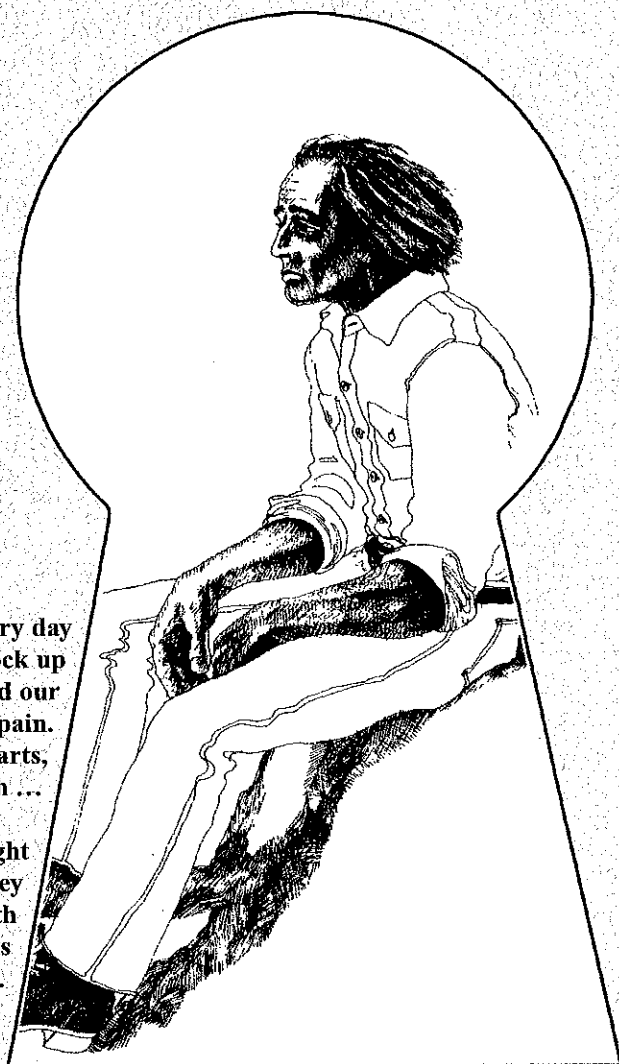
Special Commemorative Edition

# The Night of The Murdered Poets August 12, 1952

... on this very day  
we tightly lock up  
our lament and our  
pain.  
pain in our hearts,  
lament twixt our teeth ...

it was deep in the night  
when they  
breathed their last breath  
No consolation was  
brought before death ...

*Joseph Kerler*



August 12, 1952

**The Night of The Murdered Poets**

Revised Edition  
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with a Foreword by

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Joseph Kerler was personally acquainted with the Jewish intellectuals killed on August 12, 1952. He now makes his home in Israel.

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The final responsibility for this pamphlet rests with the editors and with the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

C.R.S.  
S.L.W.

## FOREWORD

One day, a decade ago, I sat waiting my turn at the speakers table in a New York hotel meeting hall where a Jewish labor convention was taking place. I was pleased to have been thought of, yet a touch uncomfortable because life had carried me out of this milieu. Here in the hall were delegates with Yiddish newspapers stuck in their coat pockets, and I heard around me the accents of my uncles, my father. But still I reassured myself, I had never turned away. And though English was our language, here I wrote of Jews; I had confronted the Holocaust and Israel was part of my pattern.

Then, just before I was to speak, the chairman asked the delegates to rise for a memorial. And as they stood, he read out a list of names of Jewish authors who had been executed in the Soviet Union.

Now and then a name resounded to me; I had somewhere heard it, in Europe or in Israel it had come through to me, Peretz Markish, I had heard, David Bergelson, Itzik Feffer . . . but their works were unknown to me. Yiddish poetry, I had not followed. But it was not my ignorance of their work that came into question, good work would live, and it has; it was my ignorance of their destruction that startled me.

Two of the names evoked particular murmurs in the hall; these men had been here in New York, travelled in America, sent during the war by the Soviet Union in a special Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee: Solomon Mikhoels, director of Moscow's Jewish State Theater, and Itzik Feffer, good communist poet. Many of the men in this hall had grasped their hands.

But how was it that I had not heard of their "liquidation"? That the world had not heard of it? In our newspapers, in our news magazines, had there been mention of this massacre? We had heard of the "Doctors Plot," yes, and heard in general about Stalin's anti-Jewish measures, of arrests and exiles, the closing down of Jewish institutions, schools, publications, of cultural strangulation, but how had this enormity, the mass execution of the leading Jewish poets and novelists escaped world attention?

It may be that research will prove that the fact was indeed reported here and there; just as in the research on the Holocaust, it can be shown that reports of a sort were made: "we did know". But we could not accept, and doubted, and held away the horror as long as we might, out of fear of having to confront an inadmissible human capacity for evil.

So too we — particularly we writers — have held off from absorbing this explicit event; from knowing that there took place a massacre of writers, of Jewish writers, and in the first land of the great social revolution. Even up to today, this story of the Holocaust of Russian Jewish authors remains virtually untold. True, their death was signalized in grief by their readers, the sadly dwindling world of readers of Yiddish, and here in this modest booklet it has been told to the English reading world. Over the past year, five thousand copies were disseminated. But the embers show life, a new wind blows, and now the booklet will be published again, in a larger edition.

Only as a remembrance? Fitting and needed as that may be, this is more than a memorial; it is a continuation. A living continuation, for one of the most highly gifted of these murdered poets, is exemplified here in the work of his son, David Markish, now at last in Israel. He is one of that incredibly courageous band of Russian Jews who have proven to the whole world that resistance is possible, is alive, and can succeed even in a police state.

There occurs this remarkable passage in the diary of Anne Frank:

Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God who has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again. If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from

which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason alone do we suffer now. We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English, or just representatives of any other country for that matter, we will always remain Jews, but we want to, too.

In their mass death, these massacred Jewish poets, these inextinguishable souls, sent us their last alert. What we must do in unity with them is to heed it, not to shrink away in horror, but to spread this alert, and wherever the Jewish self, the human self, is threatened, to react, with all the strength of the living, and yes, the living dead.

New York, June, 1973

— Meyer Levin

CHAIM GRADE

ELEGY FOR THE  
SOVIET YIDDISH WRITERS

(Excerpts)

I weep for you with all the letters of the alphabet  
that made your hopeful songs. I saw how reason spent  
itself in vain for hope, how you strove against regret—  
and all the while your hearts were rent  
to bits, like ragged prayer books. Wanderer, I slept  
in your beds, knew you as liberal hosts;  
yet every night heard sighs of ancient ghosts:  
Jews converted by force. My memory kept  
it all, your hospitality, and all that Russian land  
that fed me, broad as its plains and confining as a cell,  
with its songs on the Volga, and the anchor sunk in sand;  
homelands all gone down in blood. And so I tell  
your merits, have always looked to your defense, not to justify  
for pity of your deaths, but for what you were  
when all the space  
of Russia sustained you still, and you lived your deathly lie:  
Marranos—your deepest self denies your face.

I saw you, stunned and dumb,  
Yiddish poets of Minsk, Moscow, Kiev, when they brought home  
Job's heavy hurt, the few whom fate had spared. Agonized,  
you saw the credo you had catechized  
in holy Hebrew—*Ani m'amin*  
*b'emunah shlomah*—fall dead in the ravine  
at Kiev, among the hidden slain: "With full faith I believe  
in Friendship of Peoples!"—faith even faith could not retrieve  
from Babi Yar.

"Are you asleep?" David Bergelson came to me in  
the night:

"No sleep for me, Chaim. My bed is all nails from fright  
of what we hoped for—the New Enlightened Man!  
And I have lived to know him in my own life's span."  
I can see his noose hanging down like lead,  
and his canny eyes, quick to find.  
From the way he bites on the knot of his thoughts with teeth set  
askew in his head  
I can tell no one knows better the maze of his mind.

Mikhoels, tragedian of Tevye and King Lear!  
The milkman's faith, the king's despair—  
your very fingers speak the lines,  
while double-dealing fate plays on.  
They call you Solomon, and Moscow crowns  
you King. I myself would rather shun  
Mikhoels; I fear nothing in him throbs  
for Solomon's Song, or Israel's sobs.  
But one New Year's night when a blizzard beat,  
and partied and vodka'd all Moscow went mad,  
and both of us drunk we pitched through the sleet,  
he groaned out the grief that stuck in his blood:  
"I play the King with my hands, Susskin the Fool with his feet.  
The audience knows no Yiddish; we bleat  
to an ignorant hall." The nation trembled at his death  
when tyranny snuffed the guiltless breath.

Smelling of summer, a stag with belly sated,  
charming as a child, Kvitko smiled and prated.  
But Bergelson bellowed, "A third eye's what you'll need

for all the tears you've yet to lose if you run  
away, Chaim—you'll only run to weep! Feffer gave his creed  
with outstretched arm: "The days of the trials are done."  
Posters on walls could thrill us then—but he forgot  
the walls of the cellars where the prisoners were shot.  
The day of his trial—let me be mute:  
praise God I wasn't there. I feel my own head crack  
with the bullet aimed at Colonel Itzik Feffer's back  
in cold murder. Hard for me to speak of him, and then  
hard not to. Still let me deliver  
his name from evil repute. *Ani ha-gever!*  
*I am the man!*—When we met to remember the slain  
I saw his tear, and heard his hallowed Amen.

Peretz Markish flies into my room with the storm,  
flies out again with the lightning's flare,  
his grave grown scant for his giant's form,  
his arms spread wide with wing-like whirr.  
Stormy poet, enchanting silhouette,  
how the style of your step bewitched!  
But when you ranted a great bird twitched,  
and your poems were rant caught up in a net,  
thickets of words. You boomed like a wind,  
all gusto and gladness—"Why does everyone fret?"  
The storm in your song was thinned  
for the doomed Siberian dead.  
"Am free, am free, am free!" you said;  
wild as your poems, you shook out your wild hair.  
Already the rifle was cocked to tear  
Apollo's wreathed and lovely head.

Ghosts justify my despair, phantom faces  
 smile their lost mute shame.  
 Through nights of fever and dream  
 you razed your palaces  
 to glimmering ruin. In your poems you were  
 like a pond—crooked mirror  
 for the world of truth. The young  
 have forgotten you and me and the hour  
 of our grief. Your widows receive their dower  
 of blood money. But your darkly murdered tongue,  
 silenced by the hangman's noose,  
 is no longer heard, though the muse  
 again sings in the land. You left  
 me your language, lifted with joy. But oh, I am bereft—  
 I wear your Yiddish like a drowned man's shirt,  
 wearing out the hurt.

*translated by Cynthia Ozick*

## THE NIGHT OF THE MURDERED POETS

On the night of August 12, 1952, twenty-four leading Jewish poets, writers and intellectual public figures were executed in the basement of Moscow's notorious Lubianka Prison. These were not random executions, but the culmination of a calculated campaign to eradicate Jewish life in the Soviet Union.

The paradox of the August 12th massacre is clear: Poetry is, by its very nature, immortal. Once a poet has committed his words to paper, or whispered them to another, he has secured a place for his ideas, his beliefs and his convictions. A bullet cannot kill a poem, any more than it can murder a philosophy.

In his despair for the murdered poets, Chaim Grade, their wartime comrade, wrote "The young have forgotten you and me and the hour of our grief . . . your darkly murdered tongue, silenced by a hangman's noose is no longer heard . . ." That poetic prophecy, written after the execution of the 24 writers, must not be allowed to be fulfilled. The repercussions of August 12th, and of the entire 1948-1953 period, when the Soviet Government effectively demolished the remnants of the Jewish community, provoked Soviet Jews to fight to retain their Jewish identity. In the void created by the destruction of Jewish life, the Soviet Government did not take into account the determined and obdurate nature of the Jewish people.

When the war was over, two million Soviet Jews had perished. The Nazis had found in the Soviet Jews the synthesis of all they despised and feared. The "Jewish Bolshevik" became a prime target of the full force of Nazi propaganda and war machinery. The three million surviving Jews were physically and psychologically depleted. With their relatives dead and their towns destroyed, Jews returned home to encounter more anti-Semitism.



This resurgence of popular anti-Semitism left Russian Jews with little more than their inherent will to survive. It was in this atmosphere that Soviet Jews began to rebuild their lives. But they had hardly any time before the Cold War, with its attendant suspicions and tensions, evolved.

The Cold War engendered in the Soviet Union a fear of anything Western and a concomitant attempt to prove that things Soviet and Russian were best. The Soviet campaign against "rootless cosmopolitanism" was a natural outgrowth of this new perspective. At first, the campaign was directed at all those whose outlook and preferences were for Western and international ideas. However, as the propaganda became more extensive, anti-Jewish sentiments emerged. Soviet authorities saw the trait of "cosmopolitanism" as a contemptible Jewish attribute. The scene was set for the period that came to be known as the "Black Years"—1948-1953, with the purges and repressions which would follow.

Jewish communal and religious institutions had been destroyed long before the War. In 1942, the Soviet Government organized the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee to enlist wartime support from Jews in the West. The Yiddish writers and artists selected by Stalin to lead the Committee became victims of the terror of the black years. Solomon Mikhoels, director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater and an actor whose characterizations of King Lear and Tevye were legendary, had been named chairman of the Committee.

The writers who joined with Mikhoels in the work of the Committee had from the early days of the Soviet State joined wholeheartedly in the seemingly messianic work of building a new social order.

Several had left in the wake of the pogroms and upheavals of the revolutionary period, but returned voluntarily as the new Soviet Government restored order. Many Soviet Yiddish writers communicated the Communist message to the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews whose mother tongue was Yiddish.

In time, due to the absence of other Jewish institutions during the traumatic wartime period, Soviet Jews came to look upon the Committee as the symbol of Jewish consciousness in the U.S.S.R. Under the impact of shattering wartime experience, the writers began to employ Jewish

historical and religious themes. The struggle of Soviet Jews against the Nazis was portrayed in terms of the tradition of the Jewish will to survive against powerful oppressors. The public meetings of the Committee and the pages, as well as the very title of its Journal, *Eynikayt* (Unity), provided a forum for expression of Jewish sentiments, emphasizing the unity of Soviet Jews with world Jewry, which would have been considered unthinkable before the war.

Mikhoels addressed "Brother Jews" throughout the world. Peretz Markish said, "We are one people, and now we are becoming one army." Colonel Itzik Feffer recalled Ezekiel's vision of a mighty nation arising from the valley of dry bones. A Committee manifesto was addressed to "our Jewish brethren the world over." Mikhoels and Feffer were dispatched on an official mission to the United States. They were heard in many different cities by about half a million Jews, urging and receiving moral and financial support for the Soviet war effort, and promising that "firm brotherly relations" would persist among Jews throughout the world after the war.

More than three million dollars was collected in the United States. At a postwar memorial ceremony in honor of Polish Jews, Markish corrected Feffer—who had spoken of "the friendship of the Jewish peoples"—with these words:

"There are not two Jewish peoples. The Jewish nation is one. Just as a heart cannot be cut up and divided, similarly one cannot split up the Jewish people into Polish Jews and Russian Jews. Everywhere, we are and shall remain one entity."

Soviet Jews, hearing such expressions from Committee members, turned to the Committee for assistance with many kinds of problems, particularly those of refugees and evacuees. Ilya Ehrenberg, the assimilated Jewish writer who wrote in Russian and frequently served, in the postwar period, as a spokesman for Stalin's strictures against Jewish nationalism, recalled in his memoirs: "After the victory, thousands of people went to Mikhoels for help because they saw him as the wise rabbi, the defender of the oppressed."

Mikhoels as one of the leading creative Jewish personalities of the era was among the first to sound the anguished alarm of "solidarity." He called for the united front of all Jews in the face of total annihilation, in the

battle against fascism and as part of the freedom-loving people of the world. But by 1948, Jewish solidarity, which had been so important in the Soviet struggle against fascism, was no longer needed or desirable. It was viewed as divisive to a regime characterized by Russian chauvinism.

The solution to this "Jewish problem" was to be the suppression and obliteration of all traces of Jewish culture. The reign of destruction began with Solomon Mikhoels.

Mikhoels had been sent to Minsk on an official mission as a member of the Stalin Prize committee. Late at night on January 13, 1948, he was summoned from his hotel room by a Communist Party official. The next morning, his bruised and bloody corpse was found near the railroad station. The reported "accidental death" was eventually discovered; the Soviet secret police had killed Mikhoels by running him over with a truck. A Jewish theatre critic who had accompanied him, Golubov-Potapov, suffered the same fate.

The murdered Mikhoels was given a magnificent funeral in Moscow by the government. His body lay in state at the Jewish State Theatre, and tens of thousands of Jews came to pay their last respects in death. The dishonesty of the official report of "death by accident" swiftly became apparent. A Jewish detective who began his own investigation of the "accident" disappeared and was never seen again. Peretz Markish had the courage to challenge the official version of Mikhoel's death in his memorial poem, "To Solomon Mikhoels—an Eternal Lamp at his Coffin." Despite Stalin's assigning Professor Zbarsky, the expert mortician who had embalmed Lenin's body, to disguise the bruises on Mikhoels' face, Markish wrote:

"The wounds on your face are covered by the snow,  
So that the black Satan shall not touch you. But  
your dead eyes blaze with anger, And your heart they  
trampled on cries out against  
the murderous crew . . .  
Somewhere in heaven, between the wandering shine,  
A star lights up in honor of your brilliant name.  
Don't feel ashamed of the holes in you, and your pain!  
Let eternity feel the shame!"

The Soviet Government provided a splendid funeral while seeking, at the same time, to conceal the actual cause of death. Nevertheless, many Soviet Jews quickly perceived the ominous meaning of Mikhoel's death. For them, the tragic murder of Mikhoels was an alarming and frightening sign of the increasing militancy of the anti-Jewish campaign.

On September 21, 1948, Ehrenberg writing in *Pravda* delivered the opening blows of the new campaign. He warned Soviet Jews that their identifying with Jews in other countries would prove their disloyalty to the Soviet Union. The last issue of *Eynikayt* appeared on November 20, 1948 and then the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was disbanded. There followed the liquidation of the Yiddish *Emes* publishing house, the bi-monthly *Heymland*, a Yiddish newspaper in Kiev, Jewish libraries, the last two Yiddish schools, professional theaters and amateur artistic groups. Jewish books disappeared into "restricted collections" in libraries.

What was left to the authorities was now the removal of key Jewish personalities. In the winter of 1948-49, the Soviet secret police arrested hundreds of writers, poets, artists, musicians, and government and party officials.

The first of the Yiddish writers to be arrested was Feffer, who had been the most enthusiastic Communist among the Jewish writers. At intervals which allowed time for the spread of uncertainty, dread and despair, the secret police came in turn for the prominent Yiddish writers and poets. Pinkhas Kahanovich, who wrote under the mystical *nom de plume*, Der Nister ("The Hidden One"), reportedly said to the secret policemen who came to arrest him: "At last!"

While the exact toll is not known, one account (Cang) offers the figure of 431 outstanding Soviet Jewish artists arrested this period—217 writers and poets, 108 actors, 87 painters and sculptors, and 19 musicians. The families of the prisoners—wives, small children, fathers and sisters, in-laws, aged parents—were exiled to Siberia or left as social outcasts without means of support. Most of the prisoners died in Soviet labor camps. Der Nister, for example, died in a camp on June 4, 1950, when he was past 65 years of age.

Somehow the remainder of the most prominent writers and poets survived in the camps until the cataclysmic summer of 1952. They included Peretz Markish, Itzik Feffer, David Bergelson, Leyb Kvitko, Shmuel Persov, David Hofshetyn and Itzik Nusinov.

On July 11, 1952, these writers were among the 25 Jews brought to trial in Moscow. The other known defendants were:

Solomon Lozovsky, age 74, member of the Central Committee elected by the 18th Party Congress (1939), served for a time as deputy foreign minister.

Binyamin Zuskin, distinguished actor, successor to Mikhoels as the last director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater.

Eliahu Spivak, head of the Department of Jewish Culture of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences until its liquidation in 1949.

Lina Shtern, 74, the only woman defendant, a biochemist and member of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences.

Considering the positions of those involved, the charges brought against them are ironic and tragic. All 25 were charged with being: "enemies of the USSR, agents of American Imperialism, bourgeois nationalist Zionists and rebels who sought by armed rebellion to separate the Crimea from the Soviet Union and to establish their own Jewish bourgeois nationalist Zionist republic there."

The trial ended on July 18, 1952. The defendants refused to plead guilty. According to some accounts, Markish and the aged Lozovsky showed particular valor in forcefully defending themselves, claiming that the prosecutors were the real criminals. All 24 male defendants were sentenced to death; Lina Shtern was sentenced to life imprisonment. She was subsequently released and died in 1968 at the age of 90 without ever revealing the circumstances of the 1952 trial.

On August 12, 1952, the 24 defendants were executed in the basement of Moscow's Lubianka Prison, on Dzerzhinsky Square. Reportedly, the last words of David Bergelson, who was 68 at the time of his murder, were:

"Earth, oh earth, do not cover my blood!"

The Soviet policy which culminated on August 12, 1952 left three million Soviet Jews bereft of poets, writers, actors, teachers, leaders, theaters, artists and communal institutions of any kind. Even the Yiddish linotype machines had been smashed. There was no one left to give voice to simple grief, much less to what was left of Jewish national and religious sentiments. The next generation might still be Jews, but they would be dumb and mute Jews, without poets, without songs. So it seemed.

The crimes committed against the Jewish writers have never been publicly acknowledged by any official Soviet source. Even during the period following Stalin's death, when many of his other crimes were denounced, the night of August 12 was not recognized. While this absence of official Soviet recognition may be a function of the involvement of post-war Soviet leadership in the crime, it also represents a commitment on the part of the present Soviet leadership to a perpetuation of anti-Jewish policies: Jewish culture remains under sentence of death.

In November, 1955, the widows of the murdered writers were issued documents of "rehabilitation" for their dead husbands by a Soviet court. This "rehabilitation" has never been made public. The Soviet Government continues to suppress identification of even the graves of the writers.

The Jewish generation which grew to maturity is the Soviet Union after 1952 was the crucible in which the success of the Soviet Jewish policy was tested. We now know this generation of Soviet Jews has not been found wanting in its dedication to Jewish survival. Because they have been deprived of the tools of survival which most other Soviet minorities enjoy—schools, publications, seminaries, poets, writers, artists, two languages—Soviet Jews today insistently proclaim what Itzik Feffer proudly declared, in one of his last poems "I Am a Jew."

There are other signs from within the U.S.S.R. that the echoes of August 12 will not be stilled. Raiza Palatnik,<sup>1</sup> an Odessa librarian who insists on addressing the courts in Yiddish, was sentenced to three years in prison in 1971. The charges against her included possession of an old book by David Bergelson, published before 1948. And Esther and David Markish, the widow and 33 year old son of Peretz Markish, send from Moscow an endless stream of letters, telegrams, telephone calls, and petitions demanding their right to be repatriated to Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Raiza Palatnik was allowed to leave for Israel in December, 1972 after completing her prison sentence.

David Markish does not confine his demands to prose. He writes forceful poetry which demands of Brezhnev, "Pharaoh, Let My People Go." There is perhaps no better illustration of the futility of the bullets of August 12 than the fierce determination to leave the U.S.S.R. which the son of Peretz Markish expresses in "Caravans of Jewish Cemeteries."<sup>2</sup>

Our land, my land without end  
Towards you I do not age when I stride,  
Because I need you in my youth.  
Only a bullet will subdue me,  
But, if on the way I shall be killed,  
I shall fall with my head forward,  
And to you then my heart will be nearer,  
Though it be merely one step—  
Israel!

New York, N. Y., July 1972

<sup>2</sup> Esther and David Markish now reside in Israel. They were granted permission to emigrate in November, 1972.

## ITZIK FEFFER (1900 - 1952)

Feffer, the youngest of those murdered on the night of August 12, published his first poems in 1919. That same year he joined the Communist Party and the Red Army.

His murder is particularly ironic because he, more than the others, was a devoted follower of Stalin and proclaimed loyalty to the Communist Party. Despite his belief that Communism made Jewish separatism unnecessary, during the war Feffer was Secretary of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. In 1943 he travelled abroad with Mikhoels to enlist support of Jews in the West. In contrast to his ode to Stalin, Feffer also wrote the poetic credo "I am a Jew."

### I AM A JEW

The wine of countless generations  
Has strengthened me in my wandering,  
The angry sword of pain and sorrow  
Could not destroy my existence—  
My people, my faith, and my flowering,  
It has not chained my freedom.  
From under the sword I shouted:  
I am a Jew!

Neither Pharaoh's plagues, nor Titus,  
Nor Haman could break my proud spirit,  
Eternity carries my name in her hands.  
My zest has not decreased  
On the black gallows of Madrid,  
My glory resounds through time and eternity:  
I am a Jew!

When the Egyptian built  
My body into the walls, it hurt,  
And I sowed the raw earth with my pain  
And a sun arose.  
Under the sun a path stretched out  
Scattered with barbs,  
They would prick me in the eyes—  
I am a Jew!

The forty years of a former life  
Which I suffered in the desert-sand  
Have given me the courage of my years  
Bar Kochba's call has cast its spell  
On each kernel of my suffering,  
And more than gold have I preserved  
The stubbornness of my grandfather—  
I am a Jew!

What do I need gold for? I gathered that  
When I did not even have a corner.  
Could gold satiate  
My high spirits or my gloom?  
Samson's hair which Delilah stole  
Glowed and satisfied more than  
Than cold, golden coins—  
I am a Jew!

The wrinkles in the brow of wise Rabbi Akiva  
The wisdom of Isaiah's prophecy  
Have quenched my thirst—my dear  
And have matched it with hatred;  
The zeal of the Maccabean heroes  
Still seethes in my rebel-blood,  
From all pyres I have announced:  
I am a Jew!

The marvelous judgment of our Solomon  
Has not abandoned me in my wandering  
And Heinrich Heine's crooked smile  
Also cost me much spilled blood.  
Through the centuries I have heard Yehuda Halevi's call  
And I have not tired of it,  
I have withered often but have not perished—  
I am a Jew!

The noise of Amsterdam's marketplace  
Did not disquiet my Spinoza  
Space itself makes things bigger;  
Marx's sun upon the earth  
Refreshed with new redness  
The ancient blood in my spirit  
And my unextinguished fire—  
I am a Jew!

There is in my eyes the glow,  
The serenity, and the stress  
Of Levitan's sunsets,  
Of the blessed path which Mendele took  
The blade of Russian bayonets,  
The dazzle of the rye at harvest,  
I am a son of the Soviets,  
I am a Jew!

The echo of Haifa port  
Resounds with the ring of my voice  
Unnoticed telegraph wires  
Carry me over sea and dale  
The heartbeat of Buenos Aires,  
And from New York a Yiddish song,  
The horror of Berlin's edicts,  
I am a Jew!

I am a Jew who has drunk  
From Stalin's magic cup of joy,  
Whoever wants to let Moscow sink,  
To turn the world backward,  
To him I say: No! To him I shout: Down!  
I go with the Eastern peoples,  
The Russians are my brothers—  
And I am a Jew!

My glory a ship on both streams,  
My blood lights up eternity,  
My pride is Yaakov Sverdlov's name  
And Kaganovich—Stalin's friend.  
My youth floats over the snows,  
The heart is full of dynamite,  
My luck quivers in the trenches,  
I am a Jew!

I am not alone! My heroism grows,  
The struggle today is for an honest piece of bread,  
I glorify the flame, I raise the storm,  
Which brings death to the enemy in brown,  
My strength no longer lags behind,  
The blood of Papernik and Gorelik  
Cries and seethes from the earth:  
I am a Jew!

And to spite the enemies  
Who already prepare graves for me,  
I shall still have pleasure without end  
Beneath the red banner.  
I shall plant my vineyards  
And be the forger of my destiny,  
I shall still dance on Hitler's grave!  
I am a Jew!

*translated by Thomas Bird*

#### DAVID HOFSHTEYN (1889 - 1952)

Hofshteyn was born near Kiev. He was a leader in Jewish cultural affairs during the revolutionary years and protested the suppression of the Hebrew language. In 1922, he published elegies mourning for the Ukrainian Jewish communities devastated by Petliura, Deniken and other hordes. It was illustrated by Marc Chagall. In 1923 he left Russia for Germany and then Palestine. He returned to Russia in the late twenties and hailed Palestine:

"I am proud of belonging to a nation that grows not weary, that builds and believes. In order to achieve immortality, one does not necessarily have first to die! . . . more than all the world, my people remember, whether in castle or in hovel, where it may be . . . And I am proud to belong to such a people!

#### POEM

On Russian fields, in the twilights of winter!  
Where can one be lonelier, where can one be lonelier?

The doddering horse, the squeaking sleigh,  
the path under snow—that is my way.

Below, in a corner of the pale horizon,  
still dying, the stripes of a sad fallen sun.

There, in the distance, a white wilderness,  
where houses lie scattered, ten or less,  
and—there—sleeps a shack, sunk deep in the snows.

A house like the others—but larger, its windows . . .  
And in that house, to which many roads run,  
I am the eldest of all the children . . .

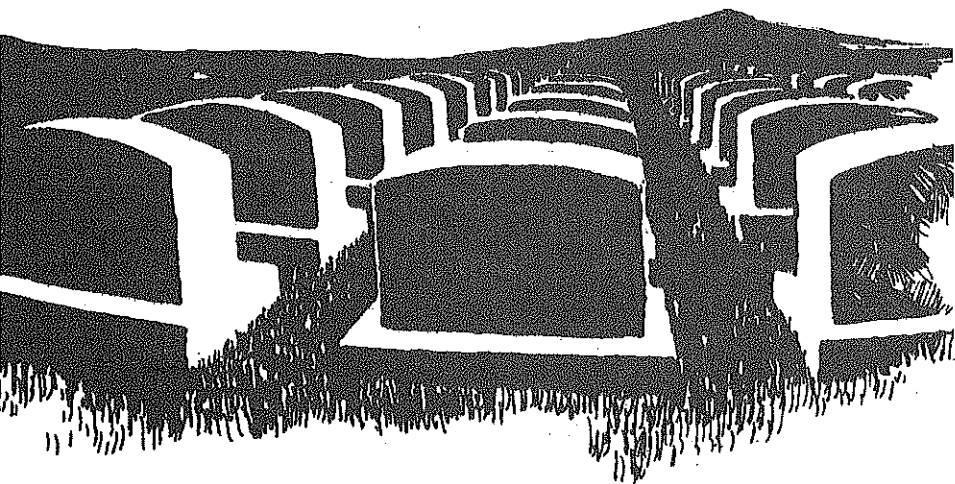
And my world is narrow, my circle is small:  
in two weeks I've gone once into town—if at all.

To long in the silence of space and fields,  
of pathways and byways that snow has concealed . . .

To carry the hidden sorrowing  
of seeds that wait and wait for planting . . .

On Russian fields, in the twilights of winter!  
Where can one be lonelier, where can one be lonelier?

*translated by Allen Mandelbaum*



## SABBATH IS GONE

Sabbath is gone.  
On the far-off snow,  
A big someone  
Pours gray ash.  
In the little store,  
Already waiting—  
A sallow girl  
With a black flask.

The whip is rested.  
Beside the oven,  
Idle—leaning  
Into the dark.  
On the ledge,  
A half-seen napkin—  
Softly hiding  
The Sabbath bread.

The meal is eaten.  
In the dimness,  
My father melts  
Into the board.  
Between my sisters,  
In tired shadow,  
A thread of voices  
Whispers, weaves.

My mother, by the window,  
Searches for a distant star.  
Does not find it.  
Sits in thought.  
I shrink into sadness,

Trying not to think  
That the cow is waiting .  
For me, hay, and night.

LEYB KVITKO (1893 - 1952)

Kvitko was orphaned at an early age and lived with his grandmother in the Ukraine. He began to write poetry at the age of twelve and had his first works published while still in his early twenties. He established his reputation as a writer of children's stories and poetry. He was a member of the Communist party and adopted the philosophy of the new regime wholeheartedly. His enchantment wavered when, during and after World War II, he encountered manifestations of anti-Semitism. Kvitko studied the folklore of many other nations and his work was translated into many languages.

The well known Russian writer, Kornei Chukovsky wrote of him that Kvitko was "a victim to dark suspiciousness, libels, and violence, and perished at the time of the Stalinist lawlessness."

## DAY GROWS DARKER

Day grows darker  
And darker.  
Gangs come nearer to the town,  
Gangs muddled with blood  
From killing children hardened,  
Coming closer zealously greedy,  
Cutting heads,  
Exhausted, terrified heads.  
And my head too,  
My head that's yet so young,  
And too my heart,  
That lullabied deep inside the joy of love.



... A survivor tragic  
Will enumerate the slain.  
My dead name will he write  
Along with many others in letters small  
On a lengthy list.  
Oh, may he not forget at least  
To note on that long list  
How old I was!

Let him leastwise note,  
That my heart was bloody young  
That strong, like fear, was my will to live,  
Strong and crazed,  
Like my final day.

*translated by Herbert H. Paper*



## WOMEN

Should you ever see out in sun women sitting,  
With dancing fingers their socks a-knitting,  
And whispering each bent to the other near,  
In their eyes mournful shadows standing clear,  
You, passerby, and you, my brother, this do know:  
Something then is sure to blow . . .

Something then is sure to blow . . .

In women's heart is prophets' spirit yet extant;  
As into *Urim-Tumin* do they gaze within intent,  
They sense a secret and solve its riddle,  
Whispering, each is bent to the other near,  
You pass them by and look about,  
Seeking but a fringe of what they know,  
You search and fear, and nearly driven mad,  
Barely flee away with pounding heart.

I urge you, brother, not then into the street to go—  
Something then is sure to blow . . .

Something then is sure to blow .

*translated by Herbert H. Paper*

## PERETZ MARKISH (1895 - 1952)

Markish's long career began in 1917 when his first Yiddish poem "The Fighter," was published. In the wake of the Revolution and Civil War, he went to Warsaw, but returned to the Soviet Union in 1926. He became what most have called the leading personality in Soviet Yiddish literature and was the only Yiddish writer to be awarded the Order of Lenin. After the Second World War, Markish wrote "War," an epic poem, which emphasized the suffering and heroism of Jewish fighters. Markish was arrested in 1949 and by the time of his death, he was reported to have been insane from his three years of imprisonment and torture.

Five years after his murder, in a foreword to an anthology of his poetry, the Soviet writer Boris Lavrener wrote: "He fell a victim of enemies' false libels. The enemies of the fatherland have physically destroyed this great poet, but they have not been able to still his echoing poetry."

His wife and son were permitted to emigrate to Israel in November, 1972.

## POEM

I don't know whether I'm at home  
or homeless.

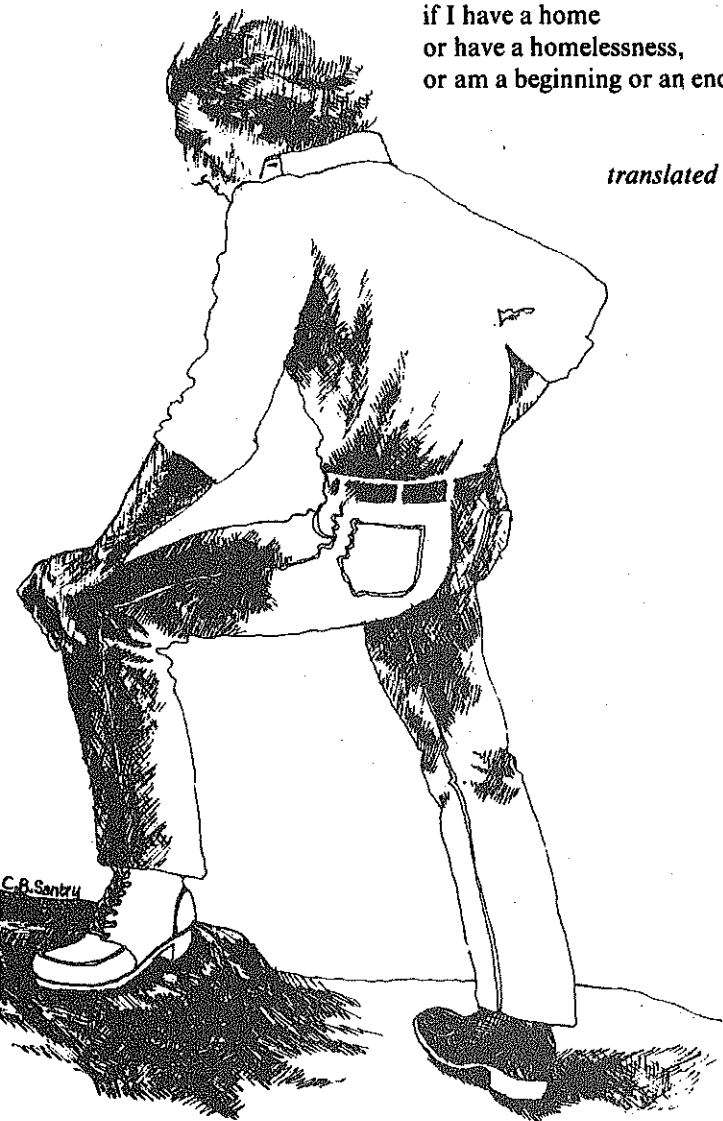
I'm running, my shirt  
unbuttons, no bounds, nobody  
holds me, no beginning,  
no end

my body is foam  
smelling of wind

Now  
 is my name. I spread my arms, my hands  
 pierce the extremes  
 of what is. I'm letting my eyes roam around  
 and do their drinking from the foundations  
 of the world

eyes wild, shirt ballooning,  
 my hands separated by the world, I don't know  
 if I have a home  
 or have a homelessness,  
 or am a beginning or an end

*translated by Armand Schwerner*



## SH. MIKHOELS— AN ETERNAL LIGHT AT HIS CASKET

Your last appearance before your people  
 Among broken rocks bedecked with snow,  
 But—without your word—without your voice.  
 Nothing but your frozen breath . . .

Yet we hear now too, as always,  
 The unseen rustle of your eagle wings,  
 In which our people clothed you,  
 To be its solace, echo, and its plea.

The curtain does not descend,  
 The lights are not extinguished.  
 Your sleeping lion-head shines forth  
 And from your figures hovering—your immortal tongue.

Here we've come to say farewell to you,  
 To you who could, like echoes of long ages pain,  
 Carry songfully Sholom Aleichem's tear,  
 That would like precious gem gleam forth.

A flooding onrush. Your last appearance  
 Is peopled dense. Your last sensation.  
 Onto your casket an honor guard descends  
 Of spirits made living by your magic grace.

Now and here you need no wig.  
 A royal cloak—is even more unneeded,  
 To see that you are indeed King Lear  
 Who his crown for wisdom bartered . . .

No make-up, no gesture,  
The colored jars are weeping, orphaned. Look at them . . .  
But Clown falls with noisy crash,  
Though stars don't fall, though stars wander without aim.

They are awakened by the scornful music  
And hither swarms up through curtain's fold,  
With silent rustle, their glance cast down in pain—  
They will carry your casket into eternity.  
The wounds on your face the snow has covered,  
That shadow of darkness shall not touch you,  
But in your eyes, though dead, rages agony,  
And from your trampled heart it cries:

"I want to come, Eternity, before your dishonored threshold  
With hurt and murder-scars upon my face,  
Just so my people walks about on five-sixths of the globe—  
Marked by axe and hate—that you should it behold.

You are this to read, carve it on yourself,  
And with your unapproachable indifference memorize:  
—For every wound on my bruised and beaten face  
A mother with a child escaped the hangmen . . .

Oh, the hand of murder did not silence you,  
Snow has not covered the smallest sign;  
The pain from out your blackened eyes implores,  
Striving forth from under brows—like hills—to heaven.

A stream gone by,  
And people-lines entwine one in another:  
With resurrection you six million honor,  
Murdered, tortured,—victims,

As you honored them by falling down before them  
At midnight, alone, in unimaginable agonies,  
On ruins of Minsk, on snows of Minsk,  
In darkening storm, in whirling blizzard.

Though dead, you would straightaway have interceded  
For their pain, their peace, their honor—  
A bleeding challenge to the world—  
Forged with frost on broken rocks . . .

And mourning streams. Dumb, it pleads.  
Clear through the heart of all your people went your misfortune:  
In their graves by arising honor you the millions six,  
As you by falling did honor them amidst ruined Minsk.

Sleep in peace, sleep, no care concerns you.  
It looks as though you flash a thought though dead—  
Still shines from you the proud and moral brow,  
Still sings through you the plea of Levi Yitshok's *Thou*

Is love extinguished by a darkening storm?  
Can a snowfall really blanket fire?  
Like two Sabbath candles kindled  
Shine your hands from out your bier.

You used to like to close your eyes in thought,  
When you pondered something, to see it clearer,  
No you keep beneath their lock, your pain,  
May it not gush forth here before your bier.

There's so much light around you—yet of mirrors, none.  
Just so readied your first-night make-up . . .  
As if: your mouth's about to stir  
And "with the right foot" off to the stars you've gone . . .

Your face turns back to stuff unlined  
And death does its ruinous work betimes;  
Absorb your tissue this last time music,  
It is—your beloved—from *Third Benjamin Abroad*.

Along with sounds, sucked full of tears and light,  
Go to eternity with pains uncolored,  
Be not ashamed of your wounded ancient face,  
Of your smashed and broken kingly pate.

This is your word in blood, your noblest paint,  
In which, a corpse, you outlive the stage—  
Go into eternity—your appearance is renowned,  
The stars of dawn will greet you with applause.

Somewhere in heaven, midst wandering gleaming shine,  
A star lights up in your brilliant name;  
Be not ashamed of your defilement and your pain,  
—Let eternity be ashamed!

The curtain does not descend.  
Not ere death do your eyes now close,  
a whole generation proud will carry your gift,  
As you your people's—golden heritage.

You do not depart from us.  
You enter all the deeper into us laden ripe,  
As under the sun's rays warm  
A seed deep penetrates into the weakened earth.

We'll no longer knock at the door  
And see your profile in your room,  
But without a knock we'll enter  
Into your heart, open bare to all,

That to all belonged,  
As does the sun, the hills and vales . . .  
And beyond—with the dreams of our land  
On high, as on a golden gondola.

*translated by Herbert H. Paper*

## BROTHER JEWS! AN APPEAL TO CONSCIENCE

*In September, 1970, 80 Moscow Jews addressed, with bold simplicity, "Brother Jews Around the World" in one of the most extraordinary Jewish statements ever to have emerged from the U.S.S.R. The 80 Jews who signed the letter requested that their appeal be made public in all Jewish organizations, synagogues, schools, and in the Jewish press of the whole world. Since that time a few of them have emigrated to Israel. The signatories represented every walk of life: engineer, housewife, physician, architect, nurse, actress, chauffeur, and physicist. We are proud to reprint in part some of that letter.*

### BROTHER JEWS!

Once upon a time these words were addressed to you by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee of the U.S.S.R. . . .

"Brother Jews," "Unity," "Eynikayt," "Akhdut,"

These words were addressed to you by the wonderful members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee—Mikhoels, Bergelson, Markish, Feffer, Kvitko, Shimelevich, Yuzefovich, and others were ardent patriots of the land of Soviets and they did all they could for the victory over fascism. The Hitlerites dreamed of bloody reprisals against these men. But it was not they who destroyed them. You know about that. They were vilely slandered; fabrications "about a Zionist plot," "imperialist agents . . . of Joint," "murderers in white hospital coats" were dragged in. They were killed so as to decapitate and then to destroy Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, so as completely to suppress a people which did not wish to assimilate . . .

Brother Jews! It has been a long time since anyone from here has addressed you in these words. It has been a long time since there has been any kind of public organization in the Soviet Union representing at least in some measure the interests of the Jewish national minority. This is not permitted us, just as we are not permitted to teach our children the Jewish language and the history of our ancient and eternally young people . . . .

We who have signed this appeal firmly declare that we will never take the painful and shameful path of national self-destruction: we declare that forcible assimilation is genocide pure and simple. We belong to those Jews of the Soviet Union who feel themselves to be an inalienable part of a united Jewish nation . . . .

BROTHER JEWS, stand together! Eynikayt! Akhdut! Unite to save your brothers and sisters from the destruction that is threatening them! Help us get out to our home!

With anxious longing and great hope we stretch our hands out to you—SH'MA ISRAEL! HEAR O ISRAEL! . . .

DAVID MARKISH (1938 - )

The son of Peretz Markish, David is a playwright and poet. He has translated several of his father's works into Russian and Hebrew. David and his mother, Esther, have been actively fighting for the right to emigrate to Israel. His wife, Irena, has been permitted to emigrate to Israel and visited the United States to appeal for help for her husband and mother-in-law.

## LET MY PEOPLE GO

Pharaoh, let my people go!  
Here we drained the cup completely  
For always and forever  
We paid you our debt.  
For the brief Russian sojourn  
On our way, so crooked,  
We paid you in full.  
And now—Pharaoh—let go  
Not from the flesh of your slaves were we formed,  
We were born upon the birthstool of a different people.  
We kept your reckoning,  
Our account is with us!  
Pharaoh, let my people go!  
Be admonished, for they will strike roots  
Our idea will sprout in silence  
And will impress your slaves.  
Let my people go, O' Pharaoh!  
As a storm we shall break through and wash away,  
We shall bite, break down the walls,  
The banks shall we lick and sweep away.  
One mighty final exodus,  
A spring river whose waters rise—  
This event will awaken your people  
—Let my people go, Pharaoh!  
Let my people go!



## A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

For two thousand years  
I was a doubter. I shrugged my shoulders  
A "World Citizen" I called myself,  
I belonged  
To Polish forests,  
To German fields,  
To French open spaces,  
But they do not belong to me . . .  
A doubter,  
I called "My brother"  
To the Russian, the French  
Human beings like myself,  
They have the same eyes  
And mouth  
and heart.  
But when they hang,  
When they shoot to kill,  
They shout in my direction:  
"Zhid!"  
For two thousand years  
I was a world citizen;  
An exalted wanderer;  
Blessed with imagination, and enchanted  
I kneaded flour not mine  
Revolutionary dough, bloody dough,  
I revealed truth to others  
Doubting remained my lot.  
The circle of my way  
was closed.  
Near the wall of tears  
I shall stand.  
My flaming forehead  
Is joined to the stone.  
For the first time,  
In two thousand years,  
The worm of doubt will no longer gnaw  
at my strength  
And in the ways of a hangman's world  
In the rear I abandoned a wretched gift—  
I left seeds of doubt.

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*\* as of 2002*



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