Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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nal—perhaps because (1) he was considered so trustworthy, (2) his enterprise so unimportant, or (3) there simply was no other censor competent enough in Yiddish. Whatever the reason may be, Vergelis was autonomous in editing and was not monitored by Glavlit—the Soviet censorship authority over printed material. Therefore, when it comes to the abundance of de facto existing Holocaust-related material in *Sovetish Heymland*, it was approved by Vergelis and Vergelis alone.

**A Monument over Babyn Yar**

A relevant case in point for this chapter might be Vergelis’s article “*Der denkmol in Babi Yar vet shteyn ledoyres*” (*The Babyn Yar monument will stand forever*) published in *Sovetish Heymland*’s June issue of 1975. In it, he celebrates the coming unveiling of the Babyn Yar memorial and offers his readers a sneak preview of the monument. This article was part of a wide Soviet public debate about the German mass murder of Kyiv’s Jews, which had been ongoing for over five decades. The most important public breakthrough was Yevgeni Yevtushenko’s 1961 poem “Babi Yar” in which the poet—a committed communist himself and not a dissident despite what liberal histories tell us—lamented the lack of a monument as a Soviet turn away from Marxist-Leninist ideals back to

26 Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 82.
tsarism. His Soviet-internal protest against what he saw as overt antisemitism was a _cri de coeur_ calling for the communist project to be put back on track. Even though Yevtushenko spurred a nationwide debate, it still took 15 more years for the Soviet authorities to erect a monument in October 1976.

*Sovetish Heymland*, meanwhile, mostly abstained from engaging in the heated “Babyn Yar Debate” of the 1960s. This policy of “not taking a clear stand” can be explained by a combination of careful calculation on the part of the editorship to cover controversial topics only to a certain extent and by their deep-seated trauma having recently witnessed the dismantlement and execution of the JAC on the grounds of alleged “reactionary nationalism.” After all, almost half of *Sovetish Heymland*’s writers had been incarcerated in gulags until the mid-1950s. And the issue was controversial insofar as there exists a de facto difference between the genocidal sites in _shtetlekh_ and the site of Babyn Yar: while in _shtetlekh_ the prime victims were Jewish, at Babyn Yar Jews made up the majority of victims, but the area served as an execution site for several thousands of non-Jews as well. Hence, the events of Babyn Yar were ripe for appropriation by the prevalent Soviet antifascist narrative, which made this site a touchy topic to embrace for the Yiddish journal.

However, all of this should not be mistaken as a total omission of the topic by the journal. *Sovetish Heymland* consistently published works dealing with this atrocity—primarily in the form of poetry. And a year before Babyn Yar’s memorial was finally unveiled, Arn Vergelis chimed in with a poetic reading of Babyn Yar’s topography of suffering:

> The ravine on the outskirts of Kyiv, that old ravine, drenched with inexhaustible sorrow, endowed with its own climate of Elul, windless, with the secrecy of the heavens, with, so to speak, a unique body-and-soul. . . . This piece of land [is] . . . almost transparent from above and endlessly-labyrinthine from deep under, soaked with blood and tears, completely empty and, at the same time, densely populated—with what and with whom God only knows. . . .

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32 Elul is the month in which it is customary for Ukrainian Jews to visit their ancestors’ graves. Litvaks, Jews from the historical territory of Lite, do this on Tisha be’Av. Thanks to Arkadi Zeltser for pointing this out.
33 Vergelis, “Der denkmol in Babi Yar vet shteyn ledoyres,” 158; a slightly different translation can be found in Pilnik, “The Representation of Babi Yar,” 200.
Vergelis’s essay then swiftly turns into a Cold War discussion over how to best interpret the events of September 1941, and the Holocaust writ large, and how to adequately memorialize it. The mid-1970s were a high time of the Soviet Jewish efforts to emigrate and of contentions between American and Israeli Jews fighting for their “liberation.” Sovietish Heymland took part in the campaign against emigration and the concurrent anti-Zionist campaign so that Vergelis’s Cold War framing must also be situated as part of this parallel struggle. In a conversation with US tourists from California—and by extension American Yiddish readers of the journal—who are adamant in highlighting Babyn Yar as an exclusively Jewish catastrophe, Vergelis explains that the differentiation of victims had been the methods of the fascists, a product of “reactionary nationalism” that has been overcome in the Soviet Union. “For all martyrs,” after all, “the blood which was spilled from their veins had one color.”

I don’t quite remember, how many times I have come here to Kyiv’s death valley under the open blue sky, to which from time immemorial—and not at all coincidentally—cling three adjacent, suburban cemeteries: the “Lukyanover”—a Christian [kristlekher] one, the Jewish one, and the one that is called in all cities the mixed or general cemetery. . . . Also, Babyn Yar is a mixed one, a general grave for 120,000 martyrs [kdoyshim].

To be sure, Vergelis did clarify that the number of Jewish victims was proportionally higher than that of any other ethnicity. But by means of this anecdote and in accordance with the Soviet protocol, he both elegantly propagates communist internationalism and the commemoration of collective Soviet suffering and strikes a blow to Western Jewish communities’ singling out of the genocidal assault against Jews, which only perpetuates a fascist methodology.

Revisiting Yevtushenko’s opening line, Vergelis asks “Why is there no monument over Babyn Yar?” and replies in conformity with Soviet orthodoxy: the admittedly long delay had to do with the complex topography of the ravine’s territory. Reminding the reader of the natural catastrophe of 1961, when a 45-foot high mudslide fatally flooded that part of the city, the territory had to be restored and paved in order for the monument to “stand forever.” What he de-

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34 Vergelis, “Der denkmol in Babi Yar vet shteyn ledoyres,” 159.
35 Vergelis, “Der denkmol in Babi Yar vet shteyn ledoyres,” 158.
cides to omit, however, is the delicate incident when in 1957 the Ukrainian Central Committee shelved the project of building a monument and planned to build a sports stadium on the site of Babyn Yar in its stead. Instead, he puts forward an interesting analogy to the memorial of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which alongside the Babyn Yar monument, as he sees it, constituted the beginning of a new sculptural tradition.

It is clear, that Mikhail Lysenko not only saw the composition of Nathan Rapoport, but that he “resumed drawing the line.” Both monuments will be united in a sort of visual-aesthetical type of sculptures, which highlight that the monuments are not only addressed to the present, but also to future generations. Dynamism, militancy, integral connection between tragedy and heroism, between death and life—these basic motives are constitutive in both works.

To revert to Warsaw’s monument as a framework to discuss Babyn Yar as both Soviet and Jewish is indeed a smart maneuver by Vergelis. The 1943 Uprising could be appropriated by Soviet Jews early on being one of few Jewish specific events included into the wider Soviet war narrative without delay. Erected on the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto on the uprising’s fifth anniversary on April 19, 1948, the monument was the first to juxtapose both the heroism of Jewish resistance to the Nazis—symbolized by muscular figures standing in for the New Jew who fights back—with figures of perennial suffering of the “weak” Diasporic Jew which culminated in their almost complete annihilation at the hands of the Nazis. As such, Rapoport’s Warsaw Ghetto memorial set in stone Soviet Yiddish interpretations of the Holocaust since 1941. By drawing a straight line from the

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39 Ewa Thompson showed that there was an ambition by Soviet propagandists to use the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto as a means of diverting attention away from the concurrently discovered Katyn mass grave of Polish officers executed by the NKVD in early 1940. See Ewa M. Thompson, “The Katyn Massacre and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in the Soviet-Nazi Propaganda War,” in World War 2 and the Soviet People, ed. John Garrard (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 212–33; mentioned in Veidlinger, The Moscow State Yiddish Theater, 250.
Warsaw ghetto to Babyn Yar with his own pen, Vergelis radically re-interpreted the events in Kyiv in late September 1941. In accordance with the communist interpretation of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as a long-planned, self-sacrificing contribution by Warsaw’s Jews to the heroic struggle of the Red Army, in Vergelis’s narrative the large-scale massacre of Kyiv’s Jews becomes part of this struggle as well. Without “red-washing” the immense suffering, Babyn Yar became a redemptive sacrifice and symbolized the longed-for overcoming of Jewish powerlessness and the final emergence of the New Soviet Jew. In this vein, the inseparable link between death and life translates as a metaphor of Jewish continuity in the Soviet here and now, intrinsically tied to the sacrifice and endurance of the Jewish catastrophe on Soviet soil. So much for the major Soviet lieu de mémoire of the Holocaust, but how did matters stand on the periphery?

Commemoration Activities in Popervāle, Latvia

Irine Legudina’s report “Keyner iz nit fargesn” (No one is forgotten) in Sovetish Heymland’s May issue of 1977 covers Popervāle (Yiddish: Popervol), the site of the Popervahlen labor camp established in 1943 specifically for Jews brought over from the Latvian concentration camp of Riga-Kaiserwald. Legudina, a secretary of the village council, was not a Popervāle native. She was sent there as a teacher and was told by the local (ostensibly non-Jewish) population of what had happened during the Nazi occupation in “one of the most horrific death-camps.” Together with her pupils, the report tells us, she investigated “whether anyone of the former KZ-lers was still alive” (tsi es iz geblibn lebn emetser fun di gevezene katsetler). As it turned out, only six of the approximately 1,000 prisoners could “save themselves from dying” (geratevet zikh fun toyt) and survive the camp’s liquidation on May 9, 1944. Every year since the erection of the monument in 1968, the town’s residents and the camp’s survivors would assemble around the erected obelisk on May 9, which was also celebrated in the Soviet Union as Victory Day. The obelisk, the report and embedded photographs relate, bears an inscription in Latvian: “Ļaudis! Mums nav tiesibu aizmirst kas ir fašisms” (“People! We have no right to forget what fascism really is!”). Legudina’s report, interestingly, transforms the Latvian “categorical imperative” into a

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42 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 23.
43 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 23.
44 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 23.