

Introduction

Intellectual and Historical Backdrop of Peretz's Early Work, Outline, and Methodology

Yitskhok Leybush Perets, better known in English as I. L. Peretz (1852–1915), was a major leader of Eastern European Jewry in the years prior to the First World War. During this period, Yiddish was the most widely spoken language of the Jews in Europe. While he was best known for writing in Yiddish, Peretz was in fact a prolific bilingual writer in Yiddish and Hebrew. Through his work and his deep involvement in Jewish communal life and politics, Peretz earned great respect during his lifetime and continues to be revered to this day. Numerous studies have been issued on Peretz;¹ nonetheless, a very central component of his life remains severely understudied, though it offers the potential to better understand his body of work and communal involvement overall.

This book strives to illuminate a key part of Peretz's life and art that has often been neglected in recent years: namely, his close alignment with the needs of the Jewish working class and his deep devotion to progressive politics. In the mid-1890s, he began to visualize the Yiddish-speaking working class as his target readership. I show that Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual" applies to Peretz, and I call this period "the radical years of I. L. Peretz." By offering close readings of Peretz's work from this period and by analyzing his Yiddish journal, *Di yontef bletlekh* (The holiday pages), I seek to recast the way political activism is understood in scholarly evaluations of Peretz's work. Peretz's journal revolutionized the means of artistic production. In my analysis, I employ a partially chronological, partially thematic scheme, following Peretz's radicalism at its inception and then the various ways in which it was synchronically expressed through its initial intense decade. In this introductory chapter, I first discuss the historical and cultural context for Peretz's radicalization, then I move on to review the previous scholarship on the subject of Peretz's politics, and I conclude by outlining the book's chapters.



Figure I.1. Peretz on the cover of a Cuban edition of his works (1951–52) entitled *The Legend of Peretz*. Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library.

The Backdrop of Peretz's Proto-Socialist Phase (1888–92)

Like his good friend and collaborator Nahum Sokolow (1859–1936), Peretz was inspired by Aleksander Świątchowski (1849–1938), one of the founders of the Positivist movement in Poland. Świątchowski preached for a swift adaptation of society to progress and argued that true progress could only be accomplished through a change in religious traditions.² In 1890 Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (sometimes known as Leon Peretz), son of middle-class family of merchants, left his hometown of Zamość, a small town in southeastern Poland of fewer than fifteen thousand people at the time, about half of whom were Jewish, like the family of Rosa Luxemburg. He then established himself permanently in Warsaw. He was a lawyer by profession and known in the literary world as a Hebrew poet. In Warsaw, he began to form relations within the intelligentsia. Sokolow describes his transformation and his integration, noting that Peretz became “more Polonized”: “He used to speak Polish then; and he used to use this language with us and at his home, and anywhere he went. Mainly he read Russian literature, but he also used to read a lot in Polish, and I remember that Świątchowski influenced him a great deal.”³



Figure I.2. Peretz in the late 1880s.
 Reprinted from I. L. Peretz, *Briv un redes fun Y. L. Perets*, edited by Nachman Mayzel (New York: IKUE, 1944), p. 100.
 Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library.



Figure I.3. Marszałkowska Street in Warsaw, ca. 1912.
Wikimedia Commons.

In the Jewish positivist circles, the attitude toward the Yiddish language, the dominant vernacular of Eastern European Jewry, was purely practical. The Jewish masses needed information about crafts and trades (*melokhe*), personal hygiene, and the sciences, and to be understood such information would have to be in Yiddish. Peretz stressed in a 1888 letter in Hebrew to the Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) the great need “to enrich [Yiddish] literature with science books.”⁴ However, despite plans to establish a popular-science library in Yiddish, among the positivists the feeling was that it would not be tragic if the so-called Jewish jargon (how Yiddish was referred to back then) eventually disappeared.⁵ Already in 1886, Peretz confessed his affinity to Yiddish (“the language of Beril and Shmeril”) in his Hebrew poem “Manginot Ha-zman” (The melodies of the time):

My fellow writers,	אחי הסופרים,
Do not hold a grudge	אל תסרו לי איבה
If I am fond of	אם לי שפת בריל
The language of Beril and Shmeril—	ושמריל ערבה—
And I would not say with contempt	ובבוז לא אקרא
“Inarticulate” regarding their tongue	“עלגים” ללשונם.
For it is the language of my people	כי לשון עמי
I shall hear it coming out of their mouths!	אשמע מגרונם!
Not the holy tongue.	לא שפת הקדש.
Not the language of the prophets,	לא לשון הנביאים,
But the language of the exiled.	אך שפת הגולים.
The language of the “Hebrews”! ⁶	לשון ה“עבריים”!

This plea to his fellow Hebrew writers not to be hated for writing in Yiddish was characteristic of nineteenth-century Yiddish writers, who all felt a need to excuse their linguistic preference to other members of the Jewish intelligentsia.⁷ Peretz had been a Hebrew writer since the 1870s, although he was also capable of writing in Polish. He first expressed his ideas concerning writing in Yiddish in his aforementioned letters to Sholem Aleichem. He told his friend about the inseparable connection he felt between nationalism and language.⁸ In another letter to Sholem Aleichem in 1889, Peretz expressed an ambition, also shared by other writers at the time such as Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (1835–1917; known as Mendele), to form a standard Yiddish literary language that would unite the different Yiddish dialects. Through this nationalist practice of standardization, it would be understood by Jews in different parts of Eastern Europe. He saw the need to constantly expand Yiddish so that it could be a fertile field for writers to develop.⁹

In his 1891 article “Bildung” (Education), Peretz emphasized the functionality and the usefulness of writing in Yiddish for spreading modern ideas, as he had previously written in his personal correspondence. At the same time, he deemphasized any intrinsic value that the language possessed: “We want to encourage our people to write in Yiddish, because we have about three million people who understand only Yiddish. But we do not consider jargon to be holy. We sympathize very openly with those who wish to substitute Yiddish for a spoken state-language . . . we sympathize even more strongly with the adherents of spoken Hebrew.”¹⁰

Peretz here does not fully break away from the Jewish Enlightenment’s agenda to eradicate Yiddish in favor of European state languages and Hebrew. Thus, he sympathizes with Safa Brura (Clear Language, 1889–91), a society for the promotion of Hebrew as a spoken language, which Peretz was associated with.¹¹ Instead, he offers a temporary tactical compromise: the Yiddish language should be developed in order to *promote* modernizing the millions of Jews who only speak Yiddish. In the long run, Yiddish would run its course, and other dominant languages would take its place, an inevitable cost of progress.

Initial ideologies aside, through the creation of Yiddish literature and by participating in related projects, Peretz played a key role in producing a modern standardized textual Yiddish language, despite Polish being more natural to him as a spoken language. At the popular literary salon he hosted, discussions were held in Polish rather than Yiddish.¹² Yudel Mark contends that Peretz’s Yiddish became much more refined and richer during the last fifteen years of his life (1900–1915) compared with

his earlier language.¹³ But the birth of his Yiddish productivity, alongside his political transformation, clearly happened during the earlier years and therefore demands special analytical attention.

As opposed to a kind of territorial nationalism that puts its emphasis on the need for sovereignty, Peretz's nationalism was first and foremost defined in linguistic and cultural terms: it is a folk nationalism, which centers on the issue of class, meaning that Peretz's is a nationalism of the common people, of the Yiddish speakers. The latter group became his professed muse, the "folk" was for him "the only genuine source of national creativity."¹⁴ Peretz believed that what the Jewish folk needed most at the time was modern education (*Bildung*).¹⁵ "Chauvinism is awful!" Peretz wrote,¹⁶ even as he was in the process of establishing an ideology that incorporates some basic nationalist thinking.¹⁷

On the surface, Peretz's version of *Bildung* encompasses a whole nation: a large group of people that, through the use of modern means of communication (mostly the press), becomes able to imagine their commonality. He wrote that his choice to use Yiddish stemmed from both the need to "educate" the people and of "knowing" the people.¹⁸ Peretz needs Yiddish in order to establish his nationalist project, and to do so he must imbue it with the power to accurately reflect "the people," who are capable of unlocking its spirit and truly knowing its essence.

The role of Yiddish becomes even more acute when taking into account that Peretz's brand of nationalism lacked a territorial component. Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland (The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia), known as the Bund, whose establishment, I argue, Peretz played a key cultural role in, were influenced early on by the ideas of Austro-Marxists Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, who had conceptualized the model of nonterritorial autonomy.¹⁹ The national-cultural autonomy platform for Eastern European Jewry, who were scattered over vast areas among other groups, stood in contrast to the proto-Zionist nationalism of the time, which was based on the narrative of "return" to the historical territorial homeland of the Jews in Palestine. Regarding the option of Jews migrating westward, to Western Europe or America, Peretz in 1891 thought it was an unfeasible solution for the poor masses since any country would eventually limit the entry of masses of people without any capital. Most Jews, according to Peretz, did not possess even the small capital needed for travel.

Peretz did not believe that Eastern European Jewry could ever acquire a modern education through Hebrew: "In Hebrew we lack even one science," he wrote (8:10). On the one hand, he broadened the *maskilic*

(Jewish Enlightenment) themes of knowing the state language (Polish in his case) plus Hebrew to include Yiddish (“three million people live in it”²⁰). On the other hand, he confronted what he called “nationalist chauvinists” who adhered strictly to Hebrew (the “holy tongue”) and would throw out the “nanny” (i.e., Yiddish) before it had completed its modernizing task. Peretz, as was common in his time, has personified and feminized Yiddish, the homely *mame-loshn* (mother-tongue).

Economic development in the Russian Empire and the relative tolerance exhibited toward Jews since the mid-to-late nineteenth century sparked massive waves of Jewish migration to the cities, such as Warsaw, Lodz, Bialystok, and Odessa, from outlying provinces. A new social class was growing within the Jewish population by the end of the nineteenth century, made up of working-class, Yiddish-speaking Jews.²¹ According to the lowest estimates, there were about 400,000 Jewish wage workers in the Pale of Settlement in 1898. Interestingly, 60 percent were handicraft workers, and the rest worked in agriculture or were day laborers or factory workers. They were almost exclusively employed by Jewish employers.²²

Jan Bloch (1836–1902) was a philanthropist, financier, and railway giant who belonged to the Jewish plutocracy of Warsaw, which dominated the board of the Warsaw Jewish community.²³ He also became well known for his passionate advocacy for pacifism, arguing that a future armed conflict would have disastrous consequences for all participants.²⁴ Bloch financed both the statistical expedition to the Tomaszów region that was represented in Peretz’s major early prose effort in Yiddish, *Bilder fun a provints rayze*, and the first two volumes of the almanac *Di yudishe bibliyotek* (1891). For the expedition, he recruited members of the Jewish intelligentsia like Peretz and Sokolow to gather information about the Jews living within the Pale of Settlement. Jews were restricted to living in the Pale according to czarist laws dating from the early nineteenth century.²⁵ However, as Jacob Lestschinsky writes, “the rapid growth of capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe during the 19th century . . . forced the Jewish masses to change their living places as well as their social appearance; forced them to seek a new place in the world and a new occupation in society.”²⁶

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the economy was unstable, Jews feared that the discriminatory May Laws of 1882 that were already in effect in the Pale (which prohibited Jews from the countryside within the Pale, thus further limiting their economic opportunities)²⁷ would be applied to Jews in Poland as well. Such laws would block the road for Jews wanting to integrate into the changing economy.²⁸ The

goal of the expedition was to prove by scientific methods that Jews in fact do contribute to the general economy, that they work the land, and that many of them, in contrast to the common stereotype, are impoverished.²⁹

Up until 1893—when he strengthened his ties with Jewish socialist activists as they were taking their first steps in appealing to Yiddish-speaking workers³⁰ and with socialist intellectuals such as Dovid Pinski—Peretz served as a middleman between the capitalist Bloch and lower-class Jews through his cultural productions. His target readership was middlemen as well, and his professed goal was to create a middle-class Jewish intelligentsia. Their mission to prove that Jews were contributing to the modernization of the economy served as a way of advocating for the modern economy itself. Peretz’s sense of doubt toward alternatives to the contemporary economic system was evident from his writings.³¹ One can speculate that Peretz’s commitment to his patron prevented him from suggesting any radical social solutions at this stage. Sokolow described the relationship between the economic elites involved in Jewish communal affairs, like Bloch, and middle-class Jews, like Peretz: “The heads of the community thought about it, and an idea began to flow regarding the use of Peretz’s strength for a spiritual purpose.” In other words, the “Blochs” would use the “Peretz” to keep the simple Jews in “spiritual” check. The idea of *Di yudishe bibliyotek*, the first Yiddish almanac that Peretz created, was born out of those meetings.³² The participation of the middle-class Jews in Jewish politics gave birth to a proto-nationalist stage in Jewish politics.³³

A valuable testimony regarding Peretz’s state of mind at the time surrounding the expedition through the Pale of Settlement is found in Sokolow’s essay years after the fact, “Yosl the Crazy (Sketches from My Memory).” In it, one gets a glimpse of the transformative value of the expedition, which I argue played a role in pushing Peretz to embrace socialism:

Our private goal was to sail in the Jewish world, to renew what we knew from our childhood, and in order to observe new impressions. . . . We both had seen beforehand that advocacy is an effort in vain, that it’s about as useful as a pair of glasses is to a blind person, or physical therapy to a corpse; but Peretz the poet, in the beginning, awoke, became angry, and afterwards froze while in rage. For both of us the work was the purpose and not a means. I was then heavily occupied in literary and public work; I wanted to shatter the walls of my

prison and break out, to get some fresh air; similarly Peretz jumped out of his hiding for the same multi-varied trip around the Jewish communities, like Jewish travelers in the Middle Ages before us. . . . Going quickly from city to city, from one small village to the next, it was an expedition of Jewish Don Quixotes, even more interesting than the literary visions of Mendele the Book Peddler with his strange twists.³⁴

Peretz is portrayed here as poet first and foremost (his main claim to literary fame at the time), somewhat out of touch of regular people's lives and who increasingly became angry and frustrated by the reality of poverty he witnessed. The pessimistic feeling of two late-nineteenth-century Jewish influencers going on a hopeless battle that Sokolow expresses here also appeared in Peretz's first literary account of a visit to the shtetl in 1887, several years prior to the statistical expedition. The Heine-inspired Hebrew poem "The small town" contains many motifs that Peretz would later develop in the Yiddish prose of *Bilder*: the deteriorating marketplace, the economic struggle for survival, the hunger, the fires, the dybbukim, the isolation from the world, and the meeting of the shtetl Jews with the modern urban Jews. The character of the modern Jew is portrayed as having a hard time communicating his position to the shtetl Jews. He is a man modernly dressed and mannered, but still he wants to prove to traditional Jews he is a Jew like them. The protagonist tells them,

"Oh, brothers, calm yourselves,	"הה, אחי, הרגעו,
I am not a gentile,	הה שמעו שמוע!
And not a wealthy person	אינני בן נכר
The short uniform	ולא אדון ושוע.
Gave the wrong impression;	המדים הקצרים
Only one faith,	אך שקר בי ענו
Only one God between us."	אמונה, אך אחת,
As soon as they heard	גם אל אחד לנו."
Away they dispersed,	אך שמעו נפזרו
"Or a heretic or a baptized Jew,	לכל עבר ורוח,
Or an instigator seducer!"	"אפיקורס או מומה, או מסית מדיח!"
They dispersed, from afar	נפזרו, מרחוק,
I would still hear the curse . . .	עוד אשמע הקללה . . .
Is this supposed to calm down	הזאת המרגעה
A troubled soul? ³⁵	לנפש אמללה?

The last question is asked after the speaker starts the poem expressing the hope of finding some relaxation in the shtetl (“The town here is small, / Here I will rest my soul”). Dan Miron describes the unnerving shtetl reality that is revealed to the modern protagonist as “a frightening Darwinist image . . . an economic jungle, where everybody is so busy in the war for survival, that that becomes essentially the content of his existence.”³⁶ In reality, Peretz himself was barely out of the shtetl at the time he wrote *Bilder*. The statistical expedition was the first undertaking that Peretz engaged in after moving to Warsaw in 1890.³⁷ Peretz ran a thriving legal practice in the late 1870s and during the 1880s in Zamość, representing prominent Polish and Jewish clients. During this period, he lectured in a workers’ evening school and was active in other civic affairs. After a decade or so of practicing law, he was stripped of his license in 1887 for allegedly promoting Polish nationalism and socialism. Unable to resume his legal practice, he moved to Warsaw the following year.³⁸ Thus, Peretz had only arrived in the big city from the large town Zamość a few months before setting out for Tomaszów, a region about thirty kilometers from where he had grown up.³⁹ Reconnecting with traditional Jews cannot have been as difficult for Peretz, the son of shop owners in Zamość, as he portrayed it in *Bilder*. The sense of pessimism and frustration, and of “[freezing] while in rage” (“קפא תוך כדי התגעשות”), expressed in these early Yiddish texts represents a phase of exposure to the reality of poverty while not yet embracing the activist solution of class organizing and socialist struggle.

The overall significance of Peretz’s evolving political consciousness as a result of being exposed to poverty and to socialist activism on the Jewish streets was that it led him to produce cultural works relevant to the socialist cause. If in the years 1888–92 Peretz was functioning as a committed agent of the hegemonic class, from 1893 onward he made an effort to establish himself as an organic intellectual, committed to the interests of the Jewish working class. According to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, every exploited social group needs to develop its own cadre of intellectuals in order to help shape its people’s culture and way of life according to its own interests rather than according to the interests of the bourgeoisie.⁴⁰ These “organic intellectuals” articulate class perceptions and aspirations for the group in its own language.⁴¹

Peretz himself did not belong to the Jewish working class, but, as I argue in this book, he consciously bound himself to it, thus becoming a critical source for Jewish proletarian culture. As Gramsci writes, “an intellectual who joins the political party of a certain social group

is merged with organic intellectuals who belong to the group itself, and bonds himself tightly with the group.”⁴² Peretz, as I show throughout this book, indeed joined the ranks of the nascent Jewish Labor Bund in spirit. An early Bundist activist in Warsaw called it “a kind of moral bond between the socialist Jewish youth and Peretz” created through a series of meetings beginning in 1893–94.⁴³ In later years, the Bund would become the biggest Jewish Marxist party.

THE BUND

Founded in Vilnius in 1897 by Jewish Marxists, the Bund’s initial goal was to recruit Eastern European working-class Jews to the emergent Russian revolutionary movement. The use of Yiddish—rather than Russian or, later, Polish—would help create a mass movement of Yiddish-speaking workers. Through strikes, Jewish workers were organized to seek better working conditions at their workshops. In 1905, the Bund added national-cultural autonomy to its platform, on top of advocating socialist revolution and civic equality. At the time, the Bund claimed approximately 35,000 members in 274 branches and was the largest and best-organized Jewish political party in Eastern Europe. However, in the Soviet Union, the Russian Bund was eventually liquidated by the authorities.⁴⁴ Between the world wars, Poland became the party’s center of activity. It enjoyed legal status as a political party, and its candidates were chosen for municipal positions. In opposition to Zionism, Bund leader Vladimir Medem sharpened its ideological commitment to *do’ikayt* (hereness): the belief that the future of the Jewish people lies in the Diaspora they reside in and the commitment to change and improve that place of residence.⁴⁵ The party positioned itself as the guardian of secular Yiddish culture, opposing attempts to cultivate Hebrew culture at the expense of Yiddish. The Bund supported the Yiddish school network TSYSHO, active in more than one hundred communities, and it played a central role in the development of Jewish newspapers in Russia and Poland. By the mid-1930s, the Bund had become the dominant Jewish organization in Poland, leading the struggle against antisemitism. Until 1949, the Bund continued to carry out activities, but the organization was eventually wiped out when Poland adopted the Stalinist line. The Bund as an organized political party ceased to exist in Eastern Europe while maintaining chapters in the decades that followed in places like the United States; France; Melbourne, Australia; and Tel Aviv.⁴⁶

Regarding the relations between Peretz and the Bund, I rely on the work of Yoav Peled, who in his book *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale* (1989) examined the rise of an “ethno-class consciousness” amongst Jewish workers in the Russian Pale of Settlement. The same year Peretz was starting to publish his radical work, 1893, was also the year when the Jewish social democratic *intelligenti* (active in Lithuania since the late 1880s) went from working in small, elite workers’ circles to agitation on a mass scale, “appealing to the workers on the basis of their immediate material needs.”⁴⁷ Following Peled, who examined the emergence of the Bund using analytical tools borrowed from political economy and sociological discourse, I argue that Peretz played an instrumental role in helping the Bund develop a Jewish, culturally unified ethno-consciousness.

Various theories exist regarding the emergence of the Bund. The traditional view based its reasoning on the socioeconomic realities of Jews, while Jonathan Frankel emphasized the role of politics.⁴⁸ Frank Wolff emphasizes the transnational character of the Bund from its inception but tends to essentialize such elusive concepts such as *yidishkayt* and *mishpokhedikayt* (family-ness) as a basis for a secular Jewish identity (inherently national).⁴⁹ Recent scholarship by Roni Gechtman uncritically adopts the Bund’s own anti-nationalist rhetoric, utopian aspirations, and self-characterization. Gechtman also tends to lump Peled with other Israeli historians, assuming Peled’s scholarship suffered from “the tension between the goals of Zionist historiography and the Bund’s political and ideological commitments, namely the party’s radical opposition to nationalism in general and to Zionism in particular.”⁵⁰ But did the Bund “radically oppose nationalism”? Is Peled’s scholarship part of the project of “Zionist historiography”? It’s much easier to show how the Bund clearly opposed territorial Jewish nationalism and statehood in the form of Zionism but actively promoted Yiddish schools and Yiddish letters in Eastern Europe, because even “national cultural autonomy is rooted in the theoretical home terrain of nationalism”⁵¹—and to show how Peled’s scholarship is critical of nationalist projects in all their forms.⁵²

In his examination of the formation of the Bund and the rise of an “ethno-class consciousness” among Jewish workers in the Russian Pale of Settlement, Peled places the Bund’s usage of (Jewish) “ethnicity” as a symptom of a split labor market. In a split labor market, the concept of ethnicity is used both by the hegemonic group as an argument to ensure its dominance within the society and by the minority group as an organizational tool in its struggle for equality.⁵³ While later Bund historians shed light on many other aspects of the Bund’s history and ideology, it is

Peled's focus on the ethno-class consciousness that provides a particularly powerful lens through which to explore the ways Peretz's work during these years participates in redefining ethnicity in radical terms.

Previous Scholarship on Peretz and His Politics

The first Peretz scholar who emphasized Peretz's socialist art and devotion to working-class Jews was Shakhne Epshteyn in his long essay *Y. L. Perets als sotsyaler dikhter* (Y. L. Peretz as a social poet), published in 1916. Epshteyn states that, contrary to Peretz scholarship's emphasis on Peretz's "artistic significance," he wants to focus on the "social content of [Peretz's] works."⁵⁴ Epshteyn overemphasizes literary content without discussing the means of artistic production and form. While I also analyze the content of Peretz's literary works and examine their commitment to progressive politics, I am not less interested in the means of art production. Revolutionary artists must also revolutionize the means of producing art, as Walter Benjamin taught us, in order to make it more accessible to more readers, and thus they create new class relations between themselves and their audience.⁵⁵ Moreover, I disagree with Epshteyn's misleading dichotomy between "artistic significance" and "social content." In contrast, I am exactly interested in the interplay between the two elements, which, weaved together, can give birth to groundbreaking political art such as Peretz's challenging and multidimensional socialist literature.

The idea that Peretz made a radical turn in the mid-1890s was first compressively presented in a 1934 book by the Soviet literary critic Ayzik Rozentsvayg entitled *Der radikaler periyod fun Peretses shafn: "Di yontef bletlekh"* (The radical period of Peretz's creative work: *The Holiday Pages*). Rozentsvayg's excellent effort emphasized the content as well as the production of the *Holiday Pages* (the journal Peretz produced in the mid-1890s) and Peretz's class position, and it puts forth the demand from the artist to commit to social realism, in line with the Soviet hermeneutic doctrine of the time. I do not demand from an artist any commitment to a certain genre or style of writing, nor do I present any negative attitude toward modernist trends in art. Therefore, I refute the long-standing convention in Peretz scholarship that his interest in new literary styles—specifically his shift to neoromantic Hasidic stories and away from his earlier social realistic and naturalistic writings—coincided with a rejection of revolutionary politics.⁵⁶

In contrast to Rozentsvayg, who was also restricted by official Soviet guidelines of literary criticism, I argue in this book that Peretz's stylistic shift reflected his ongoing search for new ways of expressing his radicalism. I analyze Peretz's radical-creative spirit through a holistic lens, which might still point to contradictions but is free of Rozentsvayg's somewhat mechanical relationship between the work of art, the mode of production, and social class—an approach that does not adequately consider the possibility of sincere internal ideological struggle.

In the process, I also refute other notable prewar and mid-century Peretz scholars like H. D. Nomberg,⁵⁷ and more so Shmuel Charney,⁵⁸ who emphasized Peretz's psychological personality portrait as a so-called noncommitted seeker, always on the look for new ideas and philosophies. Therefore, due to his restless character, Peretz was unable to fully commit to any political party. Charney acknowledges that a shift occurred in the mid-1890s in Peretz, since he began interacting with Jewish socialist activists—and, as I argue, that Peretz, as a result of those meetings, began seeing working-class Jews as his target readership. However, Charney feels obligated to stress that “Peretz did not become a socialist in the partisan sense of the word, and surely he did not become a Marxist-proletarian socialist.”⁵⁹ Charney's claim about partisanship is anachronistic, because Peretz played a key cultural role in the *formation* of the Bund among proto-Bund groups, before the party was actually founded. And one cannot speak of official membership in a party that throughout Peretz's lifetime was forced to operate underground because the czarist regime deemed it illegal.⁶⁰ Regarding Peretz not becoming “a Marxist-proletarian socialist,” judging by his various works and activism and considering the government restrictions he operated under, I do see Peretz as a socialist who was heavily influenced by Marxian thought and politics, embodied by the proto-Bund and the Bund. From “Bontshe Shvayg” to his Hasidic short stories, to essays and cultural production, I show in this book Peretz's unambiguous commitment to serving the needs of the Jewish working class. However, my strongest disagreement in this book is with later Peretz scholars.

If earlier scholars mainly debated the extent of Peretz's progressivism, postwar American and Israeli Peretz scholars began to reinterpret Peretz's legacy from a conservative perspective. In the mid-twentieth century, the rich progressive tradition of Peretz critique that emphasized Peretz's socialist work and his deep affection for the socialist cause and toward working people began to give way to work that sought to deemphasize Peretz's relation to the labor movement. Interpreters such as

Chone Shmeruk (1921–97), who was head of the Department of Yiddish at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (1970–82), presented Peretz as an ardent anti-revolutionary, constantly in a state of doubt and despair, resistant to any fixed political ideal, and certainly never committing himself to the socialist cause.⁶¹ Similarly, Ruth Wisse (1936–), the distinguished Yiddish professor at Harvard (1993–2014), argues that Peretz’s texts from the 1890s display a “constant tension between radical and conservative impulses.”⁶² She suggests that Peretz was “used” by socialists for their purposes rather than acknowledging that he was an alert and willing participant engaged in a process of mutual inspiration.

In fact, as I argue in this book, Peretz’s work from that period is characterized by a clear affection for the cause of the proletariat, and Peretz was actively engaged in stimulating Jewish workers to action, until his 1899 arrest for a speech he made at an illegal workers’ gathering despite his awareness that undercover police were in the crowd. I discuss in this book at length examples of his Yiddish social-protest literature from this period, but moreover I argue that in later years he continued to produce, though less intensively, socially oriented literature, including his so-called Hasidic stories.⁶³

One of Peretz’s major sins in the eyes of his American neoconservative interpreters was that he held negative views toward Zionism, which at his time was taking its very early steps. Already in his lifetime, Peretz was vehemently attacked in the Zionist press for expressing such views. The criticism included booklets parodying his work, written by Peretz’s contemporary David Frishman. At the time, Peretz polemicized with his attackers with full rhetorical force. Posthumously, the most vicious attack against his views came from Wisse at the end of her book *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (1991). According to Wisse, if Jewish national power, as expressed by the Zionist movement and the current State of Israel, had existed during World War II, then the Holocaust would not have occurred. Wisse’s neoconservative Yiddish scholarship not only rejects Yiddish Diaspora nationalism but attributes to it, and to Peretz as its inspiring messenger, a degree of responsibility for the destruction of European Jewry.⁶⁴ While Wisse unquestioningly supports Israeli statehood and military power, Peretz maintained his belief that “all states were coercive and culturally reductive.”⁶⁵ Until his last days, Peretz viewed “freedom of conscience, human culture and ethics” as the “only conditions for a free life and victory.”⁶⁶ One of my motivations to write this book was the scant up-to-date Peretz scholarship accessible in English and the centrality in the field given to Wisse’s neoconservative Peretz scholarship as result.⁶⁷

Rozentsvayg divided Peretz's creative journeys into three central ideological periods: a preradical Peretz up until the mid-1890s, followed by a radical period from 1893 to 1905 and a reactionary period during the last decade of his life, characterized by his closeness to bourgeois nationalist and decadent ideals.⁶⁸ Rozentsvayg's periodization does reflect much of Peretz's wonderings. Its main fallacy and my point of disagreement with him in this book concerns the so-called late reactionary period. I argue that Peretz never had a period past 1893 of utter rejection of radical socialist politics. He expressed doubt on occasion, but to the end of his life, since he was exposed to the ideas of Jewish socialists, the latter group remained his cultural-political milieu, his point of reference, his base of support, his base of affection.⁶⁹

With all that in mind, one can undoubtedly state that, first, after 1893 a radical socialist twist did occur in Peretz's writings. He invested himself in those years with an unprecedented intensity in writing social-protest literature in various genres and styles. And, second, in later years, even while he continued to produce radical work (though far less intensively), these works were occasionally accompanied by works that openly criticized socialists and socialist ideologies.

Outline of This Book

The first chapter in this book discusses the proto-socialist stage of Peretz's writing career through his major Yiddish essays and literary work, from the time he settled in Warsaw in 1890 up until 1893, when the radical shift occurred. Most of his early cultural productions in Yiddish were published in the almanac *Di yudishe bibliyotek*, which he also edited. It was published only twice due to lack of commercial success.⁷⁰ Though some awareness of social-class issues appears in his early writings as well, Peretz did not actively associate with Jewish labor groups. Moreover, his target readership was not working-class Jews but middle-class "enlightened" Jews, in an effort to create a national intelligentsia.

In the second chapter I show how Peretz's new sense of commitment to the interests of the Jewish working class was expressed not only in his many essays, works of prose and poetry, and speeches in front of working-class audiences but also, and maybe first and foremost, through the radical new ways he has produced art itself. This radicalization of the means of production is evident in the radical Yiddish journal *Di yontef*

bletlekh. Its content is examined throughout the second chapter (including further discussion of its relation to the nascent Bund) and beyond.

Peretz's Hebrew work receives special focus in the third chapter, where I analyze his ambitions to write radical literature in Hebrew. I show also that in his usage of Hebrew Peretz had ambitions to be innovative and that he left his mark on that language's literature. I examine his genuine attempts at producing radical Hebrew literature both in light of earlier attempts at producing Hebrew socialist literature and with respect to his radical works in Yiddish. I show that the inner contradiction of producing radical socialist work in Hebrew while the language of Jewish workers was Yiddish led Peretz to experiment only for a short time with writing radical Hebrew work. I also examine in this chapter, through a look at his essays and satires in both Hebrew and Yiddish, Peretz's regard toward Zionism, which was mainly negative. Peretz strongly opposed the program of the influential Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha'am, who proposed creating a Jewish spiritual center in Palestine. Peretz saw such a plan as elitist and completely alienated from the true needs of Eastern European Jewry.

In the fourth chapter, I look at Peretz's early writing career as a Hebrew poet and at his 1890s Hebrew poetry while giving attention to the poetry he was producing during that decade in Yiddish. Poetry in Yiddish was a new medium for Peretz, as was writing in Yiddish altogether. Examining his Yiddish poetry from his radical period, I will ask to what degree this poetry can truly be called radical political poetry. Peretz's poetry serves as a critical bridge in accessing his development as a writer and producer of Jewish proletarian culture in both languages.

The fifth chapter shows how Peretz's Hasidism-inspired works, both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, used the Hasidic metaphor in varied and complex ways. Peretz's Hasidic stories were often misunderstood and mistaken as reactionary by orthodox Marxist literary critics. Similarly, they were often mistakenly viewed by nationalists as simple Jewish folk tales. Both misinterpretations neglect the socialist core of many of these stories. I view in Peretz's Hasidic work an attempt to construct a mythological base for the Jewish labor movement and thereby have an important effect on the radical reader. My analysis also considers additional philosophical influences and aesthetic aspects that enrich and inform these stories.

Through my work about Peretz, I hope to give the reader a better understanding of his development as a writer, of his engagements with radical politics, and of the resulting radical literature that was the vivid expression of his alignment with the needs of working-class Jews in



Figure I.4. Peretz card with his minibiography in Yiddish. Israeli National Library.

eastern Europe. I also hope to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the cultural productions that became the cultural foundation of the nascent Jewish Labor Bund in eastern Europe. But my hope is that my work will also contribute to scholarship in fields beyond Jewish studies by helping to decipher the complex relationship between radical movements and the cultural productions and cultural agents associated with them. Similar to the uncovering of the silenced radical Martin Luther King Jr., who tackled in his later years issues of poverty and warfare and was described by Cornel West as “the most significant and effective organic intellectual in the latter half of the twentieth century,”⁷¹ I aspire to uncover in this book the neglected radical Peretz and his role in the Jewish labor movement.