

CHAPTER 1

BETWEEN CLASS AND NATION The Bund in Russia, 1897–1917

Only the dead become fossils. Living people adjust themselves to the demands of life. The point of departure remains the old one; the conclusions can be new.

—Vladimir Medem, 1916

The twenty-year history of the Bund in Russia—1897–1917—may be divided into two ten-year subperiods. In the first, 1897–1906, the Bund coalesced both organizationally and politically as an autonomous entity within the general Russian Social Democratic (SD) movement. At the end of this subperiod, in the 1905 Revolution, it reached the pinnacle of its power in the Jewish street, both in membership—about thirty thousand in its own estimation—and as a political player in Jewish public life that struggled for civil rights as an active participant in self-defense groups wherever Jews faced pogroms. Although the ideological foundations of the Bund’s national outlook were laid at that time, its final goal was not determined, as we will see.

The second subperiod began after the failure of the 1905 Revolution and lasted from 1907 to the October Revolution in 1917. The Bund lost strength during this time and, like other revolutionary and liberal movements, its membership declined severely. It took the Bund four years, until 1910, to begin to recover. It was then of all times, in the midst of the trough, that the Bund started not only to exhibit a clear and unequivocal inclination in its existential national outlook, but also to choose the directions in which its political and cultural action would head.

The process of the Bund’s gradual ascent in the Jewish popular national cultural reality in Russia and, especially, in Lithuania, is well known.¹ The Bund evolved from an intelligentsia circle to a labor circle; from ideological and intellectual “propaganda” to “agitation” in the form of information and education for groups of workers and artisans culled from the

simple, poorly educated classes; from Yiddish as a language of communication with the Jewish proletariat to Yiddish as a manifestation of national culture; from “circles” into a political party in 1897; from an autonomous organizational status within the Russian SD Party to the idea of Jewish national and cultural autonomy in Russia. Underlying this political and ideological evolution, which shifted the Bund from an “international” Socialist outlook to a “national” proletarian awareness, was the issue of the Jewish people as a worldwide historical phenomenon and a problem of ideological principle—matters that could not be ignored intellectually or politically.

In the sphere of ideology, the national definition of the proletariat made it necessary to explain where the Jewish people belonged vis-à-vis the population at large. Within a short time, due to the advent of Herzl and the passion that “political Zionism” evoked when the Jewish masses first encountered it, the Bund faced active political competition that forced it to explain where it stood on the national question. Importantly, the danger flowing from Zionism first arose in the Hibbat Tsiyyon era, even before the first Zionist Congress in Basel. The premier issue of *Der Idisher Arbayer*, published in Switzerland, gave evidence to this by devoting an editorial to the matter. “Capitalism has fragmented the Jewish people [*der idishen nation*] into two hostile classes, workers and capitalists.”² However, once Herzl came on the scene, as stated, some Bund intellectuals understood that this mechanistic bisection of the national organism into two warring classes failed to respond to the national yearnings of the Jewish masses. This is what prompted Joseph (Dzhan) Mill, the editor of the journal, to contact Hayyim Zhitlovsky,³ who was not a member of the Bund, and propose a public debate over what differentiated the Bund from Zionism. Zhitlovsky honored the request by publishing a four-article series under the title “Zionism or Socialism?”⁴

It was Zhitlovsky (1865–1943) of all people—the ideological itinerant troubadour of Jewish ultramodernism, a man who switched worldviews but never abandoned his belief in Jewish nationhood, an intellectual who was never bound by doctrinaire thinking—who got to the root of the national problem from the Socialist perspective and predicted the development that the Bund would experience decades later.

The four articles, written in the spirit of conventional Bund views, dealt mainly with an attempt to debunk the basic premises of the Zionist idea. Zhitlovsky defines Zionism as a movement of the Jewish bourgeoisie and asserts that, from the class perspective, Socialism and Zionism are irreconcilable. What is worse, Zionism is misleading the Jewish masses with its Utopian dreams and, for this reason, is the greatest enemy of the Jewish people. Furthermore, Zhitlovsky, following the classic Bund line, strongly

doubts the existence of a world Jewish nation, in which both the Zionists and Dubnow believed. After all, he reasoned, a Jewish worker in New York or Vilna has more in common with a non-Jewish worker than with the Jewish bourgeoisie in his place of residence.⁵ However, Zhitlovsky did not stop at this juncture of total dismissal of Klal Yisrael. Unlike the Bundists, he did not rule out ab initio the possibility that a world of Jewish people might come into being in a future world Socialist society. In fact, he upheld the right of the Jews, like all other peoples, to exist as nations within that society. In his opinion, Jewish Socialists who stay in touch with their origins love their people no less, if not more, than Zionists who ceaselessly trumpet this sentiment in public. The eastern European Jewish proletariat has much deeper and stronger Jewish roots, he asserted, than Zionist leaders such as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, who came from the world of the assimilationists. As A. Littwak, a grassroots Bund leader, would argue later on, Zhitlovsky stressed the loyal Jewish Socialists' emotional connection to their people. Following this premise, Zhitlovsky expressed the hope that Jewish workers in all countries would establish a world Jewish proletarian Bund that would safeguard and struggle for the interests of all of Jewry while participating in the surrounding peoples' struggle for freedom and equality. Such a Bund, in Zhitlovsky's opinion, should establish a world-embracing set of Yiddish-speaking Jewish cultural institutions. This would make Jews the world over proud of their people and culture. His practical conclusion was to establish an international proletarian Jewish secretariat, *Ayn internatsionalen idishen arbayter sekretariat* [italics in the original].⁶

Thus, Zhitlovsky proposed an alternative of sorts to the Zionist creed—a proletarian Klal Yisrael instead of a national one. By so doing, he expressed a prophecy that the Bund would attempt to fulfill fifty years later, under different and tragic conditions for the Jewish people and for him personally, after World War II and the Holocaust.

Zhitlovsky's last-mentioned remarks attracted a response from the editorial board, which expressed doubt that the Yiddish "jargon" could develop into a language of culture and creative endeavor as other peoples' languages had. Only future social developments could answer this question. Notably, however, even the editors did not rule out, theoretically, the existence of a proletarian Jewish Klal on a worldwide cultural basis. They were simply less confident than Zhitlovsky about the possibility of bringing this about. In this sense, in fact, they assumed that national existence depended not only on material factors, but also on spiritual ones as well. Furthermore, they believed that physical national existence hinged more on the cultural and spiritual factor in the case of world Jewry than among any other people.

At the initiative of John (Dzhan) Mill, Zhitlovsky's article was published in advance of the third Bund convention, held in 1899 in Kovno. At the convention, Mill himself fought for a resolution stressing the need to furnish Jewish workers with national rights so that they could defend their proletarian interests. Mill's opponents preferred to struggle for Jews' civil rights and believed that a demand for national rights would fragment and, thereby, vitiate the political struggle. In the typical Bundist manner, the debates over this issue ended with a compromise: a resolution to struggle for civil rights first and to refer the national question to broad debate in party circles.⁷

Two different clusters of basic views stood out in this debate, which lasted for more than three years. One cluster regarded Yiddish speakers and them alone, as opposed to French, English, or German speakers, as the Jewish nation.⁸ In regard to those who spoke Yiddish and practiced the Yiddish culture, this group assumed that the success of their Socialist struggle would depend on expanding the common denominator of the folk classes—the natural carriers of the indigenous national culture. Socialism, in turn, should assure the unobstructed development of this culture by removing all obstacles and impediments.⁹

In the opinion of members of the second cluster, the Jews are not a nation but an origin group that has “a certain attitude” about its origin (*a shtammeinheit, a shtammgenossenschaft*). A common historical fate strengthens people's affiliation with an origin group so powerfully that it is sometimes stronger than the national sentiment. Sixteenth-century German Protestants, for example, felt closer to French Huguenots than to German Catholics. In the changing historical reality, there is no hope that the Jews will again be a nation, since they have neither a shared language nor, as stated, any likelihood of acquiring one. Therefore, the Jews have no issue of national policy or assimilation to worry about, and in this regard Jewish social democracy has neither principles nor interests. However, it does have a special interest, if not a special mission, in disseminating progressive Western enlightenment among the Jewish proletarian masses.¹⁰

The intellectual debate surrounding the national issue was accompanied by a penetrating political debate within the Bund itself and between it and the Russian SD Party, under the leadership of Lenin and Plekhanov, on the one hand, and Dubnowian and Zionist Jewish nationalism, on the other hand. In terms of balance of forces, the Bund maintained a delicate equilibrium between “nationalists” and “internationalists.” Accordingly, at the third, fourth, and fifth party conventions, the debate on this issue led not to unequivocal resolutions but to compromise formulae between the two outlooks.

The Bundist debate on the national problem took place at two levels: political and ideational. The first concerned the status of the Bund within the Russian SD Party. The Bund advocated a federative party structure, in which each national party would have an autonomous status as the sole representative of its national proletariat. The leaders of the Russian SD Party objected to this, touching off a political struggle that led to the Bund's succession from the party in 1903 and its hesitant return in 1906.¹¹ This struggle, pronouncedly organizational in nature, had nothing to do with the Klal Yisrael issue. The ethnic identity of working-class Bund members sufficed to justify a certain form of internal organizational autonomy within the general party, much as that enjoyed by other ethnic groups.

At the ideological level, however, the idea of establishing national-cultural autonomy, proclaimed by the Bund in 1901, pertained to the Klal Yisrael question in both the principled and the political senses. After all, its validity applied to all Jews. The Bund limited this autonomy to cultural matters and took care not to expand its powers to the community-organization sphere, as Simon Dubnow and, later, the Zionists advocated, because the expansionary national significance of such a demand clashed with the concept of the class division of society. The Bund "nationalists" kept this danger in mind and therefore, paradoxically with respect to those who adhered to a Marxist materialist worldview, placed growing emphasis on the Yiddish language and culture as the basis of Jewish nationhood as that of an exterritorial people.

The intellectual formula of national autonomy was phrased at that convention, as we know. This formula, based on a compromise between "nationalists" and "internationalists" in the party, was not meant to be fulfilled as a political platform. It states: "The convention asserts that a state such as Russia, composed of many different nationalities, is fated to become a federation of nationalities with *full* national autonomy [emphasis mine] for each of these peoples, irrespective of the territory that it settles."¹²

In the course of the debate at that convention, one of the "nationalists" stated:

Let us be consistent. If we recognize every nation's right to freedom and national autonomy, and if we consider Jewry a nation, then the Bund, which protects the interests of the Jewish proletariat in particular—must *by necessity* [emphasis mine] champion Jewish national autonomy and must not in any way content itself with a demand for equality in civil and political rights, as has been the case thus far.¹³

The inclusion of these remarks in a resolution favoring *full* autonomy and asserting the *necessity* of espousing it expressed the identity of the proletariat interest and the national interest. The entire vision was geared, of course, to a future that would follow the historical episode of class warfare. Even so, however, the “nationalist” Bundists affirmed the existence of a Jewish nation.

Two years later, in 1903, V. Kossovski clashed verbal swords with the leaders of *Iskra* over the latter’s vehement opposition to giving the Bund the status of representative of the Jewish proletariat throughout Russia. He stated vigorously that the Bund existed, in and of itself, for the sake of the Jewish proletariat and maintained relations with the general Socialist Party because it considered the latter not a Russian-national (*Rusische*) party but a Russian-country (*Ruslandische*) one.

Basing himself on these premises, Kossovski explained that the Bund would not settle for autonomous status within the Russian SD Party. Such a status corresponded to the view of the *Iskra* leadership, which agreed to give the Bund the right to organize on a regional but not on a national basis. In contrast, to organize the proletariat of an entire nation, a federative form of organization was the most suitable.¹⁴ This leaves no doubt that, in the minds of the “nationalist” Bundists, there was a Jewish nation in eastern Europe. Just as the working class represented the genuine future national interests of all “normal” that is, territorial, nationalities, so it was with the Jewish nation, even though the Jews were exceptional in this respect. The *Iskra* leaders’ opposition to national recognition of the Jewish proletariat, and its result—the devaluation of the Bund’s political status—prompted the “nationalists” in the party to put together and strengthen their Socialist national outlook en bloc. Thus, it was not by chance that the clashing “internationalist” and “nationalist” views escalated into an internecine confrontation at an encounter of Bund leaders in Zurich in 1903, in preparation for the second convention of the Russian SD Party.

The outlook of the “internationalists” was fueled by a social analysis and a universalistic ideology. In their estimation, the objective process of the development of capitalism in Russia would gradually destroy the civic and economic barriers between Jews and non-Jews until the former fully integrated into society at large. This explains their staunch opposition to the idea of national autonomy, which, they believed, carried the taint of Dubnowian national ideology, and, with its subjectivity, clashed with the objective process of integration. Worse still, it had elements of Zionist nationalism. Furthermore, the “internationalists” doubted whether, a particularistic Jewish culture was at all possible in the absence of a material basis for the existence of a Jewish nation. Boris Frumkin, a leading internationalist, argued vehemently that Jewish nationhood cannot exist in the

Diaspora and that those who disagree flirt with Zionism. Therefore, there is no Jewish national problem (*Yidishe natsionale frage*) but only a “problem of Jews” (*nor a yidn frage*), since Jews are strangers everywhere amidst cultures that reciprocate by estranging themselves from them. It is this foreignness that animates the psychology from which the Klal Yisrael ideology stems. Therefore, for the very reason of the abnormality of Jewish existence, that is, the absence of Jewish territory, one should be wary about cultivating a psychologically based nationalism, one influenced by the national ideology of the Polish PPS and the Zionists. This ideology did influence the nationalists, as they did not deny. In Frumkin’s judgment, the Bund should represent only the interests of the Jewish proletariat. As such, it is a national organization and no more, and the entire issue of *full* national autonomy is none of its concern but rather that of the Zionist nationalists.¹⁵

Frumkin’s remarks reflect the crux of the internationalist worldview, which sheds additional light on the outlook of the nationalists—those who, in their opinion, could not deliberately (or inadvertently) circumvent the Klal Yisrael question that beset the Bund from the beginning of the century—at the fourth convention, held in 1901—to the middle of the century, after the Holocaust.

Vladimir Kossovski, who formulated the Bund’s national creed in the course of his struggle with the *Iskra* leaders,¹⁶ was one of the main rivals of the internationalists in this sphere, too. To oppose them, he cited three rationales. The first, the universalistic, was the national platform of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, which recognized the national majority’s right to territorial autonomy in part of the state and added, as a corrective and complementary measure, personal autonomy for national groups that lacked a territorial majority. This rule, of course, applied especially to the Jews. The second rationale was social. Kossovski, unlike his comrades, argued that the development of capitalism not only sharpened class warfare, but also forged peoples into national units. This was happening in Russia as well, where the Jewish question would not vanish any time soon. As evidence, he noted that even though Jews were emigrating to countries overseas, foremost the United States, their numbers in Russia were not declining. The third rationale was political. Kossovski admitted that the Zionist idea, which had gripped masses of Jews in eastern Europe, presented the Bund with a sticky challenge. Instead of dismissing the allure of Zionism as an artificial and transitory phenomenon, Kossovski argued that Zionism expressed the national spirit and aspirations of the Jewish masses and that, therefore, they were the soil in which Zionism grew.¹⁷ Thus, the Bund must not ignore the national problem of these Jewish masses and leave the search for its solution to the Zionists only. With this in mind, he

and others of similar conviction inferred that until the Jewish national issue found a political solution, it should be tackled by developing the Yiddish national culture of the Jewish masses. In other words, the culture to be fostered was that of the masses and not necessarily that of the organized proletariat, as Kossovski's disputants believed. Kossovski's rivals pointed to the intrinsic riskiness of his approach, which might steer the Bund toward Dubnow's national philosophy, an ideological Klal Yisrael, and even Zionist nationalism. Kossovski was undeterred by this accusation. In his opinion, the demand to encourage popular national culture among the Jewish liberal bourgeoisie did not in itself rule out the very idea, especially when national autonomy might be attained by mobilizing social forces from the progressive bourgeoisie for a political struggle that the Bund would lead. Hearing this, Kossovski's aforementioned rival, Frumkin, charged that his outlook was Zionist (*Vladimirs kuk is a tsiyoynistishe*).¹⁸

Mark Lieber (Michael Goldman), who shared Kossovski's national beliefs, added a theoretical dimension to this question. Basing himself on discussions at the Second International, he elucidated the difference between a nation-state and a nation—arguing that the two are not always absolutely identical. A nation is a cultural and psychological unity (*a kulturel-psikhologishe aynhayt*). As such, a nation is a complete entity, even though from the political standpoint it may be dispersed across different states, as in the cases of the Armenians and, especially, the Poles. Once the dis-identity of nation and state was recognized, various nations that had not asserted their national and cultural identity as a major value now embarked on a national awakening. Consequently, for all peoples, it is the national proletariat that should solve its people's national problem. In this respect, the Jews are no exception.¹⁹

In this context, it is noteworthy that the convention of the Russian SD Party, held in Brussels and London that year immediately after the Bund convention, Lieber led the struggle against the *Iskra* people, including L. Martov (Yuly Osipovich Tsederbaum), one of the Menshevik leaders, who was not one of them. In the draft resolutions that he presented to the convention concerning the Bund, Martov defined the Jews as a "race." Lieber opposed this vehemently and insisted, unsuccessfully, that they be defined as a "nation" (*natsie*).²⁰

Intellectual hairsplitting aside, Lieber's remarks indirectly but very importantly touched upon the issue discussed here, that of Klal Yisrael. After all, Lieber spoke explicitly of a Jewish nation—a cultural and psychological unity—dispersed among different states. However, it should be emphasized that in terms of Klal Yisrael, this was a silver lining within a cloud. Lieber concerned himself with a cultural and psychological integrity or unity and

not a historical one, such as that in which Dubnow and the Zionists believed. This, of course, is an overture to the grand question: who among the Jews belongs to this nation? We explore this matter below.

The stance of the nationalists cannot be fully understood without the personal, emotional dimension—that sense of a Jewish folk-home that which A. Littwak described in his memoirs,²¹ or of home-nostalgia, to use Vladimir Medem's famous expression.²² In the debate itself, Tsvia Horovitch articulated this feeling by defining the ambition for national autonomy as a liberation from the sense of enslavement that typified the assimilationist Jewish intellectuals who ruled out the existence of a Jewish nation. It is the Bund's duty to liberate itself from this slavish psychology and ideology (*knekhtishkayt*). She lauded the natural sense of Jewish nationhood, which requires neither inquiries nor justifications because, after all, it exists.²³

This was Vladimir Medem's first participation in the national debate, for which he would be the Bund's main ideologue for the next twenty years or so. Thus, we devote a special place to his national thought at a later stage in this chapter.

The end of this dispute was typical of political party life in the Bund. Usually the leadership managed to settle disagreements by phrasing an ambiguous compromise resolution, as had happened at the fourth convention in regard to the very same issue. This time, however, that stratagem did not work. The dispute was both principled and political. The "national" majority at the convention was afraid to resolve the issue before the convention of the Russian SD Party, which, as stated, took place that year in Brussels and London. Therefore, it preferred not to bring the question of national autonomy to a vote. This being the case, the Bund delegation could present a united front on the issue of the party's autonomous status within the SD Party. When its demand was turned down, of course, the refusal prompted the Bund to secede from the SD Party.²⁴

The secession of the Bund—both wings, the "national" and the "international"—from the general Russian SD Party at the London convention attests to the uniqueness of the Bund, which managed to maintain its unity in spite of its internal differences of principle. The Bund remained outside the SD Party for nearly three years. In 1906, it returned "home" after a compromise of sorts between most of its leadership and the heads of *Iskra*, prompted by pressure from rank and file members who wished to break out of their isolation and affiliate with the general Socialist Party of Russia—especially after the failure of the revolution in 1905 left the Bund severely weakened.²⁵

The Bund's return to the Russian Socialist Party, although largely formal—since the Bund remained politically separate—distanced the party

from the political *Klal Yisrael*. This occurred, of all times, after the Bund in 1905 had stationed itself at the forefront of defenders of “self-defense” postures against anti-Jewish pogroms. From the political standpoint, however, the Bund refused to participate with the other Jewish parties in the Association for the Attainment of Total Equality for Jews in Russia. This resulted in a series of furious anti-Bund articles by Simon Dubnow, one of the mentors of the association.²⁶

The title of Dubnow’s first article in the series, “Slavery in Revolution,” speaks for itself. It excoriated Jewish socialists who aligned themselves with assimilators into general Socialist parties, such as the Russian SD or the Polish PPS, and self-proclaimed carriers of Jewish national consciousness, such as the Bund and even the Zionist *Po’aley Tsiyyon*. However, as stated, Dubnow was concerned chiefly with the Bund and attempted to expose the party’s true “national face.” He accused the Bund of several sins of principle against the all-embracing national concept of *Klal Yisrael*. The Bund’s national program in regard to cultural autonomy, he argued, was severely narrow because it limited itself solely to a demand for recognition of Yiddish and a search for a way to promote it. The Bund ignored and even opposed the broad, inclusive organizational and cultural grasp of cultural autonomy that should provide the entire nation with a permanent framework for the cultivation of its culture, the shaping of its new national image, and a barrier against the menace of assimilation. This, Dubnow wrote, is because the Bund, according to its class ideological outlook, considers itself a representative of the interest of only part of the Jewish people. Therefore, it has no inclusive national interest and is unwilling to participate in the struggle for Jewish national continuity. Consequently, Dubnow maintained angrily, Bundists’ loyalties accreted to “one nation” only, the “proletarian” one. If so, they were fragmenting the Jewish nation *ab initio*—not inadvertently but deliberately and consciously. By so doing, instead of a politics that reflects the general national interest, the Bund dragged segments of the Jewish people into a class politics that devastated national unity. When normal peoples that have a permanent national territorial base practice this kind of class politics, the harm that might result cannot endanger the nation’s integrity as such. However, when a non-territorial people, dispersed across many countries, engages in this form of political behavior, it engenders a severe risk of fragmentation and disintegration.

The anomaly of Jewish national existence traces to the lack of national territory, Dubnow wrote. He admitted that normal phenomena such as class struggle exist within this anomaly, provided that the class struggle not contradict and clash with the national politics, as the Bund was doing.

In contrast to the Bund, even the Diaspora-negating Zionists, Dubnow stressed, participated in the struggle for the rights of Jewry at large in Russia. Thus, when all is said and done, the upholding of the class principle among Russian Jewish society, even though this society is composed mainly of an impoverished petty bourgeoisie, is also a manifestation of the Jewish anomaly. However, unlike the defenders of Klal Yisrael, exponents of the class worldview threatened Jewish national continuity, in which, for him, the Klal Yisrael framework provided a surrogate for the absence of national territory.²⁷

Dubnow repeated this argument with greater emphasis and passion in his response to the poet An-Ski, who was not a member of the Bund even though the party adopted his poem, "The Oath," as its anthem. An-Ski, disputing Dubnow, argued that among other peoples class struggle does not undermine national unity. In fact, it aims to create unity in the long-term historical process. In response, Dubnow ruled on principled and historical grounds that a national policy that integrates the interests of all national strata is totally at odds with the Marxist-style class philosophy. By so stating, Dubnow transformed the Jews' anomalous state into a categorical worldview of sorts that should dictate the particular national policy of the Jewish people.

This being the case, Dubnow sought to base Jewish nationhood in the Diaspora (as he termed it) on the subjective wish for national unity—a wish that, when implemented through a comprehensive autonomous community organization, would provide a substitute for the territorial setting that "normal" peoples have. This explains why the class-struggle ideology was dangerous for the Jews, since it undermined the subjective wish for Klal Yisrael.

Notably, Dubnow was so angry with the Bundists for their "slavish" attitude toward Socialism at large and their "treasonous" posture toward Jewish peoplehood that he did not even see fit to respond directly to a series of rebuttal articles that they published in the Vilna newspaper *Der Verker* in 1906.

The article was signed by B. Babsky. No one knew who this was, but since V. Kossovski and V. Medem were the editors of the Vilna newspaper that year, they must have assented to its contents, at the very least.²⁸ It is more likely that Kossovski wrote the article. The author, whoever he was, traced Dubnow's assault on the Bund to its refusal to join the association that the Jewish national parties had formed to struggle together for Jewish civil and national rights in Russia. In the spirit of remarks by the Bund nationalists, the writer agreed with Dubnow that the Jews at large (*gantsn idishn folk*) were severely encumbered by their inferior civil status. By implication,

however, by liberating itself the Jewish proletariat would also liberate the entire Jewish people. (*Az befreyendig zikh, befrayt der proletariat di gantse natsion zayne.*) This attitude—verging on an indirect “national caretaker” role of sorts—does not, according to the author, constitute a retreat from the Bund’s original classic posture as a piously Marxist Party, a posture that divided the nation into warring classes. It does the opposite, the author insisted, stressing that the class division was a universal phenomenon that typified all progressive nations that were experiencing modernization through the medium of capitalist economics. However, the Bund participated in the Jewish national front in an indirect manner only, by struggling for the rights of the working class, and this very factor made its ideological attitude toward Klal Yisrael increasingly complex. After all, the entire argument thus far implies that the Bund rejected the Klal Yisrael idea as a political framework but not as a national-cultural one. The remaining question, then, is how far this framework should extend in the global, pan-Jewish context. From the political standpoint, the Bund ruled out the establishment of a united Jewish front lest this set a precedent for similar nationally based organizational initiatives in Russia—initiatives that would fragment and vitiate the political struggle of the progressive forces in that country²⁹—in addition to the Zionist nationalist “scheme” that, according to the authors, lurked behind the plan.

Thus far, the position was clear. However, what about the nurturing of the national culture? What set the Bund apart, in this respect, from the Jewish liberal bourgeoisie? After all, the identity of class interest and genuine national interest has already been stated explicitly. Lest the borders between “class” and “national” interests be blurred, one of the intellectuals hurriedly marked them with a series of “negative commandments.”³⁰ The Bund forswore expressions such as “national consciousness,” “national revival,” and “national efflorescence”; it recognized culture as an existing phenomenon. It presumed that the more politically conscious the proletariat became, the stronger the national culture would be. Following its neutralistic formulation, however, if it transpires that the historical process was weakening this culture, the Bund would allow the process to play itself out without resistance.

In this sense, there was no room for either an in-between solution or a compromise between the liberal nationalists and the Bund. The liberal nationalists aspired to unite the people into a single bloc—“*Am tsuzamensh-lisn tsu ayn lebn, tsu di zelbe natsionale shtrebnun un tsu glaykhe natsionale idealn.*” In contrast, the Bund wished to separate these two classes totally—“*Mir shteln far unz—abtayln dem proletariat fun der burzhwazi*”—and to educate workers to take a sober view toward the social processes that set the Jewish nation apart.

The conclusion to draw from the whole debate over Dubnow's articles is that the Bund, at this phase, did not keep politics, ideology, and culture separate. However, the intellectual leadership of the party understood that things were not so simple and that the question of Socialism and nationalism needed elucidation. It was Vladimir Medem (1879–1923) who devoted his entire political and intellectual life to this question. His intellectual outpouring attested to the Bund's internal vacillations on this issue and to the changes that occurred in Medem's views during a twenty-year period. Below, then, we devote a central and special subchapter to Medem.

"VLADIMIR MEDEM—THE LEGEND OF THE JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT"

Vladimir Medem was born in Minsk in 1879 and died in New York in 1923. His comrades and admirers engraved the following words on his tombstone: "Vladimir Medem—the legend of the Jewish labor movement." What did Medem accomplish that earned him this accolade, which eluded his comrades in the Bund leadership even if their contribution to the party matched or even surpassed his? Medem did not belong to the "Vilna dynasty," as the Bund's founding fathers were called. He was not a charismatic organizer like Arkady Kremer, an underground hero such as Yekutiel (Noah) Portnoy, or a pioneer in phrasing the national-autonomy idea. In the last-mentioned respect, Vladimir Kossovski preceded him. He never founded a Bund "Committee Abroad," as John (Dzhan) Mill did. He was neither a prolific pundit like Rafael Abramovitz, A. Littwak, and Beinish Mikhalevich, nor a polemicist who challenged *Iskra* leaders intrepidly, like Mark Lieber. He was not an authoritative political leader like Henryk Erlich or Wiktor Alter. Medem joined the Bund in 1901, after the party worked out its ideological line on the national issue at its fourth convention, earlier that year, and after the Bund had solidified its position as a proletarian party and an underground organization of Jewish workers.

If so, whence did Medem derive his spell? Generally speaking, one may say that it originated in . . . his differentness! Moshe Mishkinsky believed, correctly, that "The source of the legendary halo that formed around Medem was his origin from far on the outside, and not necessarily his being a 'repenter,' the sort of person whom people treat with some ambivalence, as we know."³¹

Medem was born to a wealthy, high-class assimilated family that gradually exchanged its Jewish religion for the Lutheran faith. Medem himself was baptized into the Provoslav Church at birth. Although he had been Christian as a child—something he never concealed or denied—he was not

an ordinary “repenter” for two reasons. First, he never dissociated himself from the cultural and aesthetic values that he had imbibed as a boy. Second, he had no unequivocal explanation for his gradual return to Jewry and Judaism—a process that began with a strong interest in the Bible, continued with rapprochement with Jewish students at the University of Kiev, and ended with his enlistment in the Bund. When a comrade asked him in 1906 to explain the significance of his move, he replied that he had no intellectual explanation save this: “I wanted very badly to come home.” What is more, he returned to this home as an unswervable romanticist in his attitude toward his people, whom he chose, and toward his past, from which he could not disengage.

Due to his romantic sentiment, Medem was enamored with the grassroots echelon of the Jewish people even before he became an active member of the Bund. In his student days, he retained the memory of a Sabbath eve outing with a good friend named Teomin. As the two strolled through the Jewish quarter of Minsk, he instigated a lengthy conversation about the Jews

in the poor and remote alleys with their small houses. That Sabbath eve lives on in my memory. The silent and empty streets, with the Sabbath candles glowing in the small houses. . . . I felt in my heart *a romantic bonding* with the gray Jewish past, a warm and intimate psychic encounter that exists only vis-à-vis one’s most intimate matters, vis-à-vis your own past. . . .³²

This feeling also had its reverse: Medem’s profound attachment to Russian culture and his aesthetic disgust with the outer image of Jewish life.

In 1906, after he returned from several years of exile in Switzerland and became publisher of the Bund newspaper in Vilna, Medem visited his relatives in Moscow. The following excerpt of his writings from Moscow is worth presenting verbatim:

I came to Moscow. A totally different world. A Russian city, Moscow, and the people there are real Russians who speak Russian worthy of the name. How lovely the tones of this language are! It is altogether unlike the distorted, wretched Russian spoken in “our northwestern districts”. . . . People speak in other tones that do not resemble the Jews’ tones. Ninety percent of our Jews speak in bad, stammering, weak voices that lack flash and tone. The Russian voice, in contrast, is a loud, full-throated voice. . . . I must admit, however, that after spending a few weeks there, I felt a pro-

found inner nostalgia for the twisted, dirty alleys of Vilna and the unwashed, impoverished Jews of Vilna. *I wanted very badly to come home.*³³

If so, notably, Medem had that sense of aesthetic negation-of-the-Diaspora that beset many Zionists of his generation whom he had encountered in Bern, Switzerland. One of them was Chaim Weizmann; Medem made friends with him and his fiancée.³⁴ Despite their irreconcilable ideological differences, both rejected the Jewish existential reality in eastern Europe on cultural grounds. Weizmann was five years older than Medem. In 1895, after a stay in Berlin, Weizmann wrote to his friend Leo Motzkin,

After having lived in Berlin, I found Pinsk so repugnant and repulsive that I find it uncomfortable, if not unpleasant, to share my writings with you, my dear friend. There is nothing and no one here; instead of a city—a tremendous pile of trash. . . . masses of Jews milling and scurrying in the streets of our town, their faces worried and pained. But they do it all unknowingly, as if they were drunk.³⁵

Furthermore, although an anti-Zionist and an ultra-Diasporist, Medem was impressed by the persona of Theodor Herzl due to his aesthetic penchant. He saw Herzl at the Zionist Congress in Basel in 1903, during the “Uganda debate,” and described him, unflatteringly, as a person who had a hypnotic affect on the masses of delegates. However, he continued, “Truth to tell, Herzl knew how one should comport oneself in public. His stride was regal, proud, quiet, and his face gave off an uncommon aura.” After Herzl died, Medem wrote: “Herzl never enchanted me as a public functionary. I always considered his ‘policies’ juvenile . . . but his very image was impressive. I mean his physical image.” Therefore, when he was informed about Herzl’s death, “I felt a sort of disappointment. An odd idea passed through me: could it be that a person with such a beautiful face would die? I cannot understand how I got caught up in this weird idea. But that was my mood.”³⁶ This is probably one of the most authentic testimonies to Herzl’s hypnotic, charismatic force.

Medem’s aestheticism flowed from his high-mindedness as a person, a friend, and a political rival—a high-mindedness that included a thirst for sanctity. Medem revealed this trait with a silence that expressed a special attitude toward people, a pietism of sorts, as he defined it, that, in his mind, reflected man’s prosaic attitude toward the sacred and his love and concern for others. This quality, man’s true need, was lacking in the ordinary Jew.

Sanctity, after all, resides in life and in the human soul, “and everyone must have his own ‘holy of holies’” that one should enter, as one would enter a church, “with quiet steps, downcast eyes, and sealed lips.”

The Jew, however, does not behave that way, Medem ruled. He shouts, in glee or in grief. Even when he asks God for a favor, he engages Him in vociferous litigation as if the Almighty were his peer, and attempts to strike deals with his God if not to mislead Him. Even in the cemetery he continues to bargain with Him. Medem wrote these remarks in 1919 in the memory of his friend, the author Jacob Dineson, whom he considered the bearer of a mission in “sanctity” and “tenderness” (*haylikayt* and *aydlkayt*).³⁷

It was this dialectical and ambivalent attitude toward the Jews—romantic attraction and cultural rejection—that determined and shaped Medem’s Jewish national outlook from its onset in the early twentieth century. He never rid himself of it totally, even though it underwent changes, as he frankly admitted, in the 1920s.³⁸

Medem was the Bund’s systematic spokesman on the national question. For eighteen years—from 1904, when his essay, “Social Democracy and the National Question,” was published, to shortly before his death in 1923—Medem published several works that aimed to shape the party’s national worldview. The basic premises in this creed and the changes that it underwent pertain to the years 1904–1916. Medem himself viewed matters thus in 1917, when he produced a collection of his articles on the national issue while he was living in independent Poland.³⁹ The articles, originally written in Russian, were translated into Yiddish. Only five of them are important: “Social Democracy and the National Question” (1906); “Nationalism or Neutralism” (1910); “The World Jewish Nation” (1911); “Deep in Life”; and “Again, ‘Ourselves and Our Nationalism’” (1916). All in all, it is a rather meager corpus of theoretical literature in view of the gravity of the issue that the Bund had tackled—defining the Jews as an extraterritorial nation and determining the working class’s attitude toward it, both in intra-Jewish relations and in the essence of relations between the Bund and the Russian Socialist Party. Notably, however, Medem wrote the first of these articles—“Social Democracy and the National Question”—two years before the Austrian social democratic leader, Otto Bauer, published his famous and very influential book under the same title.⁴⁰ Medem was quite proud to have preceded Bauer, the great mentor of social democracy, in both the idea and its dissemination. It showed that an issue of minor importance in general Socialist thinking was central to Jewish Socialism in both its Zionist and its Bundist versions. Notably, Dov Ber Borochov’s original writings on the national issue and the role of the Jewish proletariat in it—“On the Question of Zion and Territory” (1905) and “Our Platform” (1906)—appeared concurrently with Medem’s writings and pre-

dated Bauer's book. Although Medem's writings did not refer to Borochov's articles, the "national awakening" that Herzl had instigated among the Jewish masses (as even Bund leaders admitted) presented the Bund with a problem, as its leaders attested, and motivated it to explain its stance on the national issue. If we recall the foregoing discussion, we may note that Medem was not the first to subject the question of the Bund and the national issue to systematic debate. In 1902, in the aftermath of the fourth convention of the Bund—a year before he participated in his first debate on this topic—a pamphlet entitled "On the Question of National Cultural Autonomy and the Building of the Russian Social Democratic Party on a Federative Basis," was published under the Bund imprimatur.⁴¹

The essay, although written by Vladimir Kossovski, was painstakingly shaped by the party's central committee to avoid unnecessary polemics with the *Iskra* people.⁴² Therefore, before we discuss the debate on this issue in the general Russian party at its convention in London in 1903, we should set forth Kossovski's main arguments.

The title of the pamphlet speaks for itself and sufficed to attract the general opposition of Plekhanov, Lenin, and Martov, who considered a federative structure inappropriate. To counter their views, Kossovski based his arguments on the premise—from which the Bund in Russia and Poland would not stray until World War II and its aftermath—that a Socialist Party must not disregard the masses' deeply rooted national sentiments and aspirations. In view of the proliferation of nations that have clashing interests and aspirations, the party should implement a policy that seeks to ordain compromises among them. In other words, recognition of national multiculturalism should, in the political sense, be based on a federative arrangement. As Kossovski attested—reliably, by all accounts—he was asked to rediscuss the issue after the schismatic convention in London in 1903, but he refused to do so for two reasons. First, his aforementioned pamphlet left no doubt about his stance. Second, in the meantime a new concept, "neutralism," had appeared in the national debate. He disapproved of this notion but did not wish to foment further unnecessary discord in the party. The father of the neutralism concept was Vladimir Medem, who played an active role at the fifth Bund convention, where the national question was debated. This is why the central committee tasked Medem with writing the article.

Before he wrote the essay "Social Democracy and the National Question," Medem participated in the debate over this question at the fifth Bund convention, which, as stated, took place in June 1903 in Zurich.⁴³ In this debate, between the champions of national autonomy, headed by Kossovski, and those who frowned on this idea for various reasons, Medem adopted an in-between stance of sorts—either due to modesty, being one of the

youngest and newest members of the Bund circle, or because he had not yet formed a cohesive attitude toward this question. Evidently for the same reason, as a disappointed Kossovski hints, Medem did not play an important role in the debate with the *Iskra* people, as he had been expected to do, at the famous London convention that followed the Bund convention in Zurich. Be this as it may, in Zurich Medem laid the foundations for his “neutralistic” approach toward the national issue, which he phrased in his aforementioned essay about a year later, in 1904, and attempted to explain and amend for more than ten years.

In that debate, Medem credited the “neutral” approach toward nationalism to the social democrats. Neutralism, he explained, denoted the very opposite of the absence of an approach. It was the social democratic stance, he said, to recognize the entitlement of every social collective and to solve the national problem in any way it deemed acceptable. In Medem’s opinion, this solution is attainable in three ways: nationalism, assimilation, and social democracy. The first two paths—clashing ones—flow from the objective developmental process of modern capitalistic society. Although they lead to contrasting goals—assimilation and nationalism, respectively, both of which attempt to alter an existing situation, one by forging national identity and the other by nullifying it—in this sense, according to Medem, they are not neutral on the national question. Social democracy, in contrast, is objective in its approach to the nationalism phenomenon. In social democracy, national affiliation is unimportant per se but does take account of the diverse needs of separate social groups. By recognizing this, social democracy accepts social development whether it seeks to assimilate or to move toward national determination, and it has no preference for either trend. However, the objective social neutralism of social democracy should not be construed as political negativism, since the SD Party plays a positive role in defending every nation from enslavement that strives to bring about its assimilation by violent and artificial means.⁴⁴

By implication, since the Jewish masses still lived within an entrenched traditional religious culture that had been enduring for thousands of years, the SD Party should seek on their behalf a cultural-political solution that would let them continue to maintain this way of life as long as they wish to maintain it. Thus, although Medem did not say so explicitly, assimilation, if unimposed and generated by an objective social process, is not illegitimate. Nor did Medem state that assimilation is desirable or preferable to the aspiration for a culturally based national self-determination.

At this stage, Medem gives us the impression of a person still groping to find his way in the maze of psychological, cultural, and political meanings of the national question, particularly in its Jewish context. Thus, he found it

convenient at first to lean on a strong brace, the social democratic theory. A year later, however, when he sat down to express his thoughts systematically and in writing, he shifted his point of departure from the universalistic to the Jewish-particularistic. He did so for two reasons that he stressed at the beginning of his work. First, the world social democratic movement did not concern itself greatly with the national issue and, therefore, had not developed a specific national Socialist theory. (Importantly, he wrote in this vein before Otto Bauer published his aforementioned book.) Second—and, from his standpoint, more important—among the Jews, unlike other peoples that gave national consciousness centrality, assimilation was on the ascent.⁴⁵ Medem rejected conscious ideological and cultural assimilationism because it reflected the aim of uprooting a historical folk culture, modifying traditional ways of life artificially, and subjecting the collective past to sweeping repudiation. Concurrently, however, Medem rejected national ideology that defines the nation, in the main, as a spiritual and historical unity based on psychological solidarity, as in the thinking of the French historian Joseph-Ernest Renan and the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow. Especially infuriating to Medem was the concept of national solidarity, which disregards and repudiates the class struggle that takes place in every society and nation. Therefore, he categorically opposed the national political principle that animated the arguments of both Dubnow and the Zionists.

In contrast to them, Medem considered the national problem an inseparable part of the class outlook that flowed from objective rivalry between the bourgeois and proletarian classes of territorial and extraterritorial peoples. However, Medem and his comrades could not conceive of a national struggle between proletarian classes. Therefore, they—paradoxically, as devout Marxists—judged the national problem to be a cultural and psychological issue, such as that manifested in the class struggle of the Jewish proletariat among Jews and in society at large. Marxism sanctions the cultural dimension of this class struggle, in Medem's opinion, because every culture has a universalistic basis and a particularistic superstructure. Does this mean that the Bund considers the national differentiation historically and socially permanent? Certainly not, Medem replied, since "we are not nationalists." Does it signify the opposite—that Bundists reject nationalism outright? Absolutely not: "We are not assimilationists." Each socionational development has a class struggle that is particular to it. The outcome of the national struggle—assimilation or national coalescence—will be a result of "a blind process, over which we have no control."⁴⁶

In Medem's opinion, the nationalists and the assimilationists err by transforming possible results into goals. In other words, if history decrees that the Jews must assimilate into the peoples among whom they live, the Bund,

for its part, will make no effort to arrest the process: "*We will not intervene in this; we are neutral.*" Although the Bund rejects assimilation as a goal, it does so because it opposes making assimilation a goal but not because of principled objection to assimilation as such. Assimilation must occur only through a developmental process. In other words, "We are not against assimilation but against the aim to assimilate, against assimilation as a goal."⁴⁷ If historical development prompts the Jews to reinforce and develop their national culture, the Bund will not oppose this either, because "We do not rule out the national nature of a culture but oppose nationalist policy." In sum, the Bund is neutral on every issue that typifies the bourgeoisie in one way or another. In this respect, neither nationalism nor assimilationism has any bearing on the Jewish working class.

From the political standpoint, Medem, pursuant to Austria's social democracy, distinguishes between two methods of nationally based determination. One is statehood, which, in its essence, is a nation's political self-determination within specific borders. The second is the right of ethnic groups to develop their national particularism on a cultural basis in multinational states.

In Medem's opinion, cultural autonomy is the only credible social democratic manifestation of national self-determination in multinational states. Apart from the issue of culture, the "national Klal" has ceased to exist and has merged into the general interest of the multinational state. In any case, Medem stressed, national autonomy is the most significant manifestation of national self-determination in a state or a given territory within the state. Medem did not oppose nationhood based on territory but nationhood based *solely* on territory. Furthermore, Medem considered territorialism an incorrect and even false basis for self-determination. This is because historical development, while destroying or lowering many national barriers, has not extirpated the wish of collectives that have a cultural national tradition to continue sustaining that tradition in the present and in the future. Therefore, the popular collective national cultural heritage can still stand up to capitalism, which in essence promotes integration among peoples and assimilation of individuals. It is true that in this sense, the comprehensive idea of national autonomism in its three dimensions—state, territory, and personal—can impede a capitalist development that may uproot entrenched cultures. However, Medem re-expressed the right of a collective to self-determination: not as a territory but rather as a nation, "the combination of all individuals who belong to a historical-cultural group, irrespective of its commanding a demographic majority in a given territory."⁴⁸ This phrasing, coupled with political demands for equal civil rights for Jews and full recognition of Yiddish as a language of the state, is the national platform of the Bund.

However, in contrast to the party's clearly articulated political demands, the definition of a nation as a partnership of individuals who are bound to each other by a historical-culture tradition left some residual confusion at the theoretical level. The question here is thus: if so, what is the difference between this outlook and Dubnow's? Even if we assume, like Medem and unlike Dubnow, that the future Jewish nation will be not a *Klal Yisrael* but a "proletariat Yisrael," the national relationship between its various segments, dispersed in different countries, will be based on the cultural historical tradition. Admittedly, Medem, unlike Dubnow, assumed on the basis of the "neutralist" outlook that the Jewish nation, like other nations, might vanish at some future time. Even so, however, there was no principled difference between the two in terms of vindicating nationhood within the existing historical process, for which no time limits can be set. Furthermore, the two were also politically indistinguishable; both sought the establishment of national-cultural autonomy, official status for the Yiddish language, and equal civil rights for Jews in the Russian state. This, in Medem's mind, is what created an internal contradiction between the future national "neutralism" and the present national "dynamism" in the political and the cultural respects.

National neutralism, even as a prognosis, discomfited the Bund nationalists—the group headed by Vladimir Kossovski. In obituary remarks for Medem twenty years after the pamphlet came out, Kossovski explained that the party's official endorsement of neutralism had been nothing but a "false" thought and a political ruse of sorts to prevent internal schism and exacerbation of the struggle with the *Iskra* people in the Russian Social Democratic Party. As for the issue as such, the theory was of no practical importance in the political and ideological life of the Bund.⁴⁹

Did Medem, too, consider the neutralist theory a political subterfuge from its outset? If not, did he attempt to back away from it in subsequent years, or did he retain something of it until the end of his days? We will pursue these questions as this chapter continues.

Four years after he published his first work, Medem wrote an article with a title that speaks for itself: "Nationalism or 'Neutralism.'"⁵⁰ Implicit in the article from start to finish is the idea that Medem had been continually criticized for defining matters that way. He admits that the concept has not been particularly successful and that he would replace it if a better one could be found. The main thing from his standpoint, however, was not the name but the content behind it. This is the thrust of the article. The debate over the national issue, in his opinion, forces the party to answer two questions—one of *prognosis*, pertaining to the future of the Jewish people, and one of *ideology*, aiming to express the national goal in the here and now. In

regard to the first question, Medem repeats his opposition to the prognoses of both the “assimilationists” and the “nationalists.” The future that both outlooks expect hinges totally on historical development, even if their predictions are firmly rooted in reality in one way or another. Accordingly, the Bund faces a different question. The Jewish nation exists and its national consciousness is on the ascent. Thus, the issue is not one of prognosis but of a social fact that requires an ideological viewpoint.

The party, Medem stated, should view this phenomenon favorably without erasing the question mark that hovers over the survivability of Jewish nationhood in the distant future. Medem stressed that even Otto Bauer, “the assimilator” as he called him, and persons of like mind had to admit that the Jews were experiencing a national awakening on their way to total assimilation.⁵¹

This situation is accompanied by a psychological doubt: since assimilation may ultimately win the day, is the national endeavor futile? Medem countered this doubt by clinging to his original formula: staunch opposition to forced assimilation and acquiescence in volitional assimilation (*fraye asimilatsie*). However, his dialectical method of thinking led him immediately to ask: What does “volitional” assimilation mean? In his opinion, even if the masses are not directly pressured to assimilate but are denied government assistance for the development of their national culture by establishing national schools, or if their national language is not freely recognized—indirect repression to bring about assimilation is being applied. Capitalist governance, which by its very nature destroys, erodes, or commingles groups of people that have national historical traditions by making them into “scattered dust” (*tsushtoybt un tsushotn*), should also be considered indirect repression. The question that Medem asks here is whether this inexorable process can be fought in view of the assimilative economic process of ascendant capitalism. After all, the entire nation, and not only marginal groups within it, is involved in and susceptible to this process. In that case, Medem asks, why struggle at all? For the idea? Can one base oneself on the notion that both Dubnow and Ahad Ha’am called “the national will” (*natsionaler viln*)? Medem did not deny the existence of the “national will” but argued that this will flows from, instead of clashing with, the social reality and its requirements. In other words, if reality were to change in such a way as to obviate the existence of nations, the Jewish national will would not be able to obstruct the Jews’ assimilation. By the same token, if this situation does not exist, one should stop asking, Hamlet-like, “To be or not to be.”⁵² Medem denied that this stance denotes national fatalism. In fact, he asserted, it inspires positive national activism in the political and cultural respects. Medem was aware that the Bund’s national

activity seemed to be moving the party closer to nationalist circles in the Jewish bourgeoisie. Therefore, he hurriedly stressed the substantive difference that, he said, separated them. In his opinion, the Bund's outlook rested on a firm foundation and employed criteria in assessing correct and incorrect conduct in respect to the national issue. Sometimes the Bund cooperated with the "nationalists" and sometimes followed its own counsel. Either way, however, it never lost sight of the abyss between itself, as a proletarian party, and the organs of the nationalist Jewish bourgeoisie.

This article is undoubtedly an updated interpretation, of sorts, of its predecessor, written three years earlier. Basically, Medem had not changed his mind about neither affirming nor rejecting nationalism at the level of principle. Everything, in his opinion, depends on future social development. In two respects, however, the latter article has something new to say. First, it stresses that forced assimilation occurs not only due to deliberate policy, but also due to the process of capitalism, which causes historical societies to disintegrate. By explicit implication, the political struggle for cultural autonomy is part of the anticapitalist struggle of Western social democracy, especially the Austrian version, which recognizes the right of peoples to national cultural self-determination. Second, Medem is newly aware that the struggle for national-cultural autonomy draws the Bund closer to the views of Jewish liberal circles, for which Simon Dubnow was considered the main communicator. For this reason, Medem states that this rapprochement is transitory and partial and that, basically, the two paths are essentially separate. He was right. Liberal nationalism affirmed the principle of nationhood as an everlasting phenomenon; Medem presumed that it might be also temporary. The temporary and partial rapprochement between Medem's and Dubnow's national outlooks, and the distance of principle and substance that separated them, were manifested about a year later in an article concerning the main bone of contention: "The World Jewish Nation."⁵³ This article is novel because it constitutes the only intellectual attempt in the intellectual and ideological world of the Bund, and in Bund history up to World War II, to explore the question of whether there is a world Jewish people. According to Professor Hersch Liebman (Pesach Liebman Hersch), a demographer who belonged to the leading intellectual circles in the Bund, the Bund as a practitioner of applied politics never pondered this question deeply and systematically. Indeed, the Bund's set of pundits did not respond to Medem's article in this regard, in contrast to their behavior in regard to the "neutralism" article. Even C. S. Kazdan, who thirty-six years later, in a pamphlet devoted to the fiftieth anniversary of the Bund in 1947, tried to rehabilitate Medem's national outlook in respect to neutralism, did not address himself to this article.⁵⁴

In terms of Medem's national beliefs, the article is important because it discusses the third dimension of the Jewish national problem. The first is *recognition* of the existence of a Jewish working class; the second is *familiarity* with the Jewish masses. The third is *vacillation* about whether the Jews are a "world people"—a long-repressed matter that rose in full fury after the Holocaust.

The article begins with a sarcastic remark by rivals of the Bund who countered his arguments by accusing the Bund of believing that Jewish peoplehood ended at the borders of Russia, that is, that other countries have adherents of the Mosaic faith or citizens of Jewish origin, but not a Jewish people.

At the beginning of the article, Medem crafts an intellectual definition of the nation. From his standpoint, the concept of "cultural community" (*kulturgemaynshaft*) is too broad and vague. After all, various national entities may fall within the ambit of one culture. However, even if we accept the cultural-community definition of nationhood—Medem asked himself—may we then consider the Jews a world people? His answer: "Absolutely not" (*Beshum oyfn nisht*)—because Jews in the Pale of Settlement have no cultural partnership whatsoever with Jews in France, Germany, England, or Bulgaria. In other words, there is a crisscross cultural divide, between eastern and western Europe and between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewry, and therefore those collectivities are not related in any real sense. Without shared cultural life, there is no particular peoplehood.⁵⁵

Medem does admit to a possible counterclaim: that in other peoples, too, that is, the Russians or the Germans, the upper and lower classes do not share a singular culture. In their case, however, Medem replied, the paltry culture that the lower classes possess is wholly national. Within the Jews, things are utterly different. Western European Jews have no indigenous Jewish culture of their own; their culture is that of the nation amidst which they live. A Jew in the West speaks neither Yiddish nor Hebrew. He considers himself an inseparable part of the French or German national collective. Even if he does not forget his origin and even if he is willing to help Jews elsewhere when in trouble, the cultural gap between them remains.⁵⁶ From this point of departure, Medem contested Simon Dubnow head-on. On what, he asked, are the consciousness and feeling that hold the Jewish nation together based? He doubted that one could predicate a collective national feeling solely on a shared historical past. In Medem's opinion, the existence of a Jewish nation in the past does not mean that, in view of historical developments and changes, such a nation still exists. Then, paraphrasing Descartes, he described Dubnow's outlook ironically: "I was, therefore I am."⁵⁷

Furthermore, Medem argued, one cannot base a national consciousness

on historical memory only, as Renan and, following him, Dubnow believed. A shared national consciousness is generated by life in common, under real historical conditions, and it changes as these conditions change. The Jews' real social and political conditions have changed radically indeed. Therefore, there is a sociocultural gap not only between western and eastern European Jews, but also, since Poland was partitioned among three powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria), among Polish Jews. Jews in Congress Poland were different from Jews in Galicia. Therefore, at the dawn of the twentieth century, even though "one cannot identify several Jewish nations" (*etlikhe yudishe natsies*), one can no longer speak of a united Jewish nation (*aynhaytlikher yudisher natsie*). This is because slowly but steadily, for more than two hundred years since the advent of rationalism in Western civilization, "the historical process unfolding before our eyes"⁵⁸ has been destroying the religious framework that has given the Jews, dispersed around the globe, the consciousness and sense of being a single collective.

In sum, Medem repeats his traditional stance, and that of the Bund, against assimilation and against nationalism. Since he cannot ignore the collective national sentiments that the dispersed Jews still maintain, he admits that some things still bind the Jews together. However, to deal with these matters jointly and successfully, it is first necessary to *dispose* of the excess weight (*gevikhtn*) that burdens the Jewish reality. Since belief in the cause of building a world Jewish nation disturbs even those Jewish nationalists who are not Socialists, it must be stamped out altogether. Paradoxically, Medem argues sarcastically, the obesity of the national Klal Yisrael idea is not dragging the nation downward, toward the ground of reality, but lifting and propelling toward the firmament of the abstract and vague historical past.

In contrast, the original, living Jewish culture, that is, the Yiddish, not the Hebrew, can and should be developed, on a global basis, as a cooperative cultural venture of the Jewish collectivities that originated in the Yiddish culture, for as long as they wish to sustain that culture. This cooperation, however, Medem stresses, must not be identified with the idea of a world Jewish people, which changes the picture totally.⁵⁹ The very idea of a world people—a Klal Yisrael—inserts mutually exclusive elements into the cultural framework, such as Hebrew versus Yiddish, religious faith versus a secular national Weltanschauung, folk Yiddishist culture versus elitist Hebrew culture, and so forth. Anything of that nature may actually accent the real contradiction that exists between the national unity idea and the Yiddishist folk culture of the Jewish masses, especially in eastern Europe. By so arguing, Medem created an unbridgeable dichotomy of a national culture that does not exist and a folk culture that does (*natsionaln un folkishn*). Thus, Medem retreated from neutralism by asserting the importance of the

Jewish national feeling at large, especially in eastern Europe, and was even willing to accept the cultivation of this culture on a global basis. However, he categorically rejected the national idea of a “world people” as argued by Dubnow and, especially, by Zionism.

Does this actually point to a change in Medem’s outlook? Indirectly, Medem definitely devalued his argument—even if the question of his having done so directly is not discussed—by extending the incidence of national cultural “activism” to Jewish collectivities in eastern Europe outside Tsarist Russia. By so doing, he invested the national culture with meaning that transcends daily folk existence within a specific, defined social reality and transformed it into a bridge between the various segments of Jewry of eastern European origin. Thus, he strengthened the spiritual dimension of national identity by elevating it over various existential realities such as the Russian and the American.

However, Medem remained true to his basic premise, the foundation stone of neutralism: the conviction that economic and social development would eventually determine everything. Furthermore, in the matter of a “world people,” it was no longer necessary to wait for the prognostic process to unfold; after all, even then anyone could see that the widening divide among Jewry’s diverse segments was leading to national fragmentation. The sociohistorical process proved that several societies of Jewish origin were coming into being. Practically, perhaps, this means that the process of Jewish disintegration was but a preparatory—an objective—phase that would lead to the Jews’ disappearance as a world nation at some indeterminate future time.

Five years later, after the beginning of World War I, this expansion of cultural validity to a domain outside the particularistic social reality of eastern European Jewry prompted Medem to modify the “neutralism” doctrine substantially in the intellectual sense. Sofia Erlich—the staunch Marxist, daughter of Simon Dubnow, and wife of the future Bund leader in Poland, Henryk Erlich—attributed this change to Medem’s encounter with the Jewish masses in Poland.⁶⁰ While this mechanistic social perspective contains some truth, it obviously disregards the organic ideational process that Medem had developed in the decade preceding World War I. There is no doubt, however, that five years after he debated the meaning of the Jews’ existence as a world people, Medem took another step forward in developing his “neutralism” concept and adjusting it to existing and changing reality.

In a six-article series, published in 1916 under the pregnant title “Deeper in Life” (*Tifer in lebn*),⁶¹ Medem describes the development of his national outlook as a collective Bundist phenomenon from 1901 to that time. Without retreating from his first premise—that the fate of peoples,

especially the Jews, hinges on the development of “historical forces” (*historische krefn*)—he invests those forces with special meaning. His description of the development of the neutralistic view offers nothing new apart from one important point. Writing about the historical forces that change and determine the fate of nations, he stresses that the people is one of these forces and, therefore, the fate of the nation depends on the actions of the people.⁶² On the basis of this activist premise, Medem distinguishes between the “old neutralism” (*alter neutralism*) and the other neutralism, the new, that has developed as its outgrowth. The erstwhile neutralism, valid until 1905, called for total multicultural freedom within a framework of Jewish cultural autonomy. Thus, only if groups of Jewish activists wished to maintain a school system that did not use the national language would they be allowed to do so, and so forth. However, Medem continues, what was logical ten years ago no longer passes the test of current reality, because political consciousness has spread and become more deeply entrenched among the Jewish masses. This change has shifted the national question from the field of an essentially intellectual debate to the applied domain of practical and clashing political demands, such as recognition of the national language (Russian, Polish, Yiddish), national schools, and so forth. These practical issues, in Medem’s opinion, entail prior decisions of principle in advance of the struggle over what political path to follow. In this new reality, the Bund, as a political and social party, cannot avoid the fray on the basis of the “old neutralism” argument. Just as the Bund has adopted an active stance on the issue of class struggle, so should it in the national struggle, because the two are related. For this reason, the decision should not be left to objective or neutral historical forces.⁶³

Medem explains that the transformation of neutralism from passivism to national activism for inroads in popular life (*tifer in lebn arayn*) corresponds to the transformation of the Bund from an underground organization to a mass political movement. This transition has made abstract intellectual issues into practical daily problems, and “in this manner we have moved deeper into life” (*Mit dem dazign veg zenen mir gegangen alts tifer in lebn arayn*).⁶⁴

Medem summarized his “new neutralism” outlook, if one may thus define the change that occurred in his understanding of the national issue, in an article titled “Again, Ourselves and Our Nationalism.”⁶⁵ His purpose in writing it was to justify the party’s active involvement in political struggle for the organization and shaping of Jewish national-cultural life by advocating the abandonment of the old theory of total separation of class and national interests. Indeed, he believed that, despite the class differences, class interest and national interest should not be totally separated.⁶⁶ Thus,

concern for the nation at large should be a trait of the working class, too, and not the Jewish nationalists only. The Bund, as a political party, no longer floats in the mist of abstract theories but strides on the ground of reality. This being the case, when realities change, so do the party's views on class interest versus national interest. This, the class outlook, is, in Medem's opinion, a litmus test of sorts with which one may assess developments and make policy accordingly. However, even if the old litmus test (*der altn pro-birshstayn*) is not abandoned, it should be borne in mind that the principled class approach is merely a point of departure and by no means a rubber stamp (*shtempl*) in debating political and social issues. After all, people are the ones who adjust to reality. Therefore, although the point of departure is admittedly old, its fulfillment can be new.⁶⁷ At the end of World War I, this perspective prompted Medem to create a synthesis of sorts between the "internationalist" and the nationalist prognoses. In 1918, in view of the Versailles Treaty, Medem expressed the belief that the establishment of new nationally based states was a stopgap solution only. The social process, in his opinion, would by necessity lead to the creation of large supranational political and economic units. This objective trend would invest the cultural autonomy, the function of which would be to protect the specific nation within the multinational state, with particular importance.⁶⁸

Medem implemented this creed in his activity in independent Poland in 1917–1920, after which he left for the United States. During those years, he devoted himself mainly to the party's Yiddish Jewish-education enterprise. Another factor in this was his disillusionment with what was happening in the party, that is, the internecine struggle between the left wing, which labored to bring the Bund into the Third International—an act that would quickly destroy the party's independence—and the mainstream, which, to preserve the Bund's independence, refused to accept the Comintern's conditions. Medem, a traditional anti-Bolshevik and an uncompromising rival of Lenin, inveighed vehemently against the Comintern—a form of behavior that left him isolated in the party.

Politically isolated from his comrades, Medem worked actively to bring the Bund into the Congress for Yiddish Culture. By rejecting this initiative, too, the party exacerbated his isolation. Ultimately, however, there is no doubt that Medem's activity for the creation of a broad organizational framework that would encourage national culture subsequently formed the basis on which the Bund, Po'aley Tsiyyon Left, and various Yiddishist groups built the CYSHO school system.⁶⁹

Yiddish language and culture, in Medem's opinion, were more than matters of intellectual attitude and ideology; they were manifestations of the Jewish masses' nationhood and national interest. Language also

became a very urgent problem in the new democratic regime in independent Poland. Therefore, he demanded that at the present time, an era so different from its recent predecessor, when the political situation was different—the class interest of the Jewish workers should give rise to a struggle for the overarching national task, for the Yiddish language, in conjunction with other progressive national forces.⁷⁰ At that time, the party turned a deaf ear to his urgings.

These views of Medem's, expressed in 1916–1918, also translated into political terms from his standpoint. In 1916, while in Warsaw, he was invited to take part in a conference of Jewish public figures, intellectuals, and journalists in that city. At the conference, the question of the struggle for Jewish national autonomy was debated. Medem took the occasion to express a political view that was far-reaching relative to the Bundist ideological tradition and relative to his own ideological and political development. He spoke vehemently about the need to establish an autonomous national framework of *Klal Yisrael* and stressed that, under the existing circumstances, the Jews must be in charge of their own affairs. Then he added a sentence pregnant with significance: "I say this knowing that the Bund will lose the elections to the Hasidim. *That's always better than controlling a Polish municipal council*" [emphasis mine].⁷¹ As I will show in chapter 3, in 1919 a dispute erupted between Medem and Wiktor Alter in this matter—the importance of national autonomy in the era following World War I.

Medem's views were carried on, directly or indirectly, in the resolutions of the Russian Bund on the national autonomy question the party's tenth convention (April 1–6, 1917), after the February 1917 revolution. At this gathering, the Bund expressed a favorable view toward participating "*in a pan-Jewish convention convened on the basis of a general franchise . . . of all citizens . . . who affiliate themselves with the Jewish nation—because it regards this as an instrumentality for the attainment of national-cultural autonomy*" [emphasis mine].⁷² Therefore, the Bund placed the interests of the nation at large over sectional interests that were clashed in substantive ways: between the working class and the bourgeoisie, between the Zionist and the Bundist ideologies, between the nonreligious and the religious, and between Yiddish-speaking Jews and those who had adopted Russian as their vernacular.

Pursuant to this resolution, the Bund agreed, after internal vacillations and external disagreements, to participate in elections for the general convention of Russian Jews.⁷³ Although these elections took place in January 1918, the convention was not held because the Bolsheviks assumed power in December 1917. Medem put his outlook into practice in independent Poland between 1917 and 1920, when he left for the United States. During those years, he devoted himself mainly to the Yiddish-language Jewish

education enterprise. He had an additional reason for spending his time this way: disillusionment with the wranglings of two forces within the party. The left flank of the Bund strove to bring the party into the Third International, which would result in the Bund's imminent self-liquidation, whereas the mainstream, wishing to keep an autonomous Bund in existence, rejected some of the Comintern's terms. Medem, a traditional anti-Bolshevik and an uncompromising rival of Lenin's, came out passionately against the Comintern, which isolated him within the party.

Politically sequestered from his comrades, Medem sponsored a motion to enlist the Bund in the Congress for Yiddish Culture. The party rejected this initiative, too, thus aggravating his isolation. Ultimately, however, there is no doubt that Medem's activities for the creation of a broad organizational framework that would foster national culture helped to lay the foundations of the CYSHO school system, a cooperative venture of the Bund, Po'aley Tsiyyon Left, and various Yiddishist circles.⁷⁴

For Medem, the Yiddish language and its culture reflected the Jewish national essence and the authentic interest of the Jewish masses, as opposed to an intellectual posture or a question of ideology. Language was also an urgent, pressing problem in the new democratic regime of independent Poland. Therefore, he insisted that at the present time, a time so different from the recent past, in which the political situation was different, Jewish workers should act on their class interest by struggling for the overall national mission, that is, the Yiddish language, in concert with other progressive national forces. At the time, his was the only voice in the party that expressed such a demand.

Outside the party, however, one person could observe Medem's struggle with both satisfaction and sorrow: the historian Simon Dubnow, sire of the national autonomy idea. After all, as I show in chapter 3, Medem was the last fighter for pan-Jewish national-cultural autonomy at that point in time, shortly before his departure from Poland.

Thus, Medem "came in from the cold" and died outside his eastern European home—in the United States.⁷⁵ Might this symbolism be indicative of Medem's national outlook? I would answer in the affirmative. The high-minded Medem was an outsider and so he remained; Medem the Jew wished to become one with his people. His Jewishness was not natural but intellectual and emotional. As an intellectual of the Marxist persuasion, he could not repudiate the "prognostic neutralism" doctrine, which flowed from the very theory of social and historical development. However, the passion that brought him back to Jewry and his folk roots stood in a sort of dialectic contrast to his intellectualism. In the tension between the two—intellect and passion—the latter won out. Medem became the great cham-

pion of the Yiddish language and an indefatigable fighter for its national and political status. In this struggle, as an exponent of the prognostic view, he was willing to accommodate the assimilationists who had abandoned Yiddish in favor of Polish and with the ultranationalists who repudiated it in favor of Hebrew. However, he zealously fought against the in-between solution of a Yiddish-Hebrew diglossia and those who favored it.⁷⁶ In this matter, he brooked no compromise. Yiddish was the people, and Medem, after all, had returned to his people. In his uncompromising struggle for Yiddish, he made himself into a counterweight of sorts to the possibility of a neutralistic prognosis in the future. To his fellow Bundists, Medem was important not only as a national theoretician and a warm, charming person but also as a national “repenter.” For them—people whose national beliefs prompted them to divorce from their ideological surroundings—Medem became an emblem of the correctness of the path and, therefore, the legend of the Jewish labor movement.

In this sense, Medem resembled Zionist personalities on the fringes of the Jewish national sphere who, for various reasons, penetrated its core, gave it its shape, or left their imprint on it. Such personalities were Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Yosef Trumpeldor, and the poetess Rachel. This may explain Medem’s unexplained sympathy for the persona of Herzl.

SUMMATION

Summing up the Russian chapter in the history of the Bund from the perspective of the *Klal Yisrael* concept, the question is whether the *Klal Yisrael* principle have any status in the development of the party’s national thinking? I would answer in the affirmative. By examining how the “cultural autonomy” concept evolved during the 1901–1917 period, we see how complex and serpentine the party’s exertions on this issue were. Ber Borochov, of all people, noticed these vacillations at the very beginning of the century, and he pointed out the Bund’s weakness on the national question. This weakness, he said, was manifested in “[the party’s] inability to determine a clear source for it, one way or another”—either to regard nationalism as a reactionary phenomenon and a Utopian outlook or to admit that national rights were among the specific needs of the Jewish masses. For this reason, Borochov concluded, “Bundist rationales on the national question always stop in the middle and always leave something expressed half-way—half-assimilationist and half-national.”⁷⁷

Another question is this: in 1917, pursuant to the February revolution in Russia, did the Bund really pull into the *Klal Yisrael* “station” in its attitude toward the organization and powers of Jewish national autonomy? This

question is unanswerable because it was not put to the practical political test; the October Revolution elevated the Bolshevik Party to power, and the Bolsheviks, by ruling out Jewish nationalism, forced the Bund to dissolve within two years.

Nevertheless, it is hard to resist a speculative thought in regard to the political reality and the ideological spirit of the Russian Bund. If we assume that a liberal democratic regime would have taken shape in Russia after the February revolution, and that the constitution of this regime would have endowed minorities with self-determination in the form of national-cultural autonomy, would the Bund have continued to favor the idea of Dubnow-style comprehensive Jewish autonomy in the Russian state, as it did, after much vacillation, at the pan-Russian convention in 1917? Although this question is totally ahistorical, one may, I believe, answer it in the affirmative. After all, this chapter has shown how firmly, continually, and stubbornly the Bund adhered to the pairing of its national outlook and its class awareness, even though, according to its dialectic outlook, a national autonomy that wields powers that extend beyond the cultural domain might serve as an arena for social and class struggle. History developed in the opposite direction, of course. The Bolshevik Revolution dashed the Bund's hopes in all senses. Therefore, the question we ask here is shifted to the second era in the history and the Bund and to its second setting, independent interwar Poland.