Yiddish Politics in Southern States: The Southern District of the Arbeter Ring, 1908-1949

Josh Parshall

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of American Studies.

Chapel Hill
2017

Approved by:
Marcie Cohen Ferris
Jonathan Boyarin
Timothy Marr
Karen Auerbach
Seth Kotch
ABSTRACT

(Under the direction of Marcie Cohen Ferris)

Between 1908 and 1925, East European Jewish immigrants in nearly twenty southern cities founded branches of the Arbeter Ring (Workmen’s Circle), a socialist-oriented, Yiddish-speaking fraternal organization. While the New York-based group was a well-known part of the Jewish labor movement in the North, its southern history remains underexplored. This dissertation demonstrates that secular Yiddish culture and left-wing politics served the needs of early twentieth-century immigrants as they both adapted to and resisted the economic, political and racial atmosphere of the New South. Branches offered mutual aid benefits, collected funds for international relief, hosted cultural events and operated Yiddish classes for children. They also promoted Socialist candidates and supported striking workers. In the 1920s, pro-Communist members in several cities formed radical splinter branches that eventually left the organization to join the International Workers Order. Through their cultural programs, Arbeter Ring members built local iterations of a transnational Yiddish public sphere, even as their efforts to educate their children in Yiddish anticipated the ongoing flourishing of secular Yiddish culture. By 1945, several events—including the Nazi Genocide, the rise of Zionism and the realignment of the American political landscape—caused the southern Arbeter Ring to enter a long decline. In response, its leaders wrote and/or collected historical essays and personal memoirs about Arbeter Ring activity and Yiddish life in the South. These historiographic efforts reflect the centrality of
memory in Arbeter Ring and Jewish-left life, as commemorative texts both justify Arbeter Ring activities in relation to members’ experiences in Tsarist Russia and set forth the group’s history as a “usable past” for future generations. Today, the organization’s decades-long history in the South is nearly invisible in Jewish communities, which have physically migrated to suburban settings as they have moved politically and culturally closer to the American mainstream. Despite the southern Arbeter Ring’s obscurity, its history may yet constitute a usable past as Jewish southerners reckon with questions of Jewishness, politics, race and place. Through its examination of Arbeter Ring history in the South, this dissertation expands the scope of several scholarly fields, including modern Jewish politics, southern Jewish history and southern studies.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped me in the process of this dissertation, whether by sharing their experiences in an oral history interview, providing leads for archival resources, editing proposals and drafts, listening to me ramble about the project or simply being supportive friends during the peaks and valleys that accompany this kind of academic writing. Without question, Professor Marcie Cohen Ferris, my dissertation advisor, deserves the first mention here. Since she introduced me to the study of southern Jewish history in spring 2008, Marcie has provided steady guidance and enthusiastic support. Her ongoing mentorship has unquestionably changed the course of my career and my life. My relationship with Professor Jonathan Boyarin has been equally important. I was extraordinarily lucky to have Jonathan as an instructor and advisor at the University of Kansas and as a master’s student at the University of Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). Although he left UNC just as I returned to enroll in the Ph.D. program in American Studies, he was gracious enough to serve as a committee member for the dissertation, as well as in his permanent role of mentor, colleague and friend.

My remaining committee members, Professors Karen Auerbach, Seth Kotch and Timothy Marr, offered sage advice and asked important questions throughout the process, as well. Karen oversaw a pair of independent readings classes in my final year of coursework that proved indispensable for my development as a scholar of Jewish history, and I continue to benefit from her knowledge of Jewish historiography as a discipline and her familiarity with the networks that constitute the field. Seth Kotch pushed me to better situate my work in regard to twentieth-century southern history and provided excellent comments on early drafts of the dissertation.
Finally, Professor Marr continually inspires me to expand and transgress disciplinary boundaries, as I situate my work within its many fields, including Jewish studies, American studies and memory studies.

I have been fortunate to study and work in an exciting and collegial setting as part of the growing Department of American Studies at UNC. I am part of the first cohort to be admitted to the department’s Ph.D. program, a possibility that would not exist without the leadership of Professor Emeritus Joy Kasson. In its first years, the program was ably managed by Department Chair Bernie Herman and Director of Graduate Studies Patricia Sawin, both of whom have kept things running as smoothly as possible for the guinea pigs in the initial cohorts. Outside of the Department of American Studies, Della Pollock’s seminar in performance and history (Department of Communication) allowed me to develop this project as an intervention in historical memory, and Margaret Weiner’s “Following Actor-Networks” course (Department of Anthropology) introduced me to theoretical and methodological perspectives that continue to shape my thinking in exciting and unexpected ways.

This project started during my tenure as the oral historian at the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, based in Jackson, Mississippi. I am grateful to the entire staff there for supporting my early interest in Yiddish and Jewish-left history in the South and for providing me the resources to begin to pursue this original research. Following my return to graduate school, I depended on several grant-giving offices for funding, especially the Center for the Study of the American South, the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies (headed by Professor Ruth von Bernuth) and the UNC Graduate School. Through travel grants and summer fellowships, these institutions helped me to conduct research in Georgia, Ohio, New York and Texas. Thanks are due as well to a number of archivists and librarians, but I would particularly like to mention Jeremy Katz at the
Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta and Ettie Goldwasser at the YIVO archives in New York City, who have gone above and beyond to assist me with this work. I am also indebted to Mark Bauman and Brian Stone at *Southern Jewish History* for working with me on a primary sources essay about Mitchell Merlin’s “Left and right in the arbeter ring.” Of course, none of this work would have been possible without the dedication of my Yiddish instructors, beginning with Robert Pekarar at the National Yiddish Book Center in 2005. I was exceedingly lucky to study with Sheva Zucker at the YIVO Summer Institute in 2007 and to continue classes with her after my move to North Carolina. Sheva’s advice helped me through the translation of several essays in the 1949 edition of *In dorem land / In southern states*.

I offer heartfelt thanks to everyone who shared time and expertise with me by participating in oral history interviews. Susan Ganc and Henrietta Bell, both of Houston, participated in a joint interview, gave helpful advice early in the project and shared many of the documents that form the backbone of this dissertation. I have worked constantly from a digital scan of Henrietta’s own copy of *In dorem land / In Southern States*, the 1949 Southern District Conference Journal that I cite so often. The Keeper family in Texas—including Sam, David, Paul and Brian—provided wonderful interviews as well as indispensable family papers and home hospitality. I hope this dissertation speaks to them. Shirley Brickman of Atlanta, whom I met by chance at the 2013 Southern Jewish Historical Society meeting in Austin, Texas, was kind enough to grant me an interview and to suggest other contacts in Atlanta. Her cookies also sustained me on a long drive from Georgia back home to North Carolina. These are just some of the many people whose generosity made this work possible.

I am continually impressed by my fellow graduate students at UNC, both in the Department of American Studies and among those who work in Jewish Studies. It is a pleasure
to know that so many emerging scholars are kind as well as brilliant. From my specific cohort in American Studies Elijah Gaddis deserves special acknowledgement. His critical eye improved this text in countless ways, and his steady and determined approach to his own work set the pace for my research and writing. He is an unselfish colleague and a loyal friend.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Thank you to my parents and in-laws for material and emotional support. Additional thanks to my dad, both for teaching me to write and for serving as my first reader and final copy editor. Thanks to my son, Noah, for forcing me to wake up early every morning and for dividing work time from play time. Most of all, thanks to Allison for joining me on this journey, for supporting my dreams and for tolerating my obsessions. It is a privilege to pursue this kind of work and even more so to do it with such a caring partner by my side.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF FIGURES</th>
<th>xi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Politics and Southern History</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arbeter Ring and Southern Jewish Historiography</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Path Ahead</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: BUILDING HOME IN NEW SOUTH CITIES</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern (Arbeter Ring) Cities</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jewish South</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founding of Branches</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Aid and Self-Education</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to Crisis</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The District Model</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Space in a Changing Place</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: &quot;HEYMISHE SOCIALISTS&quot; IN THE JEWISH SOUTH</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Socialism(s)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Political Roots of the Southern Arbeter Ring</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Acts</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Left-Right Split</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiplicity</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Problem of Race ........................................................................................................ 91
Jewish-Left Responses ................................................................................................... 95

CHAPTER 3: YIDDISH CULTURE AND THE HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY .............. 108
The Arbeter Ring Calendar ............................................................................................. 113
District Conferences ....................................................................................................... 118
Secular Yiddishkayt in Southern Cities .......................................................................... 123
Lecture Tours .................................................................................................................... 126
Drama and Music ............................................................................................................. 130
Education ........................................................................................................................ 134
The Changing Horizons of Secular Yiddishkayt .............................................................. 141

CHAPTER 4: REMEMBERING THE SOUTH IN YIDDISH .................................. 146
Southern Memories in Practice ....................................................................................... 148

In Dorem Land .................................................................................................................. 154
Jewish Memory ................................................................................................................ 157
Jewish History ................................................................................................................... 161
A Usable Past ..................................................................................................................... 167
The Impulse for Preservation .......................................................................................... 170

CHAPTER 5: REMEMBERING YIDDISH IN THE SOUTH ................................ 177
A Revised History ............................................................................................................. 189
Recovering Memory ......................................................................................................... 192

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................. 198
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Births by year for individuals born before 1900 and buried in the Arbeter Ring section of Greenwood Cemetery, Atlanta. .......................... 42

Figure 2: Stone archway at the entrance to the Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle section of Greenwood Cemetery, Atlanta .................................................. 187
INTRODUCTION

Miriam Feigenbaum was born in Houston, Texas, in 1923. Her parents, Louis and Ray Platt, were East European Jewish immigrants who had arrived in the United States in the 1910s. In 1948, Miriam married Manuel Feigenbaum, a Jewish man from Czechoslovakia who had escaped the Nazis during World War II and made his way to Texas, eventually opening a small department store in the small town of Caldwell, the seat of Burleson County. Manuel was a popular merchant in the area, which had been settled by Czech-speakers and still boasted a significant Czech-speaking community. The couple built a “modern brick home” just a few blocks from the town square and their store, and they had two children, whom they raised in the nearby Jewish community in Bryan-College Station.¹ When Manuel died in 1975, Miriam took over management of the store, running it on her own for forty years.

I interviewed Miriam in October 2010. At the time, I worked as the oral historian for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, based in Jackson, Mississippi, and I had scheduled a week-long trip through Southeast and East Texas to conduct interviews. I intended to ask her primarily about her family’s experiences as the only Jews in a small, rural town and about the development of Jewish life in Bryan-College Station, which has seen an increase its Jewish population due to the growth of Texas A&M University. As I set up the camera and microphones, she settled into a

¹ “Manuel’s Celebrates Tenth Anniversary,” The Caldwell News and The Burleson County Ledger, August 19, 1955, texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth176182; Miriam Feigenbaum, interview by Josh Parshall, October 9, 2010, Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) Oral History Program, Jackson, MS.
gray recliner in front of a piano that was covered with photographs of her children and grandchildren. She spoke with a slight Texas accent.

I had not been able to speak with Miriam at length prior to the interview and did not know much about her background or upbringing as the conversation started. She grew up in a heavily Jewish milieu in East Houston. As she put it, “I don’t think we were isolated, but most of your friends were Jewish.” Curious about Jewish culture in 1920s Houston, I asked about her parents’ social lives, which led to the following exchange.

MF: Well, they belonged to Jewish organizations, you know, like the Hebrew Free-Loan Association and—also my daddy belonged to the Arbeter Ring, the Working Men’s Circle.

[Surprised, Josh starts to interject, but stops himself. Miriam continues.]

I didn’t go to Sunday School; I went to Yiddish school. I went to the Arbeter Ring school. We learned Jewish. I went there for about five years.

JP: Five years? Really? What did you learn there?

MF: Well, Jewish, Jewish history, and, at that time, the only time Hebrew was used was in the synagogue. If you conversed, you conversed in Yiddish.

JP: Now, the Arbeter Ring—

MF: —Yeah, the Workingmen’s Circle—

JP: —that’s a left-leaning organization!

---

MF: Well, I don’t know if it was—actually, my son always kids me, “your daddy was a capitalist!” [Miriam grins.] ... he had his own grocery business. It really was more of a social thing.3

Although I am not visible on the video, I am audibly excited and stumble as I formulate my follow-up questions. Up to that point, my interests in Yiddish language and culture and southern Jewish history had been separate pursuits. The revelation that Houston once had its own branch of the Arbeter Ring (Workmen’s Circle) expanded my sense of the vibrancy of Jewish immigrant life in early twentieth-century southern cities and contradicted my assumptions about the lack of an organized Jewish-left movement in the region. Although Miriam downplayed the group’s political dimension, the very existence of the Arbeter Ring in Houston signaled that the city was home to at least a nominally radical Jewish politics. Additionally, her initial use of “Jewish” to refer to the Yiddish language indicates how thoroughly East European Jewish culture shaped her early conception of Jewish identity.

My conversation with Miriam Feigenbaum planted the seed for the current project, an attempt to shape a history of the “everyday socialists” who founded southern Arbeter Ring branches and participated in their various activities.4 In subsequent years, I conducted additional oral history interviews with the children and grandchildren of Arbeter Ring members, located references to Arbeter Ring activity in secondary sources about the Jewish South and southern politics, translated essays, letters and memoirs written in Yiddish by southern members, and studied photographs, newspaper articles and other primary sources.

3 Feigenbaum, interview.

As I learned through my research, East European Jewish immigrants founded Arbeter Ring branches in more than fifteen southern cities between 1908 and 1926.\(^5\) Local branches provided mutual aid benefits, hosted Yiddish cultural events and, beginning in the 1920s, operated Arbeter Ring *shules* (after-school educational programs) for children, which taught Yiddish language and culture and Jewish history. As Miriam’s oral history indicates, the group was not strictly socialist; the Arbeter Ring tended toward ideological flexibility and members expressed a range of political views from progressive liberalism to communism. Still, they raised money in support of striking workers, both Jewish and non-Jewish and in and beyond the South, and conducted fundraisers for international Jewish relief groups such as the People’s Relief and ORT (a prominent Jewish occupational training organization). Their political activities also included the promotion of socialist candidates for national and statewide offices, especially Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas. In 1919, southern branches organized into two regional bodies, the Texas-Louisiana District and the Southeastern District.\(^6\) These merged in 1946 to create the Southern District of the Arbeter Ring. The organization’s membership in the South mirrored national patterns, peaking during the 1920s, remaining more-or-less steady during the 1930s and beginning a long decline in the 1940s.

This dissertation provides an account of Arbeter Ring activity in the urban South during the first half of the twentieth century, exploring how, through the founding of Arbeter Ring branches and the pursuit of their various activities, members created a new kind of Jewish space

\(^5\) There is some ambiguity about the precise number of southern branches at a given moment, in part due to short-lived chapters in Fort Worth, Texas, Tampa and West Palm Beach, Florida, and Montgomery, Alabama.

\(^6\) The Southeastern District included branches in Georgia, Florida, Tennessee and Alabama. There were branches in Virginia, but these belonged to a different regional network.
in southern cities, connected to fellow immigrants with similar cultural and political backgrounds, built local iterations of Jewish-left and secular Yiddish public spheres, participated in and contributed to national and international Jewish and socialist movements, and sought continually to make Jewish and radical histories relevant to contemporary problems in Yiddish culture and left-wing politics, as well as to their future development.

**Jewish Politics and Southern History**

This dissertation brings together two seemingly disparate topics: modern Jewish politics and southern history. In particular, the history that follows situates the southern Arbeter Ring at once in relation to transnational movements in Jewish-socialist politics and secular Yiddish culture and in relation to the group’s immediate surroundings in New South cities. Consequently, this work has the potential to appeal to two distinct audiences, and I have attempted to write in a way that would be accessible to readers from both southern and Jewish studies. It will be beneficial, however, to explain some key terms and clarify a few points before moving forward.

As the title suggests, this dissertation focuses on “Yiddish politics,” a usefully vague expression that calls to mind several interconnected issues. First, the choice to speak or write in Yiddish rather than in a non-Jewish language often asserts or makes use of Jewish difference. For some traditionally observant Jews, particularly Hasidim, Yiddish protects Jewish religious life by maintaining social separations between Jews and non-Jews. Among more secular Jews, Yiddish has been a vehicle for the transmission and communication of Jewish identity, whether serving as a primary vernacular language or in more performative modes, such as a comedian interspersing Yiddish terms in a stage routine. Yiddish serves as a tool, therefore, in negotiating

---

boundaries of and relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Second, Yiddish takes on political meanings in relation to Hebrew. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Yiddish competed with Modern Hebrew as a vernacular and literary language, and it came to represent the creativity of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Consequently, advocates of Yiddish often subscribed to anti-Zionist or non-Zionist ideologies. Third, Yiddish politics refers to the ways that Yiddish language and culture served as tools for specifically Jewish expressions of political movements that were not exclusively Jewish. Whereas the first two meanings point to the role of Yiddish in Jewish cultural politics, this third meaning derives from its importance to Jewish political cultures. Yiddish provided the vernacular grounding for the development of distinctly Jewish left-wing movements, and it played a crucial role in the development of the Arbeter Ring, the most successful Jewish socialist organization in the twentieth-century United States.

The Arbeter Ring, founded in New York City in 1890, emerged as a national fraternal organization in 1900 and quickly became the most popular mass-membership organization for Jewish socialists in the United States. As I discuss later, Jewish socialism took a number of forms in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the Arbeter Ring’s official political position changed over time, even as individual members represented a range of views. That said, from the 1910s through at least the 1930s, the group’s politics aligned roughly with the Socialist Party of America, and its cultural activities increasingly supported a version of diaspora nationalism—an orientation that celebrated Jewish cohesion and continuity while advocating for Jewish participation in multi-national democratic states rather than, or in addition to, the establishment of a separate Jewish state. Under this rubric, many Jewish socialists promoted the development of what Chaim Zhitlovsky called yidishe kultur, “an all-encompassing, primarily
secular civilization in Yiddish.

Zhitlovsky and other socialists were not the only advocates of a modernized Yiddish culture, however, and *yidishe kultur* represented a radical strain in a broader movement for the advancement of secular Yiddishkayt.  

While the Southern Arbeter Ring extended Jewish-socialist and secular Yiddish networks into new territories, branches and their members also encountered distinct regional and local conditions. They arrived not only in the South, but in the New South, a designation that signals both a region and an era. The New South period, spanning from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to the beginning of the Great Depression, witnessed increasing urbanization and industrialization, as well as the reassertion and reformulation of strict racial hierarchies. White elites strove to maintain power by driving a wedge between the white working classes and black southerners. They used the specter of black political and social equality to stoke the fears of the former group and, after consolidating power in the 1890s, radically disenfranchised the latter. White southerners also imposed new practices of racial differentiation on their black neighbors, using new laws, economic arrangements and social customs to limit black power, control black mobility and monitor black sociality. This segregated way of life, which had solidified across the South by around 1910, became known as “Jim Crow,” a term that signified the region’s particular structures and expressions of white supremacy.

---


The Arbeter Ring and Southern Jewish Historiography

My initial surprise at hearing about Miriam Feigenbaum’s Arbeter Ring education reflects the obscurity of Yiddish culture and Jewish-left politics in the South. The southern Arbeter Ring was not a major player, either in the cultural or political development of southern cities or in the transnational networks that constituted the Jewish left. It is no surprise, therefore, that the organization makes only brief appearances in the peripheries of southern historical scholarship—and exclusively in the subfields of labor and political history—or that historians of the Jewish left focus primarily on socialist politics and labor movements in the Jewish centers of eastern Europe, Palestine/Israel and New York City, and rarely afford any analysis of so-called “country branches.” More glaring than the southern Arbeter Ring’s omission in these fields, however, is the inattention of southern Jewish historians to the Arbeter Ring and other secular-Yiddish and Jewish-socialist organizations, a circumstance that relates to general problems of Jewish-left historiography in the United States and is amplified in the case of the Jewish South.

Admittedly, the Arbeter Ring in the South is numerically marginal in the broad sweep of American Jewish history. The number of southern district members likely peaked at around 1,200 individuals sometime in the mid- to late 1920s.¹¹ That is a rough figure, but even if the actual number approached 1,500 southern members, they still constituted a small minority within

---

¹¹ The 1,200 member estimate comes from the individual branch histories published in *In dorem land* (1949). The 1949 figure was around 900, but a third of the membership was made up of South Florida branches by then. See Leon Elkin, “Arbeter ring branch 692 in miami beach,” *In dorem land* (1949) 80-82.
the total body of the Arbeter Ring, which boasted 85,000 members in 1922. They also made up a small percentage of southern cities’ overall Jewish populations. The American Jewish Year Book estimated the 1927 Jewish population of Dallas to be 7,500 (of over 210,000 residents in total); local Arbeter Ring membership had peaked just a few years earlier at around 200 members, approximately 2.6% of the Jewish population and below 0.1% of the general population.

The small size of the Arbeter Ring in the South only partially accounts for its historical obscurity, however. Branches participated in local Jewish umbrella organizations, hosted cultural events that drew audience members from outside their own membership and had their activities announced in local Jewish newspapers. The largest southern branches persisted, albeit in diminished form, into the 1970s and even the 1980s. Still, those historians who mention the group—usually in histories of southern Jews or of 1930s labor-civil rights activism—tend not to explore its particularities or, in some cases, misrepresent the group entirely.

In the case of southern Jewish history, the lack of scholarship on the Arbeter Ring and other socialist-oriented groups relates closely to the general under-representation of the Jewish labor movement in American Jewish history but is also amplified by regional factors. As Tony Michels notes in A Fire in Their Hearts, American Jewish historians have tended to treat the

---

12 Tony Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 180.
Jewish labor movement as a transitional stage in Jewish adaptation to American culture, a perspective that deemphasizes the significance of politics for Jewish immigrants and “refuses to evaluate socialism on its own terms.”\textsuperscript{15} While most southern Jewish historians either mention the Arbeter Ring in passing or ignore the group altogether, Mark Bauman has dismissed its politics as symbolic or theoretical on several occasions. In one instance, he claimed that the lack of unionized manufacturing jobs for Jews and their roles as small business owners discouraged “overt activism.”\textsuperscript{16} Bauman’s characterization dovetails with the assumption that southern Jews acculturated quickly in the Christian, conservative atmosphere of the South, even as it echoes the “transitionary” model by discounting out of hand the possibility that socialist politics might confound other political and economic forces. While the Arbeter Ring often facilitated members’ movements toward American and Jewish mainstreams, this narrative ignores their other activities, such as collecting food for local striking workers or passing out socialist ballots on election day. Furthermore, it is exactly this tension between critique and acculturation that makes the group so interesting.

Michels also links the dominance of the “transitionary” interpretation of the Jewish labor movement to a “synthesis” model of American Jewish history, arguing that the central concern of Jewish American historians in the late twentieth century was the question of whether Jews can “maintain a vibrant ethnic community in the United States while participating fully in the larger

\textsuperscript{15} Michels, \textit{A Fire in Their Hearts}, 20.

According to Michels, this anxiety over assimilation and continuity—paired with institutional factors that oriented American Jewish history toward the broader field of Jewish studies rather than American history—has led American Jewish historians to develop a framework that legitimates American Jewish history by emphasizing the dynamic and strategic ways that Jews have continually refashioned their religious and cultural practices to adapt to American society. A “synthesis” approach, despite its merits, can easily slip into triumphalism, however, and American Jewish historians have struggled to craft narratives that account for experiences of “loss, alienation, ambivalence, disappointment, and rebellion.”

These observations on synthesis and triumphalism are doubly true for southern Jewish history. Because the South has not been a major center of Jewish American communal life since the onset of mass immigration in the 1840s, the action of American Jewish history—in terms of cultural production, religious innovation and entry into elite realms of business, education and politics—seems to have taken place in the North, especially New York, and the majority of American Jewish historiography reflects this. Meanwhile, American Jews have tended to regard the South, with its small Jewish population historically spread across market towns and minor cities, as a marginal hinterland. Marked by racial segregation, evangelical Christianity and political conservatism, the South appears exotic but inhospitable in the American Jewish imagination. In response, southern Jewish historians tend to emphasize themes of continuity and

---

17 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 17.


19 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 19.
acceptance, offering repeated examples of successful merchants turned civic leaders, interfaith bonds between rabbis and Christian clergy and tales of the great lengths to which southern Jews have gone to maintain religious communities and instill a sense of Judaism in their children.

Book and article titles such as *Shalom Y’all, Dixie Diaspora, Lone Stars of David* and “Chai Cotton” play on the assumed exclusivity of ‘Jewish’ and ‘Southern’ as cultural categories while asserting the validity of southern Jewish history by virtue of their synthesis. I am not suggesting that a synthetic approach to American or southern Jewish history is invalid or incorrect, but noting a historiographical lacuna that has obscured the southern Arbeter Ring as a result of its transnational orientation and critical politics.²⁰

Finally, in addition to, though not entirely distinct from, the transitionary interpretation and an emphasis on synthesis, the history of the Arbeter Ring has suffered as a result of its ambiguous legacies. The most detailed accounts of southern Arbeter Ring activities—conference journals and personal memoirs—were written in Yiddish, which many southern Jewish historians, let alone mainstream Jews, cannot read. Within southern cities, the movement of successive generations of Jews from central neighborhoods to affluent suburbs, as well as the destruction of former Arbeter Ring and Jewish immigrant sites under programs of redevelopment and urban renewal, has concealed the urban landscapes of early twentieth-century Jewish life.

Most importantly, perhaps, the group has no clear organizational heirs in southern cities, except a

²⁰A more thorough analysis of southern Jewish historiography should also include institutional factors. Many contributors to the field are public historians, amateur scholars, local historians or journalists, and they have often received assistance from Jewish communal organizations and museums. This does not invalidate their research, but the shape of southern Jewish history has undoubtedly been influenced by a relatively high number of “hard” communalists. See Michels “Communalist History and Beyond: What is the Potential of American Jewish History?” and David Hollinger, “Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era,” *American Jewish History* 95, no. 1 (2009), 1-32, doi:10.1353/ajh.0.0119.
few Yiddish reading circles. Members’ children often found their way into the Jewish mainstream, especially as members of Reform congregations and progressive Zionist groups, but the former presence of Jewish-left organizations is not reflected in historical displays or public commemoration. Traces remain, such as a Workmen’s Circle Credit Union in Savannah, a surviving lyceum building in Nashville and cemetery sections in Atlanta and Chattanooga, but they are not widely visible. This dissertation is an initial attempt, then, to recover the history of the Arbeter Ring in the South and restore it, in some measure, as an object of collective memory.

The Path Ahead

Through the founding of Arbeter Ring branches, East European Jewish immigrants with radical backgrounds built a kind of home for themselves in urban South environments, cultivating aspects of East European Jewish and secular Yiddish life, not just as sources of comfort, but as resources for continuing efforts to strive collectively for a more just world. Chapter one sets the scene for this home-building process by considering the economic and cultural conditions of the emerging urban South and examines the development of local branches and regional districts between 1908 and 1920. This chapter describes early members’ initial experiences in the region and branches’ initial activities, especially in regard to mutual-aid and international Jewish relief work.

My discussion of home draws primarily from Ghassan Hage’s concepts of “home-building” and “productive nostalgia,” which refer to the ways that migrants use food, language and other cultural features to invoke shared memories of a geographically or temporally remote home in order to create new spaces that offer security, familiarity and community, as well as
resources that help participants to engage with the broader society. As Hage explains, diasporic nostalgia may “take the form of homesickness,” when memory serves only as a refuge from “the potentially traumatizing encounter with the present.” “Productive” nostalgia, by contrast, “is an active insertion of memory in the construction of the present and future.” Hage’s “home-building” neatly describes the Arbeter Ring’s dual role as a space of shelter in the radically new environment of the urban New South and as a vehicle for collective action toward cultural and political objectives.

In the second chapter, I show that southern Arbeter Ring branches, although geographically distant from the major centers of Jewish-left politics and Yiddish secular culture, represent constitutive nodes in transnational networks of radical Jewish politics and explore the ways that those networks did and did not facilitate cross-racial solidarity. The chapter focuses on activism by southern branches, political conflicts within the organization, the divergent priorities of political radicalism and Jewish cohesion, and how Jewish-left politics failed to equip southern members to reliably address the racial injustices of the Jim Crow South.

Historians of Jewish socialist movements have long recognized the tension between Jewish national belonging and visions of universal liberation as a defining feature of the Jewish left, and this chapter furthers that scholarship by incorporating Annemarie Mol’s concepts of “enactment” and “multiplicity” into its analysis. “Enactment” highlights the ways that things—including objects, animals, words or groups of humans—come to exist processually and through relations to other things, and “multiplicity” refers to the ways that things are often enacted.

---


22 Hage, “Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building,” 417.
differently in relation to different things. These terms prove useful in thinking through the sometimes divergent priorities of the Jewish and socialist networks in which the organization operated. The disruptive 1920s schism between socialist and communist members resulted from a crisis in which the emergence of Soviet Russia and the Third International made it increasingly difficult for the Arbeter Ring to manage the incongruities between its radical and Jewish enactments. This theoretical perspective also emphasizes the distribution of agency across networks of mutual enactment, which helps to explain radical splinter groups’ more consistent involvement in depression-era cross-racial activism not as a result of stronger personal convictions but as a consequence of the networks in which they were enmeshed.

In addition to their political activities, Southern Arbeter Ring branches and their members participated in transnational movements in secular Yiddish culture, championing non-religious modes of Jewish engagement, contributing to the development of Yiddish public spheres in southern cities and working to ensure the ongoing relevance of Yiddish language and culture in the South and around the world. The third chapter centers on local groups’ social and cultural activities—including picnics, musical performances, regional conferences, lecture tours and children’s Yiddish classes—through which Arbeter Ring members affirmed their connections both geographically to Jewish and left-wing movements across local, regional and national boundaries and also temporally to a common East European past and a shared vision of a Yiddish (and radical/progressive) future.

In keeping with the chapter’s emphasis on time, I analyze regional conferences, cultural programming and educational endeavors as moments in which southern members collectively critiqued the conditions of American, southern and Jewish societies and imagined alternative futures for Yiddish culture and socialist politics. Here I am indebted to José Esteban Muñoz and
his work on “potentiality” and “the utopian performative.”23 “Potentiality,” borrowed from Georgio Agamben and Aristotle, refers to an occurrence or situation which is fleetingly imaginable but not yet possible and, therefore, lies at or beyond the horizon of possibility. Relatedly, “utopian performance” designates those acts through which minoritarian communities momentarily enact “imaginable but not-yet-possible conditions.”24 At a regional conference, for example, when children from the southern Arbeter Ring shules led the conference proceedings for an afternoon, the exercise spoke to radical Yiddishkayt’s potentialities as a mode of ongoing ethnic and political identification in the coming generation.25 And as the festive conference mood allowed participants to forget, for a time, their relative isolation in southern cities, mass singing, branch reports and even parliamentary process staged a performance of utopian Yiddishkayt that sustained the members’ ideals during the rest of the year.26

At each stage in the development and decline of Arbeter Ring activity in the South, participants collectively and strategically recalled pre-immigration experiences, the founding of southern branches and key moments in organizational history in order to address present challenges and chart a course for future action. Through collective memory—always instantiated


in a particular act of remembering—members made claims to personal identities, negotiated the Arbeter Ring’s place in southern cities and relationships to other Jewish groups and addressed the group’s shifting and sometimes competing political and cultural priorities. Furthermore, they did so in urban South landscapes already steeped in the symbols of Confederate memory and marked, to a lesser extent, by the counter-narratives enacted in black commemorative culture. Accordingly, Chapter Four shifts from the historical narrative offered in the preceding chapters to consider the central role of remembering in southern Arbeter Ring history and to examine the branch histories, memoirs and other commemorative texts through which southern members sought to transmit and preserve their memories.

I base my inquiries into the southern Arbeter Ring as a commemorative culture on three major claims about memory, history and the relationship between the two. First, humans do not store memories as static chunks of information to be recalled, intact and unchanged, as needed. Instead, we shape and reshape memories in acts of remembering. This is true for both the private action of personal remembering and the interpersonal actions through which we remember collectively. Second, modern historiography, despite professional historians’ claims to empiricism and objectivity, is not separate from collective memory—which I will provisionally define as a particular group’s dynamic repertoire of stories and information about the past. Instead, historiography draws from the symbols and structures of collective memory, even as it

---

has the potential to contribute to, or otherwise alter, collective memory’s form and content. The writing of history, in other words, is a form of remembering, but it is also a special kind of remembering. Historians rely on particular types of evidence, assess their sources according to prevailing scholarly standards and, generally, claim a unique authority in relation to historical facts. Third, historiography and other forms of collective memory matter to the extent that they produce a “usable past”—a narrative that explains and, often, justifies present conditions, provides models of successful and unsuccessful actions and determines, in large part, perceptions of what will be possible in the future. Based on the above claims, I interpret southern Arbeter Ring members’ commemorative and historiographic writings as aspects of an organizational culture that incorporated longstanding modes of Jewish commemoration into self-conscious attempts at modern historical documentation in order to validate its origins and ongoing presence in the South and chart a course for future action.

Questions of memory, history and forgetting also inform the Epilogue, which begins with a brief account of the Southern District’s demise. The Arbeter Ring Southern District remained steadily active during the 1930s but began to decline in earnest after 1940. Smaller branches, such as Macon and Waco, saw their membership drop significantly by the 1950s, while Houston and Atlanta were able to maintain active, if diminishing, Arbeter Ring branches for much longer. (South Florida, no longer “southern” in many ways, became the heart of Southern District

---

28 Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, 9-10. Funkenstein argues that modern historiography differs from collective memory in that the writing of history reflects “on the contents of collective memory” and “gives rise to increasing freedom” in the “individual instantiation” of those memories.

activities by the 1960s or so.) Following the dissolution of southern branches, the Arbeter Ring faded from collective memory in southern Jewish communities, and local histories of Jewish-left politics and secular Yiddish culture became increasingly obscure. After tracing this decline, I offer a revised narrative of twentieth-century southern Jewish history, recast in light of the history set forth in this dissertation. Finally, I close with an attempt to answer a question that I have asked myself throughout this project: how might this story—one in which efforts to cultivate a usable past figure so prominently—prove useful in the present moment?
CHAPTER 1: BUILDING HOME IN NEW SOUTH CITIES

David Davis arrived in Atlanta in 1906, after immigrating to the United States in 1905 and spending time in New York City and Hartford, Connecticut.\textsuperscript{30} Like other young Jewish newcomers to Atlanta, Davis left Russia to avoid military conscription and found his way to the South through family connections. His uncle Shmuel Yampolsky, with whom Davis had lived in the town of Nemirov, gave him the address of a close friend, Morris (Moshe) Tessler, who had recently moved to Atlanta.\textsuperscript{31} Although Davis hoped to make a life for himself in Hartford, where he stayed with an aunt and uncle, he soon found the exhausting conditions of factory labor little resembled the better life America was supposed to promise. With the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Davis, his uncle Reuben and his aunt Sonya left the urban Northeast for Atlanta.\textsuperscript{32} Davis’s 1974 memoir, \textit{In gang fun di yorn: zikhroynes fun beyde zaytn yam} (the book itself translates the title non-literally as \textit{The passing years: memories of two worlds}) describes his first experiences in Atlanta and his early impressions of this southern city.

\textsuperscript{30} David Davis, \textit{In gang fun di yorn, zikhroynes fun beyde zaytn yam} [The passing years, memories of two worlds] (Tel-Aviv: Nay Lebn, 1974), http://archive.org/details/nybc207093. Davis was born David Yampolsky, but changed his name in the United States. A literal translation of the title is “as the years went by: memories from both sides of the ocean.”

\textsuperscript{31} Davis, \textit{In gang fun di yorn}, 68-72.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 132-134.
After “twenty some odd hours traveling on the train from New York,” Davis walked from the Atlanta train station to the ‘streetcar suburb’ home of Moshe Tesler.\(^{33}\) (His aunt and uncle had gone out on their own to search for housing.) As Davis took in his new surroundings, he marveled at how attractive and calm the city appeared, yet his mind also raced. What could an immigrant do in such a setting—how could he make a living? Before long, Davis reached the “quiet, clean street” on which Tesler lived—Piedmont Avenue near the conservative synagogue, Ahavath Achim—and found the whole family waiting for him on their “big, wide porch,” the iconic greeting space of the domestic South.\(^{34}\) When Davis expressed his doubts about earning a living in this new southern environment, Tesler assured his landsman friend, “the majority of [Jewish] immigrants that come here start out by peddling,” and Davis soon picked up a pack and did the same.\(^{35}\)

Just as Davis recalls his migration to the South and initiation into the peddling trade—including how he met and recruited other peddlers who cosigned the loan to purchase his first supplies—he also wrote about the “narrow,” “unpaved” streets of tightly packed, company-owned mill houses and about the mass violence perpetrated on black Atlantans by white mobs in

---

\(^{33}\) The 1907 city directory indicates that “Maurice” Tesler lived at 38 Piedmont Ave., in a stretch of road that includes a number of Jewish residents and “Ahavath Achim Church.” *Atlanta City Directory* (Atlanta: Foote and Davies Co. and Joseph W. Hill, 1907), 312, http://archive.org/details/atlantacitydirec1907foot.

\(^{34}\) *Davis, In gang fun di yorn*, 141.

September 1906, the “pogrom on the Blacks,” in Davis’s words.\textsuperscript{36} Davis and other “greeners” who migrated to the emerging cities of the urbanizing and industrializing South not only had to quickly learn a new language and, often a new trade, but also encountered unfamiliar, complex systems of race and class, which were themselves in flux across the region. For some of these new arrivals, including Davis and his uncle Shmuel Yampolsky, the founding of Arbeter Ring branches in southern cities, as well as the eventual organization of regional networks, was a critical part of both orienting themselves to their new situation and creating a secure space for themselves in a society that was rigidly structured by hierarchies of race and class.

This chapter focuses on the opening decades of the twentieth century, seeking first to set the stage for the New South entrance of Jewish immigrants, who would later become the founders and organizers of local Arbeter Ring branches and networks throughout the region. While each city differed according to size, economics, demographics and other factors, the emergence of southern Arbeter Ring branches reflects the destabilizing forces of urbanization and industrialization that played out across the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, the rise of southern cities as financial and industrial centers was a precondition for the arrival of Jewish immigrant populations that could support the Arbeter Ring and other new Jewish organizations, and the rapid growth of such cities spurred anxieties about race, gender and class that informed the volatile politics of the immigrants’ adopted homes.

With the founding of Arbeter Ring branches, David Davis and other recent arrivals responded to the state of Jewish communities in southern cities, where founding members felt the need to establish a new organization for mutual aid and secular Yiddish culture, even as they

encountered suspicion and (sometimes) hostility both from traditionally religious institutions that
catered to fellow eastern European immigrants and also from established Jewish residents,
generally Reform-affiliated and “German”-Jewish. The chapter ends with a discussion of the
earliest activities and achievements of southern Arbeter Ring branches, as well as efforts to
organize at the regional level through the Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts, both
founded around 1920.

Southern (Arbeter Ring) Cities

The rapid changes taking place in the rising commercial centers of Atlanta, Dallas,
Memphis and Birmingham—only Birmingham, “the Pittsburgh of the South,” had been built
around manufacturing—drew an unprecedented number of Jewish immigrants in the first
decades of the twentieth century. These newcomers, however, represented only a small fraction
of East European Jewish immigrants to the United States, most of whom settled in larger and
more industrialized northern cities. The conditions of “New South” urbanization, then, allowed
for the arrival of a critical mass of potential Arbeter Ring members while guaranteeing that the
emerging branches would never reach the size or density of those in the North. Additionally,
Arbeter Ring members’ experiences and fortunes depended largely on the particular growth and
development of each city.

As in the North, the southern Arbeter Ring was an urban phenomenon; of the seventeen
cities in which a lasting Arbeter Ring organization developed, only one, Macon, Georgia, had
fewer than 1,000 Jews, the maximum population of a “small town” Jewish community as defined

37 The usefulness and accuracy of the “German” designation will be discussed shortly.
by historian Lee Shai Weissbach. “Urban,” however, did not mean the same thing from region to region in America. Although southern cities had grown tremendously since the Civil War, and were undergoing especially rapid expansions from 1900 to 1910 when the first southern Arbeter Ring members began to arrive, these cities remained smaller and less industrialized than cities in the Northeast and lagged in the development of infrastructure and cultural institutions. The most obvious distinction was size. The two oldest branches in the Southern District, for example, were founded in 1908 in Atlanta and Dallas, cities that ranked thirty-first and fifty-eighth (respectively) in population according to the 1910 census. Southern cities had grown substantially since 1880, but the increase in population came primarily from intra-regional migrations, rather than large-scale immigration that drove growth in the urban North. Additionally, southern cities developed as centers for the trading and processing of raw materials rather than large-scale manufacturing, so their fortunes were closely tied to the agricultural economies and extractive industries of nearby rural areas. David Goldfield notes that the


39 Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 55; List of southern branches and dates of founding, *In dorem land*, 154. The City of Atlanta still ranks in the 30s by city population, but both the Atlanta and Dallas metro areas are currently in the top ten, nationally. See “Table 20. Large Metropolitan Statistical Areas—Population: 1990 to 2010,” http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0020.pdf. While Arbeter Ring members in southern cities undoubtedly had very different experiences than counterparts in the largest and most industrialized cities, the similarities or differences between the South and smaller cities in other regions deserves further inquiry.

cultural and economic connections between southern cities and the surrounding countryside were reflected in their rustic appearances. Street lights, whether gas or electric, were installed only in business districts and affluent white neighborhoods. The region also had the worst streets in the country. In 1903 “over 70 percent of Birmingham’s streets, 85 percent of Memphis’s streets, and 92 percent of the thoroughfares in Dallas” remained unpaved.41

Despite their differences, southern and northern cities drew migrants for similar reasons. Poor people, both white and black, ventured to cities in search of work, having little chance of improving their station under the systems of debt peonage common in the rural South.42 Among educated whites, cities offered greater opportunities for advancement, especially for those who could work as bookkeepers and clerks, or in other commerce-related jobs. Finally, younger members of the rural white elite moved to southern cities in the late nineteenth century and established themselves as business leaders by translating the skills, resources and connections of their landowning families into a new middle class livelihood based on “more fluid” forms of capital than cotton and tobacco.43

In a region with the largest black population in the country, and with slavery and the Civil War within living memory, race became a central issue in the development of southern

---

42 Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 62.
43 Ibid., 64-65. John Kasson gives a useful overview of anxieties about northern urbanization in *Amusing the Million: Coney Island and the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). For an account of how issues of urbanization played out in the context of an eastern European city with a large Jewish population, see Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012). While Ury does not compare urbanization in Warsaw to other cities, aspects of his account, especially his attention to contemporaneous perceptions of violence, social disorder and moral chaos in the rapidly expanding city, are strikingly similar to histories of urbanization in the United States.
cities. Under slavery and in rural environments, “white racial power” had been backed by the state, but primarily enforced—and also resisted and negotiated—through interpersonal and, indeed, familial relationships among white and black southerners. In the absence of such longstanding interpersonal relations between blacks and whites in the newly forming urban New South, and in response to new workplaces and inter-racial consumer venues that eroded white supremacy, white leaders in southern cities developed increasingly formalized rules of racial separation, often, though not exclusively, enacted through legislation. Consequently, the southern city became a driving force behind emergent practices of “Jim Crow” racial segregation and class differentiation that came to define and institutionalize racial patterns throughout the region.

For new immigrants in southern towns and cities, one of the most visible manifestations of the push for new racial separation was the rise of segregated housing from 1890 through the early twentieth century. Thomas Hanchett, writing about racial sorting in Charlotte, North Carolina, argues that local elites’ reactions to 1890s labor unrest and political populism resulted in shifting housing patterns, with a “salt and pepper” distribution of white and black households giving way to block-by-block segregation by 1910 and neighborhood-level segregation by 1920. While an Arbeter Ring chapter did not develop in Charlotte, similar trends shaped the racial landscapes of cities where new Jewish immigrants did found branches. Residential segregation in Atlanta increased after 1900, as population growth and downtown

44 Grace Hale, Making Whiteness, 124.

45 Ibid.

commercialization displaced poor people regardless of race, and black communities consolidated homes and businesses farther from white areas, in part as a reaction to racial violence—like the so-called 1906 “race riot” in which white mobs murdered dozens of black residents. As Davis observed in his first days as a peddler, black and white residents were almost entirely segregated, and the city government sought to reinforce residential segregation through ordinances in 1913 and 1917. The emergence and hardening of housing segregation was a ubiquitous feature of the urban South, but it proceeded at different speeds and through different means in according to local conditions. As Edward Ayers writes, “the newer a Southern city, the more likely it was to be consistently segregated by race; the faster a Southern city grew, the faster it became segregated.” Consequently, the rising cities most likely to attract new Jewish immigrants were those where the divisive and inflammatory forces of racial segregation were most prominent.

The Jewish South

At the time, the Jewish population was very small in the cities and towns of the secluded South. It consisted mostly of Sephardim and “Yehudim.” They were either sworn assimilationists or fanatically Orthodox. These were Jews who led narrow lives, striving only to [meet] personal and family interests. Into such an atmosphere were thrown young Jewish immigrants from Russia, Poland, Lithuania and Romania who were already hardened in struggle against reactionary politics and injustice, against political and social inequality.


48 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 157; Steven Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America), 115-116, 187-188; Kuhn, Joy and West, Living Atlanta, 37.

49 Ayers, Promise of the New South, 67.

50 Yehudim (as opposed to yidn) refers to acculturated “German” Jews.

51 Joseph Duntov, foreword to In dorem land (1949), 6.
The influx of Yiddish-speaking Jews to southern cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not the beginning of the Jewish life in the South, but it did precipitate a complete transformation of Jewish communities in the region. Jews settled in colonial port cities including Savannah and Charleston beginning in the early eighteenth century, and southern cities boasted some of the largest Jewish communities in the early national period. Although New York City and the urban Northeast became the demographic, cultural, and emotional heart of Jewish life in the United States, Jews continued to play a prominent role in southern economies and communities both before and after the Civil War. As Jews followed the cotton industry westward to new trade centers in the interior South in the mid- and late nineteenth century, they became increasingly acculturated and contributed to the development of American Reform Judaism throughout the region. After 1890, then, when East European Jews migrated to the American South in unprecedented numbers, they encountered established Jewish communities that viewed the newcomers as a potential threat to their relatively secure social and economic positions. At the same time, Reform Jews could not ignore the demographic reinforcement that East European Jews represented in southern communities with diminishing congregations and growing assimilation.

Among the cities included in the Arbeter Ring Southern District, only Savannah’s organized Jewish community dates to the colonial era. As in other American port cities,

---Joseph Duntov, on the beginnings of the Arbeter Ring in the South, 1949


Savannah’s Jewish community was majority Sephardic at the time of its founding in the 1730s, although it also included Ashkenazi Jews from western and central Europe. Most cities in the Arbeter Ring Southern District, however, were founded in the early to mid-nineteenth century, and in those cities the Jewish population derived primarily from German states, Alsace and parts of Poland. By the 1890s, when Jews from Russia and eastern Europe began to emigrate in large numbers, the earlier arrivals to both colonial-era port cities and antebellum commercial centers—as well those who settled in smaller towns and cities—were integral players in local and regional economies, whether as traders in and processors of agricultural staples like cotton or as dry goods merchants in the new southern consumer economy that emerged after emancipation.

By 1900 the established Jewish communities of the South developed into a stronghold of Reform Judaism, and southern Jews exhibited a high level of acculturation. From 1825 to 1827, a short-lived breakaway congregation in Charleston, the Reformed Society of Israelites, had been a precursor to Reform Judaism in the United States, and Jewish congregations across the South implemented a number of religious reforms during the nineteenth century, including mixed-gender seating, English-language prayers, choral singing and organ accompaniment, and

---

54 Ferris and Greenberg, “Introduction,” 3-4. There was an Arbeter Ring branch in Richmond, Virginia, which also had a pre-revolutionary Jewish community, but Virginia branches were not included in the Southern District.

55 Ferris and Greenberg, “Introduction,” 6. San Antonio, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, were both founded in the early eighteenth century, but did not develop significant Jewish populations until the nineteenth century.

56 Ibid., 6-7, 9-11.

formally delivered sermons.\textsuperscript{58} Whereas Reform Judaism expanded rapidly in all regions of the United States, it became the “predominate form of Jewish religious life in the American South.”\textsuperscript{59}

Jews also took part in the social and civic lives of southern cities. Jews enslaved black laborers at an equivalent rate as non-Jews of similar status and occupation, and Jewish southerners fought for secession in the Civil War.\textsuperscript{60} Synagogues sought out English-speaking rabbis, often called ministers, not only to appeal to native-born generations, but also to serve as liaisons to the non-Jewish community.\textsuperscript{61} Furthermore, non-Jews often viewed the founding and growth of local Jewish communities as a symbol of progress, prompting non-Jewish groups and leaders to donate to congregations’ fundraising campaigns and to serve as dignitaries at synagogue dedications.\textsuperscript{62}

Southern Jews also experienced periods of intense nativism—particularly during the economically depressed 1890s, which was also an era of resurgent “racial radicalism” against black southerners—and civic leaders’ expressions of “public philo-Semitism” belied strong

\textsuperscript{58} Ferris and Greenberg, “Introduction,” 6.

\textsuperscript{59} Zola, “The Ascendancy of Reform Judaism,” 182.

\textsuperscript{60} Ferris and Greenberg, “Introduction,” 7.


undercurrents of “covert” anti-Semitism. As a result of these contradictory feelings, Jews in southern cities occupied an ambiguous and, at times, tenuous position at the turn of the twentieth century. Whereas Dallas’s Sanger family, for example, could count themselves among the top tier of the local elite, other Jews in Dallas and elsewhere faced new restrictions amid increasing concerns about Jewish business practices and racial status. Even as successful Jewish business owners played prominent roles in economic and civic development, they experienced social exclusion from elite white gentile institutions, often leading to the establishment of selective Jewish clubs.

The most infamous instance of anti-Semitic violence in the early twentieth-century South, the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank in Marietta, Georgia, was at once a demonstration of Christian southerners’ capacity for anti-Semitism and a significant outlier compared to the usual means through which they expressed ambivalence toward Jews. In the early morning of April 27, 1913, a black night watchman at the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta discovered the body of Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year old factory girl. Phagan’s family were recently displaced tenant farmers who had migrated to Atlanta seeking industrial employment. Leo Frank, the factory superintendent and partial owner who soon emerged as the prime suspect, was a Brooklyn-born.

---


raised, German-Jewish industrialist. Following Frank’s arrest, rumors of his sexual perversion circulated widely, and Atlanta’s white public clamored for Frank’s execution. A jury convicted him of murder on August 26, 1913, and the judge sentenced him to death by hanging. After a two-year appeal process and the commutation of Frank’s sentence to life in prison by Georgia Governor John M. Slaton in June 1915, a vigilante mob kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him on August 16, 1915.

Historians note that Phagan’s murder and the subsequent trial elicited a focused expression of white, working-class southerners’ anxieties about industrialization and urbanization and that Leo Frank’s doubly alien status as a northerner and Jew made him a powerful symbol of the threatening changes taking place in New South cities. Many of the public claims of Frank’s guilt and calls for his execution made his Jewishness explicit, and opportunistic demagogues used the occasion to argue that Jews occupied a separate and unassimilable racial category from whites. Despite attempts to organize a boycott of Jewish merchants and fears that the announcement of Governor Slaton’s commutation order would lead to a white riot against Jewish neighborhoods, the boycott gained little traction in Atlanta and

---


66 Dinnerstein, “Atlanta in the Progressive Era,” 192-194; Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 203-204.


there were no significant attacks on or protests toward the city’s Jews. Still, the incident reminded Jewish Atlantans, especially the established elite, that they remained subject to heightened scrutiny, and some Atlanta Jews avoided calling attention to the case for decades to come. Historian Steven Hertzberg additionally notes that the Frank case affected “German” Jews more directly than their East European counterparts, who had little social interaction with non-Jewish Atlanta and took anti-Semitism as a matter of course.

Although cultural and religious differences tended to separate post-1880 Jewish immigrants from earlier arrivals, the sheer number of new immigrants brought about a major transformation in the Jewish South between 1880 and 1920. In Atlanta, for example, Russian-born Jews and their children constituted a “tiny minority in a small Jewish community” prior to the 1880s—perhaps ten individuals in a Jewish population of more than 500—and eastern European Jews were well integrated into the general Jewish population. In 1900, however, “Russians and their children” numbered 900 and accounted for nearly half of Atlanta’s Jews. In 1910 the city was home to 2,300 Jews of eastern European descent, and this population grew by another 1,000 by 1920. Across the South, similar influxes of eastern European Jews to

---

69 Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 213.

70 Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 214-215; Ferris, Matzoh Ball Gumbo, 142.

71 Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 211. Hertzberg’s observation squares with 1930 correspondence between Abe Cahan and Atlanta Arbeter Ring leader Mitchell Merlin. When Cahan wrote to Merlin with an inquiry into the whereabouts of Leo Frank’s widow, Lucielle Selig Frank, Merlin provided a detailed report, apparently without hesitation. Correspondence between Merlin and Cahan, 1930, Papers of Abraham Cahan, YIVO, Center for Jewish History, New York.

72 Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 76, 98, 233.

73 Ibid., 77.
developing commercial centers and the subsequent founding of new Jewish institutions made Jews a more conspicuous minority, both numerically and culturally. As in northern cities, the rapid growth and increasing internal diversity of Jewish populations in the South resulted in stark divides and new tensions between recent arrivals and their more acculturated co-religionists.74

Historians of American Jews have conventionally designated the pre- and post-1880 immigration waves respectively as “German” and “eastern European.” According to the common narrative, the first group “arrived relatively well-off, Germanized, minimally committed to Jewish practice, and easily integrated into America,” while their eastern European counterparts were poorer, more religiously observant and more ethnically distinct.75 Although the geographic sources of Jewish immigration did shift over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the two-wave model overstates differences between earlier and later immigrants at their respective moments of arrival. Hasia Diner points out that the “German” Jewish immigrants of the pre-1880 era included those from Polish provinces that had been annexed by Prussia, that Jews from German-speaking lands were not as Germanized as has been assumed, and that Jews from eastern Europe immigrated to the United States during the earlier period, even if they made up a minority at the time.76 Furthermore, the supposed dichotomy between central and eastern European Jews emerged in response to a popular distinction between former eras of northern and western European immigration and a new period of migration from southern

76 Ibid., 80-2.
and eastern Europe, which is itself an artifact of anti-immigration discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{77}

Regardless of the accuracy of the “German” or “eastern European” labels, however, when larger numbers of East European Jewish immigrants began to arrive in American cities after 1890, they had little in common with the established Jewish communities that they encountered, and the perceived German/eastern dichotomy—often rendered as German/Russian—circulated widely in northern and southern cities. Whether or not earlier Jewish migrants to the South had experienced acculturation and upward mobility before leaving Europe, the most successful among them did find a comfortable position in the region’s growing merchant class. Furthermore, the Jewish elite of cities like Dallas and Atlanta was now headed by a generation of native-born Jews whose families’ fortunes had been built with the cities themselves. These established Jews felt at home, for the most part, in the surrounding non-Jewish culture, and their efforts to assist recent immigrants were aimed toward—and often predicated on—newcomers’ acceptance of white middle class norms.\textsuperscript{78}

The middle class and often native-born Jews who had found commercial success in southern cities before 1900 viewed the increasing flow of eastern European Jews as a threat,

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 78-79. On the significance of “German” identity for Jews in the nineteenth-century South, see Anton Hieke, \textit{Jewish Identity in the Reconstruction South}, 2-6 and 159-163.

\textsuperscript{78} Moses Rischin, \textit{The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 98-104; Light, \textit{That Pride of Race and Character}, 11-18. Rischin discusses established Jews’ desires to Americanize New York City’s Jewish immigrant masses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the newcomers’ objections to their benefactors’ paternalism and condescension. Light examines Jewish philanthropy in the South with an emphasis on established Jews’ collective concern over the perceived racial status of their “impoverished and immigrant brethren” (12).
especially in light of rising nativist sentiments among white gentiles.\textsuperscript{79} Not only could the poverty and foreignness of their traditionally observant eastern European co-religionists bolster anti-Semitic claims about Jewish racial inferiority, but the popularity of socialist and Zionist politics among some newcomers could be exploited to challenge the Jews’ collective loyalty to the nation and the region. Both before the founding of Arbeter Ring branches and throughout their early history, proponents of secular or radical Yiddishkayt encountered suspicion and even hostility from other Jewish institutions.

Just as eastern European Jews who settled in southern cities differed greatly from members of the established Jewish communities, they were also divided among themselves along lines of politics and religion. Many of the new immigrants—especially those who were born before 1885 or arrived in the South in the 1890s—attempted to maintain some or all of the Jewish practices that had structured their collective and individual lives in Europe. Others, including the eventual founders of southern branches of the Arbeter Ring, were eager to shed aspects of religious observance and Jewish insularity that they viewed as out of step with their new lives in America. Jewish immigrants who identified with socialist or secular Zionist political movements found themselves in need of community but alienated from both the assimilationism of established Reform communities and the strict observance of other recent arrivals.\textsuperscript{80}

According to a history of Birmingham’s Branch 303 by Harry Sokol, the town’s Orthodox and Reform communities were opposed to any hint of Jewish socialist activity. Orthodox Jews objected to socialists’ attacks on religion, and the more acculturated Reform Jews viewed radical politics as an invitation for anti-Semitic violence and social and economic

\textsuperscript{79} Ferris and Greenberg, “Introduction,” 12.

\textsuperscript{80} Ferris and Greenberg, “Introduction,” 11.
exclusion. Two years prior to the branch’s founding in 1909, Jewish leaders had “expelled the agent of the [*Jewish Daily* Forward], comrade Etkin, and warned him that he should never step foot in Birmingham again.”81 They later attempted to undermine the newly founded branch:

There arose a strong opposition among the Reform and Orthodox Jews, and they strove to discourage our young organization through various disturbances. This went on until the leaders [*balebatim*] of the city warned that I should give up my “wild ideas;” they told me openly that I was an unwanted guest in the city and that it would be much better for me to leave. They also declared that in America one does not advocate revolution and that for us, as greenhorns, it would be a peril to set out on such a dangerous path. This was my first welcome in Birmingham.82

While Arbeter Ring branches eventually—and to varying degrees—gained acceptance and cooperation from other local Jewish institutions, the social and cultural gulf between Arbeter Ring members and the Reform Jewish communities remained wide. Historical essays and memoirs by Arbeter Ring members note the lack of association between Yiddish speakers and so-called *daytshishe yehudim* (German Jews), and in oral history interviews the children of active Arbeter Ring members recall having little to no contact with peers from more assimilated families.83


83 Chaya Rochel Andres, “History of the ‘Arbeiter Ring’ Kindershul in Dallas,” 1976, manuscript in the archives of the Dallas Jewish Historical Society; Feigenbaum, interview. Andres uses the Yiddish term *daytshishe yehudim*, which translates literally to “German Jews.” The use of *yehudim* from Hebrew, as opposed to the more common *yidn*, marks a cultural and linguistic distinction.
Founding of Branches

In his memoir, David Davis refers to Atlanta’s “Jewish spiritual life” in the years around 1905 as “empty, dry, and flat, without even a shred of soulfulness [neshema-yeserediks].” Of the roughly 2,500 Jews in the city, the assimilated “German” Jews still held a small majority. Davis recalls that “the German Jews [daytshishe yehudim]” attended the Temple, and “the yidishe yidn [Jewish/Yiddish Jews]” had founded “their small synagogue, called Ahavath Achim” and two smaller houses of prayer. In addition, young immigrants like Davis could participate in the activities of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) or B’rith Avraham, a fraternal lodge made up of eastern European Jews. The East European Jewish immigrants who founded the YMHA in 1904 had arrived well before the eventual Arbeter Ring members and were older and more religious. YMHA activities promoted athletics, education and acculturation into American society. B’rith Avraham also catered to Jewish immigrants, but neither institution met the needs of all of the new arrivals. A subset of Jewish immigrants in Atlanta and other southern cities, especially a large group who fled Russia in the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1905-1906, had already developed a taste for secular Yiddish culture and socialist politics, and they soon set out to found their own organizations.

---

84 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 174. “Spiritual [gaystike]” here refers not just to religious feeling, but also to intellectual and cultural conditions, including national/ethnic belonging and political belief. Neshama-yeserediks is an adjective form of neshema yesera, which is usually translated as “additional soul” and refers to the belief that Jews receive an extra soul during Shabbat.

85 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 174.

86 Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 122-123; Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 174-176. Davis paid a membership fee of three dollars when he joined B’rith Avraham at the encouragement of an immigrant friend. He attended just one meeting, however, and never returned.

87 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 181; Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 122.
Through the new southern branches of Arbeter Ring, Jewish immigrants to the urban South participated in acts of “home building,” creating spaces in which they could exercise cultural and linguistic competence, collectively recall experiences of East European Jewish life and mass migration, and work together to gain knowledge and resources necessary for successful lives in their new environments. Founding members organized with the initial impulse of creating political or cultural institutions and in response to feelings of isolation, but they also came from a generational cohort that had been exposed to new forms of secular Yiddish culture. Beginning with small groups of ten to fifteen members, the branches grew quickly, both offering opportunities for mutual aid and self-education and connecting members to ongoing events in the Jewish world.

Alienated from the traditional observance of other immigrants and the assimilationism of Reform Jews, the secularized Yiddish speakers who came to southern cities in the early 1900s quickly sought each other out, forming groups that would soon emerge as the cores of local Arbeter Ring branches. In a historical essay from 1933, Morris Ross recalls meeting “fellow radical” Mitchell Merlin while “wandering over the streets of Atlanta with a pack on my shoulders.” The two soon sought to start a local section of the Socialist Party—which included Yiddish-speaking sections in other cities—but were unsuccessful. They subsequently read about the Arbeter Ring in the Forward, however, and were granted a charter from the national

---

88 On “home-building” and “productive nostalgia” see Hage, “Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building,” 417-419.

89 Morris Ross, “1908-1933, Twenty-five years of arbeter ring branch 207, a historical overview,” In dorem land, drite oysgabe, A. Landau and L. Dorin, eds. (Atlanta: 1933), 4, Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO.
organization in 1908. Galveston’s branch 307 developed out of a group called the “Galveston Yiddish Culture Union,” which was founded in 1911 by “eight to ten young men, between the ages of nineteen and twenty five,” who came together to start a secular Yiddish lending library. They joined the Arbeter Ring the following year with fourteen members.

Because the new branches appealed to a limited segment of an already small Jewish population, they did not have the luxury of separating according to hometown or region, as northern branches often did. As a result, members had to forge a collective identity despite differences in experience and background that resulted from their diverse points of origin. Abe Landau writes of the first meeting in Atlanta:

Remember … when we first gathered in a room, on some side street in the home of a friend of ours, and decided to become a part of the great, radical, Jewish, immigrant, Arbeter Ring? Remember how strange we were to one another, wanderers from different regions of Europe—Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Galicia, Romania—each looking to the other with inquiring glances?

According to his recollections, however, the group quickly formed firm friendships, “just as if we had lived our whole lives together.”

Branch histories and individual memoirs emphasize the importance of the Arbeter Ring in helping members to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. Whereas larger cities with significant Jewish enclaves were active hubs of secular Yiddish culture—both reproducing and reshaping aspects of a Jewish civilization that now spread across continents—the urban South was home to small clusters of Yiddish speakers. An immigrant to New York City in 1905 had access to

---

92 Ibid.
Yiddish theater, landsmanshaftn and fraternal organizations, a multitude of synagogues and a thriving Yiddish press, while a new arrival in Atlanta had to actively seek out the company of other immigrants, often by joining one of the struggling, apolitical Yiddish-speaking lodges or choosing to attend one of a few traditional synagogues. According to Mitchell Merlin, Atlanta’s Arbeter Ring founders “especially loved to recall our lives and the struggles in the Old World. In our loneliness, seclusion and solitude, it was a means for comfort to know how to adjust ourselves to the difficult conditions that we found here.”

Prominent among the “difficult conditions” that faced the new immigrants were their limited employment options. The labor situation in southern cities forced most Jewish immigrants to adopt a single occupation—peddling—whether they had experience in garment trades or other industries, or had only studied in yeshiva. Peddling was both physically demanding and socially isolating. Each morning, David Davis filled his pack with goods, rode to the end of a streetcar line and knocked on doors, street by street, selling curtains, sheets and other household goods. Mitchell Merlin’s brother Beryl rode a bus “about fifty miles” from Atlanta in order to peddle “various articles” to rural Georgians. Whether they sold their goods on a street corner, at the outskirts of town or in the distant countryside, peddlers spent their work lives

94 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 24, 89, 121-122; Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 90-94, 121-122.


97 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 156-157

immersed in a foreign culture, without the familiar camaraderie that might have been available in a largely Jewish factory setting or a Jewish-owned shop. For Davis, however, the freedom of operating his own “store” was “easy and fun” compared to working in a sweatshop.99

Figure 1: Births by year for individuals born before 1900 and buried in the Arbeter Ring section of Greenwood Cemetery, Atlanta.

Arbeter Ring membership served as an antidote to linguistic and cultural isolation in the South, but it also attracted a particular cohort.100 As noted above, the members of the group that preceded the Arbeter Ring in Galveston were between nineteen and twenty-five years old in 1911, indicating birth years between 1886 and 1891. The Arbeter Ring section of Greenwood Cemetery in Atlanta reflects a similar generational bond between early members; the birth years


listed on headstones of 86 members born before 1900 show a fairly normal distribution, with 44 (just over half) of the births falling between 1882 and 1890 and a mean birth year of 1886.9. In the sample, 1887 is by far the most common year of birth. Based on the Atlanta cemetery data, as well as other sources, the majority of southern members were in their twenties and early thirties between 1908 and 1915. They came of age in eastern Europe during a period of rapid cultural change, which included the expansion of secular Yiddish culture, especially literature, as well as growing interest in new forms of Jewish nationalism.101 As will be discussed in more detail, the dedication of first-generation Arbeter Ring members in the South to an emergent Jewish secularism stems directly from their experiences in the Yiddish political and cultural movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They arrived in southern cities with sensibilities that were at once markedly Jewish but sharply divergent from both earlier generations and traditionally observant contemporaries.

**Mutual Aid and Self-Education**

By 1915, about thirteen Arbeter Ring branches had sprung up in cities across the South; only the Nashville, New Orleans, Miami, Miami Beach and Montgomery chapters were established after 1920.102 Dallas and Atlanta came first in 1908, followed by Birmingham, 

101 Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 10-15; Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), especially 12-14 and 83-86; also see Mikhail Krutikov, “Yiddish Literature: Yiddish Literature after 1800,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2011, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Yiddish_Literature/Yiddish_Literature_after_1800. A handful of members were born in the United States or immigrated as children, but these were almost exclusively women who married into the organization, such as Rose Keeper.

102 There was a Fort Worth branch, which may have been founded before 1915. Montgomery Branch 440 receives no mention in *In dorem land* (1949), but there is a reference to its recent founding in a 1924 *Forverts* article. “Vos tut zikh in arbayer ring?” *Forverts*, Feb. 25, 1924, 2, Historical Jewish Press (online). New Orleans also seems to have had a pre-1915 branch that
Memphis and Savannah in 1909, Jacksonville and Macon in 1910, and Galveston, Waco, Chattanooga, San Antonio, Shreveport and Houston between 1912 and 1915. Branches typically began with fifteen to twenty members, although many grew quickly in their early years. According to a history of Branch 312 in Memphis, the initial group of fifteen members grew to 125 after “a few years of intense activity.”

At the outset, southern Arbeter Ring branches were especially active in “mutual aid” and “self-education.” Mutual aid included a variety of undertakings that assisted members as they built new lives for themselves and insulated them from economic misfortune. In 1949, Mitchell Merlin wrote, “over the decades, hardly any of us did not make use of mutual aid at one time.” Branches either set up their own free loan associations, a common feature of Jewish American life at the time, or encouraged established members to act as co-signers on loans from other Jewish loan associations. In Savannah, the Arbeter Ring’s free loan association eventually developed into a small credit union that still operates. Health benefits included both direct medical expenses and compensation for lost wages. Minutes from Galveston Branch 307 indicate that the group kept a running account with a Doctor Rosenblatt in order to pay medical bills out
dissolved and was re-formed in the 1920s. See American Jewish Yearbook, Vol. 14 (1912-1913), Herbert Friedenwald, ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), 218.

103 In dorem land (1949), 154
105 Jacob Scheinberg, “Branch 312 of arbeter ring in memphis, tennessee,” In dorem land (1949), 86.
of a common pool. Branches also administered mutual aid by responding to specific appeals, as when the women’s section of the Houston branch made payments of fifty cents or a dollar to the families of workers who had been laid off or lost wages due to sickness. In later years the national organization oversaw both medical and burial benefits.

While mutual aid provided material support to Arbeter Ring members and their families, self-education attended to their cultural and intellectual development, continuing the radical and secular educations that most members had begun in Europe. This work also helped immigrants adjust to their new circumstances. Merlin writes that the Atlanta Branch kept its “library open every evening,” and members considered it an “enjoyable duty to come read in the hall (and meanwhile have a chat also), taking along books to read at home.” Meetings included recitations from and discussions of Yiddish texts on “topics of the day” and “popular knowledge” published by the national office. This communal approach to reading was already common among Yiddish speakers in Eastern Europe and New York, and it often served as an important tool in developing a new immigrant’s Yiddish literacy, depending on his or her level of education and prior exposure to secular Yiddish writing.

---

108 Branch 307 Galveston, minute book, Jan 7, 1916, and March 12, 1916; Maximilllian Hurwitz, The Workmen’s Circle: Its History, Ideals, Organization and Institutions (New York: Workmen’s Circle, 1936), 179. On the general role of the branch doctor, Hurwitz writes, “In the beginning each branch of the organization had its own doctor whose duty it was, in return for a small stipend paid by the branch, to treat the members and their families in case of illness. These doctors likewise examined candidates for membership, and also issued sick certificates on the strength of which disability benefits were paid.”


111 Veidlinger, Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire, 67-70 and 162-164; Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 113-114. Michels notes that readers of early Yiddish journalism in the
For the far flung Arbeter Ring branches of the South, Yiddish books and periodicals were a crucial resource. Whereas Yiddish lecture series on politics and other topics had been a fixture of Lower East Side culture since the 1890s, immigrants to southern cities had to recruit lecturers from among their own ranks or make arrangements and raise funds to host a touring speaker.\textsuperscript{112} Based on Harry Sokol’s account of the harassment of the “Forward agent” in Birmingham, it is clear that the \textit{Forverts}—the Yiddish Daily Forward—was available in the region before 1910, and it is likely that members shared their subscriptions or lent out papers that they had already read.\textsuperscript{113} In later years, southern Arbeter Ring members could subscribe to \textit{Der Tog} (founded 1914, aimed for a more highbrow left-wing audience than the \textit{Forverts}) or even \textit{Di frayhayt} (founded 1922, Communist-affiliated).\textsuperscript{114}

Southern members also read Yiddish books, including volumes produced by the Arbeter Ring itself for the purpose of self-education. In 1915 the organization’s Education Committee began publishing the Arbeter Ring Library, a series that covered general educational topics including history, sociology and the natural sciences. Because the organization could fund the production of such books, advertise them in its own periodical, \textit{Der fraynd}, and offer discounts to both local branches and individual members, it was a significant source of Yiddish literature.

United States were often challenged by newspapers’ use of a stiff and heavily Germanized Yiddish, often referred to as \textit{daytshmerish}.

\textsuperscript{112} Michels, \textit{A Fire in Their Hearts}, 73-77.

\textsuperscript{113} Harry Sokol, “The History of Branch 303 in Birmingham,” 59.

for southern branches. Minutes from the February 27, 1916 meeting of Galveston branch 307, for example, note the upcoming publication of five books from the popular Arbeter Ring Library series—on botany, physics, sanitation, trade unions and socialism—available to members as a set for the price of twenty five cents.

The reading materials available to southern Arbeter Ring members served many purposes, but the education, radicalization and acculturation of Yiddish speakers were of chief importance. Scientific content, like the Arbeter Ring’s volumes on botany and physics, provided empirically based information about the natural world to populations whose formal education may only have included religious instruction in cheder and yeshiva. Political propaganda continued to shape the opinions and values of southern members and included books like the Educational Committee’s 1916 publication, *The Socialism of Socialist Revolutionaries* by Chaim Zhitlovsky, as well as the competing editorial perspectives of the leftist Yiddish newspapers. Books and newspapers also played important roles in the acculturation of the recent immigrants, offering didactic content that aimed to communicate middle-class values. The Arbeter Ring Library and *The Forward* educated readers on topics of hygiene, American history and current events, explaining as well as interpreting the new society into which their readers had

---


immigrated.\textsuperscript{118} While Yiddish newspapers and other publications acted as “agents of acculturation,” however, this was not an uncomplicated or acritical role. The Yiddish left’s literature of self-education expanded the cultural and intellectual horizons of a population that sought new alternatives to the perceived traditionalism and insularity of former generations and helped them to gain competence and insight in a new society. At the same time, radical Yiddish literature prepared its readers for a transformation of that society through the end of capitalism.\textsuperscript{119}

**Responding to Crisis**

The early activities of the southern branches responded not only to members’ needs for mutual aid, education and acculturation, but also for their desire to remain connected to ongoing trends and events in the Jewish world. Both Yiddish journalism and touring lecturers provided information and analysis of developments in the Jewish world, while relief work allowed Arbeter Ring members in the South to act in solidarity with transnational Jewish movements. Writings by southern Arbeter Ring members indicate that Jewish-oriented fundraising projects occupied a central place in the group’s early activities and helped some branches to earn the respect of other local Jewish organizations.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 initiated a period of widespread suffering and massive disruption among the already vulnerable Jewish communities of central and eastern Europe. Much of the conflict over the ‘Eastern Front’ took place in key areas of eastern European Jewish settlement, and four years of fighting between Russia and the Central Powers—primarily Germany and Austria-Hungary—led to the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{119} Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 20, 93.
Jews. Along with mass displacement, Jews faced economic crisis as a result of the military mobilization of heads of household and other workers, disease epidemics fueled by the movement of refugees, and other hardships brought on by wartime conditions.\textsuperscript{120}

In response to the new threats to Jewish life in Europe, American Jews founded relief organizations, and, although these were initially separated by divisions within the Jewish population and competed with one another for funds, fundraising on behalf of East European Jews spurred early attempts to coordinate across internal divides. Nationally, the Jewish People’s Relief Committee of America, commonly referred to as the People’s Relief, drew the support of the Arbeter Ring and other leftist Jewish groups. Although the People’s Relief joined the Joint Distribution Committee in 1915—which already included the Reform-oriented American Jewish Relief Committee and Orthodox-affiliated Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering through the War—Arbeter Ring members in the South and elsewhere continued to address their contributions to the People’s Relief.\textsuperscript{121} In later years, ORT (the Society for Handicraft and


\textsuperscript{121} Jonathan D. Sarna, \textit{American Judaism: A History} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 210-211; Michael Beizer, “American Joint Distribution Committee,” \textit{YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe}, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/American_Jewish_Joint_Distribution_Committe. According to Hertzberg, the pogroms in Kishinev (1903) and Odessa (1905) were catalysts for coordinated fundraising across the Jewish sub-communities of Atlanta, (Strangers within the Gate City, 125-126).
Agricultural Work among the Jews of Russia) and the Jewish Labor Committee were among the chief beneficiaries of Arbeter Ring aid work.\textsuperscript{122}

During World War I and its aftermath, the Yiddish press was both an important source of information for Jewish immigrants anxious for news of their former homes and also a promoter of international aid efforts. Readers of the Forverts received regular updates on conditions in cities and regions throughout eastern Europe, as well as reports from the People’s Relief on contributions from around the country. These reports from the organization provide detailed, albeit fragmented, information about relief activities in the region, indicating that People’s Relief operated independently from but overlapped significantly with the Arbeter Ring.

A typical People’s Relief article from the May 17, 1920, edition of the Forverts includes the following report:

From our Atlanta Branch we have received $1,020.50. Of this, $910 comes from annual subscribers, including the following amounts: Poale Zion Branch 71 of the Jewish National Workers’ Alliance [Farband], from a Chanukah event, $29; with Bertha Berdayski [Bredosky] (engagement), $22.05; for the wedding of Sam Zinkof [Zinkow], $78.85; Beryl Merlin (bris milah), $60; on the engagement of Mr. Dave Isenberg’s daughter, $180; for Moshe [Morris] Flax’s wedding, $50; and also $110.05 that was collected at a banquet with comrade [Abraham] Epstein.\textsuperscript{123}

The same article also lists gifts from Jacksonville, Florida, Shreveport and New Orleans, Louisiana, and San Antonio, Texas.


\textsuperscript{123} “Pipels relief komite far di yidishe milkhome karbones [People’s relief committee for the Jewish war victims],” Forverts, May 17, 1920. Historical Jewish Press; Hurwitz, The Workmen’s Circle, 244; “Pipel’s relif komite far di idishe milkhome karbones,” Forverts, July 8, 1921. “Epstein” refers to Abraham Epstein, an organizer for People’s Relief and former president of the Arbeter Ring who toured the region in 1921.
In the South, as elsewhere, fundraising for the People’s Relief was not the exclusive province of the Arbeter Ring. The fundraising efforts of Atlanta’s Farband chapter—a socialist Zionist group that was both a rival of and collaborator with southern branches of Arbeter Ring—indicate that other groups were involved in similar relief efforts. In San Antonio, the local Jewish community had raised $600 at a “mass meeting” and split the sum between the People’s Relief and the Orthodox-affiliated Central Committee, suggesting that the event had been held in cooperation between left-leaning and traditionally religious groups.124

Although the Arbeter Ring is not mentioned explicitly in the quotation above, at least two individuals named in the Atlanta report had Arbeter Ring connections. Beryl (Barnett) Merlin was the older brother of Mitchell Merlin and the first of the Merlin siblings to immigrate to America.125 The donation was presumably made in honor of Beryl and Ida’s son William, born in 1920.126 It is not clear whether Beryl was active in the Arbeter Ring, but his brothers Mitchell and Dave were among its most prominent leaders. Similarly, there is no evidence that Sam Zinkow was an Arbeter Ring member, but an Abraham Zinkow, with whom Samuel lived during the 1910s, was buried in the Arbeter Ring section of Atlanta’s Greenwood Cemetery in 1925.127

124 “Pipels relief komite far di yidishe milkhome karbones [People’s relief committee for the Jewish war victims],” *Forverts*, May 17, 1920, Historical Jewish Press.


126 1920 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia; 1940 U.S. census, Dade County, Florida.

Other reports name southern Arbeter Ring branches explicitly, such as a November 1922 notice of an $85 donation to the People’s Relief “tools campaign” from Branch 303 in Birmingham.128

In addition to newspaper sources, memoirs and histories of the Southern District and its branches reflect a deep pride in relief activities. According to Mitchell Merlin, Arbeter Ring chapters in the South had been active in fundraising for victims of anti-Semitic violence prior to World War I, soliciting donations from “synagogue Jews” who “did not have their own aid agencies.” Although he acknowledges that, later on, the “frum Jews … had their Central Relief,” he claims that the Arbeter Ring continued to take the lead in international Jewish aid work in southern cities.129 Once the regional districts began holding annual conferences in 1920, branch delegates delivered reports on local fundraising, competing to “demonstrate the most activity.”130 The conferences also allowed branches to learn fundraising strategies from one another, and the collection of money for various organizations at the conference banquet emerged as an annual fundraising tradition of its own.131

Other historical texts emphasize the role of relief work in building relationships between Arbeter Ring and other Jewish groups. Harry Sokol, of Birmingham, wrote that Arbeter Ring members’ door-to-door fundraising on behalf of the People’s Relief during World War I earned the “acknowledgement and gratitude” of a Jewish community that had initially reacted with


130 Ibid., 33.

131 Ibid, 33.
hostility to the founding of a Birmingham branch. In Chattanooga, Arbeter Ring members became valuable members of a unified fundraising committee; when Abe Epstein planned a tour of the region—probably in 1921—to establish new People’s Relief branches, “the Jews of the city raised a cry” over fears that he would convince Arbeter Ring members to abandon the committee. When they promised not to defect, the committee voted to allow his visit.

Longtime Houston member Wolf Bell’s essay on the Texas-Louisiana District reflects a more ambivalent response from established Jewish leaders to Arbeter Ring relief activities, although the anecdote ends with similar results. Around 1917, the Houston branch arranged “a concert for the benefit of the war victims” to be held in “the great municipal auditorium” and publicized the event widely among local Jews, only to have the “yehudim” demand that they call off the fundraiser. The establishment Jews argued that “we had no right to carry out such an undertaking … because this would hinder their work, and that they could raise more money.” The Arbeter Ring rejected this request, however, and went ahead with the concert. The text adds that “from then on the ‘yehudim’ treated the Arbeter Ring with courtesy.”

The District Model

As Yiddish-speaking immigrants founded new branches in cities across the South, some local Arbeter Ring leaders began to make connections with counterparts in other cities, and, in at least one case, branches from nearby cities held joint programs. For the most part, however, each branch operated on its own. This situation persisted until the end of the 1910s, when southern branches began to organize into regional districts. The Southeastern District, composed of

134 Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 41-42.
branches in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and Florida, held its first conference in Atlanta in 1920, and the Texas-Louisiana District was initiated with a conference in Dallas in 1921. Formally organized districts strengthened local activities by establishing annual conferences, coordinating lecture tours and other events, sharing resources between branches, and providing accountability for branches and their leaders. The regional networks also encouraged the founding of branches in new locations. The two districts continued to structure Arbeter Ring activity in most of the South until 1946, when the Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts were unified into a single region, the Southern District.135

Prior to the organization of regional districts, there was some contact among local members, primarily branch leaders. Around 1917, Mitchell Merlin and other delegates from southern cities met at a national Arbeter Ring convention, where they discussed the need for greater cooperation between southern branches.136 Harry Sokol, of Birmingham, recalled that members from Memphis often visited, as well as “the always cheerful [Shmuel] Yampolsky and the serious Comrade M. Ross from Atlanta.”137 The Houston and Galveston branches came together frequently, both for cultural events and regular meetings.138 On the relationship between the Houston and Galveston branches, Joseph Keeper wrote that “when one speaks of one branch, one must immediately speak of the other, because they are only separated from each other by fifty miles—and in Texas fifty miles is a very small distance.”139 Although branch histories

136 Ibid., 30.
138 Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42
139 Keeper, “The arbeter ring branches in galveston and houston,” In dorem land (1949), 96.
indicate that leaders in the region took the initiative to develop these early connections into organized districts, the formation of regional districts was a national phenomenon with official recognition by the national office.

Whether the impetus for organizing into districts came from the national organization or from members in the region, leaders from southern branches began establishing districts in 1918 and 1919. Representatives of the two largest cities in the Southeastern District, Mitchell Merlin of Atlanta and Phillip Block of Memphis, corresponded for some time before deciding to call a district conference in Atlanta in September 1920. The Texas-Louisiana District emerged through the efforts of Houston Branch 530, which hosted gatherings in 1919 and 1920 that attracted participation from some, but not all, of the district’s eventual branches. These precursor events provided attendees a chance to address “general Arbeter Ring questions, chief among them how to unite the branches into one district.” They achieved this goal on Labor Day weekend of 1921, when the Texas-Louisiana District convened its first conference in Dallas.

The most immediate result of the Arbeter Ring district conferences, based on the recollections of participants, was a renewed enthusiasm for the organization’s work. Harry Sokol’s 1949 essay on the history of the Southeastern District notes that branches in the region “had in fact declined in their activity,” but that “a storm of enthusiasm swept up all the branches and their members” after the district was organized. This history and others consistently refer to conferences as yontifs or yonifdike—holidays or holiday-like—indicating an atmosphere

---

141 Wolf Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42.
142 Ibid.
143 Sokol, “The southern district (memories),” In dorem land (1949), 39.
which was both festive and rejuvenating, and suggesting that the regional events served as temporal markers that organized members’ years.\textsuperscript{144} Accounts of these first district conferences also emphasize that, like the strangers who came together in forming local branches, delegates and guests from different cities were excited to meet others with similar experiences and outlooks, and attendees quickly came to feel like family.\textsuperscript{145} According to Mitchell Merlin, they “saw that, although we were isolated in our cities, we have brothers and friends in all the surrounding cities.”\textsuperscript{146}

Histories of the Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts celebrate not only the mutual support that took place between the branches, but also the spirit of competition and accountability that district conferences helped to generate. According to Mitchell Merlin, the first Southeastern District conference led to a flurry of new commitments: “Each city obligated itself to come to the next conference with a new institution: libraries were being created everywhere. New lyceums were opened in Chattanooga, Memphis, Jacksonville and Birmingham. The goal was to open A.R. schools in the lyceums, and over the course of a year this was achieved.”\textsuperscript{147} J. Press’s history of Branch 495 in Chattanooga recalls that “just as Atlanta was the first branch, Chattanooga took it upon itself to be the second [in importance]” and notes with pride that Chattanooga was the second branch in the Southeast District to start a school and own its own

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.; Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 31, 34; Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42.

\textsuperscript{145} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 31; Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42.

\textsuperscript{146} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 31.

\textsuperscript{147} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 31. The movement for Arbeter Ring \textit{shules}—after school classes on Yiddish language and Jewish culture—will be examined at length in Chapter 3.
The new district committees also established new structures of accountability for branch activities. In the Texas-Louisiana District, “if a branch secretary neglected his duty to the district, the branch delegate to the district conference was responsible to the district secretary.” Similarly, lecturers touring the Southeastern District conducted “inspections of the schools,” in order to help the district secretary oversee the management of schools in the region.

In addition to supporting the activities of already existing branches, the Southeastern District expanded Arbeter Ring activities by founding new branches. The Forverts published an October 1923 report from the Southeastern District Committee which mentions its intention to establish branches in Nashville, Tennessee, and Montgomery, Alabama. Although Montgomery's branch seems to have been short-lived, new branches were founded in both cities by February 1925. Harry Sokol of Birmingham acted as a representative of the Southeastern District and assisted with the founding of both branches. In the case of Nashville Branch 641, which began with sixty members, Sokol travelled from Birmingham to conduct an installation ceremony in April or July of 1924.

---

149 Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42.
151 “Vos tut zikh in arbayer ring?,” Forverts, October 22, 1923, Historical Jewish Press.
153 Leah Kovner Shymlock, handwritten history, Workmen’s Circle Papers, Annette Levy Ratkin Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; S. Shymlock, “Arbeter ring branch 641, in nashville, tennessee,” 90. One source says April 1, 1924, but the other says July 1, 1924.
Making Space in a Changing Place

David Davis, like many of the early Arbeter Ring members in the South, arrived as a young adult early in the twentieth century and built a life for himself in an unfamiliar and rapidly changing environment. He moved to Atlanta two years before the 1908 founding of Branch 207, and by the time that the Southern District was established in 1920 he had married and had three daughters.¹⁵⁴ Like other Arbeter Ring members, he had moved on from peddling, and now co-owned a retail business, Mutual Clothing Company.¹⁵⁵ The city around him had changed, growing in population from roughly ninety thousand in 1900 to over two hundred thousand in 1920.¹⁵⁶ The continued arrival of new Jewish residents, especially those with roots in eastern Europe continued to transform Jewish life in the city, even as small businesses owned by Arbeter Ring members and other Jewish immigrants contributed to the growing city’s emerging consumer culture.

In the middle of this growth and transformation, both in Atlanta and other cities, a relative handful of Jewish immigrants came together to form Arbeter Ring branches, which, in turn, offered an alternative to religious orthodoxy or rapid assimilation, provided a space for mutual support and education, and linked southern Jews to transnational developments in Jewish life and Yiddish culture. In the face of local opposition, and despite their relative isolation, these branches grew steadily through the 1910s and even earned a place for themselves among the

¹⁵⁴ 1920 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.; Atlanta, Georgia, City Directory, 1923, 64, Ancestry.com.

general Jewish community. The establishment of regional districts in 1920 and 1921 brought about a new era of educational and cultural activity for the branches, but the coming decade was also marked by deep political divides that forced members to consider again what exactly the Arbeter Ring was, as well as what it should be.
CHAPTER 2: “HEYMISHE SOCIALISTS” IN THE JEWISH SOUTH

Freida Weiner was born in 1890 in Korostyshev, a small town between Kiev and Zhitomir. Around 1909, she was living in Kiev, which was larger and more cosmopolitan than her hometown, and working as a tailor. In an oral history from the late 1980s, she recalled that her employer, “Rev Froika,” was “sort of a dictator.” 157 The fourteen workers slept in the shop, the boys near their workstations and the girls in cots in a nearby room, and, although there was an indoor restroom in the building, it was reserved for the boss. Employees were expected to walk outside from the fourth floor to use “dugouts in the ground.” 158

Freida tolerated the sweatshop conditions in order to remain in Kiev, until a confrontation with the shop owner led to her dismissal. She had been corresponding with her future husband, Isaac, who had settled in Detroit in 1908 and was active in socialist groups. Freida kept her letters from Isaac in “a little box.” One day, as she returned to the shop from going out, her friends told her that Reb Froika had taken her “letter case.”

That I couldn’t stand anymore … When I came [to see if] my letter was still in there—of course, it wasn’t there—I said, “Rev Froika, how could you go and get my letter? With what right did you go to my little case to take my private letter?” So he starts [yelling] at me.

My boyfriend that I was courting [was] in Detroit, Michigan … [and] was writing [to me] about the socialist movement in America, how free America is, what he is doing in the

---


158 Ibid.
socialist movement. So [Rev Froika] read it—so he knows I am a socialist because he read my letter.

When I told him, “Rev Froika, with what right did you go to my case and get my letter,” he said, “what do you want you socialist? You want me to go and let police know? And they’ll put you in jail? Do you know what that means?” And he gave me my fifty rubles that [he owed me]. “Get out of here. I don’t want you here.”

According to Weiner, Rev Froika only fired her, rather than reporting her to the police, because “he didn’t have nerve enough.” Contact with the police could draw unwanted scrutiny for the informant as well, after all, “and socialism was trouble.”

Not long after the confrontation, Isaac raised the money to buy Freida a ticket to America, and she joined him in Detroit in 1911.

Isaac and Freida moved with their young children to Houston in 1915 and then to Galveston in 1921. The pair were active in the Houston and Galveston Arbeter Ring branches, and Freida, who lived to be over one hundred years old, was a longtime advocate for Yiddish language and culture in the area. Like many early leaders of southern Arbeter Ring branches, Freida first encountered socialist ideas as a young adult and came to the United States in part to escape the political oppression of the Russian empire. This aspect of her life history typifies foreign-born Arbeter Ring members’ early experiences with socialist politics. How, though, did these immigrants’ radical politics continue to develop in the early twentieth-century South? And did their apparent socialism lead to significant political actions?

159 Ibid.

160 Immigration dates for Isaac and Freida Weiner are based on the 1930 United States Census, Galveston County, Texas.

With a few exceptions, histories, memoirs and oral histories related to the Arbeter Ring in the South explicitly connect the group to socialist politics. Both “socialism” and “politics,” however, carry multiple and hotly debated meanings. The Arbeter Ring and its members generally promoted socialist politics until at least the mid-1930s, but the membership tended to be ideologically diverse and the (often competing) meanings of socialism changed over time. Although southern members described their politics variously as “socialist,” “radical” and “progressive,” available documents offer scant commentary on what those labels meant in a given historical moment. Freida Weiner herself, in the recording from the late 1980s, argued that the Workmen’s Circle “wasn’t a socialist organization. It was socialist inclined, but not socialist.” Furthermore, “politics” refers at once to explicit ideological programs or policy preferences; methods of seeking power and affecting policy through means of lobbying, elections, mass organization and direct action; and, most broadly, the multitudinous ways that collective bodies express themselves and perceive others through “culture”—the discursive, material, symbolic, aesthetic, affective and/or performative means through which people enact and interpret their worlds. Because the story of the Southern District primarily concerns rank and file members rather than intellectual elites, the politics of the Arbeter Ring in the South are in large part embedded in the histories of their fundraising, activism and cultural work, rather than in overt statements on policy or ideology.

However southern members chose to express their political convictions, they did so in environments that were hostile to political dissent. From 1890 to 1910 the decline of Populist and fusionist politics and the disenfranchisement of black and poor white voters virtually guaranteed that state and local governments throughout the South operated as one-party systems under

Democratic control. Among the political elites’ most effective tools was white supremacy. Accusations that a leader or movement favored racial equality were often sufficient to undermine support among the white working classes, and the ubiquitous threat of anti-black violence—from the mass attacks of a “race riot” to the focused ritual of a lynching—constrained the aspirations and tactics of black activists. Additionally, these factors hampered the development of organized labor, which struggled to gain traction even as industrial wage labor became more prominent in the region’s growing cities. Although, as one commentator wrote, the founders of Arbeter Ring branches had sought to plant “the socialist ideal” in their new homes, the region’s “soil” proved “sunny but, for us, sandy.”

In order to explore the southern Arbeter Ring as a political phenomenon, this chapter begins with a brief overview of Jewish socialist movements and their attempts to formulate compatible expressions of Jewish identity and left-wing politics. It continues with an examination of the importance of members’ political experiences in eastern Europe to their eventual involvement in the Arbeter Ring, a central theme in members’ own accounts of their lives and shared history. Next, it takes up southern branches’ political activities, arguing that branches participated in and provided a site for meaningful political actions, especially labor activism and promotion of the Socialist Party. The chapter then turns to the schism between socialist and communist factions (in the South, as elsewhere) that began in the 1920s, positing that the tensions between Jewish cohesion and political radicalism illustrate the inherent multiplicity of Jewish-socialist movements. Finally, it moves to southern Jewish leftists’

---

163 Woodward, Origins of the New South, 321-349; Ayers, Promise of the New South, 310.

164 N. Chanin, “The thirtieth conference of the southern district of the arbeter ring is thirty years of jewish life,” In dorem land (1949), 19.
inconsistent responses to the problem of anti-black racism in the region and concludes that communist splinter groups’ stronger record of cross-racial activism occurred as a result of their working primarily in radical, rather than Jewish, networks. Throughout the chapter, these histories reorient the study of Jewish politics toward seemingly peripheral sites in the emergence and negotiation of secular Yiddish culture and demonstrate that members and branches took an active part in transnational debates over the compatibility of socialist politics and secular Jewish nationalism.

**Jewish Socialism(s)**

From the late nineteenth century through World War I, East European Jews and East European Jewish emigrants participated in a diverse range of radical movements and developed an array of Jewish political organizations that attempted to synthesize elements of socialist thought with some version of Jewish national or cultural identity. While such groups differed widely over how Jews should work with non-Jewish radicals and whether or how Jews might retain a collective identity in a revolutionized world, each struggled to win support from a population that was drawn at once toward the (often) divergent priorities of the universal liberation of working peoples and Jewish cohesion. As in other regions, the Arbeter Ring in the South was particularly influenced by the Jewish labor movement in New York and the East European Bund, but southern Arbeter Ring members came into contact with other branches of radical Jewish politics as well, both before and after their arrival in the region.

Although a few Jewish radicals had anticipated the possibility of specifically Jewish socialist movements prior to the 1880s, the development of Jewish mass politics became possible

---

165 “Universal liberation” refers here to the cessation of economic exploitation, occupational limitations and material inequality, as well as the extension of educational opportunities and political rights, regardless of class or ethnic status.
only in the aftermath of the crises of 1881-1882, especially the widespread pogroms that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and subsequent calls for mass emigration of Russian Jews. These events helped to precipitate the development of a proto-Zionist movement in Russia and Palestine and the emergence of a Jewish labor movement in the United States. Economic and political restrictions in eastern Europe corroded Jewish optimism in regard to emancipation and assimilation, thereby increasing interest in new visions of Jewish nationalism and autonomy, while in New York City a combination of industrial wage labor and the relative social and political freedoms allowed for new forms of Jewish cultural expression, especially in Yiddish.¹⁶⁶

By the late 1890s, the Lower East Side had emerged as the leading hub for Yiddish mass culture, including a diverse and discordant radical movement. In eastern Europe, the Bund—the common name for the General Jewish Labor Bund in Russia, Poland, and Lithuania—had begun to bridge the gap between Jewish members of the socialist intelligentsia and the Yiddish-speaking masses.¹⁶⁷ On both sides of the Atlantic, Jewish radicals contended with questions of ideology and tactics, as well as the issue of Jewish nationalism. Early proponents of Jewish socialism took a minimalist position on Jewish nationalism, adopting Yiddish primarily as a practical means of educating and indoctrinating Jewish workers, and placing little value in the persistence of Jewish cohesion in a post-revolutionary world. In the early twentieth century, however, parallel movements including socialist Zionism and Territorialism advocated a variety


¹⁶⁷ Frankel, Prophecy and Politics, 460-461; also See Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, especially “Introduction” and Chapter 2, “Speaking to ‘Moyshe’: Socialists Create a Yiddish Public Culture.”
of stances on Jewish nationalism, even as socialist movements changed their positions on such questions over time.

Although each branch of Jewish socialism aimed to restructure Jewish life on a secular basis, they differed over whether and how Jews ought to remain a distinct people, where Jews should live, and what language(s) they should speak. Bundists eventually acknowledged the legitimacy of Jewish-specific grievances against the Russian Empire and the desirability of the continued development of secular Yiddish culture, but they remained committed to the “principle of *doykayt*” (hereness), which validated the Diaspora experience and encouraged local action and solidarity with other working-class and minority groups.168 Whereas Bundists argued that the conditions of Jewish life would improve with the liberation of other peoples, territorialists and Zionists maintained that Jews would only be secure and prosperous in an independent state. The Zionist left cited historical and tactical reasons in its preference for Palestine as a national homeland but, unlike most mainline Zionists, “affirmed the perpetuation of Jewish national existence in the Diaspora,” whereas territorialists sought an alternative site for an autonomous Jewish state and viewed Yiddish as the appropriate language for the Jewish masses.169

Additionally, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new campaigns for the development of secular Yiddishkayt ran alongside and through Jewish political movements, especially after 1905. As Yiddish theater, Yiddish literature and other expressive genres reached larger audiences, secular Yiddishkayt and its attendant cultural institutions came to play central

---


roles in the emergence and democratization of Jewish public spheres—neutral spaces “in which private individuals meet to debate collective affairs.”\textsuperscript{170} Yiddish mass culture, especially periodicals, also facilitated the collective enactment of Jews as a political community, one constituted by cultural and linguistic affinity and common material interests rather than geographic proximity or class status.\textsuperscript{171} Proponents of \textit{yidishe kultur} advocated for Yiddish not only as a vehicle of Jewish mass politics but also as a goal, seeking to institutionalize and legitimize Yiddish language and culture through journalism, scholarship and education.\textsuperscript{172} While the Bund and its supporters, including Freida Weiner, often attributed the blossoming of secular Yiddishkayt to the Bund itself, the party in fact “participated in a linguistic cultural trend that engulfed most of Russian Jewry,” thereby contributing a particularly radical vision of Yiddish culture to an already emergent public sphere.\textsuperscript{173}

The variety of Jewish political ideologies that developed in the early twentieth century is significant, both because they help to demonstrate the tensions between Jewish cohesion and socialist universalism and also because they circulated among southern Jewish communities, both within and parallel to local Arbeter Ring branches. Although members’ accounts tend to emphasize Bundism or other moderately nationalistic versions of Jewish socialist thought over

\textsuperscript{170} Ury, \textit{Barricades and Banners}, 141-143.

\textsuperscript{171} Ury, \textit{Barricades and Banners}, 142, 144, 164. Although I use the term “enactment” here, Ury points specifically to Benedict Anderson’s work on “imagined communities.”

\textsuperscript{172} Ury, noting the role of Yiddish cultural institutions in the creation of the Jewish public sphere in Warsaw, writes that “the very form of Jewish politics would determine the content of Jewish politics” (142).

\textsuperscript{173} Fishman, \textit{The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture}, 60-61.
Zionism or Territorialism, Arbeter Ring participants were familiar with a range of perspectives through prior experience and ongoing events in southern cities.

The Political Roots of the Southern Arbeter Ring

In 1949, Atlanta Arbeter Ring leader Mitchell Merlin recalled that “in the good old days of the 1920s, the branches were made up entirely of socialists, heymishe socialists. The leadership consisted of those who, back in the old country, had been leaders of socialist circles.” Indeed, the biographies of Mitchell Merlin and other major figures in the southern Arbeter Ring support the assertion that pre-immigration engagement with radical politics was a common bond among early members. Merlin wrote that, in the early years of the organization, they “especially loved to recall our lives and the struggles in the old world” as a way of relieving their “loneliness, seclusion and solitude.” Additionally, members’ life histories typify the experiences of young East European Jewish radicals in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most branch leaders had some exposure to traditional Jewish education and religious practice, were radicalized by a local organizer, took part in clandestine reading groups, and witnessed or participated in the failed revolution of 1905 and its aftermath. These shared experiences, as well as the variations and exceptions, reflect the continuity of the Arbeter Ring’s development in the American South with prior and contemporaneous Jewish movements.

Growing up in Korostychev, Freida Weiner did not receive the same religious education as her male counterparts, but religious belief was a strong influence in her early life. Although she came from a “poor working family of cabinetmakers,” her father was well read in the

---


Talmud and worked as a teacher.\textsuperscript{176} In an oral history interview recorded in the late 1980s, she recalled the day that she heard her father died. She was twelve years old and playing with her friends on a Saturday. The children were eating berries that were growing on someone else’s property, when someone from town ran to tell her about the telegram that had come with the news of her father’s death in nearby Zhitomir. She was told to return home. “So the first thing I was thinking: G-d punished me because I stole the [berries] from the little tree.” Although her friends tried to comfort her, Freida ran home crying, “why did I sin?” “That was how \textit{frum} [religious] we were. That was the situation in the little town.”\textsuperscript{177} David Davis, who also grew up in a small Ukrainian town, wrote in his memoir that, at the time of his departure for a larger town in 1900, local Jews had little direct knowledge of the secular literary and political movements taking shape elsewhere in the Jewish world.\textsuperscript{178}

Although Davis, Weiner and others emphasize the traditionality and insularity of small-town Jewish life, secular texts and radicalized “intelligentsia” began to arrive in small towns from larger Jewish centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Freida Weiner spent time in Kiev before becoming a socialist—she witnessed the Kiev pogroms that followed the failed 1905 revolution—yet her first introduction to secular literature and political radicalism occurred in her hometown, Korostyshev.\textsuperscript{179} There she attended her first Bundist meeting with a friend who was a tailor. She remembered “about fifteen or twenty people” in attendance, most of

\textsuperscript{176} Freida Weiner, untitled handwritten memoir (1985), Freida Weiner Papers; Freida Weiner, interview, July 6, 1982.

\textsuperscript{177} Freida Weiner, “Yiddish and Socialism,” interview, c. 1989.

\textsuperscript{178} David Davis, \textit{In gang fun di yorn}, 18.

\textsuperscript{179} “Korostishev” in Yiddish.
whom were working class. One of the leaders was a local doctor, part of the “intelligentsia.” The clandestine group had developed a small library and loaned out Yiddish translations of Russian and French literature.\textsuperscript{180} This experience both echoes similar stories from other southern Arbeter Ring members and epitomizes recent historical accounts, which note the importance of mentorship systems and lending libraries for the dissemination of secular and radical ideologies among East European Jews.\textsuperscript{181}

Whereas stories of shtetl-raised youths’ conversions to secularism and radical politics reflect both historical trends and popular literary tropes, the experiences of other early southern members demonstrate the diversity of Jewish life in eastern Europe. Abraham Landau, for example, was a “Russified Jew” when he arrived in Atlanta but was inspired by the Arbeter Ring to “educate himself in Yiddish and Yiddish literature and culture, and became a highly intelligent modern Jew.”\textsuperscript{182} Although Landau never adopted radical politics, he immersed himself in the Arbeter Ring’s intellectual environment.\textsuperscript{183} The Bell brothers of Houston—Nathan, Abe, Wolf, Sol, Morris and Mitchell—had grown up in a relatively secular family in Ukraine. Nathan, at least, attended cheder as a child before attending a secular high school in the town of Radomsyl. When Jewish quotas prevented Nathan from studying law at Kiev University, he took a job as an

\textsuperscript{180} Weiner, untitled handwritten memoir (1985).

\textsuperscript{181} Veidlinger, \textit{Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire}, 26-27, 37-38.

\textsuperscript{182} Sokol, “The southern district (memories),” 39; Memorial for Abraham Landau, \textit{In dorem land} (1949), 128.

\textsuperscript{183} Joseph Jacobs, interview by Clifford Kuhn, August 15, 1990, transcript, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ggdp/id/5779. Jacobs adds, however, that (at least) one of Landau’s daughters developed a more radical outlook than her father as a result of her Arbeter Ring education.
assistant for a prominent lawyer and began to write for a liberal Russian newspaper, *Kievskaya Mysl* (*Kiev Thought*). When younger brother Sol Bell documented his 1911 journey to Texas, he wrote his diary entries in “a good, literate Russian,” indicating that Nathan was not alone in receiving a secular Russian education.184

The cases of Abraham Landau and the Bell family also indicate that Arbeter Ring members did not simply transplant secular Yiddish politics and culture from eastern Europe to their new environments. Instead, southern branches provided the conditions in which immigrants actively developed the knowledge, skills and practices that allowed them to participate in secular and radical Yiddish culture. For members such as Landau and Joseph Keeper (discussed further in chapter 3), who had achieved a level of assimilation into Russian or other East European societies, this included learning to read and write a modernized Yiddish, familiarizing themselves with Yiddish literature and Jewish history, and adopting some variety of Jewish national consciousness.

However much the narratives of early members like Dave Davis, Freida Weiner and Mitchell Merlin draw from conventional depictions of their cohort—radicalized immigrants, born around 1885 and deeply affected by the failed 1905 revolution and its aftermath—available evidence suggests that younger members, who were born in the early twentieth century and immigrated in the late 1910s or early 1920s, brought a different set of experiences and values. These younger members came of age during a blossoming of Yiddish secular culture that followed the political disappointments of 1905-1907, an era in which Zionist, Territorialist and even socialist movements promoted competing but overlapping modes of Jewish national

Correspondingly, they may have been less averse to Zionism and Jewish orthodoxy than earlier arrivals.

Irving Nad, for example, was born in 1903 near Bialystok and adopted Zionism as a young man. At around eighteen years old, he migrated to Palestine, where he worked on a kibbutz for two years. When Irving arrived in Houston in 1923, he and his wife, Esther, followed the lead of relatives who had already joined the Arbeter Ring in order to have a Jewish social life. According to Abe Nad, their son, Irving and Esther were never dedicated socialists, despite their Arbeter Ring membership. They voted for socialist presidential candidates at times, but they also subscribed to Der Tog, a moderate Yiddish newspaper. Although the Arbeter Ring filled their cultural and educational needs for a time, they were not bound to it socially or ideologically. When the Houston Arbeter Ring school suspended operations during World War II, the family became active in the local chapter of the Farband, a labor Zionist group.  

By the 1930s and 1940s, Arbeter Ring participants were also more likely to observe Jewish religious traditions. In Atlanta, Irving and Rose Berkowitz and Bluma and Jacob Goldman, all born around 1900, were younger than founding branch members and did not immigrate until the early 1920s. Their connection to the Arbeter Ring stemmed from an interest in Yiddish secular culture rather than radical politics, and it did not preclude religious observance. Both families sent their children to the Arbeter Ring school but also attended traditional synagogues. The Berkowitzes’ daughter Shirley Brickman remembers that her

_185_ Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 12-17, 59, 64.

_186_ Nad, interview. “Farband” commonly referred to the *yidish natsionaler arbeter farband* (Jewish National Workers Alliance).

_187_ Shirley Brickman, interview by Josh Parshall, August 17, 2015; Helen Alperin and Sylvia Friedman, interview by Josh Parshall, August 16, 2015.
father explained, “we belonged to Arbeter Ring for what we could learn, not who we could be.” Although Irving did not share the group’s politics, the shule “answered a need for our folks, who were immigrants, who spoke Yiddish at home.”

Political Acts

Across the South, economic and political conditions, along with the relatively small number of Jewish immigrants, affected the shape of Jewish-left movements. Whereas Jewish socialists in the urban North or eastern Europe struggled to win labor victories, ensure Jewish political rights and elect socialist officials, left-leaning Jews in the South worked primarily as craftsmen and small business owners in areas where socialist candidates never drew widespread support. Historian Mark Bauman argues that southern Arbeter Ring branches participated in symbolic politics: “Socialism, communism, and labor unionism were topics of debate rather than actual pursuits, and the Arbeiter Ring/Workmen’s Circle was known for Yiddish schools rather than overt activism, since few Jews in the South worked in factories and the capitalist marketplace provided an enticing lure.”

Although Bauman correctly recognizes that economic factors affected the development of Jewish-left activity in the South—and that should be expanded to include the overall political, social and racial conditions in the region—his assessment overlooks instances of genuine political activism. A more accurate account of Arbeter Ring political activity in the South reveals that members took a number of concrete actions to support labor activism and socialist political movements, both within the South and

---

188 Brickman, interview; on Brickman, see Marcie Cohen Ferris, Matzo Ball Gumbo, 161-162.

189 Bauman, “A Multithematic Approach to Southern Jewish History,” 274; also see Bauman, The Southerner as American: Jewish Style, 30; and Bauman, Dixie Diaspora, 354.
beyond. The politics of the southern Arbeter Ring, then, were more than symbolic, even if the realities of the New South limited the possibilities of the group’s activism.

As in the North, the Arbeter Ring in the South proudly claimed the title “the Red Cross of labor,” and the group served as the fraternal arm of the Jewish labor movement, along with unions and the socialist Jewish press. Southern members, however, were less likely to work in unionized industrial settings. In the urban North, the Arbeter Ring attracted union members as well as non-unionized and former wage workers, and provided social, financial and political support to organized labor. Although some southern Arbeter Ring members worked in the trades they had learned in Eastern Europe or New York, including tailoring and watchmaking, these wage-laborers tended to work for small shops rather than large manufacturers and were rarely union members. Additionally, most members established their own businesses or moved into the professions over time. As a result, southern members supported labor struggles primarily as an outside source of financial and material support rather than as direct participants.

Regardless of southern Arbeter Ring members’ non-industrial and non-union employment patterns, historical essays by southern Arbeter Ring members and branch records reflect an early commitment to labor movements in the United States. The national office regularly solicited funds from the branches to support strikes by Jewish and non-Jewish workers, and local branches contributed as best they could. In January 1916, for example, Houston Branch 530 responded to such a letter by donating ten dollars to be split between striking miners in

---


Pennsylvania and Colorado.\textsuperscript{192} Strikes by Jewish workers often took place in the New York garment industry, and southern branches raised funds for these struggles as well.\textsuperscript{193} Not satisfied with the amounts they could raise on their own, some branches sent members to homes and businesses to ask for additional help, although they “often … suffer[ed] shame from a number of Jews who insulted us for the chutzpah of begging for money for ‘damn strikers.'”\textsuperscript{194} According to Mitchell Merlin, this activity also helped connect Arbeter Ring branches to non-Jewish workers: “ Strikes by local non-Jewish workers also took place in our cities, and we were the first to offer our help. We used to obligate ourselves to pay a set weekly amount for the strikers and earned the recognition of the local unions.”\textsuperscript{195} Members who owned grocery stores often supplied packages of food to striking workers, as occurred in Atlanta during the 1916 strike by employees of the Georgia Railway and Power Company.\textsuperscript{196} In Texas the Arbeter Ring developed sufficient rapport with labor activists to persuade the Texas Federation of Labor to “take up a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{192} Houston Branch 530, minute book, January 8, 1916, Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York, New York. \\
\textsuperscript{193} Mitchell Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 29. \\
\textsuperscript{194} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 29; Freida Weiner, handwritten memoir (1985). Weiner wrote of “begging donations” from “little stores” to raise greater sums. \\
\textsuperscript{195} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 29.\end{flushright} \\
\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
protest resolution against the persecution of Jews in Europe” at its 1916 conference in Houston.197

In addition to their financial and material contributions toward labor activism, Arbeter Ring members participated in socialist electoral politics. In contrast to their counterparts in New York City, southern members never had the opportunity to vote for viable socialist candidates for local offices or the state legislature, but this did not stop them from pursuing socialist politics. While Isaac Weiner and other early members of Houston Branch 530 argued over whether to establish a party branch separate from the Arbeter Ring, Atlanta Branch 207 formed after members were unable to launch a local chapter of the Socialist Party of America.198 Whereas these early attempts to organize Socialist Party locals failed, Atlanta eventually boasted two branches—“English and Jewish”—of the Socialist Party, which collaborated with the local Arbeter Ring and Poale Zion to hold an “International Labor Day” celebration on May 1, 1921.199

Although Arbeter Ring members varied in their commitment to radical politics and the group trended towards political moderation during the first half of the twentieth century, the organization did attempt to bar members from supporting mainstream political candidates in its first decades. Southern branches turned away “decent people” who had not demonstrated


199 “Socialists to Hold Meeting on Sunday,” Atlanta Constitution, May 1, 1921, 9, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. The membership of the Jewish section of the Socialist Party in Atlanta presumably overlapped to a great degree with the Arbeter Ring.
sufficient “socialist kashres / purity.” According to sociologist Arthur Liebman, “country branches” were more likely to enforce this policy, as their relative isolation from other leftist and labor groups made them more dependent on the Central Office and, therefore, stricter in their interpretations of Arbeter Ring bylaws. While Liebman does not provide detailed support for his claim, in at least one case, southern branches did penalize members who had voted for non-socialist candidates.

Jacob Press’s essay on the Arbeter Ring in Chattanooga, Branch 495, describes a period of internal conflict following an election in which many of its members voted for a local Jewish politician running on the Democratic ticket. The account does not provide names or dates, but it does provide a rough outline of what occurred. Following the election, members who had not voted for the Jewish Democrat “brought an accusation” against those who had, which may have been motivated by the politician’s earlier hostility to the founding of an Arbeter Ring branch, in addition to his party membership. As a consequence of voting for a Jewish non-socialist, the offending members, who were “among the most active” participants, received sanctions from the branch, either a fine or some form of censure. Although many members left the branch rather than submit to punishment, “the remaining members decided not to allow this to destroy the branch,” and the sanctioned members did eventually return to the group, “with the exception of a

---


few stubborn ones.”202 This story, though frustratingly vague in its details, demonstrates that southern Arbeter Ring branches, like Jewish-left groups anywhere else, struggled with the sometimes divergent priorities of Jewish cohesion and socialist principles, and that, in at least this case, they chose socialist purity, even in the politically conservative climate of the South.

Support for the Socialist Party was not merely a matter of abstaining from voting for non-socialist candidates, of course. Southern Arbeter Ring members enthusiastically supported socialist presidential candidates—Eugene V. Debs through 1920 and, in the late 1920s and 1930s, Norman Thomas. Historical writings by southern members and oral history interviews with former students of Arbeter Ring schools fondly recall visits by both candidates to southern cities, where they spoke at events organized by local branches and were guests in members’ homes.203 When Debs was incarcerated at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary from 1919 to 1921, the Atlanta branch often met with his visitors and “was always represented in visits to the prison, especially when he was nominated as the Socialist Party presidential candidate.”204 On one occasion, a group of fifty or more Atlanta Arbeter Ring members met with Debs at the prison, where they presented him flowers and he posed for a photograph with “a child in his arms.”205

202 Press, “Arbeter ring branch 495 in chattanooga,” 74. Jacob Press, the likely author of this article, was born in 1890 and is listed in the 1920 census as D. Jacob Press. His gravestone bears the name David Jacob Press. 1920 United States Census, Chattanooga, Hamilton County, Tennessee; an index of burials for Shaari Zion Cemetery, which includes an Arbeter Ring section, is available through the website of the Hamilton County Tennessee Genealogy: http://www.hctgs.org/Cemeteries/cemetery_shaari_zion.htm.


204 Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 34.

In addition to presidential candidates, Arbeter Ring branches supported local and state-level socialist candidates. Although the state parties did not always manage to nominate a full slate, socialist candidates ran for a variety of positions in the South from the 1910s through the 1930s. In 1932, the Socialist Party candidate for governor of Tennessee, John H. Compton, spoke at a rally at the Workmen’s Circle Hall in Nashville. In the same year, Memphis Arbeter Ring members presumably contributed to the 358 votes cast for a Socialist mayoral candidate. Because socialist candidates did not appear on regular ballots in the 1910s and 1920s, local party members printed and distributed their own. According to Harry Applebaum of Savannah, the smaller number of candidates resulted in a shorter ballot, and the paper “was always a slightly different color,” so that, despite the supposed anonymity of the democratic process, socialist workers risked unemployment if their political views became known. Activists “had to stand around the polling places” to hand out ballots and did so at great personal risk.

Although socialism ceased to be a mass movement in the South during the 1920s, many Arbeter Ring members continued to support leftist and labor politics through World War II and beyond. The national Arbeter Ring continued to support labor movements, and Atlanta members who owned grocery stores contributed food to striking workers during the 1930s. Some

206 The Socialist Party of Georgia did not field a state ticket in 1920, for example. See “Two Big Parties Assailed by Debs from Prison Cell,” Atlanta Constitution, Sept. 15, 1920, 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; on socialist candidates and state party platforms, see the Printed Ephemera Collection on the Socialist Party (U.S.) at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.


members, such as Harry and Chaya Rochel Andres in Dallas, began to vote for Democrats during the New Deal era, and the Arbeter Ring split with the Socialist Party over the Socialists’ opposition to American involvement in World War II. Still, other members remained committed to socialism well after its historical peak. Houston member Joseph Keeper did not vote for a Democratic presidential candidate until John F. Kennedy in 1960, according to his son David.209 Furthermore, while the children of southern Arbeter Ring members are not universally liberal, many adopted the group’s progressive sentiments. One former student of the Savannah Arbeter Ring shule described the branch’s politics as “socialism in its finest form—which I agree with.”210

The Left-Right Split

The Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, as well increasing American nativism, anti-Semitism and political repression in the late 1910s and 1920s, contributed to a series of schisms among the American and Jewish left from the early 1920s through the end of the decade. By the mid-1920s, an emergent left wing of the national Arbeter Ring sought to align the group with the Communist International, while a more moderate faction—known at the time as the “right”—viewed the Soviet-dominated movement for world communism with greater skepticism.211 As in other socialist and labor-oriented groups, the Arbeter Ring conflict “brought debates about Jewish nationalism and internationalism into sharp


210 Gertrude Scheer Barr, interview.

211 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 217-250; Hurwitz, The Workmen’s Circle, 56-78. Michels explores the central conflicts and lead-up to the schism, whereas Hurwitz provides a partisan account of the struggle as it played out in the Arbeter Ring.
Southern Arbeter Ring branches experienced the left-right split as well, and the records of that internal struggle indicate both that members, branches and district leadership actively participated in the struggle over the organization’s future and that the desirability of socialist revolution was a live question for a significant number of southern members.

Russia’s February Revolution, culminating in Tsar Nicholas’s abdication on March 15, 1917, elicited an enthusiastic response from the American Jewish left, and southern Arbeter Ring members were no exception. Shortly after the end of tsarist rule, The Atlanta Constitution interviewed Shmuel Yampolsky, who looked forward to the development of democratic government and economic prosperity in Russia and characterized the revolution as “the fruition of the dreams and hopes of the intelligent classes of Russia, who were not among the autocracy.” Mitchell Merlin, in his account of the left-right split, recalled that the excitement over the tsar’s overthrow “lasted for years afterward, even when we became disappointed by the leaders of Soviet Russia.”

The collapse of tsarist power was not the only event that inspired a renewed radicalism among southern Arbeter Ring members, however. The repression of labor and leftist movements during and after World War I also drove some socialists toward the emerging communist movement. Merlin described the late 1910s and early 1920s as “the time of Palmerism,”

---

212 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 221.
213 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 217.
216 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 220.
alluding to U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s attempts to undermine socialist and anarchist leaders during the Red Scare.\textsuperscript{217} According to Merlin, the imprisonment of Eugene Debs in Atlanta for protesting the United States’ entry into the war “added an especially bitter taste to our mood.”\textsuperscript{218} In Texas, where a socialist movement of tenant farmers blossomed during the early 1910s, Thomas A. Hickey’s radical weekly, the Rebel, became the first target of U.S. Postmaster General—and native Texan—Albert S. Burleson after the passage of the 1917 Espionage Act. By banning the Rebel from circulation by mail and persecuting Hickey and other radical leaders, federal and state officials stopped “the heartbeat of the Texas Socialist movement.”\textsuperscript{219} As southern Arbeter Ring members witnessed wartime censorship and reactionary politics in their own states, they also experienced the chilling effects of these trends within the national organization, which discontinued national lecture tours in 1919 “because of the climate of fear and repression.”\textsuperscript{220}

The turbulence of the late 1910s and early 1920s inaugurated a shift in the political landscape of the American left, Jewish or not. Affiliation with the international communist movement, through the Third International (also known as the Comintern) or one of its subsidiary groups, held great appeal for radicals who hoped to foment socialist revolution in the United States. Many Jewish socialists felt a keen desire for a more strident revolutionary stance than that taken by the old guard of the Jewish labor movement—associated with the Socialist

\textsuperscript{217} Mitchell Merlin, “Left and right in arbeter ring” 36
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{220} Michels, \textit{A Fire in Their Hearts}, 220.
Party and the *Forverts*—and hoped that, through an alliance with the emerging communist movement, they could pursue a working-class formulation of *yidishe kultur*. By enrolling in the communist movement, radical Jewish socialists did gain the support of a transnational, multiethnic network, which eliminated the need to accommodate the moderate politics and middle- and upper-class sensibilities of non-revolutionary Jewish groups. This partnership, however, also threatened the autonomy of the Jewish left and led, at times, to the suppression of secular Yiddishkayt as an end unto itself, due to the inconsistencies and vagaries of Soviet and Communist Party policies in regard to ethnic and linguistic minorities.221

From 1919 to 1923, this tension played out in the Jewish Socialist Federation, which renamed itself the Jewish Federation and affiliated with the Communist-aligned Worker’s Party in 1921. Although the alliance allowed the Jewish Federation to publish a radical Yiddish newspaper, *Di Frayhayt*, Communist members soon seized power, and most of its original leadership had defected or been expelled by the end of 1923.222 As Tony Michels notes, the struggle within the Jewish Socialist Federation serves as a template for infighting and fragmentation in other Jewish leftist organizations, in which attempted Communist takeovers forced members to choose between the dual priorities of Yiddish/Jewish specificity and a more general program of revolutionary agitation.223

When a similar schism developed within the Arbeter Ring in the mid-1920s, southern branches also became sites of conflict. According to Mitchell Merlin, a split had already occurred in local Socialist Party branches, which resulted in the exclusion of “heretics” like

---

221 Ibid., 221-228. On the JSF see Michels 172-178.


223 Ibid., 249-250.
himself, who had balked at the Comintern’s call for the organization of militant, underground revolutionary cells. To Merlin’s surprise, the struggle soon transferred to the Arbeter Ring when a number of members accepted new leadership posts during the next round of branch elections. By Merlin’s account, the new officials were followers of the “left,” who had acted on “orders from New York” to win control of local branches.224 By 1925, left-right factionalism had disrupted the activities of both the Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts.

For the more moderate faction in southern cities, association with communism threatened the standing of the Arbeter Ring in relation to other Jewish groups and the status of Jews among the broader population. In 1924, The Houston Post-Dispatch reported that naturalization examiner Walter Wheatley raised concerns about the Arbeter Ring’s association with “red organizations in Russia,” while questioning citizenship applicant Peter O. Fleet, the treasurer of the Houston branch. The newspaper account shows that Wheatley asked Fleet to explain his participation in a recent celebration of “the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution” and accused the group of undermining citizenship schools’ teachings “in regard to the constitution and duties of Americans.” Although Fleet testified that the Arbeter Ring was “a benevolent association,” he added to the controversy with comments made “outside the courtroom,” stating that he “belonged to the radical Wing of the Worker’s Circle” and arguing that anyone “with any sense” should be a radical.225 Local leadership rushed to address the story, and the Post-Dispatch reported on their denial of “red affiliations” the following day. In the follow-up article, Houston branch secretary M. J. Atlas stated that “the purpose of the organization is solely to act as a


benevolent society among members in case of sickness or death” and justified the commemoration of the Russian revolution as a celebration of the end of “Russian despotism, the most corrupt in the world.”

The Houston Arbeter Ring’s quick response to Wheatley’s claims, as well as Atlas’s total omission of the group’s cultural and political activities, indicate that the group understood allegations of communist conspiracy to be a serious threat.

In regard to the internal conflict between socialist and communist factions within the southern Arbeter Ring, available historical sources come primarily from the so-called “right,” which ultimately maintained power in the organization. These documents treat the Left as an insurgent movement that resorted to underhanded tactics in order to deliver the Arbeter Ring into communist control, while the Right was purportedly made up of “loyal members” who “only wanted the Arbeter Ring to remain an independent organization.”

Despite the partisan perspective of these sources, they provide a general sense of the contours and development of the schism, which played out as a series of disputes over tactics and protocols as each faction attempted to legitimize its own attempts to gain power.

Just as the Left sought to win leadership positions in local branches, its adherents attempted to elect pro-communist candidates as representatives to the national body. At the September 1923 convention of the Texas-Louisiana District in Galveston, the Left succeeded in electing a radical candidate as the district representative to the national board of directors.

---


227 Ibid.

Delegates from the Right, however, protested the results on procedural grounds and appealed to
the national office. A new conference was called for October in Dallas, which was attended by
the general secretary of the national Arbeter Ring, Joseph Baskin. The second conference also
failed to satisfy both camps, and “no peace was established in the branches.” Two years later,
discord in the Southeastern District reached a new high in anticipation of the annual district
convention, at which delegates would be elected to the pivotal 1925 national convention where
the Left hoped to gain supremacy. The district leadership prepared for this showdown by
coordinating with moderate local leaders, and only the Macon branch sent a left-wing delegate to
the regional conference.

As these examples suggest, the right wing of the Arbeter Ring held powerful positions at
the regional and national levels, while members of the Left tended to be rank and file members
or local officials. Unable to gain a decisive advantage and frustrated with interference from more
moderate (but still socialist) leadership, the Left took up activist tactics—or resorted to
obstructionism in the view of their opponents. According to Merlin, the Left in Miami refused to
comply with requests from the national office or the district “out of spite.” Freida Weiner
wrote that, in the Texas-Louisiana District, “no work could be done until 1924-1925, when the
‘left’ groups split off and formed their own branches in Houston, Dallas and San Antonio.”
She also recalled an incident in which the district treasurer, Sam Fargotstein, resigned in protest

---

229 Weiner, “The arbeter ring in texas-louisiana district,” 44.
231 Ibid., 38.
232 Freida Weiner, “The arbeter ring in texas-louisiana district,” 44.
and withheld nearly six-thousand dollars in district funds from the new executive committee, claiming that the committee was “not representative of the Texas Arbeter Ring membership.”

Tensions between moderate and radical socialists continued in both the national organization and the southern districts through the end of the 1920s. In the Southeastern District, a number of Arbeter Ring teachers took up the leftist cause, and, under the leadership of Atlanta teacher Ralph Lazarson, planned a protest at a district conference in Jacksonville. Pro-communist members in larger southern cities—Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Atlanta, Miami, Chattanooga and Memphis—split off to form their own branches, though these were less successful than their moderate rivals. Some branches in smaller cities also sided with the Left. In Shreveport, “the left faction dominated for a long time.” The branch contributed to causes such as The Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union (ICOR) and sent leftist representatives to district and national conventions. While the Shreveport leftists eventually “sobered up,” in Freida Weiner’s words, the splinter branches in large cities abandoned the Arbeter Ring during the national exodus of leftist branches that occurred in October 1929.

In fall 1929, the left-wing branches of the Arbeter Ring gathered for a conference in New York City, during which they voted to leave the organization for the Independent Arbeter Ring, a

---

233 Ibid., 44-45.
237 Ibid.
smaller, parallel body that had formed in Massachusetts in 1906 due to incompatibilities in state insurance laws between New York and Massachusetts.\(^{239}\) These left-wing branches believed that “the Independent” had moved “closer to the class conscious section of the working class” since 1923, even as the Arbeter Ring had rejected leftists’ attempts to affiliate with the communist movement, and that the relocated members could work with the existing left wing of the Independent to gain control of the organization. However, the “right wing leadership” of the Independent stalled the takeover and pushed through an amendment to the organization’s constitution “to the effect that the national convention was prohibited from endorsing any workers’ party or workers’ paper.”\(^{240}\)

Having failed to enroll either the Arbeter Ring or the Independent in the communist cause, the left branches abandoned both organizations and founded the International Workers’ Order (IWO), a Communist-affiliated fraternal body that provided similar benefits packages and cultural programs as the Arbeter Ring. Although the IWO was made up of multiple “sections,” divided by nationality and language, the split in the Arbeter Ring provided its initial membership, and the Jewish Section, later known as the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order, remained its largest section.\(^{241}\) Of the southern Arbeter Ring splinter branches, at least those in

---


\(^{240}\) *Class Struggle in Fraternal Organizations*, 7-11. For a “right” perspective on these events, see Hurwitz, *The Workmen’s Circle*, 55-78.

Atlanta, Chattanooga and Miami formed chapters of the new IWO and contributed to local communist movements.242

The occurrence of a dramatic left-right split within and among southern branches helps to reframe Jewish history outside of more prominent centers of Jewish life, marking peripheral cities such as Chattanooga and San Antonio as active sites in the production, development and contestation of emergent modes of Jewishness. Like those Jews who became literate in Yiddish through their involvement in southern Arbeter Ring branches, Ralph Lazarson, Sam Fargotstein and other leftists acted locally in ways that connected them to movements in other states and countries. While the struggle over the future of the Arbeter Ring in the South developed along similar lines as conflicts outside the southern district, the regional iteration of the socialist-communist rupture did not merely reflect a broader context, but played a constitutive role in national and transnational events. The coordinated response by district leaders to the threat of a leftist takeover, as well as interventions by the national office, indicate that the outcome of the left-right split was in doubt both nationally and in the South. Although it is unlikely, for example, that “loyal” southern delegates provided the deciding votes at the 1925 national conference, southern branches participated actively as the schism unfolded.


**Multiplicity**

The left-right split in the Arbeter Ring centered on the question of what kinds of networks the organization would affiliate with and how much of its action would be determined by those affiliations. These were not new tensions, but the development of a transnational communist movement forced a crisis by offering a radical network that appealed to Jewish socialists and claimed an exclusive relationship with them. Communism offered Jewish socialists opportunities and resources to develop a radically working-class *yidishe kultur* but also demanded that class solidarity take precedence over cultural or national concerns. As a result, the communist movement ran the risk of isolating Jewish leftists from less radical Jews and placed secular Yiddish culture in a tenuous position with regard to shifting party policies on national and ethnic difference. Insofar as Jewish socialists were forced to choose between Jewish cohesion and revolutionary socialism, the schisms of the 1920s resulted from the inherent “multiplicity” of Jewish-socialist groups.

Multiplicity, as used by Annemarie Mol, refers to the ways that an apparently stable and cohesive thing—the Arbeter Ring, in this case—is enacted differently in different situations.\(^{243}\) As a Jewish-socialist organization, the Arbeter Ring acted in relation to (and was acted upon by) networks that I will provisionally label ‘Jewish’ and ‘socialist.’ Certainly, these networks overlapped, but at times they also pulled the Arbeter Ring in different directions. The cohesion of the organization depended, as a result, on the “coordination” of its differing enactments.\(^{244}\) In relation to Jewish and non-Jewish labor movements, southern Arbeter Ring branches acted as


\(^{244}\) Ibid., 53-55.
conduits for pro-labor propaganda into immigrant Jewish communities and for financial and material resources from those communities to unions and striking workers. In relation to geographically local Jewish communities, the group offered Yiddish-language events that drew participants from outside its own membership, was (at times) a client or beneficiary of Jewish organizations such as an education alliance or community center, and operated (at times) as a competitor to other Jewish groups. The coordination of the Arbeter Ring’s left-wing and Jewish activities worked in part through the “distribution” of different activities, allowing one set of priorities to take place over the other, but also through instances in which its connections to leftist and Jewish networks were merged, the singing of “The Internationale” in Yiddish, for example.245

The Problem of Race

After 1930, the moderate (but still socialist-oriented) Arbeter Ring branches that remained in the South found their greatest successes in Jewish educational and cultural work.246 The weakening of socialist and labor movements in the 1920s left them with few local non-Jewish allies, and previous clashes with their own leftist factions precluded collaboration with the handful of Communist groups that took root in the South. At the same time, the escalation of global Jewish crises during and after World War I took up more of their attention, as did their efforts to advocate for Yiddish language and culture in America, which was threatened by immigration restrictions, ongoing acculturation and the rising popularity of Zionism. As the founding generation of southern Arbeter Ring leaders entered middle age, the branches attracted


members through Jewish cultural programs and offered Yiddish education for the children of immigrants, but both member families and local chapters suffered the economic effects of the Great Depression. All of these factors, along with many members’ entry into the middle class, diminished the group’s potential for radicalism, as evidenced through the group’s relationship with the defining problem of the twentieth-century South: race.  

Early members of southern Arbeter Ring branches arrived in the South during the hardening of Jim Crow segregation and quickly took notice of this aspect of their new American lives. Dave Davis, on his first day as a peddler, was not surprised to find himself in a black neighborhood when he disembarked from the streetcar at the end of the line: “I had already heard and seen that here in the city of Atlanta, and generally in the South, there were no mixed neighborhoods of white and black residents.” His memoir also notes that the American Civil War was “still fresh in the memories of southern whites” and describes annual celebrations of Confederate Memorial Day, when remaining confederate veterans were honored participants in “a large parade.” For Jewish immigrants like Davis, who referred to white mob violence against black Atlantans as a “pogrom,” recent experiences of anti-Semitic violence, economic exploitation and political oppression “enabled [them] to sympathize with the black man’s plight.” Yiddish newspapers, to which many southern Arbeter Ring members subscribed,

---

247 The assertion that race was the defining problem of the twentieth-century South should not be taken to mean that race is not a central problem to the United States more broadly or in other periods of southern (or American) history.


250 Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City*, 191. Hertzberg also cites Davis’s description of the 1906 Atlanta “race riot.”
made similar comparisons between the sufferings of Jews and black Americans, as did African American journalists.\textsuperscript{251}

Whatever sympathy left-leaning Jewish immigrants to the South had for their black neighbors, they lacked the tools and standing to effectively address Jim Crow racism. After witnessing white “hooligans” attacking black residents in the streets of Atlanta in 1906, Davis asked himself “where am I? What have I seen? Is this the free America?”\textsuperscript{252} His “poor English,” however, dissuaded him from attempting to “express solidarity” with black Atlantans.\textsuperscript{253} Beyond simple communication, immigrant Jews’ precarious economic situation and social marginalization compounded the difficulties and dangers of speaking out. Even if Davis or other recent immigrants had managed to publicly condemn racist violence, they would have received little support from more established members of southern Jewish communities, who held similar racial views as other middle class whites and pressured less affluent Jews to observe racial boundaries as well.\textsuperscript{254} Beyond the Jewish community, of course, overt acts of cross-racial solidarity were likely to precipitate violent responses.

The potential for left-leaning Jews to address white supremacy was also limited by the attitudes of other radical and progressive whites. The Socialist Party was relatively small in the South and never developed a practical response to the problem of American racial inequalities.

\textsuperscript{251} Hertzberg, \textit{Strangers within the Gate City}, 185-186.

\textsuperscript{252} Davis, \textit{In gang fun di yorn}, 162.

\textsuperscript{253} Hertzberg, \textit{Strangers within the Gate City}, 191. Hertzberg cites an oral history interview with Davis, as well as \textit{In gang fun di yorn}, but this seems to be from the interview. See note 18 on page 191.

\textsuperscript{254} Hertzberg, \textit{Strangers within the Gate City}, 191-192; Caroline Light, \textit{That Pride of Race and Character}, 135-141.
Instead, the party appealed to the material interests and social attitudes of its white political base, largely composed of skilled laborers, railroad employees and farmers. Historian Michael Honey notes that “while many southern Socialists formally supported economic equality for blacks, most also eschewed ‘social equality,’ a code word for integration.”

Furthermore, despite Jewish socialists’ concern for labor and justice, their brand of self-education relied on Eurocentric notions of culture and civilization. In 1911 Baruch Charney Vladeck, the first lecturer to tour the southern branches of the Arbeter Ring, published an account of southern Jewish life in the Forverts. While Vladeck castigated Jewish peddlers and merchants for exploiting black customers and recognized “the Negro question” as “the most burning issue in every sphere of southern life,” he also lamented that the children of Jewish grocers in black neighborhoods “come under the influence of the black street which is still barbaric and half-wild.” Vladeck’s mixed message, at once mindful of black victimization and suspicious of black working-class culture, reflects American Jewish socialists’ desire, not only to critique their new society but also to improve their own living conditions and pursue, in Vladeck’s words, “the enlightenment of the Jewish masses.” Consequently, Arbeter Ring members’ exposure to radical and progressive viewpoints was unlikely to counteract impressions

---


257 Ibid. Vladeck used this term in reference to the political and cultural potential of the Arbeter Ring in the South. “Enlightenment” here is translated from aufklärung.
of black cultural inferiority, especially as immigrants and their children gained familiarity with New South racial dynamics and access to the privileges of the middle class.258

**Jewish-Left Responses**

Clearly, race posed a significant problem for left-leaning Jews in southern cities, and their responses to the problem were inconsistent. Histories of labor-oriented Civil Rights struggles in the depression-era South—in cities such as Memphis, Atlanta and Birmingham—provide clues about Jewish-left involvement (and noninvolvement) in pre-1950s southern movements for racial justice. Southern Jewish leftists (as opposed to activists from the Northeast) make only brief appearances in these accounts, however, and their affiliations with specifically Jewish political groups receive little sustained attention. Bringing additional evidence to bear on these traces of southern Jewish radicals and reframing the actions of southern Arbeter Ring branches and related groups in terms of Jewish-left politics provides a clearer view of their reactions to racial inequality in particular and the political contours of the southern Jewish left in general.

Michael Honey offers a characteristic reference to the Memphis Arbeter Ring in his work on civil rights and labor activism in 1930s Memphis. He notes that Memphis socialists had shown little interest in either black civil rights or labor organizing in the 1920s and continues,

> By the early thirties, the shell of the Memphis Socialist party that remained consisted of a few elderly Jewish men and a few white middle-class supporters holding regular meetings at the Arbeiter Ring Hall at Jefferson and Orleans Streets, a building run by the Workmen’s Circle, a Jewish fraternal group. Devoid of contact with blacks and differentiating themselves from their “bitterest enemy—communism,” the Socialists

258 On Jewish views of African American culture in Atlanta, see Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City*, 191.
seemed inert, but in the early thirties they began to show life and agitate for an end to free market capitalism.\(^{259}\)

Apart from the misleading characterization of 1930s Arbeter Ring members as “elderly” and their alleged lack of contact with blacks—the known founders of Branch 312 were between forty and sixty years at the time, and many of the local Jewish socialists owned businesses that catered to black clientele—this depiction points to significant facts about Memphis’s Jewish left, especially the location of the Arbeter Ring Hall less than a mile west of downtown and its use as a meeting place for Jewish and non-Jewish socialists.\(^{260}\) As for the “bitter” opposition to communism, a 1949 history of Branch 312 shows that, at least for Memphis’s Jewish socialists, strong opposition to communism resulted not merely from a general sense of political rivalry but a split in the local Arbeter Ring that occurred in 1926.\(^{261}\)

Such socialist-communist schisms in southern Arbeter Ring branches had lasting effects, including an enduring reluctance to work with Communist-affiliated organizations and activists. According to Honey, allegations of Communist influence hindered biracial activism in Memphis. Although, for example, the largely-Jewish Memphis Socialists joined with other progressive Memphis groups to found the Unemployed Citizens League in 1932, the new organization soon failed due to internal red-baiting and “the prevailing anticommmunist rhetoric fostered by city leaders and the newspapers.”\(^{262}\)

\(^{259}\) Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, 57.

\(^{260}\) A list of founding members is included in Scheinberg, “Branch 312 arbeter ring in memphis, tennessee,” 86. Approximate birth years for most of those listed are available in the 1910 United States Census, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee.

\(^{261}\) Scheinberg, “Branch 312 arbeter ring in memphis, tennessee,” 86.

\(^{262}\) Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, 57-58.
While the short-lived Memphis coalition was non-Communist, other racial justice movements in the region were linked to Communist-affiliated groups. In Atlanta, the Communist Party attempted to build a biracial movement of unemployed workers during the early years of the Depression but encountered harassment, surveillance and repression by local authorities. After police arrested activists—two white men, two white women and two black men—at two events in March 1930, all six were charged with inciting “resistance to the lawful authority of the state” under a Reconstruction-era insurrection law. Two years later, prosecutors charged Angelo Herndon, a black Communist organizer, for the same offense. Herndon had helped bring together black and white workers to demand increased unemployment relief. The “Atlanta Six” and Angelo Herndon cases dragged on for years and became celebrated causes, not only for Communists but also for liberals and socialists who objected to the racist and reactionary policies of local and state officials.

Atlanta’s Jewish left, both the mainstream Arbeter Ring and the radical faction, responded to the Atlanta Six and Angelo Herndon cases and took part in contemporaneous activism, but their involvement differed. Arbeter Ring Branch 207 (the “right”) participated in the Angelo Herndon-Atlanta Six Defense Committee, along with other progressive and radical organizations, but the committee struggled as liberal and socialist factions balked at the Communist-backed International Defense League’s prominent role in the defense. Socialists and Communists generally distrusted each other at the time, but the misgivings were especially personal for members of the Arbeter Ring and IWO, who had fought bitterly for much of the

264 Ibid., 44-49.
265 Ibid., 53-54.
1920s and only recently shared administrative duties over their building and school. Mitchell Merlin, whose brother Morris sided with the “Left,” wrote that the conflict “boiled the blood of both sides,” “divided brothers and sisters, husbands and wives,” and “led to hatred in many cases.”

Atlanta’s radical splinter group, formed as Arbeiter Ring Branch 462 in the 1920s and then reorganized as a branch of the IWO, had closer connections to the cases. Prior to his arrest in 1932, Angelo Herndon was involved in a minor automobile accident while “riding with a Jewish grocer” in a car hired by the local Unemployment Council. While Herndon did not name his Jewish comrade, it might have been Sam Feinberg or Nathan Katz, both of whom ran groceries and were active in Communist circles. According to FBI files on the white activist Donald West, Feinberg and Katz served as contacts for West, who worked on the Herndon Defense around 1933, and “Feinberg was always good for some food.” West himself later recalled that Jewish grocery store owners in Chattanooga and Atlanta provided food and even meeting spaces for pro-Herndon activists. Although available sources have not yet shown that

---

266 Merlin, “Left and right in arbeiter ring,” 38; Joseph Jacobs, interview by Cliff Kuhn, October 22, 1990, transcript, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ggdp/id/5863. Mitchell Merlin does not name his brother as a member of the Left in his account, but Joseph Jacobs describes the political and religious differences within the Merlin family.


270 Donald West, interview by Jacquelyn Hall and Ray Faherty, January 22, 1975, interview E-0016, transcript, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection,
either Feinberg or Katz had been a member of the Arbeter Ring, the FBI files refer to Katz as the “leader of the Jewish Section or ROTHERNBERG GROUP in Atlanta,” likely referring to the Jewish branch of the IWO. 271

In Chattanooga, Jewish IWO members who owned grocery stores also assisted activists in the Communist Party and the related Trade Union Unity League. According to party organizer James S. Allen, Sam Borenstein “had a small grocery store in a racially mixed neighborhood” and was a “sure haven” for Communists in the early 1930s.

Without a family of his own, he fed and, when necessary, lodged them as if they were his kin. The Party section committee often met in the room in the back of the store that served as a kitchen and sitting room. It was a convenient meeting place since the room was entered from the store and both Black and white members could come unnoticed. 272

Borenstein also ran as the Communist Party candidate for governor of Tennessee in 1930, sharing the ticket with senate candidate Sherman Bell, a black plasterer. Borenstein received 1,296 votes and Sherman Bell received 3,382. 273 Finally, the continuity between Chattanooga’s Jewish IWO section and the local Arbeter Ring is clearer than in Atlanta, as Borenstein seems to have been a former member of Chattanooga Branch 495. 274


271 Donald West FBI Files; Lorence, The Unemployed People’s Movement, 121.


273 James S. Allen, Organizing in the Depression South, 53.

274 Borenstein lived in Chattanooga prior to the Left’s complete exit from the Arbeter Ring, and his family attended at least one Chattanooga Arbeter Ring event. In 1928, Borenstein and his two sons were injured and his wife was killed in a collision between a passenger train and a truck in
Despite a thin record of Jewish IWO activity in the South, the support offered by Communist grocery store owners to black and white activists suggests that their new organizational affiliation allowed or compelled them to engage more directly with race-conscious radicalism than did the Arbeter Ring and other liberal or socialist groups. Through the Communist-funded weekly *The Southern Worker*, they received regular accounts of white violence against black southerners, and as the IWO established black lodges in southern cities, black workers became (if not socially then financially and discursively) part of their extended fraternal network.\footnote{275} Jewish IWO branches in the South continued to enjoy and support Yiddish culture—members read the *Morgn Frayhayt*, branches conducted business in Yiddish and the Atlanta group attempted to open its own Yiddish school—but, especially in the early 1930s, the group placed less emphasis on Jewish national sentiments than class solidarity and re-channeled Jewish-specific concerns through party-approved programs.\footnote{276} By linking themselves to the Communist movement, IWO members became more capable of cross racial solidarity while limiting their associations with other Jewish groups.

---

\footnote{275} See various issues of *The Southern Worker*, available online through the Marxist Internet Archive, \url{https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/southernworker/}; On black IWO branches in Atlanta, see Lorence, *The Unemployed People’s Movement*, 117-118 and 121;

Arbeter Ring branches, by contrast, continued to operate primarily in Jewish and socialist networks, cooperating with non-radical Jewish organizations such as the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A.), Jewish Educational Alliances and local congregations. The final withdrawal of the far-left ended, more or less, the long debate over the appropriate relationship between the Arbeter Ring and local Jewish umbrella groups, sometimes referred to as “kol yisroel / all Israel” organizations. By participating in the broader activities of the local Jewish community, in part through representation on federation boards, Southern Arbeter Ring branches agitated for progressive ideals and marshaled community resources for Jewish-left causes, such as ORT and the Jewish Labor Committee. However, the participation of individual members or entire branches in the activities of Jewish federations and community councils required an acceptance of the Arbeter Ring’s minority status among mainstream Jewish groups and a willingness to participate in “the general Jewish life,” even in the role of dissenting voice.

It is not clear whether local Jewish umbrella organizations monitored or attempted to control Arbeter Ring branches’ activities or politics during the 1930s or 1940s, but Jewish groups did show concern over public perceptions of links between Jews and Communist or anti-

---

277 In April 1930, for example, Arbeter Ring Branch 303 and two traditional synagogues, Knesseth Israel and Temple Beth-El, co-sponsored a lecture by Baruch Charney Vladeck at the Birmingham Y.M.H.A. “B. vladek morgen in tshatanuga, tenesi, far’n folks getsayg kampein,” Forverts, April 16, 1930, Historical Jewish Press.

278 Morris Ross, “Twenty-five years of arbeter ring br. 207, a historical overview,” 5.

279 The Vladeck talk in Birmingham, for example, benefited ORT programs: “B. vladek morgen in tshatanuga, tenesi, far’n folks getsayg kampein,” Forverts, April 16, 1930, Historical Jewish Press. Also see Mitchell Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 35. On Federation donations to the JLC, see correspondence from Harry Sokol and Mitchell Merlin to the JLC, Jewish Labor Committee Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

racist politics. In 1949 the Atlanta Federation of Jewish Social Services terminated social worker Eudice Tontak, a graduate of the Atlanta Arbeter Ring shule but not an active member, after she testified for the defense in the trial of a Communist Party organizer and refused to answer whether she was a member of the party. According to another witness, Tontak (a single white woman) hosted interracial Communist meetings at her apartment and helped to keep the local chapter of the Progressive Party under Communist control. When local papers—which had previously belittled Tontak’s work with the racially progressive Southern Conference for Human Welfare—reported that she worked for the Atlanta Federation of Jewish Social Services, the federation board opted not to take immediate action, but a group of agitators brought the situation to the attention of the Atlanta Jewish Community Council and threatened the federation’s funding.\footnote{Eudice Tontak, “SCHW Chapter,” The Atlanta Constitution, Nov. 8, 1947, 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Edward M. Kahn to Jacob H. Kravitz, Sept. 28, 1949, Eudice Tontak Personnel File, Atlanta Jewish Federation Records, Cuba Family Archives, William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta; “Chase Case May Close Tomorrow,” The Atlanta Constitution, June 5, 1949, 2A, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.} Despite assurances from Tontak that she was not a Communist, did not support the violent overthrow of the United States government and only became involved with the events surrounding the court case through her work on the 1948 Progressive Party campaign, the federation’s president and executive director “suggested that she tender her resignation.” When Tontak refused, she was “relieved of her duties” at the agency.\footnote{Edward M. Kahn to Jacob H. Kravitz, Sept. 28, 1949.} Although this scandal hinged on allegations of Communist affiliation, local leaders surely understood that Tontak’s
biracial activism and vocal stance against white “chauvinism” would also draw unwanted attention to Atlanta’s Jewish community.\(^{283}\)

Memoirs and oral histories about the southern Arbeter Ring often express sympathy for African Americans and a concern for racial justice, but such sentiments are also common among Jews who espoused a more mainstream liberalism. Furthermore, sympathy did not necessarily lead to action. As Gertrude Scheer Barr, a student in the Savannah Arbeter Ring shule in the 1930s explained, Jews “could empathize” with African Americans, “but they still paid them next to nothing.” According to Barr, other Jewish women “used to fuss at me because I paid the part-time help … much more than they did. I said, ‘I can’t do it.’ You know, because of my upbringing.”\(^{284}\) While Barr’s testimony undermines a popular narrative in which Jewish southerners universally offer better treatment to blacks than non-Jewish whites, she is far from the only southern Jewish woman to report that she paid above-average wages to black domestic workers.\(^{285}\) At its worst (though not necessarily in this instance) this longstanding trope minimizes Jewish complicity in the exploitation of black labor by comparing Jewish employment practices to contemporaneous standards.\(^{286}\) Perhaps, then, Arbeter Ring members’ racial attitudes were more similar to than different from the views of other Jews.


\(^{284}\) Gertrude Scheer Barr, interview.

\(^{285}\) The interviews in the Institute of Southern Jewish Life Oral History Program provide numerous examples of the complex ways that southern Jews remember and describe black employees, especially domestic workers.

\(^{286}\) In *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*, Eli Evans’s accounts of African American employees, both in the family business and in their home, serve as paradigmatic examples of liberal southern Jews’ thoughts on black labor in the South. Evans oscillates between frank recognition of the conditions facing black workers, self-congratulation for his
Nevertheless, an idealistic and optimistic historian might see in the Arbeter Ring a greater potential for Jewish anti-racist activism, even if that potential was never fully realized. Unlike other Jewish groups, the Arbeter Ring’s socialist orientation offered its members a critical distance from America’s racialized capitalisms while its organizational structure could have provided a basis for collective action. Instead, the apparent inconsistency of cross-racial alliances speaks to a potent mix of desires and pressures—Arbeter Ring members’ economic, educational and cultural aspirations, other Jewish groups’ expectations of political moderation and the real threat of violence and repression by state and non-state actors—that shaped southern branches’ responses to the problem of race. Jewish-Communist activism in Chattanooga and Atlanta, by contrast, shows how a different set of networks produced more direct acts of solidarity in particular situations.

**Tracing the “Reality” of Southern Arbeter Ring Politics**

The Weiner family relocated from Houston to Galveston in 1921. Isaac had earned a good living at a Ford automobile plant in Houston, but he suffered a “mental breakdown” after the birth of the couple’s third child in 1917. Isaac was unable to work for several months, “and when he came to himself he did not have a job.”287 Around the same time, the Galveston branch collapsed due to the autocratic leadership of Sam Fargotstein, who both favored a stronger stance on Jewish nationalism than other members and also alienated the branch from the local Jewish community by aggressively denouncing religion. Fargotstein, a pawnshop owner, recruited Isaac family’s (legitimately) progressive actions in regard to black customers and employees, and sometimes romanticized memories of the intimacies shared between his Jewish family and black domestic workers. Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), especially 26-28 and 255-262.

287 Freida Weiner, “My memories of the workmen’s circle’s activities,” manuscript (Yiddish), Freida Weiner papers.
to Galveston and offered to help him find work as a tinsmith with the hope that the Weiners would assist with the revival of the branch.\textsuperscript{288}

Isaac and Freida did help to reorganize Galveston’s Arbeter Ring, but political conflict continued to disrupt branch activities. As the left-right split developed in the early 1920s, Sam Fargotstein advocated a pro-Soviet stance while Isaac Weiner favored the moderate approach of the \textit{Forverts} and the national Arbeter Ring leadership. The majority of Galveston Arbeter Ring members sided with Weiner, especially as the Soviet regime’s oppressive and violent tactics became more widely known. Fargotstein continued to support the radical cause, however, eventually denouncing the branch for its “kol yisroel” stance and resigning from the Arbeter Ring altogether.\textsuperscript{289} He moved to Memphis in the 1930s after buying a watch parts company, but passed away in 1938 at fifty-three years old. Although Sam Fargotstein “died a Communist,” the 1949 Southern District conference journal honors him as a founder of the Galveston and Houston branches in its memorial section.\textsuperscript{290}

Freida Weiner’s early involvement with underground revolutionary groups in Russia and her later experience of the Arbeter Ring’s left-right split reflect the ways that southern branch members’ life stories are deeply enmeshed with the emergence and transformation of Jewish political movements and the historical events to which those movements both contributed and responded. Members’ biographies and branches’ histories demonstrate not only that Arbeter Ring activity in the South emerged as an extension of participants’ pre-immigration political

\textsuperscript{288} Ibid.; Weiner, untitled handwritten memoir (1985), Freida Weiner papers.

\textsuperscript{289} Personal communication with Shep Fargotstein, May 27, 2015.

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.; memorial for Sam Fargotstein, \textit{In dorem land} (1949), 140; 1930 United States Census, Galveston, Galveston County, Texas. It is not clear whether Fargotstein joined the IWO or was a Communist Party member. He is buried in the cemetery of Temple Israel, a reform synagogue.
identities, but also that southern cities served as sites for the continued development of Jewish politics as members engaged in live debates over questions of Jewish welfare, Yiddish culture and class solidarity.

Additionally, Arbeter Ring members’ political actions, including campaign rallies, strike support, ballot distribution and other undertakings, indicate that the group’s politics were not merely cultural or symbolic. Instead, southern members worked collectively for labor and left causes both within their cities and across national boundaries. Although these efforts might appear peripheral to the historical trajectories of Jewish socialist and southern labor movements, Arbeter Ring history in the South provides a window into the activities of the “heymishe socialists” who made up the organization’s rank-and-file and affords a richer understanding of the southern Jewish radicals and progressives who found their way into the margins of the South’s labor and political histories.

Finally, in the 1920s and 1930s, the schism between socialist and communist factions and the subsequent discrepancies in their relationships to black working-class activism highlight the multiplicity of Jewish-left projects and the ways that relational networks—enacted in the movement and exchange of currency, texts, material goods and human bodies—can constrain or enable individual and collective action. The Jewish left-right split reveals how Jewish socialism emerged at the dynamic nexus of Jewish collective consciousness and politically radical universalism but existed through the constant coordination of the priorities and obligations that Jewish and revolutionary identities entail. The development of the international Communist movement precipitated a crisis in the Jewish left, even in the provincial South, by disrupting that coordination, and the organizational realignment that followed constituted more than an “intellectual exercise,” as the radical contingent soon came to operate (even if in a minor role) in
biracial activist circles. Attending to the multiplicity of the Jewish-left in the South and the enactment of competing Jewish radicalisms in relation to divergent networks, then, complicates casual distinctions between ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’ politics by demonstrating how ‘cultural’ associations can limit or enable tangible modes of activism.

---

CHAPTER 3: YIDDISH CULTURE AND THE HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY

Since its founding, the Southern District Committee has not only unified the Arbeter Ring branches under a flag of communal activity but also succeeded in forging from all the members in the South a family of friendship and affection.\textsuperscript{292}

—N. Chanin, 1949

Rose Burman met Joe Keeper in 1912, and he immediately caught her attention. At seventeen, she was an intelligent and attractive young woman, although family circumstances limited her educational and social opportunities. Rose and her family moved to Houston from Buffalo, New York, in 1902, seeking a business opportunity for Rose’s father, Phillip. In 1907, her mother died of an accidental morphine overdose, and Rose dropped out of school to take care of the family. Throughout this time, she continued to read books from the library and tried to keep up friendships with girls her age, but her home responsibilities left her feeling isolated. Eventually, however, her situation improved. At eighteen years old, Rose took a job at a local department store and joined a local Jewish social organization associated with the Orthodox synagogue Adath Yeshurun. She also began teaching “rudiments of English” to newly arrived immigrants “a couple of times a week during the evening hours.” Joe Keeper, a recent migrant from New York, arrived one night as the guest of Rabbi Wolf Willner, and Rose was introduced.

\textsuperscript{292} Chanin, “The thirtieth conference of the southern district of the \textit{arbeter ring} is thirty years of Jewish life,” 18.
She later wrote, “I promptly made my decision: THIS WAS THE MAN I WANTED TO MARRY!”

Joe Keeper, described by a family friend as “a jolly, slender, bespectacled accountant,” came from an acculturated family in Kishinev and received a secular education. He joined a revolutionary circle as a teenager, and, according to family history, Joe’s father sent him and a brother to New York in 1907 after a comrade was hanged for his political activities. After living “hand to mouth in New York” and “trying his hand at several menial jobs in the Northeast,” Keeper and a companion “decided to see how far away from New York they could go on their savings.” They soon arrived by boat in Galveston, where “Joe walked around looking for Jewish names.” He saw a sign for Sam Fargotstein’s watch repair business and went in to introduce himself. Fargotstein, a founder of the Arbeter Ring in Galveston, quickly befriended Keeper, as they had “belonged to the same revolutionary organization in Europe, though in different cities.” With Fargotstein’s help, Keeper started out as a peddler in the small towns of East and Southeast Texas but soon found work as a clerk for the IGN Railroad in Palestine, Texas, which later reassigned him to Houston. There, Keeper joined the Jewish Literary Society and became popular as a humor writer, adopting the pen name Yossel der Griner (Joe the

---


295 David Keeper, interview.

296 Rose Keeper, “The Ten Decades,” 13-14. It is not clear which revolutionary group they belonged to.
Greenhorn). In 1915, Joe Keeper became a founding member of Houston’s Arbeter Ring Branch 530.

Rose dated other men, but she kept an eye on Joe. Eventually they started seeing each other regularly, meeting for lunch or walking home in the evening. “It was 1914 and boat rides, both daylight picnic excursions and moonlight sojourns, were the vogue. We embarked from Harrisburg docks and cruised to Dickinson. Picnics in a park way out on South Main Street were also a delight.”

Rose was a smart and capable young woman, but she had received no formal education past age twelve and “felt very inadequate” around Joe Keeper’s literate and well-educated friends. Joe, however, was impressed by Rose’s ability to manage her family’s house from such a young age. He proposed to her in 1915.

Rose and Joe were married in June 1916, and the Arbeter Ring soon became a central part of her life. Her wedding ring was purchased from Sam Fargotstein for twenty-five dollars, and they asked a judge to perform the ceremony instead of a rabbi “because of Joe’s socialistic ideas.” Among the guests at the small wedding were Galveston and Houston Arbeter Ring members Sam Fargotstein, Wolf Bell and their wives. Because Joe was active in the Arbeter Ring, Rose was “automatically included” in the group’s activities after the wedding. Rose wrote that “it was a way of life for us, and it occupied our time and our thoughts.” Joe volunteered as the branch’s “spokesman and organizer” and “even helped teach singing at the [Arbeter Ring] school, where all our children learned Yiddish language, history and holidays.” In 1927, the

---

300 Ibid., 15
Keepers and their three children moved to a home on Hadley Avenue, which was “convenient to the railroad stations” and attracted visitors and overnight guests, including “lecturers, writers and Workmen’s Circle conventioneers.”

Rose Keeper’s story illustrates several aspects of the social and cultural lives of southern Arbeter Ring members in the early twentieth century. Radicalized immigrants such as Joe Keeper, Sam Fargotstein and Wolf Bell developed strong friendships as they attempted to cultivate a Jewish-left milieu in the Galveston-Houston area, and these relationships formed the core of emergent Arbeter Ring branches and districts. At the same time, however, Arbeter Ring members could not separate themselves entirely from the broader Jewish community, especially its East European element. Economic, familial, cultural and linguistic bonds held even strident socialists within the orbit of the growing immigrant communities.

Additionally, Joe’s participation in the Jewish Literary Society and the Arbeter Ring, and Rose’s introduction into those circles, reflect the significance of secular Yiddish culture and education for Arbeter Ring members. This commitment to Yiddish language and related expressive forms—literature, drama and song—marks the organization as part of a broad movement dedicated to secular Yiddishkayt, which sought to refine and elevate Yiddish as a modern language and culture that would draw from East European Jews’ collective past and form the basis for their ongoing cohesion, even as the decline of traditional religious observance and the easing of externally imposed legal restrictions allowed Jews greater freedoms in and access to non-Jewish societies. Yiddishism, as the ideological commitment to the language is known, emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its adherents competed with proponents of Hebrew (primarily Zionists) and Russian (advocates of acculturation) to

301 Ibid., 17-18. Keeper names Norman Thomas and the poet H. Leivick specifically.
establish Yiddish as the appropriate language of Jewish life and literature. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Yiddish language and culture drew increasing support from diaspore Jewish movements, including radical and progressive groups, which worked toward the goal of Jewish cultural autonomy in the context of pluralist democratic states.\textsuperscript{302}

As branches and district organizations grew, they connected like-minded immigrants within individual cities and across the South and linked members to transnational movements in secular Yiddishkayt. The Arbeter Ring’s intellectual, literary, dramatic and musical programs brought notable national and international Jewish thinkers to the region and provided opportunities for Jews in the South to participate for themselves as speakers, writers, debaters and performers. Thus, southern Arbeter Ring branches became active nodes in a network of Yiddish cultural innovation, even if they faced challenges due to size and location.

The Arbeter Ring’s cultural undertakings, as well as its educational work, also linked southern members temporally to a common past and an anticipated future. On both sides of the Atlantic, and beyond, producers and consumers of secular Yiddish literature and other expressive genres sought to make sense of the East European Jewish past, valorizing, rejecting or reforming elements of traditional Jewish lifeways in pursuit of modes of Jewishness better suited to the present, and the South was no exception. Furthermore, through the creation of Arbeter Ring shules, members attempted to share a secularized Jewish heritage with their children, thereby encouraging a form of Jewish continuity into the future.\textsuperscript{303}

\textsuperscript{302} Veidlinger, \textit{Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire}, 83-84 and 127-134; Fishman, \textit{The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture}, 99-102.

\textsuperscript{303} The word “heritage” often refers uncritically to the transmission of supposedly static traditions or identities across time, and I hesitate to use it here. In this case, however, “heritage” encapsulates the conscious and selective use of the past in order to chart a future course for Jewish culture through particular articulations and instantiations of \textit{yidishe kultur}. This closely
As American-born children of early members entered adulthood, however, they tended not to remain involved with the Arbeter Ring. The initial enthusiasm for Arbeter Ring education in the southern branches in the 1920s and 1930s and former students’ declining engagement during and after World War II correspond to major events in Jewish history and shifts in American culture and politics. These developments, including the Nazi Genocide, the founding of the state of Israel and the beginning of the Cold War, dampened the radical potentialities of *yidishe kultur*—its power as a vehicle of utopian imagination—and, outside the largest Jewish centers, reduced its viability as an organizing principle for everyday Jewish life.

**The Arbeter Ring Calendar**

Arbeter Ring members in southern cities gathered for a variety of events, including weekly branch meetings and annual district conferences. Official activities, as well as informal contact among members in social and business settings, provided occasions for participants to form interpersonal bonds and affirm their dedication to the organization and its goals. Furthermore, the annual cycle of local, regional and national events structured the group’s year, much as traditional holidays did for more observant Jews.

Arbeter Ring social events included picnics, balls and banquets. Branches in Savannah and Galveston held events at nearby beaches, while Atlanta members gathered at lakes on the outskirts of the city.\(^{304}\) Newspaper notices from the late 1910s announced the Houston branch’s matches Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definition of heritage as a “new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.” *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 149.

annual picnics, promising live music by “Prof. Charles Lewis’s Union Orchestra” and contests with “handsome prizes.” Branches held regular balls at local auditoriums, as well, in order to raise funds for charitable causes and their own activities. The Atlanta branch hosted its first annual ball in 1909 and split one-hundred dollars in net proceeds evenly between the organization’s sanitarium in upstate New York and the local branch’s own library. Arbeter Ring members also came together for banquets, usually held in honor of out-of-town visitors or prominent local leaders, such as a dinner held at Jewish-owned Silver’s Restaurant in Houston for delegates to a conference for Texas and Louisiana branches in 1916.

With balls in the fall or winter, socialist May Day celebrations in the spring and picnics in the summer, southern branch activities developed an annual rhythm, one which was completed with the institution of district conferences over Labor Day weekend. The Arbeter Ring

---

305 Houston Post, May 31, 1916, 7, Newspapers.com; July 13, 1917, 10; June 30, 1918, 20; June 15, 1919, 13. Professor Lewis’ Orchestra played “old-fashioned” and “modern dances” according to another article, “Large Crowd Attended New Year Festivities,” Houston Post, January 1, 1918.

306 In 1917, the Houston branch rented City Auditorium, the premier concert hall in Houston, and in 1929 they held the event in Community Hall at 917 Jackson St. The Atlanta branch used Auditorium Armory in the mid-1920s. Houston Post, Nov. 26, 1917, 7, Newspapers.com; Program of 15th Annual Concert and Ball, Branch No. 530 Workmen’s Circle (Houston: 1929), Joseph Jacobs Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta; Program, Eighteenth Annual Arbeiter Ring Ball (Atlanta: 1926), Joseph Jacobs Papers.

307 Morris Ross, “Twenty-five years of arbeter ring br. 207, a historical overview,” 5. The sanatorium opened in 1909 and was located near Liberty, New York. Hurwitz, The Workmen’s Circle, 149.


309 One Houston May Day concert included singing of “The Internationale” in Yiddish, recitation of a politically charged poem (“Di vant / The wall”) by Abraham Reisin, a speech by shule
calendar existed in part as an extension of the revolutionary calendar developed by Jewish socialists in eastern Europe, but in an altered and expanded form that responded to new conditions, especially the scattered distribution of southern branches and an increased interest in secular Jewish culture. Local and regional programs ordered the year as members occupied themselves with preparations for approaching events and found themselves reinvigorated for organizational work in their aftermath. The events themselves created immersive social spaces in which members surrounded themselves with like-minded comrades and served as focused expressions of the group’s political and cultural priorities. Furthermore, memorial and historical texts by southern Arbeter Ring members underscore the significance of district conferences and other celebrations by referring to them as and comparing them to yontoyvim (religious holidays), an indication of the ways that the organization offered secular analogs to traditional practices.

The cycle of Arbeter Ring events did not entirely displace the Jewish religious calendar, however. While the most observant members attended synagogue on holidays, others marked the

student Minnie Kessler on “The Origin of May Day” and a Yiddish dramatization of Oscar Wilde’s moralistic and class-conscious children’s story “The Happy Prince.” “Program: May First Concert,” (handwritten draft, probably by Rose Keeper, c. 1933), personal collection of Paul Keeper.

310 Ury, Barricades and Banners, 114-117. Ury writes, “in addition to a new language, revolutionary culture also included a series of new holidays and other events that were designed to distinguish the revolutionary calendar and community from more traditional ones. While the new calendar included several different events and days, protests and demonstrations surrounding the First of May represent the most prominent example of how these organizations attempted to popularize revolutionary holidays that would be used to transform the calendar, teleology, and boundaries of culture and society in eastern Europe.”

traditional festivals in their own manner. Serra Gordon, daughter of Sam Platt, remembers sitting in synagogue with her mother on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur while her father paced outside as a show of his religious ambivalence. Although the Scheer family in Savannah did not attend services, they did prepare traditional holiday foods, and the children “knew the holidays … by the smells in the house.” Children also learned about the holidays at Arbeter Ring shules, although these lessons emphasized the historical and cultural significance of the festivals that best meshed with Jewish-left politics.

While annual events provided structure to the organizational year, more quotidian interactions bound Arbeter Ring members together in the interim. Weekly meetings, often held on Sunday evenings, were the first regular activities undertaken by a new branch and were (except for children’s classes) the most frequent events on the Arbeter Ring calendar. Branch leaders reported to members about correspondence, recent and upcoming events and fundraising efforts, branch finances and other developments, and members attended to organizational and business matters including the nomination and approval of new members and the disbursement of health and other benefits. Morris Ross noted that Atlanta meetings featured “debates and discussions on issues of the day” and were, during the earliest years, “our only spiritual

---


313 Gertrude Scheer Barr, interview.


315 Minutes of Branch 530 (Houston), 1921-1923, and Minutes of Branch 307 (Galveston), 1915-1927, Workmen’s Circle Collection, YIVO, Center for Jewish History, New York. There were also special and executive meetings for completing certain aspects of branch business.
pleasure.”

As branches grew and members started their own families, the Sunday meeting became a family event. Bertha Plotkin Freedman, who was born in 1928, recalled that the women of the group “used to prepare a Sunday night Supper” that included a “delicious” dairy soup known as “shule soup.” According to Memphis member Jacob Scheinberg, meals prepared by the women’s club “cemented friendship among our ranks.”

Members also socialized at informal gatherings and interacted incidentally in their daily lives. Peddlers and small-time merchants saw each other while buying goods at wholesale markets, and those who lived or worked near each other met before opening their shops or gathered after closing. In Houston, the Keeper family bought bread from fellow member Max Pasternak, who delivered fresh baked goods door-to-door, yelling out “bread!” in a thick Yiddish accent as he walked through the neighborhood.

In the early 1930s, Savannah members including William Scheer, Sam Hirsch and Harry Applebaum—a shoemaker, grocer and tailor, respectively—used to meet in the evenings to play pinochle at someone’s home or “sit in front of Nat Daubs’ store and shoot the bull.” According to Scheer’s daughter Celia, Arbeter Ring

316 Morris Ross “Twenty-five years of arbeter ring branch 207,” 5.


318 Jacob Scheinberg, “Branch 312 arbeter ring in memphis, tennessee,” 86.


320 Sam Keeper, interview by Josh Parshall, August 16, 2011, Institute of Southern Jewish Life Oral History Program.

members “stuck together” rather than socializing with other Jews in part because they were in similar “financial straits.”

**District Conferences**

At the first meetings with unfamiliar people from other cities, but with whom we had so much in common, a new soul entered. It was a festive mood that I cannot forget to this day. We saw that although we were isolated in our cities, we had brothers and friends in all the surrounding cities.

—Mitchell Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south”

Annual district conferences began around 1920 and continued into the 1980s, well after the dissolution of most southern branches. The events facilitated interpersonal relationships among members from different cities, who came to regard each other as extended family. The conferences served a practical function for the District Committee as regional leaders supported local activities, coordinated collective efforts and relayed information between the national body and individual branches. Historical sources also point to the emotional significance of the yearly gatherings—immersive environments in which participants enacted their connections to one another and to transnational movements in Jewish culture and politics, and imagined new possibilities for a collective Yiddish future.

The founding of Arbeter Ring districts facilitated and reinforced social connections among members in different cities and states. Houston and Galveston members knew each other

---

322 Celia Hirsch, interview. William Scheer had a shoe repair shop, Sam Hirsch ran a grocery store, and Harry Applebaum was a tailor (1930 U.S. Census, Savannah, Chatham, Georgia, ancestry.com).


324 The districts were not officially organized until 1920, although regional conferences in Texas took place before that year. On district conferences in the 1980s see Joseph Jacobs Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State Libraries, especially Series III: Workmen’s Circle, Box 34, Folder 4.
well, even prior to the formation of the Houston branch, and worked with other branches in Texas and Louisiana to organize the district and hold regular conferences.\textsuperscript{325} In the early years of the Southeastern District, if not earlier, Morris Jacobs—then living in Birmingham—stayed with Mitchell Merlin on trips to Atlanta, and “they used to kibbitz to all hours of the morning.”\textsuperscript{326} In at least one instance, Jacobs went by train in order to buy a car, as Birmingham did not yet have a Ford dealership.\textsuperscript{327} When Morris’s son Joe began his career as an Atlanta-based labor attorney in the 1930s, he was able to represent unions in other southern cities at a lower cost because local Arbeter Ring members provided home hospitality.\textsuperscript{328} Regional connections also resulted in marriages between members’ children. Simon Kaset, from Chattanooga, and Dena Scheinberg, from Memphis, grew up in Arbeter Ring families and met through the organization; they were married in the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{329} Similarly, Morris Jacob’s youngest daughter, Henrietta, became acquainted with her husband-to-be in 1946 at the first meeting of the unified Southern District in New Orleans. “I drove from Miami with my mother and my father, my best friend and her mother and father, who were Workmen’s Circle members in Miami. And I met Boris ‘Bussy’

\textsuperscript{325} Wolf Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42; Freida Weiner, “The arbeter ring in texas-louisiana district,” 43. Weiner and Bell give different years for the first district conference.

\textsuperscript{326} Joseph Jacobs, interview, August 15, 1990. Morris Jacobs lived in Birmingham from around 1907 until the early 1920s, then moved to New York for a few years. He returned to the South in the mid- to late twenties, spending time in West Palm Beach, Atlanta and Miami.

\textsuperscript{327} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{328} Joseph Jacobs, interview, July 12, 1991.

\textsuperscript{329} Personal communication with Elaine Kaset, June 2, 2016; Chattanooga City Directory, 1936, 1064, heritagequest.com; 1940 United States Census, Tennessee, Hamilton, Chattanooga, heritagequest.com.
Bell in New Orleans, because he came representing the [younger] group in Houston.” They continued to see each other at conferences and courted by mail, eventually marrying in 1948.330

As the regional districts developed, conferences became indispensable for administration of district affairs. Delegates from the branches elected officers to the district executive committee and delegates to the national convention, debated and voted on resolutions and reported on local activities. The reports occasioned friendly competition between branches and facilitated the exchange of strategies for fundraising and organizational work.331 Branches also set goals for the upcoming year, as in the early 1920s when each southeastern branch “obligated itself” to establish a school before the next conference.332 After the merger of the Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts in 1946, the district committee also held meetings before and after the district conference (as well as at one other point in the year) in order to conduct business.333

In addition to official organizational work, delegates and guests took part in social and cultural activities. At the fifth Texas-Louisiana District conference in 1923—held in Galveston the Sunday and Monday of Labor Day weekend—participants attended morning and afternoon meetings, followed by entertainment in the evenings. On Sunday night a “bathing party” (presumably at Galveston Beach) preceded a concert, and the Monday schedule included a “sightseeing trip” and a closing banquet at Hotel Galvez.334 A 1943 conference, again in

331 Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 33-34.
332 Ibid., 32.
333 Ibid., 32.
Galveston, included a “turkey supper” and a “watermelon party.” Other conference events included speeches by noted guests, often members of the national executive committee, on educational, political or organizational issues. By 1932, the Southeastern District had lengthened the conference from two to three days in order to allow for such non-business activities.

Accounts of district conferences make strong distinctions between the day-to-day lives of southern Arbeter Ring members and the conference atmosphere. The gatherings drew comparisons to family reunions, religious holidays (yontif) and weddings. Participants closed their businesses or took off from work, and some traveled long distances. Atlanta member Moshe Bloshtein described the opening and closing of the conference in terms of Kol Nidre and Neilah, respectively, the prayer services that begin and end Yom Kippur. As members stood to sing the Bundist anthem “Di shvue (The Oath)” and “The Arbeter Ring Hymn” at the opening session, “each remembers his past, and you see them pull out handkerchiefs and wipe away tears of exaltation and gratitude.” Bloshtein also invoked Simchat Torah, relating the joyous


337 Chanin, “The thirtieth conference of the southern district of the arbeter ring is thirty years of yiddish life,” 18; Wolf Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42.

338 Chanin, “The thirtieth conference of the southern district of the arbeter ring is thirty years of yiddish life,”18.

tradition of having shule students “take over the conference for an afternoon” and “demonstrate for their elder comrades their Torah.”

The heightened mood of the conference, alternatingly solemn and celebratory—and tense in times of conflict—reflected its function as a time of focused reflection and collective affirmation. Whereas members felt isolated as Jews in southern cities and as socialists within local Jewish communities, district conferences demonstrated, in Mitchell Merlin’s words, that “we had brothers and friends in all the surrounding cities.” The familiar (and familial) atmosphere allowed attendees to imagine themselves not just as an embattled political and ethnic minority, but as part of a network that stretched throughout the region, across the nation and beyond. Furthermore, participants articulated and enacted shared values and visions through the conference proceedings. A variety of more or less formal performances—including collective singing, branch reports, the pageantry of children’s programs, and the parliamentary process of approving resolutions—served as “presentation[s] of the community to itself.”

These aestheticized and idealized enactments of group and belonging both reflected participants’ quotidian engagement with Yiddish language and culture and also staged a utopian version of southern Yiddishkayt. When, for example, a youth delegate addressed the district

340 Ibid.
343 This interpretation is based on José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “utopian performativity;” see Cruising Utopia,” 97-99.
convention in Yiddish, the speech demonstrated the activities of the Arbeter Ring shules even as it anticipated future uses of Yiddish that would not, generally speaking, come to be. In the face of deepening crises for Jews in eastern Europe, the increasing acculturation of members’ American-raised children and the ongoing struggles of local branches, the conference created a temporary space in which to reimagine the horizons of possibility for Yiddish culture and radical politics in the American South, offering “a critique of the here and now” and mobilizing continued struggle.

**Secular Yiddishkayt in Southern Cities**

Southern Arbeter Ring members wrote often of the stifling cultural and intellectual environment that, in their view, characterized Jewish life in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century. This reaction stemmed from their prior exposure to the blossoming world of Yiddish secular culture, which had taken root in major Jewish centers such as New York City, London and the cities of eastern Europe. For the most ardent Arbeter Ring supporters, including Joe Keeper, Freida Weiner and Mitchell Merlin, the key to Jewish cohesion and continuity was no longer religious observance, but the adaptation and reinvigoration of Jewish life through the advancement of Yiddish language, literature and arts. As Joe Keeper’s son David recounted, “my father was vitally interested in Yiddish. His Yiddish came about mostly here in America, but he had a fine library of Yiddish books, and my entrance into Judaism was through literature. We’re not a religious family, and Yiddish replaced religion in our family.”

---


346 David Keeper, interview.
Despite their geographic distance from the major hubs of secular Yiddishkayt, Arbeter Ring leaders in the South typified Yiddishist thought and kept a close eye on developments in and debates around secular Yiddish culture. In 1913, Mitchell Merlin subscribed to Dos naye lebn (New Life), a monthly journal edited by Chaim Zhitlovsky, a prominent Yiddishist and the original theorist of yidishe kultur.347 Through the periodical, founded in 1909, Zhitlovsky espoused radical and nationalistic (though diaspora-oriented, rather than Zionist) viewpoints and strove to “build a capacious Yiddish-language culture” that would serve as a cornerstone both for Jewish revolutionary politics and for “Jewish national rebirth”—the reconstruction of Jewish cultural autonomy in the diaspora.348 As a subscriber, Merlin was pleased to take part in the advancement of Yiddish intellectual life, but he also read the journal critically. In a letter to Zhitlovsky, Merlin pointed out that the Arbeter Ring “was not mentioned once” in the issues he had received. Merlin argued that even if the organization was not sufficiently nationalistic for Zhitlovsky’s taste, the influential editor could win over the masses of Arbeter Ring membership if he showed more interest in their activities.349 As the Arbeter Ring developed more extensive cultural and educational programs during the 1910s, yidishe kultur played a more integral and less tactical role in its conception of Jewish politics.350

Yiddish literature, including nonfiction, fiction and poetry, remained a central means through which southern members participated in yidishe kultur. They read and reread Yiddish

347 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 128-129.


349 Mitchell Merlin to Chaim Zhitlovsky, April 9, 1913, Papers of Chaim Zhitlowsky, YIVO.

350 Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 190-191.
classics by Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz—both of whom died in the 1910s—and consumed new works by famous Yiddish authors. Correspondence from southern branch leaders to bookseller and publisher Max Meisel show that the Southeastern District attempted to start a reading club in each branch in 1934 and ordered sets of Sholem Asch’s *Farn Mabl / Before the Flood* trilogy, which was published from 1921 to 1931. The Nashville branch also purchased dramatic scripts from Meisel, including works by Jacob Gordin, H. Leivick, Perets Hirshbeyn and Joseph Lateiner.

As the formation of reading groups suggests, Arbeter Ring members not only read privately but also celebrated and analyzed literature through participatory and public events. In addition to regular discussions and debates on literary, cultural and political themes, branches hosted special events based on famous authors and texts. The Houston branch collaborated with the Houston Yiddish Library (with which it shared members) to hold a “memorial meeting” shortly after the death of author Mendele Moykher-Sforim in December 1917. Similarly, in 1926, the Galveston branch organized a reading of Sholem Aleichem’s works on the beach in honor of the tenth anniversary of his death. Such literary programs celebrated the ongoing refinement of Yiddish as a world language, affirmed the role of Yiddish language and culture in Jewish life, and modeled an appreciation of literature for Arbeter Ring members and other participants. As in major Jewish centers, therefore, secular Yiddishkayt in the South advanced a

---

351 Dorin to Meisel, October 6, 1934, Max Meisel Papers, YIVO.
352 Shymlock to Meisel, n.d.; Lerman to Meisel, n.d., Max Meisel Papers, YIVO.
354 Minute book, Galveston Branch 307, Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO.
non-religious form of collective Jewish uplift and helped to create a Yiddish public that had not existed there before.

**Lecture Tours**

In addition to the circulation of texts and practices, tours by Yiddish lecturers and other performers through the region contributed to the formation of southern iterations of Yiddish public culture. Yiddish writers, activists and intellectuals regularly toured southern cities, spending several days with local Arbeter Ring members, exposing the wider Yiddish-speaking community to current trends and issues in the Yiddish world, and updating district and national leadership on local conditions.

Lectures were an integral part of Yiddish public culture in New York City and elsewhere, one that southern branches sought to replicate shortly after their founding. While local members delivered speeches at branch meetings, lectures by visiting experts received greater fanfare. Branches booked lecturers independently in the earliest years, and the Arbeter Ring education committee began to arrange tours by leading intellectuals in 1911. The formation of district committees at the end of the decade allowed for better coordination among cities, and the national organization eventually distributed an annual roster of recommended speakers in an attempt to control lectures’ content and quality.\(^{355}\) The increased organization of regional tours, along with support from national and district executive committees, also made lectures and performances more affordable for smaller branches, such as those in Waco and Macon.\(^{356}\)

---


Visiting speakers addressed literary and political topics, as well as current events. Before branches established their own meeting spaces, lectures drew scrutiny from Jewish host organizations, which may have tempered their political tone. The Jewish Educational Alliance in Atlanta appointed non-Arbeiter Ring officials to “audit” lectures held in its building, and the Birmingham Y.H.M.A. “categorically forbade lectures in Yiddish,” forcing the city’s Arbeiter Ring to relocate a lecture by writer A. S. Zaks to a “private house,” despite the evening’s “purely literary theme.”[357] The Birmingham example—assuming the veracity of the account—indicates that established Jews viewed Yiddish as an objectionable language for public speaking, regardless of content, and the anecdote confirms Jeffrey Shandler’s assertion that “Yiddishism invited a new kind of attention to the nature of the language as a vehicle of political ideology in performance.”[358] Despite disapproval from Jewish elites, however, Arbeiter Ring guests exposed Yiddish-speakers in southern cities to socialist viewpoints, and in cities with both Arbeiter Ring and Farband branches, visiting lecturers represented “all of the orientations of the time in the Jewish street.”[359]

Whereas political and literary topics addressed the specialized interests of Arbeiter Ring members, speeches on current events appealed to a wide Jewish audience. Beginning during the

---


[359] Davis, *In gang fun di yorn*, 184. Davis includes socialist-Zionist leader Nachman Syrkin among his list of prominent Yiddish lecturers to visit Atlanta. Although Davis does not clarify whether Syrkin spoke under the auspices of the Farband or the Arbeiter Ring, Duntov’s introduction to *In dorem land* (1949) lists Syrkin as an Arbeiter Ring lecturer (6). The Syrkin lecture may also have been a cooperative undertaking (Hertzberg, 123).
turmoil of World War I and continuing through the 1940s, Arbeter Ring events in southern cities featured prominent journalists, activists and other leaders, who reported on the condition of Jews in Europe and, often, solicited funds or other forms of support from attendees. In 1921 Shmuel Niger delivered a talk in Dallas on “The Jewish Outlook for the Future”—in which he reported on the condition of Jewish life in central and eastern Europe during the war and in its aftermath—that drew an audience of “about 200 persons.” Given that Arbeter Ring membership in Dallas peaked at around 175 members, this attendance figure indicates that a significant number of non-members heard Niger’s lecture. Talks on contemporary Jewish problems and possible Jewish futures remained a staple for southern branches. In subsequent years, Arbeter Ring lectures addressed the fate of Jews and Jewish culture under communism, the rise of global anti-Semitism and the destruction of European Jewish communities by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Beyond the lectures themselves, visits from prominent Yiddish thinkers linked the Yiddish South to the wider Yiddish-speaking world. Branch and district leaders, including Mitchell Merlin and Joe Keeper, hosted touring speakers at their own homes, and notable guests often stayed for several days. As a result, members had sustained and informal contact with visiting lecturers. When Baruch Charney Vladeck became the Atlanta branch’s first out-of-town orator in 1911, he spent a day with David Davis, who took the socialist writer on a horse and

360 “Jewish Lecturer Talks to Dallas Audience,” The Jewish Monitor, Feb. 18, 1921, 12, www.texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph296800.


362 See, for example, records of Shmuel (Artur) Zygelbojm’s tour through the Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts in 1940, Zygelbojm Papers, YIVO.

363 David Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 186; Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 34.
wagon tour of Atlanta’s neighborhoods—its segregated, white, upper class areas, the “vale of tears” surrounding the cotton mills and the “black ghetto”—and sat in on a meeting between Vladeck and a black newspaper editor.\textsuperscript{364} For southern Arbeter Ring members, geographically distant from the major centers of secular Yiddishkayt, visiting artists and lecturers provided a direct link to new trends in Yiddish culture and thought. At the same time, local members served as contact points between southern society and the Yiddish world.\textsuperscript{365}

In addition to serving the needs of individual branches, lecture tours transmitted information among local branches and to the district executive and national offices, thereby reinforcing a sense of regional unity and enabling leadership to meet the needs of local branches. Upon the arrival of a visitor, local members gathered “at the home a friend to hear what [was] going on in the district.”\textsuperscript{366} Lecturers including Shmuel Niger and N. Chalin conducted inspections of the schools and reported on local activities to regional and national leadership.\textsuperscript{367} The tour provided a crucial level of oversight for otherwise remote branches. A 1928 letter from

\textsuperscript{364} Davis, \textit{In gang fun di yorn}, 184. It is possible that Vladeck visited Atlanta in late 1910. During the tour, Davis solicited Vladeck’s opinion on the Yiddish-language history of the United States written by Abe Cahan. Vladeck encouraged Davis to learn English well enough to read books by American historians, and recommended authors including Jack Reed, Upton Sinclair and Jack London.

\textsuperscript{365} Joseph Jacobs, interview by Cliff Kuhn, March 6, 1991, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ggdp/id/5853; Mitchell Merlin correspondence to Abe Cahan, 1930, Abe Cahan Papers, YIVO. According to Joe Jacobs, his father, Morris, served as a “southern correspondent” for the \textit{Forverts}, although it is unclear whether he was paid or credited as an author. In 1930, Mitchell Merlin exchanged a series of letters with \textit{Forverts} editor Abe Cahan, who sought information on the whereabouts and activities of Leo Frank’s widow, Lucille.

\textsuperscript{366} Bloshtein, “School and cultural life in the southern district,” 106.

\textsuperscript{367} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 31.
Mitchell Merlin to Shmuel Niger underscores the necessity of such reports, as Merlin chided Niger for his “sparse words” on activities in Jacksonville and begged Niger for an update on (and his opinion of) the situation in Miami, where the school managers had raised questions about the shule teacher’s competence.\textsuperscript{368}

**Drama and Music**

Dramatic and musical performances, like lecture tours, reflected southern Arbeter Ring branches’ cultural and political priorities. Both local and touring performers enriched the proceedings of banquets and celebrations, and entertained audiences at stand-alone events. Although the available archival evidence provides an incomplete view of the role of performing arts in the region, music and drama reflected the group’s changing politics, appealed to southern members’ desires for progressive and secular Yiddish culture, and drew non-members to Arbeter Ring events.

Southern Arbeter Ring events included a variety of musical forms, including political and national anthems, secular Yiddish song, classical works and popular music. Conference programs indicate that attendees sang left-wing Yiddish anthems such as “The Arbeter Ring Hymn,” “Di Shvue” and the Yiddish “Internationale” in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{369} By 1950, “The Internationale” had lost popularity and the Southern District conference journal included lyrics to “The Star Spangled Banner” and “Hatikvah,” the Israeli national anthem.\textsuperscript{370}

\textsuperscript{368} Mitchell Merlin to Shmuel Niger, 8 April 1928, Shmuel Niger Papers, YIVO.

\textsuperscript{369} *Souvenir in honor of the twenty-year anniversary of arbeter ring branch 530* (Houston: 1935), 5, Joseph Jacobs Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta.

\textsuperscript{370} *In Southern States Journal-Program, Issued to the Thirty-First Conference of the Southern District, Workmen’s Circle*, eds. J. Duntov, J. Pollack and H. Spivak (Miami Beach: 1950),
lyrics in conference materials does not reflect whether, or with what enthusiasm, participants sang a particular song, but the shift to include Israeli and American national anthems reflects the group’s movement toward the political mainstream and its interest in affirming normative American politics in the emerging Cold War atmosphere.

During the prime years of the southern Arbeter Ring, Yiddish vocal music included theater songs, folk songs and art songs, all of which were reflected in the repertoires of touring musicians in the South. The “folk” designation often referred to Yiddish songs written in a folk style—incorporating melodic elements, subject matter and lyrical motifs of older, anonymously composed songs—and performed by a classically trained vocalist, whereas art song represented self-conscious attempts to merge elements of Jewish liturgical and folk music with the contemporary forms and styles of European concert music. Performances of folk and art song in particular served the project of yidishe kultur by enacting Jewish collective identity as a national and linguistic grouping akin to European nations and by demonstrating the Yiddish language’s ability to capture complicated emotions and sophisticated literary themes.

Musicians also performed non-Jewish music at concerts and banquets, including folk songs, operatic singing and instrumental pieces. Although he was not a member, Gregor Jassel, a


violinist for the Houston Symphony, often played at Arbeter Ring events in Houston and nearby cities. The program for the twentieth-anniversary celebration of Houston Branch 530, for instance, notes the performance of “Tchaikovsky’s Serenade” by “Prof. Gregor Jessel,” in addition to unspecified selections by the branch’s choir. When touring vocalists included Jewish and non-Jewish songs in their repertoires alongside Yiddish songs, they elevated new forms of Yiddish song through association with ‘high art’ and asserted the place of Yiddish culture among other national folk traditions. Such a mixed repertoire was didactic, especially early on, insofar as it exposed immigrant audiences to a pluralist or cosmopolitan musical repertoire and more refined modes of Jewish song, while in later years—or for audience members who already accepted the Arbeter Ring’s vision of self-education—this mode of performance appealed to attendees’ sense of themselves as cultured and worldly listeners.

Records of stage performances hosted by southern Arbeter Ring branches provide inconsistent evidence of the political and cultural content of dramatic works. Professional actors toured in groups of two or three, sometimes in tandem with musical acts, and tended to present one-act plays or series of skits and monologues, which often go unnamed in newspaper notices and reviews. Amateur dramatic groups included children and adults who presented serious as well as humorous pieces. The Houston group’s performances were simple productions with

372 Souvenir in honor of the twenty-year anniversary of arbeter ring branch 530 (Houston: 1935) and Program of 15th Annual Concert and Ball, Branch No. 530 Workmen’s Circle (Houston: 1929), Joseph Jacobs Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta; “Annual Concert Slated by Workmen’s Circle,” Waco Tribune-Herald, April 4, 1943, 17, Newspapers.com.

373 On the Arbeter Ring’s approach to arts and culture generally, see Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 201-202.

374 See, for example, “Noted Artist to Appear in Concert Here,” The Palm Beach Post, Jan. 27, 1932, 9, Newspapers.com.
costumes and makeup, but no scenery. As a child in the 1930s, Sam Keeper performed in cities around Texas and Louisiana. He was once cast as a Lower East Side peddler and, wearing a false beard, sang a song to hawk his imaginary wares, “koyft yidlekh koyft, a knepl tsum hemd / buy Jews buy, a button for your shirt.” Some of Sam’s lines included suggestive jokes that went over his head. “The audience would roar,” he recalled. “They thought it was so funny for this little boy to be saying things like that.”

Although David Keeper remembered the group presenting “standard plays—something by Sholem Aleichem, for instance,” local troupes performed more recent works as well, both dramas by prominent playwrights and poetry written for mass declamation. At the 1935 anniversary celebration in Houston, shule students performed two one-act plays, “Wage earner / Parnose-geber” by Isaac Horovitz and “The survivors” by Jane Rose, and a number of poems, including a mass declamation of “Hent / Hands” by David Krivitsky. The tone of the performance was serious. The program describes “The survivors” as “a war scene in one act,” and “Hands” deals with themes of hardship and industrial labor. Furthermore, the technique of “mass declamation” or “mass recitation”—undertaken by Arbeter Ring dramatic groups in Houston and Atlanta—indicates a connection to 1930s radical politics as that mode of performance was popular primarily among the “Popular Front cultural left.”

375 David Keeper, interview.

376 Sam Keeper, interview.


Touring actors and musicians—and, to a lesser extent, local amateurs—contributed to the Arbeter Ring’s outreach to “the Jewish street.” District committees viewed performing arts tours, along with lecture tours, as a key part of “the task of spreading the progressive Yiddish word as much as possible in the South.” In pursuit of that goal, they coordinated performance tours throughout the districts and found ways for larger branches to take on a greater share of the costs, so that “even the smallest branch” could host tours as well. Through these performances, Arbeter Ring branches presented emergent visions of secular Jewish culture, both implicitly and overtly political, thereby appealing to non-members and earning the respect of other Jewish organizations, even as they popularized yidishe kultur and created new Jewish publics in southern cities.

**Education**

The central role of young people, such as Joe and Rose Keeper’s children Zelda, David and Sam, in local Arbeter Ring performances reflects the importance of education for the continuity of Yiddish and Jewish-left politics. Beginning in the 1920s, southern branches devoted much of their energy to the secular Yiddish school movement in an effort to familiarize members’ children with Yiddish culture and socialist politics and to combat the effects of rapid acculturation. According to Mitchell Merlin, the Southeastern District adopted the phrase “an

---

379 Mitchell Merlin refers to the “Jewish street,” in “The arbeter ring in the south,” 32. The term commonly represents the broad Jewish public of a given place.

380 Wolf Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 42.

Arbeter Ring school in every city” as a motto for an early conference. By the time of the 1926 conference, there were schools in Atlanta, Birmingham, Jacksonville, Chattanooga, Memphis, Miami, Macon, Nashville and Savannah—every southeastern Arbeter Ring city except West Palm Beach.\textsuperscript{382} The majority of branches in the Texas-Louisiana District also opened schools, even if for a short time.\textsuperscript{383} The founding of shules, regardless of their successes and failures, demonstrated members’ sincere efforts to build and sustain Yiddish life in the South, and their visions for the Jewish future.

Local and regional efforts to establish schools were part of a broader movement by the national organization, which established its education department in 1918.\textsuperscript{384} The central office supported southern shules with subsidies and by assigning teachers to southern cities, usually for one- or two-year terms.\textsuperscript{385} The Arbeter Ring also trained teachers, offering pedagogical and

\textsuperscript{382} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 29.

\textsuperscript{383} Wolf Bell, “Memories of the texas-louisiana district,” 41; Phillip Stupack, “Arbeter ring branch 242 in waco, texas,” In dorem land (1949), 73; Weiner, “Arbeter ring branch 307, galveston,” 64. Waco did not have a school, and Galveston had a “half school” for a short time.

\textsuperscript{384} Naomi Prawer Kadar, Raising Secular Jews: Yiddish Schools and Their Periodicals for American Children, 1917-1950 (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 10-16; “The Goals of the Arbeter Ring Folk-Shuln,” Jewish Education in the United States, 157; Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 210-211. Naomi Prawer Kadar gives a useful overview of the origins of the Arbeter Ring shule network and the shifts in its guiding philosophy and educational content. Tony Michels notes that the Arbeter Ring did not develop its own secular Yiddish education program until years after the Farband (as well as Socialist Territorialists) had done so.

\textsuperscript{385} Records suggest that Ralph Lazarson served approximately two years each in Atlanta (1926-1928) and Dallas (c. 1929-1931). Atlanta, Georgia, City Directory, 1927 and 1928, ancestry.com; Dallas, Texas, City Directory, 1930 and 1931, Ancestry.com; Chaya Rochel Andres, Years Have Sped By: My Life Story, bilingual, trans. from Yiddish by Yudel Cohen (Dallas: self-published, 1981), 32-33, https://archive.org/details/nybc205792.
content-related coursework for Yiddish teachers beginning in 1919.\textsuperscript{386} Although the Arbeter Ring was not the only secular Jewish organization to open schools during this period—the socialist-Zionist Farband and the Communist-affiliated IWO (later JPFO) had parallel school movements—they faced little competition in most southern cities. Atlanta chapters of the Jewish section of the IWO and the Farband attempted to open their own schools, but could not sustain them. In Memphis, however, the Farband school preceded the opening of the Arbeter Ring shule and conducted classes from the early 1920s until at least 1929.\textsuperscript{387}

The founding of schools reinvigorated southern branches. The school movement provided an impetus for branches to obtain or enhance their own meeting spaces and brought together members, especially women, in pursuit of ambitious new projects.\textsuperscript{388} Additionally, as teachers arrived in southern cities, they reinforced branches’ cultural work, helping to coordinate visits by speakers and artists, conducting their own lectures and organizing local volunteers. Mitchell Merlin wrote, “with more teachers came more expenses for the district, but it was

\textsuperscript{386} The organization opened a more comprehensive teacher’s seminary in 1924, which merged with the Jewish Teachers Seminary (founded by labor Zionists) in 1929. Michels, \textit{A Fire in Their Hearts}, 214; Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich, \textit{Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910-1960} (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 2010), 112, 114.

\textsuperscript{387} Freidenreich, \textit{Passionate Pioneers}, 309.

\textsuperscript{388} Mitchell Merlin, “The arbeter ring school,” 12. Merlin states that the lyceum in Atlanta was purchased with the intention of opening the school. Women’s branches often formed around this time and were particularly active in educational activities. Mary McCune notes that, although Arbeter Ring women ostensibly held full membership rights, men tended to be more active in local branches and national leadership. Mary McCune, \textit{The Whole Wide World Without Limits} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 14. The records of southern branches suggest that the vast majority of adult Arbeter Ring women in the region had a husband or father who was also a member.
worthwhile. They added culture and meaning to the work.”389 The teachers also took on advisory roles at conferences and in district committees “and took part in all of our proceedings.”390

In 1920, founding Arbeter Ring members in the South were, for the most part, in their thirties. Their children attended public schools and were increasingly exposed to normative American values, and the only options for Jewish education were, in members’ views, fanatically religious or insufficiently Jewish. Proponents of Yiddish-socialist education lamented that children did not understand their parents’ experiences or political values. Teaching Yiddish was viewed as the solution. As one socialist-territorialist leader wrote, “the father is [considered] a ‘greenhorn,’ and his socialist ideals are but one aspect of his greenness. The children do not know their parents’ language, their world, their aims, and their thoughts. Yiddish, therefore, leads the child to his folk, and to the progressive ideas of Jewish democracy and socialism.”391 A 1929 introduction to the Houston Arbeter Ring School similarly stated that a secular Yiddish education would address the “serious chasm” between American-born children and their immigrant parents and that “a great many children think that because their parents speak English poorly, they, the parents, are mentally inferior, and their ideas and ideals are, therefore, unsound.”392


390 Ibid.

391 Arn Glants-Leyless, quoted in Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, 209. Glants-Leyless was affiliated with the Socialist Territorialist Party, but his words reflect the motivations of non-territorialist and Arbeter Ring education proponents as well.

392 Program of 15th Annual Concert and Ball, Branch No. 530 Workmen’s Circle (Houston: 1929), 25.
In pursuit of this vision, southern branches established shule programs to provide students with “a Jewish radical school” in which they would “receive a Jewish upbringing, learn the Yiddish language, and come to know Jewish history and Yiddish literature.”\textsuperscript{393} In general, classes met after school Monday through Thursday and on Sunday mornings, and the school year lasted from fall until spring.\textsuperscript{394} In the 1920s and 1930s, most students had learned Yiddish from their parents and many spoke the language at home, so language instruction focused on reading, writing and grammar. Children learned about Jewish holidays and traditions from a secular perspective, and teachers organized dramatic performances and other events. In the 1930s, for instance, the Atlanta shule organized a “junior orchestra”; a photograph taken circa 1938 shows a group of twenty-three children ranging in age from elementary to high school holding violins, mandolins and other instruments.\textsuperscript{395} The schools also arranged for joint programs with nearby cities, centered on “debates and discussions on themes developed by the teachers.”\textsuperscript{396}

Although Arbeter Ring branches dedicated much of their energy and financial resources to the administration of shules, the long-term effects of their educational efforts are difficult to measure. For engaged students, usually those in larger cities whose parents were most active in the Arbeter Ring, the local shules provided a respectable Yiddish education. Joe and Rose Keeper’s son David, born in 1922, became a proficient Yiddish speaker in the Houston school,

\textsuperscript{393} Morris Ross, “Twenty-five years of arbeter ring branch 207,” 6; Chanin, “The thirtieth conference of the southern district of the arbeter ring is thirty years of jewish life,” 19.

\textsuperscript{394} Chaya Rochel Andres, “History of the ‘Arbeiter Ring’ Kinder Shul in Dallas.” The Dallas shule was open for three hours a day, five days a week.


\textsuperscript{396} Merlin, “The arbeter ring in the south,” 32
despite speaking English at home. He was able to read and write in Yiddish, and used Yiddish later in life to converse with other Jews while traveling abroad.\textsuperscript{397} Mitchell Merlin’s daughter Marjorie received enough of an education to correspond in Yiddish, although she apologized for her “childish” Yiddish in a 1940 letter to Shmuel Zygelbojm.\textsuperscript{398} Furthermore, essays by Atlanta students on works by I. L. Peretz, Sholem Asch and I. J. Schwartz demonstrate that committed students gained sufficient skills to understand and interpret modern Yiddish literature.\textsuperscript{399}

These examples, however, may not represent the majority of Arbeter Ring students. Many smaller schools were unable to operate for more than a few years and combined students of several ages into their classes. Shules also struggled with attendance. Records from Houston show that several enrolled children stopped coming to classes altogether over the course of the year.\textsuperscript{400} Furthermore, in the South as in other regions, children came to the shules with less prior Yiddish knowledge in subsequent decades. Although branches in Atlanta, Houston and Miami offered Arbeter Ring classes into the 1950s, their students were unlikely ever to achieve the level of literacy obtained by earlier pupils.\textsuperscript{401}

Regardless of the extent to which Arbeter Ring students achieved the educational goals set by their parents and teachers, the very existence of shules in southern cities speaks to adult members’ visions of the Yiddish future, globally and in the South. In the 1920s and 1930s,

\textsuperscript{397} David Keeper, interview.

\textsuperscript{398} Marjorie Merlin to Shmuel Zygelbojm, Dec. 3, 1940, Zygelbojm Papers, YIVO.

\textsuperscript{399} Atlanta Shule Papers, Educational Department Records, Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO.

\textsuperscript{400} Houston Class Journal, late 1930s, Educational Department Records, Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO.

\textsuperscript{401} See, for example, Paul Keeper, interview by Josh Parshall, Oct. 25, 2014.
members believed Yiddish literacy was a crucial tool for new generations that would connect them to Jews around the world and allow them to participate in the advancement of Jewish culture in a pluralistic socialist society. This was characteristic of radical Yiddish education generally, but it appears explicitly in texts produced in the Southern District, including a 1933 journal published in celebration of Atlanta Branch 207’s twenty-fifth anniversary. One article in the journal features a hand-drawn image of the earth with the phrase “Yiddish literature is the cement that unites the Jews of the entire world” written across it. In another essay, Mitchell Merlin wrote that, through the shule, members aimed to raise their children to be “a vanguard of Jewish intellectuals,” “able to analyze and, perhaps, contribute to the literature and culture themselves.” The journal contributors did not value Yiddish education solely for its role in Jewish life, however, but also for its relation to other world cultures. Merlin and others viewed yidishe kultur as the Jewish contribution to “the cultural storehouse of the world, which is brought together as a sum of distinct national cultural treasures.” As for the school’s political dimension, national Arbeter Ring education director Phillip Geliebter wrote of the Atlanta branch’s “true dedication” to “our children’s Jewish socialist upbringing” as part of their “striving to help restructure our current economic order.”

Although more moderate members did not share this enthusiasm for the “inevitable” transformations of the coming socialist movement, they did imagine a world in which Yiddish


403 Dorin and Landau, eds., *In dorem land* (1933), 10.


405 Ibid.

language and culture would persist as defining features of Jewish life. Labor Zionists such as the Nad family in Houston and Isaac Tontak (Eudice Tontak’s father) saw an Arbeter Ring education as the best option for developing a secular Jewish identity in their children—an attachment to and familiarity with Jewish culture that would keep them active in Jewish circles without demanding religious observance.⁴⁰⁷ Among the observant families who sent their children to the shules, classes through the Arbeter Ring rounded out a traditional religious education by introducing children to the language and culture that surrounded and had developed alongside East European Jewish religious practice. As Shirley Brickman remarked about her father, Atlanta member Irving Berkowitz, “he belonged to Arbeter Ring for what we could learn, not who we could be. … We went to shule because we were learning the language. We could write. We could read a little bit. And it answered a need for our folks, who were immigrants.”⁴⁰⁸

The Changing Horizons of Secular Yiddishkayt

Zelda, David and Sam Keeper rarely, if ever, attended synagogue as children, and they lived in a different neighborhood from most of their classmates in the Arbeter Ring shule. Nevertheless, they understood themselves to be Jews and socialized with other Jewish children. David and Zelda attended the Arbeter Ring shule through high school and became proficient readers of Yiddish. Zelda was a lifelong friend of Wolf and Lena Bell’s daughter Helen (later Helen Kapiloff), and one of David’s closest friends was Helen’s brother Boris “Bussy” Bell.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ Nad, interview; David Glassberg, personal communication, July 14, 2015.

⁴⁰⁸ Shirley Brickman, interview; on the Berkowitz family, also see Ferris, Matzoh Ball Gumbo, 329-331.

Sam lost interest in the Arbeter Ring shule earlier than his older siblings and stopped attending around the age of thirteen. Although he, like David, had non-Jewish friends in high school, Sam also belonged to a Jewish social circle and did not date non-Jewish women until he entered the military. 410

The Keeper children absorbed progressive politics and secular Jewish identities from their Arbeter Ring upbringings, but the organization held little appeal for them as young adults. None of the three joined Houston’s English-speaking section, Branch 530Y, which was founded in 1947 and had thirty-six members in 1950. 411 Although the adult children of other longtime branch members, especially the Bell family, were active in the new branch, many former students found other social, cultural and political outlets. David, for instance, joined the local chapter of the United World Federalists. As Sam put it, “all of us young people came back from the war, and we weren’t interested in the Workmen’s Circle.” 412

Despite this range of responses from engaged participation to apathy, the majority of children raised in the pre-World War II Arbeter Ring maintained some form of Jewish identity and an interest in Jewish continuity. Both Keeper brothers married Jewish women after serving in the military and made efforts to give their children Jewish upbringings. Sam, who was never interested in organized religion, and his wife, Cele, belonged to Temple Emanu El, the Reform

410 Sam Keeper, interview.

411 Boris Bell, “A Brief History of Branch 530Y,” In Southern States: Issued to the Thirtieth Conference of the Southern District, the Workmen’s Circle (1949, English section of In dorem land), 15; Program for “Branch No. 530 Workmen’s Circle (Arbeiter Ring) of Houston, Texas, Thirty-Sixth Annual Concert, December 10, 1950,” Joseph Jacobs Papers. According to Boris Bell, the English-speaking group peaked at fifty-one members in the late 1940s.

412 David Keeper, interview; Sam Keeper, interview.
congregation in which she had grown up, and their two children attended Sunday school there.413 David had a stronger interest in Jewish culture and history than his brother, but he and his wife, Seline, did not initially enroll their children in religious school. David’s son Paul attended Arbeter Ring classes for a few years in the 1950s, when the Houston branch briefly revived its shule. However, he was the only one of David and Seline’s eight children to do so.414 Even after the Christian conservatism that dominated 1960s Houston motivated the family to affiliate with a synagogue, they continued to emphasize a secular approach to Jewish identity. When their daughter Lisa announced at the dinner table that her public school teacher had taught the class that “Jesus Christ is our lord and savior,” David and Seline immediately joined Temple Emanu El and sent their children to Sunday school. 415

The Keepers’ trajectory from the Yiddish left to (nominal) affiliation with the Reform movement reflects common trends among southern Arbeter Ring families. By the time that the American-born children of early members started families of their own, the potentialities of yidishe kultur had changed dramatically. Half of the world’s Yiddish speakers had been murdered.416 There would be no continuation of Jewish mass migration to the United States, and the remaining Yiddish life in eastern Europe faced an uncertain future under Soviet rule. Whereas secular Jews in New York City and other major centers constituted a critical mass for the continuation of non-religious modes of identification, southern cities did not support such dense Jewish enclaves. In the South, as elsewhere, many former Arbeter Ring students had

413 Ibid.
414 Paul Keeper, interview; David Keeper, interview.
415 Paul Keeper, interview.
416 Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, 15.
already become involved in more mainstream Jewish organizations, such as Young Judea, Junior Hadassah and B’nai Brith, or married spouses from more religious backgrounds. In the 1950s and 1960s, then, many of the grandchildren of early southern Arbeter Ring members grew up in normative American Jewish environments, characterized by Zionist politics and moderate liberalism.

This shift toward congregational affiliation and increasing acceptance of Zionism did not necessarily (or merely) indicate a rejection of Arbeter Ring principles. In the postwar era, Jewish denominational movements began to adopt progressive political stances that, while cautious in comparison to socialist or communist demands for wholesale economic and social transformations, offered a viable alternative to the reactionary politics that often characterized white conservatism in the South. In the family story of Lisa Keeper’s public-school exposure to Christian theology, evangelicalism represented a political and cultural threat to the family’s dual identity as Jewish and progressive. A Reform movement upbringing, though not entirely in line with Sam and David Keeper’s approach to Jewish identity, offered an acceptable means of communicating Jewish and progressive values to a new generation.

The family histories of southern Arbeter Ring members illustrate the varying ways that successive generations of Jews, in eastern Europe as well as America, have chosen from a shifting range of available practices—such as establishing Yiddish libraries, feeding striking workers, joining Reform synagogues or maintaining Kosher homes—to enact forms of

417 Feigenbaum, interview; Barr, interview; Hirsch, interview; Freedman, interview.

418 On American Jews’ “extensive abandonment of Yiddish as a vernacular” in the post-war era, see Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, 16.

Jewishness that serve their particular needs and respond to the pressures of a given time and place. The founding generation, disillusioned with the narrow interests of traditional religious life, yet skeptical of the benefits of assimilation, championed new modes of Jewishness that staked a claim for cultural cohesion and (in most cases) radical politics as dual solutions to the Jewish problems of the early twentieth century. Their children, raised by immigrant parents and educated at Arbeter Ring shules, bore the distinct imprint of a Jewish (and Yiddish) upbringing, but gained access to educational and economic opportunities that led them, for the most part, toward the mainstream of post-war Jewish life. Even those who belonged to young adult and English-speaking branches in the largest southern cities tended to participate in more mainstream Jewish groups as well, indicating the extent to which the symbols and activities of the Yiddish left no longer provided a self-sufficient Jewish life in the South.
CHAPTER 4: REMEMBERING THE SOUTH IN YIDDISH

In 1949, the Arbeter Ring Southern District held its regional conference in Houston, Texas. The Southeastern and Texas-Louisiana districts had merged in 1946, and this was their fourth official meeting. At the same time, however, the conference marked the thirtieth anniversary of the 1919 founding of the original regional districts. In celebration of this milestone, the district’s executive committee published a bilingual Yiddish-English “journal” titled *In dorem land / In Southern States*, which was distributed to delegates. In the foreword to the Yiddish section, the editors make the following remarks:

It has been forty years since the Arbeter Ring took root and began to grow in the southern states. At one time, all of the branches were expanding rapidly. Almost every branch had its own lyceum, library and Arbeter Ring school. They organized lectures, dramatic groups and choruses. They built a network of mutual loan associations. Among the clerical and assimilationist Jewish population of the South, the Arbeter Ring branches were the first and almost only radical and modern Jewish organizations that brought together Yiddish language, culture and literature. They began to build a new modern Jewish life. Small groups of impoverished, green immigrants developed into a political and moral force with its own place within the Jewish communities, and a voice even among the non-Jewish population.

The forty-year history of Arbeter Ring in the southern states has been almost entirely unwritten and unexamined. Luckily, a few pioneers and founders still remain who can share information and history. But time takes its toll... and there is almost no written archival material. We are in danger of losing important and glorious pages from the history of A.R. and of Jewish life in the southern states. To put together the not-yet-written pages, to discover memories of all those who helped create this wonderful organization, was the highest aim of the A.R. Southern District in publishing this collection.  

---

420 Duntov, foreword to *In dorem land* (1949), 5. Although the text credits the foreword to “the editors,” only Joseph Duntov (Duntow, elsewhere), assistant secretary of the district and a member of the Miami Beach branch, is listed as an editor.
Although the 1949 edition of *In dorem land*—the title was used several times—provides the most extensive collection of self-produced southern Arbeter Ring histories, it represents one of several attempts by district and branch leaders to record the group’s history in the region. Along with journals from other conferences and branch anniversaries, personal memoirs (published and unpublished) and family histories, *In dorem land* reflects how Arbeter Ring members in the South sought repeatedly to memorialize their experiences and activities in writing.

Whereas the previous chapters reconstruct and interpret the history of the Arbeter Ring in the South, this chapter considers the commemorative and historiographic practices of southern Arbeter Ring members themselves to examine their strategic uses of memory at different points in the organization’s development and decline. Human groups, ranging in scale from families to nations, rely on narratives of the past to imagine internal cohesion and temporal continuity. As individuals describe personal experiences and relay accounts they heard from others, select narratives circulate more widely and enter into collective memory, constituting a nebulous and dynamic repertoire of stories about the group’s past. Groups form, absorb new members and re-form in large part through memory practices—actions and interactions that transmit, evoke, dramatize or otherwise activate knowledge of the past—and participating in a group often, if not always, requires the individual to participate in these practices. As discussed below, Jewish religious traditions emphasize a dual imperative to remember that defines the relationship

---


between God and the Jewish people. Arbeter Ring members, ambivalent toward if not hostile to religious practice, adopted a different set of memory practices to create and transmit versions of the Jewish past better suited to their particular needs.

The historical and commemorative writings by Arbeter Ring members in the South supplemented (and recorded) a range of memory practices through which the group drew members together, enacted an alternative cultural sphere in emerging urban South environments already marked by local modes of commemoration, and connected participants to a common past and ongoing movements in transnational Yiddish culture. In these texts, allusions to biblical history and rabbinic memorialization invoked the longstanding centrality of remembering to Jewish belonging, even as the authors relied on more recent trends in Jewish historiography to claim continuity with the revolutionary movements of the late Russian Empire and the American Jewish labor movement. Through the latter practice, commemorative texts from the 1930s and 1940s presented a “usable past” that informed calls for ongoing activism, while later memoirs and family histories increasingly framed their efforts at historical documentation in terms of necessity, given the approaching disappearance of the immigrant generation.

Southern Memories in Practice

The historiographic and memorial texts written by southern Arbeter Ring members, such as the various editions of *In dorem land*, represent one facet of the group’s commemorative practices, all of which co-existed with other cultures of remembrance, including white and black memory practices, in southern cities. On June 19, 1865, for instance, Union soldiers arrived in Galveston to announce the end of the Civil War and proclaimed the immediate emancipation of all enslaved blacks in Texas. As a result, Galveston became the birthplace of Juneteenth, an annual celebration of black freedom that became widespread in Texas and beyond in subsequent
decades. Galveston was a site of white, pro-Confederate memory, as well, and the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy commissioned a Confederate Civil War memorial in 1912, the same year that Sam Fargotstein and other young Jewish immigrants founded Branch 307.

As the Galveston examples demonstrate, Jewish migrants to the early twentieth-century South entered a region that was continually shaped and reshaped by the racial, class and gender politics of memory-making and memorialization. From the end of Reconstruction through the Jim Crow era, white southerners, especially elite white women, enacted Confederate memory through parades, architecture, monument building, historic preservation, and the naming of streets and parks. By saturating southern public spaces with markers of southern nationalism and white supremacy, proponents of Confederate memory marked white ownership of New South landscapes and enshrined a particular version of the southern past that justified black southerners’ continuing subjection to segregation, disenfranchisement and exclusion from the dominant public sphere. Confederate veterans paraded through the streets on horses every April for Confederate Memorial Day. Women’s groups, especially the United Daughters of the Confederacy, erected monuments to the Lost Cause and held elaborate dedication events. Additionally, white elites encoded idealized versions of the antebellum South through the preservation and revival of architectural styles that evoked the grandeur of plantation society


424 See Brundage, *Southern Past*. 
while obscuring the realities of exploitation and violence that underwrote such luxury. Of course, these commemorations did not maintain white supremacy on their own, but worked in tandem with disenfranchisement, segregation and anti-black violence to assert white control in an era of rapid change.

The Arbeter Ring and other Yiddish-speaking networks provided a somewhat separate public sphere for immigrant Jews in an environment permeated with markers of a mythologized white antebellum and Confederate past. Except for David Davis’s memoir, *The passing years*, historical documents produced by southern Arbeter Ring members do not dwell on the ubiquity of Confederate memorialization in their home cities. Nevertheless, the close proximity of Arbeter Ring activities to instances of Confederate memorialization generate striking juxtapositions, such as a 1933 listing of social events in *The Nashville Tennessean*, which announced an upcoming meeting of the Kate Litton Hickman Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy directly above a notice for the installation program of the Nashville Young Circle Club.

Whereas Lost Cause monuments and memorial events established the regionally hegemonic role of Confederate memory by enrolling newcomers and visitors in the collective commemoration of lost grandeur and benign paternalism, Arbeter Ring memorial practices appealed to a much smaller potential audience and tended to draw participants from within the organization or the adjacent Jewish immigrant community. In New York City, by contrast, East

---


427 *Nashville Tennessean*, June 4, 1933, 14, Newspapers.com.
European Jewish immigrants constituted a large enough body to commission prominent markers of Jewish collective memory. Jewish immigrants from Bialystok, for instance, opened the first Bialystoker Center building in 1923 and constructed a larger center in 1931—both of which served as Jewish landmarks in the Lower East Side and symbols of continuity and cohesion for Bialystok landslayt in the United States.  

Records from southern branches rarely provide detailed accounts of particular events or celebrations, so many of the group’s memory practices remain unclear. Nevertheless, Arbeter Ring activities in the South cultivated and activated collective and personal memories through formal acts of commemoration and the informal sharing of memories. In the earliest years of the Atlanta branch, members from different towns and regions forged connections with one another in part through conversation about their experiences as radicals in the Russian Empire. In 1949, as noted in Chapter Three, Morris Bloshtein commented on the “reverence” with which members sang the Bundist anthem “Di shvue / The oath” at district conferences, as well as the commemorative function of the song, which implicitly connected Arbeter Ring membership to the revolutionary activities of many members’ pasts. Although, contrary to Bloshtein’s account, southern branch members had not universally participated in revolutionary movements, the continued performance of “Di shvue” evoked memories of Jewish solidarity in the face of

---


oppression. Individual branches also used anniversary celebrations, including concerts and banquets, to recall local groups’ beginnings and celebrate their growth and persistence. The particular ceremonial details of such events are not available, but remarks by branch leaders and visiting regional and national officials surely marked these programs as moments of heightened attention to the organization’s past and occasions for recalling its local struggles and achievements.

The small audience for Arbeter Ring events in the South—Yiddish-speaking Jews and, occasionally, members of the non-Jewish left—constrained its capacity as a vehicle for collective memory. Performances like the mass singing of “Di shvve” solidified and maintained a shared identification with anti-Tsarist struggle among immigrant members, while educational programs primed their children to adopt the Bundist revolutionary past as their own. Certainly, literary events, lectures and musical and dramatic performances attracted Jewish audiences from outside the organizations. These events made use of a common past in order to affirm the value of Yiddish expressive culture and Jewish cohesion, if not the necessity of Jewish-socialist activism. Additionally, political demonstrations held in conjunction with the local Socialist Party or other non-Jewish radicals, May Day celebrations and, in the 1920s, commemorations of the Russian Revolution, likely fused Jewish-specific recollections of oppression in Europe with non-Jewish

---

431 A translation of the first stanza reads, “Brothers and sisters in toil and in need / All those who are scattered and dispersed / Come together, the banner is ready / It waves in anger. It is red with blood / An oath! An oath! In life and in death.”

432 See, for example, Souvenir in honor of the twenty-year anniversary of arbeter ring branch 530 (also cited in Chapter 3); and “An arbeter ring yontif in der south,” Forverts, July 22, 1928, Historical Jewish Press.
activists’ own experiences of exploitation and repression. These extensions of Arbeter Ring collective memory, however, circulated only within marginal pockets of southern society and had little to no measurable effect on the broader public.

Material expressions of collective memory by southern branches were similarly limited in reach. Lyceum buildings were neither imposing structures nor built to recall a particular time or place, and branches generally established lyceums in renovated buildings, including residences, rather than constructing new facilities. Although lyceum exteriors did not evoke shared historical memory, their interior decorations asserted a common past through the centrality of revolutionary politics and Yiddish literature to the group’s identity. A 1949 photograph of an anniversary banquet in Nashville, for example, shows a group of primarily middle-aged attendees in suits and dresses sitting at long tables. Behind them, the following items are visible on the walls: an American flag, an Israeli flag, a framed certificate (probably the branch’s charter), a photograph of Karl Marx and two other photographic portraits. In another photograph of the lyceum interior, pictures of Marx and Sholem Aleichem hang above a group of Arbeter Ring members. These items seem to be typical for the time; Atlanta members decorated their lyceum walls with pictures of Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz, two of the most celebrated

433 On May Day celebrations, see Chapter 3, n309; see Chapter 2 for discussion of a commemoration of the Russian revolution held in Houston.

434 May Day celebrations and memorials of the Russian Revolution drew occasional newspaper mentions, but these were as likely as anything to raise concerns over Jewish connections to socialism, rather than to legitimate leftist politics as the appropriate response to Jewish history. See, “Socialists to Hold Meeting Sunday,” Atlanta Constitution, May 1, 1921, 9, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

435 “The 25-year anniversary of branch 641 in nashville,” [photograph], In dorem land (1949), 91; Photograph by Paul Calcian, John E. Hood Photos, MS 16, Annette Levy Ratkin Jewish Community Archives, Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee. A note on the reverse dates the Calcian photograph to the 1920s, but it was more likely taken in the 1940s.
modern Yiddish authors. While photographic portraits of historical and literary figures asserted the group’s roots in a transnational tradition of secular Yiddish and radical politics, the local branch’s charter, framed and prominently displayed on the wall, recalled the group’s local origins and, as decades passed, its long tenure in southern cities.

*In Dorem Land*

By the 1930s, southern Arbeter Ring branches began to produce texts that detailed the organization’s local histories. These were usually journals or programs that accompanied branch events, especially concerts, balls and conventions that marked significant anniversaries. Whereas earlier event programs spoke primarily to the educational and cultural activities of local branches, the later publications served an explicitly commemorative function as well. In 1935, for example, the Houston branch published a “souvenir” program in honor of its twentieth anniversary celebration. The program book, written primarily in Yiddish with some English sections, contains a list of remaining founders, a brief history of the branch and greetings from regional and national Arbeter Ring leaders. In other respects, the 1935 Houston program resembles other booklets—they are 5.5 by 4.25 inches, thirty pages or less in length and contain several pages of ads—but the extra historical material reflects a more retrospective focus.

The Atlanta Arbeter Ring branch used the title *In dorem land* regularly for anniversary journals from the 1920s until at least 1954. The branch published the first or second edition in

---

436 Henrietta Bell and Susan Ganc, interview.

437 For an earlier event program, see the program for Houston Branch 530’s fifteenth annual concert and ball (1929), Joseph Jacobs Papers, Georgia State University Library, Special Collections and Archives, Atlanta.

438 *Souvenir in honor of the twenty-year anniversary of arbeter ring branch 530* (Houston: 1935), also discussed in Chapter 3.
1928, presumably for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Arbeter Ring activity in Atlanta. Another journal, billed as the third edition of *In dorem land*, followed in 1933 and honored the branch’s twenty-fifth anniversary. The 1933 journal is a twenty-eight page staple-bound booklet, containing mimeograph reproductions of typewritten text. The contents include histories of branch activities, greetings from national and regional Arbeter Ring leaders, reflections on the group’s current challenges and future goals, and an appeal to “all the progressive Jews of Atlanta” on behalf of the Arbeter Ring shule, “the best and most suitable place for your child.” The 1933 edition reflects a local Arbeter Ring movement with a strong following and potential for growth, despite the economic setbacks of the Great Depression. Its authors take a strident political tone, in keeping with the resurgence of socialist politics in the early 1930s. The branch published the fourth edition of *In dorem land* in 1943.

In 1954, the Atlanta branch published a fifth edition of *In dorem land* in the same manner as the 1933 edition—staple-bound reproductions of type-written pages. Whereas the 1933

---

439 Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers*, 310, 334 n295. Freidenreich cites a 1928 edition of *In dorem land* in her entry on Miami Beach, Florida. It is possible that the 1928 edition was created for a district conference rather than a local Atlanta event.

440 David Merlin, “Ten years of the arbeter ring lyceum,” *In dorem land* (1933), 18. David Merlin refers to the members of the Arbeter Ring as contributors to “the great, inevitable rebuilding of the current economic structure.” In the same volume, Phillip Geliebter, at that time the Educational Director of the Arbeter Ring, used similar language in his greeting to the branch. P. Geliebter, “A festival of constructive work,” 11.

441 It is not clear where a copy of the 1943 journal is archived, but Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich lists it in the bibliography of *Passionate Pioneers* (484). The select bibliography for the *Passionate Pioneers* is also available through the American Jewish Archives: http://collections.americanjewisharchives.org/ms/ms0770/Freidenreich_Select_Bibliography.pdf.

442 *In dorem-land, funfte oysgabe: 45 yor arbeter ring brentsh 207, 25 yor binush mikhalevitsh brentsch 207-B*, Mitchell J. Merlin and M. Bloshstein, eds. (Atlanta: n.p., 1954), Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO. The 1954 journal commemorates the forty-fifth anniversary of the
edition features brief historical essays by several authors, each one addressing a different aspect of branch history, the 1954 edition begins with a single fifteen-page essay by Mitchell Merlin, followed by shorter histories of Branch 207 B (the women’s club) and Branch 1015, (English-speaking). The journal also contains nine pages of brief recollections by longtime members.443

In addition to publications by individual branches, the Southern District sought to record a regional history of the organization on at least one occasion—the 1949 regional conference—for which it published *In dorem land / In Southern States*. The 1949 edition is a softbound, quarto-sized publication with 204 pages. It is also bilingual. Held with the binding to the right, it appears to be a Yiddish text, but the reader sees an English cover after flipping the book over with the spine on the left.

The Yiddish section of the journal is 156 pages long. It begins with names and addresses of district officials and branch secretaries. Following the table of contents, it includes a foreword (quoted above) and opening remarks by editor Joseph Duntov; lyrics to the “Arbeter Ring Hymn” and other songs of the Jewish left; a greeting from the organization’s national executive committee to the state of Israel; commemorative texts on the Warsaw ghetto uprising and Nazi genocide; essays by national Arbeter Ring leaders; resolutions from the 1948 Arbeter Ring conference in Boston; histories of the district and individual chapters; photographs of district officers and local branches; a report on the 1948 district conference in Chattanooga; articles on Yiddish education, the socialist movement in the South, the Jewish Labor Committee, YIVO (the leading institution for Yiddish scholarship) and the Jewish Culture Congress; a table of figures

Atlanta Arbeter Ring, which took place in 1953. Because of “a number of factors,” however, members delayed the celebration until May 1954 (i).

443 Ibid.
for Arbeter Ring member dues, benefits and assets from 1900 to 1948; memorial photographs and short biographies of deceased leaders of Southern District chapters; and greetings and congratulations from constituents and partner organizations. Much of this material, especially the national conference resolutions and the membership and financial data, mark the journal as a yearbook, but its extensive historical content reflect its commemorative function. Of the Yiddish section’s 156 pages, around sixty cover local and regional history of the Arbeter Ring, and another thirteen are devoted to the memories of late founders and leaders.

Rather than providing a translation of the journal’s Yiddish content, the English portion serves the needs of the region’s English-speaking branches. It includes a general history of the Arbeter Ring; articles on the activities and potential of the organization; histories of the youth branches in Houston and Miami; proposals for more action by young members in the region; information on the Jewish Labor Committee, antisemitism in America and abroad, global socialism and Jews displaced by World War II; updates on labor struggles in the United States and rising corporate profits; and data on Jewish immigration to the United States, national and local Jewish populations, and Arbeter Ring chapters by city. There are forty-eight pages in English, including four pages of general organizational history and four that discuss the history of the Southern District and its two youth branches.

Jewish Memory

The 1949 edition of In dorem land / In Southern States functions as a memorial text, both in relation to its historiographic content and through references to and invocations of Jewish

---

444 Descriptions of the journal’s contents have been reproduced with minor changes from the author’s previously published essay, “In Southern States: Historical Texts from the Arbeter Ring’s Southern District (English Translation from Yiddish),” Southern Jewish History, vol. 17 (2014), 54.
memory practices that preceded the development of modern Jewish historiography. Through their use of biblical allusions and words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin, the authors and editors of *In dorem land* embedded centuries of Jewish memory and memorial practice in its Yiddish text. National education director Nathan Chanin, for example, composed a greeting in the 1949 journal in which he describes the founders of southern branches as “*meraglim* / scouts” who first encountered the South as a Jewish “*midber* / desert.”\(^{445}\) His imagery and the use of Hebrew-origin words recall the events of Numbers (13:1-33) and frame the historical development of southern Arbeter Ring branches in biblical terms.\(^{446}\) Elsewhere, references to biblical events and elements of long-standing memorial practices work in part to frame explicitly memorial passages and to enhance their emotional resonance.

Being Jewish, in any of its variations, requires some kind of remembering. As Yosef Yerushalmi points out in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, practices of memory are a definitive aspect of the relationship between God and the Jewish people:

> Altogether the verb *zakhar* [remember] appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both.\(^{447}\)

From the biblical narrative through rabbinic Judaism and into the development of secular modes of Jewish identification, however, the ways that memory is *done*—and, in turn, what memory *does*—have undergone major changes. Significantly, many early members of southern Arbeter

---

\(^{445}\) Chanin, “The thirtieth conference of the southern district of the arbeter ring is thirty years of jewish life,” 19-20; for a brief biography of Chanin, see Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 120-121 and 265.

\(^{446}\) Despite the allusion, the account he provides does not neatly mirror the biblical narrative.

Ring branches grew up immersed in the memorial traditions of East European Judaism but adopted self-consciously modern approaches to Jewish history as they adopted secular worldviews and radical politics.

Yerushalmi interprets the Bible as a significant historical innovation, a linear record of concrete and human-scale events that portray the unfolding of divine will. In his account, the writing of Jewish history more or less ended after the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of the rabbinic period, however, and he marks a sharp distinction between the Jewish memory practices of the rabbinic era and the work of modern historiography. For Yerushalmi, traditional Judaism’s various “rituals of remembrance” only incidentally carry historical knowledge because they portray time as non-linear and rely on “evocation and identification” rather than “intellection.” In the aggadic texts of Talmud and Midrash, for example—with which Mitchell Merlin, among others, was deeply familiar—time collapses and expands, with biblical figures and events moving freely across temporal frames. While (as I argue in the epilogue) Yerushalmi underestimates the extent to which historiography is itself a “ritual of remembrance,” the older modes of communal memory that he identifies remain present in the

448 Ibid., 8-9. Yerushalmi also notes that this mode of historical memory was highly selective, and enacted primarily through practices of “ritual and recital”—annual festivals and oral poetry (11).

449 Ibid., 40-44.

450 Ibid., 17-19. Aggadah refers to the narrative, as opposed to legalistic, portions of rabbinic literature.
text of *In dorem land* as a consequence of their embeddedness in the Yiddish language as well as the traditional religious educations of the journal’s authors.\(^{451}\)

The persistence of Hebrew and Aramaic expressions—words and phrases known as *loshn koydesh* (holy tongue)—in the Yiddish section of *In dorem land* demonstrates the authors’ personal familiarity with and ironic distance from the observance of traditional eastern European Judaism. Although *loshn koydesh* words are integral to the Yiddish lexicon, the use of these expressions tends to carry significant connotative meaning, especially in relation to secular topics and when synonyms from other loaner languages are available. Through the “internal polylingualism” of Yiddish, discrete terms and biblical quotations in *loshn koydesh* embed communal memory, including traces of traditional memory practices, in the language itself.\(^{452}\)

An illustrative example occurs in Mitchell Merlin’s account of the left-right split in the 1920s. Recounting the blind obedience with which hardline Communists in southern branches sought to follow the directives of the Third International, Merlin describes their attitude as one of “*na’ash v’nishma* / we will do and we will hear” and ironically refers to the more moderate dissenters as “*apikorsim* / heretics.”\(^{453}\) The first phrase quotes from Exodus (24:7) and concerns the Israelites’ complete acceptance of divine law at Sinai.\(^{454}\) Having placed the far left faction in

\(^{451}\) For additional criticism of Yerushalmi’s account and further commentary on the relationship between “historical consciousness” and “collective memory” see Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, 3-15.


\(^{453}\) Merlin, “Left and right in arbeter ring,” 36.

\(^{454}\) The sequence of “do” and then “hear” may be interpreted as a promise to follow law even prior to comprehending its justifications.
the role of true believers, Merlin then claims the label of *apikorsim*, which signals secularism and scepticism, for the moderates. In doing so, he simultaneously recalls and rejects the traditional religious upbringing common to many Arbeter Ring members, even as he links ideological rigidity of his former political opponents to the fanaticism of Jewish orthodoxy.

Elsewhere, *loshn koydesh* marks more earnest passages of *In dorem land*, especially those having to do with memorializing deceased comrades and the destroyed communities of Europe. In two instances—a memorial for the victims of Nazi genocide and a section dedicated to deceased leaders of Chattanooga Branch 495—the word “yizkor” provides a heading for commemorative texts.455 “Yizkor” refers to a memorial service offered four times a year (in Ashkenazi tradition), and the name comes from the first word of a key passage in the service, where it means, “may [God] remember.”456 In the secular context of *In dorem land*, however, it is not clear whether God, Arbeter Ring readers or the reader is responsible for remembering, and the non-religious content of the memorials marks a departure from the prayer that the heading recalls. Nevertheless, the traditional practice still resonated with the editors as a framing device, recalling biblical and rabbinic exhortations to remember even as the appropriate mode of recollection had changed.

**Jewish History**

While the journal contains traces of older Jewish memory practices, the authors are more concerned with a self-consciously modern and Jewish-nationalist historicism that reflects the Southern District’s connections to transnational Jewish movements. Historical scholarship


456 A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (1932; repr. New York: Dover, 1995), 200, 232. Significantly, it is likely that the *Yizkor* service was first instituted in commemoration of Jewish communities destroyed during the Crusades.
emerged as a vital component of secular Jewish cultural and political movements in the nineteenth century. As external events and internal upheavals in the twentieth century continued to shake the Jewish communities of Europe, Jewish intellectuals undertook projects of collection and preservation, and the writing of history took on a memorial and even monumental function, especially with the dispersion and destruction of East European Jewry.

Yerushalmi identifies “a vague consensus … that a knowledge of history is somehow desirable for the Jews” among the leaders of the Haskalah—the late eighteenth-century Jewish enlightenment movement—and he and other historiographers date the emergence of a secular and social-scientific tradition of historical research to the Wiessenschaft movement of the 1820s.\footnote{Yerushalmi, \textit{Zakhor}, 82-84. Also see Michael A. Meyer, \textit{The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824} (Detroit, 1967), 144-182.} As a growing number of German Jews sought to participate more fully in non-Jewish society, they adopted the “historicist perspectives” of “European culture.”\footnote{Yerushalmi, \textit{Zakhor}, 85.} Yerushalmi notes that the sudden development of Jewish historiography took place at the same time as widespread alienation from traditional Jewish religious practice.\footnote{Ibid., 86} From the Wiessenschaft push for “scientific” knowledge of the Jews, closely tied to Reform movements in Germany, to the later developments of Zionism and Jewish socialism, historical knowledge came to stand in for, or perhaps displace, the commemorative modes associated with Jewish religious observance.

Although Yerushalmi refers to history as “the faith of fallen Jews,” proponents of secular Jewish historiography, including Arbeter Ring members, understood themselves as part of the ongoing
elevation of Jewish culture, through which new modes of Jewish cultural practice would refine or replace former methods of commemoration.\textsuperscript{460}

Retrospectively, the centrality of history to secular modes of Jewish identification is not surprising. Historiography, like language, was a key tool for European nationalist movements, and it appealed to individuals and groups who wished to retain a measure of Jewish autonomy or solidarity without submitting to the strictures of traditional Judaism. Among emerging Jewish political and cultural movements, historical interpretations were vital to debates over the so-called Jewish Question. For some Zionists, Jewish return to Palestine would serve to negate the history of Diaspora. In contrast, non-Zionist Jewish nationalists—Simon Dubnow, most notably—took up history as a way of affirming the dynamism of the Diaspora and the deep connections between Jews and their adopted homelands. This philosophy of working toward political and economic equality in territories where Jews already lived was known as “doykayt / here-ness.” For late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Diaspora nationalists like Dubnow, it meant advocating for the cultivation of Jewish secular culture as well as non-territorial political autonomy.\textsuperscript{461}

While Jewish historiography developed in part out of crises of emancipation and assimilation, mass migration of and increasing violence against East European Jews raised the stakes of documentation and preservation. Both internal migrations to emerging centers of trade and industry and the large-scale emigration of Jews out of the Pale of Settlement spurred social

\textsuperscript{460} Ibid., 86. On the elevation of Jewish secular culture generally, see Mitchell Merlin, “The arbeter ring school,” 14.

scientific research in history, linguistics, ethnography and ethnomusicology. Although highly trained researchers pursued some documentation and preservation projects, important information was also gathered by zamlers—volunteer collectors or semi-professional scholars.462 The most significant institution to undertake this work is YIVO, the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Jewish Research Institute), which was founded in Vilna in 1925 and moved to New York City in 1940.463 YIVO was notable for its commitment to academic research on Jewish topics, for publishing in Yiddish and for its widespread dissemination of scholarly materials to a sizeable and supportive Jewish readership.464

In the 1930s, YIVO had recommitted itself to contemporary social scientific methodologies with new efforts to collect local and personal documents. As part of this effort, the institute held contests for autobiographical essays by young people from sixteen to twenty-two years old in 1932, 1934, and 1938-1939.465 While the historical essays of In dorem land are not autobiographies, they do include personal recollections and take their authority from the firsthand experiences of the authors. Additionally, efforts by branches and individuals to record


464 Kuznitz, YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture, 3-6.

465 Ibid., 150-151.
more substantial memoirs elsewhere indicate that the collection of autobiographies was a significant project for members of the southern Arbeter Ring.\textsuperscript{466}

\textit{In dorem land} describes its project as one of collecting threatened history, even as it parallels YIVO’s tradition of grassroots data collection in its solicitation of information from local leaders. The foreword refers to the “danger of losing important and glorious pages from the history of the Arbeter Ring and of Jewish life in the southern states.”\textsuperscript{467} It also emphasizes the importance of collecting historical information from the participants themselves, “to discover memories of all those who helped create this wonderful organization,” even if the work is a partial and imperfect attempt undertaken by writers who are “poor in talent, especially as writers.”\textsuperscript{468} Like other preservation projects, the need to collect information was great enough to overcome worries about the qualifications of those doing the collecting.

This sense of urgency may have developed in response to decades of turmoil, migration and violence in Jewish communities worldwide, but it also related to local conditions and a sense of impending decline. While the southern district would continue to operate for several decades, the future of its smallest chapters was already in question. The history of Branch 495 in Chattanooga, written by Y. Press, provides a representative example of how the loss of local leaders and an inability to replace them left the chapter struggling to maintain its earlier level of activity. By 1949, the branch’s peak membership of seventy five members had dwindled to forty,

\textsuperscript{466} Freida Weiner, of Galveston and Houston, for example, composed autobiographical essays and recollections for the explicit purpose of having them archived at YIVO. These records were sent to YIVO, but it is not clear if they have been processed. There are also a number of Atlanta-specific reminiscences in the 1954 edition of \textit{In dorem land}.

\textsuperscript{467} Duntov, “Foreword,” 5.

\textsuperscript{468} Ibid.
in part due to a number of deaths that occurred in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{469} Furthermore, the remaining members were advancing in age; most of the founders and leaders of Chattanooga and other branches were born in the 1880s or 1890s, and many were approaching their late sixties and seventies when \textit{In dorem land} was published. As for the prospect of new members, “new Jews arrive in Chattanooga every day, but not ones that we could recruit to A.R. The majority of them are young, American-born businesspeople, and they do not have the disposition for the Arbeter Ring.”\textsuperscript{470} Press cites Zionism as another major challenge, writing, “with the way that everyone is captivated by Zionism these days” the branch’s continued activity “is a wonder.”

As a safeguard against decline or erasure, \textit{In dorem land} bears some resemblance to other attempts to create Jewish “monuments” in text.\textsuperscript{471} The most prominent of these are \textit{yizker bikher}, memorial books created by the dispersed remnants of Jewish communities destroyed during World War II. Certainly, many of the commonalities between \textit{In dorem land} and \textit{yizker bikher} result from common source material, rather than from the influence of the recently published memorial books. One of those common sources was the centuries-old practice of writing the names of deceased community members in local records and reciting them during memorial services.\textsuperscript{472} The generic links between a commemorative publication for a local Arbeter Ring

\textsuperscript{469} Y. Press, “Arbeter ring branch 495 in chattanooga,” 74-76. Press’s first name is not clear, but the author may be David J. Press.

\textsuperscript{470} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{471} The notion of literary monuments (or tombstones) was a significant one, as Jewish communities often ceased to function in the sites of their greatest losses.

branch and a memorial book for a destroyed community could be more explicit, however, as in the case of *Pinsk W/C Branch 210: Life in and Around Our Branch*, a 1948 supplement to a *yizker bukh* for the city of Pinsk.⁴⁷³ Although none of the southern Arbeter Ring branches in the Southern District was organized around *landsmanshaft* organizations, the journal does resonate generally as evidence of continuity and perseverance for the home communities of its early members. Despite any similarities to memorial books, however, *In dorem land* was not intended to be the final say in the history of Arbeter Ring in the region, as the foreword makes clear in its hope that the volume will be refined and improved on the occasion of future anniversaries.⁴⁷⁴

**A Usable Past**

The 1949 conference journal marks a transitional moment for the Arbeter Ring in the South. The histories of smaller branches such as Chattanooga serve primarily as historical documentation in the face of inevitable decline, whereas more general essays and contributions from Atlanta, Houston and Miami aim to rally continued engagement through appeals to the group’s roots and visions of its future. Like the 1933 Atlanta journal, the more ambitious sections of the 1949 text use historiographic writing to enact a collective past and encourage continued action by southern members.

By the publication of the 1949 edition of *In dorem land*, many of the district leaders of the Arbeter Ring had been in the United States for thirty or forty years. They had married, raised children, and established small businesses in southern cities, and a few had started professional careers. The regional and local histories, however, emphasize the organization’s radical roots,

---


⁴⁷⁴ Duntov, “Foreword,” 5-6.
especially early members’ participation in revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe—hence Mitchell Merlin’s reference to “heymishe socialists.” 475 Elsewhere, the authors specify that many or most of the founding members had been Bundists prior to their immigration. 476 The inclusion of lyrics to “Di Shvue,” in addition to the words to the “Arbeter Ring Hymn” in the journal’s introductory materials, further underscores the connection between the Bund and the Arbeter Ring. 477

The authors are quick to contrast Arbeter Ring members with the Jewish populations that they encountered as new arrivals in southern cities. Duntov describes most of the prior inhabitants as “Sephardim and ‘Yehudim’ [German and/or Reformed Jews],” who “were either sworn assimilationists or fanatically Orthodox.” The founders of the Arbeter Ring, however, “were already hardened in struggle against reactionary politics and injustice, against political and social inequality.” 478 Likewise, Harry Sokol begins his history of Branch 303 in Birmingham with a reference to “reformed German Jews” and the “extremely conservative Orthodox” community, and follows with his account of those factions’ shared hostility toward the upstart Arbeter Ring. 479

475 Merlin, “Left and right in arbeter ring,” 35.


477 S. Ansky, “Di shvue,” In dorem land, 8. The presence of many former Bundists in the Arbeter Ring Southern District was far from exceptional, and the inclusion of “Di shvue” alongside “The Arbeter Ring Hymn” and other radical anthems was standard practice in Arbeter Ring texts.


479 See Chapter 1; Sokol, “The history of branch 303 in birmingham,” 59-60.
This version of southern Arbeter Ring history is plausible as well as strategic. Even as Arbeter Ring members’ participation in revolutionary activities in Tsarist Russia and their alienation from both traditionally observant and assimilated Jewish circles explain the formation of southern branches and their necessity for its members, the historiographic emphasis on members’ radical pasts serves to demonstrate the Arbeter Ring’s leftist credentials at a moment in which the group appeared increasingly moderate. Nationally, as well as at the local and regional levels, the left-right split of the 1920s had resulted in victory for the more moderate faction, with “leftist” branches either liquidated or reconstituted as chapters of the IWO. During the 1930s, the Arbeter Ring maintained a socialist position in opposition to the Communist Party and affiliated organizations. By World War II, however, the group had ended its support for the Socialist Party of America, because of the socialists’ opposition to the United States’ entry into the war.480

By claiming a revolutionary past for the Arbeter Ring and the Southern District, the authors of *In dorem land* defended their legitimacy as the proper representatives of a Jewish-nationalist left while cautioning against apathy and excessive moderation. This is most clearly articulated in Joseph Duntov’s introduction. Duntov describes the southern branches as “the only radical, modern, Jewish national organization,” and he criticizes other Jewish groups for lacking “deep national belief” and a commitment to Yiddish language.481 He goes on, though, to acknowledge a number of problems. He notes a decline in enthusiasm and activity among Arbeter Ring members, and bemoans the group’s inability to recruit their adult children. Duntov lauds the branches’ charitable work, but identifies a danger in becoming just a “charity”

---


organization. He also points to the significant rise in “the general standard of living” and the ascent of former peddlers into the middle class. According to Duntov,

> For a majority of our members, all of this has created the impression that we have already accomplished our goals, that we can be sure—for generations—that what happened in Europe could not happen to us ... We delude ourselves into thinking that we are secure from economic crises, unemployment, and war. As a result, we no longer speak of socialism and of socialist organizations. \(^{482}\)

Duntov’s solutions include a greater commitment to Yiddish language, the establishment of youth branches, and the founding of local chapters of the Jewish Socialist Verband (Yidisher Sotsialistisher Farband)—the last of which is not echoed elsewhere in the journal. His warnings do resonate with words of other contributors, though, who also assert a common radical past as they call for continued action.

**The Impulse for Preservation**

Whereas the 1949 journal oscillates between bleak and hopeful impressions of the South’s Yiddish and socialist futures—framing its historical content alternately as an urgent response to aging membership and organizational decline and as a justification and inspiration for ongoing engagement—later histories and memoirs by Arbeter Ring members more consistently present themselves in terms of historical documentation. These texts acknowledge the transformation of Jewish communities (local, national or transnational) and the necessity of salvaging the historical memories of the immigrant generation. Freida Weiner, in a 1985 history of her involvement with the Arbeter Ring in Galveston and Houston, noted that she would soon turn ninety-seven years old and stated plainly that “it is time to write, because I am the last remaining member!” \(^{483}\) Through their various writings, Weiner, Mitchell Merlin and David

\(^{482}\) Ibid., 7. Ellipses in the original.

\(^{483}\) Freida Weiner, handwritten memoir (1985), 1.
Davis sought to preserve their memories of a Yiddish past that was becoming increasingly obscure to younger generations, and, in doing so, they revealed their own feelings about the changes they had witnessed.

The 1954 Atlanta edition of *In dorem land*, in contrast to earlier publications by the branch and district, emphasizes the need for documentation rather than offering historical narrative as a guide for present action. In the introduction to the historical essay that begins the journal, Mitchell Merlin notes the temptation to write “songs of praise” and “marvel at the past,” but cautions against a triumphalist tone. Instead, the article “needs to serve the future historian as material, when he will research the life and strivings of the immigrant generation … in a distant capital in the southern states.” At the end of his essay, Merlin looks forward to writing an expanded version of Atlanta’s Arbeter Ring history on the occasion of the branch’s fiftieth anniversary and once again anticipates a future audience:

I imagine that I will be an old man by then. In my fantasies, I see young people deeply interested in our past, that beg us to tell about our lives and strivings … about our struggle for a world of peace and justice, light and love among all peoples, all over the world. I hope to tell them all of this, to inspire them to revere the ideals that are so dear and holy to us.

With these passages, Merlin frames his history in terms of its future, rather than present, significance. At the time, Atlanta had an English-speaking branch, organized in 1951, but there was little prospect for growth at that time. Members had hoped that Yiddish-speaking refugees

---


would bolster the Arbeter Ring’s numbers in Atlanta following World War II, but the group attracted few, if any, of the new arrivals.486

In the ensuing years, Merlin and others continued to record personal experiences and family histories. These writings reflect complicated emotional responses to the major changes in Jewish life that took place over the course of authors’ lifetimes. In 1967 Mitchell Merlin composed a family history, in Yiddish, which notes that he and his brother Dave are the last of their eight siblings and laments that the newest generations of the family do not know about their predecessors: “from the eight of our generation most have gone to their eternal rest. The children and the children’s children do not know who they are and how they came to America. They are here and that is enough.”487 Nevertheless, Merlin expresses satisfaction at the opportunities the family has been afforded in the “new and free” United States.488 In his 1974 memoir, David Davis at one point emphasizes the nearly complete disappearance of the Yiddish culture that blossomed in Atlanta in the 1910s and 1920s, attributing it to the inevitable succession of generations.489 In a later chapter, although Davis acknowledges the emergence of so-called “checkbook Judaism,” he celebrates the growth and cohesion of the Atlanta Jewish community, especially the prominence of East European Jews and their descendants.490


487 Merlin, “Merlin Family in America.”

488 Ibid.

489 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 186-188.

490 Davis, In gang fun di yorn, 221-224. The term “checkbook Judaism” had been used to criticize the centrality of fund-raising to American Jewish life since at least the 1960s. Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “‘Checkbook Judaism’ Assailed at Discussion on Jewish Survival in U.S.,”
Freida Weiner’s attempts to collect, record and transmit her experiences, as well as Yiddish and Arbeter Ring history, also reflect an awareness that such knowledge would soon pass from living memory. When Freida died in 1990 at the age of 102, she had participated in at least two oral history interviews, created recordings of herself reading in Yiddish and speaking at public events, and written several autobiographical essays about her upbringing in Ukraine and her Arbeter Ring activities in the United States. She marked these autobiographical materials, as well as a collection of correspondence, photographs, press clippings and ephemera, for donation to the YIVO archives.491

The repeated attempts to preserve her own memories and to gather together related documents indicates that the creation of a historical record was an ongoing concern for Freida in the last decades of her life. At the conclusion of a 1988 essay in which she recounts her experiences during the 1905 Kiev Pogrom, she wrote,

none of my family can read or write Yiddish. As a matter of fact, some of my family is no longer even Jewish. Would they, or could they, understand Jewish struggles and Jewish suffering … the glorious history of our sages and our ideals for social justice? Would my 8 grandchildren, four great-grandchildren really know the truths of my life … what I lived through … and will they work to assure that nothing like that can ever happen again? As I near the century mark of my life, I can only hope so—for them, for their fellow citizens—and for all posterity!492

The passage centers Yiddish literacy as a key tool for understanding the Jewish past, makes a claim for continuity between Jewish religious tradition (“our sages”) and modern Jewish politics


(“social justice”), and proposes an understanding of “Jewish struggles and Jewish suffering” as a catalyst for pursuing justice in the present and future. Although this quotation and her other historical efforts demonstrate her ongoing dedication to progressive politics and Yiddish language and culture, she was not bitter about the decline of Yiddish, changes in Jewish culture or the intermarriage of her own descendants. Susan Ganc, who studied Yiddish with Freida in Houston and became her protégée during the 1980s, described Freida as ideologically flexible and “open to life as it changed.”

The preceding examples show that, despite some ambivalence, aging Arbeter Ring members accepted that socialist activism and secular Yiddish culture could no longer form the basis for Jewish organizational life in the South. Nevertheless, even as Merlin, Davis and Weiner framed their historical and memoiristic writings as efforts to preserve their experiences for future readers, they continued to write primarily in Yiddish. The persistence of written Yiddish, in quotidian correspondence as well as published memoirs, demonstrates, as Jeffrey Shandler and others have observed, that World War II and Nazi genocide did not precipitate a sudden end for Yiddish as a vernacular or literary language, but that Yiddish public spheres sustained lively discourses for decades, despite declining numbers of readers and writers. Davis’s 1974 memoir had a large potential readership, then, although those readers were unlikely to include his grandchildren or great-grandchildren. The decision to write in Yiddish may have resulted from an ideological commitment to Yiddish; it may have served a tactical purpose as a lure for later

---

493 Susan Ganc, oral history interview by Josh Parshall, 21 May 2012, Institute of Southern Jewish Life Oral History Program.

494 Anita Norich, Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 5, 119-121; Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, especially 31-33.
generations to learn the language. Perhaps the authors felt that it would be inappropriate to write about a vanished Yiddish world in another language or that English would prove insufficient to the task. Maybe their choices stemmed merely from the fact that Yiddish was the language in which they were most literate. In any case, Yiddish remained the language in which Davis, Weiner, Merlin and others recalled their upbringings in Europe and their lives in the South.

From the perspective of 2017, the commemorative texts written by southern Arbeter Ring members chart a journey. The 1933 authors stand at the top of a hill, having completed an arduous climb marked by external and internal struggles. The path ahead appears to be rugged but navigable, and they catch glimpses of greater and more glorious peaks in the distance. They recall their triumphs and prepare for the climbs to come. What they produce is neither a religious festival or song of praise nor a day of fasting or penitential prayer, but a journal of regional and local histories. In 1949, sixteen years later, it is clear that the path slopes down, and a fog obscures the view. But for how long, how far down, and into what new environments? They can only guess. They gather their memories, individual and collective, into stories, according to the forms available to them, and carry on.

As decades pass, the travelers’ numbers dwindle. Now they craft their tales, not for the inspiration of their peers or children, but for a future audience they can only imagine, who may or may not cross this path in years to come. They do so, for the most part, in the language most familiar to them, but they mark the texts clearly as something to be saved and one day passed on. Dave Davis finds an Israeli publisher for a 240-page Yiddish-language memoir four years before his death. Freida Weiner, nearing her one-hundredth birthday, scrawls instructions on the inside
cover of a three-ring binder: “this book contains part of my life work and … should be sent to Yiddish Scientific Institute.” She makes sure to include the address.

Over more than fifty years, southern Arbeter Ring members composed commemorative texts—memoirs and historical essays that claim a place for the organization within local Jewish life, within the memory-saturated landscape of the South and within transnational Jewish networks. These texts demonstrate that Arbeter Ring members invoked and cultivated collective memories in order to establish and maintain Jewish-left politics and secular Yiddish culture in new locations and under new circumstances, first as they sought to mobilize themselves toward ongoing activism and, later, as the decline of the organization and disappearance of its founding generation compelled remaining members to salvage an increasingly obscure history. This dissertation has attempted to recover and reshape that history, as well as to address the circumstances in and forms through which branches and members attempted to archive their own experiences. The remaining task will be to consider how these stories have fallen out of local and regional memory and ask what difference it might make to call the Arbeter Ring past into the southern present.
CHAPTER 5: REMEMBERING YIDDISH IN THE SOUTH

On May 1, 1969, the Atlanta Workmen’s Circle, together with the local Jewish Labor Committee and the AFL-CIO, held the first Organized Labor and Workmen’s Circle Annual Awards Banquet at the Sheraton-Biltmore Hotel in Midtown Atlanta. The ceremonies included an invocation by Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., an address by the president of the Seafarer’s International Union of North America, and greetings from the vice-mayor, the Arbeter Ring Southern District chairman and labor and Civil Rights leaders. The awards banquet originated with local Arbeter Ring members’ desire to recognize Joe Jacobs’ contributions to the organization as well as his labor activism in the South. At the event, Jacobs received the “first annual labor award” for his role as an “advocate, counsellor, comrade and friend of workers throughout his southland.”

In addition to honoring Joe Jacobs and celebrating the local labor movement, the event helped to raise money for the development of the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University, which became a significant repository for Arbeter Ring records from Atlanta and the Southern District.

---


The founding of the Organized Labor and Workmen’s Circle Awards Banquet demonstrated the local Arbeter Ring’s persistence as well as the changes that the group had experienced in the postwar era and its tenuous future in Atlanta and the South. By the mid-1970s the Atlanta Arbeter Ring consisted of one, rather than three, branches, and its activities had slowed somewhat. The original Branch 207 and women’s branch 207B dissolved sometime around the establishment of the awards banquet, and remaining members of the immigrant generation joined English-speaking Branch 1015, which had been founded in 1951 by the adult children of early Atlanta members. The group maintained a membership of approximately one hundred individuals through the end of the 1970s, however, and the annual banquet, which drew hundreds of participants from the Atlanta labor movement, asserted the Arbeter Ring’s continued presence in the city.

The 1969 awards banquet also reflected the Arbeter Ring’s rightward trajectory as it became enmeshed in the anti-communist politics of Cold War liberalism. Both the Arbeter Ring and the AFL-CIO supported the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. In the early 1960s, the local branch participated in the “People to People Friendship Program,” which organized collection drives for books and sports equipment to be distributed in foreign countries.

---


498 1979 membership list for Branch 1015, Joseph Jacobs Papers; Merlin, “45 years of arbeter ring in atlanta,” 13.

499 1979 membership list for Branch 1015, Joseph Jacobs Papers.

The fortunes of southern branches varied greatly in the postwar era. South Florida branches in Miami and Miami Beach had experienced rapid growth in the 1930s and 1940s due to an influx of northern Jews. Local branches continued to reap the benefits of southward migrations for decades, and, by the end of the 1970s, Arbeter Ring activity in Miami and Miami Beach dwarfed the rest of the South. The Waco branch, which was never large, struggled along with an aging membership until at least the early 1970s. In a 1970 letter to Freida Weiner, longtime branch leader Phillip Stupack lamented the sad state of the group and referred to its recent hosting of a district-organized concert as “a moral success but a financial failure.”\footnote{Phillip Stupack to Freida Weiner, Aug. 12, 1970, Freida Weiner Correspondence, Texas/Southern District Records, Workmen’s Circle Records, YIVO.}
same concert tour also stopped in Dallas, where the first and formerly largest Texas branch had dwindled to six members and no longer held meetings. The Dallas Farband made arrangements for the event instead. In Memphis, Louis “Red” Kramer—the son of early Atlanta members Max and Celia Kramer—helped Branch 312 survive into the 1980s, but his death in 1986 left the branch with no one to manage its affairs.

Members of the Nashville branch realized in the early 1970s that their group was dwindling and created a plan for the liquidation and distribution of its assets, as well as preserving its history and memory. In 1979, when the membership dropped below eight members, they sold their meeting house at 115 32nd Avenue and sent the proceeds to the national office with directions for distributing it among several Jewish organizations. The remainder of their bank balance went to the Southern District with similar instructions. Around the same time, Rose Keeper saved a 1960s minute book from women’s branch 530 B in Houston and a set of programs from local conferences and branch events, and had them delivered to Joe Jacobs for inclusion in his collection in the new Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State.

---


504 An obituary for Lewis Kramer and correspondence relating to the fate of the Memphis branch are available in the Joseph Jacobs papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University.

505 Leah Kovner Shymlock, handwritten history of Nashville Workmen’s Circle, Annette Levy Ratkin Jewish Community Archives, Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee.

506 Workmen’s Circle branch minutes, Annette Levy Ratkin Jewish Community Archives, Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee.

507 Joseph Jacobs Papers.
By the 1990s, the early decades of southern Arbeter Ring activity had nearly disappeared from living memory, and the American-born children of early members, many born in the 1910s, had begun to enter old age. As the number of individuals with personal knowledge of southern branches declined, collective memory of local branches also faded. Within some families, members’ present-day descendants are aware of their grandparents’ or great-grandparents’ interest in Yiddish culture or commitment to socialist politics, but the details are often vague. Among contemporary Jewish communities in southern cities, not to mention the broader population, there are few visible signs of the Arbeter Ring’s former presence and no public memorials or regular commemorations.

Where physical signs of Arbeter Ring activity in the South persist, they do not figure prominently in local Jewish communities’ historical consciousness. In Savannah, Branch 383 operated a lending circle for several decades before establishing the Workmen’s Circle Credit Union (WCCU) in 1950. The credit union, which does not offer checking or debit services, continues to operate out of a small suite in a modest office building in Southside Savannah. While the WCCU is the only active successor organization of a southern branch, it hardly serves as a repository of Arbeter Ring history. The credit union’s website offers this account of its origins: “Workmen’s Circle began in the early 1900’s when a group of Jewish businessmen decided to form a financial organization to assist Jewish immigrants with their financial needs.” By defining the Arbeter Ring solely as a mutual aid organization and identifying its

---

508 Rose Keeper, Freida Weiner and Harry Scheinberg were among the few European-born members who survived into the early 1990s.


510 Workmen’s Circle Credit Union, “About Us.”
founders primarily as “businessmen,” this history obscures the political and cultural features that distinguished it from other Jewish groups, including other, older fraternal and mutual aid societies.\footnote{Savannah’s Hebrah Gemiluth Hesed Society, founded around 1888, already provided similar benefits as the Arbeter Ring. See \textit{American Jewish Yearbook} Vol. 1 (1899-1900), 124: http://www.ajarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1899_1900_5_LocalOrgs.pdf; and the finding aid for “Hebrah Gemiluth Hesed (H.G.H.) Society Records,” Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta: http://www.thebreman.org/Research/Cuba-Family-Archives/Finding-Aids/ID/710/Mss-340-Hebrah-Gemiluth-Hesed-HGH-Society-Records.}

The “businessmen” label also conflates the founders’ eventual successes with the reality of their early years in America. Harry Applebaum, among the credit union’s charter members, even specified in his 1949 history of the branch that none of the original members owned their own businesses when the branch was founded.\footnote{Workmen’s Circle Credit Union, “About Us;” Harry Applebaum, “Arbeter ring branch 383 savannah ga.,” 92.}

Furthermore, as Applebaum’s role in 1919 as the secretary of a Socialist Party local attests, some—if not all—of the credit union’s founders were or had been socialists.\footnote{United States Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, \textit{Bolshevik Propaganda: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary} (Washington, D.C.: 1919), 1096, https://archive.org/details/cu31924030480051; on William Scheer and other Arbeter Ring members, see Gertrude Scheer Barr, interview.}

Whereas the WCCU website diminishes the Arbeter Ring’s history through omission, other physical markers of the group’s southern past have become marginal by virtue of their locations in relation to suburbanized Jewish communities.\footnote{The WCCU history is not the only instance in which descendants or others minimize the Arbeter Ring’s politics: also see Rachel Saltzman, “Shalom Y’all” \textit{Southern Exposure} 11, no. 5 (September/October 1983), 32-33; Leonard Kantziper, interview.} The Nashville branch’s original building at 521 Fifth Avenue South, which it owned from 1927 until 1952, still stands in the southern end of the city’s downtown. New owners renovated the building in 2011 and, with
encouragement from preservationists and local Jewish historians, kept the concrete “Arbeter Ring/Workmen’s Circle” sign that crowns the second story.\footnote{515} Although the building’s renovation received attention from local media, its downtown location places it outside the central orbit of Nashville’s Jewish institutions, which have moved progressively to the southwest. Similarly, when the Atlanta Arbeter Ring began burying members in Greenwood Cemetery in the 1910s, the cemetery sat on the southwest edge of the city, just a few miles from the early twentieth-century centers of Jewish immigrant life. The Arbeter Ring section contains over one-hundred-fifty graves and features a tall, stone archway, built in 1936. From the 1920s on, however, Jewish life shifted to the northeast and, eventually, beyond the city limits altogether. Currently, the twenty-five-mile drive from Greenwood Cemetery to the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, located in the northern suburb of Dunwoody, takes between forty minutes and an hour, depending on traffic.\footnote{516}

\footnote{515} Workmen’s Circle Records, Annette Levy Ratkin Jewish Community Archives, Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee.

\footnote{516} Hertzberg, \textit{Strangers within the Gate City}, 220-221; traffic information from Google Maps.
As the suburbanization of mid-century southern cities pulled Jewish life out of city
centers, highway construction, urban renewal and redevelopment transformed the former
landscapes of Jewish immigrant culture. When the Houston branch revived its shule for a brief
period in the mid-1950s, the group still conducted some events at its downtown lyceum building
but held classes in borrowed space at the Jewish Community Center in order to accommodate second-generation members who had migrated out of the old Jewish neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{517} The lyceum, formerly at 1910 Bell Ave., stood on a block that was razed in the late 1950s for the construction of the Southwest Freeway, which connected suburbs such as Bellaire and Sharpstown to downtown Houston.\textsuperscript{518} In Atlanta, the white middle and upper classes moved northward beginning in the 1920s, and the southside neighborhoods near the Atlanta lyceum transformed into black and working-class enclaves. Following years of disinvestment, the area was redeveloped in the 1960s for the construction of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, which attracted professional baseball and football teams to the city. The lyceum’s former location now sits a block south of Turner Field, constructed as part of the redevelopment that accompanied the 1996 Summer Olympics and the home of the Atlanta Braves from 1997 through 2016.\textsuperscript{519} In these and other cities, white flight, neglect of working class and minority neighborhoods and repeated efforts at renewal have erased, to a large degree, the physical sites where Arbeter Ring members and other Jewish immigrants built new lives, a circumstance that further impedes their historical visibility in the present.

\textsuperscript{517} Paul Keeper, interview.


A Revised History

The story of the Arbeter Ring in the South adds a new layer of detail to twentieth-century southern Jewish history, even as it points to the need for further research. The development of Jewish-socialist and pro-Yiddish organizations in the South calls attention to the circulation of Jewish-left ideologies in the region, recasts southern cities as active nodes in transnational Jewish networks, complicates overarching narratives of acculturation and class mobility and introduces precursors to Jewish responses to the “classical” civil rights movement. None of these observations overturns the major features of southern Jewish historiography, but they do offer points of clarification and opportunities to ask new questions.

Southern Jewish historians correctly emphasize tensions between elite, Reform Jewish communities in New South cities and the East European Jews who began to arrive in large numbers around 1890. In an era of increasing xenophobia and hardening racism, established Jews feared that the influx of Jewish immigrants would draw unwanted attention and increase public perceptions of Jewish difference. Many of the newcomers balked at the level of acculturation displayed by elite Jewish families and bristled at the Reform communities’ paternalistic attitudes. Prior histories frame the gaps between the predominant factions in southern Jewish communities as matters of religious practice, acculturation and class position. However, the activities of the southern Arbeter Ring, beginning with the founding of the Dallas and Atlanta branches in 1908, introduce political ideology to that equation, as some East European Jews sought to perpetuate aspects of secular Yiddish culture in keeping with Diaspora nationalist beliefs.

See Ferris, Matzoh Ball Gumbo, 143-144; Light, That Pride of Race and Character; Goldstein, “Now Is the Time,” 139-146.
The presence of Diaspora nationalist and Jewish socialist politics in southern cities also re-orient the Jewish South toward transnational Jewish movements. Scholars of southern Jewish history have, understandably, tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of Jewish life in the South or discussed developments in southern Jewish history in terms of national trends. 521 Southern Arbeter Ring history, like other underexplored aspects of the Jewish South, points to the ways that southern Jews actively engaged with Jewish events taking place well outside their local and regional vicinities. The splintering of southern Arbeter Ring branches over the issue of global communism in the 1920s, to give just one example, suggests that scholars of southern Jewish history must integrate their local accounts with analysis of networks that reach beyond the boundaries of region and nation.

By the late 1940s, class mobility had changed the profile and standing of southern Jewish communities, and outward migration to the suburbs was well underway.522 The process, however, did not proceed smoothly for all southern Jews, nor did it transpire without any ambivalence. One of the Bell brothers of Houston, Nathan, joined the pro-communist “left” of the Arbeter Ring in the 1920s and, after suffering financial setbacks in the early years of the Depression, relocated his family to Moscow in 1931 with the hope of living in a socialist utopia.523 Although Morris Jacob’s children did well for themselves, he never built a lasting business for himself. Joe Jacobs recalled him as a “restless person” who moved often and “never

521 Marcie Cohen Ferris, for example, wrote in Matzoh Ball Gumbo that “the Old South myth and the culture of segregation defined every aspect of Jewish life in Atlanta” (145). Arbeter Ring history, by contrast, demonstrates how immigrants created spaces in which they were insulated, at least temporarily, from aspects of southern culture and imagined themselves instead as participants in global Jewish movements.

522 Ferris, Matzoh Ball Gumbo, 144.

wanted to be rich, I think.” Various exceptions to the dominant trend of upward mobility, Arbeter Ring history highlights the trade-offs that came with acculturation and economic success, especially as the founding generation’s Yiddish language and culture played an increasingly marginal role in American Jewish life.

By the late 1960s, when the Atlanta Arbeter Ring and its partner organizations inaugurated the annual awards banquet, more than a decade of black civil rights activism had forced southern Jews to contend with problems of race and racism to a greater degree than ever before. Southern Jewish historians rightly focus on the “classical” civil rights era—spanning from the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 until shortly after the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—as a period in which Jews in the region faced mounting pressure from northern Jews and local black populations to support civil rights and social equality, even as they became targets of white supremacist extremists for their suspected links to “outside agitators” and perceived support for the cause of racial justice. At the same time, southern Jews, including rabbis, business and civic leaders and their less prominent co-religionists, differed widely in their support for, responses to and participation in the attempts to restructure Jim Crow society. Just as histories of 1930s labor-civil rights activism have demonstrated important continuities between the “classical” movement and earlier struggles, southern Arbeter Ring history highlights


some of the ways that everyday Jews wrestled with southern racial politics in the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, the circulation of Jewish-socialist ideologies in the early twentieth-century South and the movement of a number of early Arbeter Ring members and their descendants into the Jewish mainstream point to an under-examined tributary for the political beliefs that characterized Jewish progressives’ cautious support for black civil rights in southern cities during the 1960s.

The history presented here also points to the need for new research beyond the scope of this study. First, the Arbeter Ring was not the only Jewish-left fraternal organization in the South, and a more thorough examination of Farband and IWO/JPFO activities may yield important information about Jewish politics in the region. Second, the South is not the only region in which Jewish migrants developed outposts of Arbeter Ring and other Jewish-left groups. It may be productive to develop comparative studies that consider parallel activities in the Midwest or other regions. As the current account adds new material to the growing body of southern Jewish historiography, it may also provide a starting point for the development of these and other projects.

Recovering Memory

In addition to reassessing Jewish history in the twentieth-century South, I pursued my inquiry into the southern Arbeter Ring with the goal of recovering collective memories of the organization’s activities in the region. The process of conducting archival research, recording oral history interviews, delivering lectures and conference papers and, eventually, publishing this history, has occasioned and will continue to spur, I hope, new conversations about Jewish life and radical politics in America and, more specifically, the South. The writing of this history has been, in itself, a commemorative act, one that highlights the historical roots of contemporary
struggles for social and economic justice, offers lessons on the difficulty of sustaining solidarity and seeks to understand the legacies of the Yiddish-left as tools for ongoing Jewish activism.

For Yosef Yerushalmi, “memory and modern historiography stand … in radically different relations to the past.” He marks a sharp divide between ritualized acts of remembering embedded in traditional Jewish worship and the empirical methods of the professional historian. He mourns the commonality and collaboration of those older practices, their ability to call people together in communal experience and in identification with the past. I sympathize. Martyrology, penitential prayer and religious festivals are not, however, the only means through which a group of people can remember together, as evidenced by change and flux even within traditional memorial practices. I would revise his statement to include historiography among the other modes of memory, as one set of practices through which to know the past and make it useful in the present. Historiography is done differently than other types of remembering, of course, and it does different things; it enrolls different texts, constructs particular types of facts, and—often—claims a unique authority (and universality) for itself over other memory. Through this project I have aimed to shape a durable history out of well-constructed facts, respect the voices of my living and/or archived interlocutors and think carefully about processes of collective memory in order to make this account of the past “usable” in the present. Now, at the close of this history, I want to discuss three of its potential uses.

---

526 Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 94.

527 Ibid., 93-95. It might or might not be fruitful to contrast the communal practices of mourning in Yizkor and Kaddish, both of which require ten qualified worshippers, with the often solitary practices of writing and reading history.

First, the story of the Arbeter Ring Southern District adds to a body of literature on southern labor history and the “long civil rights movement” that runs counter to popular representations of the South by highlighting recurring struggles by working class, black and otherwise marginalized southerners to challenge the region’s rigid social and economic hierarchies. The South is and has been a stronghold of political and cultural conservatism, and this reality leads too often to a monolithic view of the southern past that figures the ongoing dominance of white, Christian ethno-nationalism—covert or overt—as natural and inevitable. That is not the only southern story, however, and cultivating a broader historical awareness of a more complex ethnic South and the wide variety of local and regional struggles for justice, equality and security may prove necessary to the collective reimagining of the region’s future.\textsuperscript{529} This history, that is, might allow contemporary groups to point to the Arbeter Ring as a kind of precursor and stake new claims on the rightful place of social justice movements in the South.

Second, and perhaps in contrast to this history’s potential to legitimize present-day southern activism, the southern Arbeter Ring’s successes, failures and ultimate decline raise thorny questions about solidarity and allyship. If, as I argue, accountability to communist-influenced networks enabled a higher degree of cross-racial activism among Jewish IWO branches than their Arbeter Ring counterparts, then current activist groups must carefully consider how their links to other organizations and institutions limit, facilitate, force or otherwise

\textsuperscript{529} See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” 1233-1235. Hall notes that the development of “the master narrative” of the civil rights movement dovetailed with rightward shifts in American politics in the late twentieth century. Especially by isolating the “classical” (1954-1965) era of the movement from preceding struggles for social and economic justice and the subsequent proliferation of mass movements in the late 1960s and 1970s, the dominant narrative of civil rights history “simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement,” preparing it for popular consumption while preventing it “from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time.” (1234).
inflect their work. Thinking through southern Arbeter Ring members’ inconsistent support for black causes—whether due to physical and economic risks, internalized perceptions of black inferiority, a growing “possessive investment” in structures of white supremacy or their unwillingness to make common cause with Communists—provides an opportunity to reflect on the difficulties and precariousness of solidarity, especially across lines of race and class.⁵³⁰

Third, I am interested in the ways that varying formulations of Jewishness can and do serve as resources for dissent in American society. From the 1890s to the 1920s, mass migration, industrial labor, anti-Tsarist sentiments, secular Yiddish culture and a lack of access to mainstream political power created a fertile environment for Jewish socialist and labor movements in the United States. Even as the Jewish left declined, American Jews and Jewish-descended Americans continued to play significant roles in a variety of radical and social justice movements, and the majority of American Jews remain firmly liberal, especially in comparison to other white Americans.⁵³¹ Still, progressive and radical Jewish movements criticize mainstream Jewish organizations as overly moderate and push them to confront issues of racial and economic justice more directly, and the history of the Yiddish left informs some of their

---


critiques. Although recent moves to center experiences of Mizrahi Jews and Jews of color within the Jewish left demonstrate that secular Yiddishkayt will not, and should not, become the dominant strain of left-wing Jewish identification, this dissertation contributes to a wide ranging cultural and political project that seeks to adapt aspects of Yiddishkayt and preserve Yiddish history as precedents for contemporary Jewish-left identities.\textsuperscript{532}

The founding of the Workmen’s Circle-Organized Labor Annual Awards Banquet was not the only significant Arbeter Ring event to take place in Atlanta in 1969. On July 28, Mitchell Merlin—a mainstay of the Arbeter Ring Southern District and the most cited author in this dissertation—died at the age of 83. Merlin, who grew up in Dubrovna (now Dubroŭna, Belorus), emigrated from the Russian Empire around 1904, following his brother Beryl to London, New York and then Atlanta. He worked as a peddler and then a grocer. After World War II he closed his shop and worked for an insurance agency.\textsuperscript{533} In approximately 1914, he married Bessie Yampolsky, the daughter of Shmuel Yampolsky and cousin of David Davis, and the couple raised two daughters, Edith (1915) and Marjorie (1920). Four days after Merlin’s death,


Atlanta’s weekly Jewish newspaper, *The Southern Israelite*, memorialized him as a leader in the Arbeter Ring and the general Jewish community. Ed Kahn, the longtime director of the Atlanta Federation of Jewish Social Services wrote that “M. J. Merlin’s life was dominated by a universal humanitarianism, but he felt that he could best express it through activities within the Jewish community” and “his deep tolerance for Jewish diversity made it possible for him to be consistent and yet develop an ability to work with all segments of the population.”

Merlin’s biography, from his radicalization as a young man in Tsarist Russia to his eventual acceptance of the State of Israel and his request for a “traditional Jewish funeral”—though in the Greenwood Cemetery’s Arbeter Ring section—epitomizes the origins and trajectory of the southern Arbeter Ring, a history which itself encapsulates significant aspects of twentieth-century Jewish history in the region, the nation and beyond. Although Mitchell Merlin’s own descendants have not lived in Atlanta for some time, the extended Merlin family continues to hold reunions there regularly. The ongoing presence of the Merlins and other former Arbeter Ring families in southern cities such as Atlanta demonstrates the group’s significance and even centrality in local Jewish histories, as well as the ways that the Arbeter Ring past, for all its obscurity, is not as distant as we might assume.

---


535 “M. J.’ Merlin Dies at 83; Cultural, Intellectual Leader,” 5.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Collections
Atlanta, Georgia
   Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University
   Georgia Government Documentation Project
   Joseph Jacobs Papers, Southern Labor Archives
   Organized Labor Awards Banquet Committee Records, Southern Labor Archives
   William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Cuba Family Archives
   Helen Goldman Alperin Family Papers
   Atlanta Jewish Federation Records
   Benita Goldin Papers
   Merlin Family Papers
   Savannah Jewish Archives Oral History Collection

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
   Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library,
      University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
   Southern Oral History Project
   Southern Folklore Collection, Wilson Library,
      University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Cincinnati, Ohio
   American Jewish Archives
      Workmen’s Circle Nearprint
      Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich Collection

Dallas, Texas
   Dallas Jewish Historical Society

Houston, Texas
   Personal collection of Henrietta Bell
   Houston Public Library Digital Archives

Jackson, Mississippi
   Institute of Southern Jewish Life Oral History Program

Nashville, Tennessee
   Annette Levy Ratkin Archives, Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee

New York, New York
   Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University
      Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers
      Jewish Labor Committee Records
      Socialist Party Ephemera
   YIVO, Center for Jewish History
      Abe Cahan Papers
      Joseph Duntow [Duntov] Papers
      Max Meisel Papers
      Shmuel Niger Papers
      Freida Weiner Papers [unprocessed]
      Workmen’s Circle Records


———. The socialist movement in the southern states.” In Duntov, *In dorem land*, 103-104.


Bell, Boris. “A Brief History of Branch 530Y.” In Duntov, *In Southern States* (English section of *In dorem land*), 15-16.


*Class Struggle in Fraternal Organizations: Text of Declaration Adopted at Conference of Left Wing Progressive Branches of the Workmen’s Circle and Independent Workmen’s Circle, March 30, 1930*. Education Department Records, Workmen’s Circle Collection, YIVO Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York.


———. Introduction to Duntov, *In dorem land*.

———. Foreword to Duntov, *In dorem land*.

———. “YIVO.” In Duntov, *In dorem land*.


204


Merlin, Mitchell J. “The arbeter ring in the south.” In Duntov, *In dorem land, ___.

———. “Left and right in arbeter ring.” In Duntov, *In dorem land, ___.


———. “In Southern States: Historical Texts from the Arbeter Ring’s Southern District (English Translation from Yiddish),” Southern Jewish History, 17 (2014), 54.

Press, J. “Arbeter ring branch 495 in chattanooga.” In Duntov, In dorem land, 74-76.


Saltzman, Rachelle. “Shalom Y’all.” In Southern Exposure 11, no. 5, 28-26. September/October 1983. Southern Folklife Collection,


Scheinberg, Jacob. “Branch 312 of the arbeter ring in memphis, tennessee.” In Duntov, In dorem land, 86.


Stupack, Phillip. “Arbeter ring branch 242 in waco, texas.” In Duntov, In dorem land, 73.


Fertzik yor arbeter ring: A geshikhṭe in bilder [Forty years of workmen’s circle: a history in pictures]. New York: Natsyonaler eḳzekutiyṭ fun arbeter ring, 1940.


———. “East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South,” in Bauman, *Dixie Diaspora*, 110-113


