לקט

יִידישע שטודיעס הײַנט

Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Jiddistik Edition & Forschung Yiddish Editions & Research יִידיש אויסגאַבעס אוּן פֿאָרשונג

Der vorliegende Sammelband לקט eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

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Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
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Rebecca Margolis

Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Yiddish Theater in Montreal

A Canadian Response to Catastrophe

Introduction

What are the wider implications of Yiddish theater performance during and after the Holocaust in a bystander nation such as Canada? This study will examine Yiddish theater in Montreal as a Canadian response to catastrophe. It will do so by discussing wartime and post-war ventures to establish permanent, locally trained Yiddish theater troupes in the city, notably by two individuals: Chayele Grober (1894–1978) and Dora Wasserman (1919–2003). The study will examine the repertoire and rhetoric associated with each of these Yiddish community theater projects and the responses of each theater to the events that have since become known as the Holocaust. It posits that the two theater studios bracket a transitional period in Yiddish life within a Jewish immigrant center as it was shifting from an outpost to a hub of Yiddish cultural production on the international stage.

During and after the Holocaust, Jewish life in Montreal encompassed a strong Yiddish cultural component. By the early 1920s, the city had become home to over 50,000 Jews out of a total urban population of some 620,000. On the 1931 census, 99 percent of Jews in the province of Quebec – a vast majority of whom lived in the Montreal area – claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue. Most of Montreal's Jewish residents had immigrated to Canada within the previous two decades and maintained linguistic and cultural ties with the Old Country. A group of activists closely attuned to the European Jewish heartland as well as its other immigrant centers established a local infrastructure that reflected and refracted global trends in Yiddish culture. As such, Montreal was home to a spectrum of ideologies that promoted Yiddish culture – most notably the Workmen's Circle, the Bund, and the Poale Zion (which promoted both Yiddish and Hebrew) – through a wide variety of local organizations. With the province historically divided into two separate spheres – the politically and economically dominant and English-Protestant urban minority and a French-Catholic majority whose population remained largely agrarian – and the Jews marking Montreal's first sizable non-Christian group, the acculturation of

the mass Yiddish immigration ranged from incomplete to non-existent. This exclusion from the mainstream encouraged the creation and long-term maintenance of Jewish cultural life, notably in Yiddish.[1] By the 1920s, Montreal hosted a daily newspaper, a network of secular Zionist schools with Yiddish and Hebrew curricula, and a non-partisan יִידישע פּאָלקסביבליאָטעק (Jewish Public Library), as well as a sizable group of Yiddish writers whose primary forum for publication was specialized literary journals. Although Montreal remained a minor center of Yiddish culture, it evolved close connections to the larger hubs in Europe as well as nearby New York, and was very active in promoting trends in Yiddish politics and the arts locally. The city remained a major Jewish immigrant center and a vibrant hub of Yiddish cultural life well into the decades after the Holocaust.[2]

Until the eve of the Second World War, Canadian Yiddish theater consisted largely of imported productions and sporadic amateur performances organized through local cultural organizations. Even as the country's Yiddish center, Montreal was unable to sustain locally produced Yiddish theater until 1939. Instead, Yiddish theater there consisted almost entirely of local theater companies who imported talent from nearby New York City supplemented by visiting performances, and was largely dominated by popular fare. In addition to these offerings, there were sporadic performances by local community organizations such as the Workmen's Circle. While the 1930s marked the emergence of local dramatic societies of a more political orientation – טעאַליג (Theater League), associated with the Zionist Jewish National Workers' Alliance, and the militant אַרבעטער טעאַטער־גרופּע (Workers' Theater Group, or ARTEG) – they were short-lived.[3] Only when the local Yiddish milieu was bolstered by the arrival of refugees from Nazi Europe and, subsequently, displaced persons and other post-war arrivals from Europe, did the city begin to consistently produce theater that drew on local talent. The country's Yiddish theater came into its own with the arrival in Montreal of professionally trained European actors displaced by the events of the Second World War and Holocaust.

The founders of Montreal's two permanent Yiddish theaters were products of a new tradition of avant-garde Soviet Jewish theater. Both established studios in Montreal that trained local talent to produce high-caliber theater. In contrast to the wildly popular interwar phenomenon of touring Yiddish theater troupes, such as the Wilna Troupe (ווילנער טרופּע) and others, both Grober and Wasserman created theaters

1 See Robinson and Butovsky 1995.
2 See Robinson, Anctil and Butovsky 1990.
3 See Larrue 1996.

that were firmly rooted in Montreal: they relied on local resources, local talent and local audiences for support. While caused by the displacing effects of the war and its aftermath, which brought both women to Montreal, this rootedness rendered them an integral part of the local Yiddish cultural and theater scenes. Although both Grober and Wasserman emphasized the artistic dimension of their projects over any potential ideological aspects, their theaters came to form part of wider community discourse about the evolution of Yiddish culture during and after the Holocaust.

Chayele Grober, a seasoned actress who had established an international career as a performer of Yiddish and Hebrew songs, initially founded her Montreal Yiddish theater studio in response to circumstances beyond her control. Trained with the Moscow-based Hebrew-language Habima theater company, Grober left the troupe in 1928 to establish a solo program of dramatic interpretations of Yiddish and Hebrew folk songs, and spent the next four decades touring her shows internationally. During a visit to Montreal in that same year, she became acquainted with local Yiddish writer and activist H. M. Caiserman, who helped her to establish permanent residence in Canada and introduced her to the journalist Vladimir Grossman, who acted as her manager (and later became her husband) as she continued to perform internationally. When the war broke out in 1939, she found herself in Montreal, and, unable to tour Europe as planned, decided to found a local experimental theater. According to her memoirs, after several months of being in the city, she realized that she required a new project, and "all I knew was the stage." Although, in her estimation, Montreal was not a theater city, she undertook the project after proposing the idea to the Caisermans, who responded with enthusiasm and backed her in her efforts.[4] The יִידיש טעאַטער גרופּע (Yiddish Theatre Group) was formally established in March 1939 under Grober's direction and the auspices of the Jewish Public Library as a local experimental theater atelier. At the formal launch in the home of Montreal-born opera singer Pauline Donalda, Grober outlined her program for the group, with its studies based on the Stanislavski Method and dramatic techniques akin to those of the Moscow Art Theater.

During the three years of its existence, Grober's YTEG produced widely lauded original works that included montages, adaptations of classic Yiddish literary works, and original poetry penned by local writers. Despite being an amateur theater, the studio offered its young members rigorous and systematic training in song, dance, rhythmics,

4 Grober 1968: 103.

Yiddish Theater Group — אידיש טעאַטער גרופּע

From right to left

The lower row sitting: Doris Saltan, Rochele Vool.

Second row sitting: Helen Berliner, A. Finkelstein, I. Clement, Minnie Shapiro, M. Siniuk, Sydney Berg.

Standing row: Ina Tenenhouse, Morris Lifshitz, Freda Kunigis, Dudi Rabinovitch, and Feiga Solomon.

Not in the picture: Willie Thomas and Ben Shechter.

פון רעכטס צו לינקס:

אונטערשטע רייע זיצנדיק: דאָריס סאַלטאַן, רחל'ע וואָל.

צווייטע רייע זיצנדיק: העלען בערלינער, א. פינקעלשטיין, י. קלעמענט, מיני שאַפּירא, משה סיניוק, סידני בערג.

שטייענדיק: אינא טענענהויז, מאָריס ליפשיץ, פרידא קוניגיס, דודי ראַבינאָוויטש און פייגע סאָלאָמאָן.

פעלן: ווילי טאָמאַס און בן שעכטער.

PATRONIZE OUR ADVERTISERS

Yiddish Theatre Group cast, program for the January 1942 performance. Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal

and diction, with an emphasis on improvisation and the process of developing a repertoire. Members of the troupe worked collectively to adapt a literary work into a scene using song, speech, and movement. The studio would then intermittently present the products of these efforts to the general public. Grober collaborated with local writers, notably established Montreal Yiddish poet J. I. Segal (1896–1954), and productions included specially commissioned sets from local painter Alexander Bercovitch (1892–1951). The YTEG operated thanks to wide community support that encompassed Yiddish writers, artists, and cultural activists, and was hailed in the Yiddish press as the coming of age of Canadian Yiddish theater.

Dora Wasserman, a product of the Moscow Yiddish Art Theater (GOSET), spent the years of the Second World War performing in theater troupes in Kiev and Kazakhstan before arriving in Montreal in 1950 as a displaced person. Her studio emerged out of local community theater projects that she coordinated, including small performances at local institutions or Yiddish children's theater workshops held in her home. The principal of a local secular Jewish school invited her to direct student theater productions and helped her to establish the Jewish People's Schools Graduates' Society as a community amateur group in 1957, and the Society staged ambitious productions in the auditorium of the school. When the troupe expanded, Wasserman transformed the Jewish People's Schools Graduates' Society into a repertory theater in 1960. Wasserman incorporated the studio as the Yiddish Theatre Group in 1967 and it joined the city's newly created Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts, known today as the Segal Centre for Performing Arts.

Still active today, the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre has produced a wide array of productions, from classic works of Yiddish theater to specially commissioned Yiddish translations of English- and French-language plays. Until she left the theater in 1998 due to failing health, these 70+ productions included adaptations of works by Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Chaim Grade, and others, alongside works by local authors such as M. M. Shaffir and Shimshen Dunsky. As one of the world's few permanent Yiddish theaters, it has gained an international reputation and continues to perform annually in Montreal as well as abroad. Despite the fact that audiences are increasingly composed of non-Yiddish speakers, it has been characterized as a stronghold of Yiddish culture.

Both Grober and Wasserman were directly affected by the catastrophe of the Holocaust, but their theaters ultimately offered very different responses. These variances underline the degree to which the war

years were a transitional period in Yiddish cultural life, even in a location far removed from Nazi Europe. During the existence of Grober's studio, Yiddish Montreal remained an outpost of a Yiddishland that was firmly entrenched in Europe; in Wasserman's time, with the decimation of the Yiddish heartland in Europe, Montreal became a major center of Yiddish culture that was revitalized by displaced European Yiddish activists and artists permanently transplanted to the city. The two theaters bridged the shift of Yiddish language from the realm of everyday communication to one of increasingly symbolic functions in the secular realm. Grober's theater existed during a period when the actors, supporters and audiences largely related to Yiddish as a vernacular. In 1941, over three-quarters of Canadian Jews identified Yiddish as their mother tongue on the Canadian census and Yiddish institutions were thriving despite the immigrant community's dominant trend of linguistic acculturation to English. In contrast, Wasserman's Yiddish theater in post-war Montreal evinces Jeffrey Shandler's concept of post-vernacular Yiddish, which argues that the culture has become increasingly performative in the post-Holocaust era, with the language taking on values not contingent on linguistic fluency; in response to these conditions, music and theater, which do not rely on an ability to speak or even understand a language, have expanded rapidly.[5]

The community aspect of Grober's and Wasserman's theaters also reflected the different dynamics surrounding the place of Yiddish culture during and after the Holocaust. Grober's theater was widely reocgnized as a major development in Montreal's Yiddish cultural life and supported as a significant artistic venture; however, this support was not enough to maintain the studio. Wasserman's theater has been characterized as a bastion of secular Yiddish culture in a context where Yiddish was facing decline. It has received extensive support that has buoyed it into the present day to form an integral part of Jewish theater in the city of Montreal.

Although Grober initially understood her sojourn in Montreal as temporary, and the studio as a project to occupy her until the end of the war when she could resume her international touring schedule, the local Yiddish community involved itself closely in her project. The rhetoric around Grober's YTEG theater hinged on the advent of homegrown, high-quality Yiddish theater and the maturation of the Canadian Yiddish cultural milieu rather than on issues of Yiddish linguistic or cultural continuity. Grober's theater marked a crystallization of ambitious Yiddish cultural ventures in the city. Community supporters

5 Shandler 2004.

formed an executive committee that raised funds and handled some of the logistical aspects of the project; at one point the YTEG had over 200 subscribers. Its inauguration and performances attracted the leaders of various Jewish organizations as well as Jewish members of parliament. The city's Yiddish daily, The קענעדער אַדלער (Canadian Jewish Eagle), whose editors and contributors had long advocated for Yiddish theater with high artistic merit, reported closely and enthusiastically on the development of the YTEG. The newspaper's editor, Israel Rabinovitch (1894–1964), a theater enthusiast and co-founder of the pioneering local הזמיר (The Nightingale) dramatic and musical group in 1914, who penned regular columns on local theater, wrote numerous articles in support of the YTEG. Further, the YTEG coordinated public events on Yiddish theater such as symposia and lectures.[6] According to Grober's memoirs, "the YTEG became an artistic hub around which the Jewish intellectual population gathered."[7]

In tandem with this broad community support, the YTEG was firmly situated within a wider matrix of Yiddish theater that was evolving simultaneously across the globe. The nexus of Montreal's Yiddish activity was nearby New York City, as well as major Yiddish cultural centers in Poland and the Soviet Union. During the existence of the YTEG studio, close connections with the Yiddish motherland in Europe had been interrupted during wartime, but by no means severed. With a transnational Yiddish culture expanding rapidly in the interwar period to develop literary artistic traditions to parallel other major European civilizations, the ultimate goal of the YTEG was to produce art on a par with the greatest expressions of Western theater in the majority language of the Jewish nation. The YTEG repertoire centered on *études* based in Yiddish literary works that addressed particular aspects of the Jewish historical experience such as immigration from Europe to America. With its moving tableaux or dramatizations of folksongs with universal themes such as dislocation, the YTEG repertoire remained challenging yet accessible to non-Yiddish speakers, as indicated by the positive reviews of its performances in the mainstream English-language press.

Ultimately it was the lack of wider community backing that forced the YTEG to close, despite the efforts of its supporters. In 1942, Yiddish Montreal remained an immigrant community in the process of Canadianizing. While Grober received support from various parts of the local community, the infrastructure to support a venture such as a permanent Yiddish art theater was not yet in place. The community was in a period of transition linguistically as well as culturally: as its

6 Margolis 2011.
7 Grober 1968: 104.

Yiddish activists attempted to create stability around Yiddish cultural ventures, they found themselves increasingly pushed to the margins of an acculturating Canadian Jewish mainstream. Grober's studio closed when she appealed to a representative of the main chapter of the Workmen's Circle in New York for funding and was informed that Yiddish theater needed to be self-supporting, a perspective that reflected an understanding of Yiddish theater as self-sustaining commercial fare. The vision that Grober and her local supporters held of a high-caliber, edifying, community-based Yiddish theater was not conducive to the popular view of Yiddish theater as entertainment for the masses.

Much changed in Yiddish Montreal between the demise of Grober's YTEG in 1942 and the late 1950s, when Wasserman's theater became active. The decreased number of Yiddish-speaking newcomers due to the tightening of immigration laws – notably during the period 1933–1948 – combined with ongoing linguistic integration resulted in a marked decrease in the language as Jewish *lingua franca* in Canada. The percentage of Canadian Jews who identified Yiddish as their mother tongue dropped from 77 percent in 1941 to 51 percent in 1951 and 32 percent in 1961. As the destination of some 15,000 Holocaust survivors (out of a total of some 35,000 in Canada), including renowned writers, actors and other cultural figures, Montreal became a hub of Yiddish cultural activity. However, the overall trend remained a decline of Yiddish as the core Jewish vernacular in Canada. Yiddish newspapers offer but one example of the shift. The קענעדער אַדלער continued daily publication until the early 1960s, but more and more of its traditional readership sought out English-language publications. While the newspaper continued to offer a wealth of diverse material related to the Holocaust, with linguistic integration, it diminished as a focal point of local Jewish cultural life and became less and less accessible as linguistic facility in Yiddish declined among subsequent generations of Montreal Jews. More broadly, while a host of Yiddish writers continued to publish poetry and prose in the language, translation came to play an increasing role in the dissemination of these works.[8] As the place of Yiddish shifted from communicative language to heritage language in the secular sphere, education and performance, notably community theater, marked two areas of growth in the post-Second World War era.

In the short period between Grober's and Wasserman's Yiddish theaters, the dynamics of Yiddish culture shifted. Both theaters were firmly entrenched community ventures, yet whereas Grober's theater

8 Margolis 2006.

was located within a discourse of cultural crystallization, Wasserman's was situated as part of a wider trope of cultural survival against massive losses.

Unlike Grober, who found herself stranded in Montreal for what she expected to be a finite period of time, Wasserman arrived from a ravaged post-war Jewish Europe seeking permanent roots in Montreal. By 1950, the decimation of European Yiddish civilization was no longer a question: Wasserman had experienced it firsthand. While, like Grober's, Wasserman's studio grew out of an artist's dream to create high theater, it soon gained the status of a beacon in a ravaged Yiddish world. Shloime Wiseman, the principal of the יידישע פֿאָלקשולע who invited Wasserman to establish her Jewish People's Schools Graduates' Society in the 1950s, was a strong advocate of Yiddish culture. Since the 1920s, Wiseman had cultivated mechanisms for his students to engage with Yiddish actively both inside and outside of the classroom through clubs, student publications, and performance.[9] With Yiddish on the decline, Wiseman understood Wasserman's project as a way of maintaining Yiddish as a living language among his graduates once they left the Yiddish-intensive atmosphere of the school. The project also involved longtime *shule* teachers Shimshen Dunsky and M. M. Shaffir, as well as post-Holocaust arrivals such as the poet Mordkhe Husid, who shared Wiseman's vision of the project as a means of safeguarding the continuity of Yiddish in Montreal.

An explicit rhetoric of Yiddish continuity manifested itself in conjunction with Wasserman's performances in the 1960s, a period which coincided with the end of commercial Yiddish theater in Montreal. During this period, Montreal's established Jewish community was creating infrastructure to support the venture of permanent, amateur theater in a language that was no longer its *lingua franca*. Community theater became widely identified as a viable means of keeping Yiddish alive, even as the community as a whole increasingly acculturated and anglicized. As part of a media interview concerning her 1962 production of Sholem Asch's אָנקל מאָזעס (Uncle Moses), Wasserman stated, "We are convinced that Yiddish is still very much a living, breathing language and a significant component of Jewish life."[10] While Wasserman emphasized Yiddish theater as a living art, her studio served to train generations of actors who were not necessarily fluent speakers of the language and also provided an increasingly rare opportunity for audiences to see Yiddish productions. Despite its characterization not only as a community institution, but as a "symbolic stronghold," with

9 Margolis 2011.
10 Cited in Larrue 1996: 117.

Wasserman as "the great defender of Yiddish culture,"[11] the theater has focussed on creating an innovative, fresh repertoire within an increasingly post-vernacular context. She opted not to rely on the beloved standards of the Yiddish stage, nor did her theater explicitly address themes of catastrophic loss. In the 1960s, Wasserman sought out a local pioneer of the French Canadian theater, Gratien Gélinas, for support, as well as other prominent individuals in the local English- and French-language theater milieus. She expressed a clear commitment to building bridges between cultures through theater. Among her productions were groundbreaking works of Yiddish theater including specially commissioned translations of plays such as French-Canadian playwright Michel Tremblay's *Les belles-sœurs*.[12] The repertoire Wasserman selected emphasized the malleability and vitality of Yiddish theater, which could encompass not only classics of the Yiddish stage but bold interpretations of works adapted from other cultures.

In the public eye, Wasserman's achievements hinged on her success as a director as well as her steadfast commitment to Yiddish culture. When she was invested into the prestigious Order of Canada (1993), she was identified as follows: "A creative producer and director, she has made an outstanding contribution to the performing arts in Canada and to the cultural heritage of the Canadian Jewish community. Founder of the Yiddish Theater of Montreal, she has staged many plays, including adaptations of Canadian works, in Yiddish, thereby helping to preserve a rich language and literature."[13] The discourse around her theater inevitably integrates the Holocaust. For example, the website of the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre's biography of Wasserman concludes with the line, "It was Dora Wasserman's vision, talent and determination that helped Yiddish theater rise from the ashes of the Holocaust and thrive again as a vibrant cultural force."[14]

What did it mean to create new expressions of Yiddish theater during and following the Second World War? Montreal was not the immediate destination of the Holocaust survivors who settled in the city. Rather, most spent several years as displaced persons in Europe waiting for papers that would allow them to start new lives abroad. Canada's immigration policy remained restrictive through 1948, and most of the

11 Ibid.

12 Margolis forthcoming.

13 The Governor General of Canada, It's an Honour, Dora Wasserman. (http://www.gg.ca/honour.aspx?id=3123&t=12&ln=Wasserman). Wasserman was also invested into the Order of Quebec (2003).

14 Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre 2011.

Jews who entered the country after World War II did so beginning in the late 1940s.[15]

Those who sojourned in displaced-persons camps, like Wasserman, were exposed to a flurry of Yiddish cultural activity. In Germany, which housed a large number of the Jewish displaced persons camps, a vast majority of the some 150 Jewish newspapers that were published between 1945 and 1950 appeared in Yiddish. These filled a wide need among displaced persons for reading material, offered a forum for new literature, and also engaged with issues of cultural continuity.[16] Yiddish performance played an important role in post-war Jewish culture. In displaced persons camps, a variety of music was performed, including a wide-ranging Yiddish repertoire. Guest performances by renowned Yiddish singers raised morale in the camps, while the displaced persons created their own original songs that addressed their experiences of loss and displacement, and allowed them to mourn, memorialize, and articulate defiance in the aftermath of the Holocaust as well as longing for a new home.[17] Yiddish theater productions, which were extremely popular in displaced persons camps, gave the survivors – both performers and audiences – personal agency to articulate and form their collective memories of the Holocaust as well as actively shape their experiences of the past, present, and future. In addition to staging classics of the Yiddish theater, they depicted Jewish wartime suffering and resistance, and promoted Zionist themes.[18] Wasserman was among those who performed a Yiddish repertoire for displaced persons at a transit camp for Jewish refugees in Vienna.

In the transitional period of the immediate postwar era, Yiddish served as a transnational unifier and *lingua franca* among displaced persons, whom Miriam Isaacs identifies as "the last sizeable Yiddish-speaking community in Europe."[19] A number of survivors identified the public use of Yiddish not only with everyday communication but with Jewish cultural continuity; they understood writing and publishing in the language as a form of reclamation and an avenue to psychological healing,[20] while others romanticized it.[21] However, the transition away from Yiddish was underway even in the displaced persons camps: while publications in Yiddish were seen as assertions of a revival among dis-

15 Abella and Troper 1982.
16 Lewinsky 2010.
17 Brill 2010.
18 Myers Feinstein 2011.
19 Isaacs 2010: 86.
20 Ibid.: 87.
21 Ibid.: 91.

placed persons, they reached a limited readership outside of the camps; further, as the older generation of survivors focussed on rebuilding, the younger one sought out new expressions of culture, in particular of a Zionist orientation.[22]

In the postwar exodus from Europe, efforts to restore and revive Yiddish were transplanted to new immigrant centers such as Montreal. With the arrival of thousands of survivors, including many noted cultural figures, the city became a revitalized hub of Yiddish activity. While two areas of marked growth in the post-Second World War era were education and performance, other areas of Yiddish culture that required high linguistic proficiency declined, notably Yiddish publications, including newspapers, journals and books. Thus while David Roskies's discussion of Yiddish and Hebrew after the Holocaust posits that the Yiddish press, which published a wide variety of literary responses to the catastrophe, "was to remain for decades the main purveyor of Holocaust memory,"[23] the actual readership of these newspapers declined as Yiddish was supplanted as shared Jewish vernacular. Conversely, areas that facilitated access to Yiddish culture such as schooling, music or theater grew in importance as potential arenas of Holocaust commemoration. Secular Jewish schools with Yiddish curricular content integrated the Holocaust into classroom learning as well as memorial events. In contrast, the Holocaust remained marginal to both Grober's and Wasserman's Montreal Yiddish community theaters.

Grober's and Wasserman's theaters both articulated responses to the Holocaust, but never as a core component of the repertoires. The YTEG repertoire was based in works of Yiddish literature centered on the immigrant and workers' experience, adaptations of poetry by American and Soviet poets, or classics written by I. L Peretz. Wasserman's productions comprised large-scale musicals and dramatic works, both classics of the Yiddish stage and innovative new productions. Both approaches were forward-looking and rooted in the concept of theater as a universally accessible form of art that ultimately transcends cultural differences. Although Wasserman experienced the displacement of the Holocaust firsthand and acted as a performer in the displaced persons camps, her approach to theater was centered on the creation of art rather than the commemoration of the losses of the Holocaust.

The performance in the YTEG's final season in 1942 marked the studio's first and only direct reference to the destruction of Jewish life in Nazi Europe. The YTEG's third program – prepared by Grober together with the poet J. I. Segal – opened with an epic poem composed by Segal

22 Ibid.: 101f.
23 Roskies 2011: 84.

for the YTEG titled דִי הַייליקע געטאָ (The Holy Ghetto). The text of the poem depicts a ghetto filled with wandering half-dead people uttering snatches of tormented dialogue. It concludes:[24]

וועלט, פֿאַרשעם אונדז נישט, וועלט פֿאַרפּיַיניק אונדז נישט,
וועלט גיב אונדז אונדזער אָרט אויף דר׳ערד,
האָט די וועלט פֿאַרענטפֿערט, גלות,
נחמו, נחמו, עמי.

World, don't shame us, world, don't torment us, world, give us our place on earth,
but the world replied: *goles* [exile],
nakhamu, nakhamu, ami [comfort, ye, comfort ye, my people (Isaiah 40:1)].

Segal's work marked a departure from the previous repertoire of the YTEG in both form and content. This final performance of the YTEG before the studio's closing offered a Canadian response to the perils facing European Jewry in Nazi Europe through the eyes of a Montreal-based poet. By the end of 1942, the scope of the destruction of European Jewry, in particular in Poland, was no longer in question, with detailed reports appearing in mainstream Canadian English-language newspapers.[25] Further, for the Yiddish community, the systematic persecution of Jews in Nazi Europe had long been publicly acknowledged in the Yiddish press, in news reports, editorials and literary responses;[26] Segal was among the *Keneder Adler*'s regular contributors and functioned as its literary editor. Although the performance's audience included non-Yiddish speakers, these were largely non-Jews who had come to see Grober's experimental theater; this is evidenced by the elucidatory nature of the English and French sections of the program book in comparison with the Yiddish. The assumption was that Jewish audience members understood the Yiddish content, which addressed the suffering of their European brethren. In this way, Segal – via the YTEG – was able to give voice to the anguish of the local Montreal Jewish community in a public forum. One can only speculate as to whether there would have been more Holocaust content had this performance not been the YTEG's last.

Like Grober's, Wasserman's repertoire did not emphasize the Holocaust. One area where it has offered explicit responses to the Holocaust has been outreach and broad community education in its resident youth wing, a troupe called Young Actors for Young Audiences (YAYA) that was formed two decades ago as a venture to integrate youth into the theater. Beginning in 2003, under the direction of artistic direc-

24 In her memoirs, Grober calls the poem, דִי געטלעכע געטאָ (The Godly Ghetto). Noting that it does not appear in any of Segal's published works, she cites the poem in full. Grober 1968: 104–111.

25 Frisse 2011: 232f.

26 Margolis 2012.

tor Bryna Wasserman (Dora Wasserman's daughter), the group staged a production called "No More Raisins, No More Almonds," a performance written by Holocaust survivor and educator Batia Bettman that comprised a selection of Yiddish songs written about the experiences of youth in a ghetto during the Holocaust. Performed by some 60 Montreal high school students for audiences of the same age in Canada as well as the United States, the play aims to "teach the lessons of the Holocaust, combat racism and anti-Semitism and promote tolerance" (Teachers' Guide). As part of this goal, the performances are followed by a "talkback" that allows the audiences, largely of non-Jewish background, to ask the performers questions about the show, resulting in open dialogue between students of non-Jewish and Jewish backgrounds. This approach hinges on a pedagogical approach to teaching tolerance and anti-racism through the lessons of the Holocaust.[27]

On the surface, the function of the YAYA Holocaust repertoire could not have been more different from the YTEG's 1942 production of די הייליקע געטאָ. Sixty years later, the YAYA audiences were far-removed from the Holocaust in terms of both geography and group experience. The Holocaust was not "their" story: the play, although it centered on the Holocaust, was a means to build bridges between groups and thereby combat discrimination. The two works represent responses to the Holocaust from vastly different eras of Yiddish cultural life.

Concluding remarks

Both Grober's and Wasserman's theaters were born out of a quest to create high-quality Yiddish theater, with one major point of divergence: the changing position of Yiddish in relation to the Holocaust. Both theaters depended on community support, trained non-professional actors in the art of Yiddish theater, and presented innovative productions to a wide public, both Yiddish- and non-Yiddish-speaking. However, in contrast to the YTEG, the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre evolved in a context where Yiddish was on the wane, both in terms of numbers of speakers and as a shared marker of Jewish identity. Grober's YTEG existed at a crossroads where a vibrant Yiddish cultural life was still a viable expression of Canadian Jewish identity. Wasserman's theater has evolved within a larger rubric of loss and preservation of Jewish heritage. Both theaters were shaped by the War and Holocaust, most concretely through the uprooting and displacement of their respective directors. However, they reflect very different responses to catastrophe.

27 E. g., Carrington and Short, 1997.

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