



# Building the Ratn-Farband: Monumentalizing the Soviet Utopian Project through Yiddish Art and Literature

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Building the *Ratn-Farband*: Monumentalizing the Soviet Utopian Project through  
Yiddish Art and Literature

A dissertation presented by

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to

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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**Building the *Ratn-Farband*: Monumentalizing the Soviet Utopian Project through Yiddish  
Art and Literature**

This dissertation examines how members of the Eastern European Yiddish avant-garde integrated aspects of Jewish tradition with modernist aesthetics to monumentalize the ongoing task of establishing an industrial workers' utopia within the Soviet Union. In this context, Peretz Markish's early Soviet Yiddish texts function as literary monuments that reflect the tumultuous historical developments of the years following the Bolshevik Revolution and mimic the momentous architectural creations of the 1920s. The sculptor Iosif Chaikov's work on the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition monumentalizes the ostensibly realized utopian dreams of the USSR.

Chapter One foregrounds Markish's *Mound* (*Di kupe*), in which the Yiddish writer deploys his poetics to monumentalize Jewish suffering, both in the form of the poema and in the form of the titular Mound. The poema, written as a profaned Yom Kippur liturgy, ritualized Jewish suffering long after the physical evidence of pogrom violence had faded away. Markish creates a *koyen-godl* (or priestly) mode that implicates his readership in the poema's profane sacrilege. Within the text, the Mound acts as a physical monument, a reimagined Sinai, and a foundation from which Markish produces more overtly ideological work in line with Comintern values and the Soviet industrial utopian project.

Chapter Two examines Markish's *Forty-Year-Old Man* (*Der fertsikyeriker man*) as an unrealized contribution to the canon of Comintern literature and the poet's attempt to substantiate a new mythology for the creation of an industrialized workers' utopia on the

territory of the Soviet Union. Markish uses a prophetic mode, biblical symbolism and intertexts, and poetic form to present the Soviet project as prophecy yet to be fulfilled. I consider the implications of reading Markish's text as an alternative conjectural history that embodies the initial utopian aspirations of the forerunners of Soviet culture in the early 1920s.

Chapter Three turns to the work of sculptor Iosif Chaikov, whose contributions to the Soviet World's Fair pavilions monumentalized the ideology of the USSR and presented it on an international stage. I examine Chaikov's propylaea leading to the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition, which I interpret as a reimagined Temple consecrated by the hammer and sickle of Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. My research evaluates whether Chaikov's work on the propylaea faithfully embodied the initial workers' utopian idealism of the Soviet Union.

My dissertation is framed by an introduction explaining the role of the Eastern European Yiddish avant-garde in redefining aspects of Jewish cultural tradition, and a coda that resituates the legacy of Soviet Yiddish cultural production and examines its influence on the development of modern-day Jewish identities.

## Table of Contents

<b>Title Page</b>	<i>i</i>
<b>Copyright</b>	<i>ii</i>
<b>Abstract</b>	<i>iii</i>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<i>v</i>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<i>vi</i>
<b>Dedication</b>	<i>vii</i>
<b>Introduction</b> - In Search of Stable Ground: Yiddish Art and Literature in Times of Peril	1
<b>Chapter 1</b> - Peretz Markish's <i>Di kupe</i> as a Literary Monument to Destruction	24
<b>Chapter 2</b> - Laying the Path to Industrial Utopia in Peretz Markish's <i>Der fertsikyeriker man</i>	76
<b>Chapter 3</b> - To a Temple Reimagined: Iosif Chaikov's Propylaea to the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition	140
<b>Coda</b> - After the Apocalypse: Soviet Yiddish Culture after World War II	178
<b>Bibliography</b>	188

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*To Bruce Ginsberg*

## Introduction

### **In Search of Stable Ground: Yiddish Art and Literature in Times of Peril**

*Mir hobn keyn bodn unter di fis, di amolike traditsie iz farshvunden.*

We have no ground under our feet; our time-honored tradition has vanished.

– Henryk Berlewi (*Ringen*, v. 1, p. 3; Warsaw, 1921)<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Natan Al'tman's *Portrait of a Young Jew (self-portrait)* (Portret molodogo evreia [avtoportet]), 1916.

In the years following the First World War, Eastern Europe's Jewish population found itself in a world dominated by violence and destruction, as civil war, revolution, and pogroms posed

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Seth Wolitz. This quote appears in his Wolitz's reference article on *The Gang* (Di khalyastre), the major Yiddish avant-garde movement in Poland between 1919 and 1924. Seth L. Wolitz. 2010. Khalyastre. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Khalyastre>.

persistent threats to those living across the region formerly known as the Pale of Settlement. Faced with such uncertainty, Yiddish writers and artists increasingly began to question their connections to Judaism and reject the traditional foundations of their ethnoreligious identity as they sought to adjust to a new age of industrialization and modernity. The precariousness of their position is reflected in the artistic production of the time, as is evidenced by Natan Al'tman's *Portrait of a Young Jew (self-portrait)* (Portret molodogo evreia [avtoportret]) (figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Created in 1916, Al'tman's self-portrait is believed to have been the first modernist sculptural representation of a Jewish subject. Made out of gypsum, copper and wood, the Cubofuturist work presents a figure asymmetrically donning traditional Hasidic garb. The right side of the figure is adorned with *peyes*, the collar of a *rekl* and a *hoykhe* hat, while the left is bare of any ornamentation.<sup>3</sup> Art historians and scholars of Eastern European Jewish culture have noted that during this time a trend emerged in which Jewish artists increasingly portrayed their subjects as having a split identity, often with “one eye open to the future and a second closed to the past.”<sup>4</sup>

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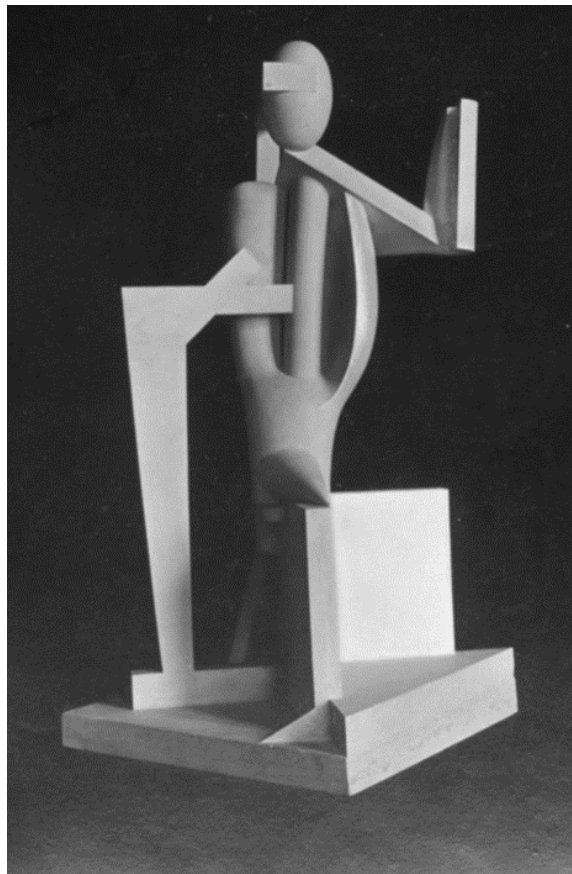
<sup>2</sup> Al'tman's sculpture is currently housed in the Benois Wing of the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg.

<sup>3</sup> The italicized terms are all components of a traditional Hasidic man's everyday appearance. *Peyes* are the sidelocks worn by boys and men, a *rekl* is a long frock coat worn during the workweek, and a *hoykhe* (“high”) hat is the high-crowned hat frequently worn by Hasidim.

<sup>4</sup> Myroslav Shkandrij, “National Modernism in Post-Revolutionary Society: The Ukrainian Renaissance and Jewish Revival, 1917-1940,” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 446. Shkandrij makes this assertion in his analysis of Iosif Chaikov's cover illustration for the Yiddish literary monthly *Dawn* (Baginen), published in Kyiv in 1919 and analyzed in greater detail in the third chapter of this dissertation. Chaikov's portrayal of the shtetl Jew with half his face defined and the other half blank bares resemblance to Natan Al'tman's *Portrait of a Young Jew (Self-portrait)*.

Al'tman's sculptural portrait of the young Jew embodies the idea of split identity by endowing the figure with two distinct sides, one adorned with Jewish attributes and the other bare.

In 1923, Iosif Chaikov would sculpt his own *Portrait of a Young Jew* (Molodoi evrei) (figure 2), exemplifying the extent to which conceptualizations of Jewish aesthetic self-representation had shifted in only seven years.



**Figure 2.** Iosif Chaikov's *Young Jew* (Molodoi evrei), 1923.

Chaikov's creation—an abstract amalgamation of smooth geometric shapes—hardly bears resemblance to a person, let alone one of any specific race or ethnicity. His figure's identity is not split, but it is completely ambiguous and does not appear to belong to any particular ethnicity or culture. During the wave of modernist movements in the early 1920s, Chaikov, along with

many of his contemporaries, sought to employ new industrial forms and technique to create an art devoid of ethnographic content.<sup>5</sup> While many Yiddish culturalists hoped that this form would define a new Jewish art, others recognized its potential to help build the emergent industrial utopian culture, identity, and ideology that were beginning to take shape in the nascent Soviet Union.

In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, these Yiddish writers and artists formed cultural organizations and avant-garde movements, among the most notable of which was the Kyiv-based Kultur-lige. The Kultur-lige, which aimed to promote Yiddish culture through education and the arts, clarified its cultural objectives for Eastern European Jewry in the 1920 bulletin “What is the Kultur-lige?” (“*Vos iz di kultur-lige?*”):

In order to make Jewry a new member of the great community of world culture, there is no need for world culture to be translated into Yiddish. Nor is there a need for a universal culture to be filtered through the temperament of one specific nation. Much more is required: the new culture has to be transplanted into old soil, thus creating a combination of our history, which is alive in us, and the culture of the modern age[...] We do not only want to draw on world culture; we also want to contribute to it. We want to contribute not only new explorers and creators, but also to introduce a new dynamics of exploration, a new original creative rhythm. The Kultur-lige is the expression of a new stream flowing into the great sea of world culture to which new nuances are added.<sup>6</sup>

Two aspects of this statement are notable. The first is the desire to transplant a new culture onto old soil. In the context of the Kultur-lige, this old soil is not that of the Land of Israel but rather the former Pale. Furthermore, the new culture is not necessarily Jewish, but one to whose

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<sup>5</sup> The embrace of ambiguity in Eastern European avant-garde art can be traced back to Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist *Black Square* (Chernyi kvadrat, 1915), which sought to liberate the viewer from the burden of objectivity in the descriptive arts. El Lissitzky, who worked with Malevich in Vitebsk, brought many of the principles of Suprematism and, later, Constructivism into Eastern European Jewish art. The history of this aesthetic evolution will be examined in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Translation from Yiddish by Hillel Kazovsky. Hillel Kazovsky, *Khudozhniki kul’tur-ligi* (Jerusalem: Gerashim Publishing House, 2003), 36.

development the Jews will contribute. It is a culture of industrialization and proletarian internationalism. The second notable aspect is the emphasis on introducing “a new dynamics of exploration, a new original creative rhythm.” As the Soviet Union emerged over the course of the 1920s, the Kultur-lige’s longing to contribute to world culture would lead many of its writers and artists to take on the rhythms of Soviet industrialization in their works.

The 1927 film *Jews on the Land* (*Evrei na zemle*) depicts the transition through which the Jews of the old culture establish their new home on old Crimean soil. Directed by Abram Room with Lilia Brik assisting, *Jews on the Land* was a propaganda documentary dually aimed at attracting Jewish settlers to farm the land in Crimea and at combating anti-Semitism. Room’s portrayal of Jews cultivating the land is particularly significant because from 1882 until the 1917 February Revolution, Jews had been prohibited from owning, leasing, managing, or owning land across the Russian Empire.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the Jewish settlement of Crimea and the emergence of the Jewish farmer became a focus of early Soviet propaganda. *Jews on the Land* was funded by the OZET (or the Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land) and written by a team consisting of Room, Viktor Shklovsky, and Vladimir Mayakovsky.<sup>8</sup> The film relies on Jewish experiences of exile—in this case Exodus and the Moses story—to frame Crimea as a

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the topic, see Hans Rogger’s “Government, Jews, Peasants, and Land in Post-Emancipation Russia: Two Specters: Peasant Violence and Jewish Exploitation.” Hans Rogger, “Government, Jews, Peasants, and Land in Post-Emancipation Russia: Two Specters: Peasant Violence and Jewish Exploitation” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 17, nos. 2-3 (1976): 171-211. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20169754>.

<sup>8</sup> The OZET (*Obshchestvo zemleustroistva evreiskikh trudiashchikhsia*) was a government committee that was primarily focused on assisting Jewish settlers in their moves to the Soviet *kolkhozes*.

reimagined Promised Land.<sup>9</sup> In one of the most striking scenes from the film, tractors move into the distance at a synchronized pace (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** A still depicting tractors riding into the distance, from the 1927 film *Jews on the Land*.

The scene cinematically represents the implementation of a new industrialized rhythm – one that is reproduced in the Yiddish poem *The Forty-Year-Old Man* (*Der fertsikyeriker man*), composed around the same time by famed Soviet Yiddish writer Peretz Markish. In the final canto of his 80-poem work and self-proclaimed *magnum opus*, Markish writes: “Right there where an ox trudged in burden – / Now tractors run, one after another.”<sup>10</sup> Significantly, these lines are written in an amphibrachic tetrameter that gradually emerges as the dominant meter

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<sup>9</sup> In her work, Ludmila Shleyfer Lavine determines the significance of Mayakovsky and Shklovsky “presenting Jewish Crimea via the Moses story.” For more on this topic, consult Ludmila Shleyfer Lavine, “Mayakovsky on the Land” *East European Jewish Affairs*, 51, nos. 2-3 (2021): 212-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2022.2088361>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ot dort vu an oks hot geshlept zikh in yokh – / Zol loyfn a traktor, a tsveyter un nokh*. Peretz Markish, *Der fertsikyeriker man* (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Perets Farlag), 122. Translation my own.

over the course of Markish's work and serve as his poetic approximation of the rhythm of Soviet industrialization. Though Markish would go on to become one of the most celebrated Soviet Yiddish poets, the harsh expressionist language and religious imagery of *The Forty-Year-Old Man* made the text unpublishable during his lifetime. Nevertheless, the 1920s remained a period in which Soviet Jewish writers and artists were free to produce remarkably experimental and innovative work.

While Room's *Jews on the Land* is clearly a work of Soviet agitprop, it was released just before *Bed and Sofa* (Tret'ia Meshchanskaia) – his most critically acclaimed production and a masterpiece of Soviet silent film that examined the sexual dynamics and social realities in a frank assessment of the new Soviet man and everyday life in 1920s Moscow.<sup>11</sup> The timing of these films releases suggests that, despite obligations to propagandize the Soviet project, Soviet Jewish culturalists retained the ability to create original and groundbreaking works throughout most of the 1920s. Released in 1927, *Bed and Sofa* came just before the Soviet regime began to institutionalize creative restrictions that stripped its writers and artists of creative autonomy and transformed the arts to conform to the tenets of what would ultimately become state-sponsored Socialist Realism in 1934. By the time Markish had finished his *Forty-Year-Old Man* in 1930, it could not have been published due to its subversive aesthetics and religious undertones, even though the poet concludes his text with an optimistic expression of hope for the Soviet industrial project. As I will demonstrate in the pages to come—though Markish's *Forty-Year-Old Man* does not have the cultural prestige and afterlife as Room's films—this work can inform our understanding of the transition for Jewish inhabitants of the Pale to productive and revolutionary Soviet workers. Despite the ultimate shortcomings of Soviet industrialization, *The Forty-Year-*

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<sup>11</sup> In English, the literal translation of this film title would be *The Third Meshchanskaia*.



*Old Man* reveals how Markish attempted to contribute to world culture, in Yiddish, and establish a new creative daily life.

### ***Defining Soviet Cultural Identity through Yiddish Art and Literature***

Debates over the form and purpose of Eastern European Yiddish art and culture developed in parallel with conceptualizations of Soviet identity and nationhood in the 1920s and 30s. In the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, Yiddish and Russian art and literature began to develop not as independent phenomena, but as a singular evolution of aesthetics in which Yiddish writers and artists contributed collaboratively with their Russian counterparts to create a new Soviet mass culture. The poetry of Peretz Markish and the sculpture of Iosif Chaikov reveal how these two Yiddish avant-gardists created literary and physical monuments that mythologized the creation of the Soviet Union over the course of the 1920s and 30s. I chose Markish and Chaikov to be the primary subjects of my research due to their success in transitioning from Yiddish avant-garde aesthetics of the early interwar period to Soviet monumentalism of the 1920s and 30s. Markish and Chaikov share similar early biographies – both received traditional *kheyder* educations, traveled across Europe with prolonged stays in Paris (Chaikov before World War I and Markish after), and settled in Moscow during the mid-1920s.<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, each became involved in the Kyiv-based Kultur-lige. Chaikov was a founding member, and Markish’s poem *The Mound* (*Di kupe*) was one of the cultural organization’s most notable publications. Upon moving to Moscow, each artist launched a prolific career that garnered official state acclaim. Chaikov was named the head

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<sup>12</sup> *Kheyder* refers to traditional Jewish primary schools that were commonplace among the shtetls of Eastern Europe. At *kheyder*, young boys, from the age of three, would learn the Hebrew language and lessons from the Torah.

of the Society of Russian Sculptors in 1929, and Markish remains the only Yiddish writer to receive an Order of Lenin Prize, which he was awarded in 1939.

Despite their great successes in and outside of Soviet systems of prestige, both Chaikov and Markish nevertheless remain relatively understudied in comparison to their peers. Chaikov, in particular, remains overlooked in evaluations of Soviet and Yiddish art. While scholars of Soviet art tend to devote more attention to figures like El Lissitzky, Vera Mukhina and Boris Iofan, scholars of Yiddish avant-garde art have only included Chaikov in larger overviews of the field. To date, the Soviet art historian Igor' Shmidt and British art history scholar John Ellis Bowlt remain the only researchers to have published analyses that focus primarily on Chaikov's work.<sup>13</sup> As far as extant scholarship on Markish goes, the Soviet Yiddish poet has been popular in recent years and received detailed attention from scholars including Amelia Glaser, David Shneer, and Anna Torres. Scholarship on Markish tends to focus on a single aspect or moment of his career, however. While there have been studies on Markish and his Futurism, Bolshevism, Internationalism and Anarchism, there has yet to be a piece of scholarship that fully synthesizes his life and creative trajectory from its avant-garde roots to its full Soviet articulation.<sup>14</sup> Chaikov and Markish enjoyed great success throughout their careers, both as Yiddish avant-gardists and Soviet monumentalists. Their artistic and literary contributions largely defined the development of Yiddish culture in the first decades of the Soviet Union. Their creative trajectories are among

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<sup>13</sup> See Igor' Shmidt, *Iosif Chaikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977); John E. Bowlt, "Icarian Games: Iosif Chaikov and the Jewish Legacy." *Experiment*, 18, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the course of this dissertation, I will draw upon the scholarship of Glaser, Shneer and Torres, who have all have published extensive research on Markish over the past twenty years. While no individual work has yet to span Markish's entire career, *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011) contains a collection of scholarly essays that covers Markish's life and works. None of the essays analyze *The Forty-Year-Old Man*.

the most representative examples of how Eastern Europe's Yiddish avant-gardists came to contribute to the development of Soviet culture and identity for both the Jewish and general masses alike.

### *Creating Monumental Texts and Artworks*

This project explores continuities between the Soviet and Jewish elements of Markish and Chaikov's monumental works. These works either mimic the monumental structures of human history—towers, mountains, etc.—or create original constructs and lay new foundations. They introduced new and creative rhythms meant to reflect Soviet daily life and to conceptualize perceptions of Soviet nationhood. The result was a mode of creativity that ritualized the pursuit of an industrialized workers' utopia for Eastern European Jewry and the international proletariat alike. My goal is to demonstrate how these two Yiddish cultural figures helped build the Soviet Union and present it as a homeland and site of redemption not just for the Jewish worker, but for all.

I define monumental works as pieces of poetry and sculpture that, through their aesthetic qualities and formal innovations, embody the collective spirit of their readership during times of societal transformation. Physical monuments, such as statues or towers, are straightforward in their classification. Literary monuments are texts that become monumental through their power to commemorate or represent new ideologies as they become engrained in the collective consciousness. Examples of literary monuments might include the Torah or the Russian Futurist manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (*Poshchochina obshchestvennomu vkusu*). Svetlana Boym's conceptualization of "Monuments to Revolutionary Estrangement" informs my understanding of monumentalism in art and literature, most pointedly by means of her

postulation that Viktor Shklovsky's "*ostranenie* was never an estrangement from the world, but estrangement for the sake of the world's renewal."<sup>15</sup> In their avant-garde work, Markish and Chaikov create images that estrange familiar scenes from daily life and aspects of ethnocultural identity to draw their audiences away from traditional Jewish customs while simultaneously substantiating the promise of Bolshevik industrial revolutionary thought.

To borrow from Yuri Tynianov's terminology originally applied to the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Markish and Chaikov manipulate form to create hyperbolic images (*giperbolicheskie obrazy*) that "protrude headfirst out of the verse, tear it open, and stand up in its place."<sup>16</sup> One notable example comes from Markish's *Mound*, written in response to a 1920 pogrom that left in its wake a heap of dead bodies in the central marketplace of a Ukrainian shtetl. Markish contorts the formal and aesthetic aspects of his verse to resemble this pile of slaughtered bodies in both sight and sound. He creates an image that establishes the titular Mound as a monument to Jewish suffering. The poet structures his cycle in the form of an irreverent Yom Kippur liturgy that ritualizes this violence so that the poema itself comes to function as a literary monument. Chaikov illustrated the second edition of the pogrom *poema*, which was published by the Kyiv-branch of the Kultur-lige in 1922 (figure 4). Chaikov's cover illustration gives physical form to the image created in Markish's poema and more emphatically presents it to the reader. The geometry of Chaikov's illustration creates the sense that Markish's portrayal of the Mound bursts through confines of the poema itself and becomes an example of Tynianov's hyperbolic image.

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<sup>15</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 224.

<sup>16</sup> Yuri Tynianov, "Interlude (1924)," trans. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko, *Common Knowledge*, 24, no. 3 (August 2018): 534.



**Figure 4.** Iosif Chaikov’s cover illustration for Markish’s *Di kupe*, Kyiv: Kultur-lige, 1922.

Chaikov’s illustration demonstrates how *The Mound*—in both its physical and literary forms—functions as both a monument to Jewish suffering and an impetus for revolution. Markish and Chaikov monumentalize one of the most striking images of Jewish suffering to transform the site of the pogrom into a foundation for the Jews’ turn to Bolshevism.

### *Situating Yiddish Art and Literature between their Jewish and Soviet Contexts*

*The Mound* exists within two contexts: the Jewish and the Soviet. I would like to differentiate between these two contexts, and to recognize how acknowledging one context informs our understanding of the other. In many cases, it is obvious when a text or artwork is “Jewish” – it might be written in a Jewish language or portray traditional Jewish ethnographic

markers like a goat or shofar. Markish's pogrom poem is written in Yiddish and addressed to a Jewish readership: "To you, victims from Ukraine."<sup>17</sup> Markish includes this epigraph as a tribute to the victims of pogrom violence, but as the poem develops, it begins to take on pro-Soviet connotations. Not coincidentally, it was in 1920 that the Red Army began to consolidate territory across Ukraine and the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) established control over what would eventually become the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922.<sup>18</sup> As the Bolsheviks subdued the Ukrainian nationalists, among whom existed many infamous pogromists, it is unsurprising that Markish would have viewed the turn to Soviet rule as a hope for decreased antisemitism across Eastern Europe.<sup>19</sup> Over the course of the 1920s, Markish wrote in different literary modes to generate among his readership an increasingly active engagement with industrial utopian thought and the emergent Soviet project. In *The Mound*, Markish produces a priestly mode of Yiddish modernism in which his poetic *persona* ritualizes Jewish suffering, and the Mound becomes a site of worship. Through this mode, Markish monumentalizes the devastation in the Ukrainian shtetl in an act that follows the Jewish tradition of renewing life through scripture. By proclaiming himself to be the *koyen-godl* (or High Priest) in this new world of violence, Markish uses his readers' familiarity with Jewish liturgy and ritual custom to profane Judaic tradition while simultaneously assuming a priestly authority in advocating for the Bolshevik cause.

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<sup>17</sup> *Nokh aykh, harugim fun ukrayne*. Peretz Markish, *Di kupe* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1921), 1.

<sup>18</sup> The Communist Party of Ukraine formally created a Ukrainian Soviet government on December 21, 1919.

<sup>19</sup> Among the most notable, and controversial, of these figures is Symon Petliura, who served as the Supreme Commander of the Ukrainian People's Army (UNA). Though historians have debated Petliura's direct involvement in the pogroms, the UNA was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Jews. In 1926, Petliura was assassinated in Paris by the Jewish anarchist Sholom Schwartzbard.

Though Markish uses *Di kupe* as a starting point from which to push his readers further toward the Bolshevik cause, the text largely exists within its self-contained Jewish context, as it engages in a conversation unique to Eastern Europe's Jews – the response to pogrom violence. Markish's *Forty-Year-Old Man* presents a more internationalist approach in its presentation of the ongoing efforts to establish an industrialized workers' utopia within the territories of a newly established Soviet Union. Written in two parts over the course of 1920-30, *The Forty-Year-Old Man* was Markish's self-proclaimed *magnum opus*. The text engenders a prophetic mode that legitimizes a new mythology of proletarian struggle and presents the Soviet workers' utopian ideal still in the process of its actualization.<sup>20</sup> As an Eastern European Jewish intellectual, Markish was born into a nation without a land, but with a religious fixation on text and an imagined messianic future. *The Forty-Year-Old Man* reproduces this construct, partially, while mobilizing it not toward the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, but rather the construction of the factory as the fulfillment of a different, proletarian and Soviet messianism. The new industrial center becomes a reimagined Promised Land, not just for Markish's Jewish readership but for oppressed workers of all nationalities worldwide. Through writing in a mode that, in the words of scholar Dan Miron, "strove, as much as was possible within a European and nonbiblical formal context, to emulate and reproduce the tonality of biblical prophecy," Markish attempts to spread his message to the international proletariat.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Miron defines the prophetic mode in his analysis of modern Hebrew poetry and traces it back to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century icon Hayyim Nahman Bialik. Notably, Bialik generated his prophetic mode to push his readership further toward the Zionist project.

<sup>21</sup> Dan Miron, *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3.

As Markish's texts commemorated a developing workers' utopian ideology through their formal and liturgical qualities, sculptor Iosif Chaikov's propylaea leading to Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition sanctified the official Soviet ideology. The bas-reliefs which adorned his monumental gates celebrated the diversity of the USSR, portraying peasants and workers from each of the eleven Soviet Socialist Republics and framing the Soviet pavilion as a temple to an ostensibly actualized industrial agricultural utopianism. By this point, Chaikov had fully transitioned away from the Jewish themes and imagery that pervaded his early works, becoming one of the preeminent Soviet sculptors. As a founding member of the Kultur-lige, Chaikov sought to create a modern Jewish art that embraced new industrial materials and techniques and that incorporated principles of abstraction into portrayals of Jewish figures.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, one might have difficulties recognizing the continuities that exist between Chaikov's earlier, Jewish-inflected avant-garde experimentations and his monumental Soviet artistic production, which so concretely emphasized the ethnographic markers of various Soviet peoples. Yet, Chaikov's departure from Judaic elements in descriptive art and his subsequent embrace of Soviet aesthetics are not just intrinsically related; one could not have been possible without the other. Beyond the political context and restrictions of state-sponsored Socialist Realism, Chaikov's search for a new form and tradition—a new ground, to invoke Berlewi—led to and informed his understanding of the industrialized Soviet monumentalist style.

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<sup>22</sup> During this time, Chaikov's artistic production fell in line with the vision of literary critic Moishe Litvakov, who sought a "non-ethnic 'universalistic' literature created in Yiddish [that would be] in service to an ideology beyond ethnicity and aestheticism." Seth Wolitz, "The Kyiv-grupe (1918-1920) Debate: The Function of Literature." *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 4, no. 2 (1978): 99.



### *From the Shtetl Threshold to the Monumental Gate*

The image of the threshold, whether it leads to the shtetl home or the Soviet pavilion, pervaded Eastern European Yiddish culture in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. Markish titled his first poetry collection *Thresholds* (Shveln), for which Iosif Chaikov provided the cover illustration. Just months before the publication of *Thresholds*, Chaikov illustrated the cover to the literary monthly *Dawn* (Baginen).<sup>23</sup> Chaikov's image features a Jewish figure standing at the threshold of his shtetl home, turning eastward as the dawn emerges in the distance. These works signify their creators' fascination with the rising sun—which was to become one of the preeminent Soviet symbols—and create an association between the threshold and the dawn. In his *Thresholds* cover illustration, Chaikov portrays what appears to be the same Jewish figure ascending a mountain, leaving the shtetl in the background. For Chaikov, these early cover illustrations represent the beginning of his own journey towards becoming a Soviet Yiddish artist, which led him to work on yet another threshold – the propylaea leading to the Soviet pavilion. To what extent is it possible to consider these works related to another? And what can be learned by trying to draw connections between these cultural creations that are so ideologically and aesthetically disparate?

These questions shape my project, which demonstrates how aspects of the Eastern European Yiddish avant-garde revealed themselves in Soviet Jewish art and literature and influenced the development of a new mass culture and identity during the early years of the USSR. This work contributes to ongoing efforts to further connect the fields of Yiddish and Slavic studies by resisting revisionist narratives and historical biases that risk framing Markish as an exclusively “Yiddish” writer or Chaikov as a strictly “Soviet” sculptor. Only through

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<sup>23</sup> Chaikov's *Baginen* illustration will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

recognizing how these figures continuously balanced their Soviet and Jewish identities can we properly situate their legacies in the contexts of Jewish and Soviet cultural history. In this regard, my approach to this research on Markish and Chaikov resembles that of contemporary scholars Mikhail Krutikov and Harriet Murav who have recently situated the oeuvres of Der Nister and Dovid Bergelson, respectively, between their appropriate Yiddish and Soviet contexts.<sup>24</sup>

Krutikov and Murav's work is notable in part because it became possible only after the fall of the Soviet Union. During the final years of Stalin's reign following World War II, the USSR had all but eliminated its major propagators of Yiddish literature and culture in a purge that culminated with the 1952 Night of the Murdered Poets, in which Markish was executed along with twelve other Soviet Jews. Though Markish and these other victims were rehabilitated shortly after Stalin's death, the Soviet censors remained hostile to their perceived allegiances to their Jewish heritage, deemed to be the defining factor of their "rootless cosmopolitanism."<sup>25</sup> For this reason, Soviet scholarship on these Yiddish writers and artists often ignores any Jewish influence in their cultural production.<sup>26</sup> Before the fall of the Soviet Union, the only post-War interactions between the Soviet Yiddish culturalists and their Western counterparts came in the form of written

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<sup>24</sup> See Krutikov's *Der Nister's Soviet Years: Yiddish Writer as Witness to the People* (Indiana University Press, 2019) and Murav's *David Bergelson's Strange New World: Untimeliness and Futurity* (Indiana University Press, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> In her memoir, Esther Markish recalls the hostility with which they censors approached Markish's work. Regarding the censor's corrections to the galley proofs of a 1969 poetry collection, the last book of Markish's to be published in the USSR, she explains: "The censor had red-penciled the word *Jew* wherever it appeared—as it did frequently—in the volume, and he suggested that the editor replace this 'unacceptable' term by words such as *man*, *citizen*, or *passer-by*. The word *Jew* was taboo." Esther Markish, *The Long Return*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 250.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, in his book on Iosif Chaikov, Igor' Shmidt never references Chaikov's involvement with the Kultur-lige or identifies any Jewish elements in his artworks.

correspondences, abruptly halted after Stalin's crackdown on Soviet Jewry. As a result, Western scholarship has historically overlooked the Soviet-era production of these Yiddish writers and artists. Only recently has there been a renewed interest in these works, as exemplified by the work of scholars including Amelia Glaser, David Shneer, and Anna Torres.

Though the Soviet Union would never serve as the reimagined Promised Land for Eastern Europe's Jewish population, this should not discredit the initial belief in and enthusiasm for the Soviet project shared among many of the region's most prominent Yiddish writers and artists. Their monumental works to Soviet industrial utopianism provide insights into a failed project but, as Boym suggests, they also posit an "alternative conjectural history that uncovers the genealogy of ideas that for a long time remained on the side roads of the prevailing versions of twentieth-century cultural history."<sup>27</sup> Given the tragic fates of so many Soviet Yiddish writers and artists of the Stalinist period, Boym's outlook is particularly critical. While it is convenient to argue that figures like Markish recognized the full perilousness of their positions before the 1920s had come to an end, this line of thinking undermines the legitimate potential of the Soviet Union to serve as a viable homeland for Eastern Europe's Jewish population. Such thought also discredits the tangible benefits enjoyed by Soviet Jewish writers and artists, many of which would have been impossible to find anywhere else in the world during that point in time.

The memoir by Markish's wife Esther Markish, written after her family's emigration to Israel in 1972, noted the vigor with which her husband "exalted the Soviet regime, not for personal gain or out of opportunity, but because it was his unshakable conviction that the regime had emancipated his people, had torn down the walls of the ghetto so that they, his people, could

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<sup>27</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 253.

blossom anew and flourish in an atmosphere of freedom.”<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that these figures did not recognize the dangers of their situations, but the fact remains that the Soviet Union in its earlier stages offered its Jewish population unprecedented promises of opportunity and material support, especially in the realms of cultural development and production. As David Roskies explains, “Never before in history did Jewish writers and artists achieve such recognition – as Jews – from the powers that be. In the West, this would be analogous to Sarah Bernhardt, Max Reinhardt, and Saul Bellow winning accolades for acting, directing and writing in Yiddish – not for enriching their respective host cultures.”<sup>29</sup> Beyond the arts and literature, this era of Soviet history also saw an unprecedented number of Jews assume significant roles in government – Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, Grigorii Zinov’ev and Yakov Sverdlov, to name a few. Borrowing from Steven S. Lee’s terminology, I attempt to “recognize the virtue of failure” in my analyses of the Soviet Yiddish texts and artworks of this period to determine the extent to which they might still embody the initial industrial utopian idealism that drew so many Eastern European Jews to the USSR in the 1920s.<sup>30</sup>

In my approach to this project, I validate these largely forgotten Soviet Yiddish works’ full significance at the time of their creation and reveal new understandings about their legacies in contemporary culture across the former USSR and beyond. The scope of this dissertation encompasses works of Soviet Yiddish poetry, sculpture, film, and visual arts. My research

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<sup>28</sup> Esther Markish, *The Long Return*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 2.

<sup>29</sup> David Roskies, foreword to *The Long Return*, by Esther Markish (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), ix.

<sup>30</sup> Steven S. Lee, “Introduction: Comintern Aesthetics – Space, Form, History” in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 12.

examines cultural artifacts ranging from state sponsored agitprop to literature written for the drawer. All of these cultural artifacts exist on a spectrum that ranges from what might be classified as ardently Jewish (e.g., Markish's *Mound*) to unmistakably Soviet (e.g., Chaikov's *propylaea*). These works exemplify how the years between 1920 and 1937 saw a shift in mainstream Soviet Yiddish cultural production, in which writers and artists became "Soviet Jews" – a transition which necessitated a departure from traditional markers of Jewishness.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the forcefulness with which figures like Markish and Chaikov sought to sever ties with what they viewed as an obsolete ethnoreligious culture and system of beliefs, these writers and artists nevertheless retained aspects of their pre-Soviet Jewish culture. As Sasha Senderovich explains, the figure of the Soviet Jew was one whose "contours were defined at the intersection of practices of Judaism both active and defunct – unique customs or their remnants that were expressed in rich folkways of Jewish life in the former Pale."<sup>32</sup> Senderovich asserts that the "Soviet Jew carries and continuously reinterprets traces of the Pale of Settlement without either 'preserving' the 'authentic' culture of the Pale or 'abandoning' it in search of Bolshevik integration."<sup>33</sup> It is impossible to recognize the full meaning of a final product—a long poem or monumental gate—without acknowledging and understanding its creative origins. Though Markish and Chaikov both sought to leave their prior cultural affiliations in the past (and, by all

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<sup>31</sup> Sasha Senderovich's recent book *How the Soviet Jew Was Made* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022) provides perhaps the most insightful and comprehensive investigation into this transition to date.

<sup>32</sup> Sasha Senderovich, *How the Soviet Jew Was Made* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

accounts, succeeded in doing so), to truly understand their contributions to the Soviet project, one must acknowledge their status as “Jewish” figures with inherently Jewish vocabularies.

### ***Three Modes to Establishing Soviet Yiddish Culture***

This dissertation is organized into three chapters followed by a brief coda. Each chapter focuses on the specific mode generated by a primary work. Chapter One treats Markish’s *Di kupe* with an emphasis on the priestly mode that memorialized Jewish suffering for his readership. Chapter Two examines *Der fertsikyeriker man* and the ways in which Markish establishes a prophetic mode to present the Soviet industrial utopian project as unrealized prophecy. The third and final chapter turns to the temple mode produced by Chaikov’s propylaea which framed the 1937 Soviet pavilion. Over the course of this work, I demonstrate how these two Eastern European Yiddish avant-gardists presented the early history of the USSR as the realization of a new, eternal homeland for Eastern Europe’s Jewish population. I evaluate how Markish and Chaikov’s artistic and literary production accomplished this first by mythologizing the events that drew Eastern European Jewry nearer to Bolshevism, then by ritualizing Jewish involvement in the Soviet project to establish an internationalized workers’ utopia, and finally by monumentalizing the ostensible successes of the USSR in creating a new homeland for all Soviet peoples.

The tragic fate endured by so many Soviet Yiddish writers and artists begs the question: to what extent is it proper to consider Markish and Chaikov’s monumental Soviet-era works such significant contributions to the greater canon of Yiddish art and literature? Returning to the sentiments of Boym and Lee in their analyses of the early cultural production of the Comintern, the ultimate failures of the Soviet Union in providing a homeland for Eastern European Jewry

should not obscure the genuine intentions and utopian dreams of the Yiddish avant-garde. Instead of focusing on the repression of these works and their creators, there is much to be gained through analyzing how texts like *Der fertsikyeriker man* allow the utopian dreams of Markish and his contemporaries to exist into the present day. These works transcend their initial contexts within both Soviet and Jewish history while providing invaluable insights for those wishing to better understand this important chapter in Soviet Jewish history. In doing so, they also allow for these ideals' reinvention and create possibilities for others to pursue them anew.<sup>34</sup> Their ability to transcend their historical contexts deemphasizes revisionist investigations into how genuinely figures like Markish and Chaikov embraced the Soviet project at specific points in time. With this in mind, my research prioritizes these Soviet Yiddish culturalists' contributions to one of the most significant sociocultural experiments of human history and highlights the formal innovations and methodologies that made their works so groundbreaking.

Perhaps most importantly, this dissertation serves as a reminder that despite the horrific fate endured by so many, the first decades of the Soviet Union produced some of the finest contributions to Yiddish culture of the twentieth century and beyond. In my coda, I turn to Markish's elegy written in honor of the actor Solomon Mikhoels, whose murder in 1948 marked the beginning of the end for Markish and Soviet Yiddish culture as it had existed prior to World War II. In 1935, Mikhoels took the stage of the Moscow State Jewish Theater as King Lear and delivered one of the most iconic performances in the history of Yiddish theater. Just a year before the onset of Stalin's Great Terror, could Mikhoels have possibly foreseen that this stage

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<sup>34</sup> In recent years, klezmer musicians have expressed a fascination in the early Bundist- and Soviet-era works of Yiddish poets and musicians. Daniel Kahn and Psoy Korolenko's "ideologically terroristic" *Unternationale* collection is just one of many notable examples. Korolenko and historian Anna Shternshis teamed up to release the album *Yiddish Glory*, which resurrects the works of music written by Holocaust victims and Soviet survivors.

would be the site of his funeral just thirteen years later? Instead of wondering about the extent to which these heroes of Soviet Yiddish culture recognized their own peril, we gain much more through recognizing the transcendence of their artworks, poems, and performances which could not have been produced anywhere else at any other time in history.

Nearly a half-century of state-sponsored suppression of Soviet Jewish culture prevented figures like Markish and Chaikov from receiving the proper scholarly attention that they warrant. This project will shed light on Markish and Chaikov's alternative conjectural histories and utopian dreams – aspirations that remained unrealized in their own time, but might still be pursued and reimagined in the present day.



## Chapter One

### **Peretz Markish's *Di kupe* as a Literary Monument to Destruction**

The symbolic power of *The Mound* (*Di kupe*) lies in Peretz Markish's embrace and exaltation of the profane. The poet's contempt for Jewish mourning rituals was not meant to dishonor the deceased, but to accentuate the impotence of established faith and tradition in a world ruled by the *malke-kupe* (Sovereign Mound), Markish's term for the heap of corpses left in the market square following a pogrom in the Ukrainian shtetl of Horoditch. The poema serves as tribute to the Mound, and the poet's writing becomes an act of retribution not against the perpetrators of pogrom violence but the existing authorities unable to prevent it.<sup>35</sup> Though Markish never explicitly acknowledges any prospect for redemption in his work, he alludes to the possibility that the Bolshevik cause might become a force strong enough to liberate his readers from their subjugation caused in part by cycles of pogrom violence.

In its physical form, the Mound at Horoditch was a heap of corpses that represented human cruelty and suffering – it was a physical monument created from the victims of pogrom violence. As a work of poetry, Markish's *Di kupe* acts as a literary monument to destruction by both extolling the devastating power of the Mound and mimicking its harrowing qualities. Markish modifies the form and sound of his verse to resemble the grotesque aesthetics associated

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<sup>35</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the Mound as a proper noun to reflect my translation of Markish's poema. The poet engages in direct conversation with the Mound and refers to it as a power or deity, and for these reasons I have chosen to write the Mound with a capital M.

with the colossal pile of bodies.<sup>36</sup> The poet's manipulation of poetics distorts distinctions between idea and form and desecrates existing institutions, both sacred and secular. For Markish, the wave of pogroms across the former Pale of Settlement in 1919-20 served as a pivotal moment that influenced the poet's creative output and ideological worldview. The aftermath of the Horoditch pogrom led Markish to adjust and manipulate language in a manner that inverted existing conventions and remapped the lexicon of what was once the sublime (i.e., Judaic tradition) to better fit his world, dominated by the profane. In lieu of honoring the dead, Markish uses expressionist language to more acutely portray the violent persecution perpetuated against Jews across Eastern Europe and provide a critical view of redemption through continued faith in Judaism and its God. In this vein, *Di kupe* serves not as an elegy for the victims of pogrom violence but as a rejection of Judaism. Markish structures his poema as an irreverent imitation of the Yom Kippur liturgy that includes new parables and lamentations, written in a variety of poetic forms.<sup>37</sup> The majority of these poems focus on the sacrilegious horror of the Mound and the shortcomings of religious faith, but Markish also includes commentary that extends into the

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<sup>36</sup> Markish sheds light upon this stylistic decision in his 1922 essay "The Aesthetics of Struggle in Modern Belles-Lettres": "If the artist of today sees dung, blood, corpses and rags – he does not make them into royal cloth [...] Most characteristic of their generation will be the pictures as they are – untouched – wild, unpolished, unwarmed, like the bleeding catastrophe of our time itself." Quoted in Yael Chaver, "Jewish Radicalism: Hebrew in Peretz Markish's Early Poetry," in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 29.

<sup>37</sup> Avraham Novershtern notes that the Yiddish poets of Markish's generation viewed the poema as "the appropriate genre for the molding of an apocalyptic image of the world, since from the essence of its nature it has a multi-dimensional worldview." Jordan Finkin identified and translated this quote from Novershtern's *Kesem ha-dimdumim*, page 134. Finkin elaborates upon the use of the poema in his book chapter "The Lighter Side of Babel: Peretz Markish's Urban Poetics," in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 33-49.

realm of socioeconomics. In these instances, the poet bemoans the merciless market system and subtly alludes to his growing sympathies toward Bolshevism. Though Markish emphatically forsakes Judaic tradition, he borrows from its repository of symbols and rituals to substantiate his new mythology for his readers.

In this chapter, I argue that Markish's *Di kupe* monumentalizes the destruction of the pogroms and that his Mound serves as a modern-day Sinai, the foundation from which Markish would later call his readers to support the Bolshevik cause. *Di kupe* marked the beginning of a crucial shift in Markish's literary career in terms of both form and content and foreshadowed his rise to becoming one of the Soviet Union's leading Yiddish poets and a voice for not only Eastern European Jewry but all those subjugated by class struggle and oppression worldwide.

### **Framing *Di kupe* within Markish's Greater Oeuvre**

Peretz Markish was born on December 7, 1895, in Polonne, Volhynia; then part of the Russian Empire.<sup>38</sup> He was raised in a poor but observant household and received a traditional *kheyder* education before running away from home before the age of twelve. He worked a variety of jobs ranging from synagogue choirboy to bank employee to day-laborer before being drafted into the Russian Imperial Army, where he was wounded fighting in World War I. He began writing Russian poetry at age fifteen and only began to write in Yiddish during the war. Markish's first Yiddish poem "The Fighter" (*Der kemfer*) was published in a Dnipro newspaper in 1917. His debut poetry collection *Thresholds* (*Shveln*) followed in 1919 and was met with praise that distinguished him as one of the most promising Yiddish modernist poets.

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<sup>38</sup> Polonne is located in what is modern-day Ukraine just under 200 miles west of Kyiv.

Markish wrote manifestos on aesthetics, founded literary almanacs, and traveled across Europe and to Palestine. He was brash and a polarizing writer; almost immediately upon beginning his professional career, his 1918 poema *Volhynia* received public criticism from his contemporary, David Bergelson, who “point[ed] to the ‘naked lines’ in Markish’s poetry.”<sup>39</sup> As a founding member of the Warsaw-based literary group The Gang (Di khalyastre), Markish notoriously rejected poet Moshe Broderzon for being too attached to rhyme.<sup>40</sup> He determined the role of aesthetics to be to “*est’ etik*,” a multilingual pun that means “to eat ethics”.<sup>41</sup> He made a name for himself by following the path laid by the Russian avant-gardists, particularly Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Futurists, who rejected the literary traditions of the past to create “an art without rules.”<sup>42</sup> In her scholarship on Markish’s early work, Amelia Glaser compares the Yiddish poet to Mayakovsky and recounts Viktor Shklovsky’s proposition that “Mayakovsky,

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<sup>39</sup> Bergelson’s rocky relationship with Markish has been well documented by literary scholars. The above quote is taken from Avraham Novershtern’s entry on Markish in the YIVO *Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* and points to Bergelson’s 1919 essay “Diktung un gezelshaftlekhayt” (Poetry and Social Life). Amelia Glaser succinctly summarizes Bergelson’s contempt for Markish’s poetry in her review of Bergelson’s essay, in which Bergelson states that Markish’s verse is “lacking the completeness of form, its intelligence can be worked out only intellectually, but not intuitively – it can only be guessed at rather than felt (*zi vet darfn zikh mer onsh toysn eyder derfiln*).” Amelia Glaser, “A Shout from Somewhere!: The Early Works of Peretz Markish” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 50.

<sup>40</sup> Gilles Rozier. 2011. Broderzon, Moyshe. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Broderzon\\_Moyshe](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Broderzon_Moyshe).

<sup>41</sup> This pun comes from the Yiddish imperative *est* (eat) and the Yiddish noun *etik* (ethics). Together they form the Yiddish word *estetik* (aesthetics). Alternatively, it can also be viewed as a combination of the Russian infinitive *est’* (to eat) and the Yiddish *etik*.

<sup>42</sup> Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 2. These sentiments play into the Russian Futurists’ desire to “throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the ship of modernity,” as expressed in the 1912 manifesto “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (*Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu*).

seeking the simplest, most accessible mythology and fresh images, adopted religious images which he destroyed in the process.” She continues to explain that “Markish was part of a generation of Jewish modernists... who viewed religion through the critical lens of revolution and cultural transformation, and readily mixed religious iconography with the mundane on an Expressionist canvas to imagine a revolutionary apocalypse.”<sup>43</sup> This practice is abundantly obvious in *Di kupe*, in which Markish alludes to widely known legends from not only Jewish biblical history, but Greek mythology, Christian scripture, and Slavic folklore and reappropriates these tales to at once substantiate the supremacy of his Mound and demonstrate the devastating impact of its reign on the Eastern European landscape. In this sense, Markish’s work resembles the *supersagas* (*sverkhpovesti*) of Velimir Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky’s contemporary and another figurehead of the Russian Futurist movement.<sup>44</sup>

Markish’s pre-Soviet poetry distorts distinctions between the traditional and the unconventional, the destructive and the commemorative. He wrote *Di kupe* using a wide variety of meters, rhyme schemes, and stanza forms; yet the full poema resisted nearly all extant formal designations, save its distinction as a pogrom poem. The poet employs both Jewish biblical tradition and European poetic norms to destabilize conceptualizations of pogrom violence and Jewish messianic redemption at both the narrative and formal levels. In their analysis of Markish’s early works, David Shneer and Robert Adler Peckerar note that “[Markish] mines tradition in order to subvert it” – a practice evident in *Di kupe*, which features innovative rhymes

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<sup>43</sup> Amelia Glaser, “A Shout from Somewhere’: The Early Works of Peretz Markish” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 55.

<sup>44</sup> Khlebnikov’s *supersagas* will be examined in more detail in Chapter Two of this work.

and meters intended to create unease, rather than beauty.<sup>45</sup> Yet, despite his critique of Judaism, Markish structures his poema in the form of a mock Yom Kippur liturgy – a stylistic decision that lends an ostensibly sanctified mode to his writing. While the poet often follows traditional metrical schemes and stanza forms, his flippant disregard for aural and visual aesthetics undermines any notions of poetry’s inherent beauty. He intentionally made *Di kupe* difficult to recite, but this should not take away from the formal innovation of his work, which defamiliarizes the very act of reading and writing poetry.

Most significantly, *Di kupe* marked a crucial turning point in Markish’s life and creative output. His early poetry had always been revolutionary in form, but *Di kupe* signifies a shift toward more revolutionary content.<sup>46</sup> Markish’s pogrom poem is more politically charged and aware of its historical and religious connotations. As Shneer notes, the poema is “quintessentially expressionist in that the outside world exists only to the extent that it is reflected within the poet himself,” but also shows that “Markish’s writing was constantly referencing to, alluding to, and in conversation with the biblical liturgical, and other Jewish textual traditions.”<sup>47</sup> I argue that *Di kupe* not only marks Markish’s shift to more politically charged writing that responds directly to

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<sup>45</sup> David Shneer and Robert Adler Peckerar. “Peretz Markish (1895-1952): Modern Marxist and Yiddishist,” in *Makers of Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Artists, Leaders, and the World They Made* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 331.

<sup>46</sup> In his critical introduction to Markish’s life and works, David Shneer remarks that “two of [Markish’s] most cited poems from this early period deal with the revolutionary explosion of the boundaries of time and space, between self and other.” Shneer refers to these works as “a celebration of the anarchic and revolutionary times, in which Markish was crafting a new poetry.” David Shneer, “An Introduction, My Name is Now: Peretz Markish and the Literature of Revolution” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 5. This analysis comes in reference to “I Say Goodbye to You” and “Don’t Know if I’m Home.”

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

real world events, but also signifies his growing support for the Bolsheviks' revolutionary ambitions. Markish combines Jewish biblical tradition with revolutionary aesthetics to substantiate the idea that the Bolshevik cause might free him and his readers from a world of anarchy and chaos.

### **The Physical and Literary Monumentality of Markish's Poetics**

Despite never visiting the scene of the pogrom at Horoditch and witnessing its horrors first-hand, Markish wrote *Di kupe* to monumentalize the horror and violence of the devastation in the Ukrainian shtetl for his readership. This act follows in the Jewish tradition of renewing life through scripture that dates to the destruction of the Second Temple. After the fall of the Temple, Jewish life as it was had been destroyed, but the rabbis rebuilt it around the oral Torah – a series of statutes and legal interpretations that were not included in the written Torah, given to Moses at Mount Sinai.<sup>48</sup> Initially, the oral Torah had been passed down orally from generation to generation. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the oral Torah was recorded in writing to ensure its preservation in a time of instability. For Eastern European Jewry, the pogroms had a similarly devastating impact that altered the lives and worldviews for those left in its wake. For a transient period, the physical mound in the Horoditch marketplace functioned as a physical monument to this destruction – a grotesque reminder of the persistent threat to Jews across Eastern Europe. Markish's poema, through its formal innovations, acts as a literary monument to pogrom destruction that outlived the physical mound and served as a reminder of the pervasive violence and chaos of daily life for his readers. As the oral Torah helped ritualize

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<sup>48</sup> The primary components of the oral Torah are the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*, which together make up the *Talmud*. According to Orthodox Jewish belief, Moses was told at least part of the oral Torah by God directly at Mount Sinai.

Jewish spiritual life following the destruction of the Temple, *Di kupe* would ritualize Jewish suffering long after the physical evidence of pogrom violence had faded away.

### ***The Aural and Visual Elements of Estrangement in Di kupe***

To convey the horrors of the Horoditch pogrom to his readers, Markish manipulates aural and visual aesthetics to degrade the supposed elegance of poetry and contribute to the profanity of his work. In the opening sonnet, he immediately adjusts the formal aspects of his verse so that it resembles the Mound in both sight and sound. He uses rhyme, meter, and perspective to contribute to his defamiliarized presentation of the haunting scene at the Ukrainian shtetl and intensify its affect.<sup>49</sup> Instead of portraying the Mound from the third-person point of view, he chooses to write from the perspective of the Mound itself, inserting himself directly into the gruesome heap of slaughtered corpses:

*1 Nit! Lek nit, kheylev himlsher, mayne farpapte berd,  
Fun mayne mayler khlyupen broyne ritshkes dzyegekhts,  
O, broyne roshtshine fun blut un fun gezegekhts,  
Nit! Rir nit dos gebrekh oyf shvartser dikh fun dr'erd.*

*5 Avek! Es shtinkt fun mir, es krikhn oyf mir fresh!  
Du zukhst dayn tate-mame do? Du zukhst dayn khaver?  
Zey zaynen do! Zey zaynen do! Nor s'shtinkt fun zey an aver!  
Avek! Zey loyzn zikh tserepete mit hent tseboygene vi mesh...*

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<sup>49</sup> In her research, Amelia Glaser has examined the significance behind the setting in Horoditch and noted that “there are, even a century later, twenty-four towns with the name ‘Horodishche’ in Ukraine. ‘Horodishche,’ meaning ‘town,’ renders the site of the pogrom an ‘everytown.’” Amelia Glaser, *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia's Literary Borderlands: From the Shtetl Fair to the Petersburg Bookshop* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 132. Research by David Roskies (to be examined further in this chapter) suggests that this poema was indeed written in direct response to specific pogrom that took place in a specific Horoditch in the Cherkasy region of Ukraine in October 1919.



9 *A kupe koytik gret – fun untn biz aroyf iz...  
Na! Vos dir vilt zikh, dul-vint, krats aroys un nem dir!  
Antkegn zitst der kloyster, vi a tkhoir, bay kupe oysgeshtikte oyfes...*

12 *O, kheylevene himlen! Aykh tsu lange yor di shabesdike hemder!  
Un trogt gezunterhayt, un nakhes, ale, ale!  
Yud-alef tishrey tarpe”alef...*

1 No! Don’t lick, heavenly tallow, my pasted beards,  
Brown streams of tar pour from my mouths;  
Oh, brown leavens of blood and sawdust,  
No! Don’t turn over the broken black thigh of the earth...

5 Away! I stink, frogs crawl on me!  
You’re looking for your mom and dad here? You’re searching for your friend?  
They are here! They are here! But they stink of a foul odor.  
Away! They ungainly delouse themselves with hands twisted like brass...

9 A mound of filthy laundry, from the bottom until the top.  
Here! What are you in the mood for, crazed-wind, scrape out and take for yourself!  
Across sits the church, like a polecat, by a mound of strangled fowl.

12 Oh, tallowed heavens! May your Shabbos shirts live many more years!  
And wear them in good health, with delight, all, all!  
11 Tishrei 5681...<sup>50</sup>

In writing this sonnet from the first-person, the poet creates an estranged depiction of pogrom violence, a horror to which Eastern European Jewry had become accustomed. As the poet becomes one with the mound, so too does the poem’s physical structure. Markish writes this sonnet in mixed iambs, beginning with iambic hexameter in the first stanza before transitioning to iambic heptameter and reaching lengths as long as iambic nonameter by the third.<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> From this point, all translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

<sup>51</sup> In this regard, the influence of Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists on Markish’s work is clear. In her analysis of the Futurists’ influence on Markish’s early poetry, Amelia Glaser explains that “although Markish does not fully embrace the [words-in-freedom] (*parole in libertà*) advocated by the Italians, his inconsistent iambic meter and mixed rhyme scheme do gesture towards the kind of formal asymmetry practiced by the Russian futurists.” Amelia Glaser, “A Shout from Somewhere,” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 52. This quote comes in

poem's jagged lines of mixed iambs become gradually wider at its base and narrower at the peak, imitating the Mound's asymmetry and erratic construction. It begins with an initially consistent enclosed rhyme scheme (AbbACddC), but even Markish's rhymes contribute to the poem's unpleasant and gruesome tone. The feminine rhyme created by the words "tar" (*dzyegekhsts*; yid: דזיעגעכץ) and "sawdust" (*gezegekhts*; yid: געזעגעכץ) in lines 2 and 3 creates a particularly guttural example, as the combination of ט and ק makes for an extremely abrasive consonant cluster ("khts").<sup>52</sup> This overt use of Slavic words is considered a break from what was considered literary language at the time. The third and fourth stanzas exclusively feature feminine rhyme in a scheme of alternate pairs followed by a couplet (efefgg). Both alternate rhymes are agrammatical, and the exact rhyme between *aroyf iz* (ארױפֿ איז) and *oyfes* (עױפֿות) looks even less natural when comparing the Yiddish words spelled in their original Hebrew letters.<sup>53</sup> Markish ends this opening sonnet with an assonant couplet that creates a slant rhyme even more visually unappealing – the words *ale ale* (אַלע אַלע) and *tarpe"alef* (תּרפּ"א). The imperfect rhymes at the bottom of the sonnet (the Mound's base) reveal a terrestrial crudeness or structural instability, while the perfect rhymes at the top reflect the celestial harmony commonly associated with the heavens. Nevertheless, the entire poem is visibly peculiar and unpleasant to recite, accentuating

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reference to the poem "I take my leave of you" (*Ikh zegn zikh mit dir*) from Markish's first collection *Shveln* (Thresholds), published in Kyiv in 1919.

<sup>52</sup> All transliterations in this paper follow the standards as defined by YIVO.

<sup>53</sup> Markish incorporated agrammatical rhymes into his poetry throughout his career, often using creativity to add emphasis. Yael Chaver notes that early in his career, Markish rarely formally rhymed his poetry, but used abundant slant-rhyme and assonance instead. Yael Chaver, "Jewish Radicalism: Hebrew in Peretz Markish's Early Poetry," in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 18. Agrammatical and visibly peculiar rhymes were also one of the most distinctive characteristics of Vladimir Mayakovsky's verse at this time.

the uncomfortable disgust one might feel upon seeing the warped mound in the Horoditch market square. Throughout *Di kupe*, Markish continues to embrace poetic tradition while simultaneously using it to instill his readers with a sense of discomfort rather than beauty.

The manner in which the opening sonnet resembles the Mound estranges Markish's symbol of pogrom violence. However, in the original 1921 edition of the poema, published by the Warsaw branch of Kultur-lige, the stanzas are centered with spacing that does not allow the sonnet to visibly resemble a mound. Markish made substantial changes to the final stanza for the 1922 Kyiv edition that elongated line 13, creating a clearer mound shape and substantiating the argument that he intended his sonnet to look like a mound or mountain. Though the poet's creative intentions will never be certain, when using the longum and breve symbols, the scansion of this opening sonnet (1922 edition) can be represented as follows:

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  ~ _ ~ _ ~ _

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While not a perfect mound, each stanza features elongating lines that form structures reminiscent of a pyramid or mound shape. The stylistic decision to format a sonnet in the Mound's image would also conform to Markish's obsession with manipulating aesthetics to create a sense of

unease for his readers and subvert established tradition.<sup>54</sup> In his analysis of Markish's 1922 article "Mit farmakhte oygn" (With Closed Eyes), Roy Greenwald notes how "Markish situates the enthusiasm with which the Yiddish avant-garde embraced materialistic representation within the context of Jewish religious tradition."<sup>55</sup> Though Markish's readers were not religious, they would have understood the significance of formatting verse in the Mound's image as an act of heresy that breaks the Second Commandment.<sup>56</sup> In this regard, Markish disturbs readers through both content *and* form, adding to the subversiveness of *Di kupe*.

### ***Markish's Mound as a Monument of Destruction***

Svetlana Boym's elaborations on Viktor Shklovsky's conceptualization of *ostranenie* (estrangement) play a vital role in better understanding Markish's status as a pogrom poet and

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<sup>54</sup> Markish's preoccupation with horrifying his readership is exemplified by his declaration in the 1922 manifesto for his literary almanac *Di khalyastre* (The Gang): "Our criterion is not beauty, but horror." Translation by Rebecca Margolis. This quote appears in Avraham Novershtern's article on Peretz Markish. Avraham Novershtern. 2010. Markish, Perets. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Markish\\_Perets](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Markish_Perets).

<sup>55</sup> Greenwald, Roy. "Pogrom and Avant-Garde: Peretz Markish's *Di Kupe*." *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 69. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.16.3.65>. El Lissitzky's *Khad gadya* (The Only Kid, 1919) stands as one of the most prominent and subversive examples demonstrating this enthusiasm for materialistic representation shared among the Yiddish avant-garde. Lissitzky's series of eleven lithographs portrays the popular Passover song, but as Nancy Perloff explains "several stylistic and iconographic elements that were incorporated into the final two plates for the lithographs of 1919 underscore Lissitzky's interest in the song as a parable of the Russian Revolution, of the defeat of the czarist rule and the victory and liberation of the Russian masses." The final plate features the red hand of God, "clearly a symbol of the Soviet people," having reached down and slain the angel of death, who had been wearing the tsarist crown." Nancy Perloff, "Introduction" in *Had gadya: The Only Kid (Facsimile of El Lissitzky's Edition of 1919)* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004), v.

<sup>56</sup> As it is written in Exodus 20:4 (The Contemporary Torah, JPS, 2006): "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth."

his future role as a leading Soviet-Yiddish writer. Building upon Boym postulation that Shklovsky's *ostranenie* was estrangement for the sake of the world's renewal, it becomes evident that Markish's harsh expressionist poetry and chillingly warped imagery accurately depicted the circumstances of the time. The poet relies on estrangement to reproduce textually the existing atmosphere across a Ukrainian landscape ravaged by revolution, civil war, and pogroms. In her research on the work of Dovid Bergelson, Harriet Murav uses the term *oylem-hatoye* to describe the Eastern European space in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. She describes how "in 1921 'the world of chaos' had overtaken Moscow. The term '*oylem-hatoye*' refers to the universe before creation and also means a kind of purgatory, a way station in which atonement is made for prior sins."<sup>57</sup> This concept of purgatory aptly applies to Markish's poema, in which the dead lie unburied and filthy, still awaiting purification (*tare*).<sup>58</sup> In *Di kupe*, Markish places himself in the midst of this *oylem-hatoye*, dominated by violence and darkness, with the monumental Mound at its center.

Markish's subversion of Jewish biblical tradition amplifies the profane and allows the Mound to eclipse the sublime in its monumentality. Throughout the poema, the presence of the grotesque Mound neither commemorates nor mourns the dead; instead, it destabilizes conventions of society, art, and nature by blanketing the world with its destructive shadow. The Mound serves a similar function as Boym's monuments to estrangement, but in this case, pogrom violence and Jewish suffering predicates the renewal generated by the heap of corpses.

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<sup>57</sup> Harriet Murav, *David Bergelson's Strange New World: Untimeliness and Futurity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 209.

<sup>58</sup> *Tare* (heb: *tahara*) is one of the most important aspects of preparing the Jewish body for burial. A form of ritual purification, the body is washed, cleansed, and dressed in the traditional burial shrouds during the process of *tore*.

Through depicting the Mound's immensity, Markish reappropriates symbols of natural and manufactured wonder and distorts them to serve his caustic depictions of this devastation. One notable example occurs in Poem 24 when the Mound grows so large as to block out the sun and cast its shadow over the world:

*15 Farroyhert men gloz fun tsebrokhene fentster,  
Me startshet di oygn fun berg bay di yamen,  
– A vunder, a vunder, a nes! Like-kheyme!*

*18 Farshfelt zikh di togzun mit blut un mit ayter,  
Mit peygershe kupe, mit Bovl fun toyte...*

15 Glass of shattered windows blacken with smoke,  
Eyes from mountains by the seas jut out,  
– A wonder, a wonder, a miracle! Solar eclipse!

18 The day's sun is screened with blood and with pus,  
With cadaverous Mound, with a Babel of the dead.

Markish's juxtaposition of the sublime awe of a solar eclipse with the profane grotesquerie of the Mound instills in readers a disorienting effect, further engendered by the terse amphibrachic tetrameter employed to describe this gruesome scene. The "wonder" and "miracle" of the solar eclipse is caused directly by the Mound which obscures the sun "with blood and pus." Linguistic signifiers and contradictions further add to the pessimism and gloom created by Markish's obscene imagery. In line 17, the exclamation "A wonder, a wonder, a miracle!" establishes an expectation for something positive or wondrous before introducing the foreboding solar eclipse (*like-kheyme*),<sup>59</sup> deemed by Talmudic interpretation to be a bad omen for the entire world and a

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<sup>59</sup> Throughout his career, Markish often used words from *loshen-koydesh* ("the language of holiness," i.e., Hebrew and rabbinical Hebrew-Aramaic) for negatively connotated words, symbols, and concepts. This practice was common among other Yiddish modernists, who relied on *loshen-koydesh* to express the profane and vulgar, but particularly exaggerated throughout Markish's oeuvre.

harbinger of judgment from God.<sup>60</sup> Yet, it is not God but the Mound that creates the eclipse. The implications are twofold: this solar eclipse is manmade in the sense that men constructed the Mound; it is also manmade in the sense that it is composed of human carcasses. The ardor with which Markish extols the Mound and treats it as a divine entity allows the heap of corpses to exist paradoxically as both a direct representation of the mortality of the individual and the immortality of collective suffering.

In this excerpt, Markish plays upon the Tower of Babel myth and places the Mound at its center. The Tower of Babel's monumentality makes it a fitting comparison for Markish, who like the Mound sought to pierce the heavens.<sup>61</sup> In her theorizations of revolutionary monumentality, Svetlana Boym also links the architectural aspiration of "touching the sky" back to the Tower of Babel, which she refers to as "an unfinished utopian monument turned mythical ruin." Boym elaborates that "in the case of the Tower of Babel, the tale of architectural utopia and its ruination is mirrored by the relatable parable about language. The Tower of Babel... was built to ensure perfect communication with God. Its failure ensured the survival of art."<sup>62</sup> Markish's Babel of the dead operates under inverted principles. The Mound came into existence not to ensure communication with God but to reject Him altogether. It is a monument of dystopian ruination. Furthermore, Markish wrote his poem not after the Mound's destruction, but while its

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<sup>60</sup> According to Sukkot 29a:8 (The William Davidson Talmud): "The Sages taught: When the sun is eclipsed it is a bad omen for the entire world."

<sup>61</sup> Elik Elhanan notes Markish's obsession with piercing the heavens in his article on blasphemy in the long poems of Markish and Uri Tsevi Grinberg. Elik Elhanan, "'Rear the Head like a Middle Finger . . . and Pierce the Heavens': The Long Poem as a Site of Blasphemy, Obscenity, and Friendship in the Works of Peretz Markish and Uri Tsevi Greenberg." *Dibur Literary Journal*, 4, no.1 (2017): 53-74.

<sup>62</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 211.

presence remained etched in the collective consciousness of his readership; *Di kupe* is meant to depict reality as it existed at that moment.<sup>63</sup> Under these circumstances, the poet was forced to manipulate his art (i.e., his aesthetics) to fit a world dominated by the Mound and its influence.

Throughout *Di kupe*, the Mound competes with and is compared to the monumental structures of biblical lore, both natural and manmade. These include the Tower of Babel, Mount Sinai, and Ararat, the perceived resting place of Noah's ark following the great flood. In poem 18, Markish provides an image of the new moon appearing atop the Mound:

11 *Un vi di teyve oyf Ararat  
Shtelt oyf der kupe zikh der moyled...*

13 *"Arayngeyt, aynvoyner fun shive,  
Di fel fun shkie ligt gekoylet...*

...

17 *Mit fresnvarg lod, moyled, on zikh,  
Leyg oyf oyf zikh a por neveyles",*

11 And like the ark on Ararat  
The new moon stands perched on the Mound...

13 "Enter, occupant of *shive*,  
The skin of the twilight lies slaughtered...

...

17 Load yourself, new moon, with foodstuffs,  
Add on a pair of decaying carcasses,"

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<sup>63</sup> David Roskies has noted the historical accuracies that inform Markish's text. Roskies points to E. D. Rosental's *Megillat hatevah* (The Chronicle of Slaughter), published in Palestine in 1927 to determine the scope of the Horoditch pogrom, which took place two days before Yom Kippur and resulted in 216 deaths. David Roskies. "The Pogrom Poem and the Literature of Destruction." *Notre Dame English Journal* 11, no. 2 (1979): 89–113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40062456>.



As a new Ararat, the Mound appears to signify the dawn of a new era after a flood of violence, but a series of inconsistencies complicate this conventional interpretation. The appearance of the new moon contradicts the Hebrew calendar which is based on the lunar cycle. In his opening sonnet, Markish dates his poem the 11<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei, at which point the moon would already be eleven days into its cycle.<sup>64</sup> The poet's distortion of time rejects Jewish tradition in favor of a new, chaotic order. Furthermore, the moon sits atop the Mound "like the ark," but is just beginning to load itself with pairs of decaying carcasses. Markish uses the *loshen-koydesh* (the Holy Tongue) term *neveyle*, meaning carcass or carrion – terms that signify not rebirth and renewal but death and decay. With the Mound serving as its foundation, the new moon comes to symbolize the beginning of an era of degeneration and darkness, metaphorically depicted by Markish's chilling proclamation that "The skin of the twilight lies slaughtered..." The Mound initiates a new cycle of chaos and suffering in which the natural order is overturned.

### ***The Subversiveness of Markish's Di kupe as Literary Monument***

As Markish's Mound functions as a physical monument of destruction, so too does his pogrom poem function as a literary monument. As mentioned previously, Markish works within established traditions (Judaic, Slavic, etc.) but subverts them to serve his poetics of violence and anarchy. This is evident in the instances already considered, in which the poet compares the Mound to Mount Ararat and refers to it as a Babel of the dead. Along with cultural tradition, Markish manipulates poetic form in an act of literary subversion. He modifies modern practices in versification and narratology to destabilize meaning and connotations in a process of semantic

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<sup>64</sup> The term *moyle* refers to the new moon but can also mean "birth." In this case, it refers to the time that the new moon is born. That is, when the first sliver of crescent appears in the sky.

restructuring. Markish accomplishes this restructuring partially through his use of *loshen-koydesh* and Slavicisms, but he is also able to do so through his manipulation of rhyme and meter. This process can be seen in poem 24, which features the solar eclipse:

*1 O, kumen un durkhgeyn a dor nokh a dor vet  
In broyt, un in zalts, un in dayges farhorevet,  
Vet efsher baym mishkns farloshener  
Kro-shayn  
Zikh pshteln tseyln un gletn di groshns.*

*6 Un vet men a mol shoyt  
Di zunshayn  
Zikh vintshn,  
Z'iz mitn dem moltsayt fun veltishn heln  
Vert koytik der droysn,  
Tseveynen zikh shveln...  
Un onshvimt in mit fun der velt a geshpenster  
Un kratst on der zun zikh dem rukn un lestert:*

– “*Se bayst mikh! Se shtinkt fun mir, brider un shvester!*”

*15 Farroyhert men gloz fun tsebrokhene fentster,  
Me startshet di oygn fun berg bay di yamen,  
– A vunder, a vunder, a nes! Like-kheyme!*

*18 Farshfelt zikh di togzun mit blut un mit ayter,  
Mit peygershe kupe, mit Bavel fun toyte...*

*20 Un lestert di kupe – a koytike khmare:  
– “Un ver vet mikh ta’aren?...  
Un ver vet mikh treystn?...  
N’fun vos far a mabl – a blondzshnde teyve  
Vet toybn mir brengen aher in der toyt-shtot?...”*

*25 O, vint fun der midber, – du st’blaybn  
Getray mir,  
A kush ton mir efsher fun feldz Prometey vet!...*

*28 – Farbay mir, farbay mir,  
Mayn kop vet keyn opru nit gebn keyn teyve,  
Mayn harts vet keyn trunk zayn far midbershe fi,*

*31 – Bedomikh khayi!  
– Bedomikh khayi!*

1 Oh, generation after generation will arrive and pass through  
With bread, and with salt, and with exacerbated concerns,  
Will they, perhaps by the ark's extinguished  
Crow-shine,  
Halt, count, and caress their groschens.

6 And if once again will  
The sunshine  
Be desired,  
Then in the middle of a meal of global radiance  
The outdoors will become dirty  
Thresholds will burst into tears...  
And a specter will swim up in the middle of the world  
And scratch its back on the sun and blaspheme:

– “I itch! I stink, brothers and sisters!”

15 Glass from shattered windows blacken with smoke,  
Eyes from mountains by the seas jut out,  
– A wonder, a wonder, a miracle! Solar eclipse!

18 The day's sun is screened with blood and with pus,  
By cadaverous Mound, by a Babel of the dead.

20 And the Mound blasphemes – a dirty cloud:  
– “And who will purify me for burial?...  
And who will console me?...  
And from what flood – will a wandering ark  
Bring me doves here to the dead-city?...”

25 Oh, desert wind, – you will remain  
Loyal to me,  
Perhaps Prometheus will kiss me from his rock!...

28 – Pass by me, pass by me,  
My head will not offer the ark any respite,  
My heart will not be any drink for desert cattle.

31 – In thy blood live!  
– In thy blood live!

Markish's verse is filled with juxtapositions and contradictions that once again operate at the visual, aural, and formal levels. The 32-line poem features playful wordplay and imagery woven into scenes of immense horror and pain. The image of the Mound appearing like a specter to

scratch its back on the sun presents a gentler depiction of pogrom violence than the cadaverous “Babel of the dead” introduced mere lines later. The introduction of the solar eclipse in lines 15-17 serves as the poem’s fulcrum, its physical center and the pivot point at which the tone turns noticeably gloomier.

Markish creates an array of rhymed pairings to introduce semantic links between concepts and terms. The slant rhyme created by the words *kro-shayn* (crow-shine) and *groschen* (groschen) immediately captures the reader’s attention at the end of the first stanza, which is set in total darkness. The *zunshayn* (sunshine) introduced in the second stanza juxtaposes the *kro-shayn* of the first, but the specter of the Mound will forever prevent those helpless generations from claiming this sunshine once more. When reading Markish’s verse, one must pay close attention to agency – who has it and who does not. Markish adjusts his language and verse in a matter that destabilizes conventional oppositions between the profane and the sublime, the dark and the light, and so forth. In this case, the living conflict with dead for control over the dawn.<sup>65</sup> Throughout the course of the poema, the negatively connotated elements increasingly dominate the positive. The dark and the profane consume the light and the sublime, as Markish distorts the significance of established signifiers and remaps them into the same semantic field as the Mound. The image of the Mound creating a solar eclipse symbolically portrays this process of semantic restructuring – the sun is overtaken by the Mound, which casts a shadow of darkness over everything around it, engulfing that which once belonged to the sublime. Markish further accentuates this remapping by referring to the Mound as a “Babel of the dead.” As a new Babel,

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<sup>65</sup> Throughout his career, Markish had remained preoccupied with reaching or escaping the dawn. This informs the title of the Legenda Series collection of essays on his life and works, *A Captive of the Dawn*. It is possible that these lines also allude to the 1913 Russian Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* (*Pobeda nad solntsem*).

the Mound introduces a uniform language of the profane. Markish's decision to directly quote the Mound in lines 14 and 21-24 is significant in two regards. Firstly, it gives voice to an entity entirely composed of the dead, those who inherently have no voice. Secondly, the epithet "Babel of the dead" signifies a supposed impossibility for live communication. So long as the Mound stands, the language of the dead remains universal.

The interplay of poetic form and semantics comes to a head in lines 31-32, in which Markish ends the poem by quoting Ezekiel 16:6:

*31 – Bedomikh khayi!*  
*– Bedomikh khayi!*

<sup>31</sup> "In thy blood live!"  
"In thy blood live!"

This allusion refers to the moment when God passes over an abandoned female newborn alone in a field. Despite its dirty and repellent appearance, God grants the child life in an act of redemption.<sup>66</sup> Markish makes this biblical metaphor literal – the mound lives thanks to the blood of its corpses – in an act that strips the biblical prophecy of its redemptive possibilities. The poet alludes to components of the Jewish liturgical tradition but seeks neither nationalistic nor messianic interpretations in biblical expressions. Instead, he chooses to distort traditional interpretations and relishes their profanity. He inserts this Ezekiel reference in an act that rejects both the expectations set by Jewish biblical tradition and those by standard poetic practice. This poem is dominated by feminine rhyme; not a single line ends on an end stress until the final three (lines 30-32), in which the poet rhymes *fi* (cattle) with *khayi* (live). The decision to end with a masculine rhyme breaks from the precedent set by the initial twenty-nine lines of the poem and

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<sup>66</sup> Leonard Wolf provides this insightful commentary in the footnotes to his translation of *Di kupe* in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Viking, 1987).

contradicts the Ezekiel reference in which the nation of Israel is represented by an abandoned *female* infant. In this sense, Markish relies on his readers' familiarity with both poetic form and Jewish biblical tradition to enhance the subversiveness of his writing. The reference to Ezekiel 16:6 suggests the cyclical nature of suffering in Markish's world; the child is permitted refuge from this instance of pogrom violence, but presumably destined to suffer the same horrific fate of those who had perished in the Mound. The "cadaverous Mound," the "Babel of the dead" comes to embody an omnipotent unholy force that supplants the supposedly just God. Thus, granting the abandoned child life becomes an act of retribution – a sentencing to a life of suffering in a dominion of darkness ruled over by the Mound. Referring back to Boym, Markish's estranged allusion to Ezekiel 16:6 signifies a sense of renewal, but into a world of violence and chaos. In its more literal sense, the command to live in blood fully embodies Markish's aesthetics of the grotesque and the profane.<sup>67</sup>

An examination into Henry Berlewi's cover illustration for *Di kupe* (figure 5) further clarifies both how the poema functions as a monument to destruction and the relationship between pogrom violence and art. Berlewi created the image for Kultur-lige's initial 1921 publication of Markish's poema in Warsaw. His illustration, a cubist portrayal of mountains stacking upon one another with the title "די קופע" (*Di kupe*) and the poet's name "פּרֶץ מֵאַרְקִישׁ" (Peretz Markish) emanating from the peaks, is a sparse visual representation of the poema's content and notably devoid of any human presence.

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<sup>67</sup> In his manifesto, published in the first volume of the literary almanac *Albatros*, Uri Tsevi Grinberg echoes Markish's expressionist vulgarity: "Derfar dos groyzame inem lid / derfar dos khaotishe inem bild / derfar der oyfgeschrey funem blut" (Thus the gruesome in the poem / thus the chaotic in the image / thus the outcry from the blood). Translation by Seth Wolitz. Seth L. Wolitz. 2010. Khalyastre. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Khalyastre>.



**Figure 5.** Berlewi's cover illustration for *Di kupe*, published in Warsaw, 1921.

The artist's decision to include many undifferentiated mountains suggests that he considered the Horoditch pogrom to be another instance of catastrophe in a Jewish history filled with violence – the Mound comes to symbolize just one in a series of similarly gruesome and debilitating disasters. This portrayal emphasizes a cumulative effect of suffering that encourages a more linear interpretation of Jewish time. Berlewi's peaks represent catastrophes that occurred over history, from the biblical past up until the present day. Alternatively, Berlewi's merging of mountains encourages viewers to position the Mound alongside Sinai, Ararat, Babel, and the monumental peaks of Jewish biblical history. The manner in which the poet's name and the title of the poem blends into the mountain peaks blurs the distinction between word and image. Berlewi's lettering rises from the ashes of the Mound, as if the result of a natural occurrence and

independent of human action. As Markish's opening sonnet resembles the Mound in form, so too does Berlewi's calligraphy. The materials comprising both the mountains and the title are one in the same – a suggestion that both Horoditch's Mound and Markish's *Kupe* were built from the same substance, suffering. In this sense, art comes not as a reaction to catastrophe but as direct result of it. Berlewi's illustration does not react to the traumas of pogrom violence; it intends to portray it.

Just a year later, Berlewi illustrated the cover page for Markish's *Radio*, in which the title and poet's name appear as part of a radio wave. Although *Radio* represents a much more modern and Constructivist approach for Berlewi, the artist employs a similar formula as he had for *Di kupe* – the lettering comes not from the artist but from the content of the illustration. Berlewi relinquishes creative control of his typography, first to the smoldering ashes of pogrom violence and later to the jagged bolts of electrification. Berlewi's cover illustrations do not further any political agenda or even reflect a subjective perspective; they center around purely creative expression. First, it was the destruction of pogrom violence that defined this expression, and then the modern technologies of radio transmission and electrification. In both cases, artistic expression occurs independently of subjective perspectives and with no underlying agenda. Art's monumentality comes not as the result of its creators' conscious designs but as objective portrayals of the surrounding world.

### **The Pogrom Poem as Destructive Force**

Markish's poema is not an elegy for the victims of the pogrom at Horoditch but a work that foregoes that mourning process entirely through acts of subversion and dismissal. The poet notes the victims at Horoditch and says *Kadesh* in the epigraph, but the scope of his poema



extends far beyond the human casualties of pogrom violence. *Di kupe* is a destructive force itself, in which Markish attacks the religious ideologies and flawed system of market capitalism that made such violence possible.<sup>68</sup> By critiquing religion and socioeconomics together, the poet positioned himself to transition into a more internationally oriented political forum and write poetry with a greater geopolitical scope.<sup>69</sup> Throughout *Di kupe*, the poet subverts traditional Jewish customs and rejects mourning rites, building upon what David Roskies has termed the “literature of destruction.”<sup>70</sup> In their examination of Markish’s career development, David Shneer and Robert Adler Peckerar note that the poet’s early works “rejected the traditional Jewish polysystem and exploded the whole idea of lamentation and martyrology.”<sup>71</sup> As Hayyim Nachman Bialik had nearly two decades prior, Markish relies on Jewish biblical tradition and the prophetic mode to prove God’s futility and initiate a shift away from traditional Jewish mourning.<sup>72</sup> Yet, even in this pogrom poema, Markish sought to expand the scope of his writing

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<sup>68</sup> Refer to Amelia Glaser’s *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia’s Literary Borderlands: From the Shtetl Fair to the Petersburg Bookshop*, published by Northwestern University Press in 2012, for more on this topic.

<sup>69</sup> In her most recent book *Songs in Dark Times: Yiddish Poetry of Struggle from Scottsboro to Palestine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), Amelia Glaser focuses on Markish’s internationalism and the manner in which the Soviet Yiddish poets leverages Jewish collective memory of the Spanish Inquisition to comment on the fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>70</sup> This would be the title for Roskies book *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, first published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1988. The book is a compilation of over 100 texts and excerpts from a tradition encompassing over 2000 years of Jewish responses to catastrophe.

<sup>71</sup> David Shneer and Robert Adler Peckerar. “Peretz Markish (1895-1952): Modern Marxist and Yiddishist,” in *Makers of Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Artists, Leaders, and the World They Made* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 331.

<sup>72</sup> Bialik wrote “In the City of Slaughter” following the Kishinev pogroms of 1903. Bialik’s pogrom poem drew upon the writer’s visit to Kishinev, where he interviewed survivors and

to encompass the struggles that extend beyond his Jewish readers. This desire is apparent from the very first line of the epigraph, in which Markish resists dedicating his poem to specifically Jewish victims and instead begins with the line, “To you, victims from Ukraine” (*Nokh aykh, harugim fun ukrayne*). Though Markish chooses the Hebraic term *harugim* (“murder victims” or “corpses”) to describe these pogrom casualties, his use of *loshen-koydesh* does not intend to honor dead. Markish follows in the Yiddish modernist tradition of using the Holy Tongue to describe the profane and unsavory. In the verses to follow, the poet undermines the viability of established customs, traditions, and folklores that range from Jewish burial rituals to Orthodox baptisms. His poetry records the devastation of pogrom violence and acts as its own destructive force – one that disposes of the need for Judaism and religion, as such, and criticizes the harsh and dehumanizing socioeconomic framework of the Eastern European landscape.

### ***Establishing a Priestly Mode of Yiddish Modernism***

Throughout *Di kupe*, Markish brashly dismisses the Jewish God, Christ, and Allah as ineffective relics of the past – powerless and inept deities. In many instances, the poet focuses more on accentuating the plight of these gods than on mourning the victims of the Horoditch pogrom. Markish emphasizes these gods’ deficiencies to underscore the scope of destruction to

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wrote a report based on these first-hand accounts. Bialik’s poem, written in Hebrew, earned him the reputation as being the father of pogrom literature, a title that Markish would assume with his *Di kupe*. In his seminal work, *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, Dan Miron determines how Bialik used the prophetic mode to present “the hopes for a Hebrew or Zionist revival as mere delusions, the final, cruel hoax on the part of malicious or indifferent Providence. The poems presented the Jewish people as moribund, doomed to physical persecution and spiritual self-debilitation.” Nevertheless, Miron views “In the City of Slaughter” as a call to action – a message to the Jews of Eastern Europe to become more assertive in fighting for their right to self-determination. Dan Miron, *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 6.

the world itself. His poema does not mourn the loss of individual victims; it mourns the loss of order to the Mound. In poem 8, Markish groups the Abrahamic gods in with other “misled pilgrims” and directs them to a brothel, while using his self-proclaimed status of *koyen-godl* (high priest) to crown the Mound as Queen of the mountains.<sup>73</sup> By framing the gods as depraved wanderers while praising the profane Mound, Markish inverts the established power dynamics of religious hierarchies:

*1 O, shparber – treyst mayne, o, kupe mist mit shneyelekh farmishte,  
Gefroyrn kh'poyder zikh oyf dir, glaykh vi a shmate a farveyte;  
– Mir iz bashert dayn koyen-godl zayn, vi in a mishkn,  
Mir iz bashert bay dir tsu dinen di avoyde...*

*5 Alla! Khristos! Shaday! Ver nokh? – Aher, farbaygeyer, farfirte piligrimen!  
Aher, farblondzshete, s'iz a beys-zoyne!...  
Fun gor der velt, fun erd un fun himlen  
Far malke iber ale berg vel ikh dikh, kupe, kroynen!...*

*9 – Geyt, valgert zikh a gantse nakht oyf oysgeshmirte tome baykher  
Loyft oyspompen fun zikh di letste tropn shimldike zere,  
Un huliet op, vi alte oyver-botldike sultans raykhe...*

*12 O, veynendiker shparber!  
Di vintn – fligl zeyere mit blut hobn bashvorn,  
Un ikh, dayn koyen-godl, munterdik un vakh bin!...*

*1 Oh, sparrow – my consolation, oh Mound, garbage mixed with snowflakes,  
Frozen I babble up to you, just like a buried rag;  
– I am fated to become your High Priest, as if in a sanctuary,  
I am fated by you to fulfill the worship...*

*5 Allah! Christ! Shaday! Who else? – Here, passerby, misled pilgrims!  
Here, wanderers, is a brothel!...  
From all over the world, from lands and heavens  
As queen over all the mountains will I, Mound, crown you!...*

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<sup>73</sup> In Judaism, the “high priest is not a public official, a teacher or a leader[...], but rather a divinely designated, sacred representative of the Israelite people. His entire function is ceremonial. In his person, dressed in the priestly vestments, he represents the body politic[...] He is also the sole officiant in the annual Day of Atonement ceremonies[...], which means he is the only person ever to enter the inner sanctum.” *The Jewish Study Bible*. Second edition. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 319.

9 – Go, wander about a whole night on greasy impure bellies  
Run to pump out of yourself the last drops of moldy semen,  
And be merry, like old rich senile sultans...

12 Oh, woeful sparrow!  
The winds – their wings have made an oath with blood.  
And I, your High Priest, am alert and in good spirits!...

Formally, this sonnet features an array of assonant pairs and slant rhymes throughout the first three stanzas. The blatant imperfections of these rhymes suggest a lack of harmony in Markish's world and add to its disorder. The poet relishes in his role as *koyen-godl* to the Mound and uses this priestly mode to pledge his loyalty and obligations to this new power. Markish's worship of the Mound simultaneously debases the dead and their "greasy impure bellies" on which the Mound wanders. In an inversion of God's first commandment to Adam, Markish implores the Mound to "pump out of [itself] the last drops of moldy semen, / And be merry, like old rich senile sultans."<sup>74</sup> The Mound comes to initiate an eschatological drive toward impotency – the end of the cycle of reproductive life and, thus, an end to the cycle of Jewish suffering. The Mound's ability to destabilize the establishment allows Markish to break free from the seemingly endless series of Jewish calamities. Markish's poetic persona-cum-*koyen-godl*'s insolence signifies a growth in agency from this scene in poem 2, in which he laments his misfortune of being born into yet another cycle of destruction:

*11 Oyf mayn harts geyt dul a shtot oys,  
Fun di aksl krikhn rogn;  
– O, du, tsigele fun oyfgang,  
Far tsvey gildn oysgebitn,  
Nokh a mol kh'bin oyf dayn bris!...*

*16 O, ir mayne blinde tates!  
Vi fl znus hot mikh getrogn?  
Vi fl trakhtn ongezoifte?...*

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<sup>74</sup> As it is stated in Genesis 1:28 (*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006): "Be fruitful and multiply."

– Vos *zshe shrek ikh zikh a trit ton,*  
*Ikh in mit fun velt-tseris?...*

11 On my heart a crazed city expires,  
From my shoulders crawl its street corners.  
– Oh, you, kid of the sunrise,  
For two gulden bartered,  
Once again I'm at your *bris*.

16 Oh, you my blind fathers,  
How much prostitution has yielded me,  
How many drunken wombs?...  
– So why do I fear taking a step,  
I, in the midst of the tattered-world?

The kid (*tsigele*) alludes to the *Khad gadya* song, which tells of the subjugation of the Land of Israel under various conquering nations. Markish relies on this reference to emphasize the hopelessness of his situation and affront the ancestors that placed him in it. By specifying that the kid was traded for two *gulden* and not two *zuzim*, the poet signifies that the setting for Jewish suffering has shifted from the Land of Israel to the European continent.<sup>75</sup> Despite this vast change in time and place, anguish persists and leads the poet to lash out at his depraved forebearers. He notes their impurities and accentuates their blemishes to signal that the cycle of submissive Jewish impotency must be destroyed. Furthermore, his prostitute-mothers, with their drunken wombs, and blind fathers are no worse than the debauched gods wandering towards the brothel. In this new world of the Mound, Markish portrays Shaday, Christ, and Allah – the major deities of the Abrahamic faiths – as being just as lost and misguided as his depraved ancestors.

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<sup>75</sup> The inclusion of gulden generates a more European context which can be traced back to the currency's use in its medieval Germany connotation, whereas *zuzim* (singular: *zuz*) were coins that were a part of the Jewish currency used during the time of the Roman occupation of Jerusalem.

### *The Hopelessness of a Jewish Past, Present, or Future*

Markish most effectively demonstrates the futility of the Jewish faith by hijacking one of its most essential promises – that of messianic redemption. For his poetic *I*, the path toward redemption comes not upon the arrival of a Messiah figure but of the Mound. In this profaned portrayal of messianic redemption, Markish seeks to wake the corpses in a sardonic play on the Jewish concept of *tkhiyes-ha-meysim* (the Resurrection of the dead).<sup>76</sup> In Poem 9, he seeks to resurrect the dead not into the world to come but into the chaotic world of the Mound:

*15 Az keyner zol aher aher nit tsu geyn,  
Un keyner zol fun danen opgeyn...*

*17 A tsug antkegn tsug mit zetsndike tatsn,  
Fun zaytn tsugn, tseylemt zikh mit tseykhns,  
O, treyst zikh, velt, mit blutiker iluminatsie!...  
Un ikh, vi a farroykherter lamtern,  
Vel geyn  
Aleyn  
Harugim vekn  
On shtekn  
Un on tupen:  
– “Shteyt oyf harugim in der kupe,  
Shteyt oyf tsu avoydes haboyre”!...*

*15 Nobody should come here,  
And no one should depart from here...*

*17 A train against train with seated platters,  
From all directions, trains, cross yourself with signs,  
Oh, console yourself, world, with bloody illumination!...  
And I, like a smoked-out lantern,  
Will go  
Alone  
To waken victims  
Without sticks  
And without taps:*

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<sup>76</sup> Chana Kronfeld has also noted Markish’s “wry twist on the Messianic vision of *tkhiyes-ha-meysim*” in the poet’s elegy to Solomon Mikhoels “Sh Mikhoels – An Eternal Light by Your Coffin.” Chana Kronfeld, “Murdered Modernisms: Peretz Markish and the Legacy of Soviet Yiddish Poetry” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 193.

– “Wake up, corpses in the Mound,  
Wake up for the service of the Creator!”...

Notably, Markish ends this poem with the imperative “*Shteyt oyf tsu avoydes haboyre,*” a command that can also mean “Wake up to serve the Lord.” Traditionally this task of calling the Jews for morning prayer was performed by the *shames* (beadle), who would walk around the shtetl and knock on doors to summon everyone to prayer. Now, Markish completes this task by waking the corpses to serve the Mound. The *avoyde* is also a key component of the Yom Kippur liturgy, in which Jews remember the rituals and rites performed in the Second Temple before its destruction. According to the Talmud, Jews are obligated to study the *koyen-godl*’s ritual so long as the Temple remains destroyed.<sup>77</sup> The profaned significance of this call for reanimation of the victims is multifold. Contrary to established harbingers of resurrection, Markish makes this command neither upon the reconstruction of the Temple nor the coming of a messiah; he declares it upon the appearance of the Mound. But the poet does not wish to resurrect the dead into the world to come; he commands the corpses to stand in the world left behind – a chilling theme that would recur throughout his career.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> This, along with other laws expanding upon the Temple service, can be found in Yoma, the Tractate from the Talmud concerned with Yom Kippur and its rituals.

<sup>78</sup> Markish would return to the concept of resurrecting of the dead in the final poem of his career, an elegy to the famous Soviet Yiddish actor, and Markish’s good friend, Solomon Mikhoels. In one of the poem’s most striking images, Markish writes:

*Baern in di kvorim dikh mit oyfshteyn zeks milion,  
Gemordete, farpaynikte – harugim.*

They honor you by rising in their graves, six million,  
Murdered, tortured – victims.

As in *Di kupe*, the poet portrays victims (*harugim*) standing in the places of their death. In both poems, Markish reanimates the dead only to subject them to more suffering. In *Di kupe*, the dead are resurrected into the world of the Mound; in “Sh. Mikhoels – a ner-tomid baym orn,” the

Throughout *Di kupe*, Markish constantly notes the impurity of the victims' corpses – they have not undergone *tare* and have obviously yet to be buried.<sup>79</sup> Although its opening sonnet clearly sets the action of *Di kupe* in Horoditch on 11 Tishrei 1920, the abstract poema rarely acknowledges the time and space of its world and almost always does so through obscure allusions. The “bloody illumination” referenced in line 19 likely represents the industrial project being started in the East in the nascent Soviet Union – the blood the cost of its undertaking. In this poem, Markish isolates the chronotope of *Di kupe* as a time and space detached from progress and change. As mentioned in lines 15 and 16, “Nobody should come here, / And no one should depart from here.” For those in the Mound, it will forever be 11 Tishrei 1920. In this instance, Markish inverts traditional conceptualizations of Jewish messianic redemption and creates his own profaned version, in which the Mound's arrival signifies the time for resurrection into a smoked-out world of darkness. The poet employs religious tenets to prove their limitations – victims are permitted reanimation, but not in a manner that would grant any form of redemption. As with the Ezekiel reference, Markish takes Jewish possibilities for atonement and reappropriates them to fit his derisive commentaries. The resurrection of the dead is never portrayed in a positive light; it always signifies gloom and suffering in the past, present, and future.

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victims of the Holocaust are resurrected upon the murder of Mikhoels – an event that signified the beginning of a gruesome end for Markish and other leading cultural figures of Soviet Yiddish Jewry. Through seizing the concept of *tkhiyes-ha-meysim*, Markish robs any possibilities for Jewish redemption from these victims.

<sup>79</sup> An important matter of note relating to *tare* and funeral rituals is that Jewish burial shrouds are fashioned after the garments worn by the *koyen-godl* in the Temple on Yom Kippur. In this sense, Markish's role as the *koyen-godl* becomes focused on guiding followers not toward atonement, but a profaned death.



For Markish, possibilities for Jewish messianic redemption are always improbable or futile. Despite this pessimism toward the redemptive power of religion, Markish repurposes parables and legends from the biblical past to fit his anarchic portrayal of the Eastern European present. In the last third of poem 2, Markish describes a modern-day Samson tale, in which the Mound assumes the role of the biblical hero who was famously betrayed by Delilah and imprisoned by the Philistines, who blinded the Jewish judge with spikes. Whereas the original Samson regained his strength after praying to God to avenge him, Markish's appeals to no one:<sup>80</sup>

*21 Hey, tsepreyt zikh, veltn-zaytn!  
Funem Nil biz Dniep di rod itst,  
Du mit oysgeshpizte oygn,  
Hepe, kupe, vildn fiber,  
Iber griber, iber shvel...*

*26 Blinder Shimson! Blinder giber!  
Hor oyf kop shoyt vider shprotsn...  
Hop oyf tshorne, hop oyf boygn  
Un a treysl on di vaytn  
Un tsevaliet gor di velt!*

21 Hey, boundaries of the earth! Spread!  
The mill wheel turns from Nile to Dnieper now.  
You, with spiked out eyes,  
Leap, Mound, wild fever,  
Over threshold, over ditches.

26 Blind Samson, blinded hero,  
Hairs sprouting on your head again.  
Leap upon a bow; on firebrands.  
Make the distance tremble  
And topple all the world!

Samson notably took revenge (*nakam*) on the Philistines who imprisoned and enslaved him by destroying the pillars that held up their temple, killing himself along with over three thousand

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<sup>80</sup> Samson makes these pleas to God in Judges 16:28.

Philistines.<sup>81</sup> Markish deems the Mound, “with spiked out eyes,” to be the new Samson, and his emphatic call for the Mound to “Make the distances tremble / And topple the world” is a plea for it to destroy the metaphorical pillars of society, to dismantle the suppressive institutions of power. The poet distorts spatiotemporal boundaries by transporting Samson’s mill wheel from the Nile to the Dnieper.<sup>82</sup> This spatiotemporal remapping of the Samson tale calls to mind Shneer’s note that Markish mines tradition to subvert it, and it also fits into Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii’s proposal that the culture of the past never fully fades away and serves as a “generative mechanism”:

The essence of culture is such that in it what is past does not ‘fade away,’ that is, does not disappear as events do in the natural flow of time. By fixing itself in the memory of the culture of the past it acquires a constant, but at the same time potential, existence. This cultural memory, however, is constructed not only as a storehouse of texts, but also a kind of generative mechanism. A culture which is united with its past generates not only its future, but also its own past, and in this sense is a mechanism that counteracts natural time.<sup>83</sup>

Despite his subversive intentions, Markish incorporates this reimagining of the Samson tale into *Di kupe* to provide readers with a relatable allusion that substantiates the poet’s call for revenge.

The Mound assuming the role of Samson is significant because it includes a multitude of

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<sup>81</sup> Judges 16:25-31.

<sup>82</sup> The mill wheel image is recurring metaphor in Markish’s literary work and thought. Yael Chaver adeptly highlights a quote from one of Markish’s 1921 essays on modernist aesthetics in which the poet emphasizes the need for innovation: “They [poets in time of storm] must free their minds and hearts for new ways of thought; like millstones they must rid themselves of that which has been ground in order to receive new grain.” Yael Chaver, “Jewish Radicalism: Hebrew in Peretz Markish’s Early Poetry,” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 17.

<sup>83</sup>J. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, “The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture” in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1984), 28.

oppressed peoples and thus permits revenge to come by the hand of the masses and not just one hero. As in the biblical version, Markish's Mound-cum-Samson regains its strength once hairs begin to sprout on its head once more, but the poet makes no reference to Samson's belief or faith in God. The Mound gains its destructive strength not through belief in an external power but through its own suffering. Unlike Lissitzky had in *Khad gadya*, Markish eliminates the prospect that "[God] will redeem [the Jews] with an outstretched arm."<sup>84</sup> In his appeal to the Mound, Markish discards redemption and chooses instead to focus solely on revenge. Most significantly, Markish demands direct retribution against not just the perpetrators of pogrom violence but the Jewish God that permitted such pain and torment to happen.

### ***Di kupe as a Rejection of Judaism as Religion***

Markish's poema signals a rejection of the Jewish faith that had been brewing among members of increasingly assimilated Jewish social classes for decades. Though these Jews had grown less observant, Markish's denunciation of religion is particularly harsh. The poet most emphatically calls for the rejection of Judaism in poem 26, in which the Mound hurls the Ten Commandment back at Mount Sinai and Markish's poetic *persona* delivers the Queen-Mound's decree:

*1 S'iz haynt a milkhike nakht fun ayngeshteltn krigele levone-layb gerotn,  
Dershrekt zikh nit, o shvartse ketz, far umru mayn tupen;  
Ikh gey aykh onzogn a gzeyre fun der malke-kupe:  
– Zi shlydert dem barg sinay op tsurik di tsen gebotn...*

*5 Ir moyl zikh dorshtik roykhert, vi a krater a tsegliter,  
Un troyerik ir zoyf, glaykh vi mit shvartse markh farzotn;*

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<sup>84</sup> As it is written in Exodus 6:6 (*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006): "Then יהוה said to Moses, 'You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.'"

– Hey, berg un markn! Oyf a shvue ruf ikh mit mayn lid aykh,  
Di kupe blutikt dem barg sinay op di tsen gebotn!

1 Today there's a milky night resembling the moon-flesh of a wagered pitcher.  
O black cats, don't be startled by my anxious tapping;  
I go to inform you of a decree from the Sovereign-Mound:  
– She hurls the Ten Commandments back at Mount Sinai...

5 Her mouth thirstily smokes, like a glowing crater,  
And I sadly guzzle it, as if it is boiling marrow;  
– Hey, mountains and markets! I solemnly call you to oath with my song.  
The Mound bloodies Mount Sinai's Ten Commandments!

Markish's description of the Mound with its smoking mouth like a "glowing crater" emphasizes its explosive potential.<sup>85</sup> The portrayal of fire and smoke resembles the setting at Mount Sinai as God descended upon Moses to give him the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:8).<sup>86</sup> However, instead of commandments, Markish's poetic *persona* receives the Mound's *gzeyre*, a term that refers to punishment inflicted by God.<sup>87</sup> In its immediate context, the Mound's *gzeyre* is intimately linked to Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement when God completes judgment of His people. Markish's poetic *persona*, by means of his subservience in delivering the Sovereign-Mound's *gzeyre*, becomes complicit in this most extreme rebuke of God's authority to judge and punish. The Mound's hurling of the Ten Commandments back at Mount Sinai is a symbolic act

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<sup>85</sup> Scholars have long noted the Russian Futurists' preoccupation with explosions. For more on this topic, consult Nina Gurianova's *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) and Nancy Perloff's *Exploidy: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016).

<sup>86</sup> According to Exodus 19:8 (*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006): "Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for יהוה had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently."

<sup>87</sup> This term might also refer to any in a series of decrees that had enabled past pogroms, most notably the Khmelnitsky pogroms of 1648-49 (*gzeyres takh vetat*).

that denounces the pillars of Judaism. As the Mound desecrates this foundation of Judaism with blood and suffering, Markish chooses to embrace this new sovereign authority.

Despite Markish's forceful rejection of Judaism, his poema ends where it began – with a final sonnet that is a near mirror image of the opening one. Cyclicity and repetition play a pivotal role in *Di kupe* and would continue to feature heavily in later works throughout Markish's career. In this instance, the poet makes only a few changes to the final two stanzas that emphasize the fact that he, along with everyone else are there in the Mound:

*9 A kupe koytik gret – fun untn biz aroyf iz...  
Na! Vos dir vilt zikh, dul-vint, krats zikh oys: a kind? A kale?  
Antkegn zitst der kloyster, vi a tkhoyn, bay kupe oysgeshtikte oyfes...*

*12 O, kheylevene himlen, – Mir zaynen do! Mir zaynen do! Mir ale!...  
Yud-alef tishrey tarpe... tsu gots nomen,  
– Omeyn!...*

9 A mound of filthy laundry, from the bottom until the top.  
Here! What do you want, crazed wind, scrape it out: A child? A bride?  
Across sits the church, like a polecat, by a mound of strangled fowl.

12 Oh, tallowed heavens – We are here! We are here! We all are!  
11 Tishrei 5681. To god's name,  
– Amen!...

The repetition in line 12 – “*Mir zaynen do! Mir zaynen do! Mir ale!* (We are here! We are here! We all are!) – both stresses the scope of the pogrom at Horoditch and implicates Markish and his readers as victims to pogrom violence, war, and bloodshed that has ravaged the Eastern European landscape. Markish's primary readership was concentrated in Kyiv, Warsaw, and the other cosmopolitan city-centers located many kilometers from Horoditch. His poema brings the scope of the pain and suffering to his readers, and his poetics help them understand the sights and sounds of such violence. The cyclicity of *Di kupe* suggests that such chaos and destruction

persist. The date is still 11 Tishrei 5681, the day after Yom Kippur, but atonement has not been obtained.

Counterintuitively, Markish ends his poema with the exclamation “*tsu gots nomen, / – Omeyn!...*” (To god’s name, / – Amen!...). As in the opening sonnet, Markish writes this poem in mixed iambs with the same consistent, albeit aurally unpleasant enclosed rhyme schemes. These last two lines, however, break the pattern by creating an agrammatical assonant pairing that is noticeably off rhythm. Jewish custom calls for an extended and pronounced articulation of the second syllable of the word *omeyn*, and Markish manipulates this custom to place his readers in an uncomfortable position – they must either pronounce a short, rushed “*omeyn*” to adhere to the poet’s rhyme scheme or a longer, more emphatic “*omeyn*” in response to his profaned Yom Kippur liturgy as *koyen-godl* for the Mound.<sup>88</sup> Markish’s “*Omeyn!*” appears awkwardly, with a presence that contradicts both the formal structure and narrative content of the poema.

Markish’s function as *koyen-godl* in the world of *Di kupe* substantiates the role of the poet during this cycle of violence and turmoil. The poema’s shocking profanity rarely stems from portrayals of pogrom violence and its mutilated victims. Markish scandalizes his readership by writing so insolently about religion and the dead. The poet disregards any possibilities for redemption for the victims of the Mound and Judaism as religion. Markish’s poema neither commemorates nor mourns the loss of these victims; instead, it expresses disdain for the existing

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<sup>88</sup> As it is stated in Shabbat 119b:5 (*The William Davidson Talmud*): “The Gemara cites statements about the reward for answering amen. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said that anyone who answers: Amen, may His great name be blessed, wholeheartedly, with all his might, they rip his sentence, as it is stated: “When punishments are annulled in Israel, when the people offer themselves, bless the Lord” (Judges 5:2)[...] When one recites: Amen, may His great name be blessed, and blesses God, his punishment is annulled. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Even if one has within him a trace of idolatry, when he answers amen he is forgiven[...] Reish Lakish said: One who answers amen with all his strength, they open the gates of the Garden of Eden before him...”

institutions unable to prevent such atrocities. In this regard, *Di kupe* comes to function primarily as a rejection of God and Judaism as a whole. The poet emphasizes their ineffectiveness and absence in a world now ruled over by the Sovereign Mound.

### **“The Mound” as a Foundation for the Turn to Bolshevism**

When he wrote *Di kupe*, Markish’s embrace of destruction and his cynicism toward the prospect of Jewish messianic redemption acted as liberating forces aesthetically. Ideologically, the violence and chaos provided an impetus that led the poet to produce more politically charged works that increasingly fell in line with Bolshevik values. Glimpses of this transition appear in the later sections of *Di kupe*, in which the poet embraces the Mound’s destructive potential as a force capable of sparking revolutionary action. Markish’s poema served a dual purpose to at once monumentalize the devastation wrought by pogrom violence and substantiate its capacity to drive revolutionary change among his readership. The poet implores his audience to forsake its devotion to Judaism and expectations for messianic redemption, while subtly pushing readers to embrace the Bolshevik struggle as a power capable of ending their persecution. Markish can do so because the Mound, by signaling the end of Eastern European Jewish life as it was, also creates the possibility for a new beginning.

In her discussion on revolutionary estrangement, Svetlana Boym notes that, after the fin de siècle and its “litany of endings,” the “[twentieth century] began with a euphoria of newness that resulted in many social and artistic revolutions.”<sup>89</sup> Boym balances theories of Hannah Arendt and Viktor Shklovsky to articulate the relationship between freedom, renewal, and

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<sup>89</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 224.

aesthetics. Markish's poema is a product of the cultural and political renewal described by Boym – a renewal which necessitated a concrete end to Jewish culture as it existed prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. Markish uses the Mound's monumentality – the immensity of its impact on Jewish society – as a platform from which to speak and push his readers into action against the systemic injustices and the oppressive violence that preclude possibilities for life. As Sinai acted as the site of divine revelation for Moses, Markish's Mound becomes the peak from which his poetic *persona* most strongly renounces Judaism and devotes himself to the Bolshevik cause. In this regard, Markish's Mound comes to act as the foundation on which the poet would build his ideological thought and further develop his revolutionary aesthetics.

A breadth of scholarship analyzing Markish's early embrace of the Soviet project exists, with the work of David Shneer serving as a notable example. In a co-authored chapter from the collection *Makers of Jewish Modernity*, Shneer and Robert Adler Peckerar describe how Markish was able to “make the Bolshevik Revolution Jewish” by explaining that, “when Markish chose to write Yiddish poetry in the biggest revolutionary moment in Russian history (and for many in world history), he was performing a self-consciously radical act. He made the Revolution a modern Jewish event.”<sup>90</sup> The two characterize *Di kupe* as: “a clear break from the accepted poetics of Yiddish poetry in the early decades of the twentieth century—not so much for its radical secularism but for its use of revolutionary poetics to respond to anti-Jewish violence... Markish's fully secular, modern articulation of violence breaks with the redemptive eschatology that embedded the pain of loss into a yearning for the Messiah through lamentations and

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<sup>90</sup> David Shneer and Robert Adler Peckerar. “Peretz Markish (1895-1952): Modern Marxist and Yiddishist,” in *Makers of Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Artists, Leaders, and the World They Made* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 324.



martyrology.”<sup>91</sup> While scholars often note the revolutionary poetics of *Di kupe* and its willingness to break from the Jewish religious past, they less frequently consider the poema to be a concrete step in the poet’s transition into a Soviet-Yiddish writer. The following sections demonstrate how *Di kupe* looks forward to a Soviet future and Markish’s Mound functions as a foundation for utopia.

It is possible that modern readers and scholars overlook Markish’s Soviet sympathies in *Di kupe* because the poema was initially published in Warsaw, just after the poet had moved from Soviet Moscow to the Polish capital and epicenter of modern Yiddish culture. Although Markish continued to live in Poland for the next five years, it is vital to note that Markish remained close to his contacts in Moscow and frequently crossed the border into the USSR.<sup>92</sup> Most significantly, Markish claimed that he was able to publish such elegant versions of *Di kupe* and, later, *Radio* because of funding received from the Soviet Embassy.<sup>93</sup> In his analysis of *Radio*, Seth Wolitz refers to Markish’s brand of Yiddish modernism during this time as agitprop, and while *Di kupe* is not nearly as forthright as *Radio* in its support for the Soviet project,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 325. This quote comes in reference to Shneer and Peckerar’s discussion relating to the Soviet literary critic I. M. Nusinov, who years after the publication of *Di kupe* noted that “neither Markish nor his readers believe in god any more— and so god [in the work] was for the most part an act of staging.” Nusinov’s quote was identified and translated by Shneer and Peckerar.

<sup>92</sup> Both Aleksandra Geller and Seth Wolitz describe Markish’s interactions with the Soviet Union during his time living in Warsaw in their chapters in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Works of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)*.

<sup>93</sup> Wolitz brings this to light in his analysis of Markish’s 1922 poema *Radio*. Wolitz found this information in Melech Ravitch’s memoir *Dos mayse-bukh fun mayn lebn*, III (The Storybook of My Life), published in Tel Aviv in 1975. For more on this topic, consult Seth Wolitz, “*Radyo: Yiddish Modernism as Agitprop*” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Works of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)*.

Markish includes a breadth of allusions that signify the strength of his allegiance to the nascent USSR.

### *Death and Rebirth as a Shared Point of Origin for Renewal*

For the Mound to serve as a viable foundation for Socialist utopia, Markish needed to expand the scope of his writing to become more universal and inclusive of those suffering under the current market capitalist system along with the Jews. The poet does so by distorting the boundaries between and overlapping the folklores and mythologies of the Jews and Slavs. This process does not erase history but finds a common point from which to start anew. Markish evokes conceptualizations of ritual purification for preparing Jewish bodies for death through *tare* and Orthodox bodies for rebirth through baptism. For the poet, Jewish death and Orthodox rebirth serve a similar function and equate the two peoples at a common point of origin. Markish most directly makes this connection between the two faiths in poems 19 and 20. He situates the first poem along the banks of the Dnieper but distorts the spatiotemporal elements of his setting by overlaying imagery of the Levant onto this quintessentially Ukrainian setting:

*5 In hoykhn farnakhtike geyen verbliudn  
Farrisn di mayler oyf shney-vaysn midber,  
Vi alte galokhim in roykhike talmes,  
Un shlepn harugim un meysim un pgorim  
Oyf hiltserne vogns ariber dem dneiper...*

...

*17 Un zaynen di meysim aley n zikh metaer,  
Un leygn aley n zikh oyf hiltserne vogns,  
Un geyen verbliudn di helzer gehorbet,  
Di mayler farrisn un veynen oyf midber:  
5 In evening breaths camels walk  
Their mouths smudge the snow-white desert,  
Like old clergymen in rich women's cloaks,*

And they pull victims and corpses and animal carcasses  
On wooden wagons over the Dnieper...

...

17 And only the corpses are purified,  
And they lie alone on wooden wagons,  
And the camels go, the woods bending,  
Their mouths smudge and cry on the desert:

The most enigmatic image to come from this poem is that of the camels going to Dnieper to purify their cargo for the market. “Only the corpses are purified”; the remaining bodies are presumably discarded.<sup>94</sup> In the Orthodox faith, the symbolic significance of ritual purification in the Dnieper originates in 988 when Prince Vladimir baptized Rus’ and threw monuments of the pagan gods into the river. In a baptism, one is purified for admission into the Orthodox Church for *life*; the process of *tare* refers to the Jewish ritual purification of the body for *death*.

The camel, an animal traditionally associated with wealth and trade in the Middle East, is as out of place in this story as the word Markish chooses for his verse. *Verbliud* is a distinctly Slavic word used for a term with widely used Yiddish (*keml*) and Hebrew (*gamal*) direct translations. The presumption that Markish only uses the plural *verbliudn* to fit his amphibrachic meter offers a convenient rationale behind this decision, but a deeper semantic significance remains. As Markish had earlier substituted gulden for *zuzim* in the *Khad gadya* allusion, here too he substitutes a word with distinctly Eastern European origins to further link the suffering of all Jews and Slavs, from those of the biblical Levant to the Dnieper of the present day.

Functionally, the camels perform the trade task of transporting wagons across the Dnieper, but

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<sup>94</sup> Finkin also notes the ambiguity in this scene and proposes that “the dead are not being carried away, but are rather carried around as a kind of historical dead weight.” Jordan Finkin, “The Lighter Side of Babel: Peretz Markish's Urban Poetics” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 44.

these wagons do not carry traditional goods of trade. Instead, they are filled with “victims and corpses and animal carcasses,” which the camels pull across the “snow-white desert” of the Ukrainian landscape.

The narrative continues into poem 20, in which Markish explains that *tare* serves not as preparation for burial, but as a cleansing of bodies before they are to be placed for sale in the night-time marketplace. As the camels deliver their heinous cargo, they call out to the nighttime market for “trade with beards and bones,” in a scene that, aside from Markish’s poetic *persona*, lacks any living human presence:

*1 “Hey, kumt oyf baynakhtishn mark do fun shtilkeyt,  
Oyf nakhtishn handl mit berd un mit beyner!”*

*3 Un veynen verbliudn oyf shkie fun midber  
Un shlepn di vogns oyf merk un oyf handl...  
Un ontrayber – vintn,  
Un baytshn – a regn,  
Un dray mol gezeyet un nayn mol geshnitn...*

*8 Un ligt zikh der breg – a tsegrizete khmare –  
Un nidert zayn oybershte lip tsu der tore...*

*10 Un hirshn-kayorn mit shire oyf herner  
Fun loytere roykhn,  
Mit shkie in mayler,  
Vi busheles shneyike, zalbn dem oyfgang...*

*1 “Hey, awaken nighttime market here from silence,  
For night trade with beards and with bones!”*

*3 And the camels cry at the twilight of the desert  
And pull the wagons of markets and trade...  
And the winds are the driver  
And the rain his lashes,  
And it is three times sown and nine times harvested...*

*8 And the banks lie – a gnawed away cloud –  
And its supreme lip descends to the purification...*

*10 And deer-dawns with a hymn from horns  
Of clear smokes,*

With twilight in their mouths,  
Like little white storks consecrate the sunrise...

By removing human interaction at the night market, Markish shifts blame for these commercial atrocities from those involved to the market system itself. In lines 3-7, Markish portrays the marketplace as its own self-operating entity – a force of nature that ravages the land, “three times sown and nine times harvested.” Glaser astutely notes that in *Di kupe*, as well as in Markish’s earlier works, the market acts as “the grave of an entire community and its entire way of life; the systems of religious imagery he employs, in addition to offering a wealth of time-honored metaphors, represent those archaic symbols that must be traded for a new order.”<sup>95</sup> The arrival of these camels, a Biblical symbol of wealth and status, transporting their grotesque haul of corpses to this epicenter of Eastern European Jewish economy and culture suggests that the marketplace is rich only in pain and suffering. Furthermore, the camels and Markish’s sudden association of Jewishness with the East orientalize his Yiddish readership and suggests that they are out of place in the current conditions of the Ukrainian marketplace.

Interestingly, Markish notes that “only the corpses (*meysim*) are purified,” thus excluding the victims (*harugim*) of the pogrom and leaving the Mound’s blasphemous question, “And who will purify me for burial?” unanswered.<sup>96</sup> Those bodies from the Mound are not permitted purification, for burial or for sale in Markish’s profaned portrayal of the nighttime marketplace. These poems are bookended by references to the deer of the dawn consecrating the sunrise, an allusion to Psalm 22 in which the author calls out to God to save him from the abuse from his

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<sup>95</sup> Amelia Glaser, “A Shout from Somewhere’: The Early Works of Peretz Markish” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 58.

<sup>96</sup> From poem 24 and previously analyzed on page 42.

enemies. The psalm may refer to the despair of the Jewish people in exile, making it a fitting reference for these poems. Markish expands upon this agony in the following poem, in which he creates an image of “[His] brothers – in tatters / Swimming dead / Without companion” on the Dnieper, the “river of purification”:

*8 Dnieper, dneiper, taykh fun tore,  
Nit tsu zen iz oyf dayn flisn  
Mer keyn oysgeknipte pleytim...  
Brider mayne – opgerisn  
Shvimen toyte  
On bagleyter.*

8 Dnieper, Dnieper, river of purification,  
There is nothing to see on your flows  
More than close-knit refugees...  
My brothers – in tatters  
Swimming dead  
Without companion...

The refugees floating in the Dnieper might have escaped sale into the marketplace, but have been forgotten and left in the river, neither alive nor buried. Markish’s refugees find themselves in a liminal space, similar to Murav’s conceptualization of the *oylem-hatoye* as a kind of purgatory. The Jewish concept of purgatory, or *Gehinnom*, helps inform this interpretation of Markish’s writing. *Gehinnom* is thought to be where “sinners suffer punishment forever (or... until the righteous take pity on them and ask that the punishment cease).”<sup>97</sup> Importantly, Jews will not recite the mourner’s kaddish for those stuck in this state of purgatory. Though Markish’s “*Kadesh!*” in the epigraph was pointedly sardonic, it also precludes these brothers and denies them admission into the traditional interpretation of the world to come. Instead, Markish would call upon these brothers to create a new world to come under the bloody red banner. From an Orthodox perspective, the swimming bodies signify a different kind of purgatory – one in which

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<sup>97</sup> *The Jewish Study Bible*. Second edition. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1157.

the bodies are to be pulled out of the river for new life. The process of baptism is delayed, however. These Orthodox bodies are to be reborn not into a world of the Christian past but the Soviet future. In this sense, the Dnieper, through rituals of death and rebirth, prepares Jews and Slavs alike for the emerging Socialist world order.

### **Di kupe as a Call to Socialist Struggle**

Looking back to Poem 26, Markish's poetic persona describes the Mound, with "its thirstily smoking mouth, like a glowing crater" (*Ir moyl zikh dorshetik roykhert, vi a krater a tsegliter*), as he calls the mountains and markets to oath with his song (*Hey, berg un markn! Oyf a shvue ruf ikh mit mayn lid aykh*). Markish uses the word *shvue* – a term that means "oath" in a more general sense, but was also universally recognized as the title to the anthem of the General Jewish Labour Bund, based on S. Ansky's 1902 poem "Di shvue" (The Oath). Ansky's poem is one of violent retribution that ends with the stanza:

*Mir shvern a trayhayt on grenetsn tsum bund.  
Nor er ken bafrayen di shklaftn atsind.  
Di fon, di royte, iz hoykh un breyt.  
Zi flatert fun tsorn, fun blut iz zi royte!  
A shvue, a shvue, af lebn un toyt.*

We swear an endless loyalty to the Bund.  
Only it can free the slaves now.  
The red flag is high and wide.  
It waves in anger, it is red with blood!  
An oath, an oath, of life and death.

*Di kupe* shares a similar preoccupation with anger and blood, and Ansky's declaration that this is an oath "of life and death" has massive implications as it pertains to the world of Markish's poem. Markish uses his readership's familiarity with "Di shvue" to coax readers into an oath with the Mound – death incarnate. This understanding helps clarify the earlier Ezekiel reference,

“In thy blood live!”, by returning agency to Jews living in the blood of the Mound. Speaking as *koyen-godl*, Markish seeks to enlist markets and mountains into oath with the Mound, but his writing is specifically intended for his Yiddish readership – those who can read his *lid* (“song” or “poem”), Jews who are as good as dead living under the *status quo*. As Bialik’s “In the City of Slaughter” had after the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, Markish’s *Di kupe* served as a call to action in response to the wave of pogroms that ravaged Ukraine from 1918-21. He knows that redemption would only be possible through retribution, not only against the perpetrators of violence but also the enabling ideologies.

Throughout most of *Di kupe*, it is difficult to read Markish’s verse allegorically as it would have pertained to his present-day outside of the pogrom scene at the Horoditch marketplace. The poet rarely alludes to the time and space of the poema, and even when he does, such references are often obscured by his abstract expressionist aesthetics. Poem 25 presents an exception in which the downtrodden poet and *koyen-godl* to the Mound pledges his heart for “a red amulet, – / The restless-red and bloody flag”:

17 *Mir kholemt zikh himl, tseflakert mit troybn,  
Mit toyznter shtern in mayler fun foyglen,  
Un ver vet zey shnaydn?  
Un ver vet zey kloybn?...*

21 *O, sreyfeshet shtern fun oysgepikt oyg!  
Du zikhst a polonke oyf meshene shneyen,  
Oyf Brustn oyf mayne fun blutikn tol,  
– Iz na dir mayn harts far a royte kamaye, –  
Di umruik-royte di blutike fon!...*

17 I dream of the sky, it flares up with trumpets,  
With a thousand stars in the mouths of birds,  
And who will harvest them?  
And who will collect them?...

21 Oh, blazing star with a pecked-out eye!  
You search for an ice hole on brassy snows,



On the breasts of my bloody valley,  
– Here is my heart for a red amulet, –  
The restless-red and bloody flag!...

Markish envisages an alternative path to redemption through aligning himself with the red flag of Bolshevism, but is aware of the work that lies ahead, which he notes in his patently abstract terms. This oath marks a vital shift in tone, in which Markish's poetic *persona* expresses an optimistic faith in an external power and hope to recapture the dawn – to reclaim the sunrise in the Mound's world of darkness. This shift in tone is apparent in lines 17-18, in which Markish dreams of the sky not with antagonistic ire, but with the ambitious desire to harvest the stars from the mouths of birds. These stars represent new dawns and the possibility for renewal, as symbolized by the stork referred to in this earlier stanza, repeated three times across poems 19 and 20:

*Un hirshn-kayorn mit shire oyf herner*  
*Fun loytere roykhn,*  
*Mit shkie in mayler,*  
*Vi busheles shneyike, zalbn dem oyfgang...*

And deer-dawns with a hymn on their horns  
Of clear smokes,  
With twilight in their mouths,  
Like little white storks, consecrate the sunrise...

Markish uses the Yiddish *hirshn-kayorn* (deer-dawns) to make a direct reference to Psalm 22, which is set to the deer of the dawn (*ayyeleth ha-shachar*) and suggests the possibility for the redemption of the Jewish people. Though Markish rejects the notion that God will deliver this redemption as He had in the Psalm, he expresses hope that the Bolsheviks will be up to this task in poem 25. Markish employs apostrophic questioning in lines 19-20 to accentuate his need for assistance – he is incapable of harvesting the stars alone. Vitaly, Markish comes to accept the Socialist struggle not only as a force capable of collecting these stars, but also as a movement to

which he can actively contribute. The poet pledges his heart for this red amulet and, moving forward, he would employ his poetics to portray not the gloom and destruction wrought by the Mound, but the potential for redemption through the establishment of an international Socialist utopia. In this sense, *Di kupe* becomes a turning point for Markish's thematic content, from which the Yiddish abstract expressionist poet would begin to focus on more politically charged, overtly Soviet works.

### ***An Artistic Portrayal of Di kupe's Revolutionary Potential***

In 1922, just one year after its initial publication in Warsaw, the Kyiv branch of Kultur-lige published a new edition of *Di kupe* with a cover illustration by Iosif Chaikov (figure 4). The differences between Chaikov's Constructivist interpretation of Markish's poem and Berlewi's Cubist approach are both striking and representative of the former's rapidly tightening allegiances to the Soviet cause. While Berlewi focused more on commemorating Jewish victims of pogrom violence and catastrophe past and present, Chaikov interprets mass Jewish suffering as an impetus for retribution.

Chaikov's cover illustration is noticeably sparse beyond the borders of the center circle. The only major details are a white semi-circle, clearly intended to be the sun, and what appears to be a waving flag beyond it. Above the flag, the poet's name "פּרִיץ מאַרקישׁ" is written in modern typography – a stark contrast to Berlewi's abstract lettering. The three-dimensionality of Chaikov's illustration adds a layer of complexity to the possible interpretations of its meaning. The circle in center is significant in a semiotic sense because of the way it seems to jut out from the within cover page, drawing both its contents and the reader's focus towards what lies within the pages of the physical book itself – the subject matter. The perceived raised effect of the circle

creates a kind of magnification, while also generating a distance between the events depicted within the circle and what lies on the outside. The pyramid that protrudes out from the circle represents the mound which reaches up to pierce the sun. In this case, Chaikov appears to depict the scene from Poem 25, portraying the sun as the “blazing star with a pecked-out eye.” His illustration suggests that the Jews might weaponize their suffering in an act of retribution. By attacking the sun, they gain power over the dawn, representative of the new day and emergent world to come. Finally, Chaikov clearly depicts the bloody red flag, which waves beyond the sun and creates a direct link between Markish’s pogrom poem and the Bolshevik cause.

Chaikov created this illustration by adhering to the artistic ideals recently established by the Constructivists and, most significantly, El Lissitzky. The influence of Lissitzky’s famous propaganda poster “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge” (1919) on Chaikov’s illustration is obvious and significant in the sense that Chaikov weaponizes the suffering of the Jewish people to rally them more emphatically in support of the Soviet cause.<sup>98</sup> In direct opposition to Berlewi’s illustration, Chaikov’s pyramid is explicitly manmade, and its more precise edges and uniform dark shading add to its artificiality. As with the final image in Lissitzky’s *Khad gadya*, Chaikov’s illustration provides an added layer of symbolism that expands the kernels of politicized thought in Markish’s poetry. Chaikov’s cover creates a direct connection to Lissitzky’s early Soviet propaganda art, thus establishing an additional link between the Jewish suffering of Markish’s poem and the greater Bolshevik struggle.

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<sup>98</sup> Roy Greenwald has also previously made this connection. Greenwald, Roy. “Pogrom and Avant-Garde: Peretz Markish’s *Di Kupe*.” *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 81. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.16.3.65>.

## Conclusion

Aside from becoming one of the most famous pieces of Yiddish pogrom literature, Markish's *Di kupe* served as an important pivot point in the artist's creative and ideological developments. The poema is a literary monument to destruction, in which the profane Mound overtakes the sublime. The poet manipulates language to remap the meaning and significance of the language and symbols of Jewish culture. *Di kupe* does not focus on mourning the dead but instead emphasizes in futility of Judaism as a religion. Despite the bleak outlook of Markish's writing, the poet leaves hints that the path to redemption might come through the embrace of socialism. Ultimately, *Di kupe* becomes a foundation for revolution and provides a blueprint for Markish's more pro-Soviet and worker internationalist works of the 1920s.

## Chapter Two

### **Laying the Path to Industrial Utopia in Peretz Markish's *Der fertsikyeriker man***

Peretz Markish's *Forty-Year-Old Man* (*Der fertsikyeriker man*) was an unrealized contribution to the corpus of what has recently been characterized as Comintern art and literature that appeared in the Soviet Union and across the world throughout the 1920s and 30s.<sup>99</sup> Markish's long poem narrates the cycles of conflict and struggle as his poetic *persona* attempts to determine the path toward the creation of international industrial utopia. The poet incorporates aspects of the ode to create explosive images depicting the struggles of the worker and the tumultuous path toward the installment of proletarian internationalism. He concludes by exalting a new industrial utopian ideology, allowing his text to act as a guide that seeks not to legitimize the viability of a specific Communist state or nation (i.e., the Soviet Union), but to substantiate the workers' utopian ideal. Through his *persona*'s journey, Markish demonstrates the resilience and potential of this ideology to withstand the surrounding chaos and violence of the 1920s and its potential to lead its followers to the factories of the new industrial center – Markish's reimagined Promised Land.

This chapter will examine how Markish uses a prophetic mode and the odic genre form to portray his *persona*'s path toward industrial utopia. His poem is a tale of becoming and self-realization, both for his poetic *persona* and the abstract yet inconspicuously Soviet landscape on which the action takes place. As the poetic *persona* follows a path toward the titular forty-year-

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<sup>99</sup> For more on this phenomenon, consult *Comintern Aesthetics* (University of Toronto Press, 2020), edited by Amelia Glaser and Steven S. Lee.

old man, his spatial movements through scenes of ubiquitous chaos and subjugation are obscure and less pronounced than the temporal changes that are abundantly apparent and portrayed in an ostensibly biblical style.<sup>100</sup> Generations cycle in and out as Markish's *persona* describes the workers' unrewarded labor under conditions of violent societal transformation. The poet generates a prophetic mode to substantiate the history of the workers' struggle as it continuously develops into his present day. By portraying these developments through this mode, Markish legitimizes a new mythology of proletarian struggle and presents the ultimate goal of industrial workers' utopia as unrealized prophecy – an ideal to continuously believe in and strive for.<sup>101</sup> Despite his past rejections of Judaism, this pursuit of industrial utopia becomes a new religion for Markish. Through writing in the odic form, Markish directly engages with both the Russian tradition originally promoted by figures such as Lomonosov and Derzhavin—literary giants of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—and a Jewish literary tradition that dates back to the Psalms. Through engaging with both traditions, the poet gains access to a vast repository of biblical and modern Russian intertexts.

As he had in *Di kupe*, Markish inserts a plethora of biblical allusions and intertexts into his narrative. Unlike his pogrom *poema*, the poet does not write *Der fertsikyeriker man* in the

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<sup>100</sup> Throughout the course of this chapter and my translations, I will not refer to the character of the forty-year-old man as a proper noun in order to reflect the ambiguity as to his identity and the universality of his symbolism.

<sup>101</sup> In this regard, Markish develops a concept of proletarian messianism, notably developed in S. Ansky's *In zaltsikn yam* (written in 1901), which features the lines: "Messiah and Jewry are both dead and buried, / Another messiah's to come: / The new Jewish worker the banner will carry / To signal that justice is done. // The world will be freed and be healed by this hero, / Who dives to the root of its wound! / In Russia, in Vilna, in Poland all hail now / The Great Jewish Worker's Bund!" Translation by Daniel Kahn. Daniel Kahn, Psoy Korolenko, and Oy Division, "In Zaltsikn Yam," recorded July 2007, track 6 on *The Unternationale: The First Unternational*, Auris Media Records, compact disc.

form of any specific Jewish liturgical tradition; instead, he creates a unique pseudo-mythology for the ongoing Soviet utopian project that borrows from a breadth of cultural and literary traditions in the style of Khlebnikov's *supersagas*. Markish Judaizes his ode to give the proletarian internationalist ideology a relatable Jewish vocabulary, but he undoes this particularization in order to push his readers toward a universal utopian pursuit. When the poet makes his work "Jewish," it is to compel his readers to renounce their nationalist proclivities and embrace the international workers' struggle. Vladimir Mayakovsky's drama *Misteriia-Buff* (Mystery-Bouffe) serves as perhaps the most obvious source of inspiration for Markish's pseudo-mythological portrayal of the workers' epic journey toward a Promised Land of industrial utopia. As Mayakovsky had intended for his play to be restaged every few years to reflect the changing realities that influence the pursuit and maintenance of such utopia, Markish's *Fertsikyeriker man* reveals the achievement of utopia to be a constantly self-perfecting process that demands numerous trials and pursuits. In this spirit, I argue that Markish's work is not about finding the forty-year-old man, but rather of becoming him. I then apply this same logic to the establishment of industrial utopia.

### **A Magnum Opus for the Drawer**

Following the publication of *Di kupe* and *Radio*, Peretz Markish began work on his two-part, eighty-poem self-proclaimed magnum opus *Der fertsikyeriker man*.<sup>102</sup> The Soviet-Yiddish

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<sup>102</sup> Chana Kronfeld was the first academic to formally elaborate on the tragic history of *Der fertsikyeriker man*. In a 2011 book chapter, she explains how Markish was able to transfer the manuscript to his family before his arrest. He told his wife Esther that it was "his greatest work." Kronfeld continues to note that the book "is at once his most Jewish and his most anarchist" and claims it to be "the key to his life's work." Chana Kronfeld, "Murdered Modernisms: Peretz Markish and the Legacy of Soviet Yiddish Poetry" in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 204. Since

poet wrote Part One of the epic poem while living abroad (primarily in Warsaw) during the early 1920s and began Part Two upon his return to the USSR in 1926. Unfortunately, Stalinist oppression and the stylistic restrictions of state-sponsored Socialist Realism made it impossible for Markish to publish this work in the Soviet Union, but this did not prevent the poet from continuing to polish his work until his arrest in 1949. Decades later in an elaborate scheme, Markish's wife, Esther, was able to ensure that copies of the manuscripts were smuggled out to her in Israel, where the I.L. Peretz Publishing House printed *Der fertsikyeriker man* in Jerusalem in 1978, 36 years after the poet's murder.<sup>103</sup>

Before his untimely demise, Markish enjoyed a remarkably productive career as a Soviet-Yiddish writer. He was able to make a dramatic stylistic transition from writing the Futurist-inspired expressionist poetry that defined his early years to socialist realist texts that led him to become the only Yiddish writer to receive the Order of Lenin Prize. Despite this shift, Markish consistently focused on Jewish themes by adopting the socialist realist mode for his depictions of Jewish life in Russia before and after the establishment of the Soviet Union. Markish thrived as a Soviet-Yiddish writer in the 1930s and during the war in the early-1940s, when his Jewish texts

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Kronfeld's chapter, Anna Torres has published an article and a book chapter examining Markish's *Fertsikyeriker man*. This remains the only extant scholarship dedicated to the work. For more information, consult Anna Elena Torres, "The Horizon Blossoms and the Borders Vanish: Peretz Markish's Poetry and Anarchist Diasporism" *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 110, no.3 (2020): 458–90. Anna Elena Torres, *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish: Anarchism and Yiddish Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

<sup>103</sup> Markish's wife Esther tells of the history of *The Forty-Year-Old Man* and its publication in her memoir *The Long Return*, originally written in French and published in 1974 upon her emigration to Israel. It is here that she recalls Markish exclaiming that the long poem was "the best thing I've ever done" a mere hours before his arrest. He implored his wife to take special care of it. Esther Markish, *The Long Return*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 154.



and cultural influence were used to garner international support for the Soviet war effort.<sup>104</sup> However, by the mid-1940s Stalin began to view these same texts as increasingly Jewish nationalist, and this ultimately led to Markish's arrest in January 1949 and execution on August 12, 1952, during the Night of the Murdered Poets.

Markish kept his work on *Der fertsikyriker man* a secret, as he knew that its expressionist portrayal of a Soviet world filled with grotesque imagery and pseudo-religious allegory would have assuredly expedited his downfall. Stylistically, Markish incorporates into his poem the same abstract expressionist aesthetics and grotesque imagery that defined his early career. The poem is divided into two parts structurally and thematically: the first describes the inescapable societal depravity surrounding Markish poetic *persona* as he ventures to find the forty-year-old man, and the second portrays the conditions leading to the violent upheaval of industrial revolution and its aftermath. Amid ubiquitous brutality and gloom, a tinge of hopefulness pervades the text. In the first section, this optimism comes in the form of the speaker's faith that he will reach the titular forty-year-old man, who leads a solitary existence alone with his pain. In the second section, upheaval results in the creation of new industrial centers, which act as a beacon of progress and reimagined Promised Land, while labor becomes the unifying force in the ongoing struggle to establish a proletarian internationalist utopia.

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<sup>104</sup> The formation of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee is perhaps the most notable of these efforts. On August 23, 1941, two dozen Soviet Jewish cultural figures made an international radio appeal to Jews across the world to join the Soviets in fighting Nazi Germany. Video footage from this meeting exist to this day, as do audio clips. For more on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, consult Rubenstein, Joshua. 2011. Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Jewish\\_Anti-Fascist\\_Committee](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Jewish_Anti-Fascist_Committee) (accessed March 11, 2024).

### Reading *Der fertsikyeriker man* as Allegory

There are many challenges to reading *Der fertsikyeriker man* allegorically. Aside from the abstract nature of the work itself, little is known about the history of its composition and authorial intent. Markish worked on his long poem in secret and any related materials and documents were seized upon his arrest in 1949, nearly three decades before his work's publication in Israel. Recent scholarship has highlighted Markish's literary contributions to leftist internationalist, anti-fascist and anarchist movements, which risks deemphasizing the legitimacy of his belief in and commitment to the on-going Soviet industrial utopian project. In her scholarship, Anna Torres provides insightful readings of *Der fertsikyeriker man* as a work reflective of Markish's anarchist diasporism.<sup>105</sup> Though Torres adeptly demonstrates how the Soviet-Yiddish poet uses his expressionist verse to erase borders and resist political rhetoric, this reading overlooks the historical fact that Markish began work on *Der fertsikyeriker man* in 1920, when he had just suggested that Bolshevik cause might provide an escape from the world of chaos that had overtaken Eastern Europe in *Di kupe*. Two years later Markish would publish *Radyo* (Radio), considered by many to be a work of Soviet agitprop.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, the path taken by the poetic *persona* resembles that of the poet himself, who while writing Part One had

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<sup>105</sup> Torres defines anarchist diasporism as “the convergence of Jewish diasporic experience and visionary antistatism found in the work of Markish and other Yiddish modernists. [It] brings into focus the political valences of temporality in Markish's poem, where euphoric embodiment of the present escapes the strictures of capitalist hourly wage systems and the nationalist temporality of Soviet communism.” Anna Elena Torres, “The Horizon Blossoms and the Borders Vanish: Peretz Markish's Poetry and Anarchist Diasporism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 110, no. 3 (2020): 462.

<sup>106</sup> Seth Wolitz elaborates on Markish's use of modernism as agitprop in his book chapter in *A Captive of the Dawn*. Seth Wolitz, “*Radyo*: Yiddish Modernism as Agitprop” in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Works of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 103-113.

left the territory that was to become the USSR, before returning to Soviet Moscow in 1926, where he wrote Part Two. Like countless other Yiddish writers and artists, Markish was drawn back to the USSR and its potential to serve as an eternal homeland for Eastern Europe's Jews.

Markish spent most of his time abroad based out of Warsaw, where he settled in 1921 and, as David Roskies explains, "came to embody the achievement and promise of the [Bolshevik] Revolution for all the young Polish Jews of leftist persuasion."<sup>107</sup> Roskies quotes a young poet, Esther Rosenthal-Shnayderman, who after seeing Markish read in Warsaw believed that:

We saw in him the messenger of the new Jew from 'over there,' from the other side of the Red border... Markish was the only Yiddish writer who knew what he wanted. And the first Yiddish writer who spoke to us in Warsaw loud and clear in the name of the October Revolution. In Poland, Markish gave the impression that he personally, in his fiery speeches and his poetic utterances, represented the Russian Revolution.<sup>108</sup>

At the end of 1923, Markish visited Palestine, where he is "said to have declared that two great things were being created in the world: the Russian revolution and the Jewish settlement in Palestine."<sup>109</sup> By the end of 1926, Markish "returned to the Soviet Union, lured by the promise of

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<sup>107</sup> David Roskies, "Foreword" in *The Long Return*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), ix.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Roskies includes the first part of this quote in his forward to *The Long Return*, Markish's wife's Esther's memoir, in which she describes her path that ultimately took her and her family to Israel. Rosenthal-Shnayderman's quote also appeared in *The Family Markish: A Case Study in the Struggle of Soviet Jewry*, a pamphlet released by the Soviet Jewry Committee of the Jewish Community Center of Metropolitan Boston to inspire support for the Markishes as they continued their struggle to leave the USSR in the early 1970s. This quote first appeared in the 1968 article "Around the Markishyade," which appeared in the Tel Aviv-based *Di goldene keyt*. Esther Rosenthal-Shnayderman, "Arum Markishyade," *Di goldene keyt*, no. 64 (1968): 218-19.

<sup>109</sup> *The Family Markish: A Case Study in the Struggle of Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Soviet Jewry Committee, 1972), 4.

a Yiddish cultural renaissance supported and funded by the government.” David Roskies justifies this “crucial decision” by explaining that:

Markish was among many prominent Yiddish writers who left the Soviet Union during the civil war only to return in the late twenties and early thirties... Though these writers were soon to discover that government support was contingent upon making their work conform to ever-tightening Party regulations, they were, in fact, treated as an elite class – they were housed in desirable apartments and their books enjoyed unprecedented print runs.<sup>110</sup>

Even after Markish’s execution, his wife Esther defended the poet’s decision to return to the Soviet Union. In her memoir, she explains that “the bullet that was fired into the back of [Markish’s] head took not only his life, but the life of the culture that had been his whole reason for being. If Markish could rise up from the ashes scattered to the winds by his executioners a quarter of a century ago, he would forsake Russia forever, no matter how much grief and pain the separation would cause him.” Though Esther Markish immigrated to Israel, she maintained that “with every fiber in his body and with all the tenderness of his soul, Markish was attached to the Jewish culture of Diaspora; he believed in its vitality as he believed in a long and glorious future for the Jews of Russia.”<sup>111</sup> With these details of Peretz Markish’s life in mind, I argue that the poet wrote *The Forty-Year-Old Man* seeking emancipation for the rest of his people who have yet to arrive to the territory of the Soviet Union to help build this glorious, industrialized future.

This chapter will expand upon Torres’s argument that Markish employs his poetics to destroy borders and nationalist predispositions, but I propose that the poet does so not to contribute to the movement of anarchist diasporism, but to substantiate the possibility of

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<sup>110</sup> David Roskies, “Foreword” in *The Long Return*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), ix.

<sup>111</sup> Esther Markish, *The Long Return*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 2.

establishing an international industrial utopia on Soviet territory. Over the course of his long poem, Markish adjusts his poetic meter and his gradual transition from writing exclusively in anapestic tetrameter to predominantly amphibrachs mirrors the gradual transition toward a full embrace of this industrial utopian ideology. Spatially, the poet gradually overlays his abstract expressionist geography onto the Soviet topography, still recovering from the violence and tumult of 1920s. As with any allegorical reading, there are inherent dangers to my interpretation. It is imperative not to essentialize Markish's work or misinterpret his commitment to the Soviet cause, and two vital questions remain unanswered: What made Markish's work unpublishable in the Soviet Union of 1930 and why did the poet consider it his *magnum opus*?

My belief is that the answers to these questions can be found in the unfinalized nature of the ode's denouement. Though *Der fertsikyeriker man* ends with a land united in its labor, the conclusion is forward-looking – it prophesizes the arrival of the workers who will begin to build the new industrialized society, thereby suggesting that the process was still in its beginning stage upon the poet's real-life return to Moscow. The penultimate line, “And the challenge is neither satisfied nor satiated” (*Un s'vert der farmest nit geshtilt un nit zat*) emphasizes the monumentality of the challenge that lies ahead.<sup>112</sup> Though Markish never explicitly criticizes the Soviet project, the implication that so much work remains to be done could be interpreted as discrediting its current viability. The following pages will examine how Markish adopts the prophetic mode to portray industrialization as an ongoing and constantly self-perfecting process. His revolutionary ode was to serve as a guide for those laying the path toward industrial utopia, but by 1930 it had already become disconnected from Soviet aesthetic and ideological

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<sup>112</sup> Peretz Markish, *Der fertsikyeriker man* (Jerusalem: Y. L. Perets Farlag), 122.

initiatives.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, the tragic fate of Markish's work should not discredit the poet's initial optimism for the Soviet project and its promises for the international proletariat.

### **The Forty-Year-Old Man as Modern Prophecy and an Ode to the Comintern Struggle**

If we are to view *Di kupe* as a literary monument to destruction that laid the foundation for his transition to Bolshevik thought, then *Der fertsikyeriker man* was Markish's attempt to substantiate the ongoing pursuit of establishing an industrialized workers' utopia within the territory of the Soviet Union. To accomplish this immense task, Markish borrowed aspects of the odic genre form and wrote in a prophetic mode that marked a departure from the *koyen-godl* mode of *Di kupe*.<sup>114</sup> The poet establishes this prophetic mode by adjusting his stylistics and narrative content to resemble biblical scripture more definitively. Thematically, *Der fertsikyeriker man* draws significantly from the Book of Isaiah, in which the biblical prophet foretells the destruction of Babylon and the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. Though the Book of Isaiah serves as the primary biblical intertext for Markish's work, his long poem differs significantly from the biblical account. His workers receive no assistance from God; their path is

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<sup>113</sup> After 1930 when Markish had completed most of the work on his *Fertsikyeriker man*, the writer began to significantly alter the aesthetics and content of his work to meet the demands of state-sponsored Socialist Realism. Perhaps the most significant evidence of these alterations can be seen in *The Return of Nathan Bekker* (1932), a film which was intended to promote the Soviet Union as a homeland for all Jews and that portrays the USSR as a much more completed project. Markish wrote the screenplay for the film, which then inspired his 1934 novel *Eyns oyf eyns* (One by One). Like the film, the novel tells of a Jewish worker who returns from the United States to the Soviet Union to participate in the building of socialism.

<sup>114</sup> In his seminal work *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, Dan Miron traces the prophetic mode back to Hayyim Nahman Bialik, who "strove, as much as was possible within a European and nonbiblical formal context, to emulate and reproduce the tonality of biblical prophecy." Dan Miron, *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3. Though Markish wrote in Yiddish, I argue that he too wrote in the prophetic mode in the tradition of Bialik, as established by Miron.

one of struggle and peril. They do not end up in Jerusalem, and the Temple is not restored. Instead, a nameless industrial center appears with the factory and its smokestacks and workbenches at its focal point. This expansive industrial center represents a new Promised Land—one that is still developing toward its prosperous future. Finally, it is not Babylon that falls, but the Russian Empire, from the ruins of which the poet's reimagined Promised Land emerges. As Markish's process of writing *Der fertsikyeriker man* became one of constant development and self-perfection, so too did his vision for this industrial utopia. In this sense, the process of writing his ode comes to mirror the process of installing a new industrialized rhythm to daily life.

### ***Between Byron and Bialik: Markish's Versifying of a Prophetic Mode***

Though it would take some time for Markish to establish the thematic connections between his work and the Isaiah intertext, he immediately develops formal connections in his opening poem. As he does throughout the majority of Part One of his epic, Markish sets this poem in an incantatory anapestic tetrameter metrical scheme organized into a series of masculine rhyming couplets:

*1 Fertsikyeriker man! Zay bagrist in dayn payn!  
S'vet dikh keyner nit maydn, s'vet dikh keyner farbay.*

*Oyfn barg fun dayn payn, oyfn barg fun dayn freyd,  
Zol baginen mayn oyfgang, zol oyfgayn mayn rey.*

*Nokh der zet bin ikh itst, nokh der zet, nokh der ru –  
Nit faran oyf mayn aksl keyn koysh un keyn krug.*

*Nor dos moyl iz in dorsht un in fiber farzoymt,  
Vel ikk oyfgayn tsu dir un dir zogn azoy:*

*1 Forty-year-old man! Greet your pain!  
No one will avoid you, no one will pass you.*

On the mountain of your pain, on the mountain of your joy,  
Shall my sunrise begin, shall my turn ascend.

Now I have been satiated, after the satiety, after the rest –  
There is neither basket nor jug on my shoulder.

But my mouth is hemmed in thirst and fever,  
I will walk up to you and tell you this:

Omitted consonants in the word-final position cause the rhymes to be imperfect and engender feelings of lack – the absence of the forty-year-old man. In this case, the poetic *persona*'s thirst might refer to either his physical thirst or his lack of spiritual fulfillment. The regular metrical scheme adds an energetic formal elegance to Markish's verse that calls to mind Lord Byron's famous poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib," from his *Hebrew Melodies* collection. Byron's poem, originally published in 1815, is based on the biblical account of the Assyrian king Sennacherib's attempted siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC, as described in Isaiah 36-37. As Isaiah serves as thematic inspiration for Markish's epic, Byron's poem provides the formal template, which is exemplified in the first stanza:

1 The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;  
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,  
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.<sup>115</sup>

Though Byron wrote his poem in quatrains, it is 24 lines long and consists of exclusively masculine rhyming couplets like Markish's.<sup>116</sup> Byron's anapestic (often referred to as

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<sup>115</sup> Baron George Gordon Byron, *Hebrew Melodies* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1815), 46.

<sup>116</sup> The nineteenth century Russian poet A.K. Tolstoy translated Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" into Russian in 1858. Tolstoy's popular Russian translation was also written in anapestic tetrameter and set in masculine rhyming couplets. It is likely that Markish would have been more familiar with this Russian translation than the English original.



“galloping”) meter mimics the beat of the Assyrian riding into battle. For Markish, this rhythm mimics not a galloping horse’s hooves but the steps of his poetic *persona* ascending the mountain to find the forty-year-old man and deliver his message.<sup>117</sup> In his *Hebrew Melodies*, the English Lord Byron mines Jewish biblical tradition in a comparable manner to Markish, but with vastly different intentions. As Thomas Ashton notes, “Byron joined Jewish nationalism and a Calvinistically inclined understanding of the Old Testament to create metaphors of man and man’s condition... In the plight of the exiled Jews, Byron found man’s plight, and the tears he shed for fallen nationhood were shed for fallen man as well.”<sup>118</sup> Like Byron, Markish alludes to the plight of the Jews in exile, but his sympathies toward the ongoing industrial workers’ project lead him to reject outright the viability of nationalism in its Jewish diasporic context and all other forms. As Byron had done, Markish finds man’s plight in the plight of the Jews, but the Yiddish poet uses it to implore his readers to rid themselves of nationalist affinities and follow the path toward a new, nationless industrial utopia.

As with *Di kupe*, Markish likely found inspiration for *Der fertsikyeriker man* from the Hebrew poetry of Hayyim Nahman Bialik, who remains the preeminent master of the prophetic mode in modern Jewish literature to this day. Despite their stark ideological differences (Bialik being a staunch Zionist), the two poets use the prophetic mode to similar effect. In his analysis of Bialik’s “In the City of Slaughter,” Dan Miron notes how the Hebrew poet used the prophetic mode to present “the hopes for a Hebrew or Zionist revival as mere delusions, the final, cruel

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<sup>117</sup> In this sense, Markish’s work resembles the canonical odes of 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature. Mikhail Lomonosov’s “Na vziatie Khotina” (“On the Taking of Khotin”), written in 1739, is one notable example.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas L. Ashton, *Byron’s Hebrew Melodies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 74.

hoax on the part of malicious or indifferent Providence. The poems presented the Jewish people as moribund, doomed to physical persecution and spiritual self-debilitation.”<sup>119</sup> Miron, along with countless others, acknowledges that Bialik wrote so sardonically in order to create a sense of urgency among his readership and trigger a more vigorous approach to the Zionist movement. Throughout his poem, Markish constantly reminds his readers of the labor and struggles that remain along the path to creating a workers’ utopia. Like Bialik, Markish does so not to suggest his readership give up on the proletarian internationalist project, but to implore them to envision the potential for an industrialized society that transcends nationalistic prejudices and imperialist whims. In this sense, Markish uses the prophetic mode in a manner similar to Bialik, but while the Hebrew poet sought to push his readership further toward the Zionist project, Markish implores the reader to shed their nationalist predilections and remain focused on the establishment of the new industrial centers.

### *Creating a Yiddish Supersaga in the Form of an Ode*

In addition to establishing The Book of Isaiah as the primary biblical intertext for his ode, Markish regularly alludes to other writings and histories from the Jewish, European, and Soviet traditions. To the non-Jewish reader, the resulting text—a new mythology constructed from ostensibly disparate stories—would likely resemble Khlebnikov’s supersagas more so than *Di kupe*. In his introduction to *Zangezi*, Khlebnikov defines this term supersaga (*sverkhpovest’*) and details its composition by explaining how “the building unit, the stone of the supersaga is the story of the first order. The supersaga resembles a sculpture of varicolored blocks of different

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<sup>119</sup> Dan Miron, *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 6.

bedrock... It is carved out of varicolored word-blocks of different structures.”<sup>120</sup> Markish’s endeavor to substantiate the promise of an emergent industrial utopia necessitates a similar process of composition that incorporates texts from various traditions to build a viable prophecy that is inclusive of all peoples and not just his Yiddish readership. In addition to the structural resemblances between Markish’s *Fertsikyeriker man* and Khlebnikov’s *Zangezi*, the Yiddish poet generates explosive language and imposing imagery in the manner of the Russian Futurists.

Though Markish’s long poem resists classification within a single genre, Yuri Tynianov’s analysis of the works of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky in his 1924 essay *Promezhutok* (Interlude) provides a compelling framework through which we may more appropriately recognize the significance in reading *Der fertsikyeriker man* as an ode.<sup>121</sup> The Russian Formalist critic notes that Russian Futurism “broke loose from the middling poetic culture of the nineteenth century. In its brutal struggles and its conquests, it was much like the eighteenth century.” Tynianov compares the Futurist poets to the great odists of the Russian canon, explaining that “Khlebnikov is a lot like Lomonosov. Mayakovsky is a lot like Derzhavin. The geological shifts of the

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<sup>120</sup> “*Stroevaia edinitsa, kamen’ sverkhpovesti, – povest’ pervogo poriadka. Ona pokhozha na izvaianie iz raznotsvetnykh glyb raznoi porody... Ona vytesana iz raznotsvetnykh glyb slova raznogo stroeniia.*” Velimir Khlebnikov, *Zangezi* (Moscow: Tipo-lit Upr. OGES, 1921), 1.

<sup>121</sup> Tynianov elaborates on the difficulties in assigning genres during this point in time: “We still treat genres as if they were ready-made objects. The poet gets up, opens some kind of cabinet, and takes out the genre he needs. Any poet can open this cabinet. And there are plenty of genres, from the ode all the way to the long poem. There should be more than enough to go around. But the interlude teaches us a different lesson. That is what an interlude is for: there are no ready-made genres, they are in the process of being created, slowly and anarchically, and not for general use. A poetic genre is created when the language of verse, gathering momentum and bringing itself to fruition, has all the qualities it needs to present a completed form.” Yuri Tynianov, “Interlude (1924),” trans. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko, *Common Knowledge*, 24, no. 3 (August 2018): 534.

eighteenth century are closer to us today than the calm evolution of the nineteenth.”<sup>122</sup> To write about the monumental shifts in the historical and industrial development of Eastern Europe during the 1920s, Markish in many ways had to write like Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky. As the Yiddish poet resembles Khlebnikov in his wide array of symbols and allusions, Markish takes after Mayakovsky in his ability to generate what Tynianov refers to as the hyperbolic image (*giperbolicheskii obraz*), which can “protrude headfirst out of the poem, tear it open, and stand up in its place.” Like Mayakovsky’s, Markish verse “emphasizes that the nature of his language is inimical to the plot-driven epic and that the singularity of his large form lies in its being a ‘great ode,’ not an epic.”<sup>123</sup>

Perhaps most significant in its relation to Markish’s *Fertsikyeriker man* is Tynianov’s proposition that:

Mayakovsky revitalized the grandiose image that was lost to us after the age of Derzhavin. Like Derzhavin, he knew that the secret of the grandiose image is less in its “loftiness” than in the extreme contrast of linked levels—the high style and the low style—in what the eighteenth century called “the proximity of unequally lofty words” (as well in as the “conjoining of distant ideas”).<sup>124</sup>

Like Mayakovsky, Markish combines the high style with the low. This juxtaposition between and subsequent blending of the sublime with the profane was evident in *Di kupe*, and Markish continues to write *Der fertsikyeriker man* in this style. He portrays the violent processes of industrialization using abstract and grotesque imagery like that found in his pogrom *poema*. Yet

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 513. Tynianov makes these determinations in his analysis of Mayakovsky’s “*Pro eto*” (About That).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 510.

*Der fertsikyeriker man* ends on an optimistic note, perhaps best exemplified by these lines from

Part Two Poem 36:

*4 Un makhnes nokh makhnes in freyd kumen on.  
Me hert nit keyn fon un keyn flater fun fon.  
S'iz penemer hele, vi fonen kayor,  
Un alts iz farshtendlekh un zunik un klor.*

*Un vint tsum badinen, un vint tsum bafel,  
Un keynem gemitn, un keynem gefelt!*

*A tog vi a kavn tseshnitn oyf helft –  
Un s'shtromt fun im zaft, un s'shtromt fun im hel.*

4 And wave after wave arrives in joy.  
They hear no flutter from any flag.

Faces light like flags of the dawn,  
And everything is comprehensible, sunny, and clear.

And wind comes to serve, wind is at your command,  
And no one is shunned, no one is missing!

A day like a watermelon cut in half –  
And juice and light stream from it.

Markish emphasizes the joyful potential of the new day, likened to “a watermelon cut in half” with “juice and light stream[ing] from it.” This new day—a watermelon bursting with juicy potential—is Markish’s hyperbolic image. It leaps from the page and explodes the poem, taking the place of the wandering and languishing that preceded. Vitally, it replaces the longing for the forty-year-old man, as the poetic *persona* exclaims “And no one is shunned, no one is missing!” in line 9. In her analysis of this enigmatic segment, Anna Torres notes how “in spite of—or perhaps to spite—Soviet state ownership of time, Markish’s writing prefigures another temporality. We encounter neither a utopia deferred after the revolution, nor a coopted past, but a

present containing all possibility within itself, despite it all.”<sup>125</sup> But Markish does present a land united in its labor, which he depicts in the poem’s final lines:

*15 Un vayber un kinder, un ale baynand –  
Di hent un di aksl oyf hoybn dos land.*

*Es raysn zikh hent. Me dervart nit keyn sof.  
Di droyte ashmoyre. Es klekt nit keyn shtof.*

*Fargeyt shoyrn der tog, in di oygn er tayet.  
Es hot far di hent keyn varshtat nit gestayet.*

*Un s’raysn zikh hent dort geshtrekt in farlang:  
A hoyb ton dos land un a trog ton dos land.*

*Un s’vert der farmest nit geshtilt un nit zat –  
A tsekh mit a tsekh, mit varshtat a varshtat!*

15 And wives and children, and all together –  
The land picks up its hands and its shoulders.

Hands raise. One does not expect an end.  
The third night watch, no substance suffices.

The day already passes, in their eyes it melts.  
Not a single workbench suffices for all the hands.

And the hands raise there, extended in desire:  
The land creates a beginning and the land makes a harvest.

And the challenge is not satisfied or satiated.  
A workshop with a workshop, with a workbench a workbench!

The unity of the workers is represented by the refrain in the final line “*A tsekh mit a tsekh, mit varshtat a varshtat!*” A version of this slogan appears three times throughout this final poem, and in this last instance, Markish ensures that it is written in amphibrachic tetrameter, creating a

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<sup>125</sup> Anna Elena Torres, “The Horizon Blossoms and the Borders Vanish: Peretz Markish’s Poetry and Anarchist Diasporism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 110, no. 3 (2020): 490.

consistent metrical scheme and a transition from the anapests found in the opening poem.<sup>126</sup> It is vital to keep in mind that this poem does not depict a utopia realized, but rather a group of eager workers, at long last ready to contribute to the building of industrial utopia. The poet depicts the world not as how it existed at the time, but how it might exist so that it may reach its full potential. As Khlebnikov had done in *Zangezi*, Markish presents a new or alternative vision of history but for a workers' culture still in the process of defining itself. He creates a hyperbolic image of the new day, which contains the full potential of this industrial utopian vision. He writes in the prophetic mode to substantiate the value in working toward the fulfillment of this vision.

### ***The Journey to a "No Place"***

While Markish's work ends with arrival at the industrial center, *Der fertsikyeriker man* begins with the poetic *persona* asserting that he will find the forty-year-old man. The *persona* vows to reach the mysterious titular character's mountain of pain, but he never succeeds in completing this trip. In fact, nearly all the details surrounding the *persona*'s intended journey are unclear; all that is certain is that it begins in the valley and ends at the mountain. It is an abstract itinerary, though it resembles the Jews' journey out of exile to Jerusalem. However, by the beginning of Part Two, Markish's poetic *persona* returns to his point of origin, the valley, which receives mass waves of workers from all four corners of the world. At this point, focalization shifts from being largely internal to predominantly external. The *persona* focuses less on his personal journey to the forty-year-old man and more on objectively portraying the events

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<sup>126</sup> In her analysis of this poem, Anna Torres emphasizes the liberation that has taken place without a connection to a specific ideology. She notes that "in this moment of lucidity, banners and slogans are replaced by the irreducible human face." Ibid.

happening around him. This shift in focus stems in part from Markish's embrace of the prophetic mode, which Markish uses to tell of the growth and development of the surrounding world. Thus, Part Two comes to tell the tale, the developmental "journey," of the land as it metamorphosizes into an industrialized society. The dynamic nature of Markish's poem lies not in the journey of his poetic *persona* but in his attempts to situate himself amidst the immense transformations that reshape the landscape and society and ultimately foreshadow the sacrifice of the Russian Motherland.

By shifting narrative focus from the *persona's* quest to find the forty-year-old man to the pursuit of developing an industrialized utopia—an idealized location that does not yet exist or, as Thomas More theorized, a "no-place—the poetic speaker's path becomes one not of travel but of becoming."<sup>127</sup> The forty-year-old man's absence pervades the first half of Markish's text, which can be read as an extended prayer to find the quasi-mystical being. Markish never leaves any hints that might link the forty-year-old man's identity to a specific person, but the number forty does have special significance in the Jewish faith. The Talmud states that at age 40, man transitions to the next level of wisdom, to the level of *binah*.<sup>128</sup> At this age, he gains a deeper insight of understanding one matter from another.<sup>129</sup> In this sense, the poetic speaker's journey

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<sup>127</sup> More coined the term "utopia" as the name of a fictional island in his 1571 fictional work *Utopia*. The word, which is derived from the Greek οὐ ("not") and τόπος ("place"), can literally be translated as "no place."

<sup>128</sup> At this point one may practice *Kabbalah*. Anna Torres makes this important observation in her research. Citing the afterword to *Der fertsikyeriker man*, she notes how Esther Markish recalled her husband explaining that he would only finish his work when "'we grow old, raise children, free ourselves from all worries and obligations.'" Torres connects this to the Kabbalistic limitation that states: "only people over forty who have fulfilled their family and worldly obligations may turn to the mystical sphere." *Ibid.*, 472.

<sup>129</sup> Another connection to the number 40 comes from Deuteronomy 29:3-4 (*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006), in which, after 40 years of wondering in the desert, Moses tells his followers,



may be interpreted as one not toward the forty-year-old man but rather to becoming the forty-year-old man.<sup>130</sup> Like the process of creating utopia, this progression is constantly self-perfecting. This interpretation of Markish's epic falls in line with Harsha Ram's analysis of Khlebnikov's *Zangezi*, in which he emphasizes how:

The constitutive contradiction between utopia as a state of "being" – the perfected place that is at the same time a no-place, whose first modern articulation was Thomas More's *Utopia* (1571) – and utopia as an experience of "becoming," an anticipatory impulse or desire which... represents what Ernst Bloch once called "cultural surplus," the concentrated dream-image of unfulfilled human potential whose realization is projected onto an alternative future.<sup>131</sup>

The attempts of Markish's poetic *persona* not only to prophesize but also to reach this highest-most realization of human potential, to withstand violent societal transformations and upheaval, reflect the monumental nature of his journey, even if it never covers much physical ground. The aspiration to reach this theoretical no-place proves to be both challenging and costly for the *persona*, and even upon the work's conclusion, it is unclear as to whether he ever succeeds in reaching or becoming the elusive forty-year-old man.

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"Yet to this day יהוה has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. I led you through the wilderness forty years[...]" Additionally, Hillel was 40 years old when he arrived in Jerusalem from Babylonia.

<sup>130</sup> This interpretation evokes the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*: "Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in some dark woods, / for I had wandered off from the straight path." Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Inferno: The Indiana Critical Edition*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 19. Though the narrator is 35 years old (half of the biblical lifespan of seventy years), this concept of wandering from the straight (or right) path and conflict between darkness and light are major themes in Markish's work. Like Markish's poetic *persona*, Dante's initially sets out to climb a "joyous mountain." *Ibid.*, 21. Perhaps coincidentally, Markish was 35 years old at the time that he completed *Der fertsikyeriker man*.

<sup>131</sup> Harsha Ram, "World Literature as World Revolution: Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and the Utopian Geopoetics of the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 35.

The connection between the forty-year-old man and the poetic *persona* is illuminating, beginning with the second part of the opening poem, in which Markish delivers his first message to the forty-year-old man:

*9 – Nit keyn zun, nit keyn broyt, nit keyn yam, nit keyn feld  
Nit keyn vayn, nit keyn fleysh, hot mir haynt nit farfelt.  
Un tsu kopns – der shteyn, un dos lid tsum gezang,  
S'iz gevezn haynt alts vos badarft s'hot tsu zayn.*

*Nor baym royshikn tish un tsezungener shvel  
Hot dayn payn, fertsikyeriker man, haynt gefelt...*

*Nit zayn paynlekher blik, nit dayn dorshtike hant,  
Nit gebentsht hot dem tish, fertsikyeriker man.*

*17 Z'ibergekert kh'hob dem tish, un tsegosn dem vayn,  
Un gelozt zikh tsu dir, tsu dem barg funem payn.*

*Tsu dayn eynzamen likht, in der tif funem zayn,  
Tsu dayn kop vos iz grov un in groyz far der tsayt.*

*Vi a shof tsu der sharf fun der shverd shtilerheyt –  
Zol baginen mayn oyfgang, zol oygeyn mayn rey.*

*Tomer bistu nito, oyb du bist nit faran,  
Zol mayn veg tsu dir zayn, fertsikyeriker man!*

9 – Neither sun, nor bread, nor sea, nor field,  
Nor wine, nor meat have we lacked today.

And for kicking – the stone, and the song for chanting,  
Today has become everything that it was ought to be.

But at the rustling table and singing threshold  
Your pain, forty-year-old man, was missing today...

Neither your distressed glance, nor your thirsty hand,  
Have blessed the table, forty-year-old man.

17 I have turned over the table and spilt the wine,  
And led off for you, for the mountain of your pain.

To your forlorn light, to the depth of your being,  
To your head which is gray and withered by time.

Like a sheep silently to the sword's blade –  
My dawn will begin, my turn will rise.

If you are missing, if you are not there,  
Shall my road to you be, forty-year-old man!

Counterintuitively, the poet uses negative constructions through the repetition of the phrase *nit keyn* (“not any”) in lines 9 and 10 to establish a sense of excess – he has all that is necessary, and the day “has become everything that it was ought to be.” Still, there is something missing, someone who has yet to arrive: the forty-year-old man. Instead of noting the absence of the man himself, Markish specifies his “distressed glance” and “thirsty hand.” The forty-year-old man comes to embody not a singular person but a human condition, as well as the skepticism that not all is as wonderful as it appears. The poet emphasizes the forty-year-old man’s pain to suggest that, though they appear to be content, those at the table might be satisfied only as the result of the suffering and misfortune of others. Markish stresses the forty-year-old man’s head which is “gray and withered by time” to suggest that he has already aged and, despite reaching only the age of forty, perhaps has reached the end of his path. Markish likens the rise of his dawn to a sheep heading obediently to the blade as an acknowledgment of the forty-year-old man’s dreary outlook. In seeking the path to the forty-year-old man, Markish longs to embrace those who have suffered to create the conditions of the present day. His journey becomes a quest to reconcile the present with both the past and future in the ongoing process of creating utopia, of the striving toward perfection – an endeavoring deeply rooted in the Jewish biblical tradition back to when

God told Abraham, “Walk before Me, and be perfect.”<sup>132</sup> By attempting to walk the path toward the forty-year-old man, Markish substitutes God for this man of forty.

This idea of reconciling the present with both past and future leads to an alternative messianic interpretation, in which the forty-year-old man may symbolize the messiah, broadly defined, in all his permutations, past and present. Throughout Part One, the poetic persona awaits this messiah-like figure who has yet to arrive or reveal himself. In this sense, Markish’s *persona* is not only on a journey to a “no-place,” but also seeking the appearance of a “no-one.” In thinking back to Markish’s Isaiah intertext, if the poet prophesizes not the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the building of the factory in the nameless industrial center, then we may identify the worker as Markish’s messiah. This reading lends new meaning to the final four lines: “Like a sheep silently to the sword’s blade – / My dawn will begin, my turn will rise. // If you are missing, if you are not there, / Shall my road to you be, forty-year-old man!” Should he not meet the forty-year-old man, it will be the *persona*’s turn to become the figure capable of bringing in the messianic age.

### ***Generating Inclusivity through Ambiguity***

The journey to situate the self between the three temporalities of the past, present, and future is an attempt to ensure the making of the utopia is inclusive of and accessible to all who contributed to its creation – those who have toiled and suffered in the past and who will labor in the future. Markish’s quandary is reminiscent of Qohelet’s laments in Ecclesiastes 1:

1.2 Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

1.3 What profit has a man of all his labor wherein he labors under the sun?

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<sup>132</sup> Genesis 17:1. This comes from *The Koren Jerusalem Bible* (1995) translation. *The Contemporary Torah* (JPS, 2006) states: Walk in My ways and be blameless.

1.4 One generation passes away, and another generation comes: but the earth abides forever.

1.5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to its place where it rises again.<sup>133</sup>

Markish's *persona* is acutely aware of his place in this vicious cycle.<sup>134</sup> Markish's recognition that it is his turn, that he is on the path to becoming the forty-year-old man sparks his desire to reconcile the past, present, and future; to break the generational struggle of laboring with nothing show in return other than pain and suffering. His proclamations in this opening poem represent an evolution in thought for the evolving poet who had previously, as Amelia Glaser notes, dismissed both the past and the "dreamlike future" in favor of what she describes as an "insignificant now."<sup>135</sup> Glaser makes this observation in her analysis of the poet's 1917 poem "I take my leave of you," in which Markish states:

*Un du ver bist, mayn tsukunft,  
Farvaksene in groye hor?  
Kh'geher nit dir,  
Du kholemst zikh mir nokh!*

And you – who are you, future,  
Grown out in gray hair?  
I don't belong to you,  
You will appear in my dreams!<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *The Koren Jerusalem Bible.*

<sup>134</sup> Byron also bases one of his *Hebrew Melodies* "All is Vanity, Saith the Preacher" off these words. Baron George Gordon Byron, *Hebrew Melodies* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1815), 28.

<sup>135</sup> Amelia Glaser, "A Shout from Somewhere': The Early Works of Peretz Markish" in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 51.

<sup>136</sup> Translation by Amelia Glaser.

Markish's forty-year-old man, with his withered head, is at once a manifestation of the poet's predecessor and future self, figures that he now desires to consult, if not embrace. Breaking from his early contemptuous disregard for the past and future, Markish exhibits a new maturity and proactivity in ensuring the wellbeing of generations past and future by seeking to secure their place in a rapidly developing modern society. He acknowledges the gravity of his position in Poem 9, in which he alludes to Ecclesiastes 1:

*13 Kh'hob bagegnt a dor, un bagleytn a dor.  
S'iz alts eyns vos me tor nit, alts eyns vos me tor*

*Oyfn rand horizont, oyfn helbloyen kant.  
Geyt a hiltserner vogn avek in fargang.*

*A levayedik ferd, un in vogn ot dort –  
Mit a torbe fardekt – a fargangener dor...  
Un mit di hent in di arbl, farbrente fun brokh,  
Geyen tsvelf geboygene zkeynem im nokh.*

13 I welcomed a generation in and ushered a generation out.  
It's all the same if it's forbidden or permitted.

On the border of the horizon, on the light blue edge,  
Exits a wooden wagon into the past.

A funeral horse, and in the wagon precisely there –  
Is a beggar's sack covering – a past generation.

And with their hands in their sleeves, burnt by catastrophe,  
Twelve hunched old men walk after it.

Markish's use of abstraction to generate obscure landscapes amplifies the affect generated by the image of a funeral horse dragging a wooden wagon carrying the past generation, sordidly covered by a beggar's sack. His description of the "light blue edge" makes it seem as if the wagon exits not on land, but water. The poet provides few details regarding the setting to direct focus to the dreary cycle of generational changeover. In its ambiguity, the twelve hunched old men may allude to the Twelve Sons of Jacob, the Twelve Apostles, or Aleksandr Blok's Twelve

Red Guards.<sup>137</sup> Just as early Christian thinkers—Saint Augustine, for example—saw the twelve sons of Jacob (the Twelve Tribes of Israel) to be the forerunners for the Twelve Apostles, Blok portrays the Apostles as the forerunners for his twelve depraved Red Guards. In these instances, Augustine and Blok use the culture of the past as Lotman and Uspenskii’s “generative mechanism” with an intent to delegitimize this past culture and make it obsolete. Markish’s “twelve hunched old men” (*tsvelf geboygene zkeynem*) encompass the Twelve Sons of Jacob, the Twelve Apostles, and Blok’s Twelve Red Guards – designations that the poet views as obsolete and fading into the past. Throughout his epic, Markish alludes to people and traditions that range from the Jewish biblical past to contemporary Soviet history. The ambiguous portrayal of these twelve men allows Markish to simultaneously usher out the undesirable influences from the Jewish, Christian, and Bolshevik traditions – all potentially represented by the poet’s *zkeynem*.

### ***The Chaotic World of Markish’s Work***

In comparing *Der fertsikyeriker man* to the Book of Isaiah and Ecclesiastes 1, one of the major differentiating factors between the Yiddish poem and its biblical subtexts is the chaotic volatility of Markish’s world. Though the poet makes frequent allusions to biblical history to establish a prophetic mode, the content of his ode rarely correlates to the biblical texts to which they allude. In Ecclesiastes, Qohelet notes the static nature of his world – “the earth abides

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<sup>137</sup> Blok’s long poem *The Twelve (Dvenadtsat’)*, written in January 1918, was very popular among the Yiddish modernists; by July 1918, Moyshe Broderzon had already published a Yiddish translation. Blok’s poem which portrays twelve members of the Red Guard trudging through a snowstorm in revolutionary Petrograd generated much controversy upon its publication. As they march, the soldiers attack and defile the bourgeois and counter-revolutionaries in the chaotic Petrograd environment. Blok concludes the poem by revealing that Jesus has been leading these sadistic Red Guardsmen. Stylistically, Blok’s harsh and slangy language resembles that of Markish’s.

forever.” Markish’s poetic *persona* challenges this maxim as the workers attempt to transform the earth to serve their industrial pursuits. He uses poetic language reminiscent of the Book of Isaiah, in which God transforms the world to assist the Jews in their return from Babylonian exile. A voice calls, “Let every valley be raised, every hill and mount made low. Let the rugged ground become level and the ridges become a plain.”<sup>138</sup> Along the path out of exile, God vows to “open up streams on the bare hills and fountains amid the valleys;” to “turn the desert into ponds, the arid land into springs of water.”<sup>139</sup> In Markish’s story, the mountains are ultimately lowered, and the valleys raised, but only after cycles of struggle and through extreme acts of violence wrought not by God, but the workers themselves. Markish elaborates on the chaotic dynamics of his world in Part One Poem Eight:

*11 Biz dem zoym fun der erd, biz dem breg funem yam,  
Geyt hamoyn ergets oyf in gevebn fun flam.*

*Dortn brider un shvester – in eynem geshpant –  
Lodn teg dort vi shifn a hant bay a hant.*

*S’zaynen shroyfn di hent un zey shroyfn zikh ayn  
Inem barg fun der freyd, inem barg fun der payn.*

*Un zey trogn dem barg un zey trogn dem vey,  
Un gezang iz gezang, un geveyn iz geveyn.*

*Azoy noent di vayt, un di vayt iz dervekt,  
Un fun breg biz tsu breg zey farfleytsn dem veg.*

11 ‘Til the edge of the earth, ‘til the shore of the sea,  
The mob ascends somewhere in the fabric of the flame.

There, brothers and sisters – strained as one –  
There, hand in hand they load days like ships.

Their hands are screwed, and they screw themselves

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<sup>138</sup> Isaiah 40:4 (*Revised JPS*, 2023).

<sup>139</sup> Isaiah 41:18 (*Revised JPS*, 2023).



Into the mountain of joy, into the mountain of pain.

And they carry the mountain, and they carry the woe,  
And a hymn is a hymn, and a lament a lament.

The distance is so close, and the distance is roused,  
And from coast to coast, they flood the path.

Markish describes the movement of mob (*hamoyn*) in abstract yet powerful terms. The poet harnesses the full potential of terrestrial energy in his descriptions of the mob's ascent in "the fabric of the flame" and the manner in which they "flood the path." Markish uses a technique similar anthropomorphism to endow the *hamoyn* with godlike capabilities that create a sense of unease and infuse a current of chaotic energy into the expressionist landscape. Functionally, the mob claims controls over the days, which they load like ships, and they move mountains of joy and pain – an image that calls to mind Chaikov's *Di kupe* cover illustration. The mob, in its revolutionary drive, wields a biblical power that destabilizes the landscape through flood and flame. Yet, in Part One, Markish's *hamoyn* demonstrates that they are not yet mature enough to handle such power. In Poem 14, the poet tells of this mob ripping days from the distance like "unripe pomegranates":

*13 – Mir hobn gerisn di teg fun der vayt,  
Vi roye granatn fun boym un fun tsvayg.*

*Gerisn mit tseyen un mit dorshtike hent,  
Oyf aksl gezunikt, oyf aksl gebrent.*

13 We have ripped out the days from the distance,  
Like unripe pomegranates from the tree and the branch.

Ripped with our teeth and with thirsty hands,  
From a sun-dappled shoulder, from a burnt shoulder.

Throughout the course of his career, Markish stressed the importance of the dawn, which often assumes a biblical significance, as the passing of days represent generations coming and going.

In returning to Qohelet's question – “What profit has a man of all his labor wherein he labors under the sun?” – we find that the ravenous mob takes what it can get. It seizes days prematurely, before they can fully ripen. The bronzed, burning shoulder of the mob is a metonymic representation of the proletariat that conveys the extent to which they have labored. As his poetic *persona* navigates the expressionist landscape throughout Part One, Markish acknowledges the mob's power and potential to transform the earth. However, he also demonstrates the crowd's unpreparedness to convert such power into sustainable revolutionary change. He establishes the conflict between the worker and the new day – a central conflict within his larger oeuvre. In Markish's chaotic expressionist landscape, the poetic *persona* seeks revolutionary action and sustainable change not just for the present, but the future as well.

### **Neither Jewish nor Soviet: Markish's Embrace of Comintern Aesthetics**

*Der fertsikyeriker man* marks a shift from Markish's pogrom writing, in which the poet framed Jewish suffering as part of the greater common struggle. In his epic, Markish applies a Jewish vocabulary to portray the common struggle to establish a global workers' utopia. In the mold of Khlebnikov's *supersagas*, Markish employs symbols and intertexts from both the Jewish Soviet cultural-historical contexts, but adapts them to fit the ideological goals of proletarian internationalism in what I argue is his greatest contribution to the global canon of literature that scholars have recently termed “Comintern aesthetics.”<sup>140</sup> In his exposition of this term, Steven S.

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<sup>140</sup> In particular, I refer to the 2020 volume *Comintern Aesthetics*, edited by Amelia Glaser and Steven S. Lee. The volume seeks to “remap world literature and culture from the perspective of world communism – that is, from the perspective of a leftist, anti-capitalist modernity that ascended in the years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.” Steven S. Lee, “Introduction: Comintern Aesthetics – Space, Form, History” in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 3. It “uses specific aesthetic forms to track the Comintern's utopian

Lee stresses the need to resist viewing Comintern aesthetics “as synonymous with the coercion of artists and writers by state and party or, more specifically, with Soviet socialist realism,” and instead highlight “the gap between the entropic actuality of the Comintern... and its unrealized and perhaps unrealizable dream: to balance centripetal control with local struggle, internationalism, and nationalism.”<sup>141</sup> He elaborates that:

‘Comintern aesthetics’[...] cross historical boundaries like interwar versus postwar; spatial boundaries like East versus West; and formal boundaries like modernism versus realism. Understanding this concept requires unpacking each of these two terms, ‘Comintern’ and ‘aesthetics’ – tracking the Comintern’s applicability across multiple contexts and cultures, and regearing the aesthetic so that it is able to encompass multiple forms, media, and political applications.<sup>142</sup>

This cross-cultural applicability allows Markish to use the prophetic mode effectively to portray the traumas of the workers’ struggle. The poet relies heavily on Jewish biblical tradition due to his familiarity with the canon, but uses it to uncover universal obstacles in this path toward a nationless workers’ utopia.<sup>143</sup> By weaving in well-known biblical intertexts and allusions to portray the struggles toward the establishment of industrial utopia, Markish legitimizes the history of its creation, even as it continues to develop in real time. Furthermore, this process makes Markish’s text more relevant to international, non-Jewish audiences. Markish ensures that the suffering of his poetic *persona* and titular forty-year-old man represent not just a Jewish

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promise and dispersed networks, and then follows these forms to understand how this promise and these networks have been carried forward into the present.” Ibid., 5.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>143</sup> Again, this demonstrates how Markish finds the plight of the international proletariat in the plight of the exiled Jew, a technique similar to that employed by Byron in his *Hebrew Melodies* which was touched upon earlier in this chapter.

struggle, but a communal one. To this point, it is vital to understand that Markish believes the Jews suffer because of their nationalistic inclinations. His poem is a call to his Yiddish readership to forsake its nationalist and nativist predilections and join in the construction of nationless utopia – a call that had simultaneously gone out to workers worldwide.<sup>144</sup>

Three prevalent factors allow Markish's *Fertsikyeriker man* to resist contextualization within a purely Jewish or Soviet framework: the conflation of Soviet and Jewish histories, the distortion of biblical allusion, and the manipulation of etymologies and geopoetics.<sup>145</sup> These elements all suggest that Markish's work would be most appropriately contextualized within a greater framework of Comintern aesthetics. In *Der fertsikyeriker man*, Markish transcends the Soviet and Jewish contexts by presenting own vision for world history and the emergence of an industrialized workers' utopia.

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<sup>144</sup> Perhaps the most recognizable manifestation of this call comes in the form of the Marxist slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" Though this phrase does not appear in Markish's work, the significance of this slogan in both its Russian and Yiddish contexts will be a major focus of Chapter Three.

<sup>145</sup> Throughout this section, I will refer to Harsha Ram's conceptualization and application of geopoetics from his chapter "World Literature as World Revolution: Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and the Utopian Geopoetics of the Russian Avant-Garde." Ram elaborates upon the term as defined by Italian poet-scholar Federico Italiano, who as Ram explains "sees geopoetics as the 'hybrid fruit of an epistemic translation' between the disciplines of geography and literary criticism and theory (11–12), an 'operative category for the understanding of geographical knowledge and for the modes of inscription of the Earth into a literary text' (18)." Ram considers geopoetics to be "principally interested in how spatial-geographical, territorial, and ecological-environmental markers are aesthetically encoded in a text, revealing a specific inscription of the earth or some part of it in a literary artifact." Harsha Ram, "World Literature as World Revolution: Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and the Utopian Geopoetics of the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 70.

## *A Conflation of Jewish and Soviet Mythologies*

Markish blurs the distinction between Jewish and Soviet histories in a process that substantiates his reimagining of the genesis of the USSR and establishment of a Communist International. He accomplishes this largely through employing biblical allusion to reappropriate scenes from the Old Testament into his abstract retelling of early Soviet history. For instance, in Part One Poem 24, he conflates the death of Moses with that of Lenin:

*7 Un makhnes nokh makhnes derlangt horizont  
Fun gor fun der velt, fun vayt un fun nont.*

*Un ver mitn harts un ver mit der fon,  
Nor a trune farnemt dort dos ort oybn on.*

*An opene trune, mit roytn badekt –  
S'iz der lerer geshtorbn in mitn dem veg*

*Un s'trogt umetum dos gebeyn mit dos folk –  
Fun tol oyfn barg fun barg oyfn tol.*

*15 Ale gekumen, fun gor fun der velt,  
Fun vayt un fun noent, es hot keyner farfelt.*

*Bloyz dem firer aleyn bay dem zunikn rand  
Nit bashert iz gevezn arayngeyn in land.*

*Oyfn tol fun der freyd, oyfn tol fun der frayheyt,  
Bashert im geven iz a kuk fun der vayt.*

*A kuk ton fun vayt un oysgeyn fun freyd  
Mit a kush funem folk, mit a kush funem toyt.*

*Iz ver mitn harts | un ver mit der fon,  
Nor leydik un vist iz dos ort oybn on.*

*7 And group after group reach the horizon –  
From all over the world, from near and far.*

*Some with heart and some with flag,  
But a coffin sits there at the place of honor.*

An open coffin, covered in red –  
It's the teacher who died in the middle of the path.

And the remains are carried everywhere with the people –  
From the valley up the mountain and from the mountain to the valley.

15 Everyone has arrived, from all over the world,  
From near and far, no one is missing.

Only the ruler alone by the sunny border  
Was not predestined to enter the land.

In the valley of joy, in the valley of freedom,  
He was predestined to give just a glance from the distance.

A glance from the distance and then he died of joy,  
With a kiss from the people, with a kiss of death.

Some with heart and some with flag,  
Only the place at the head of the table is vacant and unoccupied.

The “kiss of death” lavished upon the deceased leader mirrors the divine kiss bestowed upon Moses in Deuteronomy 34, but instead of God, it is the people who give their teacher this kiss.<sup>146</sup>

Markish mixes poetic meters switching freely between amphibrachic and anapestic tetrameter, though many of the lines written in amphibrachs (namely 8, 9, 14, 21, and 23) contain caesurae, indicating a disruption in the utopia-building process as a result of the ruler's death.

Thematically, this passage suggests an incompleteness to the Soviet utopian project, which under Lenin had not yet established itself as the metaphorical Promised Land. The coffin, “covered in red,” referred to in line 11 appears to be a reference to Lenin's “open” crystal sarcophagus,

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<sup>146</sup> As it is written in Deuteronomy 34:4-5 (*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006): “And יהוה said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ‘I will assign it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there.’ So Moses the servant of יהוה died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of יהוה.” Interpretations have viewed this “command” to be a “divine kiss,” as the literal translation of the Biblical Hebrew (עַל־פִּי יְהוָה) would be “by the mouth of the LORD.”

which sits in Red Square and has been open to the public since his death in 1924. Markish's defamiliarized biblical homage to Lenin simultaneously honors the founder of the Soviet Union, but by creating an equivalency between Moses and Lenin, Markish emphasizes the work left to be done and the progress yet to be made – the teacher “died in the middle of the path,” not at its end. Vitaly, this indicates that Moscow, Lenin's final resting place with its “open coffin, covered in red,” is not the end of the road – that is, it is not destined to be the centerpiece of a future industrial utopia. Markish produces another form of *ostranenie* for the sake of the world's renewal, in which the poet reimagines the establishment of the Soviet Union. Through its connection to Moses leading the Jews out of exile and toward the Promised Land, Markish's allusion to death of Lenin at once substantiates the Soviet industrial utopian project as righteous (and even divinely ordained), but also clarifies that it remains a work in progress and of constant renewal.

Though his allusions to Soviet history are vague initially, Markish definitively links his work to the USSR through the image of the hammer and sickle in Part One Poem 40. This poem marks the halfway point of Markish's text and functions as a turning point, after which references and allusions to contemporary events, people and places become more direct:<sup>147</sup>

*1 Me shtromt tsum hamoyn, fertsikyeriker man,  
Un groys zaynen vunder, un shtark iz der drang.*

*Far blind un farblendte tsu fertsiker yor  
Zikh efnt tsum ershtn mol oyf der kayor.*

...

*11 Der tog zikh fartsit, zikh fartsit un fartsert,  
Un ver mit a hamer, un ver mit a serp.*

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<sup>147</sup> Though *Der fertsikyeriker man* contains 80 poems, Part One consists of 42 and Part Two 38.

*S' bafelt der hamoyn un mit zun er basgvert.  
Un ikh mit a zastup far keyversher erd.*

*Iz farklyanet dos harts un mit fiver farzoymt.  
Vel ikh oyfgeyn tsu dir un dir zogn azoy:*

*– Itst mit dorshstike oygn di vaytn me mest  
Un tsu kvure vil keyner itst brengen keyn mes.*

*Ligt der mes oyfn veg, s'iz vi shrift zayn gebeyn.  
S'zaynen foystn farsharkt un tsum himl – di tseyen.*

*Nor di geyers farbaygeyn un tsrik kumen on,  
Ligt der mes unter pakhve farrukt m'hot a fon*

*Mit oyfshrift mi heln, mit oyses royt:  
– Der toyter in lebn zol lebn in toyt!*

1 They stream to the mob, forty-year-old man,  
And the wonder is great, and the desire is strong.

For those blind and misguided, at forty years old  
the dawn opens itself up for the first time.

...

11 The day drags on, drags on, and drags,  
some with hammer and some with sickle.

The mob makes an oath with and commands the sun.  
And I an oath with a spade for the grave-like earth.

My heart languished and was hemmed in fever.  
I will walk up to you and tell you this:

– Now they measure the distances with thirsty eyes  
And now no one wants to bury the corpse.

The corpse lies on the path, its bones like a type font.  
Its fists frozen and teeth pointed to the sky.

Only travelers pass by and around,  
And a flag was stuck under the corpse's armpit



With an inscription in bright red letters:  
– The deceased in life shall live long in death!

Stylistically, Markish returns to the aesthetics of his pogrom poetics and repurposes them to describe the disturbing horrors of the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent Civil War. As I argued in my analysis of *Di kupe*, Markish attempted to turn the Mound at Horoditch, a symbol of pogrom violence and immense Jewish suffering, into a catalyst for revolutionary action. His poetic *persona* refused to honor the dead and pledged his heart “for a red amulet – / The restless-red and bloody flag.” Though he began writing *The Forty-Year-Old Man* in the immediate aftermath of completing his pogrom poem, his poetic *persona* is now the one who finds himself tasked with the responsibility of honoring the dead. The mob attempts to carry out Markish’s pledge to the bloody flag made in *Di kupe*, but the poet now recognizes its destructive fervor as its members “measure the distances with thirsty eyes,” without considering their toll on human life. The mob (*hamoyn*)—previously portrayed as immature—is now forty years old. It has reached the level of knowledge and maturity so enigmatic in Jewish mystical thought and “opens itself up for the first time to the dawn.” Yet, Markish’s poetic *persona* recognizes the mob’s shortcomings, notably their lack of regard for the dead. While the mob pledges itself to their hammer and sickle, Markish’s *persona* makes an oath with a spade (*zastup*), indicating his desire to bury the dead, and he laments his anguish to the forty-year-old man. The mob’s dawn, their new day, appears destined to be no different than those of old. The major difference in this iteration of mob violence is that the role of Markish’s *persona* shifts from that of victim to one of onlooker. His *persona* does not relish in the destruction, as he had as *koyen-godl* in *Di kupe*; instead, he takes on a role of critiquing prophet.

### *The Manipulation of Etymologies and Geopoetics*

In Part Two of *Der fertsikyeriker man*, Markish develops a system of abstract geopoetics that expands the scope of the workers' struggle to an international audience. The Yiddish poet mimics techniques employed by his Russian contemporaries. Harsha Ram has explained that "by analytically decomposing the linguistic and artistic raw materials of the creative process and reconstituting them as a new means to signify the coordinates of space and time, the Russian avant-garde strove to generate a planetary internationalism of aesthetic form commensurate with world revolution." He points to Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* as a case study, in which Ram describes how the Russian avant-garde vision for world revolution was "grounded in the specificities of Eurasian history and geography," but shows how "the regional 'geopoetics' of the Russian avant-garde point beyond the Eurasian landmass to the structuring principles of the modern artistic and social utopia."<sup>148</sup> He cautions that the "geopoetics of the Russian avant-garde, although facilitated by a singular convergence of revolutionary change and artistic experimentation, should not be viewed as irreducibly Russian. [...] Its deeper logic mirrors what Louis Marin has identified as the characteristic structural tension of 'the modern literary-political utopia'" – a corpus to which Markish, upon the completion of *Di kupe*, began actively contributing to.<sup>149</sup> Ram's application of this conceptualization of geopoetics to Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* provides a fitting framework through which to analyze *Der fertsikyeriker man*. Though Markish's ode would only be accessible to a Yiddish readership (at least in its untranslated

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<sup>148</sup> Harsha Ram, "World Literature as World Revolution: Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and the Utopian Geopoetics of the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 31.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

form), the poet manipulates linguistics and generates cultural-religious symbolism that applies his revolutionary aims to an international proletariat that extends well beyond the work's Jewish and Soviet contexts.

In Part Two, *Der fertsikyeriker man* reproduces the “convergence of Khlebnikov’s poetic utopianism with the Comintern’s celebrated ‘eastward turn’ in 1920” through emphasizing the contribution of worker-youths from the steppe to the Soviet industrialization project.<sup>150</sup> Markish overlays the abstract geography previously defined by his expressionist poetics onto a distinctly Soviet topography. In Part Two Poem Seven, he mentions “mountainous youths, youths from the steppe” coming to construct cities – a direct allusion to the Soviet mass construction efforts of the 1920s:

*1 Zunik-farbroynte un bronzik-geblendt,  
Layb vi kashtanen, vi tsvaygers di hent.  
Tserisene kepkes in roykh fun di hor,  
Breyter vi lenger – di tsvantsiker yor,*

*Nit oyf di zamdn un nit oyfn breg –  
In mitn dem tog un in mitn dem veg.*

*Bergike yungen, yungen fun step –  
Vegleygers yungen fun pletser un shtet.*

1 Sun-browned and bronze-dazzled,  
Bodies like chestnut trees, hands like branches.

Torn visors with smoke coming from their hair,  
Wider than long – the years of the twenties.

Not on the sands and not on the coast –  
In the middle of the day and in the middle of the path.

Mountainous youths, youths from the steppe –  
Youths laying the path of squares and cities.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 38.

These youths represent the legions of Central Asian workers that moved across the USSR to build the Soviet industrial centers in the 1920s. For the first time in his work, Markish distinctly identifies groups of people and their concrete contributions to Soviet industrialization. Markish's description of these youths might be portrayed as orientalizing – the decision to emphasize their “sun-browned and bronze-dazzled skin” marks an otherness, especially for Markish's Eastern European Jewish readership. Yet the poet does not orientalize malevolently; instead, he views these youths as abruptly uprooted, as is evidenced by their “bodies like chestnut trees” and “hands like branches.” Just two pages later in Poem 9, Markish portrays these youths as a cohesive unit and fervent contributors to the Soviet project through their involvement in the Pioneers:

*1 Iz dos den nit friling oyf friling gekeyflt  
Ven s'flien tsuzamen zikh kinder tsunoyf?*

*In makhnesvayz, tshatesvayz, freyd un gefokh,  
Fun mizrekh, fun dorem, fun nokh un fun nokh,*

*Mit fonen un hertser, vi parmet fardreyt,  
Un hent tsu di hoykhn: “mir zaynen shoyn greyt!”*

*Un vos iz a grenets un vos iz a rand,  
Az s'frilingen kinder fun land iber land?*

...

*15 Nit di bafarbung fun layb un fun hoyt –  
Oysgepikt ale fun mi un fun noyt.*

*Un dos moyl vert in dorsht un in fiber farzoygt.  
Vel ikh oyfgeyn tsu dir un dir zogn azoy:*

*Fun broynike lipn, fun blankende tseyen,  
Fun blenkik un blonde, fun ale alts eyns,*

*– Fun farhoybene hent vi fun zangiker freyd  
Geyt a psure der velt: “shtendik greyt, shtendik greyt!”*

*Un undz un di letste zol zayn itst bashert  
A gurt a gretrayer zey zayn oyf der erd!*

1 Then is this not spring multiplied by spring  
When children are flying together?

In groups, in flocks, in joy and waving  
From east, from south, from other directions,

Flags and hearts, like twisted parchment,  
And hands to the heights: “we are already ready!”

And what is a border and what is an edge,  
When children spring from country to country?

...

15 It is not the coloring of their bodies and skin –  
Everyone is born from toil and want.

And my mouth becomes hemmed in thirst and fever,  
I will walk up to you and tell you this:

From brown lips, from sparkling teeth,  
Dazzling and sparkling, from everyone all the same.

– From raised hands as if joyfully chanting,  
Comes a message to the world: “always ready, always ready!”

And we and the last one should now be predestined  
To be a girdle, a loyal one, for them on the earth!

The saying repeated in line 22, *shtendik greyt* (“always ready”; Russian: *vsegda gotov*), was the official slogan of the Pioneers, the mass youth organization founded by Lenin in 1922. As the poem shifts to a more contemporary historical mode in Part Two, new ideologies begin to take shape and insert themselves into Markish’s text. The poet continues to emphasize the fervent involvement of the children of the peripheries, “from east, from south, from other directions,” in the development of the Soviet industrial project. He treats all these children as equals, noting that “It is not the coloring of their bodies and skin / Everyone is born from toil and want.” Though the

children are united in part by their oppression, Markish stresses their collective potential and the enthusiasm of their message, emanating “From brown lips, from sparkling teeth, / Dazzling and sparkling, from everyone all the same.”

In this poem, Markish begins to erase the borders and boundaries that had previously impeded revolutionary progress, but his manipulation of poetic devices suggests that this progress is still at risk of delay. His verse is rife with apostrophic questioning and enjambment spanning multiple couplets, which can reflect the destruction of boundaries but also signify a sense of disjunction, as seen in an examination of lines 3-6. The poet ends line 3 with the participle *gefokh* (waving) and returns to it in the next couplet in line 5 by continuing: *mit fonen un hertser* (flags and hearts). Together the phrase *gefokh mit fonen un hertser* means “waving flags and hearts,” but the inclusion of line 4 and subsequent stanza break fragment this grammatical construction and make the narrative content difficult to follow. The groups of youths exclaim “we are *already* ready,” but the poet manipulates poetic form to delay this message – to delay the delivery of meaning. Markish employs a similar technique in lines 19-22, in which the “brown lips” that appear in the beginning of line 19 deliver the message “always ready, always ready” that only comes at the end of line 22. In both cases, Markish’s eager Pioneers seek to demonstrate their willingness to contribute to the Soviet project, but his fragmented poetics disconnect their proclamations and cast doubt on their readiness. As Markish’s *persona* explains to the forty-year-old man in the final couplet, “And we and the last one should now be predestined / To be a girdle, a loyal one, for them on the earth!” The children of different races and ethnicities are ready across the world; now it is up to Markish and his readers to support them and facilitate this unification.

As Part Two develops, depictions of violence extend into the distance and implicate workers worldwide in instances of suffering and upheaval. In Part Two Poem 14, gruesome imagery fills Markish's heights and distances, which span in all directions beyond Eastern Europe – toward the Seine, the Thames, and into Asia. Mass executions accompany economic collapse as Markish conflates images of falling prices with falling rice and falling heads. The distance becomes tubercular – sickly and weak – while the heights are bloody and the borders wounded. In this chaos, the boundaries that once restricted and subdued the spatiotemporal elements of Markish's narrative begin to deteriorate and the formal properties that defined the poet's verse are destabilized:

*1 Mit blut ruft der mizrekh, der mayrev mit ayter.  
Es shrayen di pletser un forshtet – oyf shayters.*

*Iz blutik di hoykh un faraytert der zoyf,  
Un vintn farsapet fun yog un fun loyf.*

*A riked fun tsifers, fun tsol un fun tseylems,  
Un drotn dertsitert, un drotn dertseyn:*

*On oyfshtand bayt dunay, a parad bay der sen,  
Hundert geshosn, gehangene – tsen!*

*S'iz blutik di hoykh un faraytert dos feld,  
Un s'roysht oyf der hundertster, toyzntster vel:*

*A shtrayk bay der temze, in shtatn – a bunt,  
Hundert geshosn un toyznt in vund.*

*13 Un in dr'hoykh, oyf der hundertster, toyzntster vel,  
Geyt fun birzhe tsu birzhe a radio shnel:*

*In di toln fun azie, oyf di felder fun rayz,  
T'zikh gehoybn dos blut un gefaln di prayz.*

*Un dem kop oyf a shteyn un gebundn di kni,  
Un s'hakn di kep zikh, vi rayz oyfn shit.*

*Un s'blutikt di erd, un di vayt iz in tshakh,  
Un fun blud makht men zayt un fun hoyt – tsheshuntsha.*

*N'durkh farvundete randn dertrogt dos gever:  
Oyf yetvider gas iz tseshtelt a baryer.*

*Un s'kortshen zikh layber farblutikt un gel,  
Un dr'hoykh, oyf der hundertster, toyzntster vel...*

<sup>1</sup> With blood cries the East, the West – with pus.  
The squares in suburbs scream – atop pyres.

The height is bloody and the booze festering,  
And winds breathless from blowing and gusting.

A dance of figures, numbers, and crosses,  
And cables shock, and cables narrate:

Without a rebellion the Danube changes hands, a parade by the Seine,  
One hundred shot dead, hanged were ten!

The height is bloody and the field festers,  
And the hundredth rustles, the thousandth will:

A strike by the Thames, in states – a bund,  
One hundred shot dead, a thousand with a wound.

<sup>13</sup> And in the height, by the hundredth, the thousandth will,  
A radio goes rapidly from stock exchange to exchange:

In the valleys of Asia, on the fields of rice.  
Blood has risen and falling is the price.

Their head is on a stone and their knees are bound,  
And heads are chopped off, like pouring rice.

And the earth is bloodied, and the distance is tubercular,  
And from blood one makes silk and from skin – tussore.

Armaments are carried across wounded borders:  
A barrier has been placed on every road.

And bodies writhe, bloodied and yellow,  
And the height, on the hundredth, the thousandth will...



No longer referring to the "light blue edge" of the horizon and nameless peaks and valleys, Markish becomes as specific in his geographic references as he is broad. He switches freely between amphibrachic, anapestic, and dactylic meters, reflecting the diverse geographic scope of the instability and violence that continue to ravage economies and societies worldwide. In line 5, he describes the chaos as "a dance of figures, numbers, and crosses" (*A riked fun tsifers, fun tsol un fun tseylems*). Curiously, he chooses to use the Hebraic term *riked* to describe these frenzied scenes. In a poem rife with foreign borrowings (e.g.: *tsheshuntsha* – tussore; *baryer* – barrier), *riked* is just one of four words from *loshen-koydesh* to appear in these 24 lines. The other three are *mizrekh* (east) and *mayrev* (west), which appear in line 1; and *tseylems* (crosses) which appears in line 5 along with *riked*. The inclusion of these words and their placement in their respective lines suggests an association between the Jewish-inflected *riked* and the East (both of which appear in the first half of their lines) and the Christian *tseylems* and the West (which appear in the second half).

In the lines that follow, Markish explodes semantic and geographic associations with a chaotic portrayal of revolutionary upheaval from across the world. The parades in France, strikes in England, and bloodshed in Asia affect the workers of the world as they become embroiled in a global struggle for improved labor conditions.<sup>151</sup> In a similar manner as in *Di kupe*, Markish creates an array of innovative rhymes that serve a dual function. At once, these rhymes add to the

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<sup>151</sup> Though Markish is vague in these references, they appear to be linked to contemporaneous events: the "strike by the Thames" referring to the 1926 United Kingdom general strike, the "parade by the Seine" the general revival of conservative activism in France between the years 1924-26, and the violence in China during the Shanghai massacre of 1927. For more on the Shanghai massacre and its influence on Comintern aesthetics, consult Katerina Clark, "Berlin–Moscow–Shanghai: Translating Revolution across Cultures in the Aftermath of the 1927 Shanghai Debacle" in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 81-108.

international scope of the text and accentuate its grotesque imagery. Of particular note is the masculine rhyme at the end of lines 19-20 between the words *iz in tshakh* (is tubercular) and *tsheshuntsha* (tussore). This agrammatical slant rhyme combines a phrase of part Germanic and part Slavic origin with a term that originates from ancient Sanskrit.<sup>152</sup> Drawing upon the aesthetics of his pogrom poetry, Markish uses formally innovative poetics to describe scenes of violence and depravity.

### ***Distorting Biblical Allusion to Represent the Workers' Struggle as Modern Exile***

Despite the international scope of Markish's text, its biblical allusions frame the workers' struggle as an attempt to escape a state of oppressive exile. As has already been demonstrated, Markish distorts these allusions to make traditional conceptions of Jewish exile a universal burden that all workers struggle to overcome. In Part One Poem 28, he creates an uncanny depiction of Jacob's Ladder, the staircase to heaven that appeared in Jacob's dream. In Genesis 28:10-17, Jacob envisions angels unsuccessfully attempting to ascend a ladder to heaven; Markish presents a more bizarre image:

*18 – Es iz itst a gevet, es iz itst a geloyf,  
Ver es vet shneler un hekher aroyf.*

*Trogt yeder karlik a leyter mit zikh,  
Oyf yogn un shteygn oyf shnel, oyf der gikh,*

*Iz mestn zikh itster oyf glitshike trep  
Di heykh fun leytters, un nit fun di kep.*

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<sup>152</sup> The phrase *iz in tshakh* combines the Germanic auxiliary verb and preposition “iz in” (literally, “is in”) with an abbreviated form of the adjective *tshakh* *ototshn* (consumptive). This term appears to have entered certain Yiddish dialects from the old Polish term *suchotnik* (literally, “a consumptive person”; this comes from the stem *suchy* meaning “dry”). The term *tsheshuntsha* is the Yiddish translation for “tussore,” which originates from the Sanskrit *tasara* (literally, “shuttle”). The word exists as a cognate *chesuncha* in Russian as well.

*N'vos hekher der leyter, vos shneler der shtayg,  
Alts shtarker der umfal der letster vet zayn!*

18 – Now there is a wager, now there is a stampede,  
Who will ascend quicker and higher?

Every dwarf carries a ladder with him  
And they hurry and climb quickly, in haste.

Now measuring themselves at every slippery step,  
The height of the ladders, and not the heads.

And the taller the ladder, the faster the climb,  
And all the stronger the final fall will be!

According to Jewish commentaries, the number of rungs ascended by each angel was to represent the number of years that various Kingdoms were to hold dominion over Israel.<sup>153</sup> The first angel was thought to have climbed seventy rungs before falling down, representing the seventy years of the Babylonian exile. Notably, the term *vayt* (distance) appears seventy times over the course of *The Forty-Year-Old Man*.<sup>154</sup> Though this may appear coincidental, Markish's adoption of the prophetic mode and the biblical *modus operandi* of his epic lend themselves to this kind of exegesis. This numerical equivalency links the distance, associated with Markish's dispersed exiles, to the heights, which in Markish's writing will ultimately signify not the heavens but the smokestacks and chimneys of industrialization. The poet portrays the angels as dwarves to emphasize how years of war, pogroms, and revolution has beaten them down, and their struggles to climb the ladders suggest that they are not yet capable of ending the generational struggle to escape their exile. Markish's dwarves do not wish to reach the Land of Israel, however; they seek to arrive at a workers' utopia that has not yet fully materialized.

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<sup>153</sup> The Ramban elaborates on this in his commentary on Genesis 28:12.

<sup>154</sup> This includes the singular and plural noun forms, *vayt* and *vaytn*, as well as the comparative adjectival form, *vayter*.

### *Seizing Divine Agency to Create the Industrial Center – A New “Promised Land”*

By the conclusion to Markish’s *Forty-Year-Old Man*, the poet’s youthful exiles and wanderers arrive at the industrial center, not by the Hand of God but by their own volition. They seize agency from God and, at long last, prove themselves prepared and capable to use this power not in the pursuit of retribution but redemption through the establishment of industrial utopia. This redemption comes not through the intervention of God (as it had many times throughout Jewish biblical history) or another external force (as suggested at the end of *Di kupe*). It comes after a period of violent upheaval and insurrection carried out by Markish’s workers themselves. Markish recounts this revolt in gruesome detail with an emphasis on the violence done upon the land. Markish relies on another biblical intertext to describe the repercussions of industrialization in Part Two Poem 34. He portrays a ravaged landscape in a manner evocative of Psalm 46:

*Yungfroyish rufn di trakhtn fun dr’erd:  
– Kumt tsu undz, kumt, un farlangt un bagert!*

*Es gisn zikh iber di oytsres fun land:  
– Kumt tsu undz, kumt, un bagert un farlangt!*

*Iz ingeveyd vargt zikh di erdroye kraft  
Mit ayzn un koyln, mit gold un mit naft.*

*Mit oysbrukh, mit oyfreys fun kval iber kval,  
Shrayt der gebargter kavkaz tsum ural.*

*Un ural tsu sibir, un sibir oyf farkert:  
– Kumt tsu undz, kumt, un farlangt un bagert!*

Wombs of the earth virginly call out:  
– Come to us, come, and demand and desire!

The treasures of the country overflow:  
– Come to us, come, and desire and demand!

Terrestrial power choking on viscera  
On iron and coal, on gold and on oil.

Breaking through, tearing open, wave after wave,  
The mountainous Caucasus cries to the Urals.

And the Urals to Siberia, and Siberia right back:  
– Come to us, come, and demand and desire!

Markish definitively overlays the abstract expressionist geopoetics onto the territory of the Soviet Union; the “mountainous Caucasus” cry out to the Urals, as wave after wave defiles the mountains with no signs of remorse. Though Psalm 46 was written as an expression of the “community’s confidence in God” to domesticate the waters of chaos, Markish’s waves represent the people who wreak havoc on the land and disembowel the mountainside for its iron and coal, its anthracite and other resources.<sup>155</sup> Additionally, Markish uses graphic imagery, gendered language, and anthropomorphism in his depiction of this Soviet landscape to suggest that the mountains and mineral reserves are giving themselves up to the workers, that they are calling to be raped. The poet employs an explicitly sexual modifier to describe how the wombs of the earth “virginly” (*yungfroyish*) cry out for his readers to come and “demand and desire” (*bagert un farlangt*). He depicts this scene in a manner that demonstrates the full extent to which the new makers of Soviet society long for and even eroticize the realization of its industrial utopian project. The verbs *bagern* (to desire, crave, or covet) and *farlangen* (to demand) both carry sexual connotations and imply a longing, which can represent both the delayed gratification finally achieved after an extended period of pain and suffering and a more sinister, violent form of erotic retribution. In this case, Markish’s workers turn against the Eurasian landscape and ravage it for its minerals and other resources. Psalm 46 tells of the waters that once carried the

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<sup>155</sup> *The Jewish Study Bible*. Second edition. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1861.

mountains into the sea, transforming it into a calm river, “whose streams gladden God’s city, the holy dwelling-place of the Most High.”<sup>156</sup> In Markish’s reimagining of the Psalm, these waves serve not the city of God, but the factories and the plants:

*Me darf anratsit un tshuhun farn land –  
Kumt tsu undz, kumt, un bagert un farlangt!*

*S’farmestn zikh shakhtes ahin un tsurik  
Oyf nokh a zavod un oyf nokh a fabrik.*

*Umru tserudert, umru dervekt –  
Un s’geyt fun di toln mit breg a farvet.*

*Es tsien zikh gorglen fun koymens nokh zet,  
Es rufn zikh iber di derfer mit shtet –*

One needs anthracite and cast iron for the country –  
Come to us, come, and desire and demand!

Mineshafts to and fro set as their goal,  
Yet another plant, yet another factory.

Unrest disturbs, unrest wakes up –  
And a wagger travels from the valleys to the shore.

Chimneys’ gullets stretch in search of satiety,  
Calling out over villages and cities.

The landscape is undergoing a transformation as the mountains give themselves up for the furtherment of industrialization in a subversion of both biblical lore and earlier events from Part One. In Psalm 46, the city of God is scattered with tabernacles; Markish’s poem only mentions chimneys protruding into the sky. The chimneys contrast with the tabernacles, both in their height and their permanence. The ancient Jews constructed low-rising tabernacles, based on specifications handed to Moses by God himself, during their time of wandering in the desert and

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<sup>156</sup> Psalms 46.8. (*Revised JPS*, 2023).

the Babylonian exile. As the (re)construction of the Temple made these portable tabernacles obsolete, the smokestacks rising from the Markish's factories signify a sense of permanence to the workers' arrival at the industrial center. The appearance of mineshafts, which extend deep into the ground, are yet another indicator of permanence and a callback to Markish's prior allusion to Jacob's Ladder, in which a wager over which dwarf will ascend their ladder highest and quickest spreads across the valley. Instead of focusing on movement upwards toward the heavens, the valley is now concerned with going downward to extract the earth's resources. Unlike ladders, which (like tabernacles) are portable and easily moved, mineshafts are lasting and stationary. Their presence in the Urals and Caucasus suggests that Markish's workers have established permanent roots in their new industrial center. Most significantly, this new goal of going down into the earth reflects a full reversal of the previous preoccupation with reaching God and the heavens, and the sexual imagery of mineshafts extending into the ground and chimneys' gullets (*gorglen fun koymens*) protruding upwards further contributes to violent eroticism of Markish's verse.

### ***A Step Toward the Establishment of the "Socialist Global Ecumene"***

In *Der fertsikyriker man*, Markish's workers finally find their homeland not in Moscow or another metropolis, but the mines and factories strewn across a nationless industrial landscape. The poet's idealistic conclusion falls in line with the recent trend in scholarship of viewing the transcultural proliferation of Marxist ideas and industrial-utopian values as facilitating the creation of a "socialist global ecumene." In her analysis of the cultural interchange of revolutionary ideals between the Berlin, Moscow, and Shanghai following the Shanghai

Massacre of 1927, Katerina Clark builds upon this term, originally coined by Kris Manjapra, and demonstrates how the “ecumene” refers to:<sup>157</sup>

A far-flung or worldwide community of people committed to a single cause and engaged in discussions, lobbying, and writing aimed at working towards a common, Marxist-based program, at generating a common discourse... this ecumene involves not relations between powerful centres and their dependencies, but rather lateral connections of the worldwide like-minded.<sup>158</sup>

Clark examines the literary responses to the Shanghai Debacle and the manner in which writers from across the ecumene portrayed the ongoing Socialist struggle in China.<sup>159</sup> Markish only briefly refers to the unrest in Asia in Part Two Poem 14 and later in Part Two Poem 19:

*1 Oyf felder fun khine, oyf felder fun indie,  
Fargeyen un faln gefangene kinder.*

*Es traybt zey der hunger, er muntert un rayst  
– A kvertl mit shveys far a kvertl mit rayz!*

...

*11 Oyf felder fun payn – tog-ayn un tog-oys –  
Dort kumen shoy n skeynim fun kinder aroys.*

*Me reyst zey, di kinder, fun oremer shtub,  
Oyf felder – di heym un oyf felder – di grub.*

*1 On fields from China, on fields from India,  
Children pass away and are held captive.*

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<sup>157</sup> In her analysis of Kris Manjapra’s scholarship, Clark cites Manjapra’s “Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition,” in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*.

<sup>158</sup> Katerina Clark, “Berlin–Moscow–Shanghai: Translating Revolution across Cultures in the Aftermath of the 1927 Shanghai Debacle” in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 81.

<sup>159</sup> It is important to acknowledge Clark’s disclaimer that “one should not just dismiss the ecumene as yet another example of an insidious Soviet cultural imperialism with the foreign participants as unwitting pawns. Many of the writers involved, whether they were affiliated with the Party or the Comintern or not..., were relatively independent members of the ecumene and, though committed anti-colonialists, drew in their writings on a variety of influences.” *Ibid.*



1 Hunger pushes them, it cheers them and tears at them  
– A container of sweat for a container of rice!

...

11 On fields of pain – day in and day out –  
There, children already grow into old men.

They tear them, the children, away from a poor house.  
The fields are their home and the fields are their grave.

By projecting Qohelet's laments onto the child laborers in the fields of China and India, Markish continues to rely on the motif of generational struggle and toil. Though the Ecclesiastes intertext remains, as Markish's ode becomes more grounded in contemporaneous political developments, his writing becomes less dependent on its Jewish undertones and more reminiscent of the literary works analyzed by Clark. This continues into Part Two Poem 23, in which the poet interjects a parable of a trainer taming a "thousand-headed beast" (*toyzntkipe khaye*) into the narrative:

1 – *Bravo, dresirer, bravo, hura!*  
*Ot iz zi, di khaye, un nayger z'faran!*

*Dresirer in hantshn mit knaknder rut –*  
*Er shpilt azoy laykht mit gedulg un mit blut!*

*Di khaye tsereytst iz, es zetst fun ir hits,*  
*– Bravo, dresirer, atsinder! Ot itst!*

...

13 *Un demolt dresirer zayn kop leygt arayn*  
*Iz tseefent moyl fun fartumkter khaye...*

...

23 *Un hersherish vayzt dort zayn kop der dresirer.*  
*– Bravo, zi t'opbaysn – shpeter tsi frir!*

1 – *Bravo, trainer, bravo, hooray!*  
*Here it is, the beast, and there's a curiosity!*

The trainer wears gloves and with a crackling switch –  
He plays so easily with patience and blood!

The beast is provoked, it sits in its fervor.  
– Bravo, trainer, now! Here now!

...

13 And then the trainer puts his head in  
To the opened mouth of the bewildered beast...

...

23 And the trainer despotically shows his head there.  
– Bravo! It will bite – sooner or later!

The “thousand-headed beast” refers back to the thousands wounded by the Danube and the Thames; the thousand writhing, “bloodied and yellowed” bodies from the Seine and beyond, as described in Part Two Poem 14. The beast represents the abused worker, broadly construed and encompassing proletarians from all lands and national identities. In Part Two Poems 23-29, Markish introduces a series of parables that foreshadow imminent revolutionary action. Though these parables are vague and only loosely correlated with ongoing geopolitical developments, in his depiction of the thousand-headed beast, Markish appears to adopt a strategy widely employed by his contemporaries in their portrayals of Chinese revolutionary activity. As Clark notes:

Most of the literary works about recent revolutionary events in China that were published between 1928 and 1933 in Berlin, Moscow, and Shanghai end not with a revolutionary triumph per se, but with some deafening roar that implies massive revolutionary resistance. The outcome, what happens after the “roar,” is not represented, as the text breaks off at that point. What constitutes the “roar” varies.<sup>160</sup>

Markish’s beast with its mouth open, seemingly ready to clamp down onto the head of its despotic handler, engenders an anticipation that this “roar” will come at any moment.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 88.

Thematically, Markish's parable with its Comintern influences signifies the Yiddish poet's turn to proletarian internationalism and participation in building the "Socialist Global Ecumene."

### **Making a Foundation for Proletarian Internationalism**

Markish ends his work on an optimistic, albeit ambiguous note. *Der fertsikyeriker man* concludes with the dawn of a new day in a land united in its labor. For the first time, the day appears destined to last and labor to contribute to a communal goal. Notably, Markish's workers never arrive in a specific country or place; their final location is an ambiguous point on Markish's abstract-expressionist geographical plane. By never specifying a location for his workers' utopia, the poet ensures that his writing can apply to a multitude of times and places – his utopian ideals may be applied anywhere and everywhere. In this regard, Markish's *Fertsikyeriker man* provides two conceptualizations of utopia: one centered around the workbenches and factories of Markish's fictional industrial center and one centered around the book – Markish's poem itself. It comes to act as a quasi-spiritual guide for Markish's wandering workers, in a way analogous to the function of the Tanakh for the Jews, past and present, of diaspora and exile. But while modern Jewish religious and spiritual thought began to become more and more focused on a return to Jerusalem, Markish's *Forty-Year-Man* envisions an arrival to the "no-place" of industrial utopia and the establishment of a new proletarian internationalist culture.

### ***A Revolutionary Aftermath of Uncertainty and Potential***

Throughout much of Part Two of *The Forty-Year-Old Man*, Markish describes the injustices plaguing humanity worldwide and establishes an expectation for revolutionary action.

Though Markish never explicitly defines this action – Clark’s revolutionary “roar” – he portrays its aftermath with an emphasis on the devastation wrought upon the earth. In Part Two Poem 35, the poet notes that “the bloody nail sets itself under its [the earth’s] body” (*s’zetst unter layb zikh der tsushlog fun blut*). He continues to depict the earth through dark messianic imagery in Part Two Poem 36, in which the poet notes the world’s “wreath of thorny wire”:

*13 Un zunenzaft gist zikh, un zunenzaft kvelt,  
Un s’vilt oyf di hent itst zikh nemen di velt.  
Pamelekh zi nemen, tsuzamen in eynem.  
– Ot dort iz a vund nokh, ot do tut nokh vey...*

*Ot do nit farheylyt nokh, ot dort nokh a shram,  
Un ergets nokh trifndik vundfleysh faran.*

*Az borves iz zi nokh, oyf glaz nokh ir trot,  
Un s’shtekht zi der krants nokh fun dernerdik drot.*

*Un vu s’iz farvorlozt, un vu s’iz farbrent –  
Dokh vilt zi zikh nemen azoy oyf di hent.*

*Pamelekh zi nemen, pamelekh, in eynem –  
Ot do iz a vund nokh, ot do tut nokh vey...*

13 And sun-juice streams and sun-juice gushes,  
And now you feel like caressing the world in your arms.

Caress her slowly, all together.  
– Right there, there is still a wound; right here, it still hurts...

Right here, it’s still healing; right there, another scar,  
And wounded flesh still drips somewhere.

She is still barefoot, still walking on glass,  
And the wreath of thorny wire still pricks her.

And where she’s been abandoned, and where she’s been burnt –  
After all you feel like caressing her in your arms.

Slowly caress her, slowly, together –  
Right here, there is still a wound; right here, it still hurts...

Thinking back to Part Two Poem 34, in which Markish situates his text in the territory between the Caucasus and the Urals, it becomes clear that the poet uses images of Christian messianic sacrifice to portray the Russian Motherland as a Christ-figure that has given herself up for the advancement of proletarian internationalism and the possibility of a truly nationless Socialist utopia. For Markish, the promise of the Comintern can only be born out of this mass violence done upon the land – the territories of the USSR. Again, Markish uses gendered language to accentuate the erotic nature of the violence wrought upon the land. He refers to the land as *di velt* (“the world”) – a feminine-marked noun – and continues to refer to it using forms of the third-person pronoun *zi* (she) six times over these six couplets. The poet portrays the world, the Russian Motherland, as a victim not of Christlike sacrifice but of rape. Her wounded flesh still dripping and barefoot steps on broken glass further suggests that this scene depicts the aftermath of a sexual assault. Markish’s poetic *persona* calls upon readers to embrace the abandoned world slowly for her wound is still fresh. The implication that these workers committed such profaned violence upon the earth demonstrates the full extent of their depravity, and Markish demands his readers treat their land with more care and compassion.

### ***The Poetics of Proletarian Internationalism***

Part Two Poem 38, the last of Markish’s eighty-poem work, demonstrates how his workers optimistically embrace a new nationless industrial ideology. Though they do not arrive in the traditional “Promised Land,” the workers young and old are united in their labor:

*1 In likht un in fayer der tog khapt zikh oyf –  
Yeder otem in vint, – un der vint iz a ruf:*

*Bashtoln dos land un es koven azoy –  
Fun flihl der kop un fun ayzn – di zoyl!*

*Ot dort vu an oks hot geshlept zikh in yokh –  
Zol loyfn a traktor, a tsveyter un nokh.*

*Un dortn vu eyner un tsvey shoyn gepruvt –  
Iz a tshat oyf dr'erd un a tshat in der luft.*

*Un s'rufn zikh koymenes iber in dr'hoykh:  
– Deryogn di hent fun badarf un gebroykh.*

*Es zol zikh farmestn oyf gob un fartser  
Mit varshtat a varshtat un a tsekh mit a tsekh.*

*13 Ot dort vu eyn koymen – zol oyfshteyn a vald.  
Un s'ayln zikh hastik fun yung un fun alt,*

*Un vayber un kinder, un ale baynand –  
Di hent un di aksl oyf hoybn dos land.*

*Es raysn zikh hent. Me dervart nit keyn sof.  
Di droyte ashmoyre. Es klekt nit keyn shtof.*

*Fargeyt shoyn der tog, in di oygn er tayet.  
Es hot far di hent keyn varshtat nit gestayet.*

*Un s'raysn zikh hent dort geshtrekt in farlang:  
A hoyb ton dos land un a trog ton dos land.*

*Un s'vert der farmest nit geshtilt un nit zat –  
A tsekh mit a tsekh, mit varshtat a varshtat!*

*1 In light and in fire the day wakes up –  
Every breath in wind, – and the wind is a call:*

*The land irradiates and forges as so –  
From wings the head and from iron – the sole!*

*Right there where an ox trudged in burden –  
Now goes a tractor, a second and another.*

*And there where one and two already experienced –  
Is a flock off the earth and a flock in the air.*

And chimneys call to one another over the heights:  
– The hands overtake from need and use.

It should set as its goal bounty and devour  
With workbench a workbench and a workshop with a workshop.

13 Over there where chimneys – should arrange a forest.  
And hastily rush from young and old.

And wives and children, and all together –  
The land picks up its hands and its shoulders.

Hands raise. One does not expect an end.  
The third night watch. No substance suffices.

The day already passes, in their eyes it melts.  
Not a single workbench suffices for all the hands.

And the hands raise there, extended in desire:  
The land creates a beginning and the land makes a harvest.

And the challenge is not satisfied or satiated.  
A workshop with a workshop, with a workbench a workbench!

With this conclusion, Markish settles the many conflicts of time and space that defined the earlier parts of his epic. Days pass, but the same challenge remains and unites the people in a common goal. The distances are connected by a vast forest of chimneys that “call to one another over the heights,” and “where an ox trudged in burden – / Now goes a tractor, a second and another.” This image of tractors working in the distance contrasts starkly with the picture from Part One of the funeral horse pulling past generations beyond the horizon. With this poem, Markish settles his seemingly perpetual struggle with the dawn and provides a resolution to Qohelet’s millennia-old laments. By suggesting that the establishment of workers’ utopia is a self-perfecting and constantly developing process, Markish ensures that labor will no longer be meaningless. Markish’s workers, united by a common goal, have found an escape from exile

through their embrace of the proletarian internationalist ideology, embodied by the refrain: “A workshop with a workshop, with a workbench a workbench!” (*A tsekh mit a tsekh, mit varshtat a varshtat!*). The refrain, repeated in slightly different variants in lines 12 and 24, replaces the poetic *persona*'s addresses to the forty-year-old man and signifies that focus has shifted from finding the man to working toward future progress. Finally, the time has come for Markish's *persona* and his readers to build their industrial utopia, a process that each person with their workbenches and workshops can contribute to equally.

The formal aspects of this poem indicate the ideological transition that occurs over the development of Markish's entire epic. Part One of *The Forty-Year-Old Man* begins set exclusively in anapestic tetrameter, reflecting the poetic *persona*'s attempted ascent to reach the mysterious man of forty, but this uniform metrical scheme soon devolves into an unpredictable mix of lines written in anapestic, amphibrachic, and dactylic tetrameter that echoes the work's narrative chaos and its various collisions of cultures and ideologies. By the end of Part Two, Markish transitions into writing almost exclusively in amphibrachic tetrameter – Poem 36, for instance is written entirely in amphibrachs. In reviewing the final poem above, Markish follows a pattern in line 1-12 in which he writes lines 2, 6, and 10 in anapestic tetrameter and the rest in amphibrachs (that is, amphibrach – anapest – amphibrach – amphibrach). Then the second half of this poem, lines 13-24, are written exclusively in amphibrachic tetrameter. By this point, Markish introduces the workbenches and workshops, the structures that are to unite the world through labor and usher in a new order, represented by a new metrical scheme. Throughout the course of the epic, Markish increasingly incorporated amphibrachs into his verse, and this nearly full transition away from anapests suggests both an end to the poetic *persona*'s early wandering and an embrace of a new path, represented by the amphibrachic rhythm.



Finally, as in the poetry previously analyzed to this point, Markish substantiates the viability (or lack thereof) of ideology, in this case proletarian internationalism, through the manipulation of thematic elements and biblical intertext within his poetics. In this excerpt from Part Two Poem 37, Markish uses biblical intertext to demonstrate how the land will serve the pursuit of industrial utopia:

*7 Es geyen di berg un es ayn zikh toln:  
Mit vos vet men dinen un vos vet men ton?*

*Efenen berg zikh vi rizike nis:  
Yoderdik ayzn vi broyt un – genist!*

*Fun rand biz tsu rand un mit broytbreyter hant  
Tseshpreytn zikh toln gebroytikter land.*

*Es geyt un s'baheft zikh der barg mitn tol  
Un s'shnaydn zikh bleter fun ayzn un shtol.*

7 The mountains go and valleys rush:  
And how will they serve; what will they do?

Mountains crack open like enormous nuts:  
Hearty iron like bread and – enjoy, profit!

From border to border and with a providing hand  
Valleys spread throughout the breaded land.

They go, and the mountain unites with the valley  
And they cut out leaves of iron and steel.

The imagery of mountains walking and valleys hastening recalls that of Psalm 114 – “The mountains skipped like rams, and the hills like lambs” – in which the nation of Israel embarks out of Egypt and into what would become the Kingdom of Judah. The Psalm, recited during times of celebration, tells of the earth’s obedience to God and the Jews as they arrived at their predestined homeland. In the final poems of *The Forty-Year-Old Man*, Markish borrows this idea that the land will serve in the establishment of a realized Promised Land, but repurposes it to

demonstrate that the land will serve not a specific nation, but the industrialized proletarian internationalist ideology. After a period of conflict and struggle, during which the world was so violently defiled, the mountains now willingly crack open like giant nuts to provide iron and steel for the furtherment of proletarian internationalism. Most significantly, the valley and the mountain – the two topographical points that defined the outer limits of Markish’s abstract expressionist geography – converge upon one another and unite to serve the industrial utopian project. The world’s obedient willingness to provide its inhabitants with bread and natural resources indicates the full vision of Markish’s prophetic mode and provides a vision as to what a future workers’ utopia might look like.

### ***The Poem’s Role in Creating an Industrial Utopia***

Markish’s *Fertsikyeriker man* provides two possibilities for utopia: one centered around the industrial centers of the narrative itself and another that revolves around Markish’s book as a guide for those destined to continue the proletarian internationalist struggle. Though Markish does not present a realized industrial utopia on the territory of the Soviet Union, he does not give up on proletarian internationalism and the pursuit of Comintern goals. In his elaborations on Tatlin’s Tower and its significance to the development of “Comintern Aesthetics,” Steven S. Lee stresses the need to “recognize the virtue of failure. Paradoxically, the fact that the utopian ambitions behind the Comintern and its monument remained unrealized is precisely what allows these ambitions to remain intact.”<sup>161</sup> Markish’s *Fertsikyeriker man* serves a similar function. Though Markish recognizes that an age of proletarian messianism has yet to materialize, his

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<sup>161</sup> Steven S. Lee, “Introduction: Comintern Aesthetics – Space, Form, History” in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 12.

poem ensures the survival of the Revolution's initial and purest aspirations. Harsha Ram remarks that Khlebnikov's "*Zangezi* stands alongside Tatlin's own unrealized Monument to the Third International (1919–20) as an immensely ambitious attempt to generate an artistic form and a set of constructive principles equal to the global resonance of the Russian Revolution."<sup>162</sup> Markish epic, though it was completed nearly a decade later, exists in the same realm as Tatlin and Khlebnikov's projects, as a work that monumentalizes the utopian idealism of not the Soviet Union, but the Communist International and allows for its potential future applications.

### **Conclusion**

If we are to view *Di kupe* as a literary monument to pogrom violence and Markish's attempt to ritualize Jewish suffering, then it becomes possible to view *Der fertsikyeriker man* as the Soviet Yiddish poet's effort to monumentalize the proletarian internationalist struggle during a time when the increasingly oppressive Stalinist regime stifled any possibility for the realization of utopia in the Soviet Union. Though Markish recognizes the deficiencies of the Soviet utopian project in *Der fertsikyeriker man*, he never gave up on the utopian ideal and revolutionary drive that inspired his pivot toward the Bolshevik cause, as reflected in *Di kupe*. As *Di kupe* ensured that the impact of pogrom violence would remain in his readers' minds, *Der fertsikyeriker man* reinforces the pursuit of a truly nationless workers' utopia. Throughout his life, Markish's readership remained exiled from such utopia, denied from reaching a Promised Land that never fully materialized. His readers were not exiled from a state or nation, but from the full realization of the utopian ideals promised at the inception of the Soviet Union. His epic serves as a reminder

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<sup>162</sup> Harsha Ram, "World Literature as World Revolution: Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and the Utopian Geopoetics of the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 38.

to continue such utopian pursuits, no matter how bleak the situation. In this regard, *Der fertsikyeriker man* serves a similar purpose to the Tanakh – the corpus of biblical scripture around which the Jews preserved and (re)defined their national identity throughout millennia of diaspora and exile – only Markish’s epic seeks not to maintain ethnoreligious tradition but Comintern ideals among workers who find themselves in a different form of exile. Markish never defines a location for his reimagined Promised Land, so that his epic can allow for the potential utopia to be anywhere and everywhere. Playing on utopia’s designation as a “no-place,” *Der fertsikyeriker man* remains a reminder to the workers of the world to continue their pursuit of an escape from exile to a Promised Land yet to materialize.

### Chapter Three

#### To a Temple Reimagined: Iosif Chaikov's Propylaea to the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition



**Figure 6.** A view of the Soviet and Nazi German pavilions positioned in opposition to one another at the 1937 Paris Exposition.

Standing proudly atop head architect Boris Iofan's Soviet pavilion and thrusting their hammer and sickle upward, Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* was intended to symbolize the union of workers and peasants, considered to be a central component of the

Stalinist policy of “socialism in one country” (*sotsializm v otdel’no vziatoi strane*).<sup>163</sup> However, due to its positioning directly across from Albert Speer’s Nazi German pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition, the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* took on a new symbolic meaning as opponents of fascism. The image of these two pavilions, separated by the Jardins du Trocadéro with the Eiffel Tower in the background (figure 6), captured the attention of visitors as it gave physical representation to the ideological clash between Nazi Fascism and Soviet Socialism and foreshadowed the violence to come in World War II. While much scholarship has been devoted to the confrontation between these two pavilions and their relation to one another, this chapter will examine how the Soviet pavilion celebrated the ostensible successes of the USSR in creating a viable homeland for the peoples of the eleven Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs).<sup>164</sup> In doing so, I will specifically focus on Soviet Jewish sculptor Iosif Chaikov’s propylaea—or monumental gates—which stood in front of the pavilion and sanctified it as a temple to Soviet achievements.<sup>165</sup>

Chaikov’s propylaea are notable for their ornamentation – a series of bas-reliefs depicting “Physical Culture and Sports,” “Art and Popular Creative Work,” and most prominently, the

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<sup>163</sup> In particular, Nikolai Bukharin stressed this need in his 1926 publication *Put’ k sotsializmu i raboche-krest’ianskii soiuz* (Path to Socialism and the Union of Workers and Peasants). Following Lenin’s death, Bukharin was an important ally to Stalin and helped develop the policy of “socialism in one country.” He remained a key figure in Stalinist politics and helped create the 1936 Constitution, before falling out of favor with Stalin and perishing in 1938 as part of the Great Purge.

<sup>164</sup> For two such examples of works analyzing the clash of these two pavilions, see Igor Golomshtok, *Totalitarnoe iskusstvo* (Moscow: Galart, 1994) and Danilo Udovicki-Selb, *Soviet Architectural Avant-Gardes: Architecture and Stalin’s Revolution from Above, 1928-1938* (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

<sup>165</sup> Throughout history, propylaea have functioned to separate the secular parts of a city from the sacred. The most famous propylaea are likely the Propylaea of the Athenian Acropolis, built between 437 and 432 BCE.

“Republics of the USSR.” In their depiction of peoples from across the eleven SSRs, Chaikov’s bas-reliefs honor the Soviet Union as a homeland for all nations under the hammer and sickle and perpetuate the Friendship of Peoples motif that had engrained itself in the Soviet political consciousness. Though the Friendship of Peoples initiative was intended to generate a sense of Soviet patriotism, I contend that Chaikov’s reliefs depict scenes of Soviet peoples sacrificing their national resources and ethnocultural identities in subservience to the Soviet regime. They convert the once liberating and idealistic industrial utopian drive of the international proletariat into a rigid and limiting system of duty and obligation to the USSR and its official Soviet ideology. To advance this argument, I begin with an examination of Chaikov’s early work with the Kultur-lige and the factors that led to his transition into a Soviet artist – specifically, the promise of a Jewish homeland within the territory of the USSR. While the construction of Chaikov’s propylaea and the 1937 Soviet pavilion did not ultimately signify the establishment of a viable homeland for the Jews and other peoples of the Soviet Union, the afterlives and disparate fates of Chaikov’s bas-reliefs and Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* reveal important insights that clarify the incongruent legacies of official Soviet ideology and Soviet idealism.

### **Awakening the Jewish Self-Conscious in Descriptive Art**

Before Chaikov evolved into the renowned Soviet sculptor whose contributions were featured in two world’s fair pavilions, he was a young artist from the Pale of Settlement. He was born in Kyiv on December 1, 1888, and raised in the city of Pinsk in present-day Belarus’, where he received a traditional *kheyder* education. In 1908, the twenty-year-old Chaikov returned to Kyiv, where he enrolled in an engraving workshop. He then moved to Paris in 1910 to work

under the tutelage of the Russian Jewish émigré sculptor Naoum Aronson, whose works had achieved acclaim in Russia.<sup>166</sup> In Paris, Chaikov studied at the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs and later enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts from 1912-13. He co-founded the Jewish art group *Mahmad* (Hebrew for “something sweet or desirable”), which published a Hebrew-language journal under the same name. In 1914, Chaikov returned to Kyiv and was conscripted into the Imperial army to serve as a medic on the Russian-German front during World War I. In 1918 following the war, he became a founding member of the Kultur-lige, the Kyiv-based Yiddish cultural organization.<sup>167</sup> He focused on educating the Yiddish youth by leading sculpture classes, opening a children’s art studio, and illustrating Yiddish children’s books.<sup>168</sup> Chaikov also published his treatise *Sculpture* (Skulptor, 1921), the world’s first Yiddish-language book on sculpture. In the midst of heated debates among membership over the form and purpose of Jewish art and literature, Chaikov sought to create a modern Jewish art

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<sup>166</sup> Aronson primarily focused on busts and sculpted one of the known firsts of V.I. Lenin.

<sup>167</sup> The values of the Kultur-lige are stated in its motto: “The Kultur-lige stands on three pillars: 1) Jewish folk education; 2) Yiddish literature; and 3) Jewish art. Make our masses thinkers. Make our thinker Jewish. This is the purpose of the Kultur Lige (Motto, *Kultur Lige Zamlung*, November 1919, Kyiv).” Translation borrowed from Seth Wolitz’s chapter “The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia” from *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912-1928* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1988), edited by Ruth Apter-Gabriel.

<sup>168</sup> Of these years, Chaikov recalls that he “became acquainted and began to often meet[...] with artists El Lissitzky, Aleksandra Ekster, among others.” He explains that they “were all united by a sincere, all-consuming passion for art, by a desire to say in it something of their own, bold, and unusual...” These quotes were taken from Igor’ Shmidt, *Iosif Chaikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), 15. Notably, Shmidt’s 1977 book on Chaikov makes no reference to the artist’s affiliation with the Kultur-lige.



through embracing new industrial materials and techniques.<sup>169</sup> The artist clarifies this desire in his 1921 treatise, in which he notes:

*Dos yidishe zelbsbavustayn in der shilderung-kunst hot zikh dervekt in der tsayt fun elektritsitet, industrieler tekhnik un ayzn-beton.  
Ot di naye koykhes fun der mentshlekher geyones revolutsionizirn on an opshtel undzer lebn un tseshtern di alte dogmes fun der mentshlekher shafung.  
Mit shneln temp yogn zikh di naye eroberungen funem mentshn iber der natur, vos shteln zikh tomer in vidershtand tsu im.*

The Jewish self-consciousness in descriptive art has awakened in the time of electrification, industrial technology, and reinforced concrete. Here the new strengths of human genius revolutionize a break from our life and destroy the old dogmas of human creation. Man quickly pursues new conquests over nature, which stand invariably in opposition to him.<sup>170</sup>

The publication includes 12 plates—8 sculptures and 4 drawings—portraying subjects ranging from El Lissitzky to a bridgebuilder and a young Jew. Chaikov, who had been trained in classical sculpture, presents an array of abstract creations such as his *Fiddler* (Fidler, 1921) bas-relief (figure 7). Though Chaikov attempts to create a Jewish aesthetic form, the artist theorizes that “national creation does not express itself in its ethnographic contents” (*di natsionale shafung drikt zikh nisht oys in ir etnografishn inhalt*).<sup>171</sup> John Ellis Bowlt clarifies Chaikov’s aesthetic

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<sup>169</sup> Perhaps most notably, writer Dovid Bergelson feuded over this question with literary critic Moshe Litvakov from 1918-20 in the literary journal *Eygnis* (One’s Own). In his research, Seth Wolitz explains that Bergelson “represent[ed] the position of *modern* Yiddish literature. His entire literary production up to 1919 was in the service of building an autonomous Yiddish nationalist secular culture. The artist gave aesthetic definition to national and cultural longings[...]. His aesthetics required that he reach ‘the universal’ through the particular,” while Litvakov considered the modern Yiddish culturalist “specifically the creator functioning in form and content devoid of any clinging national or cultural identity beyond the fact of language. The artist of this non-ethnic ‘universalistic’ literature created in Yiddish was in service to an ideology beyond ethnicity and aestheticism.” Seth Wolitz, “The Kyiv-grupe (1918-1920) Debate: The Function of Literature.” *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 4, no. 2 (1978): 99.

<sup>170</sup> Yoysef Tshaykov, *Skulptor* (Kyiv: Melukhe farlag, 1921), 11.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

philosophy by noting how the Yiddish artist “seemed to recognize that an art of ‘form’ rather than of ‘content’ and one bereft of indigenous motifs might also become the basis not only of a truly international style, but also of a modern Jewish art.”<sup>172</sup>



**Figure 7.** Chaikov’s *Fidler* bas-relief, 1921. Image reproduced from Chaikov’s treatise *Skulptur*, plate 8.

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<sup>172</sup> John E. Bowl, “Icarian Games: Iosif Chaikov and the Jewish Legacy.” *Experiment*, 18, no. 1 (2012): 175. Bowl elaborates by linking Chaikov’s artistic philosophy to that of abstract sculptors Naum Gabo, Ilia Chashnik and Lazar Khidekel, who were among the Jewish artists to study under Kasimir Malevich in Vitebsk. Bowl continues to explain how Chaikov’s propositions build off of those previously made by other Jewish artists of the time, including painter Issachar Ryback and stage designer Boris Aronson, who in their 1919 assessment of Jewish painting, proposed that “form is the essential element of art. The composition of a painting is more important than its idea, and the richness of color means more than the realistic rendering of objects. . . . Pure abstract form is precisely what embodies the national element. Only via the principle of abstract painting, free of any literariness, can the expression of one’s own national foundation be achieved.” *Ibid.*

Chaikov's fiddler presents an interesting case in which abstraction occurs *through* the distortion of ethnographic contents. His fiddler holds his instrument tightly under his chin, allowing it to blend directly into the figure of the musician. The fingers of the musician and the strings of the instrument are nearly identical, blurring both the distinction between the two and the source from which the music—the product of cultural expression—originates. The fiddler and his instrument exist on the same plane, leading to a semiotic distortion in which the signifier (the fiddle) becomes embedded into the signified concept that it represents (Jewish cultural expression). This continuity generated through semiotic distortion exemplifies what Chaikov conceptualizes as an “effect-sphere” (*virzung-sfere*):

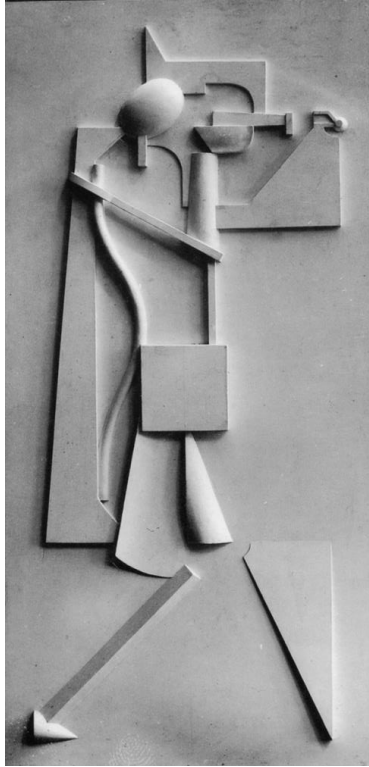
*Aza form fun material brengt tsu abstraktsie, velkhe firt arayn dem tsuzeer adank ir ritm, in der vrikungs-sfere funem kinstlerishn verk un derfirt tsu der emotsioneler emfindung, vos der skulptor hot gehat.*

Such material form brings forth an abstraction which, thanks to its rhythm, introduces the spectator to the effect-sphere of the artistic work and brings about the emotional sentience that the sculptor had.<sup>173</sup>

In the *Fidler* relief, the positioning of the fiddle creates a confined effect-sphere that conceals its function and produces a subdued, even elegiac tone that reveals the artist's desire to conceal Jewish ethnographic markers. In 1922, Chaikov sculpted another, even more abstract variant of the *Fidler* bas-relief (figure 8), in which the figure's bowed head and arm positioning create the impression that the musician is not even playing his instrument but rather offering it as a kind of tribute.

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<sup>173</sup> Yoysef Tshaykov, *Skulptor* (Kyiv: Melukhe farlag, 1921), 10.



**Figure 8.** Chaikov’s second *Fidler* bas-relief, 1922. Image reproduced from Hillel Kazovsky et al. *Kul’tur-liga: Khudozhnii avangard* (Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2007), 154.

Chaikov previously hinted at this desire to forsake traditionally Judaic elements in his cover illustration to the literary journal *Dawn* (Baginen), published in Kyiv in 1919 (figure 9). The cover features a muscular figure standing outside the threshold of a shtetl home. His face is divided – its right side contains lips and a single dreary, shaded eye; the left side is completely blank, devoid of any discernable features.<sup>174</sup> The figure gazes eastward, but a black plane blocks him from the rising sun.

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<sup>174</sup> As Myroslav Shkandrij notes in his analysis of Chaikov’s illustration, the artist has “one eye open to the future and a second closed to the past, blind to the rural world he has left behind.” Myroslav Shkandrij, “National Modernism in Post-Revolutionary Society: The Ukrainian Renaissance and Jewish Revival, 1917-1940,” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 446. This portrayal of the Jew with half his face defined and the other half blank bares resemblance to Natan Al’tman’s *Portrait of a Young Jew (Self-portrait)* (1916), believed to be the first modern sculptural representation of a Jewish subject.



**Figure 9.** Chaikov's cover illustration for the literary monthly *Dawn* (Baginen), published in Kyiv, 1919.

The man blows a shofar—the instrument associated with its use in High Holiday liturgy, but also Biblically used to ready troops for battle. Notably, Joshua 6 tells of the shofar's use in toppling

the Walls of Jericho.<sup>175</sup> The signification of Chaikov's illustration reassigns the roles to the symbols of this famous biblical tale. The caption accompanying the illustrations displays the Marxist call to action "Proletarians from all lands unite!" (*proletarier fun ale lender fareynigt zikh!*). The shofar blasts call not only the Jews, but all workers; and it is not the Walls of Jericho that the figure seeks to topple, but the walls of the traditional shtetl and the capitalist factory alike. As the Battle of Jericho was the first fought in the Israelites conquest Canaan, Chaikov's illustration presents the destruction of and journey out from the shtetl as the first step in the proletarians' struggle to claim their homeland.<sup>176</sup>

Though Chaikov's work in the plastic arts during the early 1920s was rarely overtly political, he often portrayed the new men of an emergent Soviet society such as workers and iron bridgebuilders. Aesthetically, the sculptor borrows from but never fully embraces the liberating non-objectivity promoted by contemporaries Kasimir Malevich and Naum Gabo. This balance is apparent in Chaikov's *Electrifier* (*Elektrifikator*) (figure 10).<sup>177</sup>

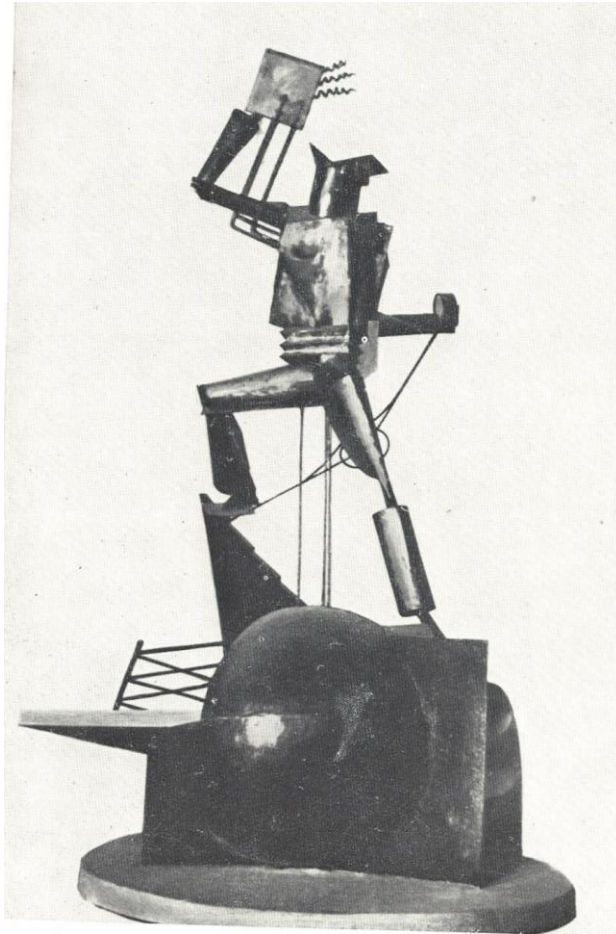
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<sup>175</sup> As it is written in Joshua 6:20-21 (Revised JPS, 2023): "So the troops shouted when the horns were sounded. When the troops heard the sound of the horns, they raised a mighty shout and the wall collapsed. The troops rushed into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they captured the city. They exterminated everything in the city with the sword: man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey."

<sup>176</sup> A few months following the publication of *Baginen*, Chaikov created the cover illustration to Peretz Markish's collection *Shveln* (Thresholds, 1919). The figure in the illustration, who bears a strong resemblance to the figure from *Baginen*, has left the shtetl and is pictured ascending a mountain; the sun is unobstructed.

<sup>177</sup> Chaikov's *Elektrifikator* was based on a sketch of the same name, created in 1921. The sculpture is composed of marble, iron, and brass – a conflation of classical and modern industrial media.





**Figure 10.** Chaikov's *Electrifier* (Elektrifikator), 1925. Reproduced from Igor' Shmidt. *Iosif Chaikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), 48.

The *Electrifier* triumphantly raises his junction box in an act of apparent glorification. Semiotically, the junction box occupies a sacred space in the unconfined effect-sphere of the work, supplanting Malevich's *Black Square* in the position traditionally reserved for an icon or consecrated relic. While Malevich's *Black Square* represents a zero-point of form and ushered in an embrace of non-objectivity in art, Chaikov's *Electrifier* returns a level of impartiality to artistic interpretation.<sup>178</sup> He presents the junction box—a product of industrialization—as

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<sup>178</sup> Though Chaikov never directly collaborated with Malevich, aspects of Malevich's Suprematist aesthetics and artistic philosophy can be seen in some of Chaikov's earlier works, such as the 1921 sketch of the *Electrifier*. Traces of Suprematist influence could likely be

something to be celebrated, and his work extols the triumphant emergence of both the electricity worker and the process of electrification itself. The piece's title adds an additional layer of political significance. In December of 1920, just months before Chaikov created his sketch for the *Electrifier* sculpture, Lenin famously proclaimed that "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" (*Kommunizm – eto est' sovetskaia vlast' plius elektrifikatsiia vsei strany*).<sup>179</sup> The sculpture creates a concrete link that unifies Chaikov's conceptualization of the evolution of the modern Jew with that of the new Soviet man.

As the Soviet Union emerged out of the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, Chaikov's status as a leading Jewish artist made him an ideal candidate to create works that situated the new Jew in a developing Soviet society. By the time Chaikov moved to Moscow in 1923, the Soviet regime was beginning to aggressively recruit Jewish workers to farm the land and become a new people of constructive labor. By 1925, the OZET (*Obshchestvo zemleustroistva evreiskikh trudiashchikhsia*) or the Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land had been created to promote the progress of this ethnographic revolution.<sup>180</sup> As part of this effort,

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attributed to Chaikov's collaborations with El Lissitzky during his time in Berlin from 1921-23. By this point however, Lissitzky was already transitioning to more Constructivist-style artistic production and Chaikov appears to have followed suit. In *Skulptor*, Chaikov addresses the prevalent trends in the modern plastic arts before noting: "It is clear here that all singular endeavors should be utilized through modern sculpture" (*S'iz klor, az ot di ale eyntselne pruvn darfn oysgenutst vern durkh modernem skulptur*). Yoysef Tshaykov, *Skulptor* (Kyiv: Melukhe farlag, 1921), 8. Chaikov saw the new in sculpture as emerging not from one of the extent aesthetic styles, but as an amalgamation of modern artistic tendencies.

<sup>179</sup> "VIII vserossiiskii s'ezd sovetov," in *Lenin: Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. Vol 42. (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury: 1970), 159. Lenin made this comment upon the founding of the *GOELRO* (*Gosudarstvennaia komissiiia po elektrifikatsii Rosii*) – the State Commission for the Electrification of Russia. The plan was officially accepted by the 8<sup>th</sup> All-Russian Congress of Soviets on December 22, 1921.

<sup>180</sup> The OZET primarily focused on assisting Jewish settlers in their moves to the Soviet *kolkhozes*. Its leadership was made up of various Old Bolsheviks, but also included cultural



the OZET released an annual *sbornik* (miscellany)—aptly named *The Jewish Farmer* (Evreiskii Krest'ianin)—in which the task of the new Jewish agricultural worker is defined:

*Novyi evreiskii krest'ianin chuvstvet sebja prochno i uverenno v svoem novom dome na zemle. On ustraivaetsia navsegda, naveki. On uveren v uspekhe svoego truda[...] Vse zdes' chuvstvuiut i vidiat iasno, chto my—v nachale istoricheskoi raboty, kotoraiia budet oznachat' novuiu stupen' v nashei istorii: iz torgasheskogo naroda my stanovimsia tvorcheski trudiashchimsia narodom.*

The new Jewish farmer feels secure and confident in his new home on the land. He settles forever, eternally. He is confident in the success of his work[...] Everyone here feels and sees clearly that we are at the beginning of historical work that will represent a new stage in our history: from a people of trade, we are becoming a people of constructive labor.<sup>181</sup>

This appears at the end of the 1926 volume of *Evreiskii krest'ianin*, for which Chaikov was commissioned to provide the cover illustration (figure 11).<sup>182</sup> Chaikov's letterpress cover contains Constructivist features that resemble the agitprop works of El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko among others, and it stands out as one of the artist's most overtly politicized early works. The illustration shows the process of the Jewish farmer establishing his home on the land, portrayed in distinctive coloring.

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figures such as Solomon Mikhoels and Vladimir Mayakovsky. In 1927, the OZET commissioned the release of the documentary film *Evrei na zemle* (Jews on the Land), which was directed by Abram Room and written by Room, Mayakovsky, and Viktor Shklovsky. Lilia Brik served as the assistant director.

<sup>181</sup> *Evreiskii Krest'ianin* (Moscow: OZET, 1926), 301. From the address "To all Jewish writers of Europe and America," originally drawn up in April 1926 and signed by 49 Yiddish literary figures from across the Soviet Union, including Nokhem Oyslender, Dovid Hofshiteyn, and Itsik Fefer among others.

<sup>182</sup> Chaikov's contemporary Natan Al'tman was commissioned to create cover illustration for the 1925 edition. During this time, Al'tman was primarily occupied with working on stage designs for the Moscow State Yiddish Theater (GOSET) and the Habimah Theater, where he was the head of stage design for the production of S. An-ski's *The Dybbuk*.



**Figure 11.** The cover illustration for *The Jewish Farmer* (Evreiskii krest'ianin), 1926. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/12705>.

A black and white Jewish farmer sits on tractor that enters into a matte green plane.<sup>183</sup> Though the Jewish figure is colorless, he is straddled by red shading which colors the rest of the tractor. The color segmentation suggests that an otherness remains; the Jew himself has yet to turn red. Across the green field sits a provincial home, a representation of the Jewish farmer's "new home on the land." Both the house and tractor are clear in form, indicating that the goal of an eternal

<sup>183</sup> What appears to be the same "stock" image of the Soviet Jew appears in Yisakhar Ber Rybak's propaganda poster *Boit a komunistishn oyf di felder fun sssr* (Build a Communist Life on the Fields of the USSR, 1926). The work was among his very last before permanently leaving the USSR for Paris at the end of 1926.

home and means of reaching it through labor are clearly defined. The title of the journal is positioned beyond the home with the word *Evreiskii* (Jewish) written prominently in red to further demonstrate that the farmer will not only reach his home across the green field, but also become Soviet.

Chaikov's illustration alludes to the excerpt from the address to the Jewish writers of America and Europe that is prominently featured in the final pages of the *sbornik*. The signers of the address stress that, in the Soviet Union, where "thousands of working hands plow the expanses of the fields" (*tysiachi trudiashikhsia ruk borozdiat prostory polei*), "the miracle of our [the Jews'] rebirth is taking place" (*proiskhodit chudo nashego pererozhdeniia*). These Soviet Jews "prepare fertile soil for a new healthy Jewish mass culture, a culture of labor and bloom" (*gotoviat plodonosnuiu pochvu dlia novio zdorovoi evreiskii massovoi kul'tury, kul'tury truda i rastsveta*).<sup>184</sup> The address takes on messianic undertones in its reference to the miracle of rebirth and the promise of a new home on the land, upon which the new Jewish farmer will settle "forever, eternally" (*navsegda, naveki*). Despite the USSR's strict prohibition against religion, these Soviet Yiddish writers seize the Jewish promise of redemption and repurpose it to recruit Jews not to the Land of Israel but to the territories of the Soviet Union.<sup>185</sup> As Chaikov had previously substituted a junction box in the place of the fiddle in his previous sculptural production, in this scene Soviet agricultural industrialism replaces Zionism and other competing

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 302.

<sup>185</sup> The most notable of these efforts to endow the establishment of Soviet Jewish homeland with biblical significance was likely the framing of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast with its center in Birobidzhan as a "Soviet Zion." For more on this topic, consult Robert Weinberg's *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Gennady Estraiikh's *The History of Birobidzhan: Building A Soviet Jewish Homeland in Siberia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

ethnoreligious ideologies as the guiding system of beliefs for Jews seeking to establish a permanent home in the USSR.

### **Using the Plastic Arts to Monumentalize Ideologies**

As Chaikov developed his career as a Soviet artist, he became one of the USSR's premier sculptors. Upon his 1923 move to Moscow, Chaikov immediately joined the sculptors Boris Korolev and Vera Mukhina teaching at Vkhutemas (*Vysshie **khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie*** or the "Higher Art and Technical Studios"). By 1929, Chaikov had become the head of the Society of Russian Sculptors and fully transitioned away from the Jewish themes and styles of his earlier career. During this time, Chaikov produced works such as *The Electrifier* (1925) and *October Tower* (Oktiabr'skaia bashnia, 1927) that revealed increasingly prevalent Constructivist influence.<sup>186</sup> The 1930s was a prolific decade for Chaikov, who by this point had fully deviated from the "radical interpretations of Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism" that marked his works in the late 1910s and early 1920s and transitioned into "a staunch Socialist Realist and champion of the Soviet monumental style."<sup>187</sup> Though he is most well-known for his

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<sup>186</sup> Chaikov's *October Tower* was originally erected in front of the Museum of the Revolution in Moscow before being dismantled. As John Ellis Bowlt notes, the tower "pays immediate homage to Tatlin's project for the *Monument to the III International* (1919) and Georgii Iakulov's for the *Monument to the Twenty-Six Baku Commissars* (1923), both icons of the Russian Constructivist movement." John E. Bowlt, "Icarian Games: Iosif Chaikov and the Jewish Legacy." *Experiment*, 18, no. 1 (2012): 178.

<sup>187</sup> John E. Bowlt, "Icarian Games: Iosif Chaikov and the Jewish Legacy." *Experiment*, 18, no. 1 (2012): 166. Regarding Chaikov's transition during this time, Bowlt elaborates: "Inevitably, with the imposition of Socialist Realism in the 1930s, he adjusted his artistic sights and compiled a repertoire of proper and secure subjects, even if his Soviet career was not entirely exemplary or smooth: if he did receive state awards, exhibited regularly, and accepted prestigious commissions, he was not immune to 'Formalism' and 'Modernism,' 'harmonious on the outside, but of a cold resolution on the inside.' Not surprisingly, therefore, Chaikov was long remembered for his sports scenes and ideological portraits rather than for his Constructivist

1938 sculpture *Footballers* (Futbolisty),<sup>188</sup> his work on the propylaea leading to the entrance of the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition stands among his most significant endeavors.

After years of development and societal transformations, the 1937 Soviet pavilion monumentalized the unification of the Eurasian space under the auspices of the Soviet Union. In its depiction of Republics of the USSR, Chaikov's propylaea celebrated a universal restoration that was made possible through a communal ideology of labor and the unity of peoples under the hammer and sickle of the USSR, given physical form by Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*.<sup>189</sup> As propylaea are intended to separate the secular parts of cities from the religious, Chaikov's creation elevated the Soviet pavilion to a sublime status. His monumental gates framed the pavilion as a modern temple to unity and labor meant to usher in an age of proletarian messianic redemption for Jewish and other Soviet workers alike. Yet, an essential promise remained unfulfilled – the establishment of a viable and eternal homeland for the Jews and all other peoples included in what Terry Martin refers to as the Soviet Union's "imagined community" represented by the Friendship of Peoples.<sup>190</sup>

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explorations and, as a venerated teacher (he taught at Vkhutemas-Vkhutein between 1923 and 1930) and venerable member of the Union of Artists of the Soviet Union, he himself seemed to attach little significance to his youthful experiments." Ibid, 169.

<sup>188</sup> *Footballers* was shown in the Soviet pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair and later occupied a central space in the main entrance of the State Tretyakov Gallery for many years – a distinction that Bowlt describes as "symptomatic of the status which Chaikov enjoyed in the Pantheon of twentieth-century Soviet culture." Ibid, 170.

<sup>189</sup> Mukhina's statue was constructed from stainless steel and measured 24.5 meters high. The pavilion's head architect Boris Iofan was responsible for the statue's concept and design.

<sup>190</sup> Martin makes this assertion in his *Affirmative Action Empire*, in which he states: "The Soviet Union was not a nation-state. No attempt was ever made to create either a Soviet nationality or to turn the Soviet Union into a Russian nation-state. The Soviet people were primarily a figure of speech, used most frequently as shorthand for the passionate patriotism and willingness of all the national distinct Soviet peoples to defend the Soviet Union from foreign aggression. The role

Chaikov's "Republics of the USSR" bas-reliefs concretely define a Soviet agricultural-industrial ideology and present it to the world as a fully realized product, suggesting a transition from uncertainty to belief in the power of the USSR to unite workers from across various nations in their labor.<sup>191</sup> After the period of abstract experimentation that spanned the late 1910s-20s and produced Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International—unrealized attempts to “generate an artistic form and a set of constructive principles equal to the global resonance of the Russian Revolution”—the Soviet pavilion existed as a physical representation of an ostensibly finalized Soviet industrial utopian ideology and achievement.<sup>192</sup> However, instead of faithfully reflecting the workers' utopian ideals of the

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played by the dominant nationality of traditional nation-state would be played in the Soviet Union by the Friendship of the Peoples. The Friendship of the Peoples was the Soviet Union's imagined community.” Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 461.

<sup>191</sup> As Martin explains, Joseph Stalin introduced the Friendship of Peoples metaphor in December 1935. Martin views this concept as having grown out of the Brotherhood of Peoples campaign that had attempted to stir a sense of Soviet patriotism and unity among peripheral, non-Russian republics in the 1920s. He emphasizes the striking lack of attention devoted to “creating an image of the Soviet Union as a unified multiethnic state” during this time. Martin elaborates that while there were “vigorous debates... about the nature of the Ukrainian, Belorussian, Tatar, and Buriat-Mongolian national cultures” there was little discussion about the “multi-ethnic dimension of Soviet culture.” He views this as intentional, explaining that the Affirmative Action Empire was “premised on the belief that multiethnic Soviet unity would be furthered by granting the non-Russians maximal national self-expression within the constraints of a unitary Soviet state. Soviet unity would emerge spontaneously as a result of the disarming of non-Russian nationalism, which would in turn lead to a focus on class interests and so interethnic proletarian brotherhood.” Ibid, 433. Chaikov's propylaea leading to the Soviet pavilion and Vera Mukhina's towering *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, suggest that this time, there would be a stronger emphasis on engendering a multi-ethnic sense of Soviet patriotism.

<sup>192</sup> Harsha Ram, “World Literature as World Revolution: Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* and the Utopian Geopoetics of the Russian Avant-Garde,” in *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 39. Refer back to Chapter Two, in which I consider Peretz Markish's *Der fertsikyeriker man* (The Forty-Year-Old Man) to be yet another unrealized attempt at generating an artistic form commensurate with the Bolshevik Revolution.

youthful forerunners of 1920s Soviet Yiddish culture, Chaikov's propylaea played a role in repurposing ethnocultural pride and channeling it into a still vague sense of Soviet patriotism. Though Chaikov's bas-reliefs sought to celebrate Soviet diversity, the positioning of the SSRs' emblems in the effect-sphere of each relief emphasizes each nation's subservience to Soviet ideology. The reliefs convert the once liberating industrial utopian drive of the Yiddish (and international) proletariat into a rigid and limiting system of duty and obligation to the Soviet Union. Representatives of each nation straddle the emblems of their SSR and offer up their national resources, generating a semiotics of sacrifice to the Soviet regime. Furthermore, the positioning of the Soviet pavilion across from the Nazi German pavilion creates a hierarchy of effect-spheres that redefines the objectives of Soviet ideology. In the context of this visual hierarchy, Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* primarily function not as symbols of Soviet labor but as opponents to Nazism. The peoples depicted in Chaikov's reliefs—those who provide their labor and resources in support of the Soviet ideology—are tucked away at the base of the pavilion, where they do not assume the same role as opponents to fascism despite their future sacrifices to be made during World War II.

Perhaps the most striking element of Chaikov's bas-reliefs is the manner in which each one generates a uniform iconographic symbolism that perpetuates a semiotics of sacrifice to the Soviet regime, embodied by the hammer and sickle at the center of each republic's emblem.<sup>193</sup> In

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<sup>193</sup> In fact, upon first discovering the shattered remains of Chaikov's reliefs, archaeologist François Gentili believed that he had uncovered "the debris of a religious monument" (*oblomki religioznogo pamiatnika*) before seeing the hammer and sickle. Ksenia Bobrovich, "Sputniki 'efemernogo' pamiatnika," *Russkii mir*, Fond "russkii mir," December 1, 2009, <https://rusmir.media/2009/12/01/skulptury>. For more on the symbolism and iconography of Chaikov's reliefs, see Gentili's research article following the 2004 archaeological excavation in Bailleul-en-France. François Gentili, "Moscow-Paris-Bailleul-Moscow: The Sculptures of the USSR Pavilion at the International Exhibition of 1937: Rediscovering a Lost Monument through

traditional Judaism, belief prevails that *korban* (sacrifice) will resume upon the reconstruction of the temple, and Chaikov's reliefs depict the peoples of the USSR offering the crops, livestock, minerals, and national resources of their republics in an act of apparent sacrifice. In their depictions of the peoples from across the eleven Soviet republics, the reliefs are notable in their diversity but consistent in form. Chaikov constructed his propylaea from a metallized concrete providing each figure with a uniform metallic sheen. At a total height of 200 cm, the various nationals would have stood at eye level with the passersby as they approached the pavilion. Despite portraying figures from eleven ethnically and geographically diverse republics, Chaikov's bas-reliefs do little to emphasize the unique cultures that make up the Soviet Union. For instance, in comparing the reliefs depicting the Armenian and Belorussian SSRs (figure 12), there are few discernable differences in the figures. Their clothing styles are not identical, but hardly capture the essence of each people's cultural traditions.



**Figure 12.** Photographs of drafts for the bas-reliefs portraying the Armenian SSR (left) and the Belorussian SSR (right). From the daily newspaper *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, April 29, 1937.



Chaikov does not sculpt with the same abstraction as he had while at the Kultur-lige in the early 1920s—his figures are lifelike and distinguished from one another—but the sculptor does not emphasize the unique identifiers (i.e., the ethnographic markers) of these Soviet peoples. In this case, diversity of cultural expression does not work to the benefit of the people; it is used only as a means of advancing Soviet patriotism, and nations are reduced to the labor and resources that they can offer the USSR.

The republics' emblems occupy the focal point within each of Chaikov's reliefs. In 1937, all SSRs (aside from the RSFSR) updated their emblems, all of which adhere to the same general layout: a red star as a crest; wheat, flax, and other national crops acting as supporters; and the Marxist motto "Workers of the world, unite!" embroidered in both the native language(s) and Russian across red ribbon. As the figures portrayed in Chaikov's reliefs offer only a superficial depiction of ethnic diversity, the emblems create a similarly reductionist representation of Soviet geographic diversity. For example, it is difficult to discern between the Caucasus Mountains of the Georgian emblem and Tian Shan Mountains of the Kirghiz.<sup>194</sup> The same can be said of the Caspian Sea portrayed in the Azerbaijani emblem, which might just as well be any body of water.<sup>195</sup> Some emblems, such as the Georgian and Turkmen, do feature degrees of ethnocultural ornamentation, though the hammer and sickle occupies the predominant space, below the red star crest, within each emblem. Though they appear to celebrate national identities, by sanctifying the hammer and

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<sup>194</sup> The Armenian emblem which features Mount Ararat is the one notable difference.

<sup>195</sup> Such as the Baltic Sea, for instance, which would be portrayed in the Latvian emblem, adopted upon the creation of the Latvian SSSR in 1940.

sickle, Chaikov's reliefs disarm non-Russian nationalism and repurpose it to generate Soviet unity.<sup>196</sup>

Language functions similarly both as a means of superficial ethnocultural ornamentation and as a tool that converts proletarian idealism into Soviet patriotism. Thinking back to Chaikov's *Baginen* illustration, the motto "Workers of the world, unite!," which once acted as a liberating force both aesthetically and ideologically for many of Eastern Europe's young Yiddish writers and artists, is repurposed to unite the peoples of the eleven SSRs by instilling in them a sense of Soviet patriotism. This Marxist call to action is no longer primarily concerned with promoting proletarian internationalist ideology worldwide, but with creating "socialism in one country" and unifying the Soviet workers against fascism. Though no Jews are explicitly featured in Chaikov's bas-reliefs, Yiddish culture makes its way into the propylaea by means of the Belorussian emblem (figure 13), which features the motto "Workers of the world, unite!" in four languages: Belarusian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish – the official languages of East Belarus following World War I. Just one year later, the emblem was changed to include only the Belorussian and Russian translations of the Marxist call to action, perhaps foreshadowing the Soviet regime's increasingly hostile stance toward Yiddish language and culture as a form of Jewish nationalism.<sup>197</sup> Whether through incorporating language, national geographies or

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<sup>196</sup> In his examination of the efforts to establish a "multi-ethnic dimension of Soviet culture," Terry Martin explains that the USSR was "premised on the belief that multiethnic Soviet unity would be furthered by granting the non-Russians maximal national self-expression within the constraints of a unitary Soviet state. Soviet unity would emerge spontaneously as a result of the disarming of non-Russian nationalism, which would in turn lead to a focus on class interests and sow interethnic proletarian brotherhood." Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 433.

<sup>197</sup> Relatedly, *Eynikayt* (Unity) was the name of the official newspaper of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR. The newspaper which was published from 1942 until the Committee's

ornamentations, the propylaea celebrated ethnocultural identity inasmuch as it could be used as a to engender support for a finalized and inflexible conceptualization of Soviet proletarianism. The ideology that once offered promises of liberation and redemption for Chaikov and a generation of writers and artists from across the nations and territories of the USSR came to unify them under a seized ideal of worker’s utopianism.



**Figure 13.** A reproduction of the 1937 emblem of the Belarusian SSR. The Yiddish variant of the motto “Workers of the world, unite!” can be found on the lower left.

An analysis of the Soviet pavilion beyond Chaikov’s propylaea reveals a hierarchy of effect-spheres that helps clarify the relationship between Soviet nationalism, ideologization, and idealism. Each bas-relief contains its own iconography created by the republics’ emblems and the Soviet nationals straddling them. The Soviet pavilion itself forms an additional iconography with Chaikov’s propylaea framing Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (figure 14), which

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liquidation in November 1948 sought to connect Soviet and international Jewry in an attempt to gain financial support for the Soviet war effort.

occupies the focal point. To zoom out and view the Soviet pavilion from the Seine, a new effect-sphere appears in which the Nazi and Soviet pavilions frame the Eiffel Tower – one of the quintessential symbols of Europe (figure 6). A semiotic analysis of the Soviet pavilion at each level of this hierarchy adds context to the roles played by Soviet people, ideology, and ideal leading up to the Great Patriotic War.



**Figure 14.** A view of the Soviet pavilion with Chaikov's propylaea leading to the entrance.

The hammer and sickle occupy a central position in all three levels of this hierarchy – either as the focal point of the effect-sphere or as a prevalent flanking symbol. Yet, the significance of the hammer and sickle varies based on the context of each effect-sphere. The hammer and sickle that adorn the emblems in Chaikov's bas-reliefs have a different meaning than the hammer and sickle held up by Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. In the context of

Chaikov's reliefs, the hammer and sickle represent the official Soviet ideology – the fixed and institutionalized system of principles and provisions outlined in Stalin's Constitution, formally adopted by Soviet Union in 1936 and displayed prominently on a central pillar within the pavilion itself (figure 15).



**Figure 15.** A picture of the interior of the Soviet pavilion with a panel displaying Stalin's Constitution prominently displayed. Photo taken by Thérèse Bonney. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The motivations behind this new constitution remain open to interpretation. Whereas some scholars including J. Arch Getty believed that “Stalinist leadership took the constitution very seriously and indeed, for a while, prepared to conduct contested elections,” others such as Ulrich Schmid thought that the constitution ought to be read as “a magic book for a fairy tale life” as it

“does not reflect reality, but rather sketches out an envisaged reality.”<sup>198</sup> As will be seen, Schmid’s logic might apply equally to Chaikov’s bas-reliefs, which portray a Friendship of Peoples that had not yet been grounded in reality, but an idealized vision of Soviet unity.

The hammer and sickle, hoisted high into the sky by Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, more faithfully represent pure Soviet idealism. Unlike the peoples of Chaikov’s bas-reliefs which are restricted by the propylaea’s upper and lower borders, the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* are unobstructed in their reach upwards, suggesting that Soviet idealism remains boundless.<sup>199</sup> Notably, Mukhina’s sculpture was constructed in an Art Deco style, channeling the creative currents of earlier, more radical Soviet revolutionary aesthetics from a time before Socialist Realism had entrenched itself as the official cultural doctrine of the USSR. The manner in which Mukhina’s figures triumphantly raise their tools resembles that of Chaikov’s *Electrifier* and *Bridgebuilder* – two figures who embodied the industrial utopian aspirations of the early 1920s. The Soviet peoples depicted in Chaikov’s reliefs are far removed from the hammer and sickle held high by the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. In their metallized ambiguity, the peoples of Chaikov’s propylaea perform a similar function as the artist’s *Fiddlers* – they offer up their resources ethnocultural markers in acts of apparent sacrifice to this definitive Soviet ideology.

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<sup>198</sup> J. Arch Getty, “State and Society Under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s.” *The Slavic Review*. 50, no. 1 (1991), 18–36. Ulrich Schmid, “Constitution and Narrative: Peculiarities of Rhetoric and Genre in the Foundational Laws of the USSR and the Russian Federation.” *Studies in East European Thought*. 62, no.1 (2010), pp. 432, 436. These quotes can be credited to Gennady Estraiikh, who includes them in the following article, Gennady Estraiikh, “The Stalin Constitution on Trial in the Yiddish Daily Newspaper Forverts, 1936-1937.” *Aschkenas*, 24, no.1 (2014): 82. <https://doi.org/10.1515/asch-2014-0015>.

<sup>199</sup> In this sense, it might also be argued that Mukhina’s statue embodies the ideal of the *luftmensch*. In his article on Chaikov, John E. Bowlt proposes that the Soviet sculptor’s *Footballers* act as “a collective *luftmensch*” and notes his fascination with flight and the denial of gravity. John E. Bowlt, “Icarian Games: Iosif Chaikov and the Jewish Legacy.” *Experiment*, 18, no. 1 (2012): 177.

Chaikov's propylaea suggest that Soviet peoples relinquish their ethnocultural markers as part of the process of adopting a new Soviet nationality. In this regard, the semiotics of the propylaea mirror those of the *Baginen* cover illustration, in which the figure discards aspects of his Jewish identity in order to pursue a new proletarian internationalist identity to pursue a new proletarian internationalist identity. However, unlike in 1919, this identity is linked to a concrete Soviet ideology and these peoples are bound under the emblems of their SSR.

With Chaikov's propylaea positioned beneath Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, the semiotics of the pavilion present the Soviet industrial utopian ideal as superior to the individuals who labor to bring it into existence. Belief in this idealism initially promoted the development of new Soviet men, but Chaikov's bas-reliefs emphasize not how the USSR supports its people and their cultures, but only how the people serve the Soviet ideology. Not only had the dynamics in the relationship between individual, ideology and ideal shifted, but the motivations driving the Soviet project had changed as well, as is evidenced by the historical inspirations behind the pavilion's creation. Iofan and Mukhina found inspiration for the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* in the classical statue to the Grecians Harmodius and Aristogeiton, created by Antenor in 509 B.C. and generally referred to as the *Tyrannicides* (figure 16). With this symbolism in mind, it becomes clear that the Soviet pavilion was just as concerned with fighting the opposing Nazi ideology as it was celebrating its own.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Danilo Udovicki-Selb elaborates by noting how "in keeping with the Bolshevik self-perceived roots in ancient Greek democracy and the French Enlightenment, Mukhina and Iofan admitted a wide span of sources: from Doric – such as the fifth-century BC, bronze paired group of the *Tyrannicides* Harmodios and Aristogeiton – to Hellenistic – such as the Louvre's second century Victory of Samothrace. Architecture topped with a giant sculpture could be found in the work of the French 'revolutionary' Neoclassicist of the late eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757-1826). The gigantism of the statue evoked equally the spirit of Louis-Etienne Boullée's architecture (1728-99), another 'revolutionary' French neo-classicist of the period, also featuring the predilection of the time for an '*architecture ensevelie*.'" Danilo Udovicki-Selb, "Facing





**Figure 16.** A Roman marble copy of the original bronze *Tyrannicides* held at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy. Image taken from the University of Cambridge’s Museum of Classical Archaeology Databases, <https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/harmodios-and-aristogeiton-tyrant-slayers>.

According to Greek lore, Harmodius and Aristogeiton’s act of tyrannicide allowed for the implementation of Athenian democracy, though historians have noted that the heroes’ influence was greatly exaggerated to mitigate the reliance on Sparta in removing tyranny from Ancient Greece. The sculpture erected in the lovers’ honor appropriately lionizes their bravery, but their heroic act was misappropriated to push an ulterior motive – they became martyrs in the name of democracy. The Soviet pavilion similarly misconstrues the heroism of the unnamed *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. In Paris, they no longer function primarily as symbols of Soviet labor; they become modern day tyrannicides standing in opposition of Nazism.

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Hitler's Pavilion: The Uses of Modernity in the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47, no.1 (2012): 28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009411422369>.



## **Monumental Afterlives: Separating Art (and Idealism) from Ideology**

The extent to which Chaikov and Mukhina's monumental art embodies a boundless industrial utopian idealism and not a restrictive ideology largely has to do with its context. For instance, as Gennady Estraikh explains the portraits of Maxim Gorky and Sholem Aleichem were positioned together within the pavilion to suggest "their belonging to the same ideological and aesthetic league."<sup>201</sup> Despite the exaggerated idealism inherent in the Soviet pavilion (as was the case with all others), Vera Mukhina view her work on the project as an opportunity to express the dynamics of an epoch and to convey the merits of Soviet idealism. Though one might question, especially from a modern perspective, the authenticity of Mukhina's convictions, the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman's* positioning atop the Soviet pavilion, unobstructed and unrestrained, allowed it to exist unimpeded as a beacon of both Soviet idealism and creativity. After the Exposition, Mukhina's monument was moved to Moscow, where it has lived physically as part of the VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy) since 1939. Regarding the VDNKh, Sonja D. Shmid has noted that "its name suggests that it was a show of Soviet achievements, but it was at least as much a materialized vision of the glorious communist future, a beautiful demonstration of future happiness."<sup>202</sup> The presence of Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, which occupies a prominent position near the entrance of VDNKh is similarly

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<sup>201</sup> Estraikh makes this observation in his book chapter "Soviet Sholem Aleichem." While he notes that the "friendly relations" between Gorky and Sholem Aleichem "became one of the most important contributing factors to the reputation of the Yiddish writer," the insinuation is that the effort to establish the two to be a part of the same ideological and aesthetic league was a bit forced. Estraikh, "Soviet Sholem Aleichem," in *Translating Sholem Aleichem: History, Politics, and Art* (Oxford: Legenda, 2012), 73.

<sup>202</sup> Sonja D. Shmid, "Celebrating Tomorrow Today: The Peaceful Atom on Display in the Soviet Union," *Social Studies of Science*, 36, no. 3 (2006): 338.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312706055534>.

paradoxical. Today, the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* exist in Moscow as conquering champions—victors in the aftermath of World War Two—yet they continue to perpetuate a future happiness under the hammer and sickle. These complications are exacerbated by the fact that Mukhina’s statue was returned to Russia shortly after the 1937 Paris Exposition and moved to the VDNKh in 1939. As with Antenor’s *Tyrannicides*, Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*—the symbol of Soviet idealism—is misattributed credit for the nation’s victory.

Indeed, the common people portrayed in Chaikov’s bas-reliefs might be considered the true heroes – those who would go on to sacrifice their lives fighting for the Soviets during World War II. Like those who perished in what the Soviets would refer to as the Great Patriotic War, Chaikov’s bas-reliefs became casualties of the ideological clash of fascism and socialism. Following the 1937 Paris Exposition, his propylaea remained in France, where they were moved to the park of the chateau of Baillet-en-France by the Union fraternelle de la Métallurgie, before being destroyed upon the Nazi Occupation in 1941 and buried underground.<sup>203</sup> In 2004 while exploring the icehouses of the château of Baillet-en-France, French archaeologist François Gentili discovered the fractured remains of Chaikov’s bas-reliefs. The discovery sparked renewed interest in Chaikov’s life and works and prompted calls for a re-examination of not only Chaikov’s life, but the Soviet Art of the 1930s, “too rapidly reduced to a simple tool of Stalinist

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<sup>203</sup> According to a press release by the Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives, Chaikov’s “reliefs were donated by the USSR to a trade union, the Confédération générale du Travail. At that time the left-wing Front Populaire was in power and the statues were accepted by the Union fraternelle de la Métallurgie and placed in the park of the château of Baillet-en-France, acquired in 1937 by the trade union as a vacation centre for the metal-workers during the first annual paid vacations.” “The ‘Resurrection’ in Baillet-En-France of the Bas-Reliefs from the 1937 Soviet Pavilion.” Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives, March 10, 2009. <https://www.inrap.fr/en/resurrection-baillet-en-france-bas-reliefs-1937-soviet-pavilion-12153>.

propaganda.”<sup>204</sup> Indeed, the afterlife of Chaikov’s bas-reliefs, albeit short-lived, continued the work of spreading the communist and industrial utopian ideologies initially promoted by the Soviet culturalists and political leadership alike. By remaining in France after the Exposition, Chaikov’s figures come to truly embody the Soviet proletarian internationalist ideal as it had originally existed and been intended to spread across the world, not just as “socialism in one country.”

Of the pieces of rubble recovered from the icehouse, there is a bust of a fiddler that remains intact (figure 17). Unlike Chaikov’s *Fidler* reliefs from the early 1920s, this fiddler is made in the classical style, though he wears an unmistakably modern suit. Despite the attention to lifelike detail in his appearance, there is little indication as to what nationality this fiddler might be, though there is no mistaking what instrument he plays. One may wonder whether Chaikov might have conceptualized this fiddler as one of his earlier *Fidlers*, transitioned from an ambiguous shtetl figure into a fully actualized Soviet citizen. Yet, in this state of rubble, the answer almost loses its relevance. Chaikov’s shattered reliefs create perhaps the most accurate representation of Soviet Yiddish culture possible. They depict peoples who offered their resources, languages, and labor to the Soviet project and ultimately suffered in the process. Their shattered, dispersed, and now resurrected state reflects this fact and unites Jews, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and all peoples of the Soviet Union in their sacrifices.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid. Despite these calls, there remains remarkable little scholarship on Chaikov for an artist of his stature. John E. Bowlt has contributed the most English language analysis of the sculptor’s work, though his article “Icarian Games: Iosif Chaikov and the Jewish Legacy” does not spend much time on Chaikov’s works of Soviet monumentalism. Aside from a few biographies on Chaikov’s life, little scholarship exists in Russian as well.



**Figure 17.** The bust of a fiddler recovered from the icehouse at the château de Baillet-en-France. Photo taken by Denis Glikman, Inrap. Picture retrieved from the online press release “The ‘Resurrection’ in Baillet-en-France of the Bas-reliefs from the 1937 Soviet Pavilion.” <https://www.inrap.fr/en/resurrection-baillet-en-france-bas-reliefs-1937-soviet-pavilion-12153#>.

What then can be made of the Worker and Kolkhoz Woman Pavilion at the VDNKh in Moscow? What functions do Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* and the reproductions of Chaikov’s propylaea perform in a park that has been described as “a crazed Soviet visionary’s wonderland” or as a “Soviet Disneyland” in a post-Soviet Russia?<sup>205</sup> Within the VDNKh now exists the Orion amusement park, the official motto of which is: “Dreams of the future yesterday, today, tomorrow.”<sup>206</sup> But how might a Soviet monument fit into the “spirit of optimism” that

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<sup>205</sup> Sonja D. Shmid, “Celebrating Tomorrow Today: The Peaceful Atom on Display in the Soviet Union,” *Social Studies of Science*, 36, no. 3 (2006): 332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312706055534>. Shmid borrows these characterizations from Jamey Gambrell’s piece “The Wonder of the Soviet World,” which appeared in pages 30-35 of the *New York Review* on December 22, 1994.

<sup>206</sup> *Mechty o budushchem vchera, segodnia, zavtra.*

drives the VDNKh?<sup>207</sup> These questions are perhaps best answered by looking at the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* statue as it exists outside of the park as the official logo for the film studio Mosfilm, a designation the work has held since 1947. While the statue itself is confined within the borders of the VDNKh, located in Moscow's Ostankinskii district, its likeness has become a ubiquitous symbol of Soviet (and now post-Soviet) cinematic innovation. In this context, Mukhina's statue not only finds new life; it continues to embody aspects of an initial Soviet creative idealism dissociated from the totalitarian Stalinist regime.

### **In the Aftermath of Destruction**

In the context of Soviet Yiddish artistic expression and ethnocultural ideology, the pavilion as Temple metaphor relies on the assumption that Chaikov, Markish, and the other forerunners of Soviet Yiddish culture truly believed in the possibility that a new Jewish homeland could be established within the territories of the USSR. Through the Friendship of Nations motif, Chaikov's propylaea attempted to unite all Soviet nations under a common struggle to defend their national homeland. As has already been clarified, the Friendship of Nations celebrated the union of *Soviet* nations, a link substantiated by the hammer and sickle that occupied the focal point of each SSR's emblem. While different nations undoubtedly embraced this Soviet project with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by the end of the 1940s, it had become clear that the USSR would never be a viable homeland for Eastern Europe's Yiddish-speaking Jewry. By the Night of the Murdered Poets in 1952, official Soviet Yiddish culture had been all

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 335.

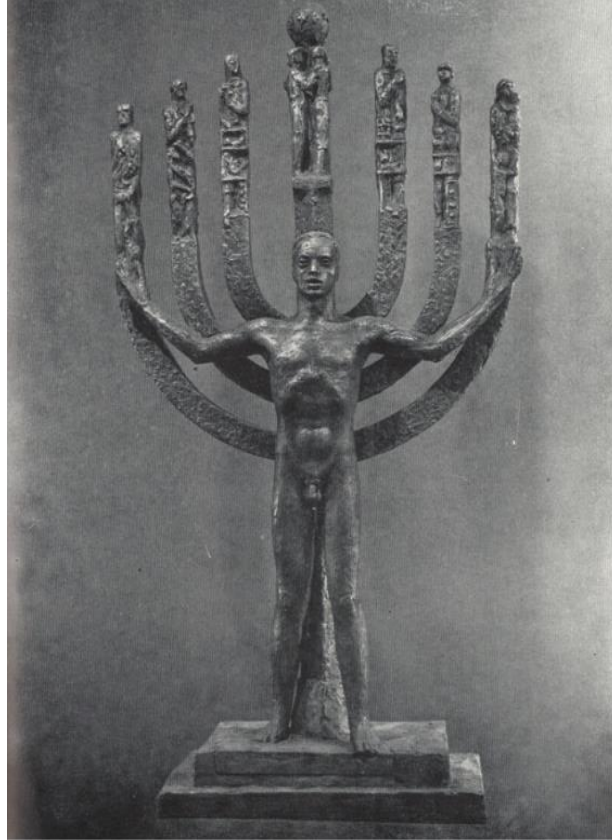
but completely annihilated.<sup>208</sup> Nevertheless, Iosif Chaikov continued to be a prolific sculptor through the mid-1970s.

During World War II, Chaikov transitioned yet again to produce works with more overt military themes and began to sculpt more portraits, which ranged in subject from Soviet Yiddish culturalists including Leyb Kvitko and Yekhezkl Dobrushin to well-known “Soviet” figures like Vladimir Mayakovsky and national literary heroes such as the Kazakh poet Abai and writer Mukhtar Auezov. After the war, Chaikov remained productive into the 1970s. In 1954, he notably created the statues for the *Friendship of Peoples* fountain at VDNKh. His post-Stalinist works tended not to be overtly political, though as Igor’ Shmidt observes, his output during the 1960s increasingly displayed “notes of elegiac reverie.” These works often gravitated toward themes of familial intimacy, though the artist continued to explore concepts of Soviet science, industrialization, and the idealized Soviet citizen on occasion. Perhaps the most enigmatic of these pieces is his 1968 sculpture *Human* (Chelovek), a piece replete with Judaic symbolism and modern political undertones (figure 18). The aesthetics suggest a return to Chaikov’s pre-Stalinist work, and Shmidt notes a clear increase in “constructive clarity, massiveness, and saturation – features dating back to the sculptor’s work from the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> This is not to say that 1952 marked the end of all forms of Soviet Yiddish culture. *Sovetish heymland* (Soviet Homeland), a Yiddish literary and political journal published in Moscow between 1961 and 1991 is strongest example of the prolonged influence of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. In fact, upon its creation in the 1960s, the journal enjoyed unprecedented print runs of 25,000 copies. For more on the history of *Sovetish heymland*, consult the “Sovetish Heymland” entry of the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe: Gennady Estraiikh, “Sovetish Heymland.” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, October 20, 2010. [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sovetish\\_Heymland](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sovetish_Heymland).

<sup>209</sup> Igor’ Shmidt, *Iosif Chaikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), 101.



**Figure 18.** Chaikov's *Chelovek*, 1968. Reproduced from Igor' Shmidt. *Iosif Chaikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), 101.

Particularly notable is the presence of the menorah, which by this point would have been clearly linked to the State of Israel, which had adopted it as its official symbol in 1949. All the more striking is the fact that Chaikov created this sculpture in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War – a watershed moment in Soviet-Israeli relations, after which the Soviet Union severed relations with Israel. Chaikov takes this symbol of the Jewish homeland and links it to that of da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, considered to be one of the most iconic images of Western civilization. In his analysis of da Vinci's drawing, physician Kenneth D. Keele notes how "[Leonardo's] studies of proportion fuse artistic and scientific objectives."<sup>210</sup> While Chaikov demonstrated a

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<sup>210</sup> Kenneth D. Keele, *Leonardo Da Vinci's Elements of the Science of Man* (New York: Academic Press, 1983), 252.

continued interest in Soviet industrial and scientific themes, as is evidenced by his 1961 piece *Science* (Nauka), his *Chelovek* imitates da Vinci's fusion of aesthetics and science to portray the ideals represented by the menorah—the symbol of the Jewish homeland—as ones shared by all. In its ambiguous representation of the titular *chelovek*, Chaikov's piece simultaneously acknowledges and denationalizes this traditional Judaic symbol and modern emblem of the State of Israel to reestablish a harmonious relationship between aesthetics and idealism, something that had been lost in Chaikov's art under the oppressive restrictions of Soviet ideology.

As in his Kultur-lige works, Chaikov uses ambiguity to subdue the ethnocultural currents that pulse through this work. Though the presence of Chaikov's menorah is unmistakable, the piece is titled *Chelovek*—"human" or "person"—and the work immediately draws the viewer's attention to the man standing in the foreground, arms outstretched and encompassing the entire menorah. A closer analysis of Chaikov's menorah itself suggests that it might well have been inspired by the menorah depicted on the Arch of Titus, erected circa 81 CE to commemorate the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in the Jewish War, and considered by many to be "the greatest of all Jewish symbols" and "the most significant historical Temple menorah to 'exist' beyond the written word."<sup>211</sup> The arch menorah was chosen to be the inspiration behind Israel's national "symbol," despite fierce debate due to its connections to Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Revisionist Zionism.<sup>212</sup> In his scholarship on the menorah and its cultural significance in contemporary

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<sup>211</sup> Steven Fine, *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 11, 15.

<sup>212</sup> Fine recounts the controversy behind the selection of this symbol and hypothesizes that "the reticence to choose this image was closely tied with the fact that the arch menorah with an inscription below had been the symbol of the Jewish Legion, which had been adopted as the symbol of the Revisionist movement and particularly of its Betar youth organization, in the decades since. [Ze'ev] Jabotinsky and his followers, always savvy to the visual culture of their



contexts, Steven Fine comes to the conclusion that not only does the “menorah... represents Jewish tradition itself,” but the “Zionist menorah transforms a traditional symbol into a tool of statehood.”<sup>213</sup> While it is highly doubtful that Fine would have been familiar with Chaikov’s *Chelovek* statue, the scholar’s analysis provides a compelling framework through which to investigate Chaikov’s own reimagined arch menorah.

While Chaikov’s opinions toward Zionism and the State of Israel remain unclear, his sculpture frames the menorah (and its symbolic meanings) as something inherent to all of humankind. The central figure stands naked, stripped of all possible ethnocultural markings, with his arm stretched out wide as if proudly glorifying the menorah extending upward in the background. Chaikov chose not to qualify who this human might be; he is not a *novyi* (new), *sovetskii* (Soviet), or *evreiskii* (Jewish) *chelovek* – nor any combination of the three. Various figures stand reverently on the branches as a couple embraces one another under a depiction of the world on the central stem. Aside from its surface-level resemblance to the arch menorah, there are no other qualities that can reasonably connect Chaikov’s piece to Jewishness or the State of Israel. The juxtaposition of the concrete portrayal of menorah against the ambiguous identity of the central figure further denationalizes the traditionally Judaic symbol and suggests a vital (and perhaps final) step in the evolution of Chaikov’s artistic production. Initially, his Kultur-lige and early Soviet works emphasized the development of *Jewish* identity within an

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movement, had transformed the legion badge into the symbol of Revisionist Zionism. It appeared on uniform patches, posters, pamphlets, and membership cards for Revisionist groups and the Betar youth movement across Eastern Europe and Palestine to the Americas, and is today associated mostly with the rightist—and sometimes openly racist—fans of the Betar soccer teams.” Ibid., 144.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 162. Fine’s examination investigates efforts made by modern Jewish leaders and groups, ranging from Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Zionists to Menachem Mendel Schneerson and the Lubavitchers.

emergent Soviet society. Throughout the late 20s and 30s, his Soviet monumental work promoted the development of *Soviet* identities within the territory of an established USSR. With *Chelovek*, Chaikov rejects traditional conceptualizations of national identity by taking the menorah (and all its modern-day connotations) and establishing it as something inherently human. The yearning to establish a homeland is no longer intrinsically Jewish, Soviet, etc.; it is the innate desire of all peoples.

## Coda

### **After the Apocalypse: Soviet Yiddish Culture after World War II**

*Nakht iz itst fun rand biz rand  
Kind, kenst ruik shlofn  
Hundert vegn do in land  
Ale far dir ofn..*

Night is here from border to border.  
Child, you can sleep in peace.  
A hundred roads, here in this land,  
All open to you.<sup>214</sup>

– A lullaby, sung in Yiddish by Solomon Mikhoels, from the film *Circus* (Tsirk, 1936)

Though the 1930s saw state-sponsored Socialist Realism restrain free cultural expression and aesthetic self-representation across the Soviet Union, it was also a time of unprecedented accomplishment and success for the USSR’s Yiddish cultural elite. Before the Great Terror of 1937 and the purges that occurred throughout the remainder of the decade, Yiddish writers and artists navigated the constraints of Soviet censorship and produced notable works including Moyshe Kulbak’s *The Zelmenyaners* (Zelmenyaner), the “talkie” *The Return of Nathan Bekker* (Nosn Bekker fort aheym), and the GOSSET’s Yiddish production of *King Lear*, which starred Solomon Mikhoels. Despite the critical and popular successes of these works, it was becoming clear that Jewish culturalists could only continue to include contemporary Jewish content if it also served Soviet ideological goals. Writers and artists who continued to produce Yiddish works were either forced to set their narratives in Imperial Russian times, as a way of signaling that

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<sup>214</sup> Translation by Eve Sicular. Isle of Klezbos & Friends, “Circus Lullaby,” recorded March 2023, track 13 on *Yiddish Silver Screen*, compact disc.

characters' Jewish identities were relics of an already distant past or sever ties to Jewishness altogether.<sup>215</sup> As historian Jeffrey Veidlinger explains, the GOSET's *Lear* "was widely regarded as the theater's greatest moment. However, the lack of Jewish content threatened to turn GOSET into a theater of translation with no direct connection to Jewish culture."<sup>216</sup> Herein lies the key conflict of Soviet Yiddish culture in the age of Stalinism and beyond. Yiddish writers and artists were forced to forsake Jewish culture to continue to find work. Worse yet, failure to do so jeopardized their very chances of survival. Kulbalk's *Zelmenyaner*, for instance, portrays a Jewish family as it struggles to adjust to the sweeping political and societal changes taking place in Soviet Minsk. The work, which was published in two volumes in 1931 and 1935, is widely considered to be one of the finest Yiddish-language satires. It also undoubtedly expedited Kulbalk's demise. The writer was arrested in 1937 and executed that same year, on October 29 after a show trial during Stalin's purge of Minsk-based Yiddish writers. Just over a decade later, Minsk would be the scene of one of the most infamous murders in Soviet Jewish history – that of Solomon Mikhoels on January 13, 1948.

On January 16, three days after his murder, Mikhoels was given a state funeral, which took place at Moscow's GOSET (figure 19). The open-casket event violated a range of Jewish

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<sup>215</sup> Der Nister's realist novel *Di mishpokhe mashber* (The Family Mashber, 1939) is an example of one such story that was set in late-19<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Russia, so as to avoid backlash over its Jewish content. In his analysis of Der Nister's career, Mikahil Krutikov explains how the writer, who began his career as a symbolist, was able to reinvent himself as a realist during his Soviet years. As Krutikov explains, for Der Nister, history "becomes a realm in which symbolic imagination can find protection from the violent assaults of reality." Mikhail Krutikov, *Der Nister's Soviet Years: Yiddish Writer as Witness to the People* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 211.

<sup>216</sup> Jeffrey Veidlinger. 2010. Moscow State Yiddish Theater. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Moscow\\_State\\_Yiddish\\_Theater](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Moscow_State_Yiddish_Theater) (accessed March 26, 2024).

burial laws, which demands the deceased be returned into the earth within 24 hours of passing. Stalin had personally ordered the assassination of Mikhoels, which was framed as a truck accident, and the Soviet authorities used this time to corroborate this “official” story.



**Figure 19.** A view of Solomon Mikhoels’s open casket at his funeral, staged at the GOSET.

Professor Boris Zbarsky, the biochemist notorious for embalming Lenin, prepared Mikhoels’s body for the funeral.<sup>217</sup> The event drew waves of mourners, one of whom was Mikhoels’s dear friend, the poet Peretz Markish, who delivered an elegy to the Soviet Yiddish actor. Markish wrote the 8-line poem in the backstage area of the GOSET shortly after viewing the body of the slain Mikhoels. His wife recalled her husband’s horror at this sight, noting how the poet

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<sup>217</sup> In an ironic twist of fate, the Jewish Zbarsky was also eventually arrested in 1952 at the tail end of Stalin’s antisemitic purges. Though Zbarsky survived his imprisonment, he died in 1954 – one year after his release. In fact, it has been noted that “all other men who had seen Mikhoels’s face before or while it was cosmetically repaired would all be either imprisoned or executed.” Louis Rapoport, *Stalin's War against the Jews: The Doctors' Plot and the Soviet Solution* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 97.

“returned to the lobby, white as a sheet. ‘Don’t go up there!’ he said, pointed to the closed door of the auditorium. ‘It’s not the old man any more!’”<sup>218</sup> Markish saw through the coverup and, when he took the stage, delivered a tribute that both glorified Mikhoels and condemned the Soviet regime responsible for his murder:

*1 Dos iz dayn vort in blut, dayn hekhster grim,  
In velkhn toyterheyt du lebst iber der bine, –  
Gey in der eybikeyt arayn – dayn oyftrit iz barimt.  
Dikh veln plieskegdik bagegenen di shtern fun baginen.*

*5 Ergets in himl, tsvishn blondzshendiker blankendiker shayn,  
Zikh tut a tsind a shtern in dayn loykhtndikn shem on;  
Shem zikh nit mit dayn gelestertkeyt un mit dayn payn,  
– Zol di eybikeyt zikh shemen!*

1 This is your word in blood, your noblest makeup,  
In which, in death, you outlive the stage, –  
Go into Eternity – your performance is renowned.  
The stars of the dawn will greet you with applause.

5 Somewhere in heaven, amidst wandering and gleaming light,  
A star shines on your luminous name;  
Be not ashamed of your blasphemy and pain,  
– Let Eternity be ashamed!<sup>219</sup>

Markish refers to Mikhoels’s blood as his “noblest makeup” – a statement that applies directly to the blood that covered his face just a few days prior and also indirectly to his Jewish blood. In her analysis of Markish’s elegy, Chana Kronfeld emphasizes the juxtaposition of blood with makeup:

This paradoxical use of color becomes a central organizing principle of the poem’s figurative language: color associated specifically throughout with stage make-up (grim) but also with blood (blut) is authentic and real; whiteness, metonymically associated with the scene of the staged accident in snowy Minsk, stands for cover-up and deceit. On the

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<sup>218</sup> Esther Markish, *The Long Return* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 145.

<sup>219</sup> Yiddish from a trilingual collection of Markish’s poetry that was released in honor of the hundred year anniversary of the poets birth. Peretz Markish, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy: K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia (1895-1995)* (Jerusalem: Beseder, 1998).

meta-artistic level, theatre and art (make-up, color) paradoxically express truth, whereas politically mediated reality is staged, inauthentic, deceitful.<sup>220</sup>

Markish stresses the supremacy of Mikhoels's blood as an explicit rejection of the Soviet attempt to cover up the actor's murder.<sup>221</sup> The poet's emphasis on the actor's blood also implicitly acknowledges Mikhoels's connection to Judaism, through both sharing the same blood with the Jewish people and serving as a reminder of a covenant with God. With these lines, Markish brashly defends the legacies of Mikhoels and the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, both of which the Soviet authorities attempted to manipulate to serve their purposes. Indeed, the Soviet regime used the *bine* (stage) of the GOSET as the platform from which to "honor" Mikhoels. Yet, Markish ensured that the truth behind the actor's death would not be misconstrued. He made it known that Mikhoels was murdered for being Jewish. Thanks to his elegy, Mikhoels, even in death, was able to transcend the stage once more.

Markish ended his passionate tribute by emphatically damning the Soviet regime with the line "– Let Eternity be ashamed!" (– *Zol di eybikeyt zikh shemen!*). The poet at once absolves Mikhoels of his guilt and accuses the Soviet authorities, implicitly represented by the term *eybikeyt* (eternity). Markish accentuates this audacious reproach with a slant rhyme between the words *shem on* and *shemen* in lines 6 and 8. In this agrammatical rhyme, Markish employs *loshen-koydesh* to honor Mikhoels's "luminous name," marking a departure from his earlier aesthetics in which *loshen-koydesh* was used to express the profane. At a time when the use of Hebrew had long been taboo in the USSR, Markish uses it to immortalize Mikhoels's name and

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<sup>220</sup> Chana Kronfeld, "Murdered Modernisms: Peretz Markish and the Legacy of Soviet Yiddish Poetry" in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* (Oxford: Legenda Studies in Yiddish, 2011), 189.

<sup>221</sup> In Yiddish, the adjective *hekhst* is commonly known to mean "highest" or "supreme."

place it in the heavens. In the first stanza, the poet implores Mikhoels to enter into a different conceptualization of Eternity, one that has not been seized by Stalin's murderous regime. By referring to *eybikeyt* twice in these 8 lines, Markish differentiates between the initial aspirations and idealized conceptualization of Eternity and the Soviet regime's variant. Markish publicly forsakes the eternal promise of the Soviet project.

In the weeks following the funeral, Markish expanded his elegy into a longer poem that was read on the thirty-day anniversary of Mikhoels's death. In this seven-part poem titled "Sh. Mikhoels – a ner-tomid bam orn" (Sh. Mikhoels – An Eternal Light at Your Coffin), Markish more forcefully accuses the Soviet regime in his condemnation of Mikhoels's murder.<sup>222</sup> While Markish uses a large portion of his 28-quatrain poem to express his ire, he also includes a stanza that cements Mikhoels's legacy, along with that of all of Soviet Yiddish culture:

*Der forhang lozt zikh nit arop,  
Di lemp in zol zenen nit oysgeloshn.  
Es shtralt dayn shlofndiker leybnkop  
Un fun geshtaltln shvebnde – dos umshterblekhe loshn.*

The curtain does not descend,  
The lamps are not extinguished,  
Your sleeping lionhead beams,  
And from the spirits takes shape – your immortal language.

In the face of destruction, Markish ensures both Mikhoels and his Yiddish readership that the show will go on. The curtain does not descend, the lamps do not extinguish, and Mikhoels's language exists immortally. Markish rhymes the participle *oysgeloshn* (extinguished) with the *loshen-koydesh* term *loshn* (language) to emphasize the immortality of Yiddish – the language of

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<sup>222</sup> In her memoirs, Esther Markish confirms that, in the days following Mikhoels's funeral, she had learned the truth behind the actor's murder first-hand from Irina Trofimenko, the wife of Belarusian Military District commander Sergei Trofimenko.



Soviet Jewry. In their eternal nature, both the theater lamps and Mikhoels immortal language mirror the *ner-tomid* – the light that hangs above the ark in of every synagogue and burns perpetually.<sup>223</sup> Markish ensures that Mikhoels will be remembered for his role as a Yiddish actor and contributions to Soviet Jewish culture, not as a false hero of the Stalinist regime. Markish was able to make such critical remarks because he recognized that Mikhoels’s murder marked the beginning of the end for the rest of the USSR’s preeminent Yiddish writers and culturalists. he understood that “this dirge would prove to be the last nail in his own coffin which he correctly sensed was already being prepared.”<sup>224</sup> Indeed, Markish was arrested on the night of January 27, 1948, not even a month after Mikhoels funeral. He was later tried and executed on August 12, 1952, during the Night of the Murdered Poets. Though the lamps at the GOSET would eventually extinguish upon the theater’s closing in 1949, the works and performances of Markish, Mikhoels, and their contemporaries would prove to be the eternal light that kept alive the spirit of Soviet Yiddish culture. As the Torah assured the survival of the Jewish spiritual life following the destruction of the Temple, these works preserved the legacy of Soviet Yiddish culture even after the destruction of its institutions.

Despite the tragic fates endured by Markish, Mikhoels, and countless other Soviet Jews, it is still possible to recognize the initial promises of the USSR and the magnificent contributions made by Yiddish writers and artists to promote the Soviet workers’ utopian ideology. On January 28, 1973, Esther Markish gave a public talk on the subject of Soviet Jews that took place at

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<sup>223</sup> In a synagogue, the ark is traditionally located behind the *bime* (the platform or stage from which services are conducted). In a play on words, Markish refers to the *bine* (the theater stage) of the GOSET in his elegy at Mikhoels state funeral.

<sup>224</sup> Louis Rapoport, *Stalin's War against the Jews: The Doctors' Plot and the Soviet Solution* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 97.

Montreal's Jewish Public Library. In the introductions preceding the event, Yiddish was referred to as “that very culture for which Peretz Markish stood and gave his life.”<sup>225</sup> Though this is undeniably true—Peretz Markish did give his life for the Yiddish culture that was so integral to his very being—another fact remains. He also gave his life for the promise of a new culture that began to emerge out of the chaos and destruction of the First World War and Bolshevik Revolution. The unfortunate reality is that Markish was murdered for the same reason so many Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian writers were killed – because they believed in and advocated for a multinational socialist ideology that had been repressed by the Stalinist Soviet regime. While we ought to remember Markish as a Jewish poet, it is vital that we also continue to recognize the monumental contributions that he made to a Soviet project that once contained so much promise, not just for Eastern Europe’s Jewish population but for all workers.

Though this promise never fully materialized in real life, the 1936 film *Tsirk* (Circus) presents an idealized manifestation of the Soviet Union’s potential. In the film, a white American circus performer flees the United States with her interracial black baby. The two find refuge in Soviet Moscow, which is portrayed as free of prejudice and racism. In one of the film’s most memorable scenes, representatives from a variety of ethnicities take turns singing a lullaby to the African American child. The lyrics are sung in Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Uzbek and Georgian, and the Yiddish lines were performed by Solomon Mikhoels. The lyrics—*Nakht iz itst fun rand biz rand / Kind, kenst ruik shlofn / Hundert vegn do in land / Ale far dir ofn*—convey

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<sup>225</sup> Esther Markish, “Meeting on the subject of Soviet Jews,” January 28, 1973, Montreal, Canada. MP3, 64:09, [https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/frances-brandt/fbr-329\\_4329/meeting-subject-soviet-jews-esther-markish-esther-markish](https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/frances-brandt/fbr-329_4329/meeting-subject-soviet-jews-esther-markish-esther-markish).

both a sense of peace of that resides over the land and its limitless potential.<sup>226</sup> In Yiddish the term *rand*, commonly translated as “border,” does not mean border as a line that divides two geographical areas; it can only mean border as in an edge or boundary – a margin.<sup>227</sup> With this meaning in mind, the Yiddish lyrics take on additional meaning. Mikhoels sings not only on behalf of Soviet Jewry but for marginalized peoples across the world. If only cinematically, Mikhoels’s song gives a glimpse into the physical manifestation of Markish’s poetics from *Der fertsikyeriker man*, which imagines workers from all over the world laboring side by side to make the Soviet industrial utopian dream a reality:

*15 – Fun undz – iber rand, fun undz – unter rand,  
Tsegeyen zikh vegn tsu yetvidn land,*

*Tsu yetvidn mentsh un tsu yetvidn kind –  
Un epes fargeyt, un epes bagint.*

*Keyn eynem – farteylt, keyn eynem – farzen,*

...

*24 Az der veg iz tsu ale – mit yedn baglaykh...*

15 Out of us—beyond the border, out of us—just before the border,  
Roads disperse outward toward every land

To every person, and to every child –  
And something passes, and something dawns.

No one is left out, no one is neglected,

...

24 When the road is for all – everyone as equals...

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<sup>226</sup> Night is here from border to border. / Child, you can sleep in peace / A hundred roads, here in this land, / All open to you.

<sup>227</sup> For a political or geographical border, the term *grenets* would be used, which comes from the German “Grenze” and also exists in Russian as the cognate “granitsa.”

Over the course of his career, Markish spoke on behalf of those within and beyond the borders of his world in his fight for equality and opportunity. As a Yiddish writer, he was able to speak for his Jewish readership – Markish’s own historically marginalized community. As a Soviet writer, Markish attempted to speak across borders to marginalized populations across the world.

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