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Nick Underwood, *Yiddish Paris: Staging Nation and Community in Interwar France*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022. xv + 245 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-025305796.

Review by Jeffrey Haus, Kalamazoo College.

Nick Underwood's *Yiddish Paris* offers readers a wealth of information about the development of Eastern European Jewish immigrant cultural institutions in Paris between the World Wars. Underwood's extensive research has two main goals. First, he seeks to challenge a prevalent theme of scholarship focused on the conflicts between native French Jews and their immigrant coreligionists from Eastern Europe. Conflicts between different ideological groups certainly existed, but Underwood argues that a common cultural agenda often bridged these political divides. Second, the groups he studies enabled Yiddish-speaking Jews in interwar Paris to "[articulate] French, Jewish and transnational identities" (pp. 14-15). These identities dovetailed at the Paris World's Fair in 1937, where ideologically opposed Yiddish-speaking Communists and Bundists cooperated in creating an exhibition, and subsequently organized a conference devoted to Yiddish language and scholarship. These factions also came together along with others on the French Left to support the Popular Front government and combat the scourge of European fascism. Ultimately, Underwood concludes, Parisian Yiddishists followed French civic models in establishing their institutions, even as those institutions remained distinctively Yiddish oriented. This symbiosis produced communal institutions that promoted a pluralistic approach to Jewish integration in France while simultaneously asserting a transnational Jewish identity grounded in Yiddish culture.

Underwood works from the inside-out, devoting his first two chapters to the two main Yiddish communal organizations in Paris. The book begins with a deep dive into the activities of the Kultur-lige pariz, established in 1920. Originally intended to promote "Yiddish high culture" (p. 32), the Kultur-lige pariz became more politically oriented after Jewish Communists engineered a takeover of the organization in 1925. In response, Jewish Bundists--socialists who believed that Jewish cultural and political autonomy was possible in the diaspora--broke away to form their own group, the Medem farband. These two organizations constitute the primary bases around which Yiddish Paris coalesced.

The Parisian Yiddish culture they created, Underwood shows, sought to balance the Jewish immigrant past with the demands of the present environment. Both the Kultur-lige and the Medem farband hearkened back to the East European origins of their Jewish immigrant clientele. The Kultur-lige pariz initially saw itself as an extension of the original Kultur-lige established in

Kyiv in 1918; the Medem farband took its name from the theorist Vladimir Medem who deeply influenced the ideology of the Bund in Poland. Despite these roots, however, both groups sought to nurture a Yiddish culture that looked to the Jewish future. More historically focused was YIVO (the Yiddish Scientific Institute), whose office moved to Paris from Vilna during this period. Yet even YIVO became more firmly ensconced in Paris, cooperating with the Medem farband in its intellectual pursuits and eventually establishing its headquarters on rue des Petits Champs across the street from the Bibliothèque nationale.

As Underwood demonstrates through exhaustive research, this combination of past and present resulted in an extensive list of communal programming efforts which expressed the growing sensibility of a community becoming more rooted in Paris. The Kultur-lige, as Underwood writes, saw its primary mission as educating the Jewish working class. It did so by offering classes in French language, literature, and history; Jewish history and Yiddish literature; and other general subjects ranging from art history, to bookkeeping, to Marxism and political economy. The Kultur-lige also tried to familiarize its members with their physical environment by organizing excursions to the French countryside. Flyers announcing its tenth anniversary celebration even incorporated the Eiffel Tower, showing the resonance that the Paris landmark had acquired among the Yiddish-speaking population. For its part, the Medem farband also held public events focusing on Yiddish literature and culture; operated an extensive library; and even briefly ran its own Yiddish language newspaper, *Undzer shtime* (“Our Voice”). By the mid-1930s, Yiddish-speaking Bundists had also integrated aspects of French culture into their own cultural and political activities. Underwood argues that the scope of activity in both the Kultur-lige and the Medem farband demonstrates that Jewish immigrants expanded their own cultural and political understanding beyond a strictly Yiddishist immigrant milieu.

The broader terrain of activity fostered different artistic expressions of Yiddish culture in Paris, many of which encouraged the growing fusion among Jewish immigrants between Yiddish and French culture. Underwood concentrates his study on two main areas: theater, and community choruses. These activities held particular significance, Underwood tells us, because “Yiddish Paris’s diaspora nation...depended as much on live, face-to-face experiences” as it did on written resources (p. 93). The main theater company was the Parisian Yiddish Workers’ Theatre (PYAT), which broke away from the Kultur-lige in 1934. Through the end of the 1930s, PYAT absorbed influences from French avant-garde theater and made inroads into the general French theater scene. Consequently, its face-to-face influence included not only Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jews but also French-speaking theatergoers and critics, even as it performed plays by the seminal Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. Underwood digs further into PYAT’s publicity materials to construct its public image, which he sees as balancing Yiddish and French cultural sensibilities. These theatrical achievements brought PYAT and its audience closer to the leftist French political and intellectual milieu while it internally supported Yiddish cultural development.

Community choruses had an even greater impact in this regard. Like the theater, musical performances were sites for interpersonal contact and thus facilitated community building. Because choruses did not require sets and elaborate costumes, however, they provided a more mobile means for shaping Yiddish culture in Paris. They could participate in a wider variety of events than theatrical productions, and their works could be disseminated beyond the performance stage through recordings and radio broadcasts. Like their counterparts in the

theater, Yiddish choruses strengthened internal Jewish communal bonds while simultaneously exposing the general French Left to Jewish immigrant culture.

The book's final chapter examines the manifestation of these efforts during the 1937 Paris World's Fair. For the Fair itself, the Kultur-lige, the Medem farband, and YIVO combined to create a Modern Jewish Culture Pavilion. In touting the achievements of Jewish writers and artists like Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Moykher Seforim, and Marc Chagall, the pavilion asserted the existence of a Jewish culture that occupied its own distinctive place in the world. At the same time, Underwood argues that the pavilion demonstrated the degree to which Parisian Yiddish culture had become deeply intertwined with the anti-fascist politics of the French Left. This leftist affinity set the stage for Yiddish organizations to support the popular Front government. The Modern Jewish Culture Pavilion also asserted an equivalency between Jewish culture and Yiddish culture. That formulation, Underwood implies, represented an argument for a Jewish national identity, albeit a diaspora identity that did not account for other Jewish cultural manifestations. The subsequent Yiddish Culture Congress reinforced this notion of Yiddish supremacy within Jewish culture.

In his examination of these organizations and events, Underwood constructs a unified narrative of Yiddish cultural flourishing in Paris. The internal agendas of the Communist Kultur-lige, the Bundist Medem-farband, YIVO, and the theater and musical troupes mediated between their Yiddish-speaking community and the French-speaking Left. Their forward-looking attitude necessitated outer-directed activities encouraging the development of Yiddish cultural production in Paris. That emphasis explains YIVO's relatively minor role in the story, as it sought to record, compile, and preserve the history of Yiddish culture rather than turn it into something new. Both the Communists and the Bundists, however, saw a future in which Yiddish-speaking Jews would play a significant role either as members of a revolution or as members of a coherent diaspora nation. As Underwood shows, the vicissitudes of the Parisian environment influenced the development of this community even as its Yiddish aspects thrived. In pursuing Jewish cultural distinctiveness, Yiddish cultural institutions in Paris nevertheless integrated to an extent that Parisian Yiddish culture became distinguishable from its counterparts elsewhere in Europe and in the United States. The pluralist outlook that pervaded Yiddish Paris thus found its way into the transnational Yiddish identity that its members were working to preserve and advance. In this sense, the outer-directed efforts of Yiddish Paris were formative as well as performative.

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