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# The Home that Never Was: Rethinking Space and Memory in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Jewish History

Frank Wolff\*

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**Abstract:** »Das Zuhause, das es nie gegeben hat: Neue Überlegungen zu Raum und Erinnerung in der jüdischen Geschichte des späten 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts«. Recent research on Jewish migration and "Jewish spaces" usually asks for the relevance of "Jewish spaces" in Jewish life. This article looks the other way and examines how the changing conditions of Jewish life altered emigrant's perceptions of their "old home" in East Europe. It argues that in Jewish memory East Europe functioned as a mythscape which changed from a repressive and revolutionary over a progressive to the lost "old home". As a result the article calls to more carefully historicize processes of Jewish memory and spatial semantics as expressions of relations between conflicting groups.

**Keywords:** Jewish memory, Jewish spaces, autobiographies, mythscapes, Yiddish literature, General Jewish Labor Bund, quantitative analysis, American history, East European history.

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## 1. Introduction

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Migration is a process full of imagination. This especially counted for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when means of transportation had become affordable for many Europeans. Prospective migrants received enough information on unknown destinations to spark their imagination, yet not enough to draw a more realistic picture of the living conditions there (Alroey 2011, 1-87). This was especially true for the temporally largest ethnic emigrant group of 2.5 million Russian Jews. Their vision of specific destinations like the United States consisted of high hopes, but they often encountered a very different reality (Lederhendler 2009). Migrants to Latin America or South Africa often had only the slightest knowledge about their destinations (Elkin 1980, 66). Relief agencies tried to provide basic information on spoken languages, expectable climate and what to wear before embarking (Jewish Colonization Association 2008 [1905]). Still most migrants entered the demanding process falsely prepared. Moreover, like previous migrants, in letters back home they

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sugarcoated their experiences. In vain an immigrant guidebook warned that Jewish emigrants “earned 50 cents a day, spent 10 cents for coffee and bagels and saved 40 cents. ‘The Jew writes home that America is the land of gold and silver for he feels rich like Korah’” (Rischin 1977, 67). Such communications eventually inspired further emigration.

Research often focuses on New York’s Lower East Side and emphasizes the role that such immigrant quarters played in the creation of new identities (Hödl 1991; Diner 2000; Bender 2004). We have a profound understanding of how the “East European Jewish worker immigrant” experienced the process of immigration and respective constructions of an imagined “promised land” (Mendelsohn 1976; Michels 2005; Cohen and Soyler 2006). In many migrants’ narratives a Russian-Jewish immigrant identity soon became American-Jewish.

What is less reflected upon is that not only the future home but also the old home was highly imagined (Morawska 1993). At least for the first immigrant generation the place of origin remained important in a double sense. They often intensively communicated with family and friends left behind. What is more, it was an imaginative repository of otherness that helped to maintain a distinct identity in the world’s melting pots. In this article I will more closely observe this underestimated aspect. Especially in American Jewish history, surprisingly little attention is being paid to the connections between the immigrants and their old home. Even established researchers on transnationalism state that Jewish migrants were “too busy to look back” (Brinkmann 2010, 51). I intend to demonstrate the contrary, for looking back had a critical function for immigrants trying to situate themselves in a changing world. While they were working on “making it” in the “promised land,” they constructed the “old home”, ranging between a simple counterexample to a romantic cultural home left in pain, or, in the case of Yiddishists, to the progressive heart of their movement.

Moreover, the “old home” did not simply refer to a geographic location somewhere in the old country. It rather referred to a state of mind and to a past left behind. And those were closely associated with certain localities. The “old home” was a mythscape, a commemorative space shaped by experiences and filled with emotions and former expectations which, for the sake of narration, had to be located in time and space.

Naturally the “old home” had to reflect ongoing changes. Time passed on, people were born, left, or died, and wars, revolutions, industrialization, and the rise of anti-Semitism changed Europe, their country, their city. No matter if Jewish observers in Russia and Poland mourned the disappearance of the shtetl or welcomed modernization, or, as in the case of the famous ethnographer An-Sky (1927), did both, they witnessed change and participated in it. As a result, for fellow emigrants as well as for those who stayed, migrants’ memoirs became resources on how life had once been in the old country. Also autobiographical reflections became a mass phenomenon exactly during this period of mass migration. In such texts the experience of geographical relocation went

along with constructions of spatial experiences that mirror transnational relations between source and destination community. In this article I will first consider spatial perspectives on Jewish history and then turn to an empirical study of constructions of three different “old homes” in Jewish memory.

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## 2. Space and Memory

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In contrast to “Jewish politics” (Frankel 1984; Mendelsohn 1993; Gitelman 2003), consideration of “Jewish spaces” has a relatively short tradition (Schlör 2005; Lipphardt et al. 2008). The “regional factors” that Moshe Mishinsky (1969) called to attention for research on Jewish Labor still need closer scrutiny. Especially when asking for performative aspects of “Jewish spaces”, research can gain new insights into internal disputes. As demonstrated by Anke Hilbrenner (2007), in tsarist St. Petersburg the struggle for leadership of the Russian Jews broke between two radical factions. Representatives of the Jewish economic elite tried to speak to the Tsar by looking west. One of their leaders, Baron Horace Günzburg, stood behind this tendency’s most visible spatial manifestation, the construction of an imperial reformist synagogue in St. Petersburg. Almost simultaneously displayed was a cabinet designed by the famous ethnographer An-Sky. It was filled with a collection of everyday articles on Jewish life in the shtetl. Both projects claimed to represent Russian Jewry and therefore to speak for them. Here the question of spatial representation, or condensed spatial imagination, reflects the question of how Russian Jews dealt with modernity.

Well beyond this example, space is a highly contested category in Jewish history. It is defined by practice and conflict as well as by experiences of loss. For Hassidim spatial dispersion was a curse, for Zionists an unacceptable status quo, and for Yiddishists a resource. Nevertheless, the strongest branch of the latter category, the Bund, barely took into account that with mass emigration Yiddish culture not only spread but also changed the overall constitution of Jewish life. For all these parties, however, the Holocaust meant the catastrophic loss of Jewish East Europe.

But despite being lost it was not gone. It persisted in the survivors’ heads who collectively engaged in commemorative projects in order to create representations of destroyed Jewish life. Their work clearly expresses that An-Sky’s cabinet had won over Günzburg’s synagogue. Already before the Holocaust, émigré groups wrote collective volumes on their home towns. During and after the Second World War and spanning great geographical distances, hundreds of groups published *yizker bikher*, memory books (Bass 1973). Often *landsmanshaftn* (home town societies) were behind such publications. In that process they became transnational social spaces (Pries 2008), institutions of the

new countries but always reconnected back home (Lipphardt 2010; Kobrin 2010).

However, the concentration on performative aspects runs the danger of essentializing constructed spaces into Jewish places, when, in fact, representations of space are always shaped by perceptions (Harvey 1990; Pott 2007). This calls for more explicitly historicizing the meaning of Jewish spaces in individual and collective memory. In contrast to most studies on Jewish spaces, I follow Jan Olaf Kleist's (2010) critique of *lieux de memoirs*. Consequently theorized this concept is inapt to capture the hybridities and conflicting memories in immigrant societies. Here Duncan Bell's concept of mythscapes offers a new perspective. Mythscapes he understands as

the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The mythscape of the page upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re)written [...] (Bell 2003, 66).

Additionally Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar (2013, 194f.) point out that this concept allows us to look beyond the methodological nationalism inherent to most other theories of collective memory. The common denominator is the interest in agency. Memory does not develop like a cloud in the sky but is intentionally formed and altered in public debates. It draws much from individually as well as from collectively developed narratives. With this in mind, the formation of memories of conflicting groups comes into focus in which varying spatial semantics underpin distinctiveness. For this purpose, Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013, 194) state, "there is actually no place like the imagined home".

And there again is no place where the home is more expressively imagined than in autobiographical writing. During the last decades and with a great bandwidth of spatial metaphors, much has been written on autobiographies as means to self-fashioning and inscription into specific groups (Maynes 1995; Hahn 2000; Herzberg 2013). Less has been thought about how autobiographies construct space and groups in the first place. Instead of summarizing social processes with spatial metaphors, I intend to examine the biographical meaning of spatial constructions.

Furthermore space needs more consideration in autobiographical research because spatial experiences are essential motivators of autobiographical writing. So far research concentrates on two factors: age and violence. The first is the allegedly most common inspiration to reflect upon one's individual achievements (Stanislowski 2004; Depkat 2006). The latter has most dramatically been described in the analysis of life fashioning under Stalinism (Hellbeck 1996, 2001; Halfin 2003). Simply speaking, behind both stands death as the greatest narrator (Benjamin 1977 [1936/7], 449f.). But apart from the ultimate threat, other factors also inspired thousands of autobiographies.

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### 3. Case Study: Bundist Autobiographies

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When we include quantitative research, we find that the experience of migration was at least as important a trigger as age. I will describe this by a mixed-method analysis of a representative corpus of Bundist autobiographies, written by members of the once largest Jewish party. The following arguments ground in an analysis of 532 Bundist autobiographical texts which vary in form and length. They were written between 1897, the year of the foundation of the party, and the climax of Yiddish culture after the Second World War. They have been analyzed in a specifically designed database that captured quantitative as well as qualitative aspects. In order to derive broader claims on Jewish memory, this sample, which I will refer to as “Bundist autobiographies,” is supplemented by various texts written by politically differently oriented authors.

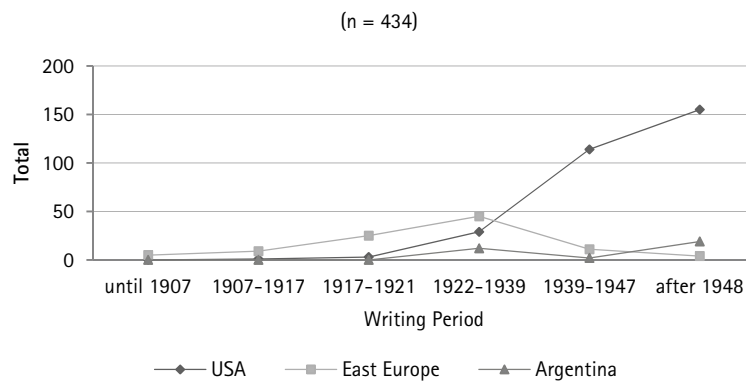
Most notably, the mere existence of this huge sample demonstrates that it is plainly wrong to speak of an “impossibility of socialist Jewish autobiographies” (Malo 2009, 177-9). Secondly, age as a motivator was less important than qualitative studies argue. Only 45 percent of the Bundist autobiographies were written by persons 60 years of age or above, as many were in working age. Thirteen texts have been written by children or adolescents. Among Bundists no “language attrition” (Pescher 2007), the decline of the usage of the mother tongue after emigration, is detectable. 95 percent of their autobiographies were written in Yiddish, no matter where and how long after emigration. This spans all classes. As a student in Russia, the originally russophone Vladimir Medem learned Yiddish as a means for party work. Later it became an identity factor and in New York he wrote his famous memoirs in Yiddish (Medem 1923). For most Russian-Jewish workers Yiddish was their mother tongue. Even in Yiddish hostile Israel of the 1950s and 1960s, for them Yiddish remained the language to recapitulate one’s past. Bundist workers like Yoel Novikov, as well as “converters,” like the former Bundist and then Poalei Zionist Hersh Mendel, published their memoirs in their *mame loshn* (Novikov 1967; Mendel 1959).

From the very beginning, Yiddish writing in emigration differed from Yiddish writing at home. In late nineteenth-century Russia, it had gained recognition as a distinct language in a dual process. Yiddish writers produced a highly literary corpus which claimed to be rooted in the “Jewish street.” Socialist activists, on the other hand, disputed the alleged necessity of first teaching the workers Russian before they could be “enlightened” and agitated (Mendelsohn 1970; Trachtenberg 2008). Combining both, especially through Bundist agency, Yiddish emerged from a mobilization tool to a social signifier and a cultural value.

The Bundist agenda tied together idiomatic and spatial aspects. Unlike their Zionist counterparts, Bundists favored political work and the improvement of

the social situation right where the Jewish masses lived. This developed into the political axiom of *doikayt* (lit.: here-ness). For them, the East European shtetls were the hotbeds of Yiddish socialism. Many young workers were first drawn into the movement and then sooner or later emigrated. They took with them their political ideas and group identities. Now *doikayt* created a conflict: did it refer to their new places of living where, in Vladimir Medem’s words, in most cases “there was no Jewish Labor movement” (Portnoy 1979, 223) or to the Jewish masses back home?

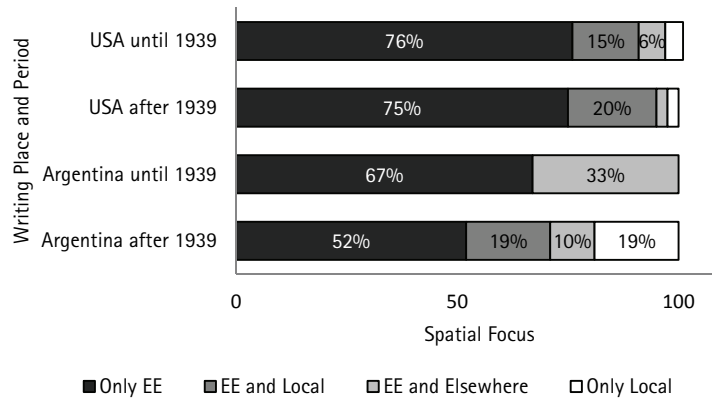
**Graph 1:** Regional Tendencies of Bundist Autobiographies Written in the Three most Important Regions of Activism



Data collection and analysis by the author.

Autobiographies looked at both worlds at the same time. While 80 percent of these texts were written either in East Europe, the US or Argentina, regional tendencies and focuses vary. The need to recollect the individual and collective past increased with experiences of loss (see Graph 1). Until 1917 Bundists barely wrote reminiscences and when they did, they concentrated on the very early years. In a romantic tone, leaders spoke of their own achievements during the pioneering period. Interestingly, and very much unlike Bolshevik conceptions of revolutionary history (Corney 2004), the year 1917 had no direct impact on the commemorative culture. Bundist autobiographies were still mainly written in East Europe and the overall number increased only after 1921, after the Bund had made it through various splits and schisms after Red October (Pickhan 2001; Jacobs 2009).

**Graph 2: Relation of Writing Place and Spatial Focus in Emigrant Bundist Autobiographies before and after 1939**



EE: East Europe; Local: Place of Writing = Spatial Focus; data collection and analysis by the author.

Afterwards and in a slow process, American and Argentinean immigrants became increasingly important. Even though the Bund's organization never fully recognized the external branches, already between 1922 and 1939 almost half of the Bundist autobiographies were written in transatlantic emigration. Thus emerged the transnational autobiographical culture of Bundists which strongly impacted the broader Yiddish commemorative movement. During the Second World War this evolved into an American led, but nevertheless first-generation only, immigrant Yiddish culture. Interestingly, the Holocaust only intensified previous commemorative trends. Through the times, American authors "looked back" to a much greater extent than did their Argentinean comrades (see Graph 2). Nevertheless, we have to differentiate how they looked back and what kind of an old home emerged in those reminiscences. As Ewa Morawska (1993) has demonstrated, Slavic and Jewish depictions of the "old home" varied, but also Jewish representations of the "old home" developed with the changing times.

### 3.1 The Repressive "Old Home"

In 1894, among the earlier arrivals was the adolescent Mary Antin. Her book *The Promised Land* was published at the height of Jewish immigration to the US and became probably the most influential autobiography of a Jewish immigrant (Antin 1899, 1912). She describes Russia as a repressive "old home" which she and her family willingly left behind. In her success story, Mary Antin expressed the will and expectations of many US-American immigrants. She presented the master narrative of Jewish immigration.



Bundist and other socialist arrivals, however, who started arriving in New York only a few years later, had a different experience. Most of them had come of age in Russia and brought with them ideas of how to live, work and organize (Wolff 2012). Exploitation and anti-Labor sentiment on the Lower East Side evoked memories of repressions well known to them. Not surprisingly, the best selling socialist daily, the *Forverts*, bridged both worlds through memories, letters and reports (Metzker 1990). Around 1905 many readers closely followed the *Forverts*' reports the uprising and the failure of the Russian revolution. The physical distance prevented them from participating in the events but not from supporting them. Donations skyrocketed and made up to half of the whole annual budget of the Bund. Campaigns were held at rallies, strikes and most importantly, lectures, picnics and festivities that were Yiddish cultural and commemorative events in one.<sup>1</sup>

Still, there was little demand for autobiographies. Memory came in the form of history and with the purpose of helping the Russian socialist movement on its path. This went far beyond Bundist circles. Even the famous Abraham Cahan, who had never joined the Bund and often has been criticized for using Yiddish as a mere tool for Americanization (Manor 2009), stepped up and spoke out for Russian matters. In an issue of a Bundist publication in 1904, he diagnosed that until then most historical Jewish activists, mainly Narodniki, had left behind Jewish identity and had silently even supported anti-Semitic reasoning. Only the Bund, he explained, broke with this tradition and now stood as the one progressive force of the Jewish masses in Russia (Cahan 1904). His call to support was also a revocation of a Bundist spatial claim over Jewish Western Russia. Bundists described this as the “bundishn rayon” which was a pun playing on the Jewish pale of settlement defined by the Tsarist government during the nineteenth century. With many others, Cahan underpinned this imagined dominance over an East European Jewish space in upheaval which was left but not left behind.

After the failure of the revolution this transnational solidarity cooled down. Increasingly arriving activists turned Jewish New York to the hub of Jewish Labor. Most famously, the Shirt Waist Strike and the rise of radical unions can be interpreted as the arrival of “Bund-Type activism” (Basch 1998, 61). But this does not mean that East Europe disappeared from the radar of Yiddish New York. Bundists were increasingly depicted as the Russian-trained vanguard of Yiddish socialism and culture. Simultaneously, this was the onset of a Bundist autobiographical culture in the US, though these texts barely emphasized the importance of the American experience and rather focused on Russia (Zivion 1909, 1917; Olgin 1909; Beker 1911).

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<sup>1</sup> YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut), New York, RG 1400, ME-18/4.

Naturally, Jewish socialists overseas warmly welcomed the February Revolution in Russia. East Europe reemerged as a distant but closely related revolutionary place. Public events and fundraising campaigns resurfaced.<sup>2</sup> Instantly, Russia again was present and now the hopes were supported by past experiences and memories of struggles in 1905. One main expression was a book compiled by a group of leading Yiddish socialists around I.B. Salutski and A. Litvak (1917) in New York. It was supposed to raise funds, to commemorate, and to enlighten about “Revolutionary Russia.” It also included the first American collection of Bundist reminiscences.

Before the book was even published, Russia called for more than memory. In early summer of 1917 Litvak returned to his “old home” in order to directly participate in the revolutionary movement. His romanticism, however, only lasted briefly. The movement turned out to differ from 1905 and history took a very different path. The Bolshevik takeover split both organizations Litvak reported to, the Bund and its unofficial US-American branch, the Jewish Socialist Federation (Hertz 1954; Brumberg 2001). Finally, Bundists who stuck to Bundist traditions had to abandon Russia as their “rayon” and retreated to Poland. This included Litvak, who, after a short period of support for the Bolshevik movement, in 1921 first returned to his old home Vilna and in 1925 continued to his “old” new home, New York.

For either group, those who adhered to and those who rejected Soviet politics and realities, the period before 1917 and especially the years around 1905 now became the mythical centers of Jewish revolutionary memory (Pickhan 2011). But while Lenin degraded the revolution of 1905 as the “dress rehearsal” for Red October (Lenin 1966 [1920], 27), for the non-Bolshevik socialists it was the turning point, the root of an ongoing cultural revolution (Moss 2008). Their version of the “old home” combined in a complex relation the onset of the Jewish mass movement, Bundist activism, Yiddish self-consciousness and revolutionary defeat. The shtetl was a place of anti-Semitism and exploitation as well as of resistance. This “primeval period” turned into a heroic past that united movements across the Atlantic Ocean. In contrast to Mary Antin’s narrative, in such memories martyrs were far more important than perpetrators. This counter narrative depicted a youth not willing to leave but rather to fight for a “promised land.”

### 3.2 The Progressive “Old Home”

Despite reduced emigration during the interwar period, still many Jews made the transatlantic passage. Globally Jewish socialist movements experienced the years 1917-1921 as a rupture and the following years as a period of redefini-

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<sup>2</sup> YIVO, New York, RG 1400, ME-18/5; IWO (Idisher Visnshaftlejer Institut), Buenos Aires, RG Bund, 1114.

tion. This came with the emergence of Bundist organizations in Poland, the United States and for the first time officially in Argentina. Especially in Poland the Bund again rose to a main factor on the Jewish street, including a dominant party organization, affiliated unions, Yiddish publishing houses, a strong youth movement named “Tsukunft” and the school network TSYSHO (Central Yiddish School Organization). After a slow start, Poland became the recognized center of global Yiddish culture.

This came with a generational shift and required a more profound understanding of where the Yiddish movement with its Bundist and Labor Zionist branches originated. The year 1922 marked the turning point. Globally, Bundists celebrated the movement’s 25th anniversary, partially in order to propel Bundist community building, partially as a counter history against the Bolshevik historical imaginary which reduced the Bund’s primeval period to their pre-history (Arbeter Luakh 1922; Frumkin 1922; Rafes 1923).<sup>3</sup>

The most influential Bundist autobiographical author was the Bund’s outstanding intellectual Vladimir Medem (Wolff 2007). As a convinced Socialist and anti-Communist – which eventually led to a split from his wife Gina Medem – he had left Europe to New York (Kossovski 1928; Medem 1943). Before his early death in 1923 he developed his first autobiographical sketches into a memoir which the *Forverts* first published in series, followed by a two-volume book in 1923 (Medem 1920, 1923; Portnoy 1979). This was not a collection of specific episodes but a full-fledged Rousseauian memoir. In it, he organized his narration not by years or epochs but by the places he lived and worked. In a model fashion it portrayed the “primeval period” as one of comradeship and conflict with other activists, including Bolshevik leaders. The main focus, however, lies on his contribution to the Bund’s development into the leading progressive movement on the Jewish street. Here the “old home” as a mythscape had two functions: as an organizing category it allowed him to locate his activism, and it mingled the imagined closeness and the experienced remoteness of Russia.

Many authors followed this model (e.g. Weinstein 1924; Blum 1940). In contrast to the earlier reminiscences which mainly served Bundist community building in the Weberian sense of *Vergemeinschaftung*, these texts now served a dual purpose. They reunited Bundists within various Yiddish organizations in America and also reminded them of a heritage which simultaneously resurfaced in Poland. As a consequence, these memoirs were exported to Poland, where they were a reservoir of pride and motivation for the younger generation. Such American support also included the collection of funds for the publication of Layb Bermans (1936) highly important autobiography. Though written and published in Poland and concerned only with Polish matters, it was financed by

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<sup>3</sup> YIVO, New York, RG 1400, ME-18/10.

Workmen Circle activists in New York. Like all other memoirs of this period, the book was not solely a self-sufficient expression of one author's self, but rather was a contribution to the history of the Bund's ongoing project of individual and collective emancipation.

The "old home"-mythscape turned into a space that connected past and present as well as American and Polish Bundist experiences. The number of published autobiographical texts increased while at the same time transatlantic contacts intensified and travels became frequent. Moreover, Bundists in Argentina connected more actively to Poland. Here, before 1917, autobiographical and historical texts by Bundists were concerned only with arrival and the creation of a Yiddish workers' movement there (Vald 1908, 2 vols.). During the interwar period authors additionally started looking back at their involvement in Russian history and what that meant at River Plate (Vald 1929; Kuvelsman 1937).

The "old home" also became a resource. In Argentina, for instance, where Yiddish schools were on the rise, Bundist schools had been in the backwater of development during the 1920s. But with the arrival of new concepts, literature and even teachers from the progressive Bundists schools in Poland, they soon overtook leadership in Yiddish schooling (Zadoff 1994, 67-99, Shefner 1936). In these schools as well as in the Workmen Circle schools in the US, the history of the Bund and its specific understanding of *yiddishkayt* and *doikayt* were among the most important subjects taught (Program fun di arbeter ring shuln 1927).<sup>4</sup> In immigrant writing as well as in local practices, the "old home" now became the progressive home. The past provided the heroism, the martyrs and the myth, the present brought new concepts to distant shores.

East Europe as a mythscape had changed from the place of repression and resistance to the home of conflicting movements and yet one proud Yiddish workers' culture. Theoretically *doikayt* was applicable anywhere, but practically Yiddish culture centered around the golden age of Yiddish in Poland. This also painted golden the "primeval period." Hence, the imagined shtetl was elevated to the key signature of Jewish life in East Europe. Emerging anti-Semitism and increasing repression by Polish national forces only added to this picture and allowed the re-evocation of memories of resistance.

### 3.3 The Post-Traumatic "Old Home"

Shortly after the Holocaust in 1946, a Yiddish written memoir was published in New York that redefined the genre. In *Fun a velt voz iz nishto mer* (engl.: *A World that Is No More*) Israel Joshua Singer (1945) recalls various episodes of his distant Polish home. Singer, who had died in New York in 1944, does

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<sup>4</sup> CAHJP (Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People), Jerusalem, PER/65 and Per/67-68; YIVO, New York, RG 1400, M-12/19.

not explicitly explain why his world vanished. Very much like An-Sky before him, as an observer and an enlightener, he speaks in a sympathetic but remote tone of anachronistic shtetl-life. Generations of later authors took his metaphor of a vanished world, but for them this world had been destroyed by the Nazis. For them, including his younger brother, the Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (1982), not only shtetl-life but East European Jewish life in general “was no more”.

Though altered through horror, the memories persisted. To a greater extent than ever before, it defined community building. For Bundists this became even more important, because with the Jewish masses their movement had lost not only its originating culture but also its Utopian vision. Its pro-diasporical *doikayt* became the subject of Zionist ridicule. As a turn to the interior, historical and commemorative publications now became the most important genre among Bundists. It allowed them to reject the Zionist and post-revolutionary “usable past” in the making and the maintenance of a Bundist identity as a hub of a subaltern survivor community (Roskies 1999; Slucki 2012). Yiddish also turned into a purely commemorative language. Without Yiddish speaking masses there was no room for Yiddish socialism. For the first time, Yiddish memoirs now truly talked of a land and a time past and gone.

Memory became an end in itself, not only in order to witness episodes and developments but also as a testimony of survival. Authors of all strata, and to an increasing amount workers, started writing memoirs (e.g. Shtern 1954; Mendel 1959; Novikov 1967; Metaloviets 1982). At least two different types can be identified. A first group of straight-forward “Holocaust memoirs” are often characterized by a lapse of time and space into what Dan Diner (1996) calls “compressed time” (*gestaute Zeit*). Already during the war, such texts also had a political function for Bundists. They were among the very first to spread knowledge of the ongoing horrors under Nazi occupation through autobiographical texts (Shvarts 1943; Hart 1943; Pat 1943a). This included texts on the Warsaw uprising in which the city changed from the previous space for progressive action (Ury 2012) to a place of inexplicable horror and defeat (Pat 1943b; Geto in flamen 1944).

Shortly after the war, the leading Bundist and ghetto-fighter Bernard Goldstein (1947 and 1949) published one of the most prominent and often translated memoirs on the Warsaw uprising. Yet, he realized that this was a misrepresentation of what Warsaw really meant to him. Consequently, about two decades later he published another autobiographical book on his life and work for the Bund in Warsaw during the interwar period (Goldstein 1960). In it, he spoke with pride of what the Bund had achieved before German destruction. Even though he and his fellow Bundists considered this to be the more representative autobiography, it was never published in a language other than Yiddish. This book therefore belongs to the second type: published memories that were triggered by the experience of loss through the Holocaust but that still tried to

reconnect to the autobiographical tradition set by Vladimir Medem before the destruction of “the old home.” Not surprisingly, Bundists continuously focused on topics similar to the ones before the war. Despite the strong presence of the Holocaust in Jewish memory, between 1939 and 1947 only 25 percent of the Bundist autobiographies reported on this period. Afterwards it decreased to only 18 percent, even sharper than reports on the “primeval period” which, despite decreasing contributors, declined only slightly from 25 to 21 percent. Bundists insisted that they should not only speak of death suffered but more of a cultural life lost. Consequently memories on the interwar period increased from 15 to 24 percent.

Nevertheless, for all authors now the mythscape was a place that was no more. While Zionists embarked on recreating another “old home” in Israel, Bundists and many non-Zionists like Bashevis Singer mourned the “old home” lost in Europe. But as with the repressive or progressive “old homes” before and after the First World War, Bundists emphasized East Europe as a space of a glorious Jewish past, now fatally overshadowed by destruction. This version of the mythscape tried to remind readers that there once was a non-Zionist and secular mass movement, a Yiddish culture which also was a root of multiculturalism in the US (Katz 2011). But activists knew that they were the last generation. In contrast to the interwar period, experiences and *yiddishkayt* rather isolated them from the youth. The mythscape was designed to mourn and glorify a spatialized past while, at the same time, trying to virtually recreate as much of it as possible. This effort needed Yiddish as an expression of authenticity while at the same time Yiddish books had fewer and fewer possible readers.

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#### 4. Conclusion

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Even though historians professionally decode autobiographical narratives according to temporal settings, authors organize their memories by spatial aspects. For them the *kheder*, the home *shtetl*, traveling experiences and episodes in larger cities at home or abroad were units that organized memory. In this setting, time was one of many factors, mostly combined with specific achievements or societal functions that helped to locate reminiscences. Temporal arguments were too imprecise and contradictory. Even Yakob Sholem Hertz, “the historian” of the Bund was uncertain about whether he entered the Bund in 1916 or 1917, but he knew for sure it happened in Warsaw.<sup>5</sup>

Both readers and writers joined the Bundist “autobiographical pact” which integrated individual and collective experiences into one big subaltern story of their movement by adding piece by piece, life by life, city by city to the greater

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<sup>5</sup> YIVO, New York, RG 1400, MG-2/429/Herts.

plot. In order to appear authentic for the readers, the “old home” needed to be located, to be narrowed down to a place, like a city, a shtetl or even a street (Rotnberg 1948; Mints 1958). But the characterization of these places altered depending on the times they were commemorated. Therefore, the “old home” never was in fact a place but a space constructed by visions of the past, settings and interests of the present and, up to a certain point in time, aspirations for the future. Only after this future had been eradicated the “old home” was fixed into a place that was no more.

Reconstructing space through communication, as geographer Marc Redepenning (2008) argues, has a healing function and it helps to come to terms even with traumatic pasts. As a “coping strategy” it allows people to overcome troubles by externalizing experiences through spatialization. Therefore, when we speak of Jewish memory we have to acknowledge that it always constructed East Europe as a “Jewish space” and that this process itself needs to be historicized. The post-traumatic autobiographical culture was not, as many researchers and commentators on Jewish memory suggest, the climax, the epitome, nor the central piece of Jewish memory. Although publications on the Holocaust skyrocketed, we have to draw more attention to autobiographical texts that were written before the Holocaust as well as to those that tried to contribute to a more complete picture of Jewish life.

For authors writing in the traditional language of the Jewish masses, the post-Holocaust autobiographical culture was not the peak of Jewish memory: it was its postscriptum. New York’s famous Jewish author, Alfred Kazin, a son of immigrated socialists, captured it most precisely. For him, socialism had become “one long Friday evening around the Samovar [...] singing ‘Tsuzamen, tsuzamen, ale tsuzamen,’” the Bund’s anthem composed by An-Sky. Before the First World War, Russia had been a place of repression and glorious resistance; after it, Polish Yiddish culture elevated it to the center of the Yiddish world. Only after destruction by war and mass murder, Kazin’s (1979 [1949], 62) “beautiful Russian country of the mind” emerged. Only then was the heritage of An-Sky’s cabinet in St. Petersburg not only destroyed, but also lost.

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