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Beyond Genocide: How Refugee Agency Preserves Knowledge During Violence-Induced Migration

Frank Wolff*

Abstract: »Über den Völkermord hinaus: Wie das Handeln von Flüchtlingen Wissen bewahrt«. Genocide targets lives and also aims to destroy cultures. Hence, refugees do not only save their bare lives, as the common notion of a refugee in need of individual protection assumes; they also engage in various collective practices to safeguard their cultural heritage from destruction. As an expression of self-consciousness against genocidal violence, this process of rescue becomes a part of that very cultural heritage and thus fundamentally alters its meaning. To develop a better understanding of this complex process, this article first develops general thoughts on refugee agency and cultural survival. Secondly, to exemplify the variety of such efforts and their cultural meaning, this article examines how European Jews, and particularly the General Jewish Labor Bund, attempted to save Yiddish culture and material collections on the secular history of European Jews during the 20th century. In conclusion, it argues that in addition to the individualized perception of a refugee, we need to consider collective cultural rescue as an integral part of refugee politics.

Keywords: Migration and refugee studies, genocidal violence, Jewish history, Yiddish language, labor history, genocide, memory, General Jewish Labor Bund.

1. Introduction

Refugee migration is often perceived as an eventful chain of profound loss. In fact, the modern notion of a refugee is predicated upon the idea of necessary protection for persecuted individuals. Appeals to solidarity from the receiving societies draw on the perception that, during violence, induced migration victims manage to save little but their bare lives (Betts 2013; Gatrell 2011, 2013). This positions refugees on the receiving end, first of violence, and then of protection. When we look at refugee agency, however, we see a different picture. In particular, the refugees of genocidal situations often expend immense effort to form networks in order to protect not only their personal lives but also their culture. This is a direct consequence of the fact that genocides not only target the bodies of the victims, but also (and perhaps foremost) their cultural

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existence. Preserving knowledge, from language and documents to artefacts, thus becomes a form of resistance against such attempted physical and cultural annihilation. Drawing on this observation, this article develops an approach via which to understand violence-induced migration, not only as a process of loss, but also as presenting the possibility to preserve knowledge that might otherwise suffer complete destruction.

Of great importance to the examination of this process is the difference between the internal (and often fragmented and overlapping) formation of cultural groups or communities on the one hand, and the external identification of groups as the targets of violence on the other. The latter process includes the marking of a specific group as different by propaganda as well as mental and physical violence (Chalk and Jonassohn 1990; Dutton 2007). Group marking occurs through pejorative designations such as, for example, lists and visual signs, and forms part of the process of spurring violence, often picking up on pre-existing social differences, transforming what used to be seen as diverse aspects or nuances of a given society into irreconcilable differences (Wistrich 1999; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Brubaker 2002). These differences are imagined as threats to security and stability. Most importantly, this “rationale” suggests that this threat does not come from individuals, but from the mere presence of this particular group of “others.” Therefore, the intended destruction of the group does not stop with persecuting or even killing persons. Even Raphael Lemkin’s earliest definition of genocide emphasized, to quote Samantha Power’s (2003, 43) highly influential analysis, that groups “do not have to be physically exterminated to suffer genocide. They could be stripped of all cultural traces of their identity.” Whether successful or not, genocide aims for the destruction of the group as a cultural formation imagined by the perpetrators. Therefore, it also targets those expressions that define the group from within as a community: first, its claim for belonging, and then its cultural practices, its material heritage, its language – in short, its collective knowledge.

Research – for instance, on the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, or against the Armenians, the Herero, and most prominently, against the European Jews during World War II – has devoted much attention to the surprisingly rapid and progressive processes leading up to, and during acts of genocide (e.g., Balakian 2003; Wildt 2007). In most cases, initial research fulfills a fact-finding function and concentrates on the unfolding of the violence itself (Hilberg 1961; Dawidowicz 1975). As a result of this focus, it tends to regard victims as mainly passive in the face of unspeakable evil. Particularly during the last two decades, innovative research has emphasized the post-genocidal struggles to bring the collective nature of the violence that occurred to the public’s attention and to condemn it as genocide (Balakian 2003; Power 2003; Payaslian 2005; K. E. Smith 2010). This has led to an increased interest in the self-assertive practices of the victims as both individuals and as a group, during and following group-directed violence.

Largely disconnected from this rising interest in analyzing the politics of genocide, the field of migration studies has (re)discovered the necessity of scrutinizing mobility during and after collective violence as a social practice, and as a political and legal challenge (Bade 2003; Lucassen 2005). Forced migration, social alienation, and expulsion are often conceived as a loss of home, as well as the culture connected to it. In fact, the possible totality of loss and the subsequent need for international protection often functions as a (highly constructed) marker between migrants and refugees (Betts 2013). Acknowledging the increasing amount of literature produced within the field of violence and genocide studies on the agency of victims, the foregoing raises the question of how the targeted groups culturally respond to violence and forced migration. As a partial response to this question, this article attempts to develop an understanding of forced migration, not merely as a loss of home and cultural grounding, but also as a means to save the self-defining aspects of a given group's culture. Thus, refugee migration should not only be seen as a means to seek individual protection (as is the general assumption of refugee protection legislation), but also as a setting within which to safeguard cultures under threat.

Forced migration, involuntarily imposed upon migrants looking for survival, is a protracted process that meanders between migration and escape. This, however, does not mean that it was a passive process of mere survival, as it involves many strategies and options to display agency in order to resist the dehumanizing force of genocidal violence (Y. J. Smith 2013). Almost two decades ago, Stephen Castles (2003, 30) had already called for a sociology of forced migration that places specific emphasis on the question of human agency. With a particular interest in cultural survival, this article intends to add a historical layer to this debate.

One expression of agency under circumstances of great distress that has until now remained largely unexplored is the dynamics at work within, and efforts made by, migrant groups to preserve their collective knowledge. Looking at violence-induced migration from the angle of (1) human agency, (2) social practices beyond the mere act of fleeing, and (3) the necessity of saving collective knowledge while saving individual lives, forced migration loses its characterization as a mere channel of loss. Despite its coercive character, forced migration thus turns into a possibility to preserve that which the perpetrators aimed to destroy. To substantiate this argument, this article focuses on the practices of knowledge preservation of the General Jewish Labor Bund in its decades-long history of activism, persecution, and forced migration. Based on this prominent example, the article first briefly discusses the concept of knowledge as an aspect of both social and migration history, and subsequently develops four different categories of knowledge preserving practices. In conclusion, it suggests a systematization to develop those empirical findings into an applicable approach to examine (and possibly compare) knowledge preservation during violence-induced migration or genocide.

2. Migration and Knowledge

Knowledge (German: *Wissen*) differs from information and individual cognizance (German: *Kenntnis*) and thought. As an overarching concept, it captures what Karl Mannheim called the “‘*Seinsverbundenheit*’ des *Wissens*” – an idea that can roughly be translated into “social belonging based on shared knowledge” (Knoblauch 2005, 100). Aspects of this belonging, such as language, manners, and meaning, “not only determine to a large extent the avenues of approach to the surrounding world, but they also show at the same time from which angle and in which context of activity objects have hitherto been perceptible and accessible to the group or the individual” (Mannheim 1979, 2).

In short, as Mannheim (1979) put it, knowledge forms the basis from which to understand “how men actually think” (1). Researching knowledge therefore means concentrating on the positions, relations, and determinations that define the possibilities of social belonging and access to the world, as well as the alteration of the experienced world through different knowledges.¹ The position of a given group in the world is therefore not solely determined by external identification or force, nor only by its self-consciousness as a group, but also by its mental and material resources to experience internal belonging and boundaries. Knowledge, therefore, can transform a group into a community and create stability through its transmission and generational variation (Bauman 2001; Castles 2002). Looking at violence and migration, this means that, as a condition of the community’s position in, and access to, the world, knowledge is also its vulnerability. Collective violence generally, and genocidal violence in particular, aims to destroy not just the group, but also its possibility to continue to exist as a community. Hence, communities in the process of forced migration are both physically and culturally endangered.

Thus, communities threatened by collective violence or genocide face a dilemma: Remaining in a given location may endanger the survival of the community and its culture. Yet, while escaping might save lives, it comes at the price of leaving behind material and immaterial goods crucial to the survival of the community as a self-defined cultural group. The often hasty process of escape necessarily involves abandoning knowledge repositories such as community schools, religious sites, libraries, archives, privately owned collections of documents relevant to the community, and anything else that granted collective orientation – such as landscapes, neighborhood relations, linguistic settings, or proximity to important locations and cities. Not only do exiles enter a

¹ As Mannheim (1964) states, the sociology of knowledge concentrates on “the emergence, and particularly the socially and cognitively determined emergence of those positions, from which a give era in its uniqueness is destined to think” [“auf das Werden, und zwar auf das *seinsverbundene Werden der Standorte*, von denen aus zu denken einem jeweiligen Zeitalter allein gegeben ist.”] (373, translation by the author).

new world full of uncertainty; they also actively leave behind ties and certainty. For this reason, exile is often experienced as a situation of immense personal and cultural loss. With an overarching emphasis on refugees during World War II, research has shown great interest in these experiences which, initially, were most lucidly described by Hannah Arendt (1996) and Bertolt Brecht (1961). Following their appeals, research has put much emphasis on developing narratives that help to understand the emotional nature of such loss. Additionally, particular biographies and cultural and literature studies with an interest in exiled persons – such as Thomas Mann, Vladimir Nabokov, Salman Rushdie, or Ai WeiWei, to name but a few – have helped to emphasize individual agency in the process of forced migration. While loss essentially shapes everyday experiences and mourning processes, one should not ignore the agency exerted by refugees in order to maintain and save the knowledge tied to material and immaterial goods that helped define their community.

3. Institutionalized Yiddish Self-Consciousness: The General Jewish Labor Bund

In order to secure empirical depth, this research now focusses on one such community (which even tended to describe itself as a “*mishpokhe*,” a family; Grosman 1945; Brumberg 1999), namely, the General Jewish Labor Bund (hereafter referred to as the Bund) and its efforts to preserve its accumulated knowledge during violence-induced migration. The Bund, illegally founded as a union of unions in Vilnius in 1897, soon became the driving force behind the Russian revolutionary movement, the largest political party in the Russian Empire, and the (then) largest Jewish party in the world (Tobias 1972). As a true mass movement, it substantially outnumbered other Russian social-democratic party branches, such as the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, both in terms of its members and its supporters. Closely connected to this political activism, the Bund also became a cultural actor and the bearer of a modern, secular, pro-diaspora Yiddish workers’ culture (Gechtman 2005; Moss 2008; Jacobs 2009). As such, it took a strong anti-Zionist and anti-Bolshevik stance. However, the Bund was not only a center piece to Jewish modernity in Eastern Europe; it was also highly important for Jewish transnationalization and globalization during the age of mass migration. Two different yet inseparable migration processes shaped the history of the Bund: transatlantic Jewish mass migration and forced emigration or exile in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thousands of Bundists emigrated from the Jewish Pale of Settlement, some to seek economic opportunities through family networks, others because of Tsarist repression, Bolshevik and Stalinist persecution, increasing Polish anti-Semitism, and finally and most violently, to escape Nazi atrocities during World War II (Wolff 2014).

Despite ongoing persecution and the Bund's ultimate political marginalization due to the German destruction of the European Jews, Stalinist purges, and rising Zionism after World War II, its history is anything but a *historia lacrimosa*. As thousands of books, memoirs, and articles claim, it was a fundamentally self-confident, resilient, and highly important contributor to Jewish modernity (Frankel 1984; Mendelsohn 1993). Even after the Holocaust, when its political, pro-diasporic program dramatically lost its appeal, the Bund remained a cultural actor and, more importantly, individual Bundists shaped a cultural landscape in order to preserve what Nazi Germany had attempted to annihilate. It thus resisted nationalist impulses and continued its version of a self-conscious, humanitarian Yiddish socialism both from, and for, what Bundists called the "Jewish masses." This Yiddish workers' culture relied on a specific knowledge reservoir, comprised of the Yiddish language, a distinct interpretation of history and contemporary Jewish culture, and its own publication culture. As described later in greater detail, this reservoir was under constant threat. The Bund's attempts to save and restore it reveal its struggle to also culturally resist persecution and even genocide (Mints 1956; Tselemenski 1963; Blatman 2003). This is particularly important for the latter: genocide marks groups by its own logic of hatred in order to define targets for extermination. Knowledge preservation efforts by the victims, however, display the community's struggles to maintain (or to re-develop) their self-defining power of belonging, their boundaries, and their alliances.

In the following section, I will examine how the Bund as the self-defined representative of Eastern European Jews acted as a bearer of the knowledge of a persecuted community. The aim is to uncover its practices and efforts to preserve knowledge; to explain their function as a collective resistance to the violence that turned its victims first into groups, and then into refugees; and to examine the reconfiguration of knowledge during the ensuing process of migration. In this way violence-induced migration becomes not only a lifesaving experience of loss, but also a possibility to maintain cultural values targeted by genocidal destruction – a process that often leads to unexpected alterations of the knowledge set to be protected.

4. Between Location and Generation: Language Transmission

The fundament of the Bund's success on the "Jewish street" was its usage of Yiddish. While earlier socialist activists perceived Yiddish as mere jargon that had to be overcome in order to infuse class consciousness into the Jewish working class, the Bund embraced it as the language of the people (Kuhn 1998; Mendelsohn 1970; Pickhan 2009). The Bund soon came to view Yiddish as an end in and of itself and far more than simply a means to mobilization. As a

protagonist of modern Yiddish culture, the Bund connected language and workers' activism into one Yiddish modernity (Trachtenberg 2008) and, as a consequence, this meant that the Bund's fate was closely tied to that of the language.

At the beginning of the 20th century, nobody imagined Yiddish as an endangered language. Linguistic genocide, however, can happen expeditiously. When South Africa attempted to invite only European settlers in the 1900s, it defined "European" by the immigrants' spoken and written language and explicitly included the millions of Yiddish speakers into that canon of "desirables" (Bentwich 1942, 79; Elazar and Medding 1983, 178; S. Cohen 1984, 4-5.). Although, with rising anti-Semitism, this notion changed after World War I, the estimated eleven to thirteen million Yiddish speakers in Eastern Europe and the Americas seemed to provide a safe reservoir for a thriving language. In fact, also thanks to Bundist cultural work, Yiddish had just freed itself of a century-old stigmatization and turned into a fully recognized and blooming literary language, spearheaded by writers such Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Leib Peretz, and Isaac Bashevis Singer (Harshav 1990). In 1978, Singer was the only Yiddish author to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. His success, however, mirrors the tragedy of twentieth century Jewish history.

While Aleichem, Peretz, and many other late 19th-century Yiddishists reinvented and elevated Yiddish folklore to a literary culture for a thriving European Jewish community, the younger Isaac B. Singer's main topic was the experience of a lost past, from despair to renewal (I. B. Singer 1982; Farrell 1987). Just as his elder brother, Israel Joshua Singer – an excellent writer in his own right – described, both told stories of "a world that is no more" (I. J. Singer 1946). Israel Singer, like the leading anthropologist An-Sky, witnessed the demise of the Eastern European Jewish *shtetl* (small towns) which, during the first half of the 20th century, had already suffered under modernization and mass migration (An-Sky 1927; Safran and Zipperstein 2006; Veidlinger 2017). This migration had multiple causes, among them economic crisis, pogrom experiences, and Tsarist persecution, as well as hope for improved living conditions in the Americas. Yet, because collective violence was but one (and possibly rather marginal) factor among many others, this migration stands in sharp contrast to the mass flight the Yiddish-speaking world experienced during World War II. Bashevis Singer's fame is based on his postwar literature, on his lively portraits of a lost "*alte heyem*" (old home). After the Holocaust, his stories stood for more than a cultural demise of one way of life, representing a global, social, and post-genocidal reality. In addition, his fame is also grounded in a particular cultural setting – namely, Yiddish New York. Both Bashevis and Israel Singer had migrated to the United States in the 1930s (Israel in 1934, followed by Isaac in 1935). In New York they thrived in a Yiddishland at the East River, which until 1939 remained well connected to Poland – the "*alte heyem*" of Yiddish life (Rischin 1977; Metzker 1990; H. Diner 2000). On the

Lower East Side and under the influence of Abraham Cahan's daily "*Forverts*" ("Forward"), Yiddish socialism blossomed and innovatively combined immigration experiences with old world trajectories. As an effect of the millions of Jewish immigrants to the city, migration from Eastern Europe, among other factors, had indeed destabilized the traditional life of the *shtetl*, and had also transferred its linguistic culture and community consciousness to the streets of New York.

This Yiddish culture, however, faced a triple threat. First, linguists are aware of a process of language attrition; the loss of a native speaker's first language in an immigration setting (Pescher 2007). This phenomenon has been extensively studied among Jews escaping Nazi Germany (Schmid 2004). Certainly, in other parts of the country and remote locations in Southern America, Yiddish speakers might have suffered from the slow demise of their linguistic capacities due to the lack of opportunities to use the language (Morawska 1996). New York's Lower East Side, however, thrived as a Yiddish haven in the first half of the 20th century. So far, migration did not endanger the language per se, as it could safely be transferred from the Yiddish world in Eastern Europe to another – namely, New York's Lower East Side.

However, the second threat – namely, passing on Yiddish from one generation to the next – was another story. What was once a common family practice in Eastern Europe, now seemed archaic to many immigrants in the United States. While for first-generation immigrant Jews, Yiddish remained the crucial access point into the local labor market, parents longed to enable their children to leave those surroundings. Beyond the narrow (and infamous) employment possibilities within the sweat shop system, American capitalism offered upward mobility, which in return required skills beyond community capacities (Lederhendler 2009). Most Jewish immigrant parents placed their bets on education as the means for their children to break out of class barriers and to prosper in the new country. Even early observers noted that, with the subsequent "Americanization" of the Lower East Side during the 1930s, due to both economic pressure and generational change, Yiddish lost its network function for the second generation's labor (and marital) market (Beer 1937).

This left little motivation to either pass it down or even acquire Yiddish in the fast-moving days of economic integration during the 1920s and well into the 1940s. In a unique collective snapshot, the vast majority of entries for the American branch of the Yiddish Scientific Institute's (YIVO) autobiographical contest – held in New York in 1942 under the (rather presumptuous) motto "Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America" – take pride in how their children prospered in the new country (J. Cohen and Soyler 2006). Yet many also mourn the fact that, while they managed to pass on their most fundamental, sometimes even politically "radical" values from the old world, they omitted or failed to teach them Yiddish as a cultural frame for both their

sense of community and as an access point to the collective knowledge of the world they had left behind (Grin 1969).²

While this departure from Yiddish was economically reasonable, Jewish cultural actors now rightfully feared the collective loss of knowledge; they considered this a threat to their very existence. Largely under the guidance of the Bundists, in the 1910s the *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen Circle) had developed from a social security network among Jewish immigrants into the largest Jewish cultural organization in the world at that time (Shneefal 1910; Veyntroyb 1910; Shapiro 1970). In hundreds of branches, Yiddish-speaking Jews continued to live their culture, and hence successfully translated community life to the metropolis (*Arbeter Ring Bukh* 1932; *Arbeter Ring*, Yeshurin, and Yakob Sh. 1962). Yet, like other Yiddish-speaking organizations in New York in the 1930s, the *Arbeter Ring* also suffered from a lack of second-generation immigrant members. In the late 1930s, it departed from its strictly Yiddish culture, and in 1938 organized an English language division. Subsequently, English-speaking branches emerged throughout the 1940s, not in order to open their cultural meetings for a broader American public, but to avoid losing touch with the English-speaking youth (Wolff 2014, 375-6). “[W]ithout them,” the organizers reported in 1941, “there is little hope for us.”³ In their eyes, they faced the question “to be or not to be.”⁴ In New York during the late 1930s, Yiddish was simultaneously thriving while, paradoxically, slowly disappearing.

As a third factor, in Eastern Europe the Yiddish language did not slowly fade away; it was systematically eradicated in the Holocaust, which was also a cultural genocide. Regardless of their local integration in America, the usage of Yiddish had remained a necessity for Jewish immigrants’ to stay connected to their families and the life world back overseas. After the Holocaust, this necessity seemed both in vain and gone. Moreover, the Zionist decision to abandon both place and language by solely relying on modern Hebrew as the language of Zionist Palestine and later Israel worsened the situation. They openly condemned Yiddish as a language of exile and an inglorious, impoverished past (Ben Rafael 1994, 66-78, 122-8; Chaver 2004, 1-44). In those terms, and particularly after 1945, Yiddish became a representative, not only of a place that had been left behind, but also of a time that had passed. This naturally rendered Israel a complicated territory for Bundists (I. Artuski *Bukh-Komitet* 1976; Slucki 2010). Only now, it appeared, Yiddish had truly become an expression of a world that was no more.

² Aaron Cohen, untitled autobiography, 1942, RG 102, 26, YIVO New York.

³ Report to the Annual Meeting of the National Organization Committee. *Workmen's Circle*, July 13, 1941, p. 1, RG 1400, *Workmen's Circle Collection*, 1317, 6, *Bund-Archives*, New York.

⁴ Report to the Annual Meeting of the National Organization Committee. *Workmen's Circle*, July 13, 1941, p. 4, RG 1400, *Workmen's Circle Collection*, 1317, 6, *Bund-Archives*, New York.

What does this mean for the question of knowledge preservation? When Zionisms re-imagined Jews as a nation, with Palestine as their homeland and subsequently Israel as their nation state, Yiddish lost its importance – or even contradicted this political project. Yet this did not hold true for other approaches to modern Jewish life. The demise of Yiddish as a popular language was opposed by a movement that aimed to secure its survival (Fishman 1965; Kadar 2007). In the 1940s, schools, youth camps, and other educational places appeared in the major centers of Jewish emigration, such as New York and Buenos Aires (Slucki 2008; Schweigmann-Greve 2011).⁵ These centers promoted a complicated form of generational transfer. Language transmission had suffered dramatically under the destruction of Yiddish Eastern Europe as the main site of Jewish life. Yet, as a new subculture it was re-imagined, not as a language of the “old home,” but as a state of mind often in explicit opposition to Zionist attempts to monopolize Jewish history, culture, and politics. New niches emerged that intended to embody an alternative Jewish life beyond Zionism. Instead of a dying language, which Hebrewists predicted, communal efforts transformed Yiddish into an alternative bearer of Jewish cultural knowledge (Fishman 1981; Slucki 2006).

This happened – and continues to happen today – along two major trajectories. The first trajectory is the increasing number of ultra-orthodox Jews, who traditionally used Yiddish as a distinctively Jewish language and a cultural code without relying on the sacred language of Hebrew for everyday concerns. The continuing growth of ultra-orthodoxy, from Williamsburg to Jerusalem, also led to the increased generational transfer of Yiddish as a practice and a cultural code of difference (Isaacs 1999; Tannenbaim and Cohen 2018). In contrast to the short-lived hopes of a Yiddish renaissance in Israel due to Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union in the 1970s (Fishman and Fishman 1974; Liptzin 1974), this seems to be an enduring yet secluded Yiddish revival.

The second trajectory, however, is both rather dispersed and inclusive. The previously mentioned collective of Yiddish educational programs and youth camps struggled (as did the related socialist movements), at least in the late 1980s, yet a small and constant number of native speakers, particularly among American Jews, actively continued to hand down their language to their children in addition to English (Wood 2013). Today, this decentralized transfer is strengthened by activist Yiddish circles and social networks on the internet, enabling online communities to maintain – and naturally update – an allegedly dead language by the most modern of means (Legutko 2016; Spolsky 2017). This is particularly strong among the younger generation, who can also improve their language skills in a series of well-received summer schools from Vilnius to New York. As those schools and circles are open to non-Jewish

⁵ For instance, see the collection of material in RG 1400, ME-14B, 32, Bund Archives, New York.

students wanting to acquire the language, they include a larger number of students with a specific interest in the history of the Bund, Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and Holocaust studies. Hence, in an unexpected turn, the destruction of the language now inspires its study – which again perpetuates and recreates the language as a carrier of knowledge.

5. Commemorative Knowledge Preservation

Closely connected to this transfer of linguistic capacities is the emergence and accessibility of commemorative knowledge. Apart from oral history within families, this mostly happened through life writing. Yiddish postwar culture in particular is shaped by memory and, possibly, a uniquely strong autobiographical tradition (Freadman 2004). Yet this devotion to autobiographical memory did not emerge after the Holocaust, but rather has older roots. Already in its first years, the Bund suffered from persecution, imprisonment, and an exiled leadership. In Bundist publications, episodes on avoiding this oppression and outsmarting the Tsarist security forces soon turned into the most popular topics (G-B 1907; Nin 1907; P[ortnoy] 1907). When illegally published in the Tsarist Empire, such short autobiographical episodes were used by leading Bundists to demonstrate the eagerness of the masses to fight Tsardom, and to motivate young new members.⁶

The larger body of memoirs was published in New York (Wolff 2013). The thriving Yiddish culture on the Lower East Side was deeply transnational, rooted both in American capitalism and the emotional communities of Eastern European origin. In early 20th-century New York, Yiddish was also a marker of difference between Eastern European Jews, among whom Yiddish remained the popular language, and German Jews, who considered Yiddish an anachronism loaded with pejorative cultural stereotypes (Aschheim 1982). Those lines re-appeared in New York, where most German Jewish immigrants led an “up-town” life, whereas Yiddish New York flourished on the Lower East Side (Rischin 1977; H. Diner 2000). Here, Yiddish became a cultural practice, carried with pride and distinction. Its common usage led to the foundation of *Forverts* – for many years the largest Jewish daily newspaper – which thrived even when the socialist press elsewhere in America faced collapse (J. Weinstein 1967, 84-102). Of course, this immigrant and deeply transnational culture longed for knowledge about the old world – albeit only of a very specific kind. When the Bund imported publications from Russia and later from independent Poland, they barely sold any copies, let alone subscriptions (Wolff 2014, 404-

⁶ See, for instance, the makeshift autobiography written by Gozhansky (1927) that (initially illegally) circulated in the 1900s and served as a mobilization tool.

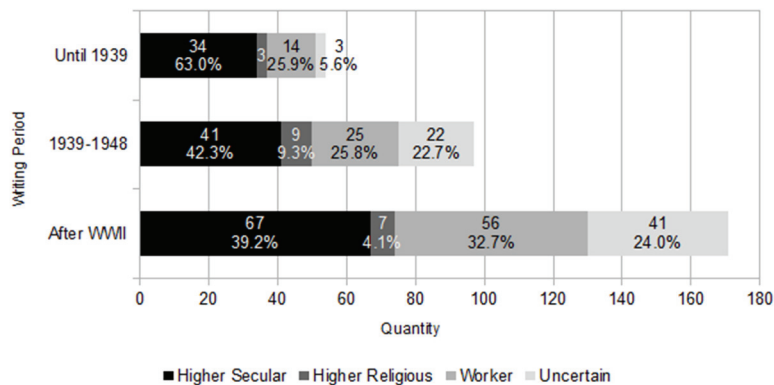
6). Even the Bundist daily *Naye folkstsaytung*, which was immensely popular in Poland, failed in America. Commemorative issues, however, attracted a broad readership. Most notably, the issues celebrating the 30th and 40th anniversaries of the Bund in 1927 and 1937 were quickly sold out (Wolff 2014, 290-2; *Naye Folkstsaytung* 1937). Apparently, the American Bundist readers had little interest in learning about daily events in the “old home.” Rather, they wanted to re-affirm knowledge they already possessed, honor the Bund’s history, and celebrate their participation in it.

This had an impact on the Yiddish book market. Sales boomed when in 1923 a group of New York Bundists published the memoirs of the leading Bundist Vladimir Medem, who had just emigrated from Poland to the United States – albeit only to die soon after of a disease he had contracted in a Tsarist prison over a decade before (Medem 1923). His memoirs had previously been published as a series by the *Forverts*. Thanks to a later translation into English, it remains possibly the most popular Bundist memoir to this day (Portnoy 1979). Many other memoirs followed. However, until World War II, those autobiographical monographs almost exclusively included authors who had achieved a certain position in the Jewish labor movement (B. Weinstein 1924; Blum 1940; Abramovitch 1944). Their books were received from the perspective of a very specific interest in knowledge transfer, namely, to hear from the leaders of the movement in which the readers grew up. This knowledge also carried this past sense of meaning and belonging to America. Writing, buying, and reading such books not only celebrated the movement and its youthful revolutionary energy, but also transferred (at least parts of) this spirit into the different and, as many felt, unwelcoming realms of American socialism (Wolff 2014, 45, 284).

After the Holocaust, authorship of Bundists autobiographical texts diversified. Well into the 1960s, a new wave of Yiddish and Bundist memoirs appeared. Yet these later publications had changed in style, intention, and authorship. Looking at a sample of 322 Bundist autobiographical publications – mostly articles and books written after emigration from Eastern Europe (including Russia and the Soviet Union) – we see a clear shift from educated authors to a post-Holocaust writing working class (see Table 1).⁷ In addition to this clear increase of working-class authors, it should also be noted that many of the (also rapidly increasing numbers of) authors listed as “uncertain” will have been working-class authors. They remain “uncertain” because they were rank-and-file Bundists who often published only one text commemorating a particular episode.

⁷ Based on a representative collection of 532 Bundist autobiographical texts (of which 322 were published). For the full list, see Wolff (2014, 479-501).

Table 1: Distribution of Bundist Autobiographical Writing by Writing Period and Author's Education



Authors listed as possessing a “higher secular” education underwent secondary or even tertiary education, such as grammar school, technological institutes, or university, whereas authors listed with a “higher religious” education received formal religious education (*yeshiva*), while “workers” attended Jewish elementary school (*kheder*) prior to working in workshops or factories.

Particularly the workers’ depictions cover all aspects of Jewish life and Bundist activism. Unlike the leadership memoirs prior to 1939, their stories did not explain to their readers how their beloved movement came about. Rather, they often told everyday stories, which for the readers felt similar to the formative experiences they had themselves collected. Their stories did not resonate from their individual significance, but rather from their commonality. Through this particular “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune 2016), writers and readers held on to what had disappeared in the world now surrounding them. The emphasis had shifted from learning about a living movement to collecting every fragment of knowledge preserved in the memories of the survivors. In a collective effort of composition, publication, and reception, every single episode told proclaimed the continued existence of the author, the community, and the people. This elevated the genre of Yiddish autobiography to a mode of cultural survival.

Yet this proclamation of survival was mostly directed inwards: it stated the significance of the community to itself. When the Bund (already in 1944) published the memories of an escaped Holocaust survivor, it did so in English in order to grab the attention of Americans and to open their eyes to what was happening (Wiernik 1944). Yet this action was not primarily aimed at the preservation of knowledge but at political (and military) gains. In contrast, the vast majority of Bundist autobiographical texts published in Yiddish talked about the world lost, rather than the details of its destruction. This interest in life before death barely reached beyond readers in the Yiddish community. In a telling example, Bernard Goldstein published two unique memoirs, one narrating his 20 years as a leading figure in the Bund in Poland during the interwar

period, and one detailing his survival of the Holocaust and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Only the latter received international attention and was translated into English, and later German and French (with prominent introductions by Lenni Brenner, Beate Klarsfeld, and Marek Edelman; see Goldstein 1949, 1992, 2008). His other book on life and activism in interwar Warsaw, however, lived a dual life. A most popular book among Yiddish readers and researchers on Jewish life in Eastern Europe, it remained unnoticed beyond that narrow circle of well-informed and deeply interested persons. Only recently, and thanks to the individual effort of the translator – the retired English professor, and son of a Bundist family, Marvin Zuckerman – has it appeared as an English translation (Goldstein 2016). As both a cultural practice and a form of historical activism, translating Yiddish books is adding another layer to this ongoing effort to preserve post-genocide knowledge by making it more accessible.

However, writing, publishing, and reading autobiographies was only one of many patterns of this form of commemorative knowledge preservation. It also created a completely new genre of Yiddish literature: *yizker bikher* (memory books; Kugelmass and Boyarin 1987; Horowitz 2011). In most cases devoted to an individual *shtetl*, a *yizker bukh* collected stories, accounts, memories, images, drawings, poems, and many other sources and expressions of memory of a lost place.⁸ Individually, each book emotionally honored the history of one specific *shtetl*, mourned its destruction, and found a way to re-integrate those places – which now lay inaccessible behind the iron curtain – into postwar Jewish life. Yet together, the hundreds of *yizker bikher* created a unique commemorative world, intentionally preserving knowledge of Yiddish life in Eastern Europe, and unintentionally on postwar practices of collective mourning and memory. In fact, the process of creating such a book became an act of knowledge preservation in its own right. Over a period of years, and often tied to certain *landsmanshaftn* (home town associations), editors expended much energy collecting materials, researching in archives, and motivating untrained authors (Kobrin 2010; Lipphardt 2010). Subsequently, not only did they publish impressive collective volumes, but they also often donated those materials to Yiddish cultural institutions and archives.⁹

Such recollective knowledge preservation can develop into a variety of forms and display great creativity in its attempts to transduce immaterial memory into written sources. Its cultural presence, however, remains closely tied to the interpersonal transfer of linguistic capacities and preserves knowledge mainly for those who speak the language. This makes commemoration inherently social, turning individual autobiographical writing into a community-based venture (Maynes 1995). Such a sociohistorical reading of life

⁸ For a collection of hundreds of digitized *yizker* books, see <<http://yizkor.nypl.org/>> (Accessed August 21, 2019.).

⁹ For instance, see Archivo Goldmintz, IWO, Buenos Aires.

writing differs from historical approaches with a stronger leaning towards literature and cultural studies (Schwarz 2005; Depkat and Pyta 2017). Yet if we look to autobiographical writing, less as individual “self-fashioning,” written “for myself alone” (Stanislawski 2004; Moseley 2006), and more as a collective effort of commemorative knowledge preservation (Herzberg 2013), we can better understand its importance in the post-Holocaust world and its significance to communities in distress. Instead of individualizing autobiographical writing, it might therefore be reasonable to also consider it as one of many collective practices of knowledge preservation after forced migration and cultural genocide.

6. The Odyssey of the Bund Archives

When Nazi forces destroyed the Warsaw Ghetto after the uprising in 1943, complete annihilation was their goal (Engelking and Leociak 2009, 766-94). Located in Warsaw’s Jewish quarter, the ghetto included a vast number of locations of high cultural importance: synagogues, schools, printing houses, libraries, and archives. Among them were the remaining pieces of the Polish Bund Archives.

Its content, shape, and even presence in Warsaw at the moment of German occupation, however, were already results of various migration movements. Due to its illegality in Tsarist Russia, the Bund possessed a dual leadership structure. The Central Committee operated in hiding and in constant motion from within the Tsarist Empire. It was supplemented by the Foreign Committee in Geneva, composed of leading Bundists who had escaped persecution in Russia (Mayoraz 2013, 56-9). Only Geneva provided a safe haven for a Bundist archival collection. Hence, shortly after the formation of the Bund, two leading figures, Dzhon Mill and Tsmeakh Kopelson, started to gather material on the party, and the revolutionary labor movement in Russia and Poland in general. This soon turned into a unique collection, the value of which extended well beyond the realms of the Bund and, in the words of Marek Web (2001) “gathering and preserving Party documents was seen as a revolutionary deed” (243).

The October Revolution of 1917 tore the Bund apart into a communist section (*Kombund*), which soon merged with the Communist Party, and the remaining social-democratic Bund, which soon officially moved to Warsaw. This also changed the conditions for the Bund Archives. “After World War I,” leading Bundists later wrote, Switzerland “ceased being the gathering-place for revolutionary émigrés and Jewish student youth. There was no reason any more for keeping the Archives in Geneva, and so its odyssey began” (Bund Archives 1965, 4). A dispute regarding ownership of the Bund Archives between the social-democratic remainder and the communist break-away group was una-

voidable. The Bolsheviks considered themselves as the one true heir to the revolutionary movement and exercised control over the historiography of the Russian labor movement as one of their major objectives (King 1997; Corney 2004; Moss 2009). Hence, they displayed great interest in the archives and could also provide the financial and institutional infrastructure to operate them. However, the social-democratic Bundists around Franz Kursky feared (with good reason) that if the Bolsheviks gained control over the archives, they would lose access to their historical documents – and control over their own past. Thus, the Bund was caught in a dilemma: while the social-democratic Bund had possession of the archives, only the Bolsheviks had the means to operate them.

After a long dispute, both sides reached an agreement to split the archives. The original Bundist material and the majority of the Yiddish documents remained in the hands of the Bund Archive managed by Kursky, while material on the wider revolutionary movement, Bundist documents written in Russian, as well as copies of other material went to Moscow, where, quite tellingly, it was soon incorporated into the Lenin Institute (Web 2001, 246-7). Not only were the Bund Archives surrendered to the Bund's major socialist opponent; in the Soviet Union the party itself was forced to dissolve in 1921, its remnants then merged with the Communist Party and finally many former Bundists fell victim to Stalinist persecution. As Zvi Gitelman (1972, 154, 513-23) put it, their social-democratic background turned them into the “illegitimate children” of the communist family (see also Polonsky 2012, 268). The Bund's past faced a similar fate. Its erasure from the history of the labor movement included the disappearance of the Moscow-based Bund Archives. For long believed lost, it was only the archival revolution of 1990 that brought this important collection (back) to light.¹⁰ Although it now provides an intriguing collection for researchers, the late re-discovery of the archive meant that, while the Bund still existed as an active party, it had lost an important part of its historical knowledge to Soviet memory politics.

Yet, when initially reached, the decision to split the collection in two also secured the funds that enabled the other branch of the struggling Bund Archive to relocate to Berlin.¹¹ As a prime destination for Eastern European Jews, interwar Berlin was a haven for various groups of refugees and migrants from the Soviet Union, as well as from increasing anti-Semitism in Poland (Estraikh and Krutikov 2010; Saß 2012). The strength of German social democracy made

¹⁰ Now it is even microfilmed and available to potential buyers (Russian State Archive of Social and Political History [RGASPI] 1999).

¹¹ Despite the fact that it was small in terms of numbers, the Bund's presence in Berlin was complex. Most importantly, the Bund Archives were affiliated with the Polish Bund and had an established contact, but no official affiliation, with the exiled representatives of the social-democratic Bund in the Soviet Union – a small exiled remainder of the once great movement in Russia's Western provinces (see Börner, Jungfer, and Stürmann 2018).

Berlin particularly appealing to Bundists. Stored at the headquarters of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) – the so-called *Vorwärts* building, which harbored a variety of similar groups, organizations, and collections – the Bund Archives continued to operate between 1926 and 1933.¹²

However, its collection contained little material on the re-emerging Bund in independent Poland. As Marek Web (2001) states, the connection between the Polish Bund and the official Bund Archives “was not all that clear” (251). With a working party structure, the Bund had set up a new archive in Warsaw, which was necessary for its day-to-day work, and it saw little need or use in sending such material abroad (Web 2001, 251). When Nazi Germany attacked Poland in 1939, the building of the Bund’s Central Committee was destroyed and with it this important collection of socialist history and Jewish life in interwar Poland (Pickhan 2001, 15). However, the party activist and commander of the military underground Jewish Fighting Organization, Marek Edelman, later stated that he personally rescued some of it and hid it in the basement of a building – 40 Świętojerska Street (Edelman 2014). Heavy fighting also broke out there during the first days of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which eventually also left that building completely destroyed (Edelman 2014; Dreifuss 2017). Despite attempts to excavate the bunkers and re-occurring news and hopes that archaeologists might have found traces of this particular collection, so far, the Warsaw Bund Archives remain lost.¹³

With the Moscow archive locked away and the Warsaw collection destroyed, what happened to the other main strand of Bundist memory in Berlin? Soon after the Nazi takeover, police and Stormtrooper units raided the *Vorwärts* building. With great efforts, the SPD hid its most valuable historical documents while opting to destroy most of its day-to-day files, such as member registries, in order to limit Nazi persecution. The Bund tried to salvage this archive (Mayer 1966, esp. 79-101). After interventions from Poland, including from the Polish ambassador, on behalf of the archives failed, the Bundists opted to utilize network structures based on its migration history. In a joint effort with representatives of other endangered collections from the *Vorwärts* building, the Bund archivists instigated a rescue operation with help from their exiled party member Leon Blum in Paris. In cooperation with the French ambassador, who nominally purchased the holdings, the Bundists managed to pack their archives in 150 sacks and four crates and, together with other archiv-

¹² There is disagreement on the date of shipping. Web (2001, 248) states that the boxes were packed in Geneva in 1917 and shipped in 1926, whereas Pratt (1981, 168) wrote earlier that the relocation to Berlin happened in 1919. For more information on the Bund and the SPD, see Pickhan (1997).

¹³ For the latest professional attempt, see <<http://muzeumwarszawy.pl/dzialalnosc-naukowa-poszukiwania-archiwum-bundu>> (Accessed August 21, 2019).

al material from the *Vorwärts* building, shipped them in two railway wagons to Paris (Mayer 1966, 93; Web 2001, 249).

With the occupation of Paris in 1940, however, the Germans finally confiscated and deported the Bund Archives. From that moment onwards, it was believed they had been lost. This hit the Bund with a situation of greatest threat, since it faced persecution and ultimate extermination in Eastern Europe. Sometimes through Western Europe, sometimes through Japan, an increasing number of Jewish and Bundist refugees arrived in New York. The Bundist colony there slowly turned into the informal center of the Bundist world. Most importantly, the foundation of *Unzer Tsayt* (Our Time) in 1941 – the newest and leading Bundist monthly publication – signaled that change (Noakh 1941). Yet, at this point, the movement was essentially stripped of all its documentation and archival materials, “which for nearly half a century had been gathered and guarded by so many devoted persons with so much love and sacrifice” (Bund Archives 1965, 7).

One cannot imagine the surprise when, shortly after the war, several crates with material from the Bund Archives resurfaced in a field near Paris. Together with other highly valuable Jewish documents, German forces had simply tossed them out as disposable material during their evacuation of the city (Pratt 1981, 169). Within a short time, and at great expense covered by the distressed Bundist community and supportive American labor organizations, the Bund Archives were moved to New York. There, they continued to serve the party while slowly transforming from a working party archive into a place for independent historical research. In the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Bund, they were again – this time voluntarily – relocated and incorporated into the YIVO collection in New York’s Center for Jewish History, where they remain accessible to readers to this day.

The above story adds even more layers to our examination of the relation between forced migration and knowledge preservation. First, their initial exile motivated and enabled Bundist leaders to document activism “back home.” Second, continuing migration and party splits had a profound impact on the Bund Archives and led to the emergence of three main Bundist collections.¹⁴ Of those, the collections in Moscow and Warsaw were (temporally) lost through either structural or genocidal violence. Finally, the remaining section was rescued, following the trajectories established by migrating Bundists, who themselves escaped persecution from Bolsheviks, Stalinism, and later from national socialism. The Bund Archives survived the war thanks to a combination of salvage efforts and luck. Again, following the routes of exiled party activists, this highly important collection then moved to New York. Despite their fragili-

¹⁴ A fourth branch emerged as a result of collective effort in the Institute for Social History (ISH) in Amsterdam. Because of its different origin, it will be described in the following section.

ty, the Bund Archives were both endangered and rescued by the dynamics of forced migration.

7. Memory in the Making: From Recollection to Restoration

After this transfer of old material, the archives kept growing. Norma Fain Pratt (1981) described this process as follows:

The Bund Archives can be likened to an immigrant, coming to America and settling here, who possesses a vast treasury of European Jewish heritage. Like other immigrants, the Archives have changed and grown by incorporating the American experience; and the Archives have transformed their environment by offering European perspectives on the past and the present. (166)

However, here one might add that this immigrant did not pick up new impressions by simply wandering the streets of New York. The archives actively collected information about workers' daily lives and its main interest was to address the gaps in their shattered memory; a fragmented mosaic with gaping holes due to splits, violence, and destruction.

Right from the beginning of its New York era, the Bund Archives concentrated on substituting the loss of archival material. It called for the submission of surviving, privately owned documents and, in this way, started to fill the gaps. Through such work, the Bund Archives returned to their initial central function within the party's structure. In 1948, the Bund underwent the transformation process from an Eastern European party to a global network based in New York, the renamed Franz Kursky Archives returned to their pro-active role in fostering the movement and enabling party work (Slucki 2012). This time, the primary aim was not to attract new members, but to learn about the whereabouts of the old. Who had survived World War II and the Holocaust, and where? Already in 1947, in the middle of this existential organizational crisis, the New York Bundists had created a questionnaire and used their contacts to distribute it around the world. It asked for basic information, such as name, date of birth, profession, and the date of first joining the Bund.¹⁵ Yet unlike the questionnaires that American Bundists had circulated in the 1920s, it showed little interest in collecting data about the members' former activism. Instead, it completely focused on acquiring information on their modes of survival and relocation. It inquired if, and when, the members had been arrested and where forced migration had led them through the years. Again, the practices of the archive echoed the intentions their founders had laid out almost exactly half a century before: to "preserve the present for the future" (Pratt

¹⁵ See the collection RG 1400, MG 2, 429, Bund-Archives, New York.

1981, 167-8). This included the idea that right after the war, Bundists realized the increasing importance of their own narratives on Nazi atrocities, Jewish survival, and – soon to be emphasized – Jewish resistance (Blatman 2003).

Among the many interesting results of the questionnaire campaign was the revelation of how scattered the Bund truly was. While only 18% of the respondents lived in Northern America, the majority still resided in Western European countries such as France and most notably Belgium, which for a short time became home to a major colony of Bundist survivors. Others submitted questionnaires from Mexico, Palestine and later Israel, and even Australia. Tragically, only 22% responded from Poland, with no responses from any other Eastern European country. The “old home,” it became clear, was lost (Wolff 2014, 229-30). One year later, the Bund in Poland was forced to join the Communist Party. Many members finally gave in, emigrated and joined the newly founded New York-based “World Bund.” This ended the once proud presence of the Bund in Eastern Europe.

The questionnaire also inquired into arrests and whether respondents had survived camps. Many had, although in very different ways. Those who had survived the war in Soviet imprisonment, as well as those who were captured in France and even Sweden during World War II, refrained from using the “imprisonment” section to detail those experiences, and entered that information under “camps,” as did survivors of German concentration camps.¹⁶ This, like the usage of the Yiddish word *khurban* as a general term for destruction instead of Holocaust or Shoa, which emerged later to indicate the uniqueness of the Nazi violence against the European Jews, indicated a desire for comparison – not with other genocides that have occurred throughout history, but as a shared experiences of anti-Jewish violence through modern Jewish history (An-sky 1927; Tselemenski 1963). Indeed, the perception of a common threat faced by Bundists on both sides of the front was based on experiences. The murder of party leaders Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter in Stalinist prisons caused a collective trauma (Portnoy 1951; Pickhan 1994). Then again, patterns of persecution were dramatically different. For example, Bundists did not suffer in Nazi camps, because they belonged to the Bund or because they were socialists, but because they were Jews. Conversely, in the Soviet Union, in particular under Stalinism, Bundists were persecuted, tried, and murdered for their party membership and activism. After the war, when Bundists learned about the atrocities, they relied on such experiences of violence and survival to develop the Bund’s own distinct narration of persecution and resistance.¹⁷ Over the coming decades, one result was refined archival work. In 1955, the Bund Archives developed more detailed questionnaires, which now focused on historical infor-

¹⁶ For instance, the famous leader of the Bund in Israel, I. Artuski: Aykhnboym, Isakhar, RG 1400, MG 2, 429, Bund-Archives, New York.

¹⁷ This culminated in Aronson et al. (1960).

mation on Bundist activism before the war. This campaign's main function was historic, namely, to support the Bund's claim for a place in modern history, which at this point was being heavily challenged by triumphalist Zionist and Soviet versions of their shared history.¹⁸

This increased institutional drive to collect memories in order to close the gaps in archival knowledge was supplemented by the urge of Holocaust survivors to tell their story. Already the earlier questionnaire campaign inspired such memories. When through this campaign Bundist survivors learned about the Bund's new "address," they used it to send additional letters about their suffering (Wolff 2011). This became a mode of memory formation and substantially increased during the second campaign. While earlier letters had focused on survival, in the later campaign, which received hundreds of responses, Bundists regularly supplemented their responses with longer autobiographical letters attached to the questionnaire.¹⁹

This coincided with a general increase in the organized recording of memory and the numbers of individual memoirs from rank-and-file members. The Bund's own publishing house published such Yiddish memoirs and biographies (Goldstein 1947; Herts 1952; der Tate 1959), while other sympathetic groups organized and sponsored the publications of still more memoirs (Shtern 1954; Novok 1957) and even multi-volume issues honoring the life and work of deceased Bundists (Kazdan 1952; Herts 1956). In addition, the popular Bundist monthly *Unzer Tsayt* regularly contained autobiographical texts, including depictions of Bundist life before 1939 and very early descriptions of the Holocaust (Hart 1943; Pat 1943a, 1943b; Rozen 1943; Hofman 1945; Motolski 1945). Yet, in contrast to the prevalent, particular genre of Holocaust memoirs – which, as Dan Diner (1996, 5-6) stated, exist in a "condensed time" between imprisonment or deportation and liberation – far more often, Bundists opted to commemorate the world before World War II, either as a story in its own right, or in a more extensive life narrative that included the Holocaust experience (see also Berman 1945; Goldstein 1947, 1960; Novikov 1967).

We could, of course, individualize this urge for memory as personally important practices in dealing with the trauma of persecution and survival. Yet, together these stories created a larger culture of memory that was not only held together by a common need for expression, but also pro-actively shaped by the Bund and its archives, which asked for memoirs, supported and inspired writing, collected every piece, and created a receptive space. Once again, the questionnaires provided a helpful tool with which to widen that circle, as respondents also included individual documents such as images and group photos

¹⁸ For repercussion of such views in research, see Gorny (2006) and Johnpoll (1967).

¹⁹ Collected in RG 1400, MG 2, 429, Bund-Archives, New York.

(including the names of those depicted), as well as membership cards, letters, and press clippings.²⁰

Moreover, the Bund Archives intensified their collection of documents on the labor movement. During the next decades, activists from all over the world submitted materials and documents they had personally saved from destruction. Once handed over to the Bund, they contributed to restoring knowledge after forced migration and genocide. The Bund Archives in New York constantly called for submission of such materials. Acknowledging the threat of loss of historical knowledge on the once leading Jewish party and social movement, other archives made similar efforts. Therefore, such collections did not only emerge in the Bund Archives in New York, but also in Europe, at the Institute for Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, the Medem Library in Paris, and in Argentina at the Jewish Scientific Institute (IWO) in Buenos Aires. Individuals (often both archivists and activists) created new collections in order to preserve the Bund's knowledge. The difference, however, is that the Bund Archives in New York did not simply store information on a given past, but rather, by collecting such materials, re-inserted them into to the living body of the (remaining) party and thus continued the process of identity formation by knowledge preservation.

Bundists considered maintaining and contributing to this collection “not only a duty, but also a privilege” (Bund Archives 1965, 16). Even today, within the context of the greater collection of Yiddish archival material of the YIVO, the Bund Archives receive donations of important material and personal collections of its former members and their families. Through this collection, the Bund Archives, already in 1965, reflected how they had “broadened their scope considerably” – well beyond the narrower realms of Jewish and socialist history (Bund Archives 1965, 12). As a result, the knowledge, once gathered for party needs, developed into a new resource. With the Bund's demise, first into political isolation, and then into the political margins, researchers have discovered that this collection is not just the institutionalized brain of a once important party, but also “one of the most rare immigrant collections in the United States” (Pratt 1981, 167).

After its rescue from destruction, the Bund Archives in New York helped to transform individual (re)collections into a repository of many different knowledge processes. They played a crucial role in preventing memory loss after violence-induced migration, not just as a safe haven, but also as a driving force behind the memorization of the Bundists' past. This move from individual recollection to the collective effort of restoration (and thus the factual reformation) of the Bund's memory was also a means to resist their opponents' attempts to condemn the Bund to oblivion. It was a resilient attempt to continue

²⁰ E.g., see the autobiographies of Borenshteyn, Shimeon; Dorin, Elyezar; Goldberg, Manye; and Liberson, Israel, 1942, RG 1400, MG 2, 429, Bund Archives, New York.

to preserve present and past experiences for future generations – not only for memory, but also for activism. Paradoxically, the fading of the once proud Bundist counterculture into the political margins only spurred the contribution to, and proliferation of, a counter-narrative of Jewish history, based on Yiddish workers’ activism and contesting religious or nationalist narrations (Gechtman 2013).

8. Conclusion: Toward Knowledge Preservation Research

The empirical explorations of Bundist and Yiddish activists’ attempts to resist genocide through knowledge preservation opens a different perspective on the consequences of violence-induced migration. Contemporary historical and sociological research largely concentrates on individual and collective needs for protection during violence-induced migration – the development of asylum and refugee legislation and, in the fields of cultural and literature studies, on the emotionality of individual refugee experiences. The story told here, however, emphasizes the agency exerted by the refugees themselves. While the described practices certainly do not cover the whole spectrum of knowledge preservation attempts, they nevertheless allow us to develop a better understanding of the meaning of refugees’ agency for their communities. In order to move on from those empirical findings to an approach applicable beyond this specific case study, the aspects described here allow for a systematization of the complex interdependence between violence-induced migration and agency-based cultural survival (see Table 2).

Table 2: Systematization of Knowledge Preservation in Processes of Violence Induced Migration

		Practice of Knowledge Preservation	
		Transfer	Pro-Active Creation
Mode of Knowledge Preservation	Interpersonal	Transmission (i.e., language)	Commemoration (i.e., autobiographical culture)
	Institutional	Rescue (i.e., rescue operations)	Restoration (i.e., recursive collection, questionnaire campaigns)

It is possible to distinguish between four overlapping expressions of knowledge preservation in violence-induced migration. We can see two possible forms of knowledge preservation practices: one is to transfer, whereas the other is to pro-actively create knowledge and its repositories. Yet, knowledge preservation also works in two different modes: these can be either communicative and

hence interpersonal; or structural, in the sense that they rely on, or are devoted to, institutions.

As a result of the overlap of practices and modes, violence-induced migration triggers four different types of knowledge preservation (see Table 2): Firstly, a migratory transfer of knowledge happens through interpersonal transmission, as discussed earlier in the case of language, but in fields such as religion, rites, or cultural norms and behavior. Secondly, preservative transfer practices include the material migration of collections. As discussed, this can include rescue operations for archives or libraries as well as any other culturally significant collection of goods, from religious objects to art. Most importantly, they can only fulfill a social knowledge function if they continue to remain the public goods of the given community after their transfer. In addition to rescue, accessibility secures their institutional function and importance. This (aimed) institutional continuation should be distinguished from attempts to create knowledge by restoring knowledge formations from fragments and segments after a given migration has taken place. More actively than the previous patterns, those two forms of knowledge preservation do not only restore knowledge, but also seek to update and elevate the cultural importance of the collection. Thirdly, there are processes of interpersonal exchange, be it through formalized memory in the form of autobiographies or through anniversary celebrations, communal festivities, etc. This process of fixing memory by bringing it into the public domain transforms individual into collective knowledge. Lastly, the same is true of material objects which, when privately rescued, carry little significance in terms of collective cultural survival, yet can gain an important institutional function when integrated into certain collections, accessible at least to that particular community – be that in an archive, a museum, or a church. These four types of knowledge preservation form, in a Weberian sense, ideal types that in reality easily overlap (Weber 1988, 190-2). Moreover, it should be emphasized that they do not merely co-exist, but co-depend on each other. To explain this, we can reconnect the abstract model with the presented empirical evidence, and thus develop a layered model of entangled and interdependent levels of knowledge preservation.

With regard to Eastern European Jewish migration, it is important to first acknowledge that the transmission of language was both an end in itself and a necessity for further preservation efforts. Language carries meaning and its transmission displays, not only the complexities of intergenerational transfer in migration, such as between parents and second-generation migrant children, but also highlights the tremendous cultural effects that social integration in the receiving countries bears. As shown in the case of Yiddish, the vulnerability of languages threatens the entire existence of minority cultures as such. Particularly after genocidal violence, the viability of a language, and thus the respective culture, often depends on the activism of those speakers that survive – in our case, the many authors and Bundists mentioned throughout. This has important

implications for the shape of refugee politics. While the persecution of languages is part of the official definition of cultural genocide, its preservation is not a primary task for refugee protection policies and regimes. To the contrary, expectations of fast integration in the receiving countries and expected language changes complicate the intergenerational transmission of language, and thus unintentionally threaten the fundamental conditions for its cultural survival.

Secondly, and loosely tied to the subject of language, are the stories conveyed through them. As shown for the Bund (but by no means reducible to just this instance), forced migration triggers memory formation within the community. A new and vital Yiddish autobiographical culture emerged in order to safeguard both the language in practice, and the stories that defined the Jewish, Yiddish, and Bundist experience. This preservation thus also aimed to re-create a Jewish identity after genocide beyond its victimization. Talking about the past became as much an educational and enlightening effort of Bundists as a distinct community, as an act of resistance against the annihilation of the Jewish people. Public commemoration, books, memoirs, songs, and poems therefore by no means only mourn a past and place left behind. Rather, they fulfill a highly important collective and mental function in the migrants' relocation process. When we look at the reception of those memoirs beyond the community, as particularly shown for translations of Bundist memoirs, receiving country populations tend to limit their interest to depictions of the destruction of that culture, rather than the culture itself. This reduces victims' life experiences and cultural significance to a pre-history of their persecution. The Bund countered this tendency with an increased focus on fostering its own historical narrative of Jewish history. While this triggered a thriving autobiographical culture, it also created a closed memory circle that exhibited distinction rather than belonging. In that sense, memory production paradoxically contributed both to the cultural survival of Bundism, and its increasing political and personal isolation.

Thirdly, Bundists did not only save immaterial goods through transmission and memory, but also documents, collections, and whole archives. Although different in their means, opponents of the Bund as well as Nazi persecution aimed to disconnect the Bund from that materially stored knowledge. Only activism, institutional support, and sheer luck allowed activists to hide, protect, and transfer parts of the party's archives. Most importantly, those transfers developed along the social ties and networks that developed during previous periods of partly voluntary, partly violence-induced migration – first to exile in Geneva, then to Berlin, and finally by escaping Nazi rule via Paris to New York. This means that knowledge preservation through violence-induced migration often depends on previously defined patterns of migration. Thus, previous, often economically motivated chain migration impacts the success rate of rescue operations during genocidal events. Therefore, the richness of sources on Jewish life is not only an effect of preservation efforts after the Shoa, but also of the constitution of the Jewish people as a global diaspora well before

the Nazi invasion of Poland. Against nationalist interpretations of Jewish history, in the context of Jewish cultural survival, migration and global dispersion turn out to be a strength rather than a weakness.

Fourthly, it was only this complex arrangement that enabled the Bund to draw on language transmission, organized commemoration, and the structural setting provided by the Bund Archives in order to materially re-create knowledge that had been lost or survived only privately during the process of violence-induced migration. Thereby it widened the scope of the Bund Archive and transformed memory production into stored and accessible knowledge.

These four-steps provide an explanation for the heterogeneity and the global distribution of relevant sources of a movement engulfed in violence-induced migration. Although I am certain that in this regard, the Bund is anything but unique, it does explicate why its collections include an unusually large amount of commemorative material, and why most historians on Eastern European Jewry start their research in New York City. Sitting in those archives, reading memoirs written in Yiddish, and reflecting on the process of preservation then in itself becomes – to revisit the Bundist expression – a “duty” (Bund Archives 1965, 16). Yet, this time it is no longer devoted to the cause of a vanished party, but to the historiographical necessity to emphasize the relevance of the activism and agency of victims in the overcoming of genocide. Thus, writing this history remains a “privilege,” possible to enjoy only thanks to those preservation efforts. These undertakings did not only secure sources for historiography; as historical practices, they also need to be integrated into the greater history of genocide and forced migration – both as carriers of information, and as expressions of meaning in themselves. Eventually, this means that the depicted patterns and modes of Bundist knowledge preservation not only shed new light on the cultural significance of that particular social movement. They also allow – to return to Stephen Castle’s (2003) call – for a closer integration of knowledge and migration research into an agency-centered historical sociology of genocide, forced migration, and social transformation.

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