

# לקט

יִיִדִישֶׁע שטודיעס הײַנט

**Jiddistik heute**

**Yiddish Studies Today**

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

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יִיִּדִישׁ אױסגאַבעס און פֿאַרשונג

Jiddistik Edition & Forschung

Yiddish Editions & Research

Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,  
Roland Gruschka und Simon Neuberg

Band 1



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## Zalman Wendroff

The *Forverts* Man in Moscow

### A Maverick among Moscow Yiddish Writers

Among the Yiddish literati who lived in Moscow when the city became the capital of Soviet Russia, Zalman Wendroff (Vendrovski, 1877–1971) stood out as a person relatively well known in the international world of the Yiddish press. Born in Slutsk, now Belarus, into a family of a *shoykhet-cum-melamed*, Vendrovski moved to Łódź in 1893. There he got his first experience in journalism, contributing to the Kraków newspaper דער ייד (Jew). In 1900, he used the passport of his brother to cross the Russian border, leaving therewith a lifelong imprint in his official papers, which identified him under the name of David. In Britain, where Zalman-David came, he worked, studied in evening classes, and became involved in Zionist and anarchist circles.<sup>1</sup> The anarchist leader Rudolf Rocker, a non-Jewish editor of several Yiddish periodicals in Britain, remembered that, when they first met in Glasgow, Wendroff – he adopted the pseudonym then – “was inclined to Zionism; we had long arguments about it. When he came to live in London afterwards he found himself much nearer to our views, and was a valued contributor” to the אַרבעטער פֿרײַנד (Workers’ Friend), edited by Rocker.<sup>2</sup>

In Britain, Wendroff married a Moscow-born intellectual woman who had fled Russia because of her political views. In 1905, the young couple went to Moscow, notwithstanding their slim chances of getting permission to reside legally there, outside the Pale of Jewish Settlement. For some time, Wendroff gave private English lessons and managed to live without a residence permit, bribing the שווייצאר (concierge) of their apartment building to avoid denunciation.<sup>3</sup> In 1906, following the compliant concierge’s death, he once again left Russia. This time he wound up in America, where the list of his jobs included working as a stringer for Yiddish periodicals.

*I want to thank Alan Rems for sharing with me the material of his genealogical research.*

1 Vendrovski 2008: C-3a–C-3b.

2 Rocker 2005: 80.

3 Wendroff 1970.

Two years later, Wendroff returned to Russia and settled in Warsaw as a reporter for the מאָרגן־זשורנאַל (Morning Journal), the American Yiddish daily with the second-largest circulation. He also contributed, from 1909, as a member of staff, to the largest-circulated European Yiddish daily, היינט (Today), launched in Warsaw in 1908. In March and April 1911, היינט featured his Palestinian travelogue. Especially successful were his humorous stories under the general name of פּראָוואַזשניטעלסטוואָ (Residence Permit), which appeared as a weekly feature from 18 November 1911 to 27 August 1912. In 1912, the Yehudiya publishing house, owned by the publishers of היינט, produced a volume of these stories, distributed as a gift to the newspapers' readers.<sup>4</sup> The following year, a Russian translation of *Residence Permit* came out under the same imprint. A bibliography of Yiddish books published in Russia on the eve of World War I lists fourteen titles by Wendroff.<sup>5</sup>

When the Russian army pulled out of Warsaw in August 1915, Wendroff evacuated to Moscow and worked for the ЕКОРО, the Jewish Committee for the Relief of Victims of War, which played an important role in Russian Jewish life of that period. Daniel Charney, the younger brother of the Yiddish literary critic Shmuel Niger and the labor leader Baruch Vladeck, and a Yiddish writer in his own right, recalls in his memoirs that at the end of 1918 he invited his "good old friend" Zalman Wendroff to work on דער אמת (Truth), the newspaper published by the Jewish Commissariat at Lenin's government. The new regime lacked professional Jewish journalists, so Charney, hardly a Bolshevik, effectively edited דער אמת. However, in mid-February 1919 the newspaper stopped appearing, and its journalists had to find other sources of subsistence.<sup>6</sup>

In the environment of military communism, which made money virtually meaningless, state employment became an imperative of survival, giving access to the centralized system for the procurement of food and other goods. Wendroff found a job at the People's Commissariat of Railways, where he headed the press office. He also worked briefly as an administrator at the Moscow Hebrew theatre Habima. On 13 March 1920, during a public discussion about the theatre, Wendroff gave vent to his feelings about the Jewish communists' anti-Hebrew campaign, accusing them of transforming "Jewish culture into a Jewish cemetery, where they, together with outdated and dead things, bury also everything still alive, valuable, and idealistic." He was indignant about the Bolshevik militants' desire to liquidate the Habima:

4 Finkelstein 1978: 217 f.

5 Estraikh 2005: 20.

6 Charney 1943: 226 f.



They deem bourgeois the language in which the Habima actors perform, as well as the theater itself and its audience.

I testify as a Jewish writer with an experience of writing in Yiddish over twenty years – and my fellow writers can confirm it – that both Jewish languages are equally alien to the Jewish bourgeoisie. [...]

Cobblers, tailors, and other workers living in shtetls, rather than the bourgeoisie, teach their children in Hebrew.<sup>7</sup>

In 1920, Moscow lived half-starved. In the words of the Yiddish writer Der Nister, the city was “half dead, a kind of Pompeii.”<sup>8</sup> Still, members of the Moscow Circle of Yiddish Writers and Artists (MCYWA), would, from time to time, get support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Therefore it was literally vital to be part of the circle. Although the MCYWA had been established as an apolitical mutual aid association, by 1920 it had already acquired a more militant Bolshevik hue and made attempts to cleanse the MCYWA of ideologically adverse literati, choosing Wendroff as the first target.<sup>9</sup> Wendroff felt compelled to respond. On 7 January 1921, he wrote a scathing letter, arguing that he hated “bitterly all parties, from Zionist to Communist” and it was his “nature to be recusant and to reject any party discipline.” Therefore the stories of his links with Zionism were either unfounded rumors or simply slander aimed at leaving him without rations.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Wendroff’s membership was renewed, but – as a result of his temporary expulsion – he missed the distribution of two barrels of herring, which the JDC had given to the MCYWA. Still, he returned to the circle’s ranks by the time of another important distribution of gifts: American yellow trench coats, with brass buttons and hoods.<sup>11</sup>

### A Foreign Correspondent

Shmuel Niger became the first פֿאָרווערטס (Forward) newsman in revolutionary Russia. From 30 March 1917, his telegrams sent from Petrograd began to appear on the front pages of the biggest New York Yiddish daily. A year later, he moved to Moscow, where he combined his work at the Soviet government’s Jewish Commissariat with representing פֿאָר-ווערטס. Some of Niger’s dispatches would be reproduced in the general

7 Ivanov 1999: 240f.

8 Borrero 2003: 77f; Estraiikh 2005: 43.

9 Estraiikh 2005: 44f.

10 Abchuk 1934: 31f.

11 Charney 1943: 301f.

American press, including *The New York Times*. Later, when Niger left Moscow for Vilna, פֿאַרווערטס had no regular representation in the Soviet capital. Until November 1921, the Soviet authorities usually refused to admit foreign correspondents; later, too, it was difficult to get permits to open bureaus of foreign periodicals.<sup>12</sup>

From Wendroff's 1957 interview given to the Paris communist Yiddish newspaper די נייע פרעסע (The New Press), we know that he began to work for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) in 1922, and soon afterwards was invited to write for the New York Yiddish press, first for the liberal דער טאָג (Day) and later for the socialist פֿאַרווערטס. He also wrote intermittently for other non-Soviet Yiddish newspapers, most notably the Warsaw daily מאָמענט (Moment). Soviet officials, especially at the People's Commissariat of International Affairs, were keenly interested in projecting a positive image of Soviet society, so the authorities allowed, and even encouraged, Wendroff to do this; had this not been the case, his cooperation with foreign newspapers, especially with פֿאַרווערטס – the main rival of the New York communist daily פֿרייהייט (Freedom), simply could not have continued for over a decade.<sup>13</sup> The Menshevik-and-Bund-leaning פֿאַרווערטס, read by half a million people, was an important forum, known for its strong influence with the labor movement and relief organizations. As a result, although the Jewish Sections of the Soviet Communist Party treated פֿאַרווערטס as an irreconcilable enemy, other constituents of the Soviet bureaucratic apparatus, most notably the Committee for the Agricultural Settlement of Jewish Toilers, regarded the American daily as an important partner. Boris Smolar, who lived in Moscow from 1928 to 1930 as the correspondent of the JTA and דער טאָג, came to the conclusion that in a conflict between the Jewish Sections and "more comprehensive government interests," the position of the former "could never prevail."<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, the forum of American Jewish socialists continued to sympathize with the new Russian regime, while remaining at odds with the Comintern and its American outposts. (The Soviet Communist Party's Jewish Sections were seen as the Comintern's element too.) According to the פֿאַרווערטס writer David Shub, many American socialists<sup>15</sup>

tried to draw a demarcation line between the Comintern and the Soviet government. They condemned the Comintern, but the Soviet government they regarded as a labor government and did not want to criticize it openly.

<sup>12</sup> Desmond 1982: 30f.

<sup>13</sup> Kenig 1957; Tikhii 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Smolar 1982: 45.

<sup>15</sup> Shub 1970: 612.

As late as 1923, פֿאַרווערטס “published pro-Soviet articles and reports from Russia.” Characteristically, the JDC also learned “to walk carefully on Communistic eggs without smashing any,” avoiding direct contact with “the uncomfortable partners, the Jewish Communists [...]; the Jews of the United States had no relish for an affiliation with such brethren.”<sup>16</sup>

The Soviet Union retained its allure in later years also, when some members of the editorial staff, including Abraham Cahan, editor-in-chief, hoped that Stalin would improve the Soviet system. In September 1926, Cahan revealed his satisfaction with Stalin’s victory over the “wild, bloodthirsty tactics and rhetoric of Zinoviev and Trotsky.”<sup>17</sup> In 1927, he brought back from his trip to the Soviet Union the conviction that the dictatorship of the proletariat was “as bad as if it were a dictatorship of the aristocracy.” Yet while characterizing the Soviet leadership as “a bunch of fanatics” who were “in a dream, a phantasmagoria,” he was ready to give them the benefit of the doubt: they, especially such “a sensible man” as Stalin, might “mean well.”<sup>18</sup>

Cahan sought to provide comprehensive coverage of Soviet affairs, obtaining information from people on the ground. In the early 1920s, פֿאַרווערטס would receive articles and letters from several Soviet locales – as a rule, through its Berlin bureau. In addition to unnamed amateur reporting, the newspaper published articles with bylines of Leyb Yakhnovitsh, who briefly edited the Odessa Yiddish paper קאַמוניסט־שע שטים (Communist Voice), and A. Kiever (Dov-Ber Slutski), a Kiev-based intellectual. In his letter to Cahan, dated 4 January 1924, Slutski explained that he found it convenient to send his material to Berlin, because the postal links with Germany were reliable and, in addition, the Berlin bureau would decipher and retype his difficult shorthand. (Jacob Lestschinsky, Slutski’s childhood friend, headed the Berlin bureau of פֿאַרווערטס.) Slutski also asked to stop sending him the newspaper, because he was not allowed to receive it. Until October 1924, when Wendroff had finally obtained special permission to receive copies of פֿאַרווערטס, he too would get only occasional or indirect access to the newspaper.<sup>19</sup>

On 30 March 1923, Cahan wrote one of his numerous instructions to Lestschinsky, sharing his thoughts, *inter alia*, about the difficulties of obtaining trustworthy, candid reports from their local correspondents in the Soviet Union. Cahan therefore asked Lestschinsky to instruct them

16 Bogen 1930: 315.

17 Estraiikh 2010: 152.

18 Cahan 1927.

19 Estraiikh 2010: 151.

to shun political topics and concentrate on describing mundane details of everyday life in various Soviet localities.<sup>20</sup> Wendroff, who ultimately remained the newspaper's only correspondent in the Soviet Union, was happy to oblige, especially as it was his forte to be an entertaining writer with a good eye for colorful details. Thus, looking condescendingly at housing conditions typical for the vast majority of Moscow residents, Wendroff wrote sarcastically about "communal apartments," where several families lived cheek by jowl. In his article "A humorous portrayal of contemporary flats in Soviet cities," published in פֿאַרווערטס on 5 December 1923, he made fun of the climate in such accommodation, arguing that a similar comradeship of inhabitants could be found only among prisoners sharing the same cell for many years.<sup>21</sup>

Baruch Vladeck, manager of פֿאַרווערטס, was more sympathetic to the Soviet country than Cahan and many other members of the staff. In his letter to Wendroff, dated 14 December 1923, he admitted that he himself was

far from agreeing with everything that we assume here. The attitude that people have here is determined by their feeling rather than thinking. And feeling, as you know, can be a very treacherous thing. Yet I can assure you that, on the tenth floor [of the *Forverts* building, where Cahan's and Vladeck's offices were situated], the attitude to you is very favorable [...]. You are already perceived as one of us and we hope that, with God's help, you'll stay with us. The only thing – let's ask the Almighty to get you eventually more freedom in choosing topics.

In a letter to Cahan on 27 September 1926, Wendroff summed up his first three and a half years of writing for פֿאַרווערטס, mentioning that only a small number of his articles dealt directly with political issues:

As for "politics," I avoid it as much as it can be avoided. No domain or facet of Soviet life escapes contact with current politics. Therefore, one has to touch on politics while discussing any topic, particularly if the objective is to give clear descriptions, rather than photos, of events and scenes from life. The thing which you call "propaganda" is, in fact, a specific point of view, which is absolutely required. One can't write from Russia in a different way.

I have to tell you that getting Soviet newspapers in New York and reading them there can't give a comprehensive understanding of Soviet reality. Only a person who lives here can understand the meaning of this or that newspaper article.

In all, I can tell you that writing from Soviet Russia for the *Forverts* is harder than you can imagine it.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Estraikh 2006: 56.

Many topics are interesting, but they will not find a place in the pages of the *Forverts*. Other issues can't be properly discussed. You always have to appreciate the problems which your Soviet-based contributors encounter in their work.

### From the Shtetl to Colonies

Jewish colonization projects in the Soviet Union in general, and in the Crimea in particular, were central topics of the Yiddish press coverage in the 1920s. On 26 August 1926, פֿאַרווערטס informed its readers that it would print six articles by Wendroff of a political nature, describing Soviet Jewish colonization from the vantage point of the Communist Party's Jewish Sections. The editorial note emphasized that the articles would appear in their original form, despite the fact that פֿאַרווערטס had very little in common with the communists. Yet the editors were ready to endorse many of Wendroff's statements, because they had consistently supported the colonization drive, making clear this attitude at the time of the September 1925 Philadelphia conference, when the American Jewish establishment decided to support the JDC's initiative to sponsor Soviet Jewish agricultural settlements.<sup>22</sup> Then, on the eve of the landmark conference, the פֿאַרווערטס editorial explained that, of all Jewish campaigns that had originated in the United States, the colonization in Russia was the most important one and that each American Jew had to consider it a privilege to participate in the new undertaking.<sup>23</sup>

Wendroff's first article, published on 30 August 1926, introduced the reader to the background of the project aimed at turning tens of thousands of Jews to farming. He disagreed with those who described the colonization drive as a bluff created by the Jewish communists. In reality, the campaign grew out of a grass-roots initiative. Wendroff emphasized that there was no real competition between the colonization drives in the Soviet Union and Palestine, because Soviet Jews usually lacked money – over 10,000 rubles – needed for resettling in Palestine. Indeed, in October 1925, Cahan spoke in Jaffa to passengers of the Soviet vessel Lenin, which had brought 361 Jewish emigrants from Odessa; to be allowed to disembark, each of them had to have at least 500 British pounds, or 2,500 American dollars.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, even the payment of 300 rubles collected for moving to a farming settlement in Ukraine or Crimea became a hurdle

<sup>22</sup> *Forverts* 1926; Dekel-Chen 2005: 72.

<sup>23</sup> *Forverts* 1925.

<sup>24</sup> Cahan 1925.

for a third of potential colonists, and their contribution had to be reduced. Palestine could get a sufficient number of migrants from such countries as Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Latvia, and Zionists leaders certainly knew it, but they worried that the Soviet colonization project could lighten their political weight and, most importantly, affect their fund-raising efforts. Wendroff also mentioned other, non-Zionist, opponents of Soviet Jewish colonization, who contended, for instance, that it was neither fair nor safe to move to the land that belonged historically to non-Jewish peasants. Anti-Bolshevik socialists worried that success of colonization would enhance the influence of Jewish communists, while nationalists maintained that it would speed up the decline of the traditional patterns of Jewish life, or *Yiddishkayt*. Skeptics also argued that the campaign was doomed to fail anyway because of the improvements in economic conditions in urban habitats and, as a consequence, a dearth of people lured to farming.<sup>25</sup>

In his second article, Wendroff addressed some arguments of the opponents and skeptics. He dismissed speculation that Soviet rule could founder, triggering a massacre of Jewish colonists by Ukrainian peasants, despite the fact that, theoretically at least, shtetl dwellers were hardly better protected than the colonists. Wendroff insisted that *Yiddishkayt* was not declining in the newly established colonies; rather, that the Yiddish language and Jewish traditions had a better chance of survival in the colonies, with their exclusively Jewish population, than in multi-ethnic towns. Significantly, at that time, Sabbath continued to be observed in all colonies. Wendroff ridiculed those who defined support of Soviet Jewish colonization as “un-American” activity, and reminded פאָרווערטס readers that no one questioned the patriotism of those American capitalists who had made significant investments in the USSR.<sup>26</sup>

In his articles, Wendroff mentioned the organizational problems of colonization. The colonies did not get enough houses, which was one of the reasons why some of the colonists either returned to their shtetls or moved elsewhere. The situation often depended on the form chosen for the farming collective: the commune proved to be a less practical form of collectivization than the cooperative.<sup>27</sup> Classified as toilers, the avant-garde, and, therefore, beneficiaries of society, colonists had to do everything themselves; they were not allowed to hire other peasants, even during the harvesting period. Status uplift played a very significant role in the colonization campaign: Jews who were classified as bour-

25 Wendroff 1926a.

26 Wendroff 1926b.

27 Wendroff 1926c.

geois and disfranchised (meaning variously disadvantaged) citizens moved to colonies to find solutions for their economic as well as social problems.<sup>28</sup>

Some journalists of פֿאַרווערטס found Wendroff's portrayal of colonization misleading. According to Stepan Ivanovich (Shmuel/Semen Portugais), a leading representative in the West of the right-wing Mensheviks, the Soviet regime had deprived many Jews of their right to continue living in places more civilized than colonies, where people faced unnecessary suffering. Ivanovich ridiculed the desire of Bolsheviks (and numerous Jewish ideologists) to improve the Jewish nation, making it healthier through farming.<sup>29</sup> Although Lestschinsky had a more positive attitude to colonization, he saw it as a rather marginal development against the grim backdrop of Soviet Jewish life.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, Wendroff wrote about the November 1926 conference in Moscow, which imbued many people with the belief that the Soviet government sought to build a Jewish statehood.<sup>31</sup> He found a supporter in Vladeck, who believed that Soviet Jews would benefit from colonization.<sup>32</sup> In his letter, dated 11 December 1926, Wendroff hailed Vladeck's article and emphasized that, indeed, he regarded the Soviet colonization drive as one of the greatest events in Jewish history. Three days later, on 14 December, Wendroff once again wrote to Vladeck, who by that time had arrived in Berlin. He reassured Vladeck that he would get a visa for him to enter the Soviet Union and that there was no need to worry about the functionaries of Soviet Jewish organizations, because in the reality they were "not such bandits" as they might appear from newspaper articles. In addition, Vladeck would be welcomed by people other than those from the Jewish Sections. He wrote:<sup>33</sup>

I am sure that you, like many other visitors, will leave our country with a much better opinion about it than you had before your trip, even if your opinion always was quite positive. The air of Soviet Russia has this effect on people.

In effect, Vladeck, at that time, did not go to Russia, but met in Berlin with representatives of Soviet communists and their opponents, émigré anti-communists.

28 Wendroff 1926 d, 1926 e, 1926 f.

29 Ivanovich 1926.

30 Lestschinsky 1926.

31 Wendroff 1926 g.

32 Vladeck 1926.

33 Vladeck 1927.

## The Rupture

In 1929, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, which was always in the forefront anti-communist ranks of the American press, published articles by Mark Razumny, a Yiddish journalist from Riga, who was allowed to visit the Soviet Union. An editorial introduction explained the newspaper's methodology of gathering information about the Soviet Union:<sup>34</sup>

In order that our readers may have at least a measure of news from Russia accurately and impartially presented, we have abandoned our bureau in soviet Russia. For most of the news that American correspondents can obtain in Russia is contemptuously, and rightly so, described as handouts. [...]

Unwilling to export at our expense propaganda for the soviet news agency throughout the world, we have adopted our present plan of covering Russia. From time to time we have been able to send our agents through Russia and reproduce exclusively the actual conditions in that country. This procedure may reduce our volume of news from Russia, but the quality is reliable.

פֿאַרווערטס, which certainly had problems with Wendroff's material based on "handouts," would also send its "agents through Russia." Little is known about Wendroff's contact with the visiting writers and activists. According to David Shub, Wendroff helped Cahan during the latter's 1927 visit, and in November 1928 arranged a pass for the leader of the American Jewish labor movement, Nathan Chanin, giving him the privilege of standing on the Red Square's tribune for foreign guests during the parade celebrating the eleventh anniversary of the October Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

In 1926, the arrival of the writers Israel Joshua Singer and Hersh David Nomberg made Wendroff angry. In his letters to Cahan written on 27 September and 7 November 1926, he protested against this practice. He also felt maltreated because the visiting writers went to Ukraine and Belorussia, whereas Cahan would not agree to send him additional money for traveling to various locations across the country. Around that time, Wendroff began to worry about the status of his association with פֿאַר-ווערטס. In his letter to Vladeck on 11 December 1926, he complained that his articles stopped appearing in the newspaper and reminded Vladeck that he began to write for פֿאַרווערטס not because he was fishing for the

<sup>34</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* 1929.

<sup>35</sup> Shub 1970: 719, 767f.



job, rather because he accepted an offer sent to him by Lestschinsky. So he wanted some sense of certainty about his situation. On 1 March 1927, פאָרווערטס published editorial notes, showing deference to Wendroff and explaining the reasons for complementing his articles with Nomberg's and Singer's travel notes:

The same note explained that the newspaper was open to various kinds of materials about the Soviet Union, though it would not publish explicit pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet propaganda.<sup>36</sup>

ווענדראָף איז אַ טאַלאַנטפֿולער זשורנאַליסט, און זײַנע בריוו און שילדערונגען פֿון דעם איצ־טיקן לעבן אין דער סאָוועטישער רעפּובליק אַנטהאַלטן מאַסן אינטערעסאַנטע פּאַסירונגען און קאַלירפֿולע בילדער. זײַן ווײַנונגס־פּלאַץ איז מאַסקווע. אין זײַנע קאַרעספּאַנדענצן באַשרענקט ער זיך אָבער ניט אויף דער רוסישער הויפטשטאָט. פֿון צײַט צו צײַט באַזוכט ער אויך אַנדערע שטעט און געגנטן, און פֿון דאָרטן שרײַבט ער אויך פֿאַרן „פּאַרווערטס“.

מיט אַ געוויסער צײַט צוריק, צום בײַשפּיל, האָבן מיר געדרוקט זײַן אינטערעסאַנטע סעריע באַשרײַבונגען פֿון די קור־בעדער אויף קאַווקאַז און זײַנע זעקס גרויסע קאַרעספּאַנדענצן וועגן די ייִדישע קאַלאָניעס. אין קורצן וועט פֿרײַנד ווענדראָף באַזוכן ייִדישע שטעט אין סאָוועט־רוסלאַנד און אונדז צושיקן קאַרעס־פּאַנדענצן פֿון דאָרטן.

רוסלאַנד איז אָבער ברייט און גרויס, און דער איצטיקער לעבן דאָרטן איז פֿול מיט שטריכן, מיט נײַע פֿאַרבן. עס איז דאָ גענוג אינטערעסאַנטע מאַטעריאַל פֿאַר פֿילע באַאַבאָכטער. דערי־בער, ווען עס מאַכט זיך אונדז אַ געלעגנהייט צו שיקן אַ טאַלאַנטפֿולן שרײַבער אין רוסלאַנד אויף אַ באַזוך, פֿאַרפֿעלן מיר ניט זיך מיט איר צו באַנוצן. אַזאָ געלעגנהייט האָבן מיר געהאַט ווען ה. ד. נאָמבערג האָט דאָרטן פֿאַרבראַכט עטלעכע וואָכן, און דערנאָך, ווען אַן ענלעכע רײַזע האָט געמאַכט אַ צווייטער באַגאַבטער שרײַבער.

Wendroff is a talented journalist. Indeed, his dispatches and descriptions of contemporary life in the soviet republic contain colorful pictures and give account of interesting events. Although he lives in Moscow, his correspondence transcends topics of the Russian capital. From time to time he also visits other cities and regions, writing from there for the *Forverts*.

Some time ago, for instance, we published an interesting series of his articles describing spas of the Caucasus and his six long articles about Jewish colonies in Soviet Russia. In the near future, Mr. Wendroff will visit Jewish towns in Soviet Russia and write for us from there.

However, Russia is a vast country. Her contemporary life is full of peculiarities and new hues. It provides enough fascinating material for numerous journalistic reflections. Therefore we did not miss any chance to send a talented writer to Russia. Such occasions happened when H. D. Nomberg spent several weeks there and, later, when another gifted writer, [I. J. Singer], made a similar journey.

36 *Forverts* 1927.

On 15 December 1928, in a letter to Vladeck, Wendroff once again surmised that the newspaper did not need him any more: during the second half of the year, only six or seven of his articles had not ended up in the editor's bin. At the same time, his journalism remained in demand: he received offers from other New York Yiddish papers, while European Yiddish papers continued to print his articles, including those rejected by פֿאַרווערטס. As may be derived from Wendroff's letter on 28 February 1929, Vladeck tried to defuse his anxiety, reassuring him that the editors continued to regard him as their Moscow correspondent.

The situation had changed dramatically after the Palestine Arab anti-Jewish riots in August 1929. News about and around these events precipitated a mass departure of readers and writers from פֿרייהייט. They were outraged with the Comintern's – and *Frayhayt's* – interpretation of the riots as a commendable episode in the Arab people's struggle against their British and Zionist colonizers. Over forty years later, in June 1971, Paul Novick, one of the founders of פֿרייהייט and its editor from 1939, recalled that in the months of August and September 1929, all American Jewish communist “organizations were in a crisis in connection with the unrest in Palestine at that time. We came into a head-on collision with the Jewish community” and “paid dearly for our stand, having lost a great many of our readers and having weakened our mass base.”<sup>37</sup> In this climate, the position of פֿאַרווערטס on the Soviet regime became one of unreserved hostility. Cahan, who was always sensitive to his readers' mood, did not want to print any positive articles about the Soviet Union.

In the meantime, Wendroff had received a clear signal that Cahan sought to replace him. In his letter on 24 January 1930, Wendroff informed Vladeck that about two months earlier Boris Smolar had received the following telegram from his New York-based colleague I. Par-sky:

FORWARD CONSULTED ME REGARDING MOSCOW CORRESPONDENT  
ASKED WHETHER YOU OR I COULD SERVE STOP WILLING PAY MORE THAN  
DAY [i.e. the newspaper *Der tog*] STOP CABLE ME WHETHER POSSIBLE  
FOR YOU OR ARRANGE WITH OTHER FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT EVEN  
OTHER LANGUAGE UNDER PSEUDONYM UNTIL I ARRIVE MOSCOW TO  
SUBSTITUTE YOU STOP [The JTA's founder and director Jacob] LANDAU  
UNOBJECTING

Smolar's reply was short:

NONE BUT WENDROFF WILL BE TOLERATED HERE

<sup>37</sup> Estraiikh 2008: 121.

Wendroff felt aggrieved at these behind-the-scenes preparations aimed at replacing him. He wrote to Cahan that it was a mistake to hope that a non-Soviet journalist would “do a better job” in reflecting “the whole truth about Soviet Russia, in the spirit of the ‘experts’ seated in Berlin and Paris.” He explained that it was impossible to defy censors without being banned from the country (quoted from a copy attached to Wendroff’s letter to Vladeck on 24 January 1930):

To begin with, I very much doubt that a special correspondent of the *Forverts* will be tolerated here in the first place. You have to remember that the *Forverts* is known as a partisan newspaper rather than a capitalist one, a forum for an ideologically antagonistic camp, which makes it in our eyes worse than a “capitalist newspaper.” I can write for you only because I always have kept my pen clean during the past thirty years of my journalistic and literary career. I write objectively and as a *friend* of the Soviet country. If a person dares in his writings to be hostile to the Soviet power, he will not be tolerated here. In this sense, no foreign passport can provide full protection. Here people are not ashamed to expel journalists who were more important than Parsky and represented bigger newspapers than the *Forverts*.

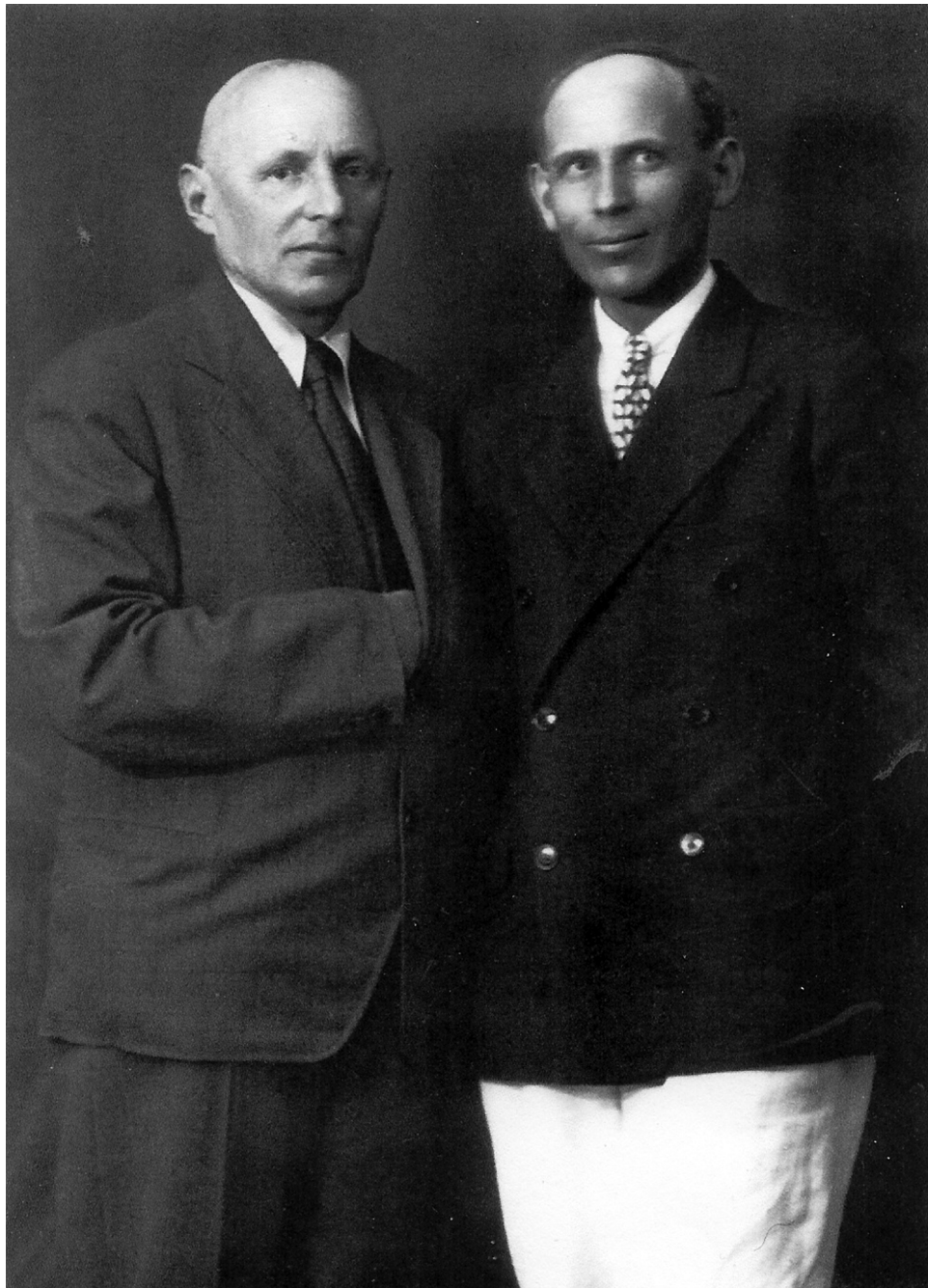
You might think about having two correspondents – me and another one. However, I don’t like this combination either. No one would accept it, because no other foreign newspaper has more than one correspondent in Moscow.

On 20 March 1930, still having not received a reply from Cahan, Wendroff wrote again to Vladeck:

[...] the newspaper has changed its attitude to Russia. No doubt, the *Forverts* has never harbored particular sympathies toward Soviet Russia, but it previously had the virtue of finding some space for “nice words” about us. In any case, there was a place in the *Forverts* for objective portrayals of Soviet reality. From the very beginning, my work for your newspaper was based on the condition that I would report about life in Soviet Russia, describing it in the way I saw it rather than how you saw, or wanted to see, it. [...]

When editors did not agree with my “pro-Soviet” pieces, they published their commentaries or expressed their opposing opinion in their editorial articles.

However, during the last six months hardly any of my articles, regardless of contents, have appeared in the newspaper. You simply don’t want to print them, because they would weaken your anti-Soviet propaganda campaign, which is being rigidly conducted by the whole [anti-Soviet] foreign press, including your newspaper.



Zalman Wendroff (left) with his brother, c. 1930s. Courtesy of Alan Rems

### Life after *Forverts*

After the rupture with פֿאַרווערטס, Wendroff continued to write for other foreign newspapers. His last traceable publication in the Warsaw מאָמענט came out on 3 June 1933. At that time, he still worked for the JTA. The American journalist Linton Wells, who worked in Moscow in the early 1930s, included in his autobiographic book a photo taken in November 1933, during a meeting of foreign journalists with the Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin. Wendroff was also there, representing the JTA.<sup>38</sup> The People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs praised him as a very reliable person, whose journalism represented "maximum [Soviet-]friendly information." It was considered important to allow him to be seen as a more or less independent journalist and, generally, help him maintain good relations with the JTA, discouraging the agency from sending to Moscow a foreign correspondent.<sup>39</sup>

In his unique role as a Soviet Yiddish writer working for the foreign press, Wendroff was known among his fellow literati as "Dollar" or "Dollar Correspondent." In a society where foreign-currency salaries were few and far between, he enjoyed a relatively lavish lifestyle. According to his grandson,

His status as foreign correspondent, receptions at Foreign Minister Litvinov's and the National Business Committee [...], getting paid in foreign currency, owning a one-family apartment in the center of Moscow – all these were almost unheard of in those times. Sporting a suit "bespoke" at a London tailor's under his fur-lined coat, swinging a cane, he always looked elegant, smart and capable.<sup>40</sup>

Among Soviet Yiddish writers, however, he remained barely visible. He certainly did not belong to the elite of the Soviet Yiddish literary milieu. Rather, he was one of numerous literati who could earn income from various jobs, including translations from English and Russian. For instance, Wendroff's translation of Liubov Khavkina's *Kak liudi nauchilis' stroit' zhilishcha* (ווי אזוי מענטשן האָבן זיך אויסגעלערנט בויען וווינונגען) came out in Białystok in 1921, and that of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* (דער פרינץ און דער בעטלער) in Vilna in 1923, while Moscow publishing houses printed his renditions of Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* (ווייסער פרינץ) in 1921 and Jack London's *White Fang* (שטויסצאָן) in 1937. He was spared during the Stalinist "great purge,"

<sup>38</sup> Wells 1937: 344f.

<sup>39</sup> Aldoshin, Ivanov and Semenov 2002: 697f.

<sup>40</sup> Vendrovski 2008: c-3c.

though his son, a young scholar, perished in the Gulag. By the end of the 1930s, Wendroff's literary works began to appear in Soviet Yiddish periodicals, and in 1941, his collection of stories, אױפֿן שוועל פֿון לעבן (On the Threshold of Life), came out in Moscow.

A man in his sixties, he was active during the war, working for Yiddish programs of Moscow Radio and for the Jewish Antifascist Committee. Esther Markish recalled that Wendroff came to her in 1949, a few days after the arrest of her husband, the Yiddish poet Peretz Markish, who had been in charge of Yiddish broadcasts during the war. When she asked him how he could have taken the risk of coming to visit the family of an arrested writer, he replied: "I am no spring chicken [ ... ]. So, I figured the worst thing that could happen would be that I might be arrested a few days sooner."<sup>41</sup> Although he was not arrested at the time of the liquidation of the committee, his turn came in December 1950. He was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for "anti-Soviet propaganda," and was kept in prison until 1954. According to some versions of Raoul Wallenberg's arrest and imprisonment by the Soviet secret police, the Swedish diplomat shared a cell with Wendroff for some time.<sup>42</sup>

During the post-imprisonment period of his life (he died in Moscow on 22 September 1971), Wendroff was regarded as the doyen of the remaining Soviet Yiddish literati. In this capacity, for instance, he chaired a meeting between several Yiddish writers and a group of foreign delegates to the Moscow Youth Festival in the summer of 1957. In March 1962, the Soviet press agency Novosti widely distributed a letter, signed by five Soviet Jewish intellectuals, including Wendroff as the representative of the Yiddish literary circles, in which they refuted the charges of anti-Semitism in the USSR.<sup>43</sup>

Like several other Soviet Yiddish writers, Wendroff became a regular contributor to foreign communist Yiddish periodicals, including the Warsaw newspaper פֿאַלקס־שטימע and the journal יידישע שריפטן. Strictly speaking, it was not completely 'kosher,' because manuscripts were supposed to be channeled through an official Soviet institution, such as the Soviet press agency Novosti. However, when a writer sent a story, poem or essay for publication in Poland, a socialist country, or in a communist periodical in a capitalist country, they presumably did not regard themselves as dissidents. In January 1957, when the פֿאַלקס־שטימע marked Wendroff's eightieth birthday, his readers in Poland learned

41 Markish 1978: 162.

42 Bierman 1981: 177f.

43 New York Times 1962.

that “he didn’t feel a single day older than stated in his passport.” Still, he preferred to lie down, “because from his own experience he had learned that it was better to lie down than to ‘sit’ in prison.”<sup>44</sup> In 1962, a collection of his stories, *Opowiadania z przeszłości* (Stories from the Past), translated by Stanisław Wygodzki, came out in Warsaw. Stories from this book appeared in English in the 2004 collection of his stories, *When It Comes to Living*, translated by Wendroff’s great-niece Irene Jerison.

On 8 October 1956, Wendroff wrote to Paul Novick:

I have found myself in the situation of losing my whole archive accumulated during over fifty years of my journalistic and literary work, including all my books, articles, stories, diaries, etc. As a result, I am left, to borrow a phrase, naked on a naked land.

After explaining euphemistically the results of his arrest and its associated confiscation of his private archive, Wendroff asked Novick to help him get clippings of his articles and stories published in the New York communist newspaper. On 31 January 1958, he informed Novick that since October 1957 he had been getting – through the International Commission of the Soviet Writers’ Union – copies of מאָרגן-פֿרײַדזייט. By mid-1961, the newspaper had published some of his works and, in his letter on 25 June, Wendroff asked Novick to send him, as a substitute for royalties, a suit or, at least, a couple of white shirts and a tie. On 5 October 1969, Wendroff received a telegram from New York, sent by Itche Goldberg, head of the Zhitlovsky Foundation, stating that *Morgen-Frayhayt*’s sister organization had awarded Wendroff with a Chaim Zhitlovsky Prize.

The Moscow publishing house Sovetskii Pisatel’ (Soviet Writer), the main producer of Yiddish books in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, brought out his collections of stories in Russian, *Rassказы o bylom* (Stories from the Past, 1957) and in Yiddish, אונדזער גאָס (Our Street, 1967). A volume of Wendroff’s stories, translated into Russian and entitled *Nasha ulitsa* (Our Street), was published posthumously, in 1980, by the Sovetskii Pisatel’. Although his books that came out in the autumn years of his life were warmly reviewed, they did not become significant literary events. At the end of the day, Wendroff’s forte was not in fiction but in journalism. A selection of his journalism describing Soviet Jewish life in the 1920s and 1930s could create a much better and more useful literary memorial to this remarkable man of Yiddish letters.

44 Gilboa 1971: 388.

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