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# SOVIETISH HEYMLAND

and the Making of  
Socialist Yiddish Culture  
after Stalin

Miriam Chorley-Schulz

*Sovetish Heymland*  
**and the Making of Socialist Yiddish Culture  
after Stalin**

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# INTRODUCTION

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In August 1961, a significant event occurred for many Jewish left-wingers around the world. Among them was Norman Puterman, a Montreal Yiddish-speaker and member of the United Jewish People's Order, a secular and socialist Jewish organization supporting the Yiddish-speaking workers' movement in Canada. For the first time in thirteen years, a Yiddish periodical appeared in the Soviet Union amidst the cultural "thaw." It was called *Sovetish Heymland* (סאַװועטיש היימלאַנד, Советская родина, Soviet Homeland) and it was distributed globally.

According to Puterman's step-daughter, Esther Frank, this journal "was the fulfillment of a hope they thought was lost." Having looked to the Soviet Union for guidance for their organizing in Montreal, the ties of the United Jewish People's Order to the Soviet Union had ended in 1952 when the murder of the most-prominent Soviet Yiddish writers and intellectuals became known. With it, the promise for a future of Soviet Yiddish politics, life, and culture seemed to have been destroyed as well – until August 1961.

In its inaugural issue, editor-in-chief Arn Vergelis vowed that *Sovetish Heymland* would "reflect at a high level the most important problems of our time," and it delivered. For thirty years, the journal showcased prose, poetry, literary criticism, and academic works on Jewish and non-Jewish folklore, history, linguistics, art, anthropology, politics, and music. It covered current events, fostered international dialogue between the Second, Third, and First Worlds, and played a key role in Holocaust memory and antifascist, anticolonial activism.

The end of the USSR in 1991 also marked the end of *Sovetish Heymland*, but it was briefly revived as *Di Yidishe Gas* (די ייִדישע גאַס, The Jewish Street) in 1993, with support from donors in the United States, France, and Argentina. The publication ceased after the death of Vergelis in 1999 but *Sovetish Heymland* remains influential in the development of modern Jewish literature and global left Yiddish cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Puterman lovingly preserved each copy hoping to share the journals with others. He had them bound professionally and, before he passed away on June 13, 1995, bequeathed them to his step-daughter, when Esther Frank started to teach Yiddish and Jewish Literatures in the

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<sup>1</sup> Gennady Estraiikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (Leeds: Legenda, 2008); ibidem., "Sovetish Heymland," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (online edition), accessed on March 3, 2025, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sovetish\\_Heymland](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sovetish_Heymland); "Sovetish Heymland: Its History and Legacy," *Preservation of Yiddish Culture and Heritage*, [https://yiddish-culture.com/category/press\\_en/sovetish-heymland\\_en](https://yiddish-culture.com/category/press_en/sovetish-heymland_en).

Department of Jewish Studies at McGill University. It is Puterman's collection that is today housed in the University of Oregon Knight Library thanks to Frank's generous donation. This exhibition aims to highlight its impact and honor the creators of the journal and the local and international culture(s) it represents. It was conceived as part of the course JDST 354 "Russian Jewry – Histories and Imaginaries."

"For many years *Sovetish Heymland* was part of a large collection of books housed in the home of my parents – Annie Tannenbaum-Kisilevsky and Norman Puterman. It is indeed my good fortune to have found Miriam [Chorley-Schulz]. Norman Puterman would surely have been overjoyed to know that the volumes have now found a home on the bookshelves at the University of Oregon. He would have been delighted by the thought that they will be studied by scholars, assessed for their value, and made available to the wide range of readers they were initially designed to reach."

*Esther Frank to the Curator, 19 February 2025*

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Yiddish is my thing | *schtick* | שטיק

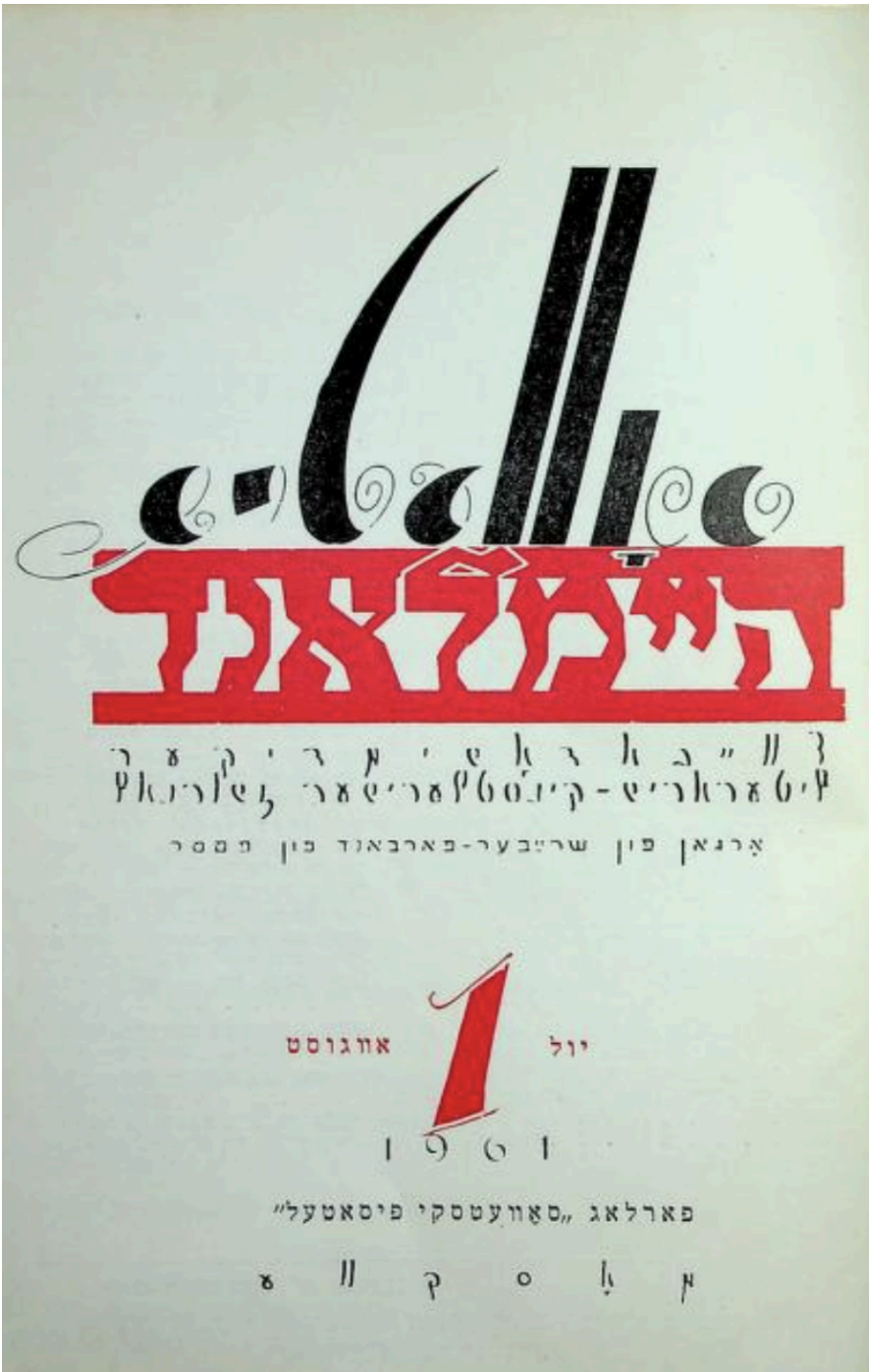
Have you heard someone use the word "schtick" in English? What about "klutz," "schlep" or "tuches"? "Schmooze" or "chutzpah"? Many Yiddish words such as these have entered English and other languages.

- Yiddish originated around the year 1000 C.E. and is about as old as most other European languages
- It was once the primary language of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, an area historically known as Ashkenaz.
- Yiddish is a hybrid language: written using the Hebrew alphabet, it originates from Middle High German, incorporating elements of Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic languages, Latin/Romance languages, and even Turkic.
- "Yiddish," meaning literally "Jewish," became common as its name among Yiddish-speakers and in English around the mid-19th century with Jewish immigration to England, and later to the United States.

- For most of its history, the language was referred to with varying other names: *Taytsh* (German), *Yidish-taytsh* (Jewish German), *Loshn-ashkenaz* (Language of Ashkenaz), or, dismissively, as *Zhargon* (Jargon).
- Before the Holocaust, it was spoken by an estimated 12 million Jews. The majority of Holocaust victims were Yiddish-speakers.
- Today, Yiddish continues to evolve, adopting new words and expressions from languages of regions where it is spoken, particularly English and modern Hebrew
- Most people who speak Yiddish in their daily lives today are Haredim, ultra-orthodox Jews; there is a growing number of secular Yiddish-speakers as well.

IF YOU WANT TO STUDY YIDDISH OR  
LEARN MORE ABOUT YIDDISH CULTURES, contact:

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School for Global Studies and Languages,  
University of Oregon  
at [miriams@uoregon.edu](mailto:miriams@uoregon.edu).

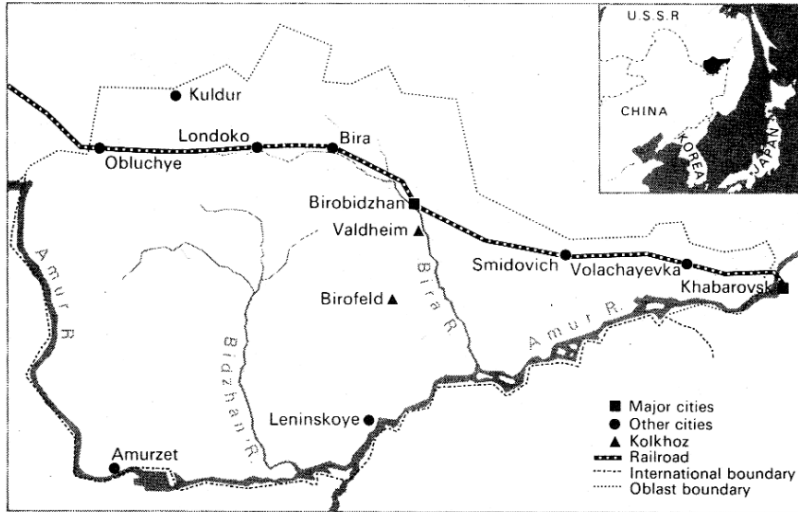


**Caption 1:** Cover page of *Sovetish Heymland*'s inaugural issue in 1961.

It says:  
Sovetish Heymland  
Bimonthly literary-artistic journal  
Organ of the Writers' Union of the  
USSR  
1st issue July / August 1961  
Publishing House "Sovetskii  
Pisatel"  
Moscow

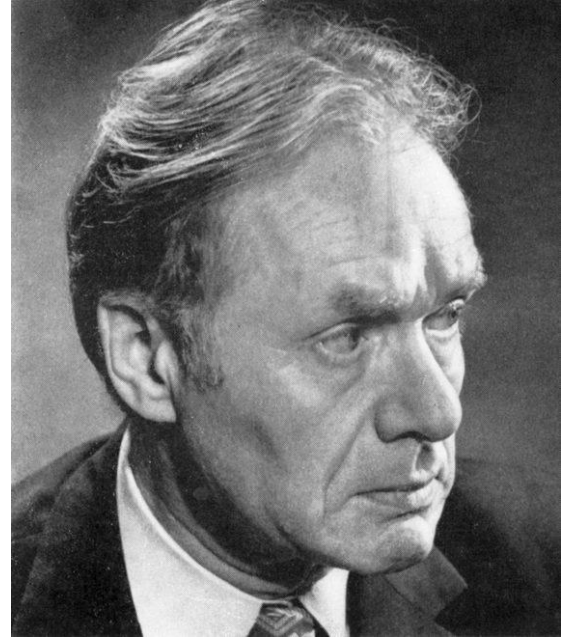
## DID YOU KNOW?

*Sovetish Heymland* set records, becoming the first Yiddish literary periodical in history to reach a global circulation of 25,000 copies in the early 1960s.



Map of the Birobidzhan region.

from: Birobidzhan; in: Encyclopaedia Judaica 1971, Vol. 4, col. 1045



## Caption 2: YIDDISH AUTONOMY

Arn Vergelis (1918–1999) was a Yiddish poet and writer raised in the Jewish Autonomous *Oblast* Birobidzhan. He was appointed both the editor and the censor of *Sovetish Heymland* – likely due to the journal’s relative unimportance to the authorities. This made *Sovetish Heymland* quasi-autonomous, bypassing Glavlit (the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs), the usual censorship body overseeing printed material.<sup>2</sup>

After the destruction of the Soviet Union, in an interview with Mark Kupovetsky, Vergelis reflected on his role, saying:

“You, like others, will in the future evaluate what I did or did not do in the course of my life. But one does not have to see everything as either black or white. Keep in mind that I acted under specific conditions, at a specific time and place... What is true is that I was and remain a committed Communist. However, I also was and remain a Jew who has felt the pain of his people. I defended them and devotedly served our *mameloshn* [mother tongue]. I did what others could not do or did not want to do... As for the authorities, they were occupied with their matters and I – with mine.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, 82.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Vergelis conducted by Kupovetsky in September 1994, quoted in Mark Kupovetsky, “Aron Vergelis: Survivor of the Destruction of Soviet Yiddish Culture, 1949–1953,” *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 58, no. 1 (2007): 41–42.



# The New York Times.

ADOLPH S. OCHS, Publisher 1896-1935

PUBLISHED EVERY DAY IN THE YEAR BY THE NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY

ARTHUR HAYS SULZBERGER  
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## Yiddish Wins a Round

Now in the last few days the first<sup>4</sup> Yiddish magazine to appear in the Soviet Union in over a decade has been published. The Yiddish language has won a round in the struggle with the Kremlin. But many observers in the outside world will continue to wonder why a nation that claims to be free of any form of discrimination, and particularly of anti-Semitism, should have so peculiar a record on the language in which so much of the secular and cultural life of Europe's Jews was conducted in the centuries before the gangsters under Hitler decimated them.

“Yiddish Wins a Round,” *The New York Times*, 26 August 1961, p. 16.

### **Caption 3:** MOST REVIEWED YIDDISH JOURNAL OF ALL TIMES

*Sovetish Heymland* stands out among Yiddish journals for several reasons, notably becoming the most reviewed Yiddish publication in history – though rarely positively in the West, due to Cold War ideological tensions.<sup>4</sup> This *New York Times* report is one example of this.

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<sup>4</sup> Estraikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & FURTHER READINGS

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## Online Resources

Some digitized issues of *Sovetish Heymland* can be accessed at the Preservation of Yiddish Culture and Heritage, [https://yiddish-culture.com/category/press\\_en/sovetish-heymland\\_en/](https://yiddish-culture.com/category/press_en/sovetish-heymland_en/)

The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe: <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/>

The Yiddish Book Center: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>

The Digital Yiddish Library:

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/digital-yiddish-library>

The Ruth Rubin Archive of Yiddish Folksongs:

<https://ruthrubin.yivo.org/exhibits/show/ruth-rubin-sound-archive/home>

Anna Shternshis' project *Yiddish Glory: The Lost Songs of World War II*, Six Degree Records, at

<https://www.sixdegreesrecords.com/yiddishglory/>

Yiddishkayt: <https://yiddishkayt.org/>

The National Center for Jewish Film: <https://www.jewishfilm.org/Catalogue/yiddish.htm>

The Online Collections of the Jewish Historical Institute:

<https://www.jhi.pl/en/collections/online-collections>

The Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/>

## Library Resources

סאַװעטיש היימלאַנד, *Sovetish Heymland*, Knight Library: Available, 2nd Floor, DK1 .S5465, [https://alliance-uoregon.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01ALLIANCE\\_UO/1ej399r/alma99901014566501852](https://alliance-uoregon.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01ALLIANCE_UO/1ej399r/alma99901014566501852)

The UO Library Research Guide in Judaic Studies: <https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/judaic>

Chorley-Schulz, Miriam, Alexander Walther, eds., *Socialist Yiddishlands: Language Politics and Transnational Entanglements between 1941 and 1991*. Düsseldorf: dup/De Gruyter, 2024.

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