

Reportage from Blotetown: Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin (Tashrak) and the Shtetlization of New York City

As the United States was about to declare war on Germany in late March 1917, Yiddish humorist and translator Tashrak (penname of Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin) wrote a column titled, “No More Germans in Rubbish Town,” which was his common appellation for New York City. Tashrak described how arrogant German Jews, who for decades had looked down on Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants, suddenly had to switch sides: “All Germans have turned into Litvakes.” Tashrak portrayed a meeting at the “Peter Peepekovitsh” lodge, where the president tries to address the members in a highly Germanized Yiddish. Yet then the members begin to protest vehemently: “Mir villen mer keyn daytsh! No more daytsh! Yidish, oder english!” The lodge’s president then called the “oysere wache” (“The Jew who stands on the other side of the door”) and asks him what is his duty. The guard answers in a ridiculously Germanized Yiddish:

“Es izt mayn pflikht di oysere tir farshlosen tsu haltn und kaynem aynlass tsu geben, der nicht datsu berekhtigt izt, und dafir zorge tsu tragen, dass das eygentum der lodzhe immer an zeynen beshtimten pletse untergebrakht vird” [“It is my duty to keep the outer door closed and not let in anyone who is not allowed to, and ensure that the property of the lodge is always securely stored in its given place”]

At that point, the lodge’s president tells him, “Say it in Yiddish or in English, as this is what our esteemed members demand.” Hence the guard changes his tune:

“Es iz mayn dzhob tsu halten di tir farmakht un di oygen ofen az es zollen zikh nit araynkhapen kibittser un zikh nit aroyskhapen ver mit fremede kaloshen, oder ambrellas” [“It is

my job to keep the door closed and my eyes open, so no jokers might snatch other people's galoshes or umbrellas"]¹.

Tashrak's satirical and insightful portrayal of American Jews' changing cultural affinities through laughable behavioral patterns was often delivered in absurdly Germanized or Anglicized Yiddish. His use of three different languages (whether correctly or colloquially) in one column was hardly exceptional in his writing, which featured many comedic devices. Tashrak published several novels, was a prolific translator of Talmudic folktales, Hasidic legends, and European literature into Yiddish, writer of advice columns, literary critic in his column, "Ink and Feather", and even a successful writer in English-language newspapers. Yet he was best known for his short comic stories, feuilletons, and satirical pieces, which illustrated some of the absurdities of Jewish life in America, and as a journalist for two of the most popular Yiddish dailies in America, *Yidishes tageblatt* (Jewish Daily News) and, later on, *Morgen zhurnal* (Morning Journal) between the mid-1890s and his death in 1926. **In fact, in the early 1900s, some observers termed Tashrak "A Jewish Mark Twain" or a "Ghetto Mark Twain".**² Despite

¹ The column appeared in *Yidische gazeten*, March 30, 1917: 11. A recent study has asserted that the Germanization of Yiddish endured later than previously assumed: see Steffen Krogh, "Dos iz eyne vahre geshikhte... On the Germanization of Eastern Yiddish in the Nineteenth Century", in Tobias Grill (ed.), *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe: Shared and Comparative Histories* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2018), 88-92. See also, M. Weinreich, "Daytshmerish toyg nit", *Yidish far ale* 4 (1938): 97-106.

The first quote is עס איזט מיינע פפליכט די אויסערע טהיר פערשלאסען צו האלטן, אונד קיינעם איינלאס צו געבען, דער ניכט דאצו בערעכטיגט איזט, אונד דאפיר זארגע צו טראגען, דאסס דאס אייגענטום דער לאדזשע אימער אן זיינען בעשטימטען פלעצע זיכער "אונטערגעבראכט ווירד".

The second is "עס איז מיין דזשאב צו האלטען די טהיר פארמאכט און די אויגען אפען אז עס זאלען זיך ניט אריינכאפען קיביצער און זיך". Unless otherwise mentioned, all the translation from the Yiddish are mine. As Tashrak's playful language was a hallmark of his writing, I kept the original transliteration rather than use the YIVO standard.

² Communal activist Bernard G. Richards termed Tashrak "A Jewish Mark Twain", *Boston Evening Transcript*, Sept. 21, 1910 (copy does not show page numbers). "Ghetto Mark Twain" appears in *Baltimore News*, Jan. 9, 1911: 2, newspaper clipping in *Papers of Tashrak*, RG 1502, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York), folder 27.

the claim that before Yiddish modernists such as *Di Yunge*, the literary image of New York City was “an inanimate backdrop of humorous sketches,” the city is anything but inanimate in Tashrak’s feuilletons.³

In his frequent references to Jewish life in “Blotetown” (Rubbish/Smut/Nonsense Town) Tashrak’s good-natured smile is sometimes reminiscent of Sholem Aleichem’s comical depiction of shtetl Jews.⁴ Presenting a variety of characters and pennames, Tashrak wittily conveyed to his readers a comforting image of the New World: New York City was just an enlarged shtetl, where traditionalists and assimilationists, radicals and nationalists, employers and employees, *gvirim* and *evyoynim*, or the backbenchers of *bote-medro’shim* clashed over a host of issues, while encountering a number of stereotypical non-Jews. The numerous storefront shuls, *landsmanshaftn*, and lodges transform New York into a mega-shtetl⁵, where iconic urban spaces such as the Brooklyn Bridge, Broadway and East Broadway Avenues, and the East River turn into a Jewish town. Tashrak’s writings appeared in *Yidishes tageblat* and its weekly edition, *Yidishe gazeten*, as a collection of congenial characters, such as “Chaim the customer peddler,” “Joe the waiter,” “Simcha the shames (sexton),” and “Berl the butcher boy” (among others). These characters were not pennames, as Tashrak’s name also titled those texts, but rather individuals in serialized humoristic stories/columns, often under the title, “From Bronx to

³ The quote is by Mikhail Krutikov, “Cityscapes of Yidishkayt: Opatoshu’s New York Trilogy”, in Sabine Koller, Gennady Estrakh, and Mikhail Krutikov (eds.), *Joseph Opatoshu: A Yiddish Writer between Europe and America* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2013), 160.

⁴ David G. Roskies, “Sholem Aleichem and Others: Laughing off the Trauma of History”, *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 2 (1982): 53-77. Aleksander Shpigelblat, “Sholem Aleichem: der dikhter fun yidishn humor”, *Di goldene keyt* 140 (1995): 190-202. Cf. Dan Miron, “The Dark Side of Sholem Aleichem’s Laughter”, *Derekh Judaica Urbinatensia* 1 (2003): 16-55.

⁵ Moses Rischin has mentioned “Megashetl” in “The Megashetl/Cosmopolis: New York Jewish History Comes of Age”, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 15 (1999): 171.

Brownsville.” In addition, Tashrak sometimes wrote under the pseudonyms “Yudkovitsh” (as his father’s name was Yuda-Leyb) and “Zonnenshein,” among others.

In his representation of internal Jewish divisions and disputes, relations with non-Jews, and the trials of modernity and assimilation, Tashrak followed, to some extent, the literary paths of earlier Yiddish and Hebrew writers, whether maskilim (proponents of Jewish Enlightenment) or later ones. Yet as his politics seemed either conservative or apolitical, and his literary style seemed shundist, critics often disregarded his work altogether, or referred to it as worthless. Furthermore, Tashrak’s catering to Jewish pride and praise for Jewish achievement made him seem as a hack in literary circles.⁶

Yisroel-Yoysef Zevin was born in 1872 in Gorki, in the Mogilev region (present-day Belarus) to a well-to-do family, who made a living as liquor distillers in the nearby town of Dribin. The father was a Lubavicher Hasid, and despite his early death, he remained a lasting influence on his son. Young Yisroel, who became a hunchback as a toddler, was a very promising Talmudic student who started writing in Hebrew at the age of twelve. He immigrated to the United States in 1889, and after working as a peddler and a storekeeper, he published in 1893 a short story in the *Yidishes tageblatt* (the first long-lasting Yiddish daily in America) and soon became a member of the paper’s editorial board. His penname was probably a take on the Hebrew alphabet written from the end backward, and it is close to the verb “to whistle” in Hebrew.⁷

⁶ Examples of that critique are quoted below.

⁷ On Tashrak’s career, see Zalmen Reyzin, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1927), 4: 902-912; and Shmuel Niger (ed., et al) *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: Altveltlekhen yidishn kultur congress, 1956-1981), 8: 807-808. Miriam Shomer Tsunzer described Tashrak’s entertaining personality as well as his unreciprocated love for Rose Pastor in “Fun yidishn literarishn nu-york baym onheyv

Tashrak's moniker for New York City, "Blotetown," both emulates and reverses the example of earlier Yiddish writers, whose invented town names reflected their criticism of the provincial, superstitious, and stagnant character of traditional Jewish society. Thus Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh's satire coined town names such as Glupsk (derived from "foolish" in Russian), Tuneiadevke (derived from "mooch" in Russian), and Kabtsansk (derived from "pauper" in Yiddish/Hebrew) to convey their residents' traits; Sholem Aleichem coined Kasrilevke (derived from "God is my crown," but intentionally close to Kabtsiel, or "God is a pauper"); and Soviet Yiddish writer Dovid Bergelson, who was younger than Tashrak, invented Mistifke (derived from "garbage").⁸ In that respect, Tashrak's Smut/Nonsense Town follows an established literary convention among maskilic writers, which affected later writers as well. **One of Tashrak's feuilletons, "Against Your Will You're a Jew!" pokes fun at Jewish atheists from a New Jersey town called Bokvil (Bucksville/Foolsville), which is not far from another town, Tsiegvil (Goatsville);** another story tells of a New York shul established by immigrants from Glupsk. If Abramovitsh and other writers decried Jewish society for its narrow-mindedness, nonetheless, Tashrak was a moderate conservative critic who satirized what he saw as New York Jewry's assimilatory, vulgar, and materialistic excesses. In New York of the early twentieth century, the struggle against conservatism was not the issue; the challenge was to maintain Jewish traditions amid rapidly declining observance.⁹

yorhundert: zikhroynes arum a bild fun yor 1905", *YIVO bleter* 33 (1949): 179-181. See also, Tashrak, "Rose Harriet Pastor", *Minikes' monat blat un yontef bleter* (August 1903): 32-34.

⁸ On the symbolism of shtetls names in Yiddish literature, see Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 14-15, 106-107; and Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 28.

⁹ Y. Y. Zevin, **"Iber gvald bistu a yid", *Tashrak's beste ertselungen* (1910, fifth edition, New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1929) 1: 53-56. My translation of that feuilleton into the English appears in this issue. Glupsk appears in "Dem noked's mazl", *ibid*, 2: 131-138. On the problem of utilizing maskilic concepts in**

In more than one way, Tashrak transferred Old-World, internal Jewish disputes and concerns to New York. Although he was far from the maskilim and other Old-World modernizers both ideologically and generationally, and faced completely different challenges, Tashrak shared their impetus to modernize and civilize the Jewish masses in the spirit of genteel norms. Perhaps his harshest reproof appeared in an etiquette guidebook he published in 1912, titled *Etiquette: A Guidebook for Respectful Conduct, Politeness, and Proper Manners for Men and Women*. Quite tellingly, in that book he distinguished between the “more developed” class of people, and those he deemed beyond repair, replicating Jewish reformers’ impatience with what they saw as Jewish society’s uncouth behavior and backwardness. In his criticism of Jewish conduct on the street, in the park, and at the theater, Tashrak mentioned, “as this book is written in Yiddish, everything that is said here will remain between us, and we need not be afraid for ‘what will the gentiles say’.” Despite those reassuring words, many of the book’s exhortations to Jews involved exactly the fear of what non-Jews might think of Jews, or as Tashrak put it, “loathsome” habits still exist, which make Jews “ridiculous in the eyes of civilized people.”¹⁰

American Yiddish literature, see Joel Berkowitz, “This Is Not Europe, You Know: The Counter-Maskilic Impulse of American Yiddish Drama”, in Edward S. Shapiro (ed.), *Yiddish in America: Essays on Yiddish Culture in the Golden Land* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 135-165. On declining religious observance, see the scathing critique (1887) by an Orthodox Rabbi, Moses Weinberger, in Jonathan D. Sarna (ed. and trans.), *People Walk on their Heads: Moses Weinberger’s Jews and Judaism in New York* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982).

¹⁰ Tashrak, *Etikete: a veg vayzer fun laytishe oyfirung, heflikhkayt, un sheyne manyeren far mener un froyen* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1912), 87, 131-132. On maskilic critique of Jewish society, see S. J. Fuenn, “The Need for Enlightenment” (1840), and Maskilim to the Governors of the Pale, “A Jewish Program for Russification” (1841), in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (1980, 3rd edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 357-360. Immanuel Etkes, “*Teudah be-yisrael* – beyn tmurah le-masoret” in Yitschak Ber Levinson, *Teudah be-yisrael* (1828, reprinted Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1977), 3-19. Alexander Orbach, *New Voices of Russian Jewry: A Study of the Russian-Jewish Press of Odessa in the Era of the Great Reforms, 1860-1871* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 54-71, 108-123. Salo W. Baron commented on the suspicion of most Jews in Russia toward maskilim, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets* (1964, 2nd edition, New York: Macmillan, 1976), 112-113.

More often than not, nevertheless, Tashrak's humor is kindhearted and mitigates the critique. As American Jewish organizations and dignitaries were preparing for the 250th anniversary of Jewish settlement in North America in 1905, Tashrak published a four-part feuilleton titled, "A Humoristic History of America."¹¹ That feuilleton demonstrates the multifaceted manner in which Tashrak shtetlized New York (and in this case, America as a whole) to his Yiddish readers. The story begins with the young Christopher Columbus, who lives in Genoa, Italy, but dreams of other countries and reads books about explorers, such as "Travels of Benjamin, Captain Cook, and Fishke the Lame".¹² After moving to Spain, Columbus works as a banana peddler in the capital city, since it is a known fact that "the Italians are skillful in that trade," where he meets the Spanish Queen, Isabella, who haggles over the price of a dozen bananas while stealing a few from him.¹³

Visiting the Spanish royal court, Columbus meets two Spanish Jewish merchants (one of them sells old clothing to the royal family), who are so highly assimilated that they eat their *kugl*

¹¹ The feuilleton appears in Zevin, *Tashrak's beste ertselungen*, 2: 59-66. Even though the first group of Jews arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, organizers chose 1655 as the anniversary year, since in that year the Dutch West India Company granted Jews the right to settle (and overruled the objection of Governor Peter Stuyvesant). On the 250th anniversary celebration, see Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 36-42; and Judith Friedman Rosen, "Earlier American Jewish Anniversary Celebrations: 1905 and 1954", *American Jewish History* 92 (2004): 481-497.

¹² The comic references are to Israel Joseph Benjamin, a Romanian-born Jew, who set out to emulate the twelve-century traveler Benjamin of Tudela in a search for the remnants of the tribes of Israel. Between 1859 and 1862 Benjamin II (as he called himself) made a journey across the United States, whose impressions he published in a German-language book, *Three Years in America* (1862, translated from the German by Charles Reznikoff and reprinted Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956). On the dissemination of his writings in maskilic circles one could learn from Mendeley Moykher Sforim's (S. Y. Abramovitch) book *Masoes benyomen ha-shlishi* (1878), *Geklibene verk* (New York: YKUF, 1946) 2: 161-162. *Fishke the Lame* is another book by Abramovitch.

¹³ Zevin, *ibid*, 59-60. On the image of the Italian fruit peddlers, see the writings of the Yiddish sweatshop poet, Morris Rosenfeld, "A royer feliton", *Shrifn fun Morris Rosenfeld* (New York: A. M. Evalenko, 1908), 3: 75; and "Nesies in yidishesh kvartal", *ibid*, 3: 172. On the imagery of Italian immigrants in American Yiddish sources, see Gil Ribak, *Gentile New York: The Images of Non-Jews among Jewish Immigrants* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 83-86, 119-122.

and *tsimmes* in the basement, and “are afraid to bring a Yiddish newspaper into the house.” In a clear scolding of modern assimilators, those two claim, “there’s no such thing as a Jewish nation,” and they “are delighted when their kids pluck out a Jewish [traditional man’s] beard.” As Columbus’s ship arrives in America, the first sailor to disembark is a Spanish Jew, who takes a walk in Lower Manhattan, where a Polish Jew has already established a clothing store and tries to pull in the sailor, “Ikh hob far aykh a metsie, mister!” (I have a bargain for you, mister!). The sailor sees that other Jews, especially those from Minsk and Warsaw, already got better bargains than him, and becomes enraged. In his anger, he returns to the ship and calls out at Columbus, “A klog tsu dir, kolombus!” (Damn you, Columbus!) – and that is how the famous Yiddish idiom was born. Columbus, however, had his own problems at that time: “already then there were more Italians in America than in Italy,” and it was difficult for him to find a job. Since the shoe shiners and the barbers’ unions would not accept “greenhorns” (newcomers) like him, Columbus becomes an ice cream seller among Native Americans.¹⁴

Tashrak possessed a keen ability to draw a comedic and homey picture of New York that was both familiar and endearing to his early-twentieth-century readership, with its Italian banana peddler and barbers, Jewish garment stores and their pullers-in, Jewish foods, and provocative assimilators. That skill appeared in many of his writings, which also depicted various arguments and quarrels among the denizens of the local shuls/bote-medro’shim that could have taken place in one of the shtetl shuls of Sholem Aleichem or Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (known after one of his literary creations as Mendeley Moykher Sforim), with their backbenchers, paupers, and

¹⁴ Zevin, *ibid*, 61-63. On the tem “Damn Columbus!” by embittered immigrants (especially traditionalists), who were outraged by any of their new country’s transgressions, see the report from Philadelphia by Julius H. Greenstone, “Religious Activity”, in Charles S. Bernheimer (ed.), *The Russian Jew in the United States* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1905), 160; Harry Golden, *The Best of Harry Golden* (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1967), 10; and in *Forverts*, July 27, 1912: 4.

idlers.¹⁵ A perfect example of that skill is Tashrak's 1909 feuilleton, "Benele also discovers the North Pole," where he described the bitter dispute that flared up in that year between two American explorers, Fredrick A. Cook and Robert E. Peary, both of them claiming to be the first to reach the North Pole on foot. As reported by "Chaim the Customer Peddler," "Nonsense Town is divided between Cookists and Pearyists." Everyone in the congregation "Temple Jacob" is talking only about Cook and Peary: the sexton, Mr. Kabtsanski ("Pauperson"), argues that, "they are both bluffers, and he believes neither of them." Yet the synagogue's secretary, Mr. Shaprinsky, dismisses that skepticism, and chides the sexton: "I beg your pardon, but you talk like a *kloyznik*! [member of a small, provincial shul]," Shaprinsky suggests, "the truth is that both are right... Dr. Cook discovered one North Pole, and Commander Peary discovered the other North Pole." The synagogue president, Mr. Sheftelson, determines, "You're all idle talkers who know nothing. According to geography there is only one North Pole." To that Shaprinsky answers that science changes – once geographers were sure "the earth is flat as a stove board, while today we all know the earth is round." In the same way, "Cook and Peary will show there are two north poles."¹⁶

The bulk of Tashrak's literary and journalistic work was published in conservative Yiddish newspapers. During most of his career, he wrote for the conservative *Yidishes tageblat*, and in his last few years also for the Orthodox *Morgen zhurnal*. The *Tageblat* artfully played on

¹⁵ On Abramovitsh's portrayal of the synagogue backbenchers, paupers and idlers, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973), 99-100, 131-135.

¹⁶ The piece about the North Pole is in *Yidishes tageblat* (hereafter YT), Sep. 10, 1909: 4. On the race to the North Pole, see Bruce Henderson, *True North: Peary, Cook, and the Race to the Pole* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005). Tashrak's own critique of Orthodox synagogues with their filth and untidiness is in his, *Etikete: a veg vayzer fun laytische oyfirung, heflikkayt, un sheyne manyeren far mener un froyen* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1912), 114-118.

the traditionalism of its readers, abounding with assaults on “ungodly” socialists and anarchists, vehemently attacking the corruptions of Gentile America, and turning purple at the idea of Reform Rabbis uttering the word Christ in sermons. The *Tageblat*’s editor until 1907 was John (Yoyne) Paley, who artfully synthesized the paper’s thunderous moral indignation with unscrupulous sensationalism and outright fabrications, which became a winning formula. The publisher of the *Tageblat*, Kasriel Zvi Sarasohn, was a rabbi’s son who received a traditional education, yet had also been influenced by the ideas of the *Haskalah*. Sarasohn considered his newspaper an instrument of enlightenment and termed “religious fanaticism” as one of the obstacles his newspaper had to struggle with on the Jewish street. In that milieu of combined modernity and traditionalism, Tashrak developed his brand of moderate and ironic conservatism.¹⁷

To be sure, as a writer in the commercial Yiddish press, Tashrak needed to cater to and flatter Jewish sensibilities and self-image as non-violent, sober, morally pure, and studious people. Yet he also believed those Jewish virtues were factual, and that conviction appeared in many of his works. Hence Tashrak was kinder in his portrayal of Jewish urban space than a writer such as Abramovitsh, who was committed to stricter criticism of Jewish society. In his 1869 novel *Fishke der krumer*, Abramovitsh’s reform-minded attitude even led him to write some harsh depictions of the Jews, and especially the Jewish poor: “Today it’s really easy to tell

¹⁷ On the *Tageblat*, and the quote by Sarasohn, see Moyshe Shtarkman, “Vikhstike momenten in der geshikhte fun der yidisher prese in amerike”, in Yankev Glatshtein (ed., et al.), *75 yor yidishe prese in amerike* (New York: Y.L. Peretz writers association, 1945), 17-18; and idem, “Di Sarasohn zikhroynes vegn der yidisher prese in amerike”, in Aleksander Mukdoyni and Yankev Shatski (eds.), *Yorbukh fun amopteyl I* (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1938), 273-274. On Paley’s style and the *Tageblat*’s final stage, when it took a more Orthodox line and was later swallowed by the *Morgen zhurnal* (1928), see Y. Khaykin, *Yidishe bleter in amerike* (New York: Published by the author, 1946), 89, 101, 114-120, 297-303. Arthur A. Goren wrote an essay about *Morgen zhurnal*, “The Conservative Politics of the Orthodox Press” that appeared in his book, *Politics and Public Culture*, 100-109.

a Jewish house from the outside. There's a little pile of garbage, a little puddle of sewage. . . . The smell alone tells you that a Jew lives here.”¹⁸

By comparison, Tashrak's social critique of Jewish behavior in the public sphere was milder. The *Etiquette* revealed not only Tashrak's turn-of-the century concepts of genteel behavior and civility, but also the Yiddish intelligentsia's self-understanding as a guide of the unenlightened masses. Its chapters advised the readers how to dress properly, greet other people, behave at the table, at the theater, during a vacation, and on the street, among numerous other situations. Tashrak mentioned that sometimes “your face burns with shame when you walk through some Jewish streets, during the Sabbath or a Jewish holiday, and see large numbers of people who are blocking the way, standing and chatting as if they were at home,” without caring at all that “people cannot go through, unless they violently push through” the crowd. Tashrak added that he has written for years against that “ugly habit,” yet to no avail. Concerning even worse habits, such as people who toss fruit peels and garbage out of their windows, Tashrak was quick to note, “We are certain that this kind of people do not read books, especially this sort of books.” The book, nevertheless, is geared toward “the more developed class of people,” who might still occasionally throw something on the sidewalk.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mendele Moykher sform, “Fishke der krumer”, *Geklibene verk* (New York: YKUF, 1947), 3: 135. See also, David Aberbach, *Realism, Caricature, and Bias: The Fiction of Mendele Mocher seforim* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 48-64. On Jewish self-image among Eastern European Jewish immigrants, see Gil Ribak, “‘The Jew Usually Left Those Crimes to Esau’: The Jewish Responses to Accusations about Jewish Criminality in New York, 1908-1913”, *AJS Review* 38 (April 2014): 1-28. See also, Michael Gold, *Jews without Money* (London: Noel Douglas, 1930), 37; and Communal worker Boris Bogen, who wrote about the degenerating influence of the environment on Jews in America in “Jews of Many Lands”, *Jewish Charities* 3 (May 1913): 3-4.

¹⁹ Tashrak, *Etikete*, 131-132. On the Yiddish intelligentsia's self-image as guides of the masses, see Irving Howe, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo, *World of Our Fathers* (1976, reprinted New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 169-170, 533-537. On notions of civility and manners in the Yiddish press, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, MA:

When it came to Jews' behavior in urban parks and public gardens, Tashrak believed that Jewish historical experience caused their unrefined behavior in those green spaces. Since Jews in Europe were regularly excluded from parks and gardens, either by law or by norm, the Jew had become "an enemy of the park, an enemy of trees and flowers." Moreover, as Jews "were expelled from the country, from nature, from the green forests, and fenced in a ghetto," they forgot how precious nature is. Thus "the Jew who comes in a public garden is simply a destructive brat," although Tashrak calls for understanding of the "historical and other root causes which led the Jew to his current condition." As an example of Jewish behavior, Tashrak mentioned an argument he had with a Jew at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, who was pulling out flowers. Tashrak told him that the park is the public's property, to which the man replied, "Well, so I've pulled out my share." Tashrak concluded that any argument with such people is useless, and for them, "the best thing is to arrest them and punish them with fines and imprisonment". But then again, he clarified, "We do not write for such people. They cannot be persuaded with reasonable words and arguments," as "for such creatures only a stick is good."²⁰

Another arena which provoked Tashrak's reproach was the behavior of audiences at the Yiddish theater: there the "whole rudeness of their [Jewish viewers'] nature, which they manage to contain in the presence of non-Jews, comes out often when they are among 'their own'." The very term "Yiddish theater" has become synonymous with "disorder, noise, no respect for yourself and others – the manners of a village tavern," Tashrak wrote. When they visit an English or German-language theater, or the opera, "our Jewish theatergoers are true ladies and

Harvard University Press, 1995), 196-199. See also, Isaac Metzker (ed.), *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971).

²⁰ Tashrak, *ibid*, 136-139. On Jewish thinkers who criticized the purported Jewish alienation from nature, see Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siecle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

gentlemen.” But when they walk into a Jewish theater hall, they talk over the actors, “get undressed in their seats, eat peanuts, chew gum, and make the people around them uncomfortable.”²¹

It would be mistaken, however, to view Tashrak as a latter-day enlightener. The *Etiquette*’s judgmental tone derived from the conventions of that genre and its goal to refine social behavior. In most of his works, he put on a pedestal what he saw as Jewish traits, such as sobriety, diligence, and intellectualism, especially when compared with non-Jewish neighbors. One example is a short story (1910), titled “The Last Drunkard,” which portrays Jim, an old Irishman, who has lived on the Lower East Side for half a century. Jim still remembers when Henry and Madison Streets, “the main streets of the Jewish proletariat” were “the center of the New York aristocrats,” and how on Hester Street “stood private, beautiful houses where Jews were not allowed to rent an apartment.” Now Jews, with their “patience to endure contempt and beatings,” have pushed out the “real American aristocrats,” and then their German and Irish successors, and he remains the only relic of yesteryear. As he walks down the street, “the new residents of the quarter point at him, ‘there goes the last drunkard’.” Soda and confection parlors, pharmacies, and grocery stores have replaced the old taverns; and even though there are still places to get a drink of whiskey or beer, they are quite different from the establishments Jim used to frequent. Since “A Jew does not come in to drink, but just to ‘grab’ a quick glass of schnapps,” for Jews, “drinking is a means, not a purpose in itself” when the heart is faint. Jim finds a drinking mate, Izzy, a middle-aged Jew who went bankrupt. Jim buys him drinks and

²¹ Tashrak, *ibid*, 87-88. On audience behavior at the Yiddish theater, and the critics of such behavior, see Nina Warnke, “*Patriotism and Their Stars: Male Youth Culture in the Galleries of the New York Yiddish Theatre*”, in Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (eds.), *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama, Performance, and Show Business* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 161-183. Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

teaches him well, but as Izzy “did not have the right exercise from his youth on” in drinking, he soon passes away, leaving Jim “the last drunkard in the Jewish quarter.”²²

In another feuilleton, “Jacob and Esau: A Little Old and New History,” Tashrak presented what he saw as the basic pattern of Jewish-Gentile relations. Esau “grew up to be a coarse and ignorant man,” strong, “... a lad with a healthy fist.” Jacob, on the other hand, was “a good boy, who studied in a *kheyder* [traditional school for boys] and had good brains, but was just skin and bones, and all he could do was shouting.” Ever since Jacob managed to convince Esau to give him his firstborn privileges for a bowl of stew, Esau vowed “to settle the score” with Jacob’s descendants. Moving on to contemporary New York, the story tells of a poor blacksmith, John Fitzpatrick, who is determined to move to another house, insisting “never to live next to a ‘sheeny’ [pejorative for Jews].” One time, as he sits with his friends drinking in a saloon, a Jewish peddler drops in, selling shoelaces and collar buttons. Fitzpatrick and friends insult the peddler, snatch his merchandise from him, and as he pleads with them to return his shoelaces, they pour cold water on his head, trip him over, as the peddler calls, “police, help!” When he finally gets up on his feet, Fitzpatrick punches him in the face, and the bleeding, injured peddler flees the saloon.²³

²² *YT*, Feb. 13, 1910: 4. On residential changes and the ensuing interethnic tensions that affected Jewish immigrants and Irish-Americans in New York, see a report (1900) on a crowd of mostly Irish Americans on a Madison Street block, who tried to drive out violently the newly-settled Jewish tenants – *YT*, Aug. 28, 1900: 4. See also, James R. Barrett and David R. Roediger, “The Irish and the ‘Americanization’ of the ‘New Immigrants’ in the Streets and in the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900-1930”, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24 (2005): 7-11. On the representation of the Irish in Yiddish sources, and their relations with Jewish immigrants, see Gil Ribak, “‘Beaten to Death by Irish Murderers’: The Death of Sadie Dellon (1918) and Jewish Images of the Irish”, *ibid*, 32 (2013): 41-74.

²³ Zevin, *Tashrak’s beste ertsungen*, 1: 9-13. Most of the stories in that collection were published in the first decade of the 20th century. On the symbolic and historical significance of Jacob and Esau’s story in Jewish-Christian relations for centuries to come, see Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1-30. On the

It is hardly coincidental that many of the non-Jewish characters in Tashrak's stories are rather stereotypical and often have Irish names. In that respect, he followed established patterns of Yiddish and Hebrew literature and folklore in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, which featured several archetypes of non-Jewish characters: the Polish *porets* (lord), the Russian constable/official, and the peasant (*muzhik/poyer*). The role played by those characters highlighted the shtetl as a Jewish space.²⁴ In New York City, Jewish immigrants met other groups, and the imagery of the Irish soon emerged as the New World's reincarnation of the peasantry: on the one hand, volatile, violent, drunk, and inherently anti-Jewish, but on the other hand, down-to-earth, no-nonsense people, whose simplicity was not corrupted in comparison with the complexities and nervousness among Jews.²⁵

As early as 1897, urban reformer Frank Moss mentioned that Lower East Side Jews encountered what he termed the “lowest elements” of the Irish community, concentrated in tenements along the East River. By the turn of the twentieth century, urban displacement, residential congestion, social dislocation, hooliganism, local politics, and antagonism toward

midrashic maxim “Esau Hates Jacob”, see Malachi Haim Hacohen, *Jacob & Esau: Jewish European History between Nation and Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 73-75.

²⁴ See, for example, the distinction between the Polish lord, Ukrainian peasantry, and a Russian colonel in Mordkhe Spektor, *Mayn lebn* (Warsaw: Achisefer, 1927), 1: 50-51, 67; 2: 51-63; a similar distinction between the Polish lord and the Russian official is in Yisroel Aksentfeld, *Dos shterntikhl un der ershter yidisher rekrut* (1861, reprinted in Buenos Aires: Literary Society of YIVO, 1971), 68-69. On the characterization of those archetypes, see Khone Shmeruk, “Mayufes: A Window on Polish-Jewish Relations”, *Polin* 10 (1997): 273-286; Israel Bartal, “The *Porets* and the *Arendar*: The Depiction of Poles in Jewish Literature”, *The Polish Review* 32 (1987): 357-369. Gil Ribak, “Between Germany and Russia: Images of Poles and the Ensuing Cultural Trajectories among Yiddish and Hebrew Writers between 1863 and World War I”, *Polin* 28 (2015): 225-248. Miron, *Image of the Shtetl*, 3-4.

²⁵ On images of the peasantry in Yiddish folklore, see Hirsh Abramovitsh, “Onvayzungen un bamerkungen”, *Yidishe shprakh* 12 (1952): 122-123. I. L. Cahan, *Der yid: vegn zikh un vegn andere in zayne shprikhverter un rednsortn* (New York: YIVO, 1933), 25-32; Nakhum Stutchkov, *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* (New York: YIVO, 1950), 167-168. See also, Amos Funkenstein, “The Dialectics of Assimilation”, *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (1995): 1-13; and Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 10-18.

New York's predominantly Irish police force converged to bring about an unflattering image of the Irish among immigrant Jews. Yiddish accounts in numerous memoirs, autobiographies, oral history interviews, and the Yiddish press, show how they frequently cast Irish Americans as drunk, coarse, and violent. Sociologist Thomas Jesse Jones, who studied an East Harlem block between 1897 and 1901, reported that the Jewish residents thought the Irish were "drunken," "thrifless and careless." One elderly Jewish woman confessed she "doesn't like" the Irish. A Jewish immigrant who identified himself as A. Berlow, arrived (1895) in New York from Lithuania, and remembered how "Irish ruffians" stood in Cherry Street and greeted Jewish passersby with "goddamn sheeny," "rotten kike" and other pleasantries. Since "almost all the policemen were Irish," they were "the good brothers of all the 'bums'" and hardly protected the Jews.²⁶

Jews were not the only immigrants who faced difficulties with local toughs, who were predominantly Irish: as one historian has observed, Jews, Italians, Chinese and Blacks found out that to the Irish, beating up the newcomers was a kind of "sport". The imagery of the Irish as drunk and violent was already well entrenched in American popular culture by the turn of 20th century.²⁷ Beyond the street level of harassment and violence, in the Yiddish literature and press

²⁶ Frank Moss, *American Metropolis: From Knickerbocker Days to the Present Time* (New York: Collier, 1897), 3: 240-241. Thomas Jesse Jones, *The Sociology of a New York City Block* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1904), 12, 15, 64. A. Berlow (A. Vorleb), *American Jewish Autobiographies Collection* (YIVO), #70: 43. One can mention here only a handful of examples: Max Feigan, *ibid*, *ibid*, #4: 23. Yechezkel Gittelsohn, *Amerikaner yidishe geshikhte be'al-pey* (YIVO), box 2: 3; Levi Glas, *ibid*, *ibid*: 20; Adolph Held, *ibid*, *ibid*: 5; Hyman Plumka, *American Jewish Autobiographies Collection* (YIVO), #19: 24; Dovid Shub, *Fun di amolike yorn* (New York: Cyco, 1970), 84; Yoysef Rolnik, *Zikhroynes* (New York: With the help of the David Ignatoff Fund, 1954), 169-170; Mordkhe Danzis, *Eygen likht* (New York: by the author, 1954), 26-27; and Y. Kopelov, *Amol in amerike* (Warsaw: Brzoza, 1928), 157-164.

²⁷ James F. Richardson mentioned the Irish "sport" in *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 166-168. For the image of Irish in New York's popular entertainment, see Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 110-114. See also, Jennifer Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865-1905* (New York: Palgrave

at the time, the image of the Irish (more than other nationalities) came to signify an unadulterated kind of *goyishkayt*, a Gentile essence that was seen as the intrinsic opposite of Jewishness. That portrayal appears in the works of a politically diverse group of Yiddish writers and public figures, such as Abraham Cahan, Leon Kobrin, Zisl Kornblit, Hirsh Masliansky, John (Yoyne) Paley, Yisroel Tsiyony, and Getsil Zelikovitsh, to name a few.²⁸ Tashrak wrote about that theme as well, and the above stories and feuilletons indeed display Irish characters in a negative light. In one short sketch (1917) titled, “Delight with the Children”, he described a Jewish mother, Mrs. Shapiro, who walks down Grand Street and suddenly meets her former neighbor, Mrs. Hennessy, “an Irish woman”. Shapiro is proud to say that her son, Benjamin, skipped three grades, and now he is in the university. Hennessy is also proud of her son, Patrick: he was sentenced to seven years in prison for robbing a conductor, but due to good behavior, a judge shortened his sentence to five years.²⁹

Sometimes the Irish presence (or residential changes) demarcated the end of a Jewish zone. In 1909, Tashrak published a feuilleton titled “A Strange Street,” in which he utilized Madison Street as an example of ethnic borders. When you take the car via that street, before

Macmillan, 2015). John and Selma Appel, *Pat-riots to Patriots: American Irish in Caricature and Comic Art* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 1990).

²⁸ See the description of the Irish in Abraham Cahan’s article, “Unzer inteligents,” *Tsukunft* (Feb. 1910): 109. Leon Kobrin’s story, “Klayninke neshome’lekh” appeared *ibid* (Jan. 1909): 40-44. Kornblit’s story, “Oysgenikhtert” (Sobered Up), was published in *Maccabaeon* (Oct. 1901): 41-44. Zvi Hirsh Masliansky, *Masliansky’s drosches fir shabosim un yon-toyvim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1915), 1: 187; See the portrayal of Irish policemen as antisemitic and corrupt in John (Yoyne) Paley’s novel, *Di shvartze khevre oder nu york bay tog un bay nakht* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, no year mentioned), 38-46. Tsiyony wrote in *YT*, Oct. 19, 1899, 4: 7. Getsil Zelikovitsh, *Geklibene shriftn* (New York: Yubileum komitet, 1913), 42. See Tashrak’s reference to Irish as “Beytsimer”, *YT*, Jan. 28, 1910: 4. See also, John J. Appel, “Betzemer: A Nineteenth-Century Cognomen for the Irish,” *American Speech* 38 (1963): 307-308; *ibid* 39 (1964): 236-237; and Rudolf Glanz, *Jew and Irish: Historical Group Relations and Immigration* (New York: By the author, 1966), 97-98.

²⁹ The sketch appeared in *Minikes’ peysakh-blat* (1917): 10.

Market Street “you’ll feel that you’re among Jews. Here you won’t find a Gentile no matter how hard you look. The last Irish janitor moved out three years ago”. Moreover, “If you don’t have a distinct Jewish face, I will not advise you to stand on the [car’s] platform, or near an open window. Something will hit your head: a banana peel, a small stone, a wooden stick.” After the car crosses Market Street, nonetheless, Jews are the ones who are pelted with banana peels and stones. Tashrak illustrates cases that he called “the tragic comedy of races”: at times the driver (in the front) is Irish, and the conductor (in the back) is Jewish. Thus “Before the car comes to Market Street, all the banana peels fall on the front platform. After Market Street, they fall on the back platform.”³⁰

Despite some of his negative Irish characters, like other Yiddish writers, Tashrak praised the Irish for their political savviness and national pride. One of the recurring congenial characters in his feuilletons is “our honorable Alderman Paddy Fitzpatrick”: “We Jews can’t live without the Irish Alderman.” Fitzpatrick knows the exact time when to come to shul (between the afternoon and evening prayers), and does not hesitate to print his name and picture on Zionist fundraising stamps. Fitzpatrick also teaches the shul’s members a short lesson in national self-esteem. He rejects Israel Zangwill’s concept of the melting pot: “I’m liberal and the greatest friend that Jews have. But I have no sympathy for the foreigner, that English guy Mister Zangwill, who comes and turns America into a melting pot, and wants to boil the Irish with the

³⁰ *YT*, July 21, 1909: 4. As Hasia R. Diner has noted, the Lower East Side was far from being a singularly Jewish urban space – *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42-44.

English together as if they were lobsters... no respectable Irishman would crawl in a pot with Englishmen.”³¹

More commonly, the non-Jewish characters in Tashrak's work are a device to extol or condemn the behavior and values of New York's Jews. In a short piece, "A Yahudi [Uptown established Jew, typically of German origin] and a Jew on one Streetcar," Tashrak describes two tobacco-chewing Irish workers, who sit on the Third Avenue streetcar and harass a traditional Jew, who is sitting next to a "well dressed and well fed man with a Jewish nose." The Jew is reading a Yiddish newspaper, which makes one worker wonder aloud why Jews read only Yiddish papers. The other replies, "Because there more auctions and fire sales are advertised" and they continue to joke about Jews as the chief perpetrators of arson for insurance purpose. The Jew smiles gloomily, and when his eyes meet those of the well-dressed man next to him, he seems to say, "see, yahudi, how they make fun of us?" But the well-dressed man's eyes say, "Of us? They make fun of you! ... What do I have to do with you? I'm a progressive Jew. And you are an ignorant Russian Jew." The Irish workers continue to ridicule the Jew, then they snatch his bundle from him and throw its contents – Purim scrolls and rattlers – across the car's floor. The yahudi begins yelling at the conductor to throw out the Irish, as they harass the passengers, but the conductor refrains from doing so. Both Jews get off the car at the Brooklyn Bridge, where the yahudi says he would like to complain to the streetcar company about the conductor. The Jew suggests that maybe a complaint would earn them a few dollars, to which the yahudi thunders,

³¹ The first feuilleton is in *YT*, Oct. 12, 1917: 6. The second is *ibid*, Sep. 10, 1909: 4. Ribak, "Beaten to Death", 53-54. **See Tashrak's praise of the Irish in English in "Ghetto Mark Twain", *Baltimore News*, Jan. 9, 1911: 2, newspaper clipping in *Papers of Tashrak*, folder 27.** Other praise for the Irish **by other Yiddish writers** is in *Yidishe gazett*, August 9, 1895: 1; May 16, 1902: 4. *Varhayt*, March 22, 1911: 4. On Zangwill and the Melting Pot concept, see Edna Nahshon, "From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill's Jewish Drama", *Jewish Quarterly* 46 (1999): 53-60; and David Vital, "Zangwill and Modern Jewish Nationalism", *Modern Judaism* 4 (1984): 243-253.

“You Russian Jews don’t have the slightest self-respect! ... For you it’s only money and money!” The Jew replies that the money should be claimed from the company without punishing the conductor, since he is a Jew – “the best proof is that he was afraid to throw out the Irish.” The two went on their separate ways, each nodding to the other’s shortcomings. In the story’s last sentence, Tashrak laments, “those are two children from one tribe, but fate drove them apart.”³²

While in “The Last Drunkard,” “Jacob and Esau,” “Delight with the Children”, and “A Yahudi and a Jew” the Irish exhibit negative traits, they are more of a foil against which Tashrak scrutinizes the state of the mega-shtetl’s Jewry. In other feuilletons, Irish characters are altogether positive, or at least simple and straightforward people, who illuminate Jewish flaws. In a feuilleton about Coney Island, an Irishman comes across just like the gullible peasant in Yiddish folklore. Tashrak told of a Jew who has cornered the market: his wife pretends to be a gypsy who reads the future in your palm for a dime, his daughter sells juice nearby, his son lets you throw rings at a row of walking canes, and the father sells hotdogs. Once an Irishman comes to the father, orders a hotdog, and after biting into it, he almost breaks his teeth, since there is a long iron nail in the hotdog. The Irishman cries out, “I’ll have you arrested!”, but the Jewish vendor assures him that he was actually fortunate: “You got the lucky hotdog,” since any customer who finds a nail in the hotdog wins a walking cane. After he gets the cane, the

³² Zevin, *Tashrak’s beste ertselungen*, 4: 107-111. On Jews and arson for insurance purpose, see Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 33-40. There is a large volume of scholarship about the relations between established, Uptown “Yahudim” and Downtown, Eastern European Jews: see Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York Jews 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 95-98, 110-111; Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States 1830-1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 301-344; Selma C. Berrol, “Germans versus Russians: An Update”, *American Jewish History* 73 (1983), 142-156; and Zosa Szajkowski, “The *Yahudi* and the Immigrant: A Reappraisal”, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63 (1973), 13-44.

Irishman's anger vanishes, he buys three more hotdogs, and later comes back with six friends who try to win the lucky nail – “but not all hotdogs are lucky.”³³

Unquestionably, the most important thread that runs through Tashrak's journalistic and literary work is his strong criticism, both comically and in earnest, of what he saw as American Jewish assimilators and Jews who were disdainful toward traditional Judaism. That category included Jewish radicals, the Reform movement, and many in the younger, Americanized generation. Those internal disputes over religion and tradition reemphasized the character of New York, or at least large parts of it, as a Jewish space, an enlarged shtetl. As the opening paragraph of this article demonstrates, Tashrak used at times absurdly Germanized or Anglicized Yiddish to poke fun at the level of assimilation in the new country. The feuilleton “Yiddish in America” is written as a letter from a “greenhorn” immigrant, who just moved to New York, to his friend in the Old Country. The narrator complains about New York Jews, who interject so many English words in their Yiddish that renders it incomprehensible. When a neighbor presents herself as “next door,” the newcomer believes it is the name of a town, and asks her, “in which *Gubernia* [Governorate] is next door?” When his sister-in-law serves him eggs for breakfast, he tries to impress her with his English, and says “that's a bargain.” She is offended and says, “Ir zolt mir eksusen... Dos zeynen frische joysey eyer!” (Excuse me... these are fresh Jersey eggs!)

³³ Zevin, *Tashrak's beste ertselungen*, 1: 158-159. The Israeli Folktale Archive (IFA) has many examples of Jews outwitting peasants. See Fishl Sidr, *Sipurey- 'am me-borislav* (edited by Otto Schinzler, Haifa: IFA, 1968). Shmuel Zanel Pipe, *Sipurey- 'am me-sanuk* (edited by Dov Noy, Haifa: IFA, 1967). See also, Ezra Gliner, “The Life and Death and Life of Coney Island”, <https://forward.com/culture/art/325835/the-life-and-death-and-life-of-coney-island/> (accessed on June 28, 2019).

The brother advises her, “nit maynden dem grinem,” (don’t mind the greener), and the narrator remains perplexed, wondering what is eksusen, joysey, or maynden.³⁴

Colloquial Americanized Yiddish was a very common form of cultural adjustment, and Tashrak treated it lightly and comically. Yet he treated differently what he saw as stronger, and more dangerous forms of assimilation. In the feuilleton “Close By,” Tashrak describes how a Jewish widow, Mrs. Cohen, sends a neighboring widow, Mrs. Fitzsimmons, a kugl she made as a token of friendship. The Irish woman tastes it, makes a face, “and gave the rest to her dog.” Fitzsimmons appreciates the gesture of the Jewish neighbor, and as a thank you – and also since Cohen “doesn’t know what to cook and what’s good for your health” – sends her a pork and beans stew. Yet what begins as an amusing story about cultural differences, turns into an appeal against intermarriage. Cohen is worried about the friendship between her son, Joe, and Fitzsimmons’s daughter, Nelly, since “the heart of a mother is a prophet.” Whereas Fitzsimmons is also against intermarriage, Cohen’s suspicions grow, and she decides to move to another place. More revealing is Nelly’s surprise when Joe explains Jewish dietary laws to her, and why his mother cannot eat her mother’s cooking. She says, “I don’t understand. I see Jewish boys and girls in the restaurant where I have lunch eating everything that is on the menu.” For Tashrak, the gravest danger is the overall slackening of traditions on the Jewish street, which begins at a young age with dietary laws and leads to full assimilation later on.³⁵

³⁴ Zevin, *ibid*, 2: 38-43. On Americanized Yiddish, see Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Problems of Yiddish Prose in America” (1943), *Prooftexts* 9 (1989): 5-12.

³⁵ Zevin, *Tashrak’s beste ertselungen*, 1: 14-18. On Jewish lack of observance, see another short piece by Tashrak, “He Knows Something about Jews”, *ibid*, 2: 113-114. On mixed marriages at that period, see Julius Drachsler, *Democracy and Assimilation: The Blending of the Immigrant Heritage in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 124-128. On Jewish-Irish mixed marriages, see Philip Krantz’s essay in *Fraynd*, Nov. 1917: 11-13; *Varhayt*, July 1, 1909: 1; July 6, 1909: 1; and the report by Celia Silbert in *American Jewish Chronicle*, August 18, 1916: 456-457.

Another story, “The Father’s Suke [tabernacle],” mentions a rich Jewish banker who marries an Irish American singer. The couple goes on a long trip to Africa, and upon their return to New York in late September, they go to the posh restaurant at their prestigious Broadway hotel. The couple notices that many guests have “genuine Jewish faces” and seem out of place, as “they don’t know what to order, and how to behave at the table, with what knife to cut the beefsteak.” At first, the banker wonders whether Jews have pushed the Gentiles out of the Broadway hotels “exactly as they pushed the Gentiles out of many businesses and theaters.” He asks the waiter, “From where came all these Jews?” and the waiter answers, “Today is the Jewish Yom Kippur, [so] the Jews who don’t want to fast, dine today in Christian restaurants.” In this story, as in others, non-Jews are the ones who eventually help assimilated Jews return to their roots.³⁶

In a feuilleton titled “The Jews of the ‘White Eagle’,” Tashrak wrote about a prestigious club on Broadway, whose manager is an antisemitic German. The German tries to kick out the Jews from his club, but cannot really tell who is Jewish, as they all appear “perfectly Americanized,” and his English is not so good anyway. Therefore, he hires an elderly Jewish cook from the ghetto and tells her to make gefilte fish and kugl in large quantities and serve them to the club’s forty members. When the gefilte fish is served, most of the members frown upon it, show their disgust, and some of them smell the fish and put it back on the plate without touching

³⁶ Zevin, *ibid*, 1:33-35. See also “John McCarthy’s Suke”, *ibid*, 4: 75-80, which attacks Jewish atheists.

it. Only four members eat the fish with great pleasure. That is how the manager realizes that there are only four non-Jews among the members.³⁷

Tashrak's harshest rebuke was reserved for *aftsulokhes* (spiteful) Jews, such as radicals and followers of Reform Judaism. In reference to the news that the flagship of Reform Judaism in New York City, Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue, would allow Baptists to hold their Sunday services at the temple, Tashrak commented, "only the reformers would allow Gentiles to hold their services in a Jewish house of prayer." Then he mentioned a case where another Reform temple invited Christians to do the same: a simple Jew goes to temple to say the kaddish on Sunday, walks into the Christian service and until its end he does not realize that anything is wrong. Mentions of Jesus? His rabbi sermonized about him. No Kaddish prayer? Maybe the reformers did away with it. Luckily, the minister, who is a Jewish convert to Christianity, explains the misunderstanding. As for Jewish radicals, in the story "John McCarthy's Suke" Tashrak presents the ubiquitous Irish janitor, who annually sets up a suke for his Jewish tenants, and charges them a dollar for the food. But now new Jewish tenants who define themselves as "freethinkers" moved in, and say they do not believe in Sukkot and "the whole business" of religion. The janitor consults a rabbi, and tells him, "Among us, the Irish, you won't find such people," and the rabbi seemed humiliated by that, as if he agrees that other nations have a healthier relation to their heritage than Jews do.³⁸

³⁷ Zevin, *ibid*, 1: 57-61. Tashrak referred to Germans as more civilized than the Irish, but even more antisemitic – see his stories, "In Crotona Park", *ibid*, 1: 19-21; and "Yoshke the Dog", *ibid*, 1: 39-43. See also Ribak, *Gentile New York*, 70-73.

³⁸ *YT*, Dec. 13, 1909: 4. See a succinct history of Temple Emanu-El in Stephen Birmingham, "The Temple that Our Crowd Built", *New York Magazine*, April 21, 1980: 45-48. The second story is in Zevin, *Tashrak's beste ertselungen*, 4: 75-78. At the rabbi's advice, the janitor increases the cost, and that pulls in the radicals, as now it is a class struggle, and that is what makes them come to the suke (even if it is to celebrate their victory).

There are many other examples of the way Tashrak created a Jewish microcosm in New York, where stereotypical Jewish and non-Jewish characters alike reenact some of the disputes and problems of the Old World, but within an American context. Rich and poor, traditionalists and freethinkers, old and young, the “civilized” and “uncivilized,” as well as others quarrel over religious observance, assimilation, politics, and cultural differences. Those Jews face certain archetypical non-Jews, who replicate Eastern European literary conventions, while actually accentuating New York’s Jewishness: the avid antisemite, the good Gentile, and the gullible or drunk peasant. Furthermore, throughout many of the stories, characters that seem exotic or foreign as can be, turn out to be Jewish: the Arabs who do the Dervish dance in Coney Island happen to be two brothers who are cantors, and lead services on Jewish holidays at an Uptown synagogue. The hairy wild man of the Island of Borneo, whom people can view for a nickel sitting in a cage in Coney Island, eating soup from a bowl, happens to be an immigrant Jew from a shtetl near Minsk. The famous Spanish dancer, Senorita Basherita, is actually bashkele, whose mother makes some of the East Side’s best gefilte fish. Crotona Park, Prospect Park, Coney Island, Fifth Avenue, (East) Broadway, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Third Avenue Car are all cast as part of that homey, though enlarged shtetl. In that shtetl, it is Jewish immigrants, with their determination, diligence, and endurance, who manage to push out other groups.³⁹

How popular was Tashrak? Most of his stories, columns, and feuilletons appeared in *Yidishes tageblatt*, which came out between 1885 and 1928. This daily had the largest circulation among Yiddish newspapers in America, and probably in the world, until almost 1910, with about

³⁹ Zevin, *Tashrak’s beste ertselungen*, 1: 61, 160-161. On ethnic succession in New York City, see 61st Congress, 3rd Session, *Reports of the Immigration Commission* (1911, reprinted New York: Arno, 1970), 26: 164-165. Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York City 1845-1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 161-162.

100,000 papers sold daily, and every copy exchanged many hands. In his later years, Tashrak wrote for the *Morgen zhurnal*, which was also very popular. Writing a wide range of genres had made him a household in many immigrant homes. Tashrak's Talmudic legends in Yiddish sold very well, and his "best of" stories were published in five editions between 1910 and 1929 (~~Tashrak passed away in 1926~~). His English-language columns in the *New York Herald* were so popular that he became a permanent contributor for that daily. The fact that Tashrak was a very popular writer is also mentioned, actually, by some of his critics.⁴⁰

Why, then, has Tashrak's work been forgotten even by scholars of Yiddish culture? The answer is mostly political. Tashrak belongs to a group of Yiddish writers (Dovid Hermalin and Yoyne Paley are also part of it), who were immensely popular among Jewish audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For many years, however, modern Yiddish culture has been studied as mostly a domain of the Jewish left (whether socialist, anarchist, or communist), whereas others were mainly disregarded. Furthermore, Tashrak's satire was often apolitical, following Eastern and Central European feuilletonists, who offered their social critic peppered with light humor, without committing necessarily to a discernible party or ideological line. Tashrak's subtle wit and moderate conservative skepticism are not comfortably situated within the field of Yiddish studies, which categorizes writers according to political loyalties and literary camps.

⁴⁰ Circulation estimates appear in N. Goldberg, "Di yidishe prese in di fareynikte Shtatn 1900-1940", *YIVO bleter* 18 (Nov.-Dec. 1941): 130, 133, 137. Khaykin, in *Yidishe bleter*, 101, 110-111, estimates a circulation of 70,000 in 1898 and 100,000 2-3 years later. According to him, the *Tageblatt* was the second richest foreign-language in America, surpassed only by the German *Staats Zeitung*. See also, Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 518-522.

No less important, Tashrak's moderate conservatism and traditionalism were not taken well by critics. Those who viewed his work more positively, such as historian and lexicographer Zalman Reyzin, noted that Tashrak's writing was "good-natured" and displayed understanding and had "a forgiving and sad smile" in its portrayal of the "negative traits" of Jewish life in America. Other commentators, however, pointed to his catering to Jewish sensibilities, frequently portraying Jews as smarter and more sober than non-Jews, which they viewed as schmaltzy, soppy flattering of Jewish self-image. Perhaps more importantly, some Yiddish critics frowned upon Tashrak as a *shund* writer. Journalist and critic A. Voliner (penname of Eliezer Landoy) argued that Tashrak's style is "sloppy and laden with overuse of Englishisms and Germanism" where "the sentence is badly built." Even at his best, with his Sholem Aleichem-like stories, "one could see the shabbiness of journalistic writing" in Tashrak's work. Voliner asserted that through Tashrak's writings, "you can see the metamorphosis of the Jewish immigrant in America in the last three-four decades. And that is interesting history, even if not good literature."⁴¹ Together with the political dimension, therefore, the responses to Tashrak were doubly negative, castigating him as both a conservative and a shundist.

Still, a neglected-but-popular writer such as Tashrak offers not just an opportunity to discover understudied aspects of the Jewish urban experience and modern Yiddish culture, but also allows us to tap into a less refined level of beliefs, behavior, judgments and attitudes of Yiddish-speaking Jews in America. Tashrak's writings were certainly humorous, while his social

⁴¹ Reyzin and Voliner are in Reyzin, *Leksikon*, 4: 905-906, 910. See also what bal-Makhshoves (Isidor-Yisroel Eliashev) wrote about Tashrak in Nizer (ed., et al) *Leksikon*, 8: 808. Cf. the eulogy to Tashrak in *Groyser kundes*, October 15, 1926: 4. On shund literature, see Justin D. Cammy, "Judging *The Judgment of Shomer*: Jewish Literature versus Jewish Reading", in Justin D. Cammy (ed. et al.), *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University, 2008), 85-127.

critique was often moderated by his appeal to Jewish sensibilities and self-image. That does not mean he refrained from dealing with the vulgar and laughable aspects of Jewish life in America, and in doing that he offered a more subtle and different kind of satire. Finally, Tashrak presents an intriguing case study of how the mythic shtetl was transported to the New World, provided a comforting feeling to the Yiddish readership, without avoiding social criticism, or losing sight of the quirks and shortcomings of the city's denizens.