



“Minsk, My Minsk, The Old Bolshevik”

Sore Kahan’s Poetry as a Mirror of the Transformation of Secular Jewish Culture in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the poetry of Sore Kahan (1885–1941), a Jewish writer from Belarus who wrote in Yiddish. Her poems reflect a pivotal period in the development of Soviet Yiddish culture, and this article presents the way in which Kahan’s writing intersects with the social changes brought by the consolidation of Bolshevik power in 1917. It investigates the role of women writers in secular Jewish culture in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, spotlighting their contributions. It explores how Yiddish served as a tool for expressing the Soviet state’s objectives, while also delving into the historical context portrayed in Kahan’s poetry. Through literary analysis, it uncovers the meanings and values within these poems, analyzing their alignment with and deviation from the state’s demands.

KEYWORDS: Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Minsk, poetry, Sore Kahan, women’s history, Yiddish



Following the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power and began curtailing the freedoms and rights introduced in Russia after the democratic February Revolution. At the same time, new Soviet policies aimed to forge the new, multiethnic empire into a socialist federation while also seeking to eliminate discrimination based on religion or ethnicity.¹ These policies ushered in significant changes, including access to education for Jews, facilitating increased social mobility and active participation in public life.² While this involvement primarily occurred through the Communist Party, certain aspects of Jewish tradition endured despite official suppression, affecting the unique and complex phenomenon of Soviet Jewish culture.³ This intersection of the new political order and traditional values varied across time and space. A special place in this story belongs to Minsk, a city once called “the Jerusalem of Belorussia,” which



became the capital of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) that was proclaimed on 1 January 1919.⁴

The subject of this article is Sore Kahan's poetry, which is analyzed against the background of the transformation and development of secular Jewish culture in the BSSR. Sore Kahan (Sara Kagan,⁵ 1885–1941) was a Jewish writer from Belarus who created her works in Yiddish; she died during the Holocaust, in the Minsk Ghetto. Kahan wrote during an extremely important moment in the development of Soviet Yiddish culture, just before and during the time that it was severely limited by the Stalinist Soviet State. As such, Kahan was an active participant in the development of Jewish culture in one of its major pre-war centers, as the Soviet Union was the home of the second-largest population of European Jews and, especially in the 1920s and early 1930s, was a place of vibrant Yiddish culture.

I view Kahan's poetry as emblematic of the generation that was publishing in the 1930s; all of her books of poems originate from this period.⁶ In Kahan's work, the lyrical subject does not adhere to the assumptions of the modernist avant-garde; instead, it actively engages in social life to promote socialist ideals and cultivate "correct" attitudes. Because of their incorporation of Soviet ideology, her poems might seem to readers tendentious, and even clumsy.⁷ However, when considering generational and gender-related categories, the figure of the poet transcends the constraints of such a narrative.⁸ Kahan stands out as one of the few authors publishing in Minsk during this period, and her unique position as a woman author and a Jew motivated me to explore her poetry. This article has three objectives: first, with the example of Sore Kahan, to identify and describe the role of women writers in secular Jewish culture in the BSSR during the early Soviet period; second, to spotlight elements in Kahan's work that reflect the characteristics of the writers' generation in the 1930s; and third, to delve into aspects of her poetry that transcend ideology, revealing what I interpret as "fissures" in her programmatic socialist realist aesthetics.

Little is known about the life and background of Sore Kahan, and in-depth archival research cannot be undertaken at the moment due to the current political situation in Belarus.⁹ As a result, I treat Kahan's literary work as both her testimony and a repository of knowledge about the writer herself. She made her literary debut late in her life, probably as late as the 1930s.¹⁰ Her volumes of poems, *In Veg* [On the Road, 1934], *Mayn Heymland* [My Homeland, 1938], and *Undzere Mentshn* [Our People, 1940],¹¹ as well as a collection of short stories, *Der Ershter Premiye* [First Prize, 1938], were published in the decade preceding the war. In 1941, she published a novel titled *Der Fidler* [Fiddler]. All of her works were printed according to the Soviet standards of Yiddish orthography. In 1940, a collection of her stories was published in Belarusian translation.¹² In this article, I focus on her poetry, because this type of literary work reacts very strongly to externally introduced changes, becoming a site of formal and linguistic experiments, especially in the 1920s and 1930s.

So far, Sore Kahan's name in the context of contemporary Belarusian culture has only been mentioned by scholars as a reference point in cultural and literary studies devoted to other subjects.¹³ Such references are usually limited to brief biographical notes and lists of her works. I am not aware of any in-depth studies of her work, and her poetry has seemingly failed to attract the interest of researchers.¹⁴ The limited

scope of this article prevents an exhaustive analysis of Sore Kahan's work, although I hope that this foray will open doors to investigate the multi-layered nature of Kahan's writing. The interpretation presented here serves as an introductory exploration into her poetry as a significant facet of Yiddish culture.

Jews and Jewish Culture in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic

Many Jews adapted well to the postrevolutionary conditions and took part in the transformation of "Jews into Soviets," creating a new Soviet intelligentsia.¹⁵ Thanks to their newly acquired political and civil rights, Soviet Jews, especially representatives of the lower classes, actively participated in this process, as beneficiaries of the new political order and a significant segment of the party's professional and administrative apparatus. Of course, participation in the revolution's success came at a price. At the official level, such engagement could only occur within the framework established by the Communist Party. By the end of the 1920s, all Jewish political organizations, religious institutions, and other Jewish communal groups that were not subordinated to the party had been abolished. This does not mean, however, that all forms, places, and opportunities for engaging in Jewish life completely disappeared. Certain aspects of Jewish tradition, although suppressed at the official level, continued to be cultivated. The new Bolshevik Jew could thus be a figure in which new and old values intersected. The position and participation of Jews in Soviet social life varied according to regional and local traditions and conditions, with Minsk holding a special place in Jewish history.¹⁶

According to Elissa Bemporad, Minsk was a historical Jewish center long before the formation of the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The city was located in the center of the Pale of Settlement, an area densely populated by Jews, where the majority of Soviet Jews lived until World War II. At the end of the nineteenth century, Minsk served as one of the largest centers of the Jewish labor movement and Jewish socialism (Bundism and Socialist-Zionism) in the Russian Empire. Between 1903 and 1905, the city was an important place of protests against the waves of anti-Jewish pogroms.¹⁸ Minsk was a tension-filled place, as it was the site of the turbulent events of World War I, the German and Polish occupations, interspersed with the February and October Revolutions. After the outbreak of World War I, thousands of refugees sought safety in Minsk, causing the city's population to grow from 100,000 to 140,000.¹⁹

The end of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution reorganized the territory of the Russian Empire, reshaping and transforming old historical and cultural divisions. These changes meant reorientation of the existing relations, as the newly created BSSR was cut off from the historical territory of Lithuania and its traditional orientation toward Lithuania was replaced by a turn toward Moscow. New relations developed between the elites of Minsk and Moscow, although the hierarchy of the relations, or rather the subordination of Minsk to the capital of the Soviet Union, was fairly obvious.²⁰ In the 1920s, many of Minsk's poorer Jewish and non-Jewish residents migrated to Russian-speaking Moscow and Leningrad in search of better living conditions.²¹ At the same time, the new reality was bringing sweeping social and cultural changes,

aimed at creating the Soviet Jew. For many Jews in the BSSR, the new Soviet context, despite its authoritarian nature, was embraced with joy and hope for peace and stability.

The establishment of the BSSR affected Minsk's status as it developed from a provincial capital into the capital of a Soviet republic—a new political and administrative center. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, Belarus was one of the least developed regions of the European part of the Russian Empire, with one of the highest illiteracy rates in these areas.²² At the time, many Jews lived in poverty. The industrialization and modernization of Minsk spurred by the revolution changed the social and economic character of the city. However, despite Minsk's relatively small size compared to other Soviet cities such as Moscow, Kyiv, and Odesa, and its somewhat provincial status, its Jewish population grew due to immigration from surrounding towns and villages. At that time, Jews were the second largest national group in the BSSR after Belarusians, and the disparity between their numbers was minimal. In 1928, Belarusians made up almost 42.5 percent of the population of Minsk, while Jews accounted for almost 41 percent.²³ As a result, the historical continuity of Jewish traditions remained unbroken in Minsk until the outbreak of World War II.

Jews actively participated in the creation of Soviet culture, in their case expressed primarily in Yiddish. Thanks to Soviet state policy, in the 1920s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was the only country in the world with state-sponsored Jewish publishing houses, writers, and schools.²⁴ Jewish intellectuals engaged actively in creating a new secular Yiddish culture built on the fundamentals of socialist ideology. The first step to achieving that objective was the education of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia.²⁵

Language became an important component of national identification for Jews, more important than for Ukrainians or Belarusians, who could also construct their national identity on the basis of territory.²⁶ The Soviet state chose Yiddish as the only language that could be used to define Soviet Jewry. The authorities reduced the influence of Hebrew, which was strongly associated with the religious sphere and with Zionism. In the BSSR, Yiddish gained the status of a state language, as the language of one of the four main national groups (the other three being Belarusians, Poles, and Russians). The situation was by no means similar in other Jewish centers, such as Odesa, Kyiv, or Moscow. According to the 1920 Declaration of Independence of the Belorussian Republic, Yiddish achieved “[f]ull legal equality of languages (Belorussian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish) with respect to government agencies and in organizations and institutions of public education and socialist culture.”²⁷ Yiddish replaced the “bourgeois” Russian as the new language of Jewish science and culture, becoming an important alternative to Russian-speaking acculturation. The position of Yiddish was strengthened by the weakness of the Belarusian language's status among the Jewish community, whose representatives, especially in the cities, did not perceive Belarusian as an attractive alternative to either Yiddish or Russian.²⁸

This new Yiddish-based concept of Soviet Jewry required, on the one hand, the particularist, communism-oriented, secular modernization of Yiddish, and on the other hand, the creation of a culture that could become a basis for the new collective identity of the group. This dual role of language—first as a tool of Soviet propaganda,

a key instrument in spreading Marxist ideology among the Jewish masses, and second as a defining factor of Jewish national identity—resulted in Yiddish acquiring a new status in the political, academic, and everyday lives of Soviet Jews. On 8 August 1920, the Main Bureau of the Jewish section of the Communist Party (Evseksiia) of Belorussia began its operations, with the aim of Sovietizing the Jewish population using Yiddish, destroying prerevolutionary Jewish life, and creating new educational, political, and cultural institutions. The removal of legal barriers to education in the Soviet Union encouraged Jewish migration to large cities and their access to secular higher education. Minsk became a regional magnet, attracting young Jews from towns across Belarus and beyond. Its geo-cultural character as a city with no historically rooted homogeneous national culture fostered the rapid integration of Jews into industry and culture, and the raising of their status as an important group in the political life of Minsk.

Revolution vs. Tradition in Sore Kahan’s Poetry

Literature played an extremely important and useful role in shaping the image of a citizen within the revolutionary state. The party supported the new Soviet Jewish culture from the top down, dictating new cultural trends. The political sphere closely intertwined with literary life. Since 1934, the Union of Soviet Writers, the official literary organization of the USSR, had counted Jewish writers as members. Moscow, the political and artistic hub of the state, hosted their training, although it’s worth noting that each Soviet republic established its own literary center.²⁹ The people chosen for membership in the Union of Soviet Writers had to meet the Union’s professional and ideological criteria.³⁰ Also in 1934, at the Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, socialist realism was proclaimed the main and only legitimate trend in Soviet art. Socialist realist literary texts had to be politically engaged, realistic in form and socialist in content, because they represented the new Soviet ideology and simultaneously functioned as its tools. A common element of all socialist realist works was the vision of the world they presented, whose essence was the absolutization of communist values. For literature should “without limiting its artistic ambitions—identify with the value system of the state and, in keeping with this spirit, have an educational effect on the masses.”³¹ Thus, the function of socialist realist literature was mainly instrumental and propaganda-related, leaving basically no room for other objectives.³²

In the Jewish world, the Cultural Revolution played out in Yiddish. Cultural life became a field of negotiation between “acting Bolshevik” and “acting Jewish,” that is, between the prevailing communist practice and the preservation of Jewish identity,³³ as a kind of liminal being.³⁴ Literary production illustrated the hard life of the Jews under the tsars and the happiness that the Bolsheviks brought them by liberating them from tsarist rule, the yoke of religion, and the oppression of the bourgeoisie. According to the socialist realist vision, reality was dichotomously divided on the basis of a simple distinction between “us” and “the other,” “the good” and “the bad.” In the world of this fundamental anthropological opposition, the “other” evoked anxiety and hostility, and posed a threat to what is “ours.”

Sore Kahan clearly described her approach to literature in her poem (which I see as her manifesto) “Ruf Fun Arbeter-Shlogler in der Literatur” [The Appeal of the Literary Shock-Worker], opening the volume *In Veg*. The collection begins with a clear declaration of the writer’s position:

Host, land, mikh gerufn, Bin ikh gekumen vi shtendik a greyte tsum kamf un tsum zig, es hot shoyrn mayn hamer nit eynmol gevunen, geyt itst mayn pen zikh farmestn in krig.	You called me, the land, so I came As always ready for struggle and victory, Not once did my hammer win, now my pen will face the fight. ³⁵
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The lyrical subject presents herself as a soldier, a builder who responds to the call of the country for which she wants to fight and win. Here Kahan expresses the ideas that would later form the ethos of the Stakhanovite movement, named after the legendary achievements of Aleksei Stakhanov, who exceeded his coal mining target by about 1,400 percent in 1935.³⁶ As a Jewish writer-worker, Kahan wants to participate in this production movement by meeting and exceeding production targets. However, her weapon of choice in this fight for progress will not be a rifle or a hammer, but a pen. In the next stanzas, the subject announces that she will create her art from cement so that it is “hard as rock and heavy as lead,” and she will “file” her words to ensure they fit into the building under construction and can take their rightful place inside. The final stanzas also show that the hammer and the pen are synonymous in the new reality—both serve a just cause, that of building the country. The position of the writer is equated with that of the builder, and literature becomes an important building block within the system.

A similar viewpoint can also be found in Kahan’s other poems. In the title poem from the volume *In Veg*, the subject describes what “being on the road” means to her. She perceives living in a country ruled by postrevolutionary changes, the birthplace of a new political system, as an opportunity for herself and her work: “Mayn lid iz geborn durkh zign” [My song was born from victory].³⁷ She treats her first poems as merely an imperfect attempt to glorify the heroic days. Nevertheless, in writing there is no place for sadness and the past, but only for rejoicing in victory and building a new country:

Un dervayl mit mayn pruv mit mayn ershtn gey ikh aroys haynt in veg – ikh vil nokh dergreykhn tsu vert zayn bazingen di heldishe teg.	Meanwhile, with my attempt, my first I’m going on the road today I still want to become worthy To celebrate heroic days. ³⁸
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To ensure that the reader has no doubt as to the meaning of the presented stories, Kahan introduces numerous categories (homeland, fight, victory), events,³⁹ and leading communist figures into her poems as metonymies of ideological interpretation.

The leader and protector of the nation, Stalin, who watches over his people from the Kremlin, is the key figure in this context. Many of Kahan's poems contain various references to Stalin: from “A Grus dem Firer” ([A Greeting for the Leader] in the volume *Undzere Mentshn*), through a separate section devoted to this historical figure titled “Lider vegn Stalinen” ([Poems about Stalin] in the volume *Mayn Heymland*), to lullabies in which Stalin's childhood and his character are presented to position him as a role model (“A Vig-Lid” [A Lullaby], one in *In Veg* and one in *Mayn Heymland*). The process of a Soviet upbringing was supposed to start very early, hence many of Kahan's poems were addressed to children. Aside from Stalin, her works also reference Lenin and other contemporary heroes of Soviet society, for example: Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), the German Marxist theorist and communist women's rights advocate (the poem “Bam Keyver fun Klara Tsetkin” [At the Grave of Clara Zetkin] in the volume *In Veg*); Sergo Ordzhonikidze (1886–1937), head of the Caucasus Section (Kavburo) of the Russian Communist Party, who led the Bolshevik movement in the Democratic Republic of Georgia (the poem “Sergo Ordzhonikidze” in the volume *Undzere Mentshn*); Zhambyl Zhabaev (1846–1945), an *akyn* (a Kazakh folk poet) (the poem “Dzshambuln” [For Zhambyl] in the volume *Undzere Mentshn*); as well as Polina Osipenko (1907–1939), Marina Raskova (1912–1943), and Vera Lomako (1913–1984), who made a nonstop flight from Sevastopol to Archangelsk in an MP-1 seaplane in 1938, covering 2,416 km and breaking the distance flight record for women (the poem “Dray Tekhter—Dray Tayere Vekhter” [Three Daughters—Three Dear Sentinels] in the volume *Undzere Mentshn*).⁴⁰

The Bolshevik Revolution brought important changes not only in the sociopolitical sphere, but also in moral and gender contexts. The “woman question” became a significant element of the politics of the Communist Party. In the new Soviet order, women's lives changed. First, women were expected to free themselves from the “dark forces” of religion, join the party, and become active in the newly established Soviet institutions.⁴¹ In the new reality, women (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) could move freely, get educated, acquire technical and medical knowledge, and enter all sectors of the urban economy. Like many others, women also moved to Minsk in the 1920s in search of employment opportunities. Jewish women, like men, hoped to find work as teachers or cultural activists in the newly established Soviet-Jewish schools and institutions.⁴²

Conducting research on Jewish women in Soviet-era Minsk, as Bemporad noted, is not an easy task. At that point, the Belarusian capital lacked the institutions, such as schools for Jewish girls or philanthropic associations run by Jewish women, that existed elsewhere in Eastern Europe.⁴³ In Minsk, two political, communist agencies dealt with the status of Jewish women in Soviet society: 1) *Evseksiia*; and 2) the Minsk branch of the *Zhenotdel* (*Zhenskii otdel Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza*, or Women's Department of the Communist Party, established in 1920).⁴⁴ They both collaborated. At the end of 1930, the Party closed down both of them, “deeming both agencies a useless threat to Communist harmony.”⁴⁵ Thus, during the 1930s there were almost no paths for the integration of women who dealt with educational, economic, or social issues in the political, economic, and cultural arena.

However, the emphasis on ideological emancipation, spread by the Soviet discourse, did not necessarily translate into a change of many conservative beliefs. As

with any women in any modern society, Jewish women in the Soviet system faced the challenge of having to negotiate their role as active participants in the public space. The issue of reconciling work with the role of homemaker was a particularly significant part of this discussion. In practice, the scope of Jewish women's participation in the public sphere was very limited. Joanna Lisek writes that there was only one woman among the top leadership of the Bund, and only one admitted into the ranks of the Central Bureau of Evseksiia.⁴⁶ Historian David Shneer finds the absence of women in Soviet Yiddish culture ironic from a historical perspective, as Yiddish—unlike Hebrew, the language of educated Jews—was long considered to be a Jewish jargon⁴⁷ associated with the sphere of women and the lower classes.⁴⁸

It is therefore worth asking what Sore Kahan's profile looks like in the perspective of the engagement of women in society and politics. As noted above, very little is known about Kahan's private life, so it is difficult to trace the specific reasons motivating her life decisions. We do know that she was born in 1885, in the village of Maksimavichy, to a large family (she was one of ten children). Her father worked in forestry, and her mother was a housewife.⁴⁹ If her poetry is to be treated as a record of her autobiographical experiences, then her house seems to have been very poor:

A shmoler alker mit nase vent, a kranker tate mit dare hent, un kinder borves, dar un hoyl – dos iz geven amol mayn heym.	A cramped bedroom with wet walls, A sick father with withered hands, and barefoot children, thin and bare – this was once my home. ⁵⁰
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Still, this is the same house where Kahan's mother would sing songs, so it is possible that Kahan inherited her sensitivity to words from her mother.

As an adult, Kahan worked as the head of the municipal library in Bobruysk. From time to time she appeared at writers' meetings in Minsk, and she moved to Minsk with her family in 1935, following the suggestion of the municipal party organization of the Jewish Section of the Writers' Union of the BSSR. After the move, she began evening studies at the Faculty of Philology of the Belarusian Pedagogical Institute. Clearly, Kahan took advantage of the educational and professional opportunities that the state offered her. Kahan was also the mother of three sons. How did she reconcile these social roles? Unfortunately, her poems do not provide an exhaustive answer to this question. However, it is possible to make some assumptions. As her poetry is permeated with visions of revolutionary happiness, one can speculate that for Kahan, the new reality was, above all, a chance at education and becoming a writer: "In eyn hant a hamer, a pen—in der tsveyter,/ Gey ikh haynt boyen mayn land un mayn kunst" [In one hand a hammer, a pen in the other,/ Today I go to build my country and my art].⁵¹

It seems that Sore Kahan, as a Jewish women writer, was an exceptional phenomenon among the Minsk Jewish literary scene. In her case, we can discuss communism's emancipatory influence on her professional life. Kahan worked as a member of the editorial team of the Yiddish literary magazine *Shtern* [Star].⁵² The first issue appeared in 1925, and important artists such as Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1937), Dovid Hofshhteyn (1889–1952), and Shmuel Halkin (1897–1960) published their works there.⁵³ As Bempo-

rad notes, analysis of the magazine’s content shows that the participation of women’s voices in its creation was very limited. In 1932, *Shtern* published only two poems by women, one of them written by Sore Kahan. Furthermore, *Shtern* also published an article written by literary critic Rivka Rubin, who soon afterwards moved to Moscow to join the Jewish literary establishment. It is worth adding here that in 1932, still before moving to Minsk, Sore Kahan was the only woman member of the Jewish Section of the Writers’ Union of Belorussia.⁵⁴

Reading Sore Kahan’s Yiddish poems, we can also ask which aspects of them—if any—reflect Jewish tradition. Is its presence expressed only in the pronunciation of certain words, some Hebraisms and the use of Yiddish?⁵⁵ Among Kahan’s poetry that appeared in print in the 1930s, there are hardly any traces of Jewish tradition to be found. Nonreligious lifestyle and scientific atheism were important elements in the education and upbringing of the new Soviet generations. As the poet herself declared in the poem “In Veg”: “Ikh vil haynt nit kukn tsurik” [I don’t want to look back today],⁵⁶ she wants to look to the future. From this perspective, Kahan does not discuss religious topics, issues related to Zionism, or any other socialist organizations. Her poem “Bam seyder aleyn” [Alone at the Seder], published in 1929 in the newspaper *Der Apikoyres* [The Apostate]—which explores the divide between the religious parental generation and the children moving away from Jewish tradition—was not included in any of Kahan’s published volumes.⁵⁷ Kahan pursued an agenda that aligned with the policy of the Jewish Section of the Communist Party.⁵⁸ In the 1920s, before Kahan published her volumes of poems, when part of the official Soviet culture allowed for voluntary and consciously Jewish participation, incorporating Jewish tradition into literary works was possible and more accessible. Grassroots, authentic, and Sovietized Jewish culture was an important stage in the creation of a specifically Soviet Jewish identity. Below, I demonstrate that the social revolution did not mean the obliteration of Jewish tradition, but its change and evolution, as well as the adaptation of some of its old elements to the new circumstances.

The revival of interest in writers such as Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitz, 1859–1916) during the 1930s was an example of the above-mentioned adaptation of Jewish tradition to the Soviet framework. Jews, like other nationalities, were entitled to have their own national heroes, as long as their celebration did not conflict with Soviet ideals.⁵⁹ Thus, the classic authors of Yiddish literature took on this role and became the new Soviet Jewish heroes. Sholem Aleichem was revered as a “Jewish national writer” throughout the entire USSR. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Kahan chose to write about him in one of her poems, “Sholem-Aleykhemen” ([For Sholem-Aleichem] in the volume *Undzere Mentshn*). She presents Aleichem as a writer for the masses whose work reflects prerevolutionary times, including, above all, the poverty in which Jews lived. In the poem, Sholem Aleichem is a figure from the dark past whose depiction illuminated contemporary circumstances, the “here and now,” of Kahan’s time.

The departure from Jewish tradition is most noticeable in the poem “Tsum Akhtn Mart” ([On the Eighth of March] in the volume *In Veg*). In it, Kahan urges women to collect gold, silver, iron, and copper to support the 1930 industrialization and collectivization campaign that was part of the First Five-Year Plan. At the time, the Minsk press

published articles praising women who had donated their Sabbath silver candlesticks and chalices to the revolution.⁶⁰ The poem depicts it as follows:

Nat aykh op fun haldz di goldgeshmidte keytn,	Take the chains of gold from your neck,
Vos hobn yornlang gebindn undzer gayst,	Which for many years have fettered our spirit,
geshtikt in undz gefiln, getoyt in undz dem viln,	They have choked our feelings, killed our will,
nat aykh zey di keytn, nemt zey un tserayst.	Here are these chains, take them and break them. ⁶¹

Although the description of the mobilization and gathering of construction materials resembles the biblical description of the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 35:22–26), such an interpretation does not seem to be justified. Addressed to women, the lyrical subject of the poem speaks directly about the limitations of the oppressive tradition and religion, and urges the female readers to break free and get rid of these chains by donating them to build a new country. The imperative mood used in the poem indicates a lack of any doubt or hesitation. Kagan's use of the phrase "di goldgeshmidte keytn" is intriguing. It can be interpreted as an allusion to Yitskhok Leyb Peretz's 1909 drama *Di Goldene Keyt* [The Golden Chain] and a reflection on Jewish tradition. The term "golden chain," often synonymous with traditional Jewish culture, represents the "mythologeme of Yiddish cultural continuity."⁶² However, in Kagan's context, it takes on a different meaning—it is not seen as connecting subsequent generations, but rather as a limitation on the generation of the Soviet revolution that must be overcome. In the postrevolutionary reality there is no place for the old world or looking back, symbolized by the "golden chain." Jewish women appear in the poem as proletarian women, who in the new reality are to constitute an important part of the Soviet people.

Thus, in Kahan's poetry published in the 1930s, Jewish tradition is noticeably absent. In her narrative, based on the party narrative of the Stalinist era, Jews are given a new life and have to liberate themselves from the past to become contemporary Soviet citizens. The semantic field in which the poet moves is defined by images and concepts taken from military terminology: fight, victory, enemy. Thus, Kahan creates a symbolic situation dominated by a spiritual and ideological war, but also a fight for territorial space. The cultural ideology of the time emphasized and strengthened the connection between Jews and their homeland, the USSR, particularly Belarus. An example of this is the historical poem *Dray Lyavonikhes* ([Three Lyavonichas] in the volume *Mayn Heymland*), in which the story of oppression and liberation is told through the prism of a Belarusian folk dance. The emphasis on the territory of the BSSR (as part of the USSR) is there to dissuade Jews from thinking about the Land of Israel as a homeland of the Jewish people as per the Zionist ideology, which was gaining momentum at that time. During the 1930s, Soviet Jewish identity was used to foster a new positive Jewish self-image, as the Jew became a Soviet hero who defended the homeland—the USSR—and accelerated the dawn of the bright future of communism, which is why traditional Belarusian regional motifs are present in Kahan's poetry.

Beyond Ideology? In Search of Fissures

As evidenced by her poetry, Kahan identified strongly with the ideology of communism. The ideological framing is therefore the basic interpretative framing of her work. However, conceptions of space and landscape may also be a promising research focus, carrying the potential for literary discoveries not immediately obvious in her poetry. By "space and landscape" I mean both the socialist city as a new space for building interpersonal relations,⁶³ forming a new person, and the nonurban landscape that functions as an important foundational context for the life and development of the poet's imagination.

Kahan's way of looking at the city is best expressed in the poem "Minsk" from the volume *In Veg*. The city of Minsk entered Sore Kahan's life fully in 1935, when she moved there from Bobruysk. Minsk, like Bobruysk, was a center of Belarusian Jewish culture and religion. For some time, Bobruysk was even considered the capital of Belarusian Jewish culture, due to its numerous yeshivas and synagogues, as well as serving as a hub for the activities of Bundists and Zionists.⁶⁴ In the poem, Minsk is a modern, industrial, developing city, where progress and improvement are visible at first glance:

<p>Volt ikh nit gevust dikh, kh'volt dikh nit derkent, bist oysgevaksn shtark, bist oysgevaksn groys, un vifl koymens naye shteyen dort farkemt mit yunginke tshuprines inderhoykh.</p>	<p>If I didn't know you, I wouldn't recognize you, You have grown strong, you have grown big, And how many new chimneys are standing up there, combed with a young shock of hair.⁶⁵</p>
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A particularly striking aspect of Minsk in the poem are the factory chimneys that rise to the sky and illuminate the city. The subject in the poem admires Minsk and addresses the city directly, using a special apostrophe: "Minsk, mayn Minsk, mayn alter Bolshevik" [Minsk, My Minsk, The Old Bolshevik]. This phrase, like the poem's final lines, reminds us that the first, founding congress of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Russia took place in Minsk in 1898:

<p>Minsk, mayn Minsk, mayn alter bolshevik, ikh kuk af dir, un s'shvimt a yor aroys. Nit umzist hot di partey mit yorn nokh tsurik dem tsuzamenfor dem ershtn dir fartroyt.</p>	<p>Minsk, my Minsk, the old Bolshevik, I look at you, and a year floats by. Not in vain did the Party years ago entrust you with the first congress.⁶⁶</p>
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Thus, the working-class context builds the text's interpretive framework. Words addressed to the city, "my city," old but with a youthful spirit, undergo transformation in

the text, making it seem as if the lyrical subject was in conversation with an old friend encountered after many years.

The poem “Minsk” could become a perfect representation of the genological⁶⁷ proposal of Wojciech Tomasiak, who suggested identifying a new genre in socialist realist poetry—in which the “postcard from a socialist city” should be distinguished.⁶⁸ Filled with happiness, the poem’s lyrical subject enters Minsk, watching the city through the window of the train: “ikh kuk in shoyb un gis zikh on mit glik, / un s’tantst in mir mayn harts fun yedn kuk” [I look through the window and I am full of happiness, and my heart dances with every look].⁶⁹ Minsk is presented as a young, beautiful man, and, at the same time, as a ship whose funnels support the sky. As I mentioned above, the 1930s were a special decade for Minsk in which the city, as the capital, acquired some features of a modern urban center. However, compared to other large cities in the European region of the Soviet Union, Minsk remained a provincial Jewish city of a limited size, with some features of a large *shtetl*.⁷⁰ Yet, in Sore Kahan’s poetry, Minsk is an inspiring metropolis that encourages literary experiments and creates a number of opportunities for self-development and education. In the example of this poem, which formally resembles a sonnet, we can clearly observe the author’s artistic ambitions. This is evident through the deliberate use of creative strategies, as evidenced by the formal structure of the poem and the rhyme scheme.

According to the assumptions of ecocriticism,⁷¹ space can be perceived not only as an element of the cultural landscape, but also analyzed as a certain ecosystem.⁷² Ecological humanities,⁷³ a relatively new paradigm within the field of the humanities, draws attention to landscape and nature as actors, witnesses, evidence, and archives that can be a source of knowledge about the past. This perspective offers a starting point for considerations about the special relationship that existed between natural conditions and Kahan’s mental state. Recognizing that nature is more than just the setting in which events take place, and that the natural environment can be treated as a causative factor of history, it is worth exploring how Kahan was influenced by the geographical location of both the area in which she grew up and the place where she spent her later years.

The above-mentioned themes may be explored in the “Lirik” [Lyric] section of *Mayn Heymland*, which contains several poems describing the nature of the Belarusian lands. In these poems, Kahan returns nostalgically to her childhood, which in her case means the village of Maksimavichy, where she was born and where she spent her youth. However, the past is no longer just the period marked by pain and misery, but also an almost Arcadian place of warmth and beauty. Thus, we find ourselves confronted with another significant breakthrough moment, the tendentious dichotomy between the bad, prerevolutionary past and the good Soviet times, dictated by the Soviet ideology. The poems still contain elements of language characteristic of communist poetics, but they also introduce a new level of sensitivity, which overcomes the socialist-realist rhetoric and poetics. They seem to point to a relationship between the lyrical subject and nature, which share a special bond. In the poem “In Shifl” [On a Boat], the subject’s words are addressed to a tree (a birch), which is called a friend: “Du, beryoze, beryoze mayn fraynd” [You, birch, birch my friend].⁷⁴ The encounter with the tree brings back good memories from the past, and gives solace and peace.

Finally, the birch is also the one to which the poet-lyrical subject wants to sing her song: "Vil ikh zingen, dir zingen biz tog, / vifl lider mayn harts nor farmogt" [I want to sing, sing to you all day as many songs as my heart has].⁷⁵ The familial relationship with nature also returns in the poem "Zolst Aroys tsum Bergele Shpatsim" [You Should Go for a Walk in the Mountains], in which the subject is greeted by all nature when on a walk: "Gey ikh um un s'grisen mikh, vi brider, / der vald, der taykh, di lonke un der tol" [I am going and the forest, the river, the meadow, and the valley greet me, like brothers].⁷⁶ Nature and working in the rural fresh air recall the good moments for which the subject yearns, untainted by violence and servitude: "Dermonen mir zikh mayne yugnt-lider" [I am reminded of my childhood songs].⁷⁷ In the poem, a walk in the mountains becomes a retreat that allows the lyrical subject to see things from a new perspective. There is something special about this hike. It takes place in solitude, away from people and the rest of the world. The subject remains in motion, she walks—referring to the literary topos—like a *homo viator*, "a person on the move," taking care of herself and her own wellbeing. For her, the walk awakens vivid memories. It is not an intellectual experience, but an emotional encounter. For centuries, in traditional societies, slow wandering was the domain of women—they walked to fetch water, plants, and herbs.⁷⁸ By repeating this movement, the force of nature allows the poet to take the blows and remain calm.

Many intellectuals have embraced the utopian ideals of social equality over the years. The desire for emancipation and faith in cultural development are usually strong in socialist states. Sore Kahan's poetry testifies to the existence of such a cultural formation in the BSSR. But does it mean that looking for elements from outside this ideological framework in Kahan's poetry is futile? Are there no records of her personal experiences or any artistic gestures that do not fit within the ideological framing to be found in her poems? As I have demonstrated, Kahan's poetry captured the image of traditional Jewish culture at its turning point—when, under ideological pressure, the old gave way to the new. The (non)presence of the "old" is overwhelming in her poems devoid of Jewish signifiers, in which the "old" is associated only with things that are bad and poor. Nevertheless, it seems that there are some places to be found in Kahan's poetry that are not obvious, but which represent certain fissures that testify to both the awakened intellectual aspirations of the poet and a sensitivity for which there was no place in the official narrative.

In this context, let us take a closer look at the poem "Bagegenish" ([The Meeting] from *Mayn Heymland*), which can be read as a starting point for reflection on significant topics in feminist criticism, that is, motherhood and loss. The lyrical situation in the poem is based on the eponymous "meeting" in which a mother is unexpectedly visited one morning by her daughter—in the form of a bird. The two women strike up a dialogue that expresses, on the one hand, their great joy at this meeting and, on the other, a surprise and disbelief that it has come to pass. The meeting lasts only a moment, as the bird flies into the room and immediately returns on its way. The daughter-as-bird talks enigmatically about the fact that she could not announce her visit in advance in any way and that she will later talk about heights and parachutes—which she ultimately fails to talk about, because she has to return to the planes that are waiting for her. While art (including literature) often aims to address a collective

experience, the personal story behind it remains inherently individual.⁷⁹ In most of Kahan's poems, that which is personal and intimate is nullified in the progressive, technocratic collective of the socialist utopia. However, in this poem, as I show below, the imagery of the industrial and technological innovation and progress of the Soviet state provides a backdrop that opens up space to talk about private feelings of longing, love, and yearning.

After moving to Minsk, Sore Kahan continued to work while taking care of her home and three sons. One of her children died of pneumonia in the second half of the 1930s, which affected her deeply. As Girsh Reles writes, Kahan withdrew from public life at that point and stopped participating in writers' meetings. Reles recalls meeting Kahan some time after her son's death, when she admitted that she did not feel up to doing anything. He adds that the poet's recovery took several years.⁸⁰ There is no place for death as an individual experience of loss in socialist poetry, which focuses on a young, dynamic, and developing world. Of course, people, as a collective, die for a just cause, but there is no tragic dimension to such death; the ideas triumph over death. However, when Kahan went through this difficult period, she continued to write or at least publish poetry. The 1938 volume *Mayn Heymland* is her only publication that opens with a dedication: "Dem ondenk fun mayn libn zun" [In memory of my beloved son].⁸¹ That is all, the only words addressed directly to a loved one. Perhaps the poem "Bagegenish," as a nonobvious ego-document,⁸² represents the meeting of the mother with her lost son, who fleetingly reappears in the mother's imagination, saying: "Ikh hob in himlen bloye zikh getrogn" [I took off to the blue sky].⁸³ In the poem, the son is replaced by the daughter Kahan never had. Perhaps it was easier for her to write about a nonexistent daughter. Perhaps this is Kahan's way of processing the loss of her beloved son, who is now looking at her from heaven:

Vish ikh oys di trern fun di oygn.	I wipe the tears from my eyes.
Kh'ze, in himl shteyt shoy'n hoykh di	I see that the sun is already high in
zun,	the sky,
S'iz mayn tokhter vayt avekgefloygn.	My daughter has flown far away.
Zay gezunt, mayn tokhter, zay gezunt!	Farewell, my daughter, farewell! ⁸⁴

The sky, where the poet's deceased son's presence lingers and from where he gazes upon his mother, may also be the liminal point in the poem. It is certainly not a religious space that allows for communing with God; yet it eludes the strict rules of Soviet secularism, which denies the existence of life after death. It is through the realm of heaven that the mother and the bird, symbolizing her son or daughter, can meet. When viewed through the lens of transgression as a category of interpretation,⁸⁵ this moment becomes a significant breakthrough in Sore Kahan's poetry.

In the poem "Bagegenish," not all fragments of the daughter's description are clear and understandable to the readers, leaving us with unanswered questions for now. The part about parachutes and airplanes is particularly surprising and intriguing:

Efn, mame, kh'vel dir dertseyln shpeter	Open, mom, I'll tell you later
fun parashiutn, un fun hoykhn, un fun	About the parachutes, about the high,
alts;	and about everything;

ikh bin geshprungen zibn toyznt
meter.

itst vil ikh shtark onkushn dayn haldz.

That I jumped from seven thousand
meters.

But now I just really want to kiss
your neck.⁸⁶

Is the bird a woman parachutist?⁸⁷ I tried to find information about this in Kahan's biography, but so far I have not found anything significant. Perhaps such information could be helpful in reading Kahan's poetry and her experiences recorded in poems. The theme of a mother-daughter relationship still needs to be explored. However, I believe that the voice of this poem can be considered a symbolic light illuminating the "black land," as described by Luce Irigaray in her work in which she emphasized the sparse presence of cultural texts depicting the "relationship with the mother."⁸⁸ The nonobvious character of this relationship (mother—daughter—planes) in Kahan's poem leaves it open to further reflection and exploration.⁸⁹ The symbolic subversion performed by the poet may constitute an artistic gesture with deeper meaning. The figure of mother and child and the relationship between them allow Kahan to talk about intimate love and loss that were beyond the scope of Soviet ideology.

Conclusion

The multitude of factors that influenced the formation of Jewish culture means that today it should not be referred to as a monolith, but as Jewish cultural pluralism, and it should be examined in its local manifestations.⁹⁰ This article presents a case study of the work of Sore Kahan, a Jewish writer from the BSSR, writing at a turning point in secular Jewish culture. The study applied an intersectional approach to the analysis of Sore Kahan's poetry, taking into account a number of historical, social, and cultural factors, and analyzing her poetry in terms of binary oppositions, primarily through the lens of tradition (continuity vs. revolution, revolution vs. rupture), region (influence of political systems), gender (man vs. woman), nationality (Belarusian, Jewish, Soviet), and language (Yiddish, Belarusian, Russian, Hebrew). The analysis, considering these various intercultural identification characteristics, reveals that Sore Kahan embodies both the patterns typical of writers from the 1930s generation and a unique role as a Jewish women writer in the literary scene of the BSSR.

Such considerations certainly do not reflect the full potential reflected in Sore Kahan's works. However, her poems unveil various shades of her work and her life experience. In reading her poetry, we can follow the working-class, political dimension of her works and try to study them as the output of the only female member of the Jewish Section of the Union of Writers of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Taking into account the perspective of ecocriticism, we can also choose a geographical focus, looking for traces of national and regional sites and elements of the cultural landscape. Furthermore, using the tools of feminist criticism, we can explore themes characteristic of women's works, such as the mother-child relationship, and I suspect many others that illustrate Sore Kahan's experience.

Although practically absent from contemporary literary discourses in Belarus, Sore Kahan is not an unknown figure. This article serves as a first step toward invoking the

reader's interest in the work of this Jewish and Belarusian poet writing at the time when important changes occurred in Jewish culture in the BSSR, and more broadly in the Soviet Union. Analyzing Kahan's poetry aligns with the trend of researching smaller literary centers in Yiddish culture. We also see the historical moment captured and reflected in Kagan's poetry. In her poems, we can observe how Yiddish, as a material manipulated in the course of artistic expression, implements the objectives of the Soviet state policy, at the same time going beyond the constrained and formulaic characteristics of Stalinist socialist realism. The article also contributes to new research on Jewish culture in both Soviet and contemporary Belarus, deepening our nuanced understanding of Soviet culture and highlighting its micro-histories closely entwined with local context.

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◆ Notes

1. See, for example, Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 128.
2. Sasha Senderovich, *How the Soviet Jew Was Made* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 3.
3. For more, see David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
4. For more, see Irina Kopchenova and Mikhail Krutikov, eds., *The Belarusian Shtetl: History and Memory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2023).
5. The name Sore Kahan is also written in Cyrillic as Сапа Караһ, and is consequently transliterated as Sara Kagan.

6. Girsh Reles, *Evreiskie sovetskie pisateli Belorussii: Vospominaniia* [Jewish Soviet Writers of Belarus: Memoirs], trans. into Russian by Mikhail Yakovlevich Akkerman and Semen L’vovich Liokumovich (Minsk: Kolas, 2006), 69.

7. Many of Sore Kahan’s poems can be considered tendentious works created under the dictates of the socialist requirements in force in Soviet literature at the time. They are filled to the brim with symbolism and values of the Soviet cultural space, following the path laid down by Maxim Gorky. Moreover, Gorky himself is the subject of one of Kahan’s poems, and she also alludes to his poetry in other poems (“A mentsh klingt shtolts” [A man—how proud it sounds] and “Gorki undzerer” [Our Gorky] from the volume *Undzere mentshn*. See Sore Kahan, “Gorki undzerer” [Our Gorky], in Sore Kahan, *Undzere mentshn* [Our People] (Minsk: Melukhe farlag, 1940), 25–26.

8. See Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik, “Generational and Gendered Memory of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, ed. Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik (New York: Routledge, 2020), 9–28. See also Mikhail Krutikov, *Der Nister’s Soviet Years: Yiddish Writer as Witness to the People* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019).

9. See Vitaliy Tsygankov, “Lukashenko pozhalovalsia rossiiskim zhurnalistam na evreiev” [Lukashenko complained to Russian journalists about Jews], *Radio Svoboda*, 19 October 2007, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/417359.html>, 2007. It would be interesting to examine the overall output of Sore Kahan, as well as the reception of her work in the 1930s.

10. Reles, *Evreiskie sovetskie pisateli Belorussii*, 69.

11. All volumes of poems were published in Minsk by Melukhe farlag. All translations of quoted passages, unless stated otherwise, were done by the author of this article.

12. *Apaviadanni* [Stories], (Minsk: Dziarzhavnay vydavetstva pry SNK BSSR, Rėdaktsyiā mastatskaī litaratury, 1940). The stories were translated by the important poet and prose writer Zmitrok Biadula (1886–1941).

13. As Kathryn Hellerstein emphasizes, “women writing poetry in Yiddish were often unacknowledged”; see Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 3.

14. The only publication I know that offers reflections on Kahan’s poetry is a 2005 book that contains Belarusian translations of a few of her poems and other writings. See Ales’ Bel’ski, ed., *Skryzhali pamiātsi, u trokh knihakh: Z tvorchai spadchyny pis’mennikaū Belarusi, iākiā zahinuli v hady Druhoi susvetnai vaīny* [Memorial tablets, in three volumes: From the creative heritage of Belarusian writers who died during World War II] (Minsk: Belaruski knihazbor, 2005). Sore Kahan also appears in the memoirs of Jewish poet and translator Girsh Reles (1913–2004), published in Yiddish in 2004 and translated into Russian two years later. See Reles, *Evreiskie sovetskie pisateli Belorussii*, 69–71. In 2021, Sore Kahan was also included in the *Far vos?* (Why?) project created by the artist known as Coffeemilka (Juliana Mikolutsкая). The project consists of a series of thirty postcards depicting Soviet-era Jewish writers of Belarus. One of these postcards shows Sore Kahan. All writers are depicted in a comic-book-like style, and the illustrations are accompanied by quotes, sayings, or fragments of reviews of their works. These projects may indicate that there is a certain need for explanation, interpretation, and willingness to make Kahan’s texts available to recipients from other cultural spheres. See Proekt *Far Vos? Evreiskie sovetskie pisateli v otkrytkakh* [Project Why? Jewish Soviet writers of Belarus in postcards], Facebook, 5 July 2021, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0UpQiTsDM3e5AGZ5cNwvKgGEmCBfwXhHtH6sjSKeXeLKBhE1CJU3y4Za9ZUA6kp8l&id=104265771268797.

15. See Anna Sternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

16. For more on the history of Soviet Jews, see Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

17. Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.

18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. *Ibid.*, 26.

20. *Ibid.*, 49 and 71.

21. For more on Jewish history outside of the Soviet centers, see Arkadii Zel'tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki 1917–1941* [Jews of the Soviet Provinces: Vitebsk and the Shtetls, 1917–1941] (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2006).

22. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 118.

23. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 39.

24. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation*, 2; Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 128–129.

25. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation*, 8.

26. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 82.

27. *Ibid.*

28. For more on Jewish and non-Jewish relations, see Daniil Romanovskii, "Otnosheniia mezhdru evreiami i okruzhaiushchim neevreiskim naseleniem v Vostochnoi Belorussii v period Vtoroi mirovoi voyny: K postanovke problemy" [Relations between Jews and the local Jewish community in eastern Belarus during World War II: Formulating the problem statement], in *Evrei Belarusi: Istoriia i kul'tura* [Jews of Belarus: History and Culture], vol. 5, ed. Inna Gerasimova (Minsk: Chetyre chetverti, 2000), 93–114.

29. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation*, 158.

30. See Gennady Estraiikh, "The Missing Years: Yiddish Writers in Soviet Bialystok, 1939–41," *East European Jewish Affairs* 46, no. 2 (2016): 176–191, here 176.

31. Janusz Sławiński, *Teksty i teksty* [Texts and texts] (Warszawa: PEN, 1990), 133.

32. Wojciech Tomasik, *Inżynieria dusz.: Literatura realizmu socjalistycznego w planie "propagandy monumentalnej"* [Soul Engineering: The Literature of Socialist Realism in the Plan of "Monumental Propaganda"] (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1999), 5.

33. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 49.

34. Senderovich, *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*.

35. Sore Kahan, "Ruf fun arbeter-shlogler in der literatur" [The Appeal of the Literary Shock-Worker], in Sore Kahan, *In veg* [On the Road] (Minsk: Melukhe farlag, 1934), 7.

36. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 267–268.

37. Kahan, "In veg," in Kahan, *In veg*, 41.

38. *Ibid.*, 42.

39. Examples include the poem "Bobruysker melukhishe nay-fabrik" [State Sewing Factory in Bobruysk] (in Kahan, *In veg*, 12), describing the creation of a new factory in Bobruysk; or the poem "Di lid fun ziger" [The Song of the Victor] (in Sore Kahan, *Mayn heymland* [My Homeland] [Minsk: Melukhe farlag, 1938], 56–59), presenting Stalin's reception of the "five hundreders" (*piatisotnitsy*, or female workers who gathered not less than 500 centners of sugar beet per hectare) in the Kremlin in 1935 (described by the press of the time, see "Priem kolkhoznits-udarnits sveklovichnykh polei rukovoditeliami partii i pravitel'stva," *Vecherniaia Moskva* [Evening Moscow], 11 November 1935, 1).

40. This history is presented in a short documentary entitled *Geroicheskie sovetskie zhen-shchiny* [Heroic Soviet Women] from 1938 (video, 2:04, uploaded 12 December 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3k88ATvpj2E>).

41. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 148–149.

42. For more on the social and political conditions of women's lives in the USSR, see Mary Buckley, "Women in the Soviet Union," *Feminist Review*, no. 8 (1981): 79–106; Wendy Z. Gold-

man, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

43. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 146.

44. For more on the Zhenotdel, see Richard Stites, "Zhenotdel: Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917–1930," *Russian History* vol. 3, no. 2 (1976): 174–193.

45. Elissa Bemporad, "Issues of Gender, Sovietization and Modernization in the Jewish Metropolis of Minsk," *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History; Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, no. 2 (October 2011): 285–311, here 309.

46. The woman's name was Malka Frumkina (nee Lifschitz), also known as Ester (1880–1943). She was called the ideological visionary of Soviet Yiddishism and held other important functions, such as an editor of the magazine "Der Veker" [The alarm clock]. See Joanna Lisek, *Kol ishe—głos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVI w. do 1939 r.)* [Kol Ishe: The Voice of Women in Yiddish Poetry from the Sixteenth Century to 1939] (Sejny: Fundacja "Pogranicze," 2018), 588; Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 261–263.

47. Yiddish was not officially proclaimed the national language of Jews, on a par with Hebrew, until the 1908 conference in Chernivtsi; see Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości: Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne* [Shades of identity: Jewish literature as a multilingual phenomenon] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2004), 8.

48. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation*, 26.

49. Ryhor (Girsh) Reles, "Kagan Sara," in: *Belaruskiia pis'menniki*, ed. Adam Mal'dzis, vol. 3 (Minsk: Belaruskaia entsyklopedyia, 1994), 60.

50. Sore Kahan, "Tsu der Stalinisher Konstitutsye" [To Stalin's constitution], in Kahan, *Mayn heymland*, 52.

51. Kahan, "Ruf fun arbeter-shlogler in der literatur," 8.

52. Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism (Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art)* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 170.

53. For more on the Yiddish literary journals, see Leonard Prager, "Literary Journals," *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Europe*, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Literary_Journals/Yiddish_Literary_Journals (accessed 10 October 2023).

54. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 170.

55. The Yiddish spoken by the inhabitants of the BSSR belongs to Northeastern Yiddish, the dialect of the North, also called Lithuanian Yiddish (Litvish). Its presence can be detected when the poet's texts are read aloud. In order to make the poem rhyme, Kahan opts for the pronunciation of some combinations of sounds that did not occur in standardized literary Yiddish.

56. Kahan, "In veg," 41.

57. *Bobruysk: sefer zikaron li-kehilat Bobruysk u-venoteha / Yisker-bukh far Bobruysker kehile un umgegnit* [Memorial Book of the Community of Bobruisk and its Surroundings], ed. Yehudah Slutski (Tel-Aviv: Tarbut ve-hinukh, 1967), vol. 1, 102–103 and 210.

58. Cf. Antony Polonsky, *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce i Rosji* [The History of Jews in Poland and Russia], trans. by Mateusz Wilk (Warszawa: PWN, 2014), 413.

59. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 64–65.

60. *Ibid.*, 161–162.

61. Kahan, "Tsum akhtn mart" [On the Eighth of March], in Kahan, *In veg*, 29.

62. Gennady Estraiikh, "Has the *Golden Chain* ended? Problems of Continuity in Jewish Writing," in *Yiddish in the Contemporary World: Papers of the First Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 1999), 119–132, here 120. *Di goldene keyt* is also the title of the Yiddish-language literary journal, founded in 1949 by Avrom Sutzkever and published in Tel Aviv, Israel.

63. See Tomasiak, *Inżynieria dusz*, 6.

64. Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans*, 52.

65. Kahan, "Minsk," in Kahan, *In veg*, 10.

66. *Ibid.*

67. I refer here to the branch of poetics that examines genres (from the Greek *génos*) and literary types, along with their various forms or varieties.

68. See Tomasiak, *Inżynieria dusz*.

69. Kahan, "Minsk," 10.

70. Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 50.

71. Cheryll Glotfelty's working definition is that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." See Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

72. Ewa Domańska, *Nekros: Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* [Necrosis: An Introduction to the ontology of the human dead body] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2017), 187.

73. See Ewa Domańska, "Humanistyka ekologiczna [Ecological Humanities]," *Teksty Dru-gie* [Second Texts] no. 1–2 (2013): 13–32.

74. Sore Kahan, "In shifl" [On a Boat], in Kahan, *Mayn heymland*, 77.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Sore Kahan, "Zolst aroys tsum bergele shpatsirn" [You Should Go for a Walk in the Mountains], in Kahan, *Mayn heymland*, 79.

77. *Ibid.*

78. See Frédéric Gros, *Filozofia chodzenia* [The Philosophy of Walking], trans. by John Howe (Warszawa: Czarna owca, 2017).

79. See Karen Archey, *After Institutions* (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2022), 33.

80. Reles, *Evreiskie sovetskie pisateli Belorussii*, 70–71.

81. Kahan, *Mayn heymland*, 2.

82. See Joanna Degler, Agnieszka Jagodzińska, and Marcin Wodziński, *Literatura autobiograficzna Żydów polskich: Tradycja, nowoczesność, płęć* [Autobiographical Literature of Polish Jews: Tradition, Modernity, Gender] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2024).

83. Sore Kahan, "Bagegenish" [The Meeting], in Kahan, *Mayn heymland*, 18.

84. *Ibid.*, 19.

85. See Maria Janion, Kazimiera Szczuka, *Janion: Transe—traumy—transgresje. 1. Niedobre dziecię* [Janion: Trances, Traumas, Transgressions. 1. Bad child] (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2012).

86. Kahan, "Bagegenish," 18.

87. Hanna Szenes (1921–1944), for example, joined the female auxiliary service of the British Air Force in 1943 and, a year later, parachuted into Yugoslavia with other volunteers to help partisan units save European Jews.

88. Luce Irigaray, *Ciało w ciało z matką* [Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother], trans. by Agata Araszkie-wicz (Kraków: eFka, 2000), 8.

89. The figures of mother and children often appear in Kahan's poems.

90. See David Biale, ed., *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002).