

Aron Vergelis: Survivor of the Destruction of Soviet Yiddish Culture, 1949 – 1953:

“Only I alone survived to tell you”
The book of Job, I:14–19.

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During the height of the Cold War the Soviet Yiddish poet Aron Vergelis (1918 – 1999) – the editor, for its whole existence, of the Yiddish journal *Sovetish heymland* was viewed by Jews both within the USSR and abroad primarily as an odious figure. His image was that of a typical *apparatchik* to whom the Soviet authorities had entrusted supervision of Yiddish culture in the USSR. He was seen as a talented Soviet apologete whose task it was to represent Soviet Jewry in the West in the face of severe political and ideological criticism regarding “the Jewish question in the USSR.”¹ An article about Vergelis in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* referred to him at having been an informer for the Soviet security services.² However, as early as the beginning of 1964, an anonymous Communist source abroad reported that Vergelis had suffered during the repressions against Soviet Jewish cultural figures in the late 1940s and early 1950s and that he had been expelled from both the Communist Party and the Union of Writers of the USSR.³

These opposing views are continued in recent historiography. Gennadi Kostyrchenko defined the role and place of Vergelis in the tragedy of Soviet Jewish culture of the late 1940s as follows: “...Salvaging his own freedom (and perhaps his very life as well), Vergelis... admitted publicly his own errors, cursed Jewish literary (mainly writers who had already been arrested), and denounced those representatives [of the literature] who still remained free...”⁴ In contrast, Benjamin Pinkus included Vergelis in the camp of national-

¹ Leonard Shapiro, “Russian Jewry after Stalin,” in *Russian Jewry 1917–1967* (New York, 1969), p. 492.

² Sol Liptzin, “Vergelis Aron,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1973), 2nd ed., Vol. 16, p. 111.

³ *Al Hamishmar*, 4 February 1964.

⁴ G.V. Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina. Vlast' i antisemitizm* (Stalin’s secret policy: the regime and antisemitism) (Moscow, 2001), p. 481.

communists and Yiddishists,⁵ Gennady Estraikh referred to him as “the perfect Jewish *homo soveticus*” characterizing him as

a prodigiously hard-working timeserver-turned-penitent when penitence became a requirement of the times? Whatever the answer, his name epitomizes the gains and sacrifices of the government-sponsored and censored Yiddish culture.⁶

David Markish, the son of Vergelis’ contemporary the Yiddish poet Perets Markish (1895 – 1952), epitomized the ambivalent evaluations of Vergelis thus: “Some see in him... an opportunist and a cynic or even a general in the KGB... In the view of others, Vergelis is a committed Communist and anti-Zionist who tried to preserve the remnants of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union.”⁷

Vergelis himself clearly recognized the ambiguity of his role in the history of Soviet Yiddish literature culture. Toward the end of his career, which was crowned with success from the 1960s through the 1980s he noted:

You, like others, will in the future evaluate what I did or did not do in the course of my life. But one does not have to see everything as either black or white. Keep in mind that I acted under specific conditions, at a specific time and place. Many of those who used to follow my coattails for years are now shouting “Vergelis was the authorities’ watchdog.” That is not true. What is true is that I was and remain a committed Communist. However, I also was and remain a Jew who has felt the pain of his people. I defended them and devotedly served our *mameloshn*. I did what others could not do or did not want to do... As for the authorities, they were occupied with their matters and I – with mine.⁸

⁵ Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 303.

⁶ Gennadi Estraikh, “Aron Vergelis: The Perfect Jewish Homo Soveticus,” *East European Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1997), p. 20. **Расширенный и дополненный по периоду второй половины 50-80х гг. вариант этой статьи, см.: Г. Эстрайх. Арон Вергелис: Главный еврей послегугаговского социализма // Архив еврейской истории. М., 2007, Т. 4, С. 125-144.**

⁷ *Ma’ariv*, 27 February 1987.

⁸ Interview with Vergelis (all interviews were taken by the author), September 1994.

In discussing the fate of Vergelis, the present article attempts to discover the reasons for the transition of the late Stalin regime to a strict policy of state antisemitism. This policy was manifested in the destruction of the remnants of Soviet Yiddish culture and in the repression of its creative figures. Attention will be paid to the questions of how Vergelis survived the situation, which was tragic not only for him but also for his whole culture and of what lessons he may have drawn from it. The answers will help us understand why he was later chosen as the most appropriate person to be in charge of the revival of Soviet culture in Yiddish from the 1960s to the 1980s, when they rejected the repressive methods of late Stalinism but maintained the policy of the forced acculturation and assimilation of the Soviet Jewish minority.

The fate of Vergelis is depicted in terms of the Soviet regime's destruction of the Yiddish culture. To clarify the latter process the article will examine three factors: 1) the influence of changes in Soviet-Israeli relations on Soviet attitudes toward the Jews; 2) the differences between two simultaneous campaigns, the one against "rootless cosmopolitans" and the one against "Jewish bourgeois nationalists"; 3) the expectations **разочарования** of the authorities regarding the attitudes of the Yiddish intelligentsia toward Soviet foreign policy and toward domestic policy concerning Soviet Jews.

The present article is based on memoirs; recently published or recently available archival materials (including the personal archive of Vergelis⁹); which have mostly remained unfamiliar even to researchers. Additional information and insights were provided by interviews conducted by the author between 1994 and 2007 – with Vergelis, with his daughter Natalia Vergelis, with his widow Evgeniia Kataeva, and with Misha Lev (1917–), Vergelis' classmate at the Yiddish division of Moscow State Pedagogical Institute in the late 1930s and executive editor of *Sovetish heymland* in the 1960s, and Mania Kotliarova, a former actress of the Moscow State Jewish Theater (GOSET) and a friend of

⁹ I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues Leonid Katsis for informing me that Vergelis' personal archive is located at the Moscow publishers *Lekhaim*, and to Arkadi Zeltser, whose observations and suggestions regarding earlier versions of this text have been very helpful.

Faina Matlina, Vergelis' first wife.¹⁰ An additional, unique source was the oral memoirs of Vergelis and of Faina Matlina that were recorded by Vergelis' grandson Ian Sheredeko between 1990 and 1994.¹¹

While making use of the audio-recordings of Aron Vergelis - профессионального литератора и пропагандиста, автор прекрасно осознает известную информационную ограниченность подобных источников для исторической реконструкции.¹² and interviews, the author has taken into consideration the following warning of Bruce Ross regarding the problem of the accuracy of sources of oral history:

in the majority of cases the task of the researcher consists not in determining the correct and the false versions..., but in elaborating a method by which the significance of actual biographical facts are formed

Именно Therefore, to the extent possible attempts were made to compare information from oral history with versions available in archival documents.

1. The Campaign against “Jewish Bourgeois Nationalism” in the USSR

At least from the early fall of 1946 high Party and government authorities expressed concern about the rise in Jewish national consciousness.¹³ The latter

¹⁰ The interview with Misha Lev was conducted in February 2007.

¹¹ Ian Sheredeko generously provided me access to the audio recordings [hereafter: Audio] of Vergelis' memoirs; copies of which are now in my possession.

¹² См., в частности Bruce M. Ross, *Remembering the Personal Past: Descriptions of Autobiographical Memory* (New York and Oxford, 1991).

¹³ Gennadi Kostyrchenko, *Out of the red shadows: anti-Semitism in Stalin's Russia* (Amherst, N.Y., 1995), pp. 60–64, 97–99. This was expressed publicly in the criticism heard at meetings of the Yiddish groups of the Union of Writers of the USSR that took place in Moscow and Kiev, as well as on the pages of *Eynikayt* and in the almanac *Heymland* and *Der Shtern* in 1946 and 1947 regarding “manifestations of nationalism and decadent and mystical attitude” in Soviet Yiddish literature (Benjamin Pinkus, “Soviet Campaigns Against ‘Jewish Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism,’ 1946 – 1953,” *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, No. 2, 1974, pp. 54–58; Shimon Redlich, *Propaganda and Nationalism in Wartime: the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee in the USSR 1941–1948* (Boulder, 1982), pp. 159–161.

was connected with the trauma of the Holocaust (which the Soviet press ignored) and Jewish rejoicing at the declaration of independence of the State of Israel.¹⁴ Against the background of the increasing Cold War with the West and the “tightening of screws” within the country one might have expected the repression of Soviet Jews. However, Soviet interest in the Middle East led to the decision to support Israel¹⁵ and, hence, the adoption of a more moderate policy towards Soviet Jews. For the Soviet Jews themselves their national sympathy for Israel was not felt to conflict with their loyalty to the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Nevertheless, on 7 September 1948, evidently in conjunction with the arrival in Moscow of Golda Meyerson (later Meir), the head of the Israeli delegation to the USSR, the first shrill anti-Zionist propaganda appeared in the Soviet press.¹⁷ Since this publication appeared in Yiddish in *Eynikayt* the official organ of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, it was apparently to be directed at Yiddish-reading Soviet Jews and also, possibly, at the Israeli political establishment, at that time almost all of whom had been born in Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe.

¹⁴ To a great degree this was connected with the increasing antisemitism among the population during the War, difficulties experienced by those Jews who had survived by being evacuated far from their homes, along with the opposition to and, sometimes, direct rejection by the Soviet authorities for the reaction of memorials at sites of mass murders of Jews on Nazi-occupied territory. See Ilya Al'tman, *Zbertvy nenavisti: Kholokost v SSSR 1941 – 1945* (Victims of hatred: the Holocaust in the USSR 1941 – 1945) (Moscow, 2002), pp. 385–417; Mordechai Altshuler “Jewish. Holocaust Commemoration Activity in the USSR Under Stalin,” in *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. XXX (2002), pp. 271–294. This was, apparently, also the reaction to the significant increase between 1946 and 1948, especially in Ukraine, Belorussia, and Moldavia, of anti-Jewish discrimination in regard to acceptance to institutions of higher education and prestigious positions of employment. See *Sovetskie evrei pishut Il'e Erenburgu 1943–1966* (Soviet Jews write to Ilya Ehrenburg 1943–1966), compiled by Mordechai Altshuler, Yitzhak Arad, and Shmuel Krakowski (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 265–292.

¹⁵ Arnold Krammer, *The Forgotten Friendship: Israel and the Soviet Blok, 1947–1953* (Urbana, Illinois, 1974); See also a recent work on this topic: Leonid Mlechin, *Zachem Stalin sozhdal Izrail'?* (Why did Stalin create Israel?) (Moscow, 2005), pp. 74–210.

¹⁶ *Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet v SSSR, 1941–1948* (The Jewish Anti-fascist Committee, 1941–1948), ed. by Shimon Redlich and Gennadi Kostyrchenko (Moscow, 1996), pp. 278–293.

¹⁷ Leyb Goldberg, “*Tsvey tsionistishe konferentsn*” (Two Zionist conferences), *Eynikayt*, 7 September 1948.

On 21 September an article by Ilya Ehrenburg (1891 – 1967) written at Stalin's order was published in *Pravda*. This publication was intended to be a direct warning to broad segments of Soviet Jewry, specifically the more acculturated ones who preferred reading Russian, against over-identification with Israel.¹⁸

In mid November, enraged by further instances of public manifestations of solidarity with Israel by Soviet Jews, and herself a high official, Stalin decided on a large-scale¹⁹ but initially covert action against those considered to be responsible for the growth of «Jewish bourgeois nationalism» in the country. The primary targets were the leadership of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) and leading figures of Soviet Yiddish culture как ответственные за провал работы по «патриотическому воспитанию» советских евреев.

At that time, the Soviet ruler still had some illusions about continuing his “grand game” in the Middle East. For this reason, apparently, the first stage of the rout of “Jewish bourgeois nationalism” began as a secret special operation of the state security services. Stalin's belief that the Jewish minority in his country was disloyal to the Soviet homeland was confirmed by a remark the Soviet leader made to his daughter Svetlana in late 1948: “...You don't understand! ... The entire older generation is contaminated with Zionism, and now they are teaching the young people.”²⁰

On the morning of 17 November officials of the Ministry of State Security appeared at the Moscow Yiddish publishing house *Der Emes* and searched the premises. Three days later Stalin issued a top secret order to immediately liquidate the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, confiscate its archive, and close down the newspaper *Eynikayt* but not yet to carry out any arrests. His

¹⁸ *Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, p. 276. *Sovetsko-izrail'skie otnosheniia. Sbornik dokumentov* (Soviet-Israel relations. Collection of documents) (Moscow, 2000), Vol. 1, Book 1, p. 375; Y. Ehrenburg, “Po povodu odnogo pis'ma” (Regarding one letter), *Pravda*, 21 September 1948.

¹⁹ Stalin decided to support the previously shelved proposal of the MGB to do so (*Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, pp. 359–371).

²⁰ Svetlana Alliluyeva, *20 letters to a friend* (London, 1968), p. 171

order was implemented over the following two days.²¹ In the same week a secret resolution of the Politburo ordered the closing of *Der Emes* publishers on the grounds that the number of readers of literature in Yiddish was insignificant.²²

Two months earlier the Yiddish poet David Hofshstein (1889 – 1952) had been transferred by the MGB from Kiev to Moscow.²³ A case against the JAC then began to be assembled on the basis of testimony beaten out of Hofshstein by security service investigators. According to the latter, Solomon Mikhoels (1890 – 1948), Itzik Fefer (1900 – 1952), Dovid Bergelson (1884 – 1952), and a number of other members of the JAC were “active Jewish nationalists closely linked to American Zionists.”²⁴ The arrests, on 24 December, of Fefer, the JAC’s executive secretary, and the actor Binyamin Zuskin (1899 – 1952), then artistic director of Moscow’s GOSET, were the first of a series.²⁵ The aspect that most interested the investigators was the ideological motivation of their suspects, which was defined as nationalism. All of the “Jewish nationalists” arrested by the MGB were reputed to have shared the following anti-Soviet view – that

the Soviet regime had not solved the Jewish problem... so basically the Jews got nothing for themselves and... it was now necessary to fight against the

²¹ Esther Markish, *The Long Return* (New York, 1978), p. 149; *Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, pp. 371–372. On 21 November the MGB carried out a search of the premises of *Eynikayt* and closed it down; the next day they did the same with the JAC at No. 10 Kropotkin St.

²² This resolution was adopted on 25 November 1948. See: *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia. Dokumenty TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul'turnoi politike, 1917–1953* (The Regime and the artistic intelligentsia. Documents of the CC of All-Union CP (Bolsheviks)-All Union Cheka-OGPU-NKVD) (Moscow, 2002), p. 643. According to Lev Strongin (1896 – 1967), the director of the publishing house: “The liquidation of the publishing house took place suddenly: only two weeks previous to this permission was received in writing for the installation of an additional linotype machine” (Zvi Preigerzon, *Dnevnik vospominanii byvshego lagernika, 1949* (Diary of the memories of a former labor camp inmate, 1949 [Moscow–Jerusalem, 2005], p. 143).

²³ He was arrested in Kiev on 16 September 1948.

²⁴ Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika*, p. 423.

²⁵ It was typical of the regime’s *modus operandi* (?) that after the murder on Stalin’s orders of Mikhoels by the MGB during the night of 12–13 January 1948, that Fefer became the new head of the JAC and Zuskin of GOSET.

ethnic policy of the Soviet government which aimed at the assimilation of the Jews.²⁶

Although this specific “citation” was fabricated, it did reflect the actual disillusionment of Yiddish cultural figures in regard to the limitations placed on Yiddish culture that, at least partially, were a result of intentional government policy. This view is reflected in the memoirs of Esther Markish, the widow of the poet:

In 1948, Markish and I spent our last summer together in Ilinki [sic, for Ilinka], not far from Moscow. We share a dacha with Der Nister and his wife.... Der Nister was by nature reserved and not very talkative, but that summer he became quite expansive. Markish and he would spend long hours together.... And they were not happy conversations.

Neither Markish nor Der Nister now harbored any illusions about the future of Jewish culture and of Jewry itself in the Soviet Union.²⁷

In 1947 and 1948 the sessions of the executive of the *Ob’edinenie evreiskikh pisatelei Moskvy* (Group²⁸ of the Yiddish Writers in Moscow) had taken place mainly in the apartment of the literary critic Yehezkiel Dobrushin (1883 – 1953). The following comes from one report about them obtained by the MGB:

The Jewish nationalists Professor Nusinov and the writers Perets Markish, Bergelson, and Kvitko often gather at Dobrushin’s apartment and discuss from a nationalistic perspective the situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union.²⁹

This list of “Jewish nationalists” did not include the names of Fefer, Aron Kushnirov (1890 – 1949), Shmuel Halkin (1897 – 1960), Noah Lurie (1906 – 1987) 1866 – 1960 Аркаша! Это Ноах Лурье, а не Ноте Лурье), or Aron

²⁶ Aleksandr Borshchagovskii, *Obviniatsia krov’* (The blood accuses) (Moscow, 1994), pp. 71–72.

²⁷ Esther Markish, p. 148.

²⁸ In order to distinguish this organization from the Union [*Soiuz* in Russian] of Soviet Writers, this article will translate “*ob’edinenie*” as “group.”

²⁹ *Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, p. 361.

Vergelis, who also were members of the executive.³⁰ The leadership of the Union of Writers was concerned about the situation and, evidently in October 1948, General Secretary of the Union Alexander Fadeev (1901–1956) made clear to Bergelson, Fefer, Halkin, and Markish that the spread of nationalistic attitudes among Yiddish writers was known to the authorities, who were extremely displeased about this.³¹

In the second half of November Fadeev, telephoned Leib Kvitko (1890 – 1952), the chairman of the executive of the Group of Yiddish Writers. Evidently intending to create the impression that the initiative came from Yiddish writers, Fadeev told Kvitko that the Group should request that the secretariat of the Writers' Union hold a discussion the Moscow and Kiev anthologies almanacs of Yiddish literature and the books of Yiddish writers and poets that were issued in the USSR after the war.³² In his speech on the first day of the general meeting of the Group, that took place in the Central House of Literature on the 24 and 25 November 1948, Fadeev noted various faults in the work of the Union Group and, especially, of its executive. The leaders of the executive attempted to mitigate the criticism. Fefer proposed adding some young members to the executive:

we must decisively and boldly introduce new members into a new executive. It is enough to suggest two or three names... [e.g.] Borukhovich... the poet Gontar... [and] that Vergelis who entered literature with a courageous word.

The idea of bringing in new blood was also supported by Fefer's antagonist Markish.³³ A most ominous tone at the meeting was sounded by the literary critic Nokhem Oyslender (1893 – 1962), who criticized the

³⁰ It is likely that one of them provided the information noted above to the MGB.

³¹ *Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, p. 121.

³² Between 1946 and 1948 Leib Kvitko was Vergelis' superior at the Yiddish section. Until late 1947 Kvitko was the organization's executive secretary and, from late 1947, when the section of the Union of Soviet Writers in Moscow was reorganized into the *Ob'edinenie moskovskikh evreiskikh pisatelei*, its chairman. From late 1947 Vergelis was the unpaid executive secretary of the *Ob'edinenie*.

³³ *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva* (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, hereafter RGALI), f. 631, op. 34, d. 305, pp. 51–52.

“nationalistic works” of Markish, Halkin, Fefer, Kvitko, and Shloyme Roitman (1913 – 1985).³⁴ The remarks of the young Yiddish poet Ziama Telesin (1907 – 1996) were also harsh. In criticizing the work of the executive, especially Vergelis, Telesin noted: “where Bolshevik-mindedness and Bolshevik principles exist there can not be, as Comrade Fadeev correctly noted, any room for petty squabbling.”³⁵

The day before that meeting, the secretariat of the Writer’s Union had established a commission to ideologically and artistically evaluate the anthologies almanacs and books produced by Yiddish writers. The commission was headed by Alexander Bezymenskii³⁶ and included the following members: Iogann Altman (1900 – 1955), David Brodskii (1895 – 1966), Mikhail Svetlov (1903 – 1964), Avrom Gontar (1908 – 1981), Osaf Litovskii (1892 – 1971), and Moyshe Notovich (1912 – 1968).³⁷

Evidently, this was part of a move by the Central Committee to introduce stronger steps against the Yiddish creative intelligentsia. In response to signals from the Kremlin, Fadeev told Bezymenskii: “It can not be the case that one can not find in Soviet Yiddish literature harmful and dangerous tendencies, that there are no manifestations of bourgeois nationalism, of national limitations, etc., in it.”³⁸

At the end of December, on the instruction of the Party leadership, Fadeev signed the first list Yiddish writers to be arrested.³⁹ At the beginning of

³⁴ The text of Oyslender’s remarks were used as part of the accusations against the Yiddish writers arrested in the JAC Case.

³⁵ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 34, *d.* 305, p. 35.

³⁶ Aleksandr Bezymenskii (1898 – 1973) – Russian-language “Komsomol poet,” essayist and publicist. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he was among the leaders of the Writers’ Union. During the war years he had worked with the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee. In 1947 he wrote an essay about Colonel David Dragunskii (1910 – 1992), who was twice decorated as Hero of the Soviet Union.

³⁷ The commission was authorized to complete its work by 12 December 1948. On 26 November Semion Rodov (1893 – 1968), Eli Gordon (1907 – 1989), and Rakhil Baumvol (1914 – 2000) were added to its staff as translators from Yiddish to Russian.

³⁸ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 34, *d.* 426, p. 21.

³⁹ Konstantin Simonov (1915 – 1979) recalled this in January 1965 in conversation with Arkadii L’vov (1927–)(A. L’vov, “*Spiski na rasstrel’*” (Execution lists), *Novoe vremia*, No. 47, 1992, p. 32.

the next month, the Central Committee sent out a secret memo stipulating the liquidation of the JAC and the decision to arrest JAC associates who were accused of espionage.⁴⁰

In the second half of January Stalin sharp shifted toward overt state anti-Semitism. By this time Stalin had abandoned his hopes for good Soviet-Israeli relations, and not only was Israel perceived to be an American satellite but Soviet Jews were seen as a people with a state of their own, a state that was hostile to the USSR.⁴¹

Until March 1949 the activity of the regime proceeded on two parallel tracks. On the one hand, the fierce propaganda campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” that was intended both to intimidate assimilated Jews and the whole Soviet intelligentsia and to stir up the wrath of the Soviet masses against the West assumed an overtly antisemitic form.⁴² On the other hand, a blackout was maintained in regard to the arrests of the “Jewish bourgeois nationalists” and the destruction of almost all the infrastructure of Soviet Yiddish culture.⁴³

By December 1948 the Yiddish creative intelligentsia had already recognized the seriousness of the threat hanging over it. Alexander Borshchagovskii (1913 – 2006) conveyed the terrifying atmosphere of the times in his recollection of a conversation he had with Markish: “They arrested Fefer last night. Have you heard?” asked the agitated Markish as he pressed my arm

⁴⁰ The memo titled “On uncovering an American Zionist [espionage] center” was sent on 3 January 1949 to provincial and territory Party committees and central committees of union republics (Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika*, p. 475). The text of the secret directive of the Central Committee has not yet been published.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Veidlinger, “Soviet Jewry as a Diaspora Nationality: the ‘Black Years’ Reconsidered,” *East European Jewish Affairs*, No. 1, 2003, pp. 11–14.

⁴² The pretext for starting this propaganda campaign was a discussion by the secretariat of the Central Committee on 18 January 1949 on the topic “the situation in theater criticism.” The same issue was added to the agenda of the 24 January session of the Central Committee *Orgbiuro* evidently by Stalin, who was not present at the meeting itself.

⁴³ This problem was discussed by Benjamin Pinkus in his preface to the series: *Evreiskii narod, 1948–1953, sbornik materialov iz sovetскоi pečati* (the Jewish people: A collection of materials from the Soviet press) (Jerusalem, 1973), vol. 1, pp. vi–vii. Among the literary figures arrested were Isaac Nusinov (1889 – 1949, on 18 January), David Bergelson (on 24 January), Kvitko (on 25 January), Markish (on 28 January), Dobrushin (on 10 February), and Halkin (on 26 February). Noah Lurie was arrested later.

above the elbow until it hurt. “That villain won’t go into his grave alone, he’ll pull everyone else in along with him...”⁴⁴ The arrest (during the night between January 27 and 28) of Markish, who was a close friend of Fadeev, shocked other Yiddish writers. The effect was heightened by a *Pravda* editorial the following morning about the discovery of many “rootless cosmopolitans” among Soviet theater critics. While this publication signaled an increased propaganda campaign against those suspected of “worshipping” the West, the Jewish names of suspects targeted made clear its antisemitic nature.⁴⁵

After participating in a meeting with Stalin, Fadeev sent a letter to the Soviet leader. Inter alia, it said:

Recently the activity of the groups [of Yiddish writers in Moscow, Kiev, and Minsk] has taken on a nationalistic character.... The group offers no prospects for increasing the cadres [i.e. number] of writers. The works of the writers who are members of the group are not reaching a wide readership.... Nationalistic tendencies appear also in the poetic works printed in the almanacs *Heymland* and *Der Shtern*.⁴⁶

A comparison of this letter and the text of the Bezymenskii report indicates that materials compiled by Bezymenskii formed the basis of the letter to Stalin.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ A. M. Borshchagovskii, *Zapiski balovnia sud'by* (Notes of a person who was spoiled by fate) (Moscow, 1991), p. 132. Some of these in very emotional tones cast the complete blame for this on Israeli Ambassador to the USSR Golda Meyerson (Meir) This was confirmed by Mania Kotliarova, who recalled the words addressed to her on the evening of December 20 at the Moscow GOSET by Shmuel Halkin: “... [he] took me by the hand out of the door so that no one could hear. [Then Halkin said:] It was all Golda, Golda [Meir]” (M. Kotliarova, *Plecho Mikhoelsa. Vospominaniia aktrisy GOSETa* [The right hand of Mikhoels. Memoirs of an actress of the GOSET] [Samara, 2002], p. 188). A similar view was expressed later by Vergelis: “To begin the repressions in late 1948 Stalin made us of Golda Meir’s provocative behavior in Moscow” (Interview of September 1994).

⁴⁵ This was followed by a whole series of similar publications in other central newspapers that were understood as calling for the holding, in February and March, of widespread meetings of workers to “criticize the rootless cosmopolitans and actively seek them out in your own environment.”

⁴⁶ Borshchagovskii, *Obrvinaetsia*, pp. 274–275. Fadeev met with Stalin on 29 January. The letter was sent no later than 3 February.

⁴⁷ For reasons that are not clear the text of this document was predated to 3 March 1949 (RGALI, f. 631, op. 34, d. 426, pp. 4–6).

On 3 February a resolution “On disbanding the Organization of Yiddish writers and closing down almanacs in the Yiddish language” was passed by the secretariat of the Central Committee. On 8 February Stalin signed a Politburo resolution to the same effect.⁴⁸ On the following day the Writers’ Union held a closed Party meeting of Moscow writers who were members of the Communist Party. Two hundred and eighty five of them participated. Almost the whole presentation of Anatolii Sofronov (1911 – 1990), the influential secretary of the Writers’ Union, was devoted to the alleged threat of “the rootless cosmopolitans” while only a few minutes, at the very end, concerned the Group of Yiddish writers.⁴⁹ Sofronov blamed those Communist writers who were members of the Group who were still at liberty of supporting those writers who had been arrested as spies and demanded explanations from the Communist writers of their behavior (see Appendix). About two dozen speakers took part in the discussion of the following day but only three of them related to the anti-Jewish Sofronov’s remarks об Объединении еврейских писателей. The Russian-language writer and journalist of Jewish origin Boris Galin stated that since the Group of Yiddish Writers was a relic of the past, it naturally was nationalistic and hostile to the Soviet regime, and that such a section did not have the right to exist (see Appendix).

The one member of the Group of Yiddish Writers who spoke was Eli Gordon (1907 – 1989), who had been a member of the Bezymenskii Commission. Although Gordon expressed repentance, he cast the blame neither on himself nor on his generation but on the older generation of Yiddish writers, i.e. those leaders of the Group who had already been arrested, especially those who had lived abroad during the 1920s. He accused them of having dominated the Group and having barred the way for those writers who had been formed during the Soviet period (see Appendix). According to Esther Markish, the intimidating atmosphere at that meeting led to a very surprising and touching scene:

⁴⁸ *Gosudarstvennyi antisemitizm v SSSR: Ot nachala do kul’minatsii, 1938–1953* (State antisemitism in the USSR: From the beginning to the culmination 1938–1953), ed. by Gennadi Kostyrchenko (Moscow, 2005), p. 234.

⁴⁹ In Fadeev’s absence Sofronov delivered the lecture “On an antipatriotic group of theater critics.”

On this occasion, the inglorious role of hatchet man was given to the Jewish poet A. Kushnirov, who had been a front-line officer and had lost son during the war. Kushnirov, who knew only too well what was expected of him, was literally dragged onto the podium. Before he could utter a word, however, he burst into tears and was led away.⁵⁰

Sofronov concluded as follows: “I would like to note the honest, in my view Soviet and Party remarks of Gordon, who correctly evaluated the activity of the nationalistic, traitorous ruling clique of the executive of the Yiddish section. And we Soviet writers will in every way support Soviet Yiddish literature that represents Party and socialist positions.” However, despite these words, his final remarks included the first public call for the disbanding of the Group of Yiddish writers:

To consider the question of the behavior of Communist Party members in the Group of Yiddish Writers who failed to oppose the criminal activity of the despicable traitors to our country Fefer, Nusinov, Markish, et al.... The fact that our Yiddish Group is closed in on itself and isolated from all writers’ responsibility and activity in the latter regard is already a problematic element of the organization. It seems to me that it would be correct for us to request the Secretariat [of the Union of Writers] to disband the Group of Yiddish Writers so that the Yiddish writers would not be isolated from the general community of writers and would work in all sections [i.e. those organized according to type of literature, not according to ethnicity] (“that’s right” was called out from the hall).⁵¹

The articles about the meeting in *Pravda*, *Izvestiia*, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, and other newspapers did not mention the Yiddish writers, but focused exclusively on

⁵⁰ Esther Markish, p. 165. A reference to this event can also be found in the anonymous “*Pis'ma moemu bratu v Izrail*” (Letters to my brother in Israel) that was illegally smuggled out of Russia and printed in Hebrew in 1953 (?). The author was Borukh Vaisman of Kiev. A partial translation exists in English in Judd L. Teller, *The Kremlin, the Jews, and the Middle East* (New York and London, 1957), pp. 107–108.

⁵¹ *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Obschestvenno-politicheskoi istorii Moskvy* (The Central State Archive of Social and Political History of Moscow, hereafter TsGAOPIM), f. 8131, op. 1, d. 20, pp. 144–145.

the “rootless cosmopolitans.” However, an Agitprop report about the meeting sent to the top Soviet leadership contained expressions about the necessity of holding the Group of Yiddish Writers responsible and accusations regarding its members nationalism and Zionism.⁵²

Two weeks later, on 21 February, at a session of the Writer’s Union Sofronov delivered a report on the Group of Yiddish Writers. Like Fadeev’s letter to Stalin, the ideas expressed by Sofronov were probably based on materials prepared by the Bezymenskii commission. Since no surviving copy of Sofronov’s speech has been found, significant passages from Bezymenskii’s drafts are cited here as indication of the arguments used to justify the destruction of Yiddish literature in the USSR in January and February of 1949. As noted, this process originated not with the Writers’ Union but much higher up – with the Central Committee.

The main thing is the special threat that they [the Yiddish writers – M.K.] posed. One side of it was subversive activity. Particular attention should be paid to this. They have done everything to develop the idea of the unity of the Jewish people throughout the world – without distinction of classes and parties. Their newspaper is even called “*Eynikayt*” [i.e. “unity” in Yiddish]. It would be hard to find a better example of a cosmopolitanism that masked a fierce nationalism.... One basic goal of these enemies of the people is the fostering of a servile attitude toward America. Their propaganda also fails to fight against bourgeois nationalism; to reveal the essence of the State of Israel; and to undertake merciless criticism of American imperialism... One should oppose [people like this and demonstrate one’s own position by saying]! You should envy me, a Jew of the Soviet Union... The enemies of the people wanted to cross lances against those weapons that were directed against the ideas and feelings that engendered the repulsive demonstration at the Moscow synagogue in honor of Golda Meyerson But this does not justify the failure of Yiddish writers, particularly, the Communists among them, to go to the Party executive [of the Writers’ Union of the USSR] to denounce them... With the exception of the leadership [of the

⁵² See Report of 14 February 1949 of the Agitprop of the Central Committee to Malenkov on the results of this meeting (*Stalin i kosmopolitizym. Dokumenty Agitpropa KPSS 1945 – 1953* (Stalin and cosmopolitanism: Documents of the Agitprop of the CPSU 1945 – 1953), compiled by D. G. Nadzhafov and Z. S. Belousova (Moscow, 2005), pp. 183–184.

Yiddish section of the Writers' Union, later Group of Yiddish Writers in Moscow] and Vergelis (whom they wished to substitute for Kushnirov [the editor-in-chief of the almanac *Heymland*] not one [of the Yiddish writers] was invited to the meeting of the Party executive.⁵³

In other words, several accusations were leveled against the leading Soviet Yiddish writers: they accepted the Zionist thesis of the unity of the Jewish people, they lacked Soviet patriotism, and they had pro-Israeli and pro-American sympathies. These faults were, allegedly, expressed both in their literary creations and their public activity. According to Bezymenskii, direct evidence of such views was their public activity in support of Israel. He also claimed that Soviet Yiddish writers who were still at liberty, including members of the Communist Party, had failed to discover in time and to report "Jewish bourgeois nationalists" who had infiltrated their ranks and, subsequently, with no thanks to the Party members been arrested.

In view of such an interpretation of events the secretariat of the Writers' Union demanded the following steps:

Disband the union of Yiddish writers and have the Yiddish writers work in the genre sections [i.e. journalism, etc.]. In the same way have the Union of Soviet Writers of Belorussia disband the Group of Yiddish Writers in Minsk.⁵⁴

At the end of this month, Sofronov informed Yiddish writers of the decision of the leadership of the Writers' Union to disband the Yiddish writers' Group of Moscow.

As Ziama Telesin recalled:

We sat as if frozen by an evil spirit, in complete silence. Then, a member of the secretariat [of the Writers' Union, i.e. Sofronov] entered two hours late, and, without a single word of apology, immediately got down to business. He stood, leaning against the table with his fat stomach. His fierce glance focused on each one of us in turn.

⁵³ RGALI, *f.* 1029, *op.* 1, *d.* 71, pp. 4–7.

⁵⁴ Ibid. RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 15, *d.* 961, p. 8.

[He said:] “Since many enemies of the people have been found among our Yiddish writers, it has been decided that it is necessary to temporarily disband the Yiddish section of the Union of Writers.

There will be no discussion [of this matter]... ”

That was his whole speech.⁵⁵

Vergelis later recalled that it was at this time that he understood “that for people like me the years were coming that would be worse than those of the war.”⁵⁶

The antisemitic nature of the public propaganda campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” needs to be stressed because even today on the level of mass consciousness, the arrests of Yiddish cultural figures in late 1948 and in 1949 is considered to have been a minor aspect of the “struggle against cosmopolitanism.” Vergelis clearly indicated his view that the regime’s fight against “cosmopolitans” was part and parcel of his fate as a Soviet Jew, specifically as a Yiddish poet in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁵⁷

In contrast to the treatment of Yiddish writers not a single main target of the campaign against cosmopolitanism was arrested although many were excluded from the Communist Party and deprived of the possibility of earning a living. Despite the lack of official information regarding overall Soviet policy, Yiddish literary figures, like other members of the Soviet intelligentsia, evaluated the situation correctly: they understood the antisemitic intentions of the fight against “cosmopolitanism” and expected an increase in the harshness of measures against the surviving Yiddish cultural institutions, including their

⁵⁵ Ziama. Telesin, *Sovremennaia proza na idish v Sovetskom Soiuzze* (Contemporary prose in Yiddish in the Soviet Union) (Jerusalem, 1972). This was expressed in his lecture at a symposium dedicated to the struggle for the preservation of Jewish culture in the USSR, that was held on Jan. 30-31, 1972 soon after Telesin moved to Israel. Among those who applauded this decision were Oyslender and Mira Khenkina (A. Vergelis, “*Smertnaia kazn*” (Capital punishment) *Erveiskaia ulitsa, Di Yidishe Gas*, No. 5, 1995, p. 53; Esther Markish, p. 165

⁵⁶ Vergelis, Audio, mid 1991.

⁵⁷ Audio, mid 1991.

possible liquidation.⁵⁸ The theater critic Borshchagovskii, who was one of the main victims singled out during this campaign, noted:

...arrests in the JAC case took place from January to March 1949 to the accompaniment or, if you will, the ‘shouting’ of the noisy strident campaign of the struggle against ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ was exactly contemporaneous [with the arrests of the Jewish figures].⁵⁹

By mid spring 1949, with the exception of Kushnirov and Vergelis, all the members of the former executive of the Group of Yiddish writers of Moscow were arrested. Only 32 Yiddish writers out of the 81 who had belonged to the Group of Yiddish writers of Moscow in mid 1948 were not imprisoned.⁶⁰

The antisemitic fight against “rootless cosmopolitans,” which had begun suddenly, also came to a sudden halt. In the last third of March 1949, at a meeting with the editors-in-chief of central newspapers and journals, Stalin noted: “Comrades, the disclosure of real names concealed under literary pseudonyms is inadmissible – it smacks of antisemitism.”⁶¹

Although Stalin’s move might have appeared surprising, there were good reasons for it. Stalin realized that the antisemitic aspect of the “fight against rootless cosmopolitans” had aroused serious concern even among the leftist intelligentsia in the West. That became especially important due to attempts to increase Soviet influence on the burgeoning international movement against nuclear war. This problem became clear when Fadeev and Ehrenburg encountered fierce, partially public criticism regarding antisemitism in the

⁵⁸ *Z arkhiviv VUChK–GPU–NKVD–KGB* (From archives of the VUChK–GPU–NKVD–KGB) (Kiev, 1998), Special issue 3/4 (8/0), pp. 48, 57; Iakov Lvovich Rapoport, *The doctor’s plot* (London, 1991), p. 37.

⁵⁹ Borshchagovskii, *Zapiski*, p. 134.

⁶⁰ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 1, *d.* 426, pp. 25–27.

⁶¹ I. Ehrenburg, *Liudi, gody, zhizn’* (People, years, life) (Moscow, 1966), Books 5–6, p. 456. This was also noted by “The New York Times” correspondent in Moscow in the late 1940s and early 1950s (See Harrison Salisbury, *Moscow Journal. The End of Stalin*, (Chicago, 1961), p. 29. The last lead article of *Pravda* that mentioned the “anti-patriotic” theater and literary critics who were serving as “a poisoned weapon of bourgeois cosmopolitanism” was dated April 10, 1949.

USSR at anti-war conferences in New York and Paris in March and April 1949.⁶²

The curtailment of the “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign coincided with the slowdown in arrests of «Jewish bourgeois nationalists» in Moscow in mid spring 1949 although the investigation of the JAC Case continued intensively until the very end of the year.

In March mass purges of Jews began in government and Party administrative bodies at various levels, as well as in the army, security agencies, internal affairs, the courts and prosecutors’ offices, and in scientific, cultural, and educational institutions, and industrial enterprises both in the center and in the provinces. In the course of four years tens of thousands of Jews were victimized by these purges. Furthermore, according to statistics of *Memorial* (an association dedicated to commemorating victims of the Soviet regime), in 1949 – 1950 alone 3,204 Jews were sentenced to execution or various terms of imprisonment according to article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR – primarily, on the charge of Jewish bourgeois nationalism.⁶³

By 1953 only a handful of institutions: representing the postwar remnants of Soviet Yiddish culture remained. These were the Jewish Autonomous Region, the provincial newspaper *Birobidzhaner shtern* (a virtual copy of the Russian-language *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda*), and a theater ensemble of Sidi Tal (1912 – 1983) consisting of three actors that was affiliated with the Chernovtsy Oblast Philharmonic and that toured only within the confines of this province.

2. The “Case” of Vergelis

In 1932, at the beginning of the disastrous Ukrainian famine 14-year-old Aron Vergelis, then a member of the Pioneer movement and a 7th grade

⁶² In particular, in Paris in April Fadeev and Ehrenburg had to avoid questions on this topic by the then famous American writer and prominent public figures Howard Fast, who was a leader of the American Communist Party, about the fate of the Yiddish writers who had “disappeared” and to reject accusations that the Soviet leadership was antisemitic, in connection with the campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” (*Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, ed. with introductions by Joshua Rubinstein and Vladimir P. Naumov (New Haven and London, 2001), pp. 47–50.

⁶³ Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika*, p. 458.

student at the Yiddish middle school in Liubar, Volynia moved together with his family, to the Birobidzhan in the Soviet Far East. In the 1920s his father Alter Vergelis had, apparently, been a merchant. As a result his family was categorized as “*lishbentsy*” [those deprived of voting and other rights]. However, apparently as a result either of an improvement of the status of part of former merchants in spring of 1932 or the family’s move to the Jewish Autonomous Region, the problem of their unfortunate social origin was resolved for the children.

In any case, in 1936, Vergelis, who had already begun to write Yiddish poetry, was accepted by the Yiddish division of the faculty of language and literature of the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute.

After the August 1938 closing of the Yiddish division, Vergelis shifted to the teaching of Russian language and literature. While still a student, he published in Soviet Yiddish literary journals and, in January 1940 (the year he graduated) he became the youngest member of the Union of Soviet Writers. In the same year *Der Emes* in Moscow issued his first collection of poetry “*Bam kevul*” (At the source [or spring]) and his translation into Yiddish of “*Pesni sovetskogo naroda: Sbornik russkikh sovetskikh pesen*” (Songs of the Soviet people: A collection of Russian-language Soviet songs).

Immediately after completing his studies, he was drafted. The 22nd of June 1941 found him serving on the new Soviet-German border in the area of Grodno as a junior sergeant in a parachutists’ school. During the war for more than half a year he commanded an anti-aircraft unit at an airport охраны авиационной базы then, for almost three years, he was the *komsorg* [the Komsomol organizer] of the Chkalov special forces base near Moscow.⁶⁴ In 1944 Vergelis became a candidate member of the Communist Party. He ended the war with the rank of sergeant старшина,⁶⁵ serving as a senior translator in a

⁶⁴ This apparently came to the attention of the secret police.

⁶⁵ Most likely this rank in the security services then corresponded to the army rank of senior lieutenant. For details about Vergelis’ situation before the late 1940s, see: M. Kupovetskiĭ, “Poslednii sovetskii evreiskii natskadr A. Vergelis: osnovnye etapy sotsializatsii do nachala 1949” (The last of the Soviet Jewish national cadres A. Vergelis: basic stages of socialization before the beginning of 1949), in *Idish: iakyk i kul’tura v Sovetskom Soiuze* (Yiddish: language

battalion in charge of German POWs (such formations were subordinate to NKVD's Main Administration for the Affairs of Prisoners of War and [other] Prisoners). Vergelis was wounded twice during the war.

A mere month after being demobilized in November 1945, Vergelis was chosen secretary without salary of the executive of the Yiddish section of the Writers' Union in Moscow (which became the Group of the Yiddish Writers in Moscow). Parallely, in August 1947 he was recommended by the presidium of the JAC for the post of senior editor of the Yiddish section of the foreign broadcast department of the All-Union Radio Committee and, in November 1947, he was confirmed in this position. From this year he also served as a member of the editorial board of the Moscow Yiddish literary almanac *Heymland*. Starting in 1945 his poetry, essays, and literary criticism began to be frequently published in *Eynikayt* and in the Yiddish pro-communist press abroad. He also recited his poems on the radio. In the first half of 1948, *Der Emes* issued his second collection of poetry *Birobidzhaner dor* (The Birobidzhan generation).

By 1948, the 30-year old Vergelis had become the most recognized of the young generation of Soviet Yiddish poets. As such, he was accorded the position of propagandist and administrator in the field of Soviet Yiddish culture. **здесь должна быть сноска**

As a member of the executive of the Group of Yiddish Writers and head of the Yiddish section of the radio committee, Vergelis found himself at the epicenter of the authorities' antisemitic campaign. The harsher this campaign the more complicated his position became. There were two good reasons for him to expect that the authorities would soon arrest him. One was his participation in the final session of the presidium of the JAC, which had taken place in October 1948. The other was that at the November general meeting of the Group of Yiddish Writers he was among those proposed by, Fefer and

and culture in the Soviet Union) (Moscow, forthcoming 2008). **Аркаша! Все, что в этой сноске выделено зеленым, должно быть отдельной сноской в том месте на этой странице, которое я выделил красным.**

Markish (who were soon thereafter arrested) to join the group's new executive.⁶⁶

At the latter meeting direct accusations were made against him. For example, Ziama Telesin remarked:

Vergelis arrived from the army and we warmly promoted him to the executive, assuming that he would work honestly, as he seemed to do initially, but subsequently it turned out that... Vergelis began to conduct a terrible policy toward writers.

He went so far that he began to be considered as a national [i.e. Jewish] hero abroad.⁶⁷

According to the transcript of the meeting, Vergelis refrained from responding.

Naturally, Vergelis was of considerable interest to the Bezymenskii commission and to those who established it. It is possible that this was, *inter alia*, connected with the demand of the Party executive of the Writers' Union that Bezymenskii take a position in regard to this poet who, although he was considered to be correct ideologically, wrote in Yiddish. As executive secretary of the Group, Vergelis was criticized for its failures

despite numerous requests from the Party organization, to Party members belonging to the Group of Yiddish Writers, to undertake more serious criticism and self-criticism of the errors of a number of Yiddish writers, until just recently a stifling atmosphere has prevailed in the Group of Yiddish Writers.⁶⁸

In the meantime, between November 1948 and the first half of January 1949 the work of the Yiddish section of the All-Union Radio Committee continued and its staff was even increased by adding a new position, that of an

⁶⁶ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 34, *d.* 305, pp. 17, 51–52. In fact, he had previously been a member.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35. After he moved to Israel, in June 1971 Telesin published in the Israeli Yiddish newspaper *Letste naves* his poem, in which he accused Vergelis and claimed that the opposite was true, that Vergelis was "... kith and kin with the Lubyanka [the gruesome Moscow prison]... His hands are bloody" (S.L. Shneiderman, "Sovetish Heymland and its Editor, Aron Vergelis," *Midstream*, No. 8, 1971, p. 30).

⁶⁸ RGALI Российский Государственный Архив Социально-Политической Истории (далее - РГАСПИ), *f.* 17, *op.* 132, *d.* 229, p. 4.

editor.⁶⁸ **здесь должна быть сноска 69** и далее нужно менять нумерацию

сносок During this period the activity of the section assumed an increasingly obvious propaganda function, with the goal of familiarizing foreign listeners with the achievements of Soviet domestic and foreign policy. However, the daily half-hour broadcast usually no longer attempted to popularize Soviet Yiddish culture. This aspect did not figure at all in the plans of the Yiddish section for the first month of 1949.⁶⁹

The antisemitic campaign did not affect the Yiddish section of the Radio Committee before 12 January 1949.⁷⁰ In mid January, at night Vergelis was apparently called to the telephone at the Radio Committee. His pass was taken away at the entrance and, in a room of the Yiddish section, a MGB official said to him: “We are closing your division. Sign to indicate that you have been informed of this. We will take care of you later.”

Vergelis recalled:

I understood what was meant by will “take care of” me. I returned home, spent a sleepless night, and did not get out of bed the next day. The only person who came to see me was the announcer of our division, Faina Matlina. To my remark “Why did you come?”, she replied: “I came so that you would not feel all the vileness.” Faina also said that she had not come to me alone, but with a coworker from the India department, Alla Rapoport, but when the latter noticed two “comrades in civilian clothes (i.e. agents of the MGB)” at the entrance, Alla was frightened off and Faina entered by herself... I spoke with her for a long time.... I must say that previously our relations had been exclusively work-related and that they had not been uncomplicated.... At this point, Faina said to me: “It is better to be the wife of someone who has been arrested than to be a bystander. I have decided: we shall live together.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ This position was given to Moyshe Notovich (*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [State archive of the Russian Federation, hereafter: GARF], *f.* 8114, *op.* 1, *d.* 1054, p. 230).

⁶⁹ GARF, *f.* 8114, *op.* 1, *d.* 1044, pp. 52–62.

⁷⁰ The last indication of Vergelis’ work there was his signature on materials of the Yiddish sections of the Radio Committee on 11 January 1949 (GARF, *f.* 8114, *op.* 1, *d.* 1041, p. 181).

⁷¹ Audio, March 1994. At the insistence of Perets Markish, in 1944 Faina Matlina, a graduate of the Jewish theater school of GOSET, received **a ob** at the All-Union Radio Committee,

The radio broadcasting sector of the Agitprop Division of the Central Committee then launched an investigation of the work of the Yiddish division of the radio. The investigation's conclusion was that

radio broadcasts in Yiddish had been completely handed over to the senior editor of the Yiddish section Comrade Vergelis.... Since they did not know Yiddish, Bepalov, the head of the administration of programming of the radio committee and, Markov, the chief editor for broadcasts to the USA and England automatically approved the broadcasts in Yiddish without requiring a translation into Russian and, consequently, had no idea of the nature of the broadcasts.... The All-Union Radio Committee Comrades Puzin and Bepalov were not aware of the nationalistic practices of the Yiddish division. Only during the investigation of its work did chairman of the All-Union Radio Committee Comrade Puzin proposed that the Party Division of Propaganda and Agitation halt broadcasts in Yiddish. On 18 January of this year the Yiddish section was closed.⁷²

Nevertheless, Soviet Yiddish radiobroadcasts abroad continued for more than a month after the firing of Vergelis and the dismissal of the Yiddish section. In his memoirs Vergelis expressed the view that the continuation of broadcasts in Yiddish until February 1949 may have reflected Soviet propaganda's aim of concealing the devastation caused to Yiddish culture in the USSR. Vergelis attributed the continued existence of GOSET until December 1949 to the same motivation.⁷³

In April and May the Yiddish writers in Moscow still at liberty made a number of personal and group appeals to the leaders of the Writers' Union. According to one of the Union's functionaries: "Appeals of Yiddish writers to

where she became a Yiddish announcer. According to Kotliarova, the relationship between Matlina and Vergelis began before the disbanding of the Yiddish section (Interview with M. Kotliarova, February 2007).

⁷² On 21 January 1949 the head of the Central Committee agitprop department Dmitrii Shepilov informed Malenkov about "... the nationalistic line in [radio] broadcasts abroad that were made by the Yiddish **editors section** of the All-Union Radio Committee" (*Stalin i kosmopolitizm*, pp. 222–223).

⁷³ In March 1994.

clarify the future of their further literary activity in Yiddish became increasingly insistent....”⁷⁴

Telesin recalled:

Living in constant fear and alarm, we did not cease knocking on the doors of the masters to whom we were faithful – the Fadeevs, Simonovs, and Polikarpovs.... We gathered in small groups to write “appeals” to the authorities.... We did not stop asking: “What will happen next?”

The economic situation of those Yiddish writers was quite difficult. They were not accepted for any work outside the Writers’ Union. According to Telesin:

Our writers’ identifications [membership cards in the Writers’ Union – M.K] only hindered us in searching for some kind of work. A writer looking for work – What did that mean? A writer should write and if he wants to work at something else, that looks suspicious.⁷⁵

That was Vergelis’ experience after he was firing.⁷⁶ In his memoirs Vergelis focused on his numerous but unsuccessful attempts, between February and April 1949, to find work. His common-law-wife Faina was then the only breadwinner in the family. After the Yiddish **division section** of the radio was

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 420.

⁷⁵ Telesin, *Sovremennaia proza*, p. 67. Sofronov’s letter to the Agitprop of the CC of the All-Union CP(B) stated: “Yiddish writers are constantly turning to the secretariat and the Party organization of the Union of Soviet Writers to complaint that they have nowhere to publish and that, with each day, they have greater material difficulties. Some of them express willingness to undertake menial jobs.... But, at the same time, they report the difficulty of finding appropriate work... The request of Yiddish writers to clarify the possibility of their future literary activity in Yiddish is becoming increasingly insistent....” (*Stalin i kosmopolitizm*, p. 420).

⁷⁶ Thus, Zinovii Sheinis, who at the beginning of 1949 was head of the German-language **department section** and a member of the Party committee of the administration of the international broadcasts of the All-Union Radio Committee, recalled: “Not only the editors were totally desperate but Vergelis as well. Like all others who had been fired, they wandered around Moscow in search of any work they might find. Their attempts were hopeless. It was impossible to find work at a plant, a factory, or a workshop. These people were viewed as pariahs: people were afraid to hire them. At the Radio Committee rumors were circulating about suicides... They were soon confirmed (Zinovii Sheinis, *Provokatsiia veka* [Provocation of the age] [Moscow, 1992], p. 77).

closed down, she obtained the modest position of radio technician at the same institution – due to the personal intervention of a mid level official there.

In contrast to Uri Finkel (1896 – 1957), Shike Driz (1908 – 1971), Moyshe Notovich, and Yosef Kerler (1918 – 1999), who requested permission from the secretariat of the Writers’ Union to move permanently to Birobidzhan,⁷⁷ Vergelis, apparently, did not want to leave Moscow. However, someone else had different ideas. In the second half of April, Fadeev urgently summoned Vergelis. Vergelis recalled that the conversation

“... with ‘uncle’ Sasha Fadeev was carried out with raised voices. After screaming at me to ask why I was still in Moscow and had not left for anywhere else, he cited the example of Emmanuel Kazakevich, who had gone over to writing in Russian. He asked why I didn’t want to do the same. Upset, I replied: “If you switch from Russian to French, then I will switch from Yiddish to Russian, and I left, slamming the door.”⁷⁸

However, despite this contretemps, Vergelis took Fadeev’s advice, to leave on a long “work holiday” to the Soviet Far East. On 19 April 1949, evidently after consulting with Fadeev, he requested the executive of the Writers’ Union to grant him a writing holiday “after my demobilization from the army I have uninterruptedly been living in Moscow. This circumstance explains my urgent request to be allowed to travel to the Far East.”⁷⁹

After receiving permission from the Union secretariat a week later, Vergelis immediately borrowed money for the plane ticket from Ushakov, a Russian colleague, and fled from Moscow. This trip served two purposes. First, his material needs for this period was provided for by the Writers’ Union. Second, like other Yiddish writers, Vergelis probably hoped that in the Jewish Autonomous Region, where Yiddish language and Yiddish culture were showcased as symbols of the titular ethnic group, he would not be accused of Jewish nationalism.

⁷⁷ *Stalin i kosmopolitizm*, p. 420.

⁷⁸ Audio, March 1994.

⁷⁹ A decision on the matter, without any signature, was made on 20 April. The text read: “I believe it is possible to support the request of Comrade Vergelis” (RGALI, f. 631, op. 15, d. 1026, p. 151).

Vergelis spent approximately two months (until the end of June) in the Far East, mainly in Birobidzhan although he had planned to be away only a month and a half. He later recalled: “In order to busy myself, I traveled on foot from Volochaevka to Komsomolsk-on-Amur, hunted, and spoke with people.” In retrospect Vergelis evaluated the whole Birobidzhan project of Jewish autonomy as follows: “What turned out in Birobidzhan was ludicrously humiliating.” He may have arrived at this conclusion during his long trip stay in the JAR while trying to avoid being arrested.

However, the campaign against “Jewish nationalists” did reach the Jewish Autonomous Region. Earlier, in February 1948, in a note sent to Central Committee secretary Alexei Kuznetsov (1905 – 1950), the CC’s commission in charge of personnel accused **people working еврейских литераторов** in the JAR of “bourgeois nationalism”:

Nationalism is being manifest among the top strata of the Yiddish intelligentsia and among certain Party and Government workers. The nationalistic sentiments are being heated up from outside: in letters, newspapers and literature received from abroad, and in personal contacts of local workers with nationalistic elements in other parts of the country.⁸⁰

At that time matters were limited to a summoning to Moscow of Alexander Bakhmutskii (1911 – 1961), the first secretary of the provincial committee of

⁸⁰ This document was composed by CC inspectors Dmitrii Polianskii and Dmitrii Pushkin. In it the young Yiddish poet who was then a combat soldier Yosef Kerler was referred to as “the Jewish nationalist writer Kerler who, without any checking, received work on a Yiddish provincial newspaper... on 1 October 1947 at a city meeting of members of the intelligentsia.... In his remarks he slanderously claimed that the USSR is forcibly assimilating its Jews and that “only in the synagogue can Jews use their native language.” In the literary-artistic almanac [*Birobidzhan* – M.K.] в повести редактора областной газеты «Birobidzhaner Shtern» Бузи Миллера «Birobidzhan» the hero of his **Kerler’s** story Lev says the following to his mother: “Mom, it is good that in our country we still have a place like Birobidzhan, a home of our own where you and I can meet. If we didn’t, where, for example, could we meet in such a big world at such a difficult time?” (RGASPI, *f.* 17, *op.* 118, *d.* 39, p. 108).

the JAR.⁸¹ However, after the receipt of a secret memo, dated 3 January 1949, titled “About the discovery of an American-Zionist Espionage Center,” activity significantly increased “to discover Jewish nationalists who had taken refuge in the JAR.” The bodies involved in dealing with this task were the leadership of the Khabarovsk Territory Party committee and the territory MGB, as well as special Party **comissions** from Moscow, whose assignment was “to find traces of a conspiracy of bourgeois nationalists on the territory of the JAR.”⁸²

The first commission completed its work just several days before Vergelis’ left Moscow for the Soviet Far East. On the day of his arrival, the most prominent Birobidzhan writer, Buzi Miller (1913 – 1988), a member of the Soviet Writers’ Union and former editor-in-chief of *Birobidzhaner sbterm*, was expelled from the Party. On June 25 Bakhmutskii and Mikhail Levitin (1913 – 1953), chairman of the provincial executive committee were summoned to Moscow, where they were removed from their positions by a decision of the Central Committee Politbiuro for “allowing political errors.”

On the same day a new commission from Moscow arrived in Birobidzhan. After three weeks of intensive investigation the commission confirmed that in the JAR

there existed a nationalistic organization that had infiltrated the editorial staff of the newspaper *Birobidzhaner sbterm* and the magazine *Birobidzhan*, the provincial radio committee, the provincial local folklore museum, and several other ideological bodies.⁸³

Among those nationalists singled out were Miller, the poetess Liube Vaserman (1907 – 1975), the writer Heshl Rabinkov (1908 – 1981), the poet Yisroel Goldwasser (Emiot, 1909 – 1978), the Birobidzhan State Jewish Theater actor Faivish Arones (1897 – 1982), the translator Dov-Ber Slutskii (1877 – 1955), and an artist named Tsimerinov.

⁸¹ After the report at the secretariat of the Central Committee, Bakhmutskii was sent for a year of study to Moscow’s Higher Party School.

⁸² David Vaiserman, *Birobidzhan: mechy i tragediia*. **История ЕАО в судьбах и документах. Хабаровск, 1999** (Birobidzhan: dreams and tragedy), pp. 265–268.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 277–278.

Word of this soon spread across the JAR. Apparently aware that the anti-Jewish repressions had reached that far, Vergelis quickly returned to Moscow on 29 June 1949.

A week later, Birobidzhan cultural figures who had been accused of Jewish nationalism were arrested. On 15 July, the executive of the provincial committee of the JAR disbanded the staff of the almanac *Birobidzhan*.⁸⁴ In this situation, in a speech before a Birobidzhan Party conference at the end of July, first secretary of the Khabarovsk territorial committee Alexander Efimov (1905 – 1980) included Vergelis in a list of nationalists:⁸⁵

In his works Boris [Dov-Ber] Slutskii also allowed mistakes of a nationalistic nature. Reviewing an anthology of poems of the Yiddish poet Vergelis, “Birobidzhan generation,” Slutskii cited as a positive value his [i.e. Vergelis’] nationalistic statements to the effect that Birobidzhan, not the Soviet Union, was the homeland of the Jews.⁸⁶

Vergelis’ name was brought up again a month later in a resolution of the executive of the Khabarovsk branch of the Writers’ Union about disbanding the executive of the Birobidzhan branch, whose members were accused of nationalism. Inter alia, the resolution said:

It should be brought to the attention of the secretariat of the Union of Soviet Writers of the USSR that member of the Union of Soviet Writers Vergelis, sent by the secretariat of the Union of Soviet Writers to the city of Birobidzhan on a creative commission, became buddy-buddy there with the bourgeois nationalists Miller, Slutskii, and Rabinkov and, at the same time, demonstratively emphasized his hostile attitude toward writers who were members of the Communist Party.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Miller was arrested on July 4, 1949 and then the same fate befell Vasserman, Emiot, Rabinkov, Slutskii, and Arones.

⁸⁵ The conference was conducted under Stalin’s slogan “Nationalism is the last position from which we have to cast down the bourgeois so that we can finally defeat it.”

⁸⁶ Vaiserman, *Birobidzhan*, p. 278.

⁸⁷ RGALI, f. 631, op. 39, d. 1107, p. 7.

The consequences soon followed. On 19 September 1949, a direct subordinate of the MGB within the Union of Writers, the deputy head of “creative cadres” [i.e., personnel who worked in the arts] N. Zhdanova sent Union head Fadeev a report “On writers of Birobidzhan and the unworthy behavior of the Moscow writers A. A. Vergelis and Y. B. Kerler”:

The department of creative cadres of the Union of Writers of the USSR has received information to the effect that in Birobidzhan a repressed group of Yiddish writers, including members of the Union of Soviet Writers B. S. Meiler (Miller), B. S. Slutskii, S.N. Goldvasser (Emiot), P.M. Kaganovich (Der Nister). The executive of the Khabarovsk branch of the Writers’ Union wishes to bring to the attention of the secretariat of the Union of Soviet Writers of the USSR information about an unworthy act of the two Moscow writers A.A. Vergelis and I.B. Kerler who, being there on an official trip found a common language with bourgeois nationalists. As one can see from the letter of the writer Goldvasser-Emiot, who is now repressed, Moscow writers [Der] Nister-Kaganovich (who is now repressed), Kerler and Vergelis spoke openly about their nationalistic views. The letter also mentions that bourgeois–nationalistic tendencies can be seen in the works of the poets Vergelis and Kerler.... In presenting material that I received from the Khabarovsk branch of the Writers’ Union, I would like to ask you to whom shall I send this material in order to clarify matters in regard to the writers Vergelis and Kerler.⁸⁸

Fadeev responded with a carefully worded resolution: **далее тем же прифтом, что и остальной текст резолюции to [Nikolai] Gribachev [1910 – 1992], [Aleksei] Surkov [1899 – 1983], and [Vadim] Kozhevnikov [1909 – 1984]**

One must clarify the matter and if [the charges are really] confirmed, then Vergelis and Kerler should be expelled from the Union of Writers. But if they are not confirmed, one should not send members of the literary section of Yiddish writers on official trips, especially to Birobidzhan.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ **Ibid.** RGALI, f. 631, op. 39, d. 1107, p. 72.

⁸⁹ **Ibid.**

On 6 October 1949 Vergelis was officially summoned to Zhdanova. In his memoirs Vergelis did not refer either to this conversation or to following events of the end of the year – with the exception of a single phrase: “... they tried to expel me from the Party then but I resisted.”⁹⁰

Between October and December 1949, evidently, due to a complicated administrative intrigue within the Writers’ Union or, possibly, within the Central Committee or the MGB it was decided not to imprison Vergelis but, instead, to confirm his loyalty and suitability as a tool for possible future manipulation.

Vergelis’ feeling that the trap was about to close on him must have been acute. On 14 December, the Moscow State Jewish Theater was closed. Exactly one week earlier Aron Kushnirov, the only other member of the executive of the Group of Yiddish Writers in Moscow still at liberty had died of cancer. Kushnirov had been the first editor of Vergelis’ poems and Vergelis referred to in his memoirs as his “adoptive father.” On the day before he died, Kushnirov asked Vergelis to visit him. When they were together, Kushnirov asked: “Why have they not yet arrested me? They arrested all the founders of Soviet Yiddish literature except me. I am hurt!” According to Vergelis, Kushnirov’s wife concluded that this situation aggravated Kushnirov’s cancer. Kushnirov’s dying complaint echoed the martyr’s pathos expressed by the wife of Shmuel Halkin after the arrest of her husband: “If Yiddish literature is in prison, then the place of Halkin is also there.”⁹¹

On 16 December, in the wake of the arrests of his colleagues, Vergelis sent to the Party bureau of the Union of Soviet Writers a critical analysis of the situation of Soviet Yiddish literature. He did this within the framework of a review of the work of the poet Motl Shturman (1908 – 199?).⁹²

⁹⁰ Audio, mid 1991.

⁹¹ Preigerzon, *Dnevnik*, p. 143.

⁹² “Iz arkhiva K.M. Simonova” (From the archive of K.M. Simonov), *Nash sovremennik*, No. 1, 1999, pp. 208–211. The journal’s after-word to this publication states that the material “came from the archive of K. Simonov from the period when he worked at the Union of Writers of the USSR and that the archive was in private hands.” The same document, with the title “A. A. Vergelis – to the Party bureau of the Union of Writers of the USSR about ‘fauty characteristics’ of Yiddish literature” was included by Kostyrchenko in his collection

Vergelis' analysis employed the same political and ideological tone and extreme rhetoric as had the remarks of Oyslender (at the meeting of the Yiddish writers in Moscow in November 1948) and of Gordon (at the closed Party meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers in February 1949), as well as of the 1949 Bezymenskii report to the secretariat of the Writers' Union.

Vergelis endeavored to convince Party bureaucrats, perhaps including Fadeev, that he was prepared to be diligent in fulfilling Party assignments. He emphasized his potential to be not only a cog in the Soviet machinery but even an important "link" (i.e. part) in the Party control of Yiddish literature. Although the Party did not need this potential of Vergelis in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the idea of his future usefulness may well have saved him from being jailed.

Vergelis' remarks should not be interpreted simply as a betrayal of his mentors and colleagues or even, as Kostyrchenko believes, "a moral failure." Attention should be paid to two important aspects of the situation. Firstly, at the time of Vergelis' criticism all the Yiddish writers whom he accused of being Jewish nationalists (i.e. Hofshstein, *Der Nister* [Pinkhas Kaganovich, 1984 – 1950], Bergelson, Markish, Dobrushin, Meir Alberton [1900 – 1947], Fefer, Anna Stelmakh [1900 – 1950], Shmuel Persov [1889 – 1950], Hersh Osherovich [1908 – 1994], and Itzik Kipnis [1896 – 1974]) had already been arrested. Second, and this should be stressed, Vergelis did not compromise those who were still at liberty. This was the significant difference between his words and those of Oyslender and Bezymenskii.

Suspicious about Vergelis' collaboration in the repression of his fellow Yiddish writers that were expressed first in 1950 and, then, became fairly widespread in the second half of the decade, were repeated in the early 1970s

of documents *Gosudarstvennyi antisemitizm v SSSR*, pp. 234–239, with the following note: "Archive of the Union of Soviet Writers. Archival collection of the compiler: Copy," with a reference to the publication in *Nash sovremennik*. On the basis of both its chronology and contents the document appears to be genuine. Vergelis' 16 December 1949 note to the Writers' Union Party bureau closely corresponds to other documents of late 1949 which are located in the Writers' Union file (f. 631) of the RGALI.

by Soviet Yiddish writers who emigrated from the USSR.⁹³ However, no proof has been found to substantiate the view that Vergelis was an informer for the MGB who bore some responsibility for the deaths of leading figures of Soviet Yiddish culture. Furthermore, in contrast to the materials of Bezymenskii and Oyslender, it is unlikely that Vergelis' comments ever came to the attention of the secret police investigators involved in the JAC Case.

However, on a personal level the evidently positive reaction of the authorities to Vergelis' effort seems to have given him hope in regard to his own future. An expression of his optimism is found in his report to the Secretariat of the Writers' Union. "About my creative official trip to the Far East" was written at the very end of December 1949 (i.e. half a year after his return to Moscow). In it Vergelis stressed that he was writing "spurred on by the fact that [at that time he] ... was certain about the future continuation" of his work.⁹⁴

However, in regard to other suspected Jews the MGB continued to pursue the JAC Case. The Jewish "bourgeois nationalists" who were arrested were officially informed of the completion of their investigation and the possibility of their reading the transcripts of their interrogations.⁹⁵ Further arrests of Yiddish literary figures who had been connected with the JAC followed.

Arrests took place in Moscow, Leningrad, Birobidzhan, Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, Lithuania, and Latvia. In April 1950 the MGB arrested the poet Yosef Kerler who, along with Vergelis, had been accused in a letter from the Khabarovsk branch of the Union of Writers. Kerler was subsequently sentenced to ten years imprisonment in a camp. His arrest appears to have been directly linked to the following month's repressions against Yiddish cultural figures in Birobidzhan. On 31 May an indictment was filed in Khabarovsk against Miller, Slutskii, Vasserman, **Goldwasser** (Emiot),

⁹³ Shneiderman, "Sovetish Heimland...", p. 30.

⁹⁴ RGALI, f. 631, op. 15, d. 1022, p. 48.

⁹⁵ Arkadii Vaksberg, *Neraskrytye тайны* (Undisclosed secrets) (Moscow, 1993), p. 269.

Rabinkov, and Arones.⁹⁶ This was three and one half months after the closure of the last two Yiddish theaters in the USSR – the Birobidzhan Dramatic Theater (formerly the Birobidzhan State Yiddish Theater named after Lazar Kaganovich) on 8 February, and the Chernovtsy Yiddish Theater named after Sholem Aleichem (the former Kiev State Yiddish Theater) exactly one week later.

Unlike Kerler and their colleagues in Birobidzhan, Vergelis was not arrested. In fact, in January 1951 he was named to the post of deputy executive editor of the factory publication *Kirovets* at Kirov Dynamo, one of the largest electro-machine construction plants in Moscow.

This may seem surprising in view of the fact that, in the second half of the previous year, the plant had seen a major purge of Jewish personnel, the most serious of which took place in the electrical industry.⁹⁷ This purge was the direct consequence of a secret 21 June 1950 Politburo resolution prepared under the direction of Mikhail Suslov (1902–1982).⁹⁸ This resolution imposed a uniform policy that was strictly enforced in regard to limiting the number of Jews employed not only as high- and mid-level directors but also in lower-ranking positions, where anti-Jewish discrimination had previously been relatively unsystematic.⁹⁹

Vergelis described the events that preceded his being hired at the plant as follows:

In 1950 life was very difficult.... Faina Matlina and I officially married. We established a new Soviet family, one where the wife worked and the

⁹⁶ Vaiserman, *Birobidzhan*, p. 383. One of the accused wrote about this case in his memoirs (see Israel Emiot, *The Birobidzhan Affair: A Yiddish Writer in Siberia* [Philadelphia, 1981]).

⁹⁷ Mass firing of Jews at the Dynamo plant were accompanied by arrests of “hostile elements,” including of the deputy director of the plant V. E. Kreindel’, head of production B.I. Kats, head of the planning and production department I. M. Ganopol’skii, head of the division of technical control G.N. Fridman, et al. This was followed by the expulsion from the Party and arrest of the plant’s director N. A. Orlovskii (Kostyrchenko, *Out of the red shadows*, pp. 241–242.).

⁹⁸ The resolution had the long title “About measures to eliminate failures in the area of the selection and training of cadres in connection with major errors discovered in work with cadres in the Ministry of the Automobile and Tractor Industry.”

⁹⁹ Idem Kostyrchenko G., *Tainaia politika*, p. 513.

husband, a Yiddish poet who was chased away everywhere he went, vainly continued to seek a permanent job since there was no place to publish in Yiddish. But I was not given a job anywhere, even as a janitor, since in questionnaires I had to indicate that I was a member of the Union of Writers.... The radio committee [where she worked] assigned Faina a room in one of their small dachas in the village of Saltykovka near Moscow. From there, due to our lack of money, I would hop onto the electric tram to get to Moscow to seek work. At that time the director of the All-Union Central Trade Union publishing house was Savost'ianov,¹⁰⁰ a former classmate of mine at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute named after Lenin, with whom in the late 1930s I had voluntarily helped publish something called *Pedvuzovets*, of which I was editor and he – my deputy.¹⁰¹ When, during my futile search for some kind of work I arrived at the VTsSPS publishing house, Savost'ianov remembered me and helped.... He recommended that the then famous journalist Olga Chechetkina [1909 – 1996]¹⁰² make use of the services of a disgraced Yiddish poet to prepare her propaganda articles and brochures. I wrote these texts and the name of Olga Chechetkina became even better known than before, while she handed over to me the honoraria that were given to her for these publications.¹⁰³

According to Vergelis, the position of ghostwriter, which was common for Jewish writers who were still at liberty, grated on him. As he put it:

¹⁰⁰ Vergelis probably meant Evgenii Savost'ianov, who in the 1960s was the head of the *Iskusstvo* publishing house.

¹⁰¹ Perusal of *Pedvuzovets* for the years 1939 – 1940 has revealed that neither Vergelis nor Savost'ianov were listed as members of its editorial staff.

¹⁰² In that connection, the well-informed Russian researcher Kostyrchenko recently wrote about this journalist as follows: "...She began her career at the Central Committee of the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth Leagues [i.e. the Komsomol]. Then she moved on to work at [the newspaper] *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, where she served as editor of the foreign information division. Often traveling abroad, Chechetkina was, as it is said, 'on the hook' of the Soviet special [i.e. secret] services who, literally, knew everything about her..." [Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika*, p. 666]. Chechetkina is primarily known for her essay "*Pochta Lidii Timashuk*" (The mail of Lidia Timashuk), published in *Pravda* on 20 February 1953, at the height of "the Doctors' Plot."

¹⁰³ Audio, March 1994.

...in late 1950 I went to the Krasnaia Presnia district Party committee [in Moscow] to speak to some one but the policeman would not let me in... it came to fisticuffs and the first secretary of the district committee, who came out because of the fracas and, for some reason, took a shine to me, gave me a note to take to the Party's city committee ... There I met a former classmate from the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, who had a high position.... And that's how I managed to find work with the publication of the Dynamo factory.¹⁰⁴

The above account appears to involve a degree of fictionalization, especially in regard to the fight with a policeman. As Misha Lev laconically remarked in a telephone interview: “After a fight of that sort in those days you would have been sent on your way to a camp, not to work as an editor of a publication, especially at the Dynamo factory.”¹⁰⁵

Vergelis depicted events of the years 1949 to 1951 as follows in a note (of December 1951) to the head of the personnel department of the Union of Writers **Elchibekov**, who, like all officials in charge of cadres reported to the secret police:

In response to your question I reply: In 1948 my last book, a collection of poems in Yiddish, appeared. At the end of that year publishers and periodical publication, which had previously published in Yiddish ceased to exist. Nevertheless, I firmly decided to continue working in literature by writing my next work in the Russian language.

In early 1949 I set out on a literary trip to the Far East. As a result I wrote a play “*Lesnye primety*” [Forest signs], which at the present time has been accepted for production by the Kamchatka dramatic theater. One has to take into consideration that this is my first work in Russian and, therefore, it suffers from many vaults due to the transition from one language to another. However, for me personally working on the play played a very positive role.

Late in 1950 I decided to write a story about the life of a work collective. For this I began working on the publication in the plant newspaper of the large **Kirov Dynamo** electro-machine construction plant «Dynamo» named

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. August 1994.

¹⁰⁵ On 10 August 2007.

after Kirov. This plant produced electrical equipment, motors and floodgate parts for the great building project of Communism. I have been working at the plant for almost a year now.

I am writing my story. I hope to complete it in the second half of 1952. Meanwhile I am publishing poems and a literary page from the editor in the plant newspaper.¹⁰⁶

On the basis of the questions that were addressed to him by Elchibekov one can assume that the authorities' interest in Vergelis was connected with the revival of the JAC Case or with the launching, in October 1951, of a new investigation of "a Zionist conspiracy within the MGB."¹⁰⁷ The MGB reported that the Yiddish section of the Radio Committee was being used for purposes of sabotage. The investigators of the JAC Case were directed to "submit to expert opinion... materials that had been broadcast by the Yiddish section."¹⁰⁸ It is not known whether these investigators interrogated Vergelis in the fall of 1951. In any case, the JAC file (which was transferred from the KGB to the government archives in August 1955) contains considerable documentation relating to the Radio Committee's Yiddish section.¹⁰⁹ This indicates interest of the secret police in the activities of the place where Vergelis was working.

In terms of what the poet knew, the interest of the security service-subordinate cadres division of the Union of Soviet Writers in him most likely dispelled any illusions on Vergelis' part that he had been overlooked and,

¹⁰⁶ RGALI, f. 631, op. 39, d. 1107, p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ However, the Case picked up steam again when Lieutenant-Colonel Mikhail Riumin, the new acting head of the investigative division of MGB for especially important cases, who had the support of the new minister of state security Semion Ignat'ev, sent Malenkov and Beria a memo recommending a "speedy revival of the investigation in the JAC case" and, especially after Riumin, on 19 October 1951, by which time he had attained the rank of general, became deputy minister of state security. About the "Zionist conspiracy" see: Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika*, p. 460. Within the framework of this investigation, in which almost all high-ranking officials of the central administration of the MGB who were of Jewish origin, on 13 November 1951, **был арестован бывший** deputy executive secretary of the JAC [??] from April 1947, Grigorii Kheifets (1899 – 1984) **was arrested**. In August 1952 he was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment (Vadim Abramov, *Evrei v KGB: Palachi i zhertry* (Jews in the KGB: executioners and victims) (Moscow, 2005), p. 323.

¹⁰⁸ Kostyrchenko, ed., *Gosudarstvennyi antisemitizm v SSSR*, p. 179.

¹⁰⁹ GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 1041–1047.

therefore, allowed to work at the Dynamo plant. As former secretary of the executive of the Moscow Group of Yiddish Writers, Vergelis wrote the following to Elchibekov in regard to the location of documents related to the case being investigated:

...the protocols of meetings of the executive, protocols of general meetings of the branch, texts of reports about activities of the executive, correspondence, etc. – all these were kept and, one should assume, are still located in the apartment of L. Kvitko.¹¹⁰

The fact that the Soviet official wanted such information seems to indicate that, at a previous stage of the investigation of Kvitko and other Yiddish writers arrested (in 1949 and early 1950) the investigators of the JAC Case had not been interested in the Yiddish group of the Union of Soviet Writers or the Yiddish section of the Radio Committee. This might explain how Vergelis could have remained out of the field of sight of or, at least, peripheral to the earlier investigators.

The situation at the end of 1951 and the beginning of 1952 was different. The investigation of the JAC Case was renewed on 19 January 1952. During that month the Union of Writers assigned four men – Vladimir Shcherbina (1908 – 1989), Iurii Lukin, Grigorii Vladykin, and Semyon Evgenov (1897 – 1973) – as literary experts to examine the questions of “bourgeois nationalistic activity” and “ideological defectiveness” of works by Yiddish writers who had worked with the JAC, including Vergelis. The latter’s poems, essays, and literary criticism were translated into Russian for that purpose by employees of the MGB.¹¹¹

On 5 March 1952 the MGB officially began the investigation of fifteen people who had been arrested in late 1948 or early 1949 in the JAC Case. Eight days later Deputy Minister of State Security Mikhail Riumin (1913–1954) ordered the opening of criminal proceedings against all the people (a total of

¹¹⁰ RGALI, f. 631, op. 39, d. 1107, p. 76.

¹¹¹ The latter’s poems, essays, and literary criticism were translated into Russian for that purpose by employees of the MGB Borshchagovskii, *Obviniaetskaia krov’*, p. 281; GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 377, pp. 1–201; d. 482, pp. 1–263, d. 988, pp. 1–138.

213), who were featured in the protocols of the interrogations of those arrestees. Vergelis was one of them¹¹²

Vergelis was fired from his job at Dynamo in May 1952. Although documentary evidence is lacking, one may assume a connection between this event and the likelihood that an official investigation of Vergelis had then been initiated.

In terms of the ending of his employment Vergelis recalled a denunciation sent to the Party committee of the Writers' Union written by Ekaterina Shchegoleva, a former worker of the Dynamo factory who later became a poetess. She wrote:

... Vergelis often went around the factory, including in the closed [i.e. secret] workshops with a camera I can not say to whom and where he sent the photos he took and the information [he gathered], but I would at least like to draw your attention to this matter....

According to Vergelis, this report got him into serious trouble.¹¹³ He was fired from Dynamo and left without a means of making a living for himself, his wife and their year-old child.

It is not clear whether Vergelis knew in May 1952 that the secret judicial process was beginning in regard to the JAC. This case concluded on 18 July 1952 with the sentencing to the "highest degree of punishment," i.e. execution, of twelve of the thirteen defendants who were still alive.¹¹⁴ According to Simonov, Fadeev signed the execution list.¹¹⁵ The executions took place on August 12, 1952.

In the summer and fall of that year, Vergelis was living in poverty. He hid with friends and acquaintances in dachas outside Moscow. He even traveled to

¹¹² *Nepavednyi sud, poslednii stalinskii rasstrel: stenogramma sudebnogo protsessa nad chlenami Evreiskogo antifashistskogo komiteta* (Unjust trial: the last Stalinist execution: stenogram of court on the members of the Jewish Anti-fascist committee), ed. by V.P. Naumov (Moscow, 1994), p. 11. An inventory of all the texts by Vergelis in the JAC archive was compiled on 1 April 1952 by Major (in the security services) Nevezhin (GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 482, p. 1).

¹¹³ Audio, September 1991.

¹¹⁴ Including Fefer, Bergelson, Markish, Kvitko, and Hofshtein.

¹¹⁵ L'vov, *Spiski*, p. 31.

Kazan, where he stayed with Notovich, a radio editor and Yiddish literary critic who had been his subordinate and his wife's colleague at the Yiddish radio.¹¹⁶ However, these escapes were only temporary.

An indication of how deeply non-acceptance of the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture had rooted itself in the Soviet ruling elite of that time is epitomized in a phrase uttered by the general of justice **A. Cheptsov (1902–1980)** who presided at the JAC Case interrogation of Bergelson. The general said:

You are trying to claim that you are not a nationalist. How can you not understand that your speaking publicly in Yiddish and your writing in Yiddish mean that you are opposed to the process of assimilation [i.e. the policy of our country].¹¹⁷

This situation is the context of the disillusionment, despair, and helpless anger were expressed in poems written by Vergelis that he dated to late 1952 and early 1953. They were published in Yiddish (and in Russian translation by David Samoilov [1920 – 1990] and Iurii Levitanskii [1922 – 1996]) only four decades later, toward the end of Gorbachev's perestroika.¹¹⁸ A search of Vergelis' archive did not find the Yiddish originals of these poems. Despite the fact that, when these poems were published in Yiddish in 1989, Vergelis wrote that he had found them in his archive.

The first of the poems, "Murder," is dated (in the publications of 1989 and 1991) to 7 December 1952, i.e. less than four months after the executions in the JAC Case and only three days after the executions in Prague of Rudolf

¹¹⁶ Telephone interview (by the author) with Natal'ia Vergelis (Vergelis' daughter) on 27 January 2007, and with Misha Lev on 3 February 2007.

¹¹⁷ Cited in Borshchagovskii, "KGB i evreiskaia kul'tura" (The KGB and Jewish culture), in *Gosbezopasnost' i literatura na opyte Rossii i Germanii [SSSR i GDR]* (State security and literature based on the experience of Russia and Germany – the USSR and the GDR) (Moscow, 1994), p. 35.

¹¹⁸ In Yiddish, in the collection of poems "*Lider, ongeshribene in di teg, ven me hot mikh oysgeshlosn fun der partey*" (Written in the days when I was expelled from the Party), *Sovetish heymland*, No. 5, 1989, pp. 117–122; in Russian: Aron Vergelis, "*Interv'iu v proze i stikhabok*" (Interview in prose and verse), in *God za godom*, Vol. 6, 1991, pp. 13–17.

Slansky and ten other former leaders of the country (the majority of victims were Jews), who were accused of having established an “anti-state conspiratorial center.” The Slansky trial was in some ways a rehearsal for the subsequent anti-Jewish “Doctor’s Plot” in the USSR and, as Benjamin Pinkus noted, the Soviet press “devoted much space to the Prague trial and to denouncing the defendants.”¹¹⁹

Der brunem iz farshtopt mit
mentsh-gedrang,
M'hot zey, azoy vi mikh, oy-
vey, gemasert.
Ikh heng ibern brunem shoy
fun lang,
Me vet mikh bald aroplozn
in vaser.

The well is stopped up with a throng
of humans.
Oy, they have been, like me,
betrayed.
I have long been hanging above the
well,
And soon they will lower me into
the water.

The poem “Neighbors,” dated four days later, contains the following lines:

Mayn lebn hot keyn fentster un keyn
tirn,
Di vent zaynen tserukt, nito keyn
dakh.
Ven kh'hob gezogt, az dort kh'bahalt
mayn tsirung,
Di gute shkheynim hobn zikh tselakht.

My life has no windows and no
doors;
The walls have been pushed back
and there is no roof.
When I said that I hid my jewelry
there,
My good neighbors broke out
laughing....

Zey redn shoy n arum di zakh on
moyre,
Un ikh bahalt dos tsirung mayns un
shvayg.
Ikh leyg avek eyn hant mir oyf der
toyre
Un mit der tsveyter vayz ikh zey a

Already they talk about this
without fear,
So I hide the jewels and am silent.
I put one hand upon the Torah,
and
With the other I give them a fig.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews 1948-1967: A Documented Study* (Cambridge, 1984), p.198.

fayg.

In the second half of December 1952 Vergelis' feelings of being trapped and doomed were apparently unbearable. His poems "Cheaters," "What's the Sense?," and "In the Electric Train" are dated 18 or 19 December. In the third the protagonist exclaims:

<p>In vagon iz freylekh, yeder iz a meylekh. Vos es glust dem harts zikh, zingt men un me redt. Un nor ikh, der geler in a modne heylekh, For on a billet. Halt ikh ayn dem otem, tif in zikh faruk zikh, Keyn billet kh'hob nit... Nor der kontrolior fregt bam vagon mit rugze: — Ver iz do a yid?</p>	<p>In the streetcar it is festive, everyone is a king. Whatever the heart desires, one sings and speaks. And only I, yellow, a little wanderer, Ride without a ticket. ... I hold my breath, withdraw deep into myself, No ticket do I have... But the conductor asks in an angry voice, —Who among you is a Jew?</p>
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"There's No Sense?" (dated 19 December) raised questions the poet had not touched upon earlier —relating to the nature of Stalin's regime itself:

<p>Du, mentsh fun a groyser shlikhes Mit revoliutionsiern drang. Du, gayst fun farshayte vikhers, Vos molokhn brekht mit gedank, — Tsubislekh du bist gevorn A shrayfele in der mashin, Un mer shoyt keyn mentsh, nor a vorem — Zog, vu zhe iz do der zin?</p>	<p>You, man with a great mission, With a revolutionary thrust. You, spirit of wanton whirlwinds, Which angels break with a thought— Little by little you have become A cog in the machine, And no longer a man, but a worm— Tell me, what's the sense?</p>
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Based on the chronology of the poems, at the end of December 1952 and early 1953 Vergelis was evidently interrogated by the MGB in connection with “Jewish bourgeois nationalism” and, perhaps also, espionage. This is alluded to in his poem “They and I” (11 January 1953).

Oykh zey fun der milkhome	Even those from the war have arrived,
zaynen ongekumen,	but I—
Nor ikh —	in the battle I interpreted the
in shlakht di shvue	curse (or oath, vow),
hob fartaytsht,	and they—
Un zey —	looked in the crooked spyglass,
gekukt inem shpaktiv dem	To see if I have left the trench to go
krumen,	whisper with the German.
Tsi kh'geyn nit fun okop zikh	
shushken mitn daytsh.	

Oykh zey nokh der milkhome	After the war, they also tasted the
funem zig farzukhn,	victory,
Nor ikh —	but I—
in mi in shverer pore	have become used to toil in heavy
zikh gevoynt,	mist,
Un zey	And they—
mit khshad zey	suspiciously they ransack and
nishtern un zukhn,	search,
Tsi kh'trog nit op mayn land in	To see if I will carry off my country in
koysht arayn tsum dzhoyn.	a basket to the Joint.
Me taynet shoynt in shtot:	Already a complaint has been filed in
S'iz greyt der eshafot.	the city:
	The gallows stand ready.

About two weeks earlier, i.e. 27–29 December (according to Vergelis in 1989) he wrote “Consolation,” “Speechless,” and “Fidelity and to the Patriarchs Ancestors,” whose basic leitmotifs are expressed in the following verses from “Loyalty... Fidelity to the Ancestors”

Yo, mayn zeyde hot in shul gedavnt	Yes, my grandpa used to pray in
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Un mayn tate hot dem rov getroyt.
 Efsher veyst ir, vemen kh'hob
 baavlt,
 Efsher gor a mentshn kh'hob
 getoyt?

shul
 and my father trusted what his
 rabbi said.
 Maybe you know who I am
 mourning,
 or did I even kill a man myself?

Neyn, gemasert hob ikh nit dem tatn,
 Nit farloshn kh'hob dem zeydns
 likht.
 Efsher veyst ir, vemen ikh hob
 faratn?
 Efsher veyst ir, vemen kh'hob farfirt?

No, I did not turn my father in,
 Nor did I extinguish grandpa's
 light.
 Maybe you know who I betrayed?
 Maybe you know who I misled?

Yo, mayn loshn hob ikh nit gebitn,
 Nit genumen zikh a tsveyte
 shprakh.
 Oyb fun dem dos lebn vert aykh
 biter,
 Vil ikh aykh nit ontroyen di makht.

Yes, I did not trade in my mother
 tongue,
 Did not take a second language.
 If this can make your life turn
 bitter,
 I will not entrust you with the
 power.

After the 13 January 1953 *Pravda* publication of the lead article “Vile Spies and Murders under the Mask of Professor-Physicians,” antisemitism gripped the masses in the country. In mid January the leadership of the Writers’ Union adopted a resolution to expel Vergelis. He was informed of this in writing on January 17 by Elchibekov, who “invited” Vergelis for a conversation with the Union’s deputy secretary **S. N. Preobrazhenskii** “... in connection with the question of ...your continued membership in the Union of Soviet Writers of the USSR.”¹²⁰

In the poem “To the Devil!” (dated 19 January) Vergelis wrote:

... Far an alef shtel ikh ayn
 dos lebn,

For an Aleph I risk my life,
 For a Beis I forget about death.

¹²⁰ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 39, *d.* 1107, p. 80.

Far a beys farges ikh inem
toyt.

Yogt der shtrom in
moskve-taykh. Tsum tayvl!

Kh'shtey un kuk arop fun
hoykher brik.

Lomir vayter blozn inem
fayfl,

Lomir vayter firn mitn smik.

The stream chases into the Moscow
River. To the Devil!

I stand and look down from a high
bridge.

Let's keep on blowing on the whistle,
Let's keep on leading with the bow.

Between the late 1940s and the early 1950s Yiddish literary figures were generally expelled from the Writers' Union on the grounds of their "having ceased literary-artistic and literary-critical activity for a number of years." In order to defend himself against this charge Vergelis wrote the following in an autobiographical statement dated 23 January 1953:

After having worked at the factory [on the publication in the plant newspaper *Kirovets* – M.K.] for a year and a half, I found it possible to again take up my literary activity, which had been interrupted in 1948. By that time I had collected material for two works that I had conceived – about people in the timber industry and about the collective of a large factory.

My first step was the play "Forest signs," which I wrote last year based on materials about the forest industry (*lespromkhoz*). However, my first attempt to write a dramatic work in Russian was not crowned with success. The play was not staged. At present I am working hard on a story. I am writing it with greater confidence than I wrote the play, with greater faith in its success.¹²¹

On the very next day, Vergelis apparently wrote "Procession":

Ikh gib aykh op vos nor ir
vilt,
Dem gloybn tshepet nit,
ganovim!
In tales heylikn farhilt,
Mayn kol kert um zikh aleyn

I give you whatever it is you
want,
Don't mess with faith, you
thieves!
Shrouded in the holy *talles*,
My voice returns to the Prophet.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 10.

oybnokh
 In der protsesie fun
 kdoyshim,
 Farviklt in der royter fon,
 Vos oyf keyn tsveyter kh'vel
 nit toyshn.

And up I go alone
 Into the procession of the
 Saints,
 Wrapped in the red flag,
 Which I will not trade
 for any other.

Vergelis dated “The Last Word” to 7 February 1953. It includes the following verses:

...Oyb du konst nit shenken mir
 dos lebn, — dan antlay es,
 Gib es mir oyf kitsve op, altseysn
 es iz dokh dayns.
 Ker mikh um in tify vald, farshtel
 mikh nit fun khayes,
 Fun di mentshn hit mikh op, o,
 likhtik heymland mains.

...If you cannot give me life—then
 loan it,
 Give it to me as a hand-out; in any
 case, it's yours.
 Return me to the deepest forest,
 don't hide me from beasts,
 Guard me from the people, oh, my
 bright homeland.

Oyf der erd, vos tsudekn mikh
 vet, kh'hob keyn fardros nit,
 Dikh mit trern bet ikh, zolst mir
 shenken itst dayn gnod —
 Heyb mikh uf ibern vald oyf ot
 der hoykher sosne,
 Kh'darf fun dortn aynroymen
 main altn folk a sod.

Against the earth, which will cover
 me, I have no complaint,
 I beg you now with tears, you should
 show me favor.
 Lift me up above the forest on this
 very tall pine,
 From there I must whisper a secret
 to my ancient people.

It is fairly certain that it was at the beginning of February 1953, at the height of the antisemitic hysteria connected with the arrest of “the physician murders in white coats,” that Vergelis was expelled from the Communist Party by the Party organization of the Writers' Union poetry section. He returned to this subject more than once. Like the verses cited above,¹²² his memoirs reflect the seriousness of the trauma he experienced.

¹²² This is the case even if they were written later.

He summarized this session of the Party committee as follows:

The cases of three people were considered: the poet Alexander Mezhirov, who the previous day had expressed his belief in God, the editor-in-chief of *Novyi mir*, Alexander Tvardovskii for publishing in his journal the “ideologically harmful” article of the critic V. Vladimir Pomerantsev,¹²³ and the disgraced Yiddish poet Vergelis.... In regard to my case [in addition to the above-mentioned report of Shchegoleva – M.K.] there was a statement by the Yiddish poet Ziama Telesin. He was an inside informer. He knew that I had been with Kvitko in the Crimea [this refers to vacations by Kvitko and Vergelis at the House of Creativity of the Union of Writers in Koktebeil in 1947 – M.K.] and he wrote that I, allegedly collected information there about troop locations in order to pass this on to Turkey in order to help the Turks occupy the Crimea. Kvitko had been arrested by this time and with this “enemy of the people” Kvitko, I had traveled to the Crimea for this purpose.... The playwright Surkov [Anatolii] Surov [1911–1987] arrived from the House of Creativity in Golitsyno specially to [help] expel me at this meeting of the Party committee. He belonged to the same class as Sofronov but, in regard to literature, he was even more of a scandalist. He asked me the usual questions: “So, Vergelis, you joined the Party during the war, at the most dangerous time. Why did you do so?” and continued “You joined the Party in order to obtain information at the Dynamo workshop about new lathes.” Further he asked: “Did you often meet with enemy of the people Mikhoels, did you spend time together?” These were the kind of questions he asked me in a loud threatening voice. I responded and seriously objected. After that, Evgenii Dolmatovskii spoke in favor of my expulsion, saying that he had been authorized to visit Emmanuel Kazakevich, a friend of Vergelis, to ask him whether Vergelis should be expelled from the Party. He reported that Kazakevich replied “Yes, it is necessary to expel Vergelis immediately

¹²³ Here Vergelis clear confused two different publications in *Novyi mir*, for which editor-in-chief Tvardovskii was severely criticized in 1953. Pomerantsev’s “Ob iskrennosti v literature” was published in issued No. 12 of 1953, i.e. much later than the events discussed here, which in early 1953, the editor was criticized for publishing, in late 1952-early 1953, Vasilii Grossman’s novel *Za pravoe delo* (For a right cause) and Emmanuel Kazakevich’s story “Serdtshe druga” (The heart of a friend) (See N. Bianki, K. Simonov, A. Tvardovskii v *Novom mire* (K[onstantin] Simonov and A[lexander] Tvardovskii in *Novyi mir*) (Moscow, 1999), p. 97.

from the Party, the sooner the better.” [As Vergelis noted in his audio-memoir, Dolmatovskii’s report of Kazakevich’s statement was entirely fictitious – M.K.]. To put in briefly, they expelled me. Vera Inber also said that it was necessary to expel Vergelis from the Party.... And Alexander Shtein also said that I should be expelled.... The poet Stepan Shchipachev opposed this... as did a number of others.¹²⁴

In one of his last interviews, in May 1998, Vergelis noted that, in addition to Shchipachev (1898 – 1979), the poets Mikhail Lvov (1916 – 1988) and Mikhail Lukonin (1918 – 1976) had also opposed his expulsion.¹²⁵

An undated and anonymous report included among preparatory materials for the 17 March 1953 session of the secretariat of the Writers’ Union executive concisely conveys both the pathos of Vergelis’ remarks at the poetry section of Writers’ Union Party committee meeting on February 1953 and the formulation of his expulsion from the Party. The report states:

After having discussed the question of extending the candidate period of Comrade A. A. Vergelis, the Party executive noted that, since he has been a candidate member of the CPSU since 1944, Comrade A. A. Vergelis has not proved himself in either public or Party life. He was creatively inactive and for a long time detached from the Party organization.

Among the editors of the plant newspaper *Kirovets*, where Vergelis worked for one and a half years, he did not justify himself as a candidate member of the Party.

The Party executive notes that, in discussing the question of extending his candidate period, Comrade Vergelis avoided a direct political evaluation of the

¹²⁴ Audio, March 1994.

¹²⁵ V. Prikhod’ko, “Skrip kalitki i dyrka ot bublika” (A screech of the fence and a hole in the bagel), *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 5 May 1998. One can not completely rely on the accuracy of Vergelis’ memoirs in regard to his experience in early 1953. For example, later, on 2 August 1955, at a meeting of the Party organization of the poetry section of the Writers’ Union at which was promoted from candidate to full member of the Party, the poet Lev Oshanin recalled a different version of the 1953 events. He noted that he himself had spoken in favor of expelling Vergelis for ideological errors in his poem “Yosif Bumagin.” At the 1955 meeting Vergelis himself confirmed Oshanin’s version (TsGAOPIM, f. 8132, *op.* 1, *d.* 4, pp. 28–29).

activity of the bourgeois nationalists in Birobidzhan and among the Moscow Yiddish section, with which he had work connections.

In view of this, the Party biuro does not consider it possible to extend the candidate period of Comrade Vergelis and resolves to remove Vergelis from the ranks of candidate members of the CPSU.¹²⁶

This document makes clear (despite what Vergelis claimed in his audio memoirs) that Vergelis was not being accused of espionage.

Judging from the report of the Party executive of the poetry section of Writers' Union to the Union's secretariat about Vergelis' expulsion from the Party, in late 1952 or early 1953 the poet behaved less questionably than he had in late 1949. There may have been several factors involved and it is hard to decide their relative importance. For one thing the series of humiliations and the disillusionment he suffered between 1949 and 1952 seriously undermined the conformist Communist faith of Vergelis' earlier years. Another likely factor was his realization of the futility of his efforts to write in Russian.

Furthermore, on the collective level, Vergelis either already knew, or could well surmise, the tragic fate of many of his colleagues, the Yiddish writers who had been arrested. He could not help understanding that the policy of state antisemitism, including the complete annihilation of his professional and cultural environment of Soviet culture in Yiddish, had become more overt and consistent. Finally, in February 1953 Moscow was rife with rumors about a deportation of the Jews.

In the face of all these factors it is hardly surprising that bitterness was expressed in the poem "Return my flute to me" (dated 19 February 1953), which included verses such as the following, apparently, addressed to his wife:

Vilst keyn orves-gelt
nemen — na mayn harts
mit di gezangen,
Heys mir lebn, heys mir flien,
heys mir zingen un zikh ranglen.

If you do not want my money—so
take heart and song;
Order me to live and flee, order me
to sing and struggle.

¹²⁶ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 30, *d.* 221, p. 101.

Two weeks later Stalin died. Despite this, at the Union of Writers the antisemitism only increased. There was a continuation of the previous month's direction of CC of the CPSU exemplified by the 16 February directive to Writers' Union secretary Sofronov "to more effectively and actively" involve himself in matters of "the infiltration of creative cadres [by Jews]."¹²⁷

On the day after the funeral of the Soviet leader, the presidium of the CC of the CPSU was presided over by Georgii Malenkov, who on 5 March had been named chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, a post previously held by Stalin. Rumors in Moscow at that time focused on Malenkov as either the initiator or, at least, the director of the antisemitic campaign.¹²⁸

The leadership of the Writers' Union attempted to offer its own contribution to the campaign. On 19 March Simonov sent Fadeev a note, composed under his supervision, which had an obviously anti-Jewish orientation.¹²⁹ After being signed also by Fadeev and Aleksei Surkov, a week later the note was sent to Central Committee secretary Nikita Khrushchev.

This document not only contained statistics about the ethnic composition of the Moscow branch of the Union of Writers (329 Jews or 29.8% of the membership), but it also dealt directly with its former Yiddish group. Strong criticism was expressed about the fact that in the spring of 1953 four of the twenty two members of this group still remained free and continued to publish, albeit occasionally, in Russian. The conclusion was drawn that those writers were "ballast" from which the Writers' Union intended to free itself in the next few months.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ *Apparat TsK KPSS i kul'tura, 1953 – 1957: Dokumenty* (The administration of the CC CPSU and culture, 1953 – 1957; documents), ed. by V. Iu. Afiani (Moscow, 2001), p. 34; RGALI, f. 631, op. 30, d. 221, p. 101.

¹²⁸ F. Borkenau, "Was Malenkov Behind the Anti-Semitic Plot?," *Commentary*, May 1953, pp. 442–444.

¹²⁹ It was titled "On measures of the secretariat of the Union of Soviet Writers to free our writers' organization from ballast."

¹³⁰ *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury*, compilers: T.M. Goriaeva et al. (History of Soviet political censorship) (Moscow, 1997), pp. 100–104; Из архива К.М. Симонова. Записка К. Симонова А. Фадееву // *Nash sovremennik*, No. 1, 1999, pp. 206–208.

The secretariat recommended that the presidium expel Vergelis, among others, from the Union. On 17 March, at a meeting chaired by Surkov, the secretariat decided: “first that it was imperative to expel Vergelis from the Union of Soviet Writers... and, second, that the presidium of the Union of Soviet Writers should confirm this resolution.”¹³¹

However, this time the factor of time played a positive role in the fate of Vergelis. The bureaucratic procedures for the confirmation, by the Writers’ Union presidium, of the secretariat’s expulsion of members required a certain amount of time. From the beginning of April, new winds had begun blowing from the Presidium of the Central Committee. On 1 April the First Deputy of Prime Minister and reappointed head of the MGB Lavrentii Beria proposed rehabilitating those who were still being held in prison in connection with “the Doctors’ Plot.” Two days later the Presidium adopted a resolution to that effect. The next day the press published the communiqué of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR that amazed Soviet society. In a dramatic turnabout, on 6 April, *Pravda* referred to Mikhoels as “an honest public figure.” During this transitional period, in a secret circular to low-ranking Party organizations, Khrushchev ordered that the topic of antisemitism not be brought up at Party meetings.¹³²

On the lowest level the Party bureaucracy continued its repression. On 8 May 1953, in Moscow the executive of the Krasnaia Presnia district committee confirmed Vergelis’ loss of status as candidate Party member.¹³³

Whatever other effects it may have had, Khrushchev’s directive evidently, had a negative effect on Vergelis’ situation since it was only in late 1953 that the Writers’ Union decided to reconsider his membership. The poet was summoned to appear on 4 January before Gorban, the new head of the personnel department of the Union. On 13 January 1954 the Union’s

¹³¹ RGALI, f. 69, op. 27, d. 23a, p. 41. f. 631, op. 30, d. 221, p. 13.

¹³² Pavel Sudoplatov, *Spetsoperatsii: Lubyanka i Kreml’ 1930 – 1950 gody* (Special operations: the Lubyanka [OGPU-NKVD-MGB] and the Kremlin 1930 – 1950) (Moscow, 2003), pp. 546–547.

¹³³ TsGAOPIM, f. 69, op. 27, d. 23a, p. 41.

secretariat reversed its decision to expel Vergelis.¹³⁴ Thereafter, there began for him, if not a “thaw,” then at least a slight warming.

Conclusion

The destruction of the infrastructure of Soviet Yiddish culture and mass repressions against its main representatives between late 1948 and early 1953 had a profoundly ideological character. In the second half of the 1930s Stalin’s regime adopted a policy of forced acculturation and assimilation of ethnic minorities. However, until the end of 1948, the Jews basically remained the sole ethnic minority in the USSR that was allowed to retain some remnants of extraterritorial autonomy with many culturally significant members of their intelligentsia continuing to create in Yiddish. Even in this period the regime considered the Yiddish intelligentsia to be an effective mechanism for the ideological and cultural modernization of the Jewish minority via its native language.¹³⁵ The Jews were considered one of the ethnic groups most loyal to the Soviet regime and played an important role in Stalin’s ambitious foreign policy plans.

Instead of directly proclaiming his goal of assimilating the Jews, in late November 1948 Stalin launched repressions, within the framework of non-publicized arrests against people connected with the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee, against members of Yiddish intelligentsia, whom he accused of being “Jewish bourgeois nationalists.”

By late January 1949, Stalin had finally abandoned his hopes that Israel would become a Soviet proxy in the Middle East. In the context of the mounting Cold War, the Jews were perceived as a disloyal minority that had a state of their own that was hostile to the USSR. The resulting propaganda campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” (that lasted until early April 1949) was, among other things, a cover for the beginning of arrests of important

¹³⁴ RGALI, *f.* 631, *op.* 39, *d.* 1107, pp. 82–83.

¹³⁵ On the ideology, role, and place of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia in the 1920s and 1930s, see David Schneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet-Jewish Culture: 1918 – 1930* (Cambridge, 2004) and Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (Syracuse, 2005).

figures of Soviet Yiddish culture. From late January the campaign assumed the public character of state antisemitism, which was expressed in the mass purges of Jews.

Nevertheless, Vergelis managed to survive these events. The complex example of Vergelis demonstrates that – despite the clear anti-Jewish orientation of the Soviet leadership in this period – the fate of individuals depended, not only on the Soviet leader or regime’s general policy but also, to some extent, on objective and subjective factors. One important reason for Vergelis’ survival may have been a positive attitude toward him among the leadership of the Union of Soviet Writers, particularly its general secretary, Fadeev.

The personal qualities of Vergelis also appeared to have played a role, even though he was undergoing a serious moral and social crisis. Analysis of this period of his life helps us understand the source of Vergelis’ anti-Zionist position during his later career. He apparently believed that the suffering that he and other Soviet Jews underwent in the late 1940s and early 1950s was caused, at least partially, by the pro-Western policy adopted by the Israeli government and the Soviet reaction to the pro-Israel sentiments among Soviet Jews.

Vergelis’ December 1949 criticism of other Yiddish writers should be viewed in the context of the specific time that it was written. The more general question of the degree of his cooperation with the apparatus of Soviet repression during this time remains open. In any case, he was a typical representative of the young generation whose personalities were formed by pre-war Stalinism and whom Soviet authorities considered eligible for promotion.

Vergelis represented one epiphenomenon of the destruction of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia that resulted from the Stalinist perception that they were “infected” with Jewish nationalism. Their Yiddish language was interpreted as itself having nationalistic content. This provided the ideological justification for the destruction of Soviet culture in Yiddish – its institutions and creators.

Appendix

About the Group of Yiddish Writers,
from a transcript of a closed Party meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers' on
9 February 1949

Sofronov:

“The Party organization has more than once drawn the attention of Party members who belong to the Group of Yiddish Writers to the presence, within their ranks also, of national self-isolation, as well as of reluctance to tears the masks off the bearers of antipatriotic ideas. It should be stated directly that the calls of the Party organization have remained mere words since the members of our Party organization never received a straight answer to the questions it posed. Now much has become clear to us. All these Nusinovs, Fefers, Kvitkos, Markishes, et al. have turned out to be despicable traitors who sold themselves to foreign intelligence services and slandered the Soviet people, our country, and the Communist Party. The Party organization asks those members of the Organization of Yiddish Writers who are present at this meeting for a straight answer top the question: why have they overlooked the presence in their midst of enemies of the people, traitors to our country?

The Moscow Party organization will not countenance among its members people who are indifferent to the activity of criminals who are attempting to undermine the power of our nation.”¹³⁶

Boris Galin:

“If all these leaders, all these Pfefers [sic.], Markishes, et al. are able for a long time to combine and join into an anti-Party, anti-Soviet block, then it seems to me that such a section does not have the right to exist (others present shout out: ‘Right!’) since the section has not justified its existence. It has shown itself to reflect *shtetl* values, to be hostile to our country, our native land... I would like to take this occasion to say that the combination of national self-limitation with cosmopolitanism leads to the logical conclusion that espionage is behind them...”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ TsGAOPIM, *f.* 8131, *op.* 1, *d.* 19, pp. 191–192.

¹³⁷ TsGAOPIM, *f.* 8131, *op.* 1, *d.* 20, p. 25.

Eli Gordon.

“There is no doubt that the activity of the rootless cosmopolitans and the nefarious deeds of the group that has caused damage to Soviet Yiddish literature has now been uncovered and that its fruits are those that can be expected from such growths.... This is a group of émigrés who fled abroad during the October Revolution.... For a long time they have been at the helm of Soviet Yiddish literature.... But are they, indeed, characteristic representatives of Soviet Yiddish literature? Of course not.... These writers slighted others writers, ones who had come from the people and were educated by the Soviet regime.... Only a lack of vigilance can explain the fact that this group for a long time succeeded in causing harm within the Group of Yiddish Writers.

What was the problem? One factor was nepotism, helping those who were close to you, and, especially national isolation, the fear of washing one’s linen in public. This, it must be said, is due to the national patriarchal aspect of the Jewish people (From the audience: ‘It is a characteristic of bourgeois nationalists’).

Now the Union of Soviet Writers has established a commission to review Yiddish books. Soon the commission will complete its work and, hopefully, we will present to the Union of Writers, and also in print, a full and clear picture of Soviet Yiddish literature, and one that does not conceal but, on the contrary, reveals and focuses on all its errors... We are asked what we writers who are members of the Party have done in order to make these outrages known... The latter... are so shameful that we should be standing here at this Party meeting covered, at least to some degree, with dirt... Comrades, for several months already I have been living a horrible nightmare: I have no one to speak with. I want to know what is happening with us. I do not yet understand, do not comprehend. We are waiting for the Party committee to call us together...”¹³⁸

¹³⁸ TsGAOPIM, *ibid.*, *d.* 20, pp. 97–105.