

Rhetoric of American Identities

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Confronting the Jewish Rejection of Jewish Particularism: Chaim Zhitlowsky's Anti-Assimilationist Intervention in the American Yiddish Press

**„Nie” dla odrzucenia przez Żydów narodowego partykularyzmu:
Antyasymilacyjna kampania Chaima Żytlowskiego w amerykańskiej
prasie jidysz**

Abstract

This article examines Chaim Zhitlowsky's (1865-1943) use of the “internal” Jewish space of the Yiddish press to critique the American melting pot and present his alternative “internationalist” model. He also attempted to raise the consciousness of immigrant Jews by analyzing the reasons for their failure to embrace what he defined as “progressive nationalism.” His application of Eastern European autonomist ideas to the American context offers a provocative critique of cosmopolitan tendencies in progressive politics, in Jewish circles and beyond.

W artykule poddano analizie sposób wykorzystania przez Chaima Żytlowskiego (1865–1943) „wewnętrznej” żydowskiej przestrzeni prasy jidysz do krytykowania amerykańskiego tygla i przedstawienia jego alternatywnego modelu „internacjonalistycznego”. Żytlowski próbował podnieść świadomość Żydów-immigrantów, analizując przyczyny, dla których nie przyjęli tego, co określił jako „postępowy nacjonalizm”. Zastosowanie przez Żytlowskiego wschodnioeuropejskich pomysłów autonomicznych w kontekście amerykańskim oferuje prowokującą krytykę kosmopolitycznych tendencji w polityce ery progresywizmu, w kręgach żydowskich i nie tylko.

Key words

cosmopolitanism, assimilation, American Yiddish press, cultural pluralism, autonomism
kosmopolityzm, asymilacja, amerykańska prasa jidysz, pluralizm kulturowy, autonomizm

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1. Introduction: Chaim Zhitlowsky and the American Yiddish Press as a Forum for “Internal” Jewish Conversation¹

Founded in 1870, the American Yiddish press ultimately spanned at least six cities, an estimated 307 titles, more than a century of feverish activity, and a circulation of up to nearly 650,000 in its heyday (Singerman 1984, 435, 439, 441 and Goldberg 1941, 143).² Recently, digitization and indexing projects³ have rendered the historical Yiddish press significantly more accessible. This makes it possible to explore American Jewish history with increased attention to the voices of Jewish immigrants themselves – and, in particular, their articulations of the nature of “Americanness” and their place within it in a context in which non-Jews were unlikely to be “listening in.” In this article, I will examine one corner of this “internal” Jewish-American discourse about Jewish-Americaness: namely, Chaim Zhitlowsky’s writings in the American Yiddish press about the position and self-conception of Jews within the American ethnic/multiethnic system.

1. This article is based on the thesis I wrote for the completion of my master’s degree in Yiddish from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under the direction of Dr. Aya Elyada. I conducted the research with the financial support of grants from the National Authority for Yiddish Culture, the Dov Sadan Foundation, and the Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, as well as the Emily Budick Scholarship for American Studies. I am grateful to my research assistant Jessica Podhorcer, who identified and transmitted relevant articles from the Press Clippings series of Zhitlowsky’s Papers in the YIVO Archives in New York City (RG 208), and to Sandra Chiritescu, who provided access to other documents held by libraries in New York City and also helped talk through elements of my theoretical framing, as did Joseph Gindi. Finally, I completed the project during my time as a Yiddish immersion student at the Maison de la culture yiddish ~ Bibliothèque Medem in Paris, France, and I’m grateful for the funding I received to do so from the program itself as well as from the Szloma-Albam-Stiftung. I’m also extremely grateful for the support and guidance I received from the faculty there, particularly Natalia Krynicka, Sharon Bar-Kochva, Tal Hever-Chybowski and Yitskhok Niborski.

2. According to Mordecai Soltes (1925), the readership of the press at the time could be estimated at about 175% of its circulation (38-39).

3. The present article has benefited particularly from the Historical Jewish Press and Abraham Icchok Lerner Index to Yiddish Periodicals projects in Jerusalem, as well as the Stephen Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA.

Hailing originally from Vitebsk, Chaim Zhitlowsky (1865-1943) traveled to the United States for the first time in 1904 in his role as a representative of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. After a brief return to Europe in 1906, he settled in the US permanently in 1908. Soon after his arrival, he founded a highbrow Yiddish political, literary, and philosophical journal, *Dos naye lebn* [The New Life] (1908-1914, 1922-1923). Zhitlowsky became a popular lecturer in the US and Canada, and wrote regularly for the nonpartisan *Tog*, the socialist *Tsukunft*, and the Poale Zion organ *Di tsayt*. He also helped to establish the American Jewish Congress and other Jewish cultural and political organizations, and played an important role in founding the North American system of Yiddish supplementary schools for children (Kharlash 1960, col. 696-702; Elsberg 1929).

Chaim Zhitlowsky was an influential public intellectual during his lifetime. However, he has been relatively neglected as a subject of scholarship in recent decades.⁴ While this is not an uncommon fate for Jewish intellectuals who operated primarily in Yiddish, Zhitlowsky poses particular challenges for the researcher due to the immense scope of his oeuvre⁵ as well as his sometimes chaotic writing style. However, wading through the chaos is worthwhile: Zhitlowsky was an insightful observer who made it his mission to confront naturalized zero-sum dichotomies, in particular the supposed incompatibility of Jewish particularism with the universal-humanist ideal, in order to reveal political possibilities that few others dared to see or name. Although Zhitlowsky is most often associated with secular Jewish political movements in the Old World (particularly diaspora nationalism), in fact, by applying his ideas about Jewish autonomism to the American setting, he offered a highly perceptive conceptualization not only of the meaning of Jewish peoplehood in the modern world, but also of the broader implications of

4. Notable book-length exceptions include Dresner 1975 and Schweigmann-Greve 2012. Two recent articles are also worthy of notice: Hoffman 2005 and Schweigmann-Greve 2007. Several book chapters provide a general overview: Frankel 1981, Goldsmith 1987, Weinberg 1996, and Michels 2009.

5. Writing in 1925, literary critic Samuel Charney (Sh. Niger) already felt the need to introduce an overview of Zhitlowsky's life and work with this disclaimer, "It is impossible for me even to attempt to write about Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky and his accomplishments without an apology. The scope of his activity is so broad; his literary, scholarly, and social interests encompass so many different arenas of modern life, of contemporary culture; his research, his persuasive writing, his intellectual leadership relate to so many matters, that even if one did not aspire to an exhaustive approach, but rather merely to touch upon the topic from all sides, one would need to immerse oneself in the most important philosophical, ethical, social, and national problems of the current era" (277). The Index to Yiddish Periodicals lists over 500 of Zhitlowsky's articles in the Yiddish press; this impressive number does not even include the majority of his writings in the American Yiddish press, not to mention his articles and books written in other languages.

what he defined as the embrace of “cosmopolitanism” on the part of self-identified progressives, both in the US and elsewhere.⁶

In 1938, Zhitlowsky wrote:

One can become a part of the non-Jewish cultural sphere while simultaneously remaining faithful to one’s own [...]. [M]inority peoples with a developed cultural life [...] are generally *bilingual*. They take part in the reigning cultural sphere of the land, as educated people who read various foreign languages, [and] they live out their lives in their own cultural sphere with full awareness that only [that sphere] is their cultural-national home. [...]

Assimilation wants us to consider the reigning culture in the land to be our own culture, [and] Jewish/Yiddish culture to be a remnant of our [previous] low cultural status, which we must get rid of as quickly as possible. [In contrast,] Yiddishism demands that we consider the reigning cultural and linguistic sphere of the land to be a *foreign* cultural-sphere with which it is worth becoming well-acquainted, from which it is worthwhile to borrow the best elements and *to assimilate them into ourselves*, into our own Jewish/Yiddish cultural sphere, in order to enrich *the latter* with the increasingly important accomplishments of humankind as a whole.⁷ (1938a)

Zhitlowsky’s reversal of the “direction of assimilation” here is of the utmost importance. From his perspective, the immigrant must not pursue fluency in English or increased familiarity with American culture in order to submit to an enforced “audition” for acceptance, legitimacy, or rights in the American cultural sphere; rather, he should consider these skills to be resources which he brings back to his own people. The unapologetic audacity of this move engenders surprise, discomfort, or a shock of recognition, which in turn make it impossible to deny the imbalance of power that lies at the very heart of the relationship between “*folk*”⁸ assimilating” and “*folk* being assimilated into.”

This fundamental reversal of perspective – the unmasking of the power differential hidden underneath the promise of “American opportunity,” and the subsequent exhortation to Jews to recenter their lives around their own ethnic identity, *without* abandoning their commitment to full participation in the American social project in its ideal form – is a maneuver that was perhaps possible only in the semi-private, “internal” forum offered by the Yiddish press. This example serves

6. A note on terminology pertaining to the American context: A full exploration of the discursive context in which Zhitlowsky was operating is beyond the scope of this study; as a result, my references to cotemporaneous mainstream American discourses about immigration and acculturation will inevitably be limited in depth and nuance. In particular, much of the discussion that follows revolves around the image of the “melting pot.” While there is much to be said about the origins and complex mobilizations of this American myth, and in particular about the violent and exclusionary aspects not only of its impact but also of its original framing, my concern here is not the history of the myth itself but rather Zhitlowsky’s particular conception of it. As such, I present the image in the terms on which Zhitlowsky, ever the optimist, took it: as a representation of an essentially progressive, cosmopolitan ideal that was destined to fail merely due to the model’s naïveté vis-à-vis human nature. Zhitlowsky did not take into serious account the possibility that mainstream American consciousness was deeply nativist at its root; as a result, I will not discuss that facet of the myth (or of its failure).

7. Note: All translations excerpted in this article are mine; all emphases in quotations are present in the original. Wherever Yiddish words appear in transliteration, I have mostly standardized the spelling according to YIVO guidelines.

8. Here and at certain other moments, I will leave the word “*folk*”/“*felker*” in Yiddish rather than translating it to the English “people”/“peoples” which (at least to today’s ear) does not carry all the same connotations. In such cases, italics is used to set apart the Yiddish word and does not reflect an emphasis in the original text.

as a microcosm of Zhitlowsky's overall endeavor: to name and thereby begin to "undo" Jewish immigrants' internalization of the ethnoracial marginalization that they experienced in the American context, with the ultimate hope of spurring them into "progressive nationalist" action in the public sphere. In the process, he shed light on the limitations of the "equality" offered by the melting pot as it was imagined by progressive thinkers who embraced the cosmopolitan ideal.⁹

A note on terminology: Although the term "assimilation" has been largely superseded by other terms in academic writing, I will be using it here because Zhitlowsky himself used it (*asimilatsye* in Yiddish), and my aim here is to describe not sociological phenomena, but rather Zhitlowsky's own discursive categories. Similarly, I will be using "nationalism" (*natsyonalizm*) in the sense that Zhitlowsky meant it, which differs from the sense to which most of us are accustomed today. Under Zhitlowsky's pen, the term does not imply ambitions of territorial sovereignty, but rather the pursuit of autonomous Jewish communal thriving, including in a culturally diverse context; he specified explicitly that this was a non-competitive, non-zero-sum quest that need not interfere with the interests of any other group.¹⁰

2. The False Advertising of the "Melting Pot"

In a pair of lectures delivered soon after his arrival in the country,¹¹ Zhitlowsky began over three decades of commentary on the position of Jews in American society by delivering a critique of the "melting pot." Despite the rhetoric, he argued, the American "melting pot" is not one: far from "melting together" to form something entirely new, in fact all immigrant populations are expected to "melt into" the Anglo-American stock and vanish. The immigrant-guest is expected to check his identity at the door and "become" his host: "[T]he [...] clearly-expressed wishes of the master of the land [are] that all of the land's children should acquire one face, and that face must be his own: they must all lose their originality and

9. Although Zhitlowsky's project seems to be rooted in the unique possibilities of the Yiddish-language context, it would nevertheless be worthwhile to compare his insights with those of Jewish American cultural pluralists writing in the English-language sphere, in particular Horace Kallen. Joshua Price has made a fruitful start on this endeavor in an unpublished paper, "Redefining Americanization: Zhitlovski and Kallen on American Pluralism" (2010), which he was kind enough to share with me.

10. See e.g. 1921e: "Can the solution to 'the Jewish problem' that the Jewish-national movement suggests bring [to Jews around the world a] free, fair existence characterized by human dignity and human happiness, without doing damage to anyone else? [...] If [a person] believes that this program is possible to implement, then his moral duty is [...] to help us [...] to build our life as we ourselves see fit, on the condition, naturally, that we do no damage to others in the process."

11. I have not been able to date the "Two Lectures on the Future of Nationalities in America" precisely. Janowsky (1933) indicates that Zhitlowsky delivered the lectures before a students' club at the University of Chicago in "1906 or 1907" (145), which would suggest 1906, given that Zhitlowsky was already back in Europe by 1907 (Kharlash 1960, col. 697). The English manuscripts of the lectures are available in the YIVO Archive ("The Melting Pot" and "The Future of Races in America"), but are undated. Here I will be consulting the Yiddish version of the texts (1906a), which were published for the first time in Zhitlowsky's collected works in 1912 (see Rozenboym 1929, 466). While it appears that Zhitlowsky delivered these two early lectures in English (Kharlash, col. 696), the vast majority of his commentary on the American context is found in the Yiddish press.

appear as he does, in language and culture, in customs and mores, in lifestyle and life purpose” (1906a, 240). Of course, an important site of this Americanization is the educational system:

The American public school produces from all peoples one and only one sort of “desirable American,”¹² just as meat factories produce “desirable” Frankfurter sausages. All sorts of meat are placed in the machine and ground up into a uniform, mushy, slippery mass and [...] stuffed into empty skins. When the crank on one end of the machine is turned, countless sausages pour out of the other end, all uniform in size, uniform in color, and uniform in taste and odor. (1906a, 230)

However, these “Frankfurter factories” ultimately do not work as planned. In this attempt to Americanize, other cultures do not disappear; rather, they are merely stunted:

At best, the United States currently constitutes a garden in which only one tree – the tree of those first English immigrants who created the New-English (American) culture – grows normally, up to the sky. The other *felker* are also separate plants, which have, however, lost their independence, and from strong trees that grow up high, they have turned into creeping vines – mushy, pliable, slippery vines – which snake parasitically around the single proud American tree, or creep together on the garden floor and become tangled into one skein, one single, barely disentangleable snarl. [...] They] lose their power to have an independent cultural life; [...] they are all equal only in terms [...] of their degeneration – whereas their differences, that which makes each *folk* a unique plant, have not disappeared, but are suppressed, crippled, prevented from any further normal development. (1906a, 214-215)

On the other hand, assimilatory pressures also have an unexpectedly stimulating effect, encouraging the growth of new local Jewish communities as well as Jewish cultural institutions, including the Yiddish press and the Yiddish theater (1926a).

In short, according to Zhitlowsky, the “melting pot” does not function as advertised: rather than giving rise to a new, hybrid, uniquely American culture, it demands that all immigrants join the dominant Anglo-American culture; however, they cannot or choose not to do so fully, and as a result, their communities undergo both degeneration and national renewal, all without becoming full-fledged members of the American polity.

3. The Dangers of “Cosmopolitanism” and a False Dichotomy

Zhitlowsky analyzed justifications for Jewish assimilationism that relied upon the language of progressive ideology in terms of the broader category of

12. This phrase appears in transliterated English in the original Yiddish text, followed by a gloss into Yiddish.

“cosmopolitanism,”¹³ a political philosophy which he considered dangerously misleading. Zhitlowsky defined “cosmopolitanism” as the ideology that in order to build a truly just society, it is necessary to do away with particularist (*natsyonal*) cultures and replace them with a single, shared “universal” (*algemeyn-mentshlek*) culture (1906b, 113, 118, 137; 1914a, 21). According to Zhitlowsky, even though “cosmopolitan” ideologies pretend to offer equal standing to members from all national backgrounds, in fact they inevitably privilege one nationality over the others. The principle at the heart of his analysis is that there is no “neutral” nationality:

[...H]umanity is currently divided into *felker*; there is no humanity that occupies a space outside of them; as soon as I jump out of my own national skin, I am compelled to jump into the national skin of another *folk* [...]. (1914a, 25)

In practice, [...] cosmopolitans, who demand that we give up our nation[al identity], are nothing but *assimilators*, demanding that we join a different nation; in other words, they are – [...] in practice – not cosmopolitans but *nationalists* on behalf of that other nation. (1906b, 115)

This explained why, as Zhitlowsky had already observed, America was heavily dominated by the Anglo culture of the nation’s original founders, rather than being able to boast a “new, never-before-seen ethnological human type” based on a true amalgamation of all of its immigrant cultures (1906a, 215) and languages (1921c). Yet despite failing to fulfill its promises, the idea of the “melting pot” was paradoxically used to justify the demand that the immigrant “reject his own people and meld entirely with the American people” (1906a, 229). Thus the cosmopolitan idea led to a contradiction in terms: the demand that participants give up their national cultures in order to become full members of a supposedly “universal” cosmopolitan culture, even though the very act of giving up their national cultures ensured that the promise of full belonging would be an empty one.

Zhitlowsky posited that this contradiction stemmed from a false dichotomy that had been set up between “universal” and “particular.” Instead of accepting that the two are in conflict, Zhitlowsky proposed a different relationship between them: namely, that in fact what it means to be fully human in the most universal sense is to be fully oneself in a national sense. First, it is a universal human trait to be emotionally attached to one’s own nation – to love one’s own language (1906b, 129, 137) and to fight for one’s own ethnic self-determination (172) – and thus, it would be the opposite of humanistic or universal to do away with nationality (even if that were possible). Second, nothing is more universally human than cultural expression – and considering that no “extranational” space exists, the pursuit of cultural expression is possible only through specific national vehicles (e.g., a given language and literature). Thus, here too, the more one engages in deeply

13. The relationship between Jewishness and “cosmopolitanism” has been fraught for the past century and beyond. Here I am dealing with Zhitlowsky’s own relatively neutral mobilization of the concept, which is rooted in his experiences in nineteenth-century Russian radical movements (see e.g. his retrospective mention of “cosmopolitan socialism” in 1914a, 6) and is not tainted by the term’s later anti-Semitic connotations.

human pursuits, the more one is compelled to engage with specific national forms (138-141, 168). “*Vos mer mentsh, alts mer yid*,” Zhitlowsky asserts repeatedly: “The more human a Jew becomes, the more Jewish he must become as well” (e.g., 186).

This idea, that a society truly based on universal humanistic values must encourage rather than prevent the national development of all its constituent peoples, became Zhitlowsky’s premise for his “internationalist” model for cultural pluralism. Indeed, although Zhitlowsky believed that cosmopolitanism does not and cannot live up to its promises, he did believe in the fundamental principle behind the ideal: that progressive, culturally diverse societies must embrace of all their members equally. According to Zhitlowsky, this aspiration could be fulfilled not through the development of one single “neutral” national culture, but only through the pursuit of “the ideal that every people [living coterritorially in a given country] should have equal rights and equal opportunities to develop” (171-172).

4. “The United Peoples of the United States,” Institutional Yiddishism, and “Progressive Nationalism”

But how does one build a unified society out of member-peoples who retain their discrete communities and their diverse national identities in their fullness? Zhitlowsky attempted to answer this question on two levels. On the cultural level, he theorized the precise interface between “particular” national cultures and “universal human” culture when they are in healthy relationship, defining which facets of culture (primarily the hard sciences) ought to be shared cross-culturally, and which (literature, art, philosophy, and religion) ought to differ along national lines (1926e, 1926f, 1938b). On the political level, he suggested that, in place of the cosmopolitan model in which diverse individuals were expected to blend into a homogeneous whole, a much better model would be a “confederation of peoples,” in which multiple ethnic groups living coterritorially would each enjoy a significant degree of political and cultural sovereignty in their own affairs. Under this system, every ethnic group would enjoy both national rights and individual citizenship rights (1906a, 241-242).¹⁴ Zhitlowsky believed that America was uniquely situated to serve as fertile soil for this “new [...] democratic ideal: [...] the united peoples of

14. This can be understood to be an expansion of the autonomist or diaspora nationalist model, which concerns itself mostly with the status of a minority community living under foreign rule. In the “confederation of peoples” model, no one people would rule over the others; rather, they would share governance equitably. Zhitlowsky played an important role in the development of the Jewish autonomist idea in the European context; see e.g. Rabinovitch 2014, 54-60. See also Dubnov’s (1929) assessment of Zhitlowsky’s role and his changing ideology. Here Zhitlowsky’s sense of the landscape of political possibilities is significantly shaped by his roots in the multinational context of the Russian Empire; while he recognized that he was doing something new by applying this model to the American context, he did not allow that to deter him (see, e.g., 1921a: “[...]n this country, [...] the idea of national autonomy for national minorities, autonomy that has nothing to do with political independence – this idea is still absolutely alien to political life here”).

the United States” (1906a, 278).¹⁵ As a land of immigrants, America was a microcosm of the world; thus, it could serve as a testing ground for political models that enabled diverse groups – and ultimately all of humanity – to live together in peace (1906a, 284-286).

National rights, or “glaykh-barekhtikung” (equal rights) for national minorities, meant in particular minority language rights (1921b, 1921f): continued national thriving and development relied on linguistic thriving (1938b). In order to cultivate and defend Ashkenazi linguistic thriving on American territory, American Jews would have to adopt a stance of institutional Yiddishism: a commitment to the cultivation of Yiddish language and culture through the establishment and development of cultural institutions, as well as political struggle to secure the longevity of those institutions (1921a, 1921c, 1921f). This stance is evident in Zhitlowsky’s own activist projects, including his extensive contributions to the American Yiddish press (both as a prolific writer for various publications and as the editor of *Dos naye lebn*) and his role in the founding and development of the North American Yiddish school system,¹⁶ a direct response to his concerns about the tendency of the American public school system to turn all children into “one and only one sort of [...] Frankfurter sausage” (see above).

But what would it mean for the American polity overall if all national groups lived out their lives in their own languages? Zhitlowsky did not believe this would present a threat to the unity or identity of the country. On the contrary, it would challenge America to live out its stated values at long last:

It certainly will not pay [then] for American nationalism to place the primary weight of its national consciousness and feeling on the English language. On the contrary, the appeal “Be Americans!” will have to mean, “Speak whichever language you wish, English, Turkish, Tatar [...]!”¹⁷ [T]he meaning of “Americanism” [...] will not consist of a particularly patriotic love for English, but rather of love and devotion to the institutions of freedom and justice that American politics embody in public life. (1921b)

Zhitlowsky spoke boldly about his vision for the US polity as a whole; however, he did not attempt to change the American political model from the top down. Rather, he concerned himself with what Jewish immigrants had the power to do on

15. See also 1921b, which concludes with the words “[...A] political movement for national minorities, for ‘national rights,’ i.e., for equal rights for [minority] languages and cultures [...] has a much better chance for success in America than in a lot of other countries.”

16. For Zhitlowsky’s own characterization of the emergence of the Yiddish schools movement as a direct consequence of his anti-assimilation work in the North American context, see Zhitlowsky 1935, 7. For other perspectives on Zhitlowsky’s role in the movement, see Dresner 1975, 303-306, Novak 1948, and Pludermakher 1935. For more on Zhitlowsky’s analysis of the importance of the schools movement, see also Zhitlowsky 1926b and 1929.

17. In Yiddish linguistic consciousness, Turkish and Tatar are both regarded as maximally unintelligible languages (analogous to the English-language attitude toward Greek reflected in the expression, “It’s Greek to me!”). As such, Zhitlowsky’s choice to allude here to these particular languages is presumably intended to emphasize the radicality of the linguistic inclusivity that he is envisioning.

their own to provoke social change from the bottom up. According to Zhitlowsky, Jewish immigrants must not be taken in by the trick of the “melting pot”; instead, they should embrace a “nationalist” orientation, identifying themselves as nationally Jewish and building up the institutions of autonomous Jewish life in the American context. This would lead to *glaykh-barekhtikung* for Jews within American society, and, in the long run, to the establishment of a “confederation of peoples” in the United States. None of this would conflict in the slightest with a commitment to universal human culture or social justice – on the contrary, this orientation embodied those values (recall: “*Vos mer mentsh, alts mer yid*”). As such, this stance could claim to be not only “nationalist” but in fact “progressive nationalist” (*progresiv-natsyonal*).¹⁸

5. Confronting the Jewish Rejection of Jewish Nationalism

Zhitlowsky attempted to play a consciousness-raising role by communicating his insights to the Yiddish-reading Jewish public and encouraging them to question their own interpretations of their place in American society. Beyond prompting his audience to reflect upon the sociopolitical circumstances in which they found themselves and the narratives used to justify those circumstances, he also encouraged them to reflect upon their own reactions to those narratives. In other words, he attempted to draw his readers’ attention to Jewish self-consciousness itself.

Zhitlowsky repeatedly criticized what he viewed as Jews’ failure to correctly assess their own position in society, as evidenced by their refusal to adopt a nationalist outlook.¹⁹ This can be understood, at base, as a critique of the refusal to acknowledge and confront anti-Semitism, including systemic anti-Semitism, particularly when it surfaced in subtle, “enlightened” forms (1914a, 13-21, 34-36). Zhitlowsky proposed three reasons for the Jewish refusal to adopt a nationalist stance.

First, Jews harbor the naïve hope that the cosmopolitan model will deliver what it promises, including the fulfillment of lofty ideals and the abolition of their subordinate status in society (1914a, 23). Second, Jews suffer from internalized anti-Semitism. Zhitlowsky (1933) quotes an editorial that appeared in another American Jewish (presumably Yiddish) periodical: “[W]e must fight for all human

18. For more on Zhitlowsky’s definition of “progressive nationalism,” see 1914a, 4-5, 39-40; 1914b. He defines “progress” as the fourfold “striving in human history to cultivate personal freedom, cultural richness, social justice and international brotherhood” (see 1915a and 1915b, 152).

19. For a related analysis from a different vantage point, see Rubin (1995, e.g., 27, 95, 227). One of Rubin’s theses is that a “universalist” stance, far from being a cross-cultural ethical movement unrelated to national identity, is in fact a phenomenon that is historically characteristic of assimilating and assimilated Jews in particular, and that many factors have contributed to the modern Jewish rejection of Jewish particularism that at least partially explains this tendency. I am indebted here to Rubin’s articulation of this argument, which helped me to recognize a similar argument in Zhitlowsky’s work.

rights, *including the right to assimilate*. We cannot tolerate imposed ‘nationalism,’ any more than we wish to tolerate imposed religion.” Zhitlowsky points out the oxymoronic nature of the concept “the right to assimilate”: if a “right” generally implies access to a resource that resolves a lack, then this framing suggests that Jewish identity is a negative state that must be resolved. Third, Jews fear that adopting a Jewish nationalist stance will fan the flames of anti-Semitism, and, in particular, will encourage non-Jews to view Jews as national outsiders who are incapable of becoming “true” Americans (1921e).²⁰

Zhitlowsky argues against each of these logics. First, just as Jews (and other national minorities) have a particular incentive to buy into cosmopolitanism, members of the majority have a particular incentive *not* to buy into it. Indeed, the latter will never be altruistic enough to give up their identity and the privileged status that it confers. Zhitlowsky sums up the attitude of the majority:

[H]ymns to the “*stam-mentsh*” [“‘just’ human,” i.e., universal human, or person not primarily characterized by his nationality] and his rights in the world would not make much of an impression on a *folk* that had not yet lost, and could not lose, its natural national egoism, a *folk* that would necessarily respond to all elegant cosmopolitan turns of phrase with boisterous impudence: “Sure, ‘humanism,’ why not? But – firstly I, the Frenchman, and only later, you, the not-Frenchman, and – sorry, but you’ll have to wait a while for the ‘later.’” (1914a, 23)

Second, Zhitlowsky rails against internalized anti-Semitism, exclaiming upon the abnormality of Jews’ reaction to the situation in which they find themselves:

Can you imagine some [other] currently oppressed people [...] putting forth a [...] demand for *the right to assimilate*? No. It is unimaginable. All of those peoples are *positive* peoples, and they fight in every way *against* assimilation [...]. Only the *Jewish* people is capable of producing a national group that would launch a fight for the right to assimilate.²¹ Apparently, the Jewish people is a *negative* people – and the national pride [that expresses itself as an insistence on] self-determination via assimilation is – like [...] loudly beating our own breasts “*al het*”²² for the “repugnant trait” of [...] belonging to the Jewish nationality.... (1933)

Third, Zhitlowsky reminds his readers that Jewish disaffiliation from and disavowal of the idea of Jewish nationality provides no insurance against the anti-Semitic tendency to view Jews as perpetual outsiders. Regardless of what point of view Jews embrace on the subject, non-Jews will persist in refusing to see

20. This fear was certainly founded. At around this time, President Woodrow Wilson expressed the same idea, as Rubin points out: “‘You cannot become thorough Americans if you think of yourself in groups. America does not consist of groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group in America has not yet become an American’” (quoted in Rubin 1995, 72).

21. For a parallel statement that “It is only among Jews that such a phenomenon [the rejection of one’s own national interests] is possible” as well as the explicit use of the terminology “abnormal”/“normal” to contrast the situations facing Jewish and non-Jewish peoples and their respective reactions to them, see Zhitlowsky 1934.

22. “For the sin of,” words from a penitential prayer recited on Yom Kippur. A Yiddish expression rooted in the custom of beating one’s breast while reciting the penitential prayers: an expression of shame and self-reproach.

Jews as anything but nationally Jewish (1921e). He points out that by penalizing Jews for embracing the idea of Jewish nationhood, non-Jews are demanding that Jews cease to believe in something that they themselves believe in. If Jews accede to this demand, they are simply engaging in a new incarnation of *mayofes* (dancing a degrading dance to entertain the non-Jewish overlord, on pain of punishment for refusal).²³

Having addressed all three of these factors, Zhitlowsky alights upon his usual recommendation: that a “progressive nationalist” orientation is the healthiest approach to Jewish life in a diverse modern society. The idea that individual Jews are worthy of respect only insofar as they can be isolated and de-Judaized is not philo-Semitic, no matter what its adherents claim: he sums up assimilatory solutions to the “Jewish problem” as “When you take off someone’s head, his headache disappears too; if there aren’t any Jews, there won’t be any Jewish problem or any anti-Semitism either” (1921d). Jews ought to seek out not the “right to assimilate” but the right to live as an empowered, autonomous people within a “federation of individual *national* groups” (1933). He concludes, “If we [...] assume, as I believe, that at our *core* we are a *positive*, merely an oppressed, people, then the idea of *imposed* nationalism is no longer on the table whatsoever. What the heart desires [of its own accord] cannot be imposed” (1933).

6. What About the Next Generation? Alienation, Surreptitious Endosociality, and “The Jewish Religion”

Zhitlowsky devotes a separate examination to a population particularly likely to refuse to adopt a Jewish nationalist orientation: American-born Jews, the children and grandchildren of immigrants. In one portion of this population, he remarked on one hand the inability to fit into non-Jewish society, and on the other, an uncritical acceptance of the cosmopolitan model. The result was a “they don’t even know what they’re missing” dynamic: social isolation combined with an inability to recognize the situation as abnormal. Zhitlowsky writes:

[Of] those individuals who have entirely lost any sense of belonging to any sort of *Jewish milieu*, who have forgotten that their parents had any connection to the Jewish people or to the Jewish faith, [...] only a small fraction – a very small fraction – have been integrated into, grafted into an American milieu.

For the most part, this sort of assimilated [Jew] lives on the *outside of all milieus*. That is his characteristic trait. He has no social life. This sounds bizarre. But it is a fact. In his daily existence, he doesn’t have the least direct intimate relationship to his fellow human beings. [He] sits in the interstices of American non-Jewish or even Jewish life like a mote of dust.

Estranged from the Jewish people, estranged from the Jewish faith, his house is a land of its own. (1926c)

23. Although Zhitlowsky does not use the word, he does allude to the image: “dancing to the [...] *goy’s* flute” (1921e). For background on *mayofes*, see Shmeruk 1997.

Zhitlowsky identifies this as yet another mechanism leading to a Jewish rejection of Jewish nationalism:

In an interstice, all storms which buffet our lives fall still. There is no anti-Semitism there; no nationalism. If such a Jew is now and then compelled to give a thought to his own nationality, he automatically comes to the conclusion either that [...] “nationality” is imaginary, and all of humanity is in fact composed of single individuals, and he himself is, like all the rest, “a human being”; or – if he does think something of nationalism – that he is quite certainly an *American*, just as much a Yankee as all other Yankees in Yankeeland. And because he does not live in the real human world, but rather in an interstice somewhere, he does not ever encounter anything that might contradict his ideas. (1926c)

He also describes a second group of highly assimilated Jews, who resolve this tension – between failing to fit into non-Jewish American society and yet buying into the cosmopolitan model nevertheless – in a different way: by seeking out Jewish community without admitting that they’re doing so. Other observers of Jewish life in America have also noted this phenomenon (e.g. Rubin 1995, 78 and Goldstein 2006, 206-207), which I will dub here “surreptitious endosociality.” About this group Zhitlowsky writes:

[...T]hey deny in their minds that the Jewish people has anything to do with them, but [...] the threads that bind them to Jewish existence have not been cut off. They live in a Jewish milieu, or at least in a milieu of Jews, [perhaps] assimilated Jews, just like they are. But they live *together* in a milieu [...], let’s say, a literary or scholarly circle [...] or a [...] *club* [...] or even a *professional organization* which does not bear a Jewish name, but consists entirely of Jewish members [...]. (1926c)

Zhitlowsky also identified a third type of reaction to this tension: the self-identification by members of the Reform movement as Jewish in religion only. True, unlike the previous two groups, “Yahudim,” wealthy Reform Jews of German origin, at least considered their Jewishness to be an important part of their identity; however, the idea that they were affiliated with “the Jewish religion” rather than “the Jewish people” was not a reflection of reality, but yet another manifestation of the Jewish rejection of Jewish nationalism. Zhitlowsky makes this clear with heavy irony:

In his first “Epistle to the Romans,” the apostle Paul [conveyed that] “in fleshly terms,” Jesus is a person, “born of David’s seed.” But “in terms of the Holy Spirit,” he is a child of God. Our “Yahudim” have built up almost the same dualistic theory of “flesh” vs. “spirit” about their own Jewish nature. “In fleshly terms,” they’re not Jews at all, but “real Americans.” They are Jews only “in spiritual terms” [...]. (1926d)

This is nice in theory, writes Zhitlowsky, but in practice, the situation is almost the reverse. In fact, on the religious front, the “Yahudim” are not particularly

observant. Their social lives, on the other hand, take place entirely in a “Jewish milieu” – in wealthy “ghettos” where expensive cars take the place of mezuzot in indicating which doorposts belong to Jewish houses. They run social and charitable organizations and private clubs that are open exclusively to a Jewish clientele; their children marry each other (1926d).

As far as “national feeling,” the “Yahudim” feel a connection to the fate of the Jewish people worldwide. “They try to convince themselves that this comes from their Jewish religious belief, but they are sorely mistaken: *at its base*, this has no connection whatsoever to their faith.” He continues, “If Reform Jews were merely followers of the ‘Israelite religion’ and not also children of the Jewish nationality, it would be impossible to explain their role in purely secular Jewish politics”: specifically, their active hatred of Jewish nationalism in general and Zionism in particular. Devilishly, he asks, “How is it that [these Americans] of the Israelite faith come to meddle in the internal national concerns of the Jewish people [if we are to understand that they are not Jewish from a national point of view]?” However, he provides the paradoxical answer to his own question: because they are in fact part of the Jewish nation, they have a “perfect right” to weigh in on Jewish national questions, even if they ultimately use that prerogative to advocate against Jewish nationalism (1926d).

Zhitlowsky believed that the latter two groups did have the potential to develop a national consciousness, and that they would do so in response to rising anti-Semitism in the US context, which was fated to affect all American Jews, no matter how assimilated they fancied themselves (1926d; 1926c).²⁴

7. Conclusion: A Proto-Rejection of “Jews Becoming White Folks”

After his arrival in the US, then, Zhitlowsky tried to develop and distribute the antidote to the particular American strain of the Jewish allergy to Jewish particularism. He dissected the phenomenon under the microscope and then held up the slides to the afflicted – at least those who could, and chose to, read the New York Yiddish press.²⁵ Zhitlowsky hoped that his audience would come around to his way of thinking and lend a hand in building the infrastructure that would spread the “progressive nationalist” outlook further: the Yiddish press, the Yiddish schools network, and other autonomous institutions that would promote Jewish national empowerment in the culturally diverse American context.

24. Zhitlowsky repeatedly mentions the growing anti-Semitism in the US and in the world alongside a half-“hopeful” assurance that this would stimulate (or already was stimulating) interest in Jewish nationalism among American Jews. For another example of this, see Zhitlowsky 1934.

25. I have not been able to find information about how frequently the position of Jews in the American context figured as a theme of Zhitlowsky’s public lectures after the initial series (1906a); additional investigation could clarify the extent to which his lectures, in addition to his publications, served as a vehicle for this portion of his political message.

Zhitlowsky was able to articulate his overt critiques of the hypocrisies inherent to the American cosmopolitan mythos (as that mythos was imagined by Ashkenazi immigrants, at least), and to analyze the impact of those hypocrisies on American Jewish communities, within the “internal” Jewish discourse of the Yiddish press in a way that likely would not have been possible in the Anglophone sphere at the time. Going beyond American Jews’ ambivalence about the prospect of enrolling in American whiteness that Goldstein (2006) documents (primarily relying on English-language sources), Zhitlowsky presents what we can read as an active, articulated proto-rejection of that prospect, combined with an envisioned and partially-realized attempt to set the American Jewish community up to construct itself along different lines. To put it another way, Zhitlowsky attempted to convince Jews not only to opt out of “becoming white” (in Karen Brodtkin’s [1998] terms), but also to help build a “*farbesert*” [new and improved] version of American society as a whole that would not be centered around any single ethnoracial norm.

If Zhitlowsky’s perspective had been more common among immigrant Jews, the American Yiddish press and Yiddish school system would likely have enjoyed wider success and lasted longer, among other outcomes. However, neither did Zhitlowsky stand alone: he emerged out of a political moment in which non-territorial Jewish nationalism (running the gamut from Yiddishist diaspora nationalism to non-territorial forms of Zionism²⁶) was both “thinkable” and compelling for many. On one level, Zhitlowsky’s attempt to apply the autonomist model to the Jewish community in the United States may indeed have betrayed a naïve misreading of the American context, as Weinberg contends (1996, 103-104). However, by bridging the Eastern European and American Jewish contexts in this way, Zhitlowsky generated a provocative commentary on some of America’s purportedly most idealistic self-conceptions, a commentary whose relevance continues to be evident.

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