

Chapter Title: Yiddish Leftists as Early Inter-Ethniks

Chapter Author(s): Elissa Sampson

Book Title: Beyond Whiteness

Book Subtitle: Revisiting Jews in Ethnic America

Book Editor(s): Steven J. Ross, Jonathan Karp, Lisa Ansell

Published by: Purdue University Press. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.10984429.5>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Purdue University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Beyond Whiteness*

Yiddish Leftists as Early Inter-Ethniks

by *Elissa Sampson*

I NTRODUCTION

An older cousin recently joined me at dinnertime. When the conversation turned to food and desserts, I asked him: “Do you like *mandelbrot*?” He answered “Of course I do, I’m Jewish.” Indeed, many in my generation see a New York Jewish identity often expressed in food and other preferences as decidedly ethnic, suggesting that this category remains useful. Yet understandings of ethnicity and similar naturalized identities are shifting rapidly. The category has arguably become less salient for younger Jews and perhaps for those whose elders were once thought “unmeltable ethnics.” Moreover, the recognition that the concept ethnicity has tended to elide processes of racialization leaves it analytically suspect.

Given recent debates on ethnicity versus race, it is useful to review an earlier phase in the career of United States immigrant ethnicity. The prewar model of ethnicity expressed in America by immigrant pro-Soviet Jews known as *Di Linke* (the Left) at once allowed for work with other ethnic groups and offered a Yiddishist home in a political/cultural formation that eschewed Jewish nationalism. If part of the debate on what we call ethnicity is whether it undermines working class solidarity, this essay documents a perhaps unusual case from the first half of the twentieth century of an organizing strategy based on ethnic affiliation and shared class struggle.

Thus, after immigration to the US had been halted, Yiddish speaking immigrants founded a fraternal benefits order (not a typical communist proposition) and then invited non-Jewish groups into what would become a uniquely inter-ethnic and inter-racial fraternal order. Fraternalism was part of the IWO’s critique of capitalism: its “builders” took no commissions when they signed up

lodge members for benefits protecting precarious workers. With this move, the pro-Soviet Jewish left worked to promote mutual aid and inter-ethnic solidarity and to fight antisemitism, racism, and anti-immigrant actions. In doing so, they voted against melting pot ideology in favor of immigrant cultural competence and generational transmission.

THE AGE OF IMMIGRATION MEETS THE AGE OF MASS INDUSTRIALIZATION

How did Leftist, pro-Soviet Jewish immigrants articulate ethnicity in America in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution? The key thing to be aware of in studying this process is the rapid mass immigration of a third of East Europe's Jews to North America within a few decades, ending officially in 1924 with the passage of the Johnson-Reed national quotas act. The antagonistic Congressional Dillingham Hearings (1907–1910) viewed the rapid urban influx of the “New Immigrants” (Southern Italians and East European Jews) as a threat to America's identity. The Commission's over forty published volumes, most famously *Folkmar's Dictionary of Race*, demonstrated that its categorization of national was related to its interest in race.

Immigrant industrial workers with their associated visible differences were at the forefront of debates on what it meant to be American, and Jews were in the Commission's cross-hairs. Three quarters of East European Jewish immigrants were urban, poor, Yiddish speakers working in the garment trade, living in highly concentrated areas often called ghettos. The Lower East Side in those years was the densest place on planet Earth; Jews were visibly, geographically, and economically concentrated in what became the world's largest Jewish city. Its proximity to the ghettoized areas of Chinatown and Little Italy was not accidental, and its political and cultural evolution were tied to those areas.

These same dense, miserable working and living conditions stimulated a flourishing of Yiddish culture as well as its radicalization. As young women were incorporated into the work force, profound shifts in gender roles affected familial life as well as labor organizing. While Yiddish theater and publishing blossomed, tragedies such as the Triangle Fire of 1911, when 146 garment workers perished due to locked fire doors, were understood as predictable outcomes baked into a system of labor in which Jewish and Italian young female immigrant lives were less valued than the goods they produced.¹ The Uprising

of the 20,000, the first US women-led strike, was a 1909 shirtwaist strike by ostensibly unorganizable young women workers, headed by immigrant firebrand Clara Lemlich.² A precursor to the events at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory (strikers protested its safety conditions while demanding higher wages), the call for the strike issued at Cooper Union was issued by Lemlich in Yiddish and then immediately translated into Italian. Lemlich later became a founding figure for *Di Linke*, busy organizing Jewish homemakers and working with African American women on food and rent issues during the Depression. Sparked by exploitation and disasters such as the Fire, socialist politics famously flourished in the wake of mass immigration, ushering in the election of immigrant Socialist Congressman Meyer London from 1915 to 1919. Although it took twenty years, labor unions benefitted from achieving a critical mass of organized workers. So did the usually less political *landsmanshaftn* (hometown benefit societies) and fraternal societies which served as critical safety nets and reinforced immigrant ties. Within immigrant Jewish leftist circles, these new conditions further stimulated existing debates about the categorization of Jewish workers: their distinctive answers to the Jewish Question looked to combine Jewish socialism with more particularistic or universalistic visions of Jewish labor and life in addressing how best to change existing conditions and shape futurity, not least in regard to antisemitism.

By way of contrast, already established “German Jews,” that is Jews of German or Central European descent, were adamantly opposed to anything that smacked of race, nation, or ethnicity rather than religion to explain Jewish difference. For Jews who came from German-speaking areas, relegating difference to the religious confessional sphere allowed for American acculturation marked by endogamy. This earlier approach which prioritized religion as that which was distinctive, was stretched to avoid other formulations of Jewish commonality: East European Jews were referred to as “co-religionists.” Labor tensions erupted where German Jews were employers in the men’s garment trades, as in the 1910 Protocols of Labor negotiated by Meyer London with German Jewish manufacturers represented by attorneys Louis Brandeis and Louis Marshall. These distinctions did not necessarily play well with poorer East European Jewish workers whose identity remained far more marked and racialized. For secular Yiddish speakers, the setting for Jewish as “ethnic” was associated with the influx from mass immigration as distinct from religious identity per se.

East European Jewish immigrants enthusiastically greeted the overthrow of the Tzar in early 1917. Once Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution followed

later that year, the ruptures concerning Socialism and Communism became larger in Jewish leftist circles and in the American left generally. A decade of splits (1920–1930) consumed the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF) as well as the Socialist *Arbeter Ring* (Workmen’s Circle), a labor fraternal benefits society that offered insurance, ran a publishing house, and organized Yiddish culture schools and summer camps. One of those splits eventuated in the creation of the International Workers Order (IWO), including its Jewish Section, later known as the Jewish People’s Fraternal Organization (JPFO), and popularly known as *Di Linke*.

DI LINKE IN THE INTERNATIONAL WORKERS ORDER (IWO)

Di Linke’s original five thousand Yiddish speaking members, after breaking off from the Workmen’s Circle, founded the pro-Soviet International Workers Order (IWO) in 1930. They subsequently invited other groups—initially leftist immigrant Slovak, Russian and Hungarian fraternal benefits organizations—to join its IWO fraternal umbrella as separate sections, at which point the Jewish component became the IWO’s Jewish (later its Jewish American) Section. Although the IWO’s leadership typically belonged to the CPUSA, few of its members did. By the time it was renamed the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO) in 1944, its Jewish section remained the IWO’s largest section and had grown to encompass almost fifty thousand members with three hundred lodges in over sixty communities. Next to B’nai B’rith, the JPFO was one of the largest lodge-based Jewish fraternal organizations.

At its height in 1947, the inter-ethnic, inter-racial IWO had sixteen separate sections with approximately 200,000 fraternal members; but by December, 1953, it was defunct, shut down by New York State during the Cold War.³ During the Depression and after, many joined IWO lodges to obtain low-cost, non-discriminatory health and death benefit insurance coverage, and participate in cultural and political activities explicitly allied with opposing Jim Crow and antisemitism.⁴ The Great Depression underscored the need for medical care, housing and jobs for precarious immigrants, African Americans, and coal miners.

The IWO’s English language 1930 recruitment brochure was explicit about the organization’s Jewish origins:

Its basic group consists of Jewish workers, many of whom split away from the Workmen's Circle and the Independent Workmen's Circle. The Order, however, will not confine itself to the works of one particular nationality. Plans are on foot to have a number of other language fraternal organizations, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian, etc., join the International Workers' Order. Every block of language branches joining the Order will have its culture commission which will conduct the work in the mother tongue of its members. At the same time the Order will be an organization bringing together the workers of various languages and thus introducing in life that which is indicated in its name, the International Workers Order.⁵

The IWO's sixteen sections eventually encompassed Jewish, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Garibaldi (Italian), Polonia Society (Polish), Romanian, Cervantes (Hispanic), Hellenic (Greek), Finnish, Carpatho-Russian (Rusyn), American-Russian, Slovak, and Croatian national affiliates, as well as interracial "general" lodges for its English section members. (The African American Douglass-Lincoln lodges were belatedly created in 1950 as a new national section although the National Organizing Committee for Work Among Negroes was added as a section by 1944.) Evolving notions of ethnicity were in play in this novel formation.

At the very same time that it opened up its organization, *Di Linke* continued to claim the sole mantle of secular Yiddishism, a movement which started in late nineteenth century Europe. Although "Yiddishland" lacked a national homeland, Yiddish as a language cut across the map of Europe. *Di Linke's* emphasis on fostering an all-encompassing *Yidische Kultur* was consistent with its overall focus on harnessing *Kultur-Arbet* (Cultural Work) for overtly political ends. For the Jewish section/JPFO, this included its edgy ARTEF theater group, Modicut marionettes, and superb Yiddish musical choirs and mandolin orchestras. Its publishing house became one of the largest Yiddish presses, publishing high-quality Yiddish classics as well as modern writers from Europe including the Soviet Union. Its extensive children's Yiddish afterschool *Shule* system was reinforced in the summer by Camp Kinderland, which celebrates its centenary in 2023. While the Yiddish writers Sholem Aleichem and Dovid Bergelson were pivotal figures for *Di Linke*, they also insisted on the importance of inserting mainstream American Jewish figures such as financier Haim Solomon and Nobel Prize winner Albert Michelson into a stream of American history from which they saw Jews as being excluded.

Yet *Di Linke's* stress on alignment with Soviet policy meant that ideological aspects of an earlier universalism as well as of Jewish particularism often became subservient to defending and promoting the best interests of the USSR, or at the least, presenting it sympathetically to a Jewish public. That tension is palpable in the pages of *Di Morgn Freiheit* which started its life in 1922 as a New York Yiddish communist-affiliated newspaper published by former Bundists Mosseye Olgin and Shakhne Epstein in opposition to the socialist *Forverts* edited by Abraham Cahan. Its Yiddish *Shule* school journals and other publications often featured ads for local Jewish businesses—including kosher caterers, thus inadvertently illustrating the contradictions accompanying the American harnessing by immigrants of the language that they tasked with producing a Jewish child advocating for class struggle. *Di Linke's* answer to the Jewish Question was tied to the Comintern's doctrine of vanguardism with Stalin; in 1939 it supported the division of Poland between Nazi Germany and the USSR.

WHAT'S A SECTION? LANGUAGE, NATIONAL, ETHNIC

The IWO's sections from 1930–1953 were variously referred to as language sections, national sections, or less frequently as ethnic sections, but these highly connected terms for its distinct groups were not necessarily used interchangeably. Again, its immigrant groups saw themselves as stranded and stigmatized after the gates to immigration shut in 1924 with the Johnson-Reed Act. Almost all of the IWO's sections worked to actively publish in native languages, stressing linguistic competence and cultural work, but none on as large a scale as the Jewish Section/JPFPO. While English was the IWO's lingua franca, for its Jewish founders the very ability to speak Yiddish was so naturalized as a Jewish identity that it served as the ideological basis for secularists who helped shape the organization's forays into theater, news media, and literature. Yiddish secularism—as a term, identity, and ideology—only makes sense if the language is understood as roughly congruent with a culture and a people, a folk, an ethnos.

National, in IWO parlance, meant a nation as in a folk or group, but not necessarily one connected to a nation-state found on a European map. Linguistic and ethnic affinities as well as self-identification were in play: Carpatho-Rusyn may well indicate Lemko lodges, and Ukrainian indicates Ruthenian and Western Ukrainian. While Soviet policy at best treated Jews as

an anomalous group vis a vis the criteria employed for national status in the USSR, the IWO clearly viewed Jews as a nation whose language and distinctive history should be promoted as such. Although the use of national as a term in the IWO strengthened during the war years, in following the CPUSA's integrationist platform of "Negro and White Unity," initially the IWO avoided its use for African Americans who were described as a racially oppressed folk or people rather than as an "oppressed nation." As a result, the IWO struggled with the need to establish a separate national Douglass-Lincoln section for Blacks;⁶ its English language section had integrated general lodges.

All of the above brings us to the term "ethnic," which indicated an acknowledgment of genuine marked difference in origins often signaled by the display of the folkloric in the performance of the arts. The archives show that the IWO both struggled with ethnicity and yet deeply embraced it, including in its use of hyphenated identities as modifiers to explain just what sort of American its members were. Overall, the IWO passionately argued for the entrance of its groups—including African Americans—into a hybrid American pantheon, in a non-assimilationist ethnicity marked with a Smithsonian Folkways performative flavor.

THE INTER-ETHNIC TIES THAT BIND

The Jewish Section became the Jewish American Section of the International Workers Order in the mid-1930s and an equivalent move happened in most sections. Although the IWO's leadership operated within a CPUSA orbit, it exhibited considerable agency in handling its ethnic societal formations in ways that were not particularly of interest to the Party, which by contrast typically pushed immigrant members to learn English and Americanize. Distinctive to the IWO were its formulations of the close ties between antisemitism, Jim Crow and anti-immigrant sentiment: a unified fight against them was central to becoming American as well as defining what a better America should be.

Conversely, nativism was portrayed as anti-American as were racism and antisemitism: despicable ploys, cynically and willingly embraced by American fascists and racists to enhance their power to divide groups under capitalism. IWO Vice President and Garibaldi Society leader Congressman Vito Marcantonio, pushed for federal "anti-discrimination" legislation in which advocating for anti-lynching bills protesting Jim Crow and advocating

for “Negro Rights” was closely tied to the fight against antisemitism. Yet in the 1930s the circumstances of racial oppression in America were still understood to be far more serious than antisemitism. The popular anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit,” made famous by Billie Holiday, was immediately written up in the IWO’s March 1939 magazine *Fraternal Outlook*; the poem and its lyrics were written by Lewis Allen (Abel Meeropol), a CPUSA member who later adopted the Rosenberg children and sent them to IWO camps. Later, in the aftermath of the war, Jews were seen as the paradigmatic case of racial genocide referenced as such by African Americans in the IWO in making their own compelling case in the UN petition “We Charge Genocide.”⁷

IWO slogans included “There’s No Jim Crow in the IWO,” along with “Immigrants All! Americans All!” The IWO held its various sections to these standards, and while some lodges adopted them with more alacrity and interest, they all agreed to them. Typically, sections participated in joint campaigns as well as worked within their communities to address these issues. Occasionally lodges were disciplined if they ignored these central concerns. But the IWO’s social glue was also based on joint activities such as inter-ethnic and inter-racial sports, picnics and dances as well as more ideologically pointed events. A January 1941 *Fraternal Outlook* article describing the first meeting of the Young Fraternalists, explained that real divisions are not racial or national, but class-based:

We will continue to build our Young Fraternalists and the Order as the model which disproves all these falsehoods about the superiority or inferiority of one or another nationality. Let all see that division among people is not based on what nationality they are, or, whether they are Negro or white, but on their position as the privileged or underprivileged.⁸

To promote solidarity, non-exclusive forms of ethnic identity were to be boosted in contrast to “chauvinistic” aspects of nationality.

HOLIDAYS AND RITUALS, SHARED ETHNIC SPACE

The IWO treated May Day as a national holiday. Union Square and other locations overflowed with IWO members, marching in their sections with floats, music, sometimes wearing ethnic costumes and sometimes in union

formations. JPFO writer Chaver Paver's beloved children's Yiddish book *Lobzik*—whose star is a leftist mutt—is replete with May Day “yuntif” holiday descriptions and children's activities for those who lived in the Bronx leftist coops on Allerton Avenue. Other holidays were celebrated as educational ritual programs designed by JPFO Educational Director Itche Goldberg which included secular observances of Pesach as well as the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. From its very beginnings, Camp Kinderland held weekly “White Salutes” featuring Soviet style gymnastics along with music and the recitation of short pieces in Yiddish. Many of the groups similarly had summer camps or programs for children, and sometimes for adults. Again, most societies had a strong emphasis on literature, language, cultural programs, dance, drama, chorus, and orchestras (especially mandolin for Jews and Ukrainians), in addition to “workers’ education.”

Mother's Day (*Dia de las Madres*) was not seen as contradictory with CPUSA ideology by the Cervantes Society (Sección Hispana). Neither was the Queen's Coronation with a “*corte de honor de nuestra reina*,” and its accompanying *Reinado de Simpatia* (Reign of Sympathy). That more fraternal ritual was wanted can be seen in a report containing an explicit discussion of why introducing Masonic or Odd Fellow rites with a Hispanic flavor would assist in shifting its perception as merely an insurance society. The report also noted issues with the pronounced aspirational differences seen in organizing poorer New York Puerto Ricans as opposed to Mexicans in California.⁹ As historian Gerald Meyer noted: “Cervantes was the only IWO branch that was organized on linguistic affinity and not nationality,” which made such differences among Spanish speakers all the more salient.¹⁰ Cervantes was also inter-racial since most of its members were Caribbean-born Puerto Ricans.

Concert flyers including for Jewish hootenannies, fund-raisers, exhibits for Negro History Week as well as its derivative Jewish History Week, journals, poetry volumes, choruses, songs and books for Yiddish schools and camps, Jewish Music Alliance activities, war bond drives, art exhibits, literary press books and magazines (*Almanakh*) along with a constant stream of material promoting the fight against antisemitism, anti-lynching, and anti-poll tax campaigns, show the broad range of cultural/political activities engaged in by JPFO members. A similar albeit smaller list can be made for each of the sections with distinct differences seen not only in the folkloric but in the political and cultural spheres of where ethnicity is on display and in dealings with religious communities.

A Junior Youth Conference write-up in the November 1941 issue of *Fraternal Outlook* magazine shows how folk performance was promoted within and among the IWO's sections.

FOLK DANCES, songs and similar activities have helped to bridge the cultural and language chasm that exists in many instances between parents and children. They help to strengthen the unity and morale of parents and children and greatly add to the respect, understanding and unity of all Americans.

BEFORE THEIR VERY EYES the audience saw children of Negro, Russian and Jewish origin performing their folk dances and merging into movement symbolizing the unity of our people.¹¹

While the initial stress is on ethnic cultural continuity and expression, the second paragraph points to the embodied cooperation of children achieving the Order's desired unity through choreographed movement with disparate IWO peers.

By the late 1930s, the IWO had already started to feature public cross-cultural, ethnic folk pageants and heritage unity events displayed within American contexts.¹² During the war, unity came to mean working within their larger communities to weaken support for fascist regimes as well as across communities to simultaneously bolster support for the US and the USSR. Without missing a beat, an ad for an overtly political World War II-themed pageant in the October 1941 edition of *Fraternal Outlook* advertised the "National Folk Festival of The International Workers Order, Russian, Jewish, Finnish, Ukrainian, Slovak, Hungarian, Croatian, And Other, Reflecting The Democratic Cultures of The Peoples Fighting Fascism. Colorful Pageantry from All States. 200 Voice Choruses Dance & Musical Groups."

SOCIETY LIFE

For the IWO's various sections, shared advocacy in the name of ethnic pride to counter America's animus against Jews, African Americans, and immigrants was critical. That advocacy required cooperation in shaping forms of equivalence. Additionally, IWO societies who agreed to create a "truly International Fraternal Order, composed of all of the sections of the American working class," negotiated a balance between centralization and autonomy. There were

initial tensions for non-Jewish Hungarians and Slovaks about joining with Jews, but the IWO's Hungarian section soon also had explicitly Jewish members. The May 1935 5th Anniversary book, which contains short histories of its previously independent ethnic fraternal benefit associations, shows that some questioned whether non-Jewish ethnic groups should join with Jews to be part of a larger mutual benefits society.

"A History of Our Hungarian Section" starts by describing a decade of internecine fights between Hungarians allied with the Socialist Party and the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) and eventual alignment with the Russian Revolution. The account of how the pro-Soviet Hungarian Workingmen's Sick Benefit and Educational Federation (MBOSZ) came to join the IWO in 1932 reports that "There were a few who openly declared that 'The MBOSZ was sold to the Jews.' This was immediately answered by the sharpest fight against these manifest anti-Semitic sectarian tendencies."¹³

"The Growth of the Slovak Section" article similarly notes that the IWO was ". . . meant to unify with Jews and Magyars, against both of whom the Slovaks were filled with prejudices. The nationalistic leaders for decades were hammering into their heads that the cause of the misery are the Jews and Magyars. We had members with such prejudices in our branches. Then, our organization alone had more funds than all the other three together, and many suspicious members stated openly that the Jews do not want us but our money."¹⁴

It's possible that in inviting these groups, the newly formed Yiddish speaking IWO was trying to fight the conditions that created antisemitism as well as broaden its insurance pool with fellow immigrant workers in creating a US fraternal "Internationale" that provided affordable comprehensive health care and other insurance. Despite these apparent initial tensions, one suspects that the IWO's Jews were also trying to underscore the ideological point that *goyim* weren't inherently antisemitic; rather, feudalism and capitalism made them such. The IWO thus offered a way of showing that not only Jewish garment workers could be transformed but that ethnic non-Jewish miners and steel workers could be as well.

Some of what the various sections created in common can be seen in the IWO's junior sports. While an extensive English language national lodge manual from 1936 simply notes that "Sports is a well-known American pastime," providing no other advice on the subject, by the late 1930s IWO publications explode with youth and junior sports such as baseball, boxing and basketball.¹⁵ Often these mainly male youth teams played with local leagues or with other

IWO societies in “championships.” The same 1936 manual emphasizes the importance of insurance benefits for the young, but also takes note that “youth activities promoted in the Youth Branches are: Athletics, dramatics, education, social life.” Once again there is a telling lack of detail although later, the manual helpfully notes: “Efforts should be made to organize musical trios, quartettes, or mandolin orchestras.”

The IWO and its sections organized for continuity of identity and shared political struggle. By the late 1930s, organized youth activity was expanding within groups, amply seen in the newly-founded Jewish Young Fraternalists’ focus on education, chorus and dramatics. Simultaneously, IWO choruses, music, parades, dances, picnics, and organized sports rapidly became part of its broader inter-ethnic, inter-racial social glue for a younger American-born generation. At the IWO’s 1940 5th Convention, delegates from all over the country were invited to a jazz fund-raiser dance at Harlem’s famous Savoy Ballroom.

THE WOMAN QUESTION AND THE NEGRO QUESTION

One of the IWO / JPFO’s strengths was its ability to see the less traditional sectors of women and African Americans as potential constituencies whose concerns became increasingly pertinent to its own politics. By 1935, the IWO’s Women’s Division had already absorbed the Progressive Women’s Council (previously the United Council of Working Class Women) which Lemlich Shavelson helped found in 1929; the Council worked across ethnic, racial and geographic boundaries to organize meat and rent boycotts and other actions. These commitments in turn affected some IWO executive committees and positions, further pushing an organization already committed to “Negro Work” and armed forces integration campaigns. Women in IWO leadership roles who were active in the CPUSA included Vice President Louise Thompson Patterson, June Croll Gordon, Rose Nelson Raynes, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson, who organized primarily Jewish and/or African American women for the IWO and JPFO.

While some organizing cut across groups, most recruiting was internal to particular sections or sectors, including that done by Louise Thompson Patterson in African American communities, especially in so-called “concentration lodges” in Harlem and Chicago’s South Side. Thompson Patterson was also put in charge of the integrated English-speaking general lodges and

Section, which meant that she also worked with children of immigrants as well as new recruits. Tensions as to the Section's importance and that of English were visible by 1940:

The building of the English Section is significant in ways other than its numerical growth. It is the link which forges fraternal unity between native and foreign-born, Negro and white, Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant. It also bridges the gap between our Order and the organization of the broad masses of the people of the United States, an almost insurmountable task as long as the Order was made up only of foreign-born people.¹⁶

Nonetheless, when the late 1930s saw the formation of the IWO City Women's Committees, the Jewish Section's Women's Committees, which were run by Lemlich Shavelson, worked on Yiddish newsletters, rent strikes, food prices, civil rights and education, and recruiting homemakers as candidates for membership. June Gordon, an immigrant labor leader and organizer whose English was stronger than her Yiddish, was also a founder of its Women's Division, which officially became the JPFO's Emma Lazarus Division at the same July 1944 convention where the JPFO was renamed. Gordon served on the JPFO's Executive Board and was married to Eugene Gordon, a well-known African American leftist journalist. A 1947 Division education pamphlet addressed the "problems of rearing a Jewish child in a democracy that allows the worm of anti-Semitism and race discrimination to bore within and break the hearts if not the lives of our children."¹⁷ The power of Gordon's words on Jews and race is apparent in a 1945 memo:

The Fair Employment Practices Committee does not concern the Negro people alone.

The opponents of F. E. P. C. speak of it in terms of a gift to the Negro people at the expense of the white. Well, we are white; but we are Jews and we also suffer the effects of this policy of discrimination.

We are here to join with all those who, cherishing our country's principles, wish to put a stop to the sickness of racism that threatens them. Without fair employment practices it will be just as impossible to rout anti-Semitism as it is to put an end to anti-Negro and anti-Catholic prejudices. The need of the moment is Government action to outlaw discrimination and make fair employment practices the law of the land. . . .

In the name of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order with its 50,000 members and its women's organization, the Emma Lazarus Division, we call upon you to vote for the continuation of the F. E. P. C. . . .¹⁸

The "Emmas" remained deeply committed to fighting for civil rights with African American groups as an explicitly Jewish women's organization which outlived the JPFO: the Emma Lazarus Federation (ELF) legally split off just prior to the confiscation of the IWO's records and resources by New York State during the Cold War.

CONTRIBUTING TO AMERICA'S PANTHEON

By the mid-1930s, the Popular Front strengthened the IWO's hand in promoting ethnic contributions: "Declaring that Communism is 'Twentieth Century Americanism,' the CPUSA deemphasized Marxist-Leninist language and promoted a leftist populism linking the CPUSA's program to the American Revolutionary heritage."¹⁹ Consistent with this strategy, the IWO highlighted ethnic group contributions in regard to the arts, sciences and the American Revolution.²⁰

However, the IWO did so by stressing difference as defining and strengthening America. At its most lyrical and compelling, we see the IWO's emphasis on ethnicity in popular music performance such as the famous "Ballad for Americans." Paul Robeson (an IWO member) and composer Earl Robinson had the IWO's All (American) People's Chorus perform the cantata in 1941 with Robeson as narrator. The spoiler alert that indeed the narrator is an American is heard when he reels off: "Well I'm just . . . Irish, Negro, Jewish, Italian. French and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Scotch, Hungarian, Litvak, Swedish, Finnish, Canadian, Greek and Turk, and Czech and double Czech American."²¹ Prior to that performance, Robinson had worked with the chorus for over three years in multiple performances of the Ballad. Robeson, a multi-lingual performer, musician, lawyer, athlete, civil rights activist, and internationalist, often performed for the IWO including in "The Negro in American Life," a pageant he helped stage in April 1941. He was later defended by IWO vets among others when he was attacked at a Peekskill concert in 1949.

All of which brings us back to Comintern theorist Georgi Dimitrov's Popular Front advice not to cede folk heroes to the Right. Thus, the IWO's

version of Americanism allowed for a tamed but celebratory ethnicity and pride, accompanied by a wide embrace of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, which included annual IWO trips to Valley Forge. (The CPUSA arguably embraced these presidential figures to shift the perception that its membership was an immigrant and somewhat Jewish affair.) The IWO's approach can offer food for humor as well as thought: the JPFO, in claiming leftist Albert Einstein as well as American Revolutionary financier Haym Solomon, added Sephardic Jews such as New Amsterdam guardsman Asser Levy, Admiral Uriah Levy, impresario David Belasco, and Justice Benjamin Cardozo to the list. The Italian Garibaldi Society joined with the Sons of Italy, whose support of Mussolini and anti-Jewish laws the Garibaldis opposed, in promoting Columbus along with other figures. The Polonia Society proudly laid claim to the aristocratic Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski. Grafted onto this impulse of promoting known, identifiable figures regardless of political persuasion, are African American heritage references to Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver.

Conversely, 1930s IWO materials that object to Italian colonialism in Ethiopia and proudly tout IWO support for African American fighters in Spain, strike a very different tone, one affected by leftist black nationalism. For Jesus Colon, head of the Cervantes Society, the cultural politics of supporting Albizu Campos in tackling US colonialism took race into account: Afro-Puerto Ricans such as himself were decidedly part of Puerto Rico's New York diaspora, with El Barrio represented by Garibaldi Society Congressman Vito Marcantonio.

Less surprising is the deep claim made by the JPFO to Sephardic luminary Emma Lazarus, given her posthumous association with the Statue of Liberty; a book was published in her honor and a Women's Division in her name was born. In an impulse very much at odds with today's identity politics, this part of the Old Left shared mainstream aspirations and promoted the inclusion of ethnically identifiable heroes or groups into an existing American pantheon. Thus, in a 1944 JPFO publication, historian Philip Foner connected Jews to Pilgrims, and to democracy and dissent:²²

The Jewish Pilgrim Fathers had much in common with those hardy pioneers who had landed at Plymouth Rock three and a half decades earlier. Like them they were fundamentally dissenters rebelling against persecutions and discriminations. They came to this country to escape the wave of persecution instituted against the Jews of Brazil after the Portuguese recapture of that territory from the Dutch.

The Jews who arrived in New Amsterdam were soon to set a precedent that most American Jews have followed ever since, namely, the bold assertion of the right of all men—regardless of race, color and creed—to enjoy the full fruits of democracy.

During the Popular Front and war years, the IWO was able to tap into an increasing sense of urgency that new immigrants and African Americans be seen as fully American. Frank Sinatra's March 21, 1945 speech "Thoughts of an American," delivered to the World Youth Rally in New York City, was rapidly printed up in a pamphlet published by the IWO for its "I Am an American Day."²³ "Look, the next time you hear anyone say there's no room in this country for foreigners, tell him you've got a big piece of news for him: Tell him that EVERY-BODY in the United States is a foreigner."

The civil rights work that the IWO undertook may sound more mainstream in retrospect than it appeared then: the organizations it supported (the National Negro Congress, International Labor Defense and the Civil Rights Congress), and causes it took up (Scottsboro, Ingram) are now seen as a known part of black history rather than its radical fringe. By the end of the war, IWO Vice President Thompson Patterson was asking for a national section and the creation of more African American community spaces. Her career and writing document the IWO's increasing commitment to integration and civil rights, if not to black nationalism. It is also true that during the postwar period, most particularly in Detroit, that stance was sometimes contested by IWO ethnic sections.

A JEWISH HOME FRONT

While Yiddish language transmission through the arts and literature remained critical, the needed shift to English and bilingualism was meant to accommodate a new American-born generation that included war veterans. As George Starr's 1944 Sixth Convention report shows, the genocide of the war years strengthened the JPFO's sense of Jewish identity and focus on transmitting to American Jews a secular, cultural, ethnic identity with pride.²⁴

The terrible fate our fellow-Jews met at the hands of Hitler and the pernicious anti-Semitism of Hitler's American followers, the native fascists, shook [American Jews] into a realization of their Jewishness.

. . . it is imperative for the American Jews to maintain their Jewish identity, and that the nurturing of a Jewish consciousness will in turn strengthen the overall American democratic tradition. . . .

We find that for the first time American-born Jews are thinking of the role of Jewish culture in their lives. The whole problem of what constitutes a Jewish cultural program in our lodges has now come to the fore.

Even as it welcomed an American-born generation, the JPFO leadership's pursuit of a Jewish unity agenda also prompted a wartime recalibration of its relationship to the IWO and CPUSA. In doing so, it had finally agreed with the CPUSA's message that English needed to be accommodated. Nonetheless, the increased autonomy deemed necessary for wartime support contributed to its recommitment to the propagation of Jewish culture in the wake of Nazi genocide. For some, in engaging with an America that the JPFO's educational director, Itche Goldberg, described as a "scorched melting pot," ethnicity was one complex piece of a non-assimilationist strategy. Yet while the IWO was aware that American antisemitism, racism and poverty were all too real, its files show no reckoning with the Soviet Union's brutal repression of Jewish or Ukrainian culture, and the continuation of Russian imperial national discrimination. The Soviet Union was touted as a workers' society where antisemitism and racism were illegal.

The advent of the Cold War and increased Soviet repression were accompanied by the unraveling of channeled, enthusiastic high-quality "folk" performances. That formula was already becoming obsolete in 1948 when the IWO organized its first and last Ukrainian National Folk Festival featuring dances, music and embroidery.²⁵ The sense that the IWO's cultures could thrive best in the Soviet Union's orbit dissipated as knowledge of Soviet repression became commonplace. Khrushchev's 1956 revelations about the cult of Stalin (which were first reported in the Yiddish press in Warsaw) sounded a posthumous death knell, years after New York State closed down the IWO as a fraternal benefits society in December 1953.

There was no evasion of Jewish identity in creating an immigrant Yiddish fraternal organization which invited other groups to join an inter-ethnic and inter-racial organization. The IWO's founders saw themselves as profoundly and naturally Jewish: allyship was integral to this worldview. Their Americanization as immigrants was mediated through adherence to a beloved immigrant fraternal organization that promoted Yiddish culture and offered

solidarity with others. We can learn from the failures and successes of that tightrope dance even as we mourn its misplaced allegiances.

What can the JPFO IWO model of ethnicity teach us? That you don't need to choose between cultural depth and deeply working with others, and that such allyship can be valuable for its theoretical insights as well as practical support. While certainly not perfect, the IWO's formula worked for its erstwhile members. These groups worked both with and against the ethnic grain in a pro-Soviet framework that provided political support for cultural and political activities predicated on diverse groups obtaining affordable insurance.

RACE, RACIALIZATION AND THE ETHNO-RACIAL IN ETHNICITY TODAY

Karen Brodtkin, Eric L. Goldstein, David R. Roediger²⁶ and others have outlined the tensions between the category of post-war white ethnicity and the realities of racialization in describing how a slippery category that elides race, is built upon it. A far harsher price was necessarily paid by the descendants of enslaved Africans who stayed at the bottom of a ladder racial hierarchy: governmental policies decimated their red-lined urban communities while excluding them from programs encouraging suburbanization as homeowners. Nonetheless, the acceptance of previously racialized Jews and other "ethno-racial" groups as white came at a price in terms of the maintenance of distinctive urban communal and individual spaces and identities (see Gabriella Modan).²⁷

Is ethnicity visible today? Most observers of New York City politics would say yes, although they would distinguish it from race. The Triangle Fire Coalition's ultimately successful effort to establish a permanent memorial to the predominantly Jewish and Italian young women who perished shows how older divides tied to ethnicity have been largely surmounted for the purpose of commemoration, if not in addressing other aspects of futurity. The Fire's newer feminist or unionist heirs, often evince the different configurations of ethnicity and race apparent in contemporary activist cultural politics.

As to the questions raised in this volume, I would answer that in addition to needing to recalibrate the term "ethnic," given its entanglement with race and racialization, we are also obliged to look at its staying power and utility as a formulation when we start seeing major shifts in Jewish identity. Contemporary

Jewish ethnicity, a category which is important to an older generation for whom immigrant antecedents are apparent, appears less salient for those who are younger. Some strategies of American Jewish identity appear jettisoned, much like the term “the Jewish Question.” What’s clear is that there has been a shift in naturalized, marked identities, outside of the religious world.

One difference is that Jewish endogamy has become a far less important criterion for those who are not conventionally religious. We in the academy often see students who have a marked pride and genuine curiosity about their Jewish ancestry, however defined. Some are also searching for community. This search is affected by identitarian quests but may be quite unaccompanied by a sense of ethnicity, let alone any particular knowledge of Jewish life other than that seen in popular representations. The result is an ability to mix and blend a variety of familial as well as racial/cultural/political/religious identities.

For most of my students, I’d venture that the salient question is simply whether they self-identity as Jewish, regardless of how that is defined. Which brings us back to the question of whether “ethnic” has also been overly encumbered by cultural and generational associations concerning what American Jews have in common, since neither Modan’s rye bread nor my cousin’s *mandelbrot* remain a staple element of a shifting Jewish repertoire.

Notes

1. See Paula Hyman on the contested successful effort that presented those who perished as workers, rather than as female members of specific immigrant communities. Paula Hyman, "Beyond Place and Ethnicity: The Uses of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," in *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler, Hasia R. Diner, and Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
2. Clara Lemlich (Shavelson), who headed the JPFO's Women's Committees, was a leader of the thirteen-week 1909 "Uprising of the 20,000," the first mass garment trade strike led by ostensibly unorganizable Jewish and Italian young immigrant women. The strikers had unsuccessfully picketed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company; they were beaten, jailed, and literally bailed out by the primarily upper-class Protestant women who formed the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Two-thirds of the picketed shops settled with the strikers.
3. The IWO's confiscated organizational files Records #5276 are held at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Henceforth, Kheel.
4. See Robert M. Zecker, *A Road to Peace and Freedom: The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930-1954* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018).
5. National Executive Committee, *A New Workers' Stronghold, What is the International Workers' Order, and Why Every Worker Should Join It* (New York: International Workers' Order, 1930): 16. Kheel, Box 49, Folder 2.
6. Jennifer Young, "Fighting Anti-Semitism and Jim Crow: 'Negro-Jewish Unity' in the International Workers Order," *AJS Perspectives* (2014), <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-peoples-issue/fighting-anti-semitism-and-jim-crow-negro-jewish-unity-in-the-international-workers-order/>.
7. The petition "We Charge Genocide" (1951) directly called for the United Nation's (UN) intervention against the violence experienced by Americans of African descent. It was presented to the UN by two lawyers, its author William Patterson (Civil Rights Congress) and IWO member Paul Robeson. It was signed by former IWO Vice President Louise Thompson Patterson and Albert Kahn (the then head of the JPFO) among others. Its introduction: "The Hitler crimes, of awful magnitude, beginning as they did against the heroic Jewish people, finally drenched the world in blood, and left a record of maimed and tortured bodies and devastated areas such as mankind had never seen before."
8. "Accent on Youth," *Fraternal Outlook* (New York: International Workers' Order, January 1941): 7. Kheel. Helen Vrabel, head of the Slovak Society who also headed the IWO's Youth Division, is quoted regarding the Young Fraternalist first meeting. Henceforth, *Fraternal Outlook*.

9. "Cervantes Society Report 1940–1944" (1944): 14. Box 9, Folder 8, Kheel. Also see "IWO 6th Annual Convention Report" (1944): 181. Kheel. Box 3, Folder 4: "... the section will utilize the different historic and cultural traditions of the various groups from different Spanish-speaking countries. This will give life to the lodges. It will enable the lodges of Mexican-Americans, or of Puerto Ricans, to become centers of attraction for their respective peoples."
10. Gerald Meyer, email message to author, September 18, 2021.
11. *Fraternal Outlook* (November 1941): 31. Kheel.
12. See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Theorizing Heritage," *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 3 (1995): 367–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/924627>.
13. Joseph Feher, "A History of Our Hungarian Section," *May 1935, 5th Anniversary Book* (New York: International Workers' Order): 65. Kheel, Box 48, Folder 13.
14. Joseph F Schiffel, "The Growth of the Slovak Section," *May 1935, 5th Anniversary Book*, 70.
15. National Committee IWO, "Chapter VI, Guide to Educational, Cultural and Social Activities. Public Buildings, Dramatics, Music and Choruses, Sports, Dances, House Parties, Sport, Theatre Parties, Concerts," in *Manual of the International Workers Order* (New York: International Workers' Order, 1936): 45, 52. Kheel, Box 49, Folder 1.
16. Louise Thompson, "With Our Lodges," *Fraternal Outlook Special Anniversary Issue* (June–July 1940): 52. Kheel, Box 48, Folder 15. Vice-President Thompson (Patterson) was then the IWO's National Secretary and head of its English Section.
17. "Call for the Constitutional Convention of the Emma Lazarus Division, Women's Organization of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, IWO, Saturday and Sunday, November 15–16, 1947." Kheel, Box 28, 25-B-1-A, Folder 4, Pamphlet.
18. Letter from June Gordon, July 9, 1945 on FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Committee). Kheel, 525A6B_1, Box 28, 25-B-1-A, Folder 2.
19. See Eric S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 93.
20. There's more than a good dose of paternalistic Herderian philosophy that informs this view in which each folk has its unique genius that defines its contribution.
21. Lisa Barg, "Paul Robeson's Ballad for Americans: Race and the Cultural Politics of 'People's Music,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2 (2008): 42. Barg notes that "Both the choice and ordering of identities also highlights a symptomatic ambiguity between the categories of race and ethnicity (and in the case of "Jewish," religion as well)."
22. Philip Foner, "The Jew in America's Struggle for Democracy," in *Our People, The Jew in America*, ed. Itche Goldberg, Jesse Mintus, and George Starr (New York: Cooperative Book League, Jewish American Section, I.W.O., 1944), 9–10. Kheel.
23. Frank Sinatra, "Excerpts from an address to World Youth Rally on March 21, 1945, New York City." Printed courtesy of the American Youth for a Free World; reprinted

IWO. Pamphlet, Kheel, Box 17, Folder 05. ID no: 5276b17f05_06. Sinatra discusses Nazi views of Italians, Jews and African Americans and goes on to say:

Now this is our job . . . your job and my job and the job of the generations growing up . . . to stamp out prejudices that are separating one group of United States citizens from another. . . .

It's up to all of us to lay aside our unfounded prejudices and make the most of this wonderful country—this country that's been built by many people, many creeds, nationalities and races.

24. George Starr, Resolution on the English-speaking Lodges of the Jewish-American Section, Protocol of the Sixth National Convention of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order of the I.W.O. (formerly Jewish-American Section): Copy 1, 81, 83, 88. 1944. Kheel, Box 27, Folder 2. ID No. 5276b27af02_02.
25. *First Ukrainian National Folk Festival* (New York: Ukrainian American Fraternal Union, IWO, Ukrainian American League, Inc., 1948). Kheel, Box 49, Folder 7. ID No. 5276b49f07_01.
26. See Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
27. Gabriella Modan, "White, Whole Wheat, Rye: Jews and Ethnic Categorization in Washington, D.C.," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2001): 116–30.

Bibliography

- Barg, Lisa. "Paul Robeson's Ballad for Americans: Race and the Cultural Politics of 'People's Music.'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 1 (2008): 27–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196308080024>.
- Brodkin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.
- Foner, Philip. "The Jew in America's Struggle for Democracy." In *Our People, The Jew in America*, edited by Itche Goldberg, Jesse Mintus, and George Starr. New York: Coopertative Book League, Jewish American Section, I.W.O., 1944.
- Goldstein, Eric L. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Hyman, Paula. "Beyond Place and Ethnicity: The Uses of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." In *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, edited by Jeffrey Shandler, Hasia R. Diner, and Beth S. Wenger. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. "Theorizing Heritage." *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 3 (1995): 367–80. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/924627>.
- McDuffie, Eric S. *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Modan, Gabriella. "White, Whole Wheat, Rye: Jews and Ethnic Categorization in Washington, D.C." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2001): 116–30.
- Roediger, David R. *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. Paperback ed. New York: Basic Books, 2005. Reprint, August 8, 2006.
- Starr, George. Resolution on the English-speaking Lodges of the Jewish-American Section, Protocol of the Sixth National Convention of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order of the I.W.O. (formerly Jewish-American Section): Copy 1. International Workers Order (IWO) Records, 1915–2002 (KCL05276). 5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1944.
- Young, Jennifer. "Fighting Anti-Semitism and Jim Crow: 'Negro-Jewish Unity' in the International Workers Order." *AJS Perspectives* (2014).
- Zecker, Robert M. *"A Road to Peace and Freedom": The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930–1954*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018.

