

Background about the Yiddish Language

From the Middle Ages until the end of the 18th century, Yiddish was the common tongue of most European Jews. Yiddish is a West Germanic language historically spoken by Ashkenazi Jews and originating during the 9th century in Central Europe. This provided the Ashkenazi community with a High German-based vernacular which was fused with many elements taken from Hebrew and Aramaic and providing a writing system primarily using the Hebrew alphabet. At the beginning of the 19th century, Eastern Europe became the Yiddish-speaking world's creative epicenter, which reached its peak in independent Poland and the USSR in the years between the two world wars. Despite a continuous process of anti-Jewish policies and the formation of a hostile atmosphere, this cultural hub was the site of multi-faceted cultural activity in Yiddish and extraordinary achievements.

Yiddish Authors Featured in the Sugihara Symphony Libretto

Dovid Hofshstein (1889-1952) and **Peretz Markish** (1895-1952) both left Russia during the years of war and revolution and were pioneers of modernist literature in Yiddish after the first World War. Both returned to the USSR in the mid-1920s and became involved in Soviet cultural activities in Yiddish. Like other Yiddish writers, Hofstein and Markish participated in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. In 1948, as part of the process of eliminating Yiddish culture in the USSR, both were arrested and tried alongside other Jewish authors. On August 12, 1952, they were executed by the Soviet government in what has come to be known as the Night of the Murdered Poets.

Moyshe Tayf (1904-1966) developed as a writer within the Soviet context. He fought against Nazi Germany as a soldier in the Red Army. His family was murdered in Minsk during the Holocaust. In 1948 he was jailed, but was released upon Stalin's death in 1953. After the war, he continued to write about trials and tribulations.

Abraham Sutskever (1913-2010) and **Simkhe Bunem Shayevitch**, (1907-1944) experienced the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand. Sutskever was already a well-known poet when the war broke out and vigorously continued his literary and cultural work in the Vilna ghetto. He joined a Jewish partisan unit and was smuggled into the Soviet Union, reaching Moscow and immigrating to Israel, becoming one of the most important Yiddish poets of the 20th century. The theme of the Holocaust occupied a central focus in his poetry. Shayevitch was interred in the Lodz ghetto, and despite the loss of those closest to him, he continued to be a prolific author. He was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Summer 1944, and from there to the Kaufering camp, where he died of typhus. Most of his writings were discovered after the war.



Yisroel Emyot Goldvaser (1909-1978) was highly regarded in the Yiddish and Hebrew literary community, focusing primarily on religious topics. During the Holocaust, Amyot wrestled with his faith and his writings centered around current events. After fleeing to the Soviet Union during the war, he later moved to the United States.

Reyzi Rzichlinski (1910-2001) was also well-known as a promising young poet in the years before the war. After the German occupation of Poland, she fled to Soviet-controlled territory; this journey is a source of significant expression in her poetry. After the war, she returned to Poland to discover that her immediate family had been murdered during the Holocaust. Soon thereafter, she immigrated to the United States.

Itzik Manger (1901-1969) was widely considered as a poet with a unique style among his peers. In the 1930s he moved to Warsaw and later to Paris, escaping from Nazi persecution. After the war, he continued to reflect on the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust. In his final years, he lived in Israel.