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Visions of a Jewish Future: the Jewish Bakers Union and Yiddish Culture
in East Los Angeles, 1908-1942

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in History

By

Caroline Elizabeth Luce

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in History

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This dissertation explores the activism of a cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who came to Los Angeles in the first decade of the twentieth century. They focused their efforts in Boyle Heights, a residential subdivision east of the Los Angeles River, where they spearheaded the creation of Yiddish-based unions, left-wing political parties, and fraternal, cultural, and educational organizations. Scholars have long assumed that the development of Yiddish life in Boyle Heights followed the same course as in Jewish communities elsewhere and referred to the neighborhood as “Los Angeles’ Lower East Side.” Using Yiddish-language newspapers, journals and biographies, this dissertation probes the neighborhood’s reputation, showing how the area’s particular geography, pattern of settlement, and unique ethno-racial diversity

influenced the dynamics of Yiddish-based labor and community organizing in the neighborhood. The Jewish radicals who settled in Boyle Heights had been involved in revolutionary socialist and nationalist movements in Eastern Europe and in the American cities where they lived before making their way west, and sought to replicate these experiences in their new home. But in the multiethnic context of Boyle Heights, they comprised the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy, not the bottom, challenging their understanding of their class-based and ethnic identities.

In their earliest efforts, these activists purposefully built an organizational and cultural life that excluded the area's non-Jewish residents in order to cultivate a distinct ethnic community in the multiethnic neighborhood. But over the course of two decades between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second, they gradually expanded the scope and scale of their activities. They strayed from the platforms of the national and international bodies with which they were affiliated, and embraced the neighborhood's multiculturalism as part of their new collective identities as American Jews. To examine the variety of structural forces, local and global developments that encouraged this transformation, I trace the history of the Jewish Bakers Union, one of several Jewish unions formed in Boyle Heights in the 1910s, showing how their attitudes and model of trade unionism shifted through the 1920s and 1930s. By highlighting the activism of the bakers and the other members of their cohort, this dissertation complicates our understandings of class formation and Americanization of Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century. And in turn, it contributes new details to the history of labor and left-wing community organizing in

early twentieth century Los Angeles and asserts Boyle Heights' place in the Yiddish-speaking world.

The dissertation of Caroline Elizabeth Luce is approved.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHOR’S NOTE ON YIDDISH TERMS..... vii

LIST OF IMAGES viii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ix

VITA..... x

INTRODUCTION: Yiddish Life in Boyle Heights, History and Historiography..... 1

1. The Origins of Yiddish Public Culture on the East Side of Los Angeles 38

2. *“Koifn Broit Bloyz Mitn Union Leybel”* (“Buy Bread Exclusively with the Union Label”): the Jewish Food Chain and the Jewish Bakers Union of Boyle Heights 101

3. Making an American Union: the Jewish Bakers, the Great Depression, and the New Deal 149

4. Los Andzhelezer Yiddishkayt and the Popular Front Against Fascism..... 196

CONCLUSION 246

BIBLIOGRAPHY 257

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON YIDDISH TERMS

Yiddish words used in this dissertation are generally romanized according to the standards prescribed by YIVO, except when I have chosen to preserve the romanization provided by the author of the source. Accordingly some publications, including *Folks Zeitung* and *Di Yiddishe Presse*, have been romanized according to the spellings provided by the authors of the publications. The spelling of the authors' and activists' names honors their preferred spellings as they appear in English-language documents from the period.

LIST OF IMAGES

Chaim Shapiro upon his release from Odtiker Prison, 1905.....	56
<i>Arbeter Ring</i> Picnic in Alhambra, 1920s.....	73
Campus of the Jewish Consumptive Relief Association’s Sanatorium, 1920s.....	81
Map, Population Distribution in Boyle Heights, 1920s.....	86
“The Bread Trust” from <i>The Bakers Journal</i> , March 13 th , 1926.....	112
Armenian Bakers in downtown Los Angeles, 1902.....	122
Advertisements from the <i>California Jewish Voice</i> , 1922	128
Mixers at an industrial baking plant, early twentieth century	130
Members of Local 453’s executive board at the 12 th Anniversary in 1936.....	134
“ <i>Bekers Union Local 453 Apelirt tsu koifn broit und cake productn mit dem union leybel</i> ” (“Bakers Union Local 453 appeals to [you] to buy bread and cake products with the union label”), 1936.....	136
“Hunger Protest, October 2 nd , 1933” by Harry Quillen	165
Logo of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union, 1938	189
Nazi Flag outside Downtown Los Angeles Businesses, 1938.....	198
Class picture from the Yiddish <i>folkschule</i> on Soto Street, 1943.....	218
Anti-Nazi Parade in Los Angeles, CA, Nov. 22 nd , 1938 (three images).....	235-236

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INTRODUCTION:

YIDDISH LIFE IN BOYLE HEIGHTS, HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

This dissertation tells the story of a cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who came to Los Angeles in the first two decades of the twentieth century and settled in Boyle Heights, a residential subdivision east of the Los Angeles River. They were born during the tumultuous years of violent pogroms and restrictive legislation that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in Russia, and had been involved in radical socialist and nationalist movements in Eastern Europe, many coming to the United States to escape forceful detention for their revolutionary activities. Most had spent years in cities in the East and Midwest before making their way to Los Angeles and brought with them experiences with labor and community organizing in the other areas. And while most could read and write in English after years spent elsewhere, they shared a commitment to using Yiddish – a vernacular language that combines Slavic, Hebraic and Germanic dialects – as an engine of community mobilization and worked to develop a vibrant Yiddish public culture in the neighborhood as a means of maintaining cultural autonomy and collective identity among its Jewish residents. Together, these workers, activists, and intellectuals spearheaded the creation of Yiddish-based fraternal, cultural and labor organizations, literary societies and publishing houses, schools and left-wing political parties in the neighborhood.

But the realities of life in Boyle Heights were fundamentally different than in the communities they had left behind. First and foremost, Boyle Heights' Jewish

population was significantly smaller: while the Jewish population of the Lower East Side of Manhattan topped 540,000 by 1910 Boyle Heights was home to only a handful of Jewish families in the same period and even at its peak in the late 1930s, only reached an estimated 50,000 Jewish residents.¹ While most of Los Angeles' residential neighborhoods were governed by restrictive covenants prohibiting non-whites, and in some cases Jews, from renting or owning property, Boyle Heights was not, and became home to "a dozen or more nationalities" including a large population of Jews as well as African Americans and immigrants of Armenian, Japanese, Russian Molokan (a Christian sect) and Mexican descent.² Boyle Heights' ethno-racial diversity was unique from both the other neighborhoods in Los Angeles and the working-class enclaves in which the Jews who settled there had lived before they made their way west. And instead of overcrowded tenements, Boyle Heights was composed primarily of single-family homes, affordable to wage earners and professionals alike.

Los Angeles' economic development was also quite different than other cities: until the latter half of the 1930s, the city lacked the stockyards, steel mills, and large-scale production facilities that came to define metropolitan and regional economies elsewhere. Many of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who came to Los Angeles never went to work in factories alongside their non-Jewish neighbors like intellectuals

¹ The population estimate for the Lower East Side comes from Tony Michels, *A Fire in their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9. The estimated Jewish population of Boyle Heights in the 1930s come from the Home Owners Loan Corporation's survey of the neighborhood in 1939, "Area Description - Security Map of Los Angeles County - Area no. D-53, April 19th, 1939," Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939.

² Commission on Immigration and Housing of California, "A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City" (San Francisco, 1924), 14-15.

and activists in other areas, and because of the racially segmented, dual labor system that prevailed in the city, even those who worked for wages joined the “aristocracy of the laboring class.”³ The particular socio-economic hierarchy in the neighborhood made it difficult to identify a distinct Jewish “working-class,” complicating their efforts to cultivate class-consciousness among the neighborhood’s residents. The social and economic realities of life in early twentieth century Los Angeles created new opportunities for the neighborhood’s Jewish residents, but also caused intense factionalism and ideological and personal rivalries within and between the neighborhood’s Yiddish-based organizations. As a result, the history of the Jewish labor movement and Yiddish life in early twentieth century Boyle Heights has been obscured and the contributions of the bakers and their cohort of community activists have been overlooked by generations of historians.

This dissertation examines how these unique realities influenced the forms of the labor and community organizing that emerged in the Jewish community in Boyle Heights. I use Yiddish-language newspapers, journals and biographies that have yet to receive any scholarly attention to reconstruct the experiences of this cohort of Jewish immigrants, tracing their ideological influences and how their ideals and strategies changed over the thirty-year period between their arrival in the 1910s and outbreak of

³ The phrase was used by the California Commission on Immigration and Housing to differentiate between the various types of workers in the city, describing those in this “aristocracy” as “skilled workmen (mechanicians, electricians, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, cooks, bakers, painters, etc.)” as compared with the “lowest group of day laborers... the diggers and delvers who have nothing to offer but their bodily strength.” See “A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City,” 56. For more on the dual labor system, see Mike Davis, “Sunshine and the Open Shop: Ford and Darwin in 1920s Los Angeles,” in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, Thomas Sitton and Bill Deverell eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 118.

World War Two. I show that through their community organizing efforts, these immigrants built an organizational and cultural life separate from their non-Jewish neighbors and the Jewish immigrants who preceded them, creating a distinct ethnic community in a multiethnic neighborhood. But over the course of their years in Boyle Heights, they expanded the scale and scope of their organizing, forging new multiethnic coalitions and embracing multiculturalism as part of their American identities. To explore the variety of developments that encouraged this transformation, I highlight the activism of the Jewish Bakers Union, one of several unions formed in the 1910s, showing how their organizing style and attitudes shifted through the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the rise of anti-Semitism in Los Angeles in the late 1930s. Through their activism, the bakers and their cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants not only fostered a vibrant Yiddish public culture in the neighborhood, but also forged a collective identity as American Jews. By using Yiddish-language materials, I am able to recover their lives and experiences and assert Boyle Heights' place in the Yiddish-speaking world.

Reexamining "Los Angeles' Lower East Side"

The first efforts to write the history of the Jews of Los Angeles began in 1954 when, in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the city's first Jewish congregation, historian Justin G. Turner, whose scholarship focused primarily on the life of Abraham Lincoln, organized the Southern California Jewish Historical Society. Up to that point, the only comprehensive portrait of Jewish life in Los Angeles was a memoir written by a leading businessman who was one of the founding members of the

city's first Jewish congregation, Harris Newmark.⁴ With the Society's support and the backing of the Jewish Federation Council, Dr. Norton Stern, an optometrist, and his writing partner Rabbi William Kramer launched the *Western States Jewish History Quarterly* in 1968 to serve as a forum for new studies of the history of Jewish life in Southern California. And in 1970, with their help and the support of the American Jewish History Center and the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, Max Vorspan and Lloyd Gartner wrote their seminal work, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, providing one of the first and only comprehensive historical accounts of the Jewish experience in Southern California from the early days of statehood. The work of this seminal generation of scholars continues to serve as the foundation for almost every examination of Jewish life in Los Angeles.

The writings of this early wave of scholars focused almost exclusively on the most prominent individuals of Los Angeles' Jewish community: the "pioneer" generation of Jewish immigrants, born in Germany and Western Europe, who came to Los Angeles in the middle of the nineteenth century. They included Harris Newmark and his brother Joseph, Herman and Isaias Hellman, Solomon Lazard, Jacob Baruch and Kaspare Cohn. These captains of industry built the city's first banks, supplied the city's food, financed the city's first water and gas lines, and subdivided their massive real estate holdings into residential districts and towns throughout Southern California. And although entirely integrated into the city's Anglo elite, these pioneers also built the city's first synagogues, fraternal organizations, and Jewish charities, playing leading

⁴ Maurice and Marco Newmark eds., *Sixty years in Southern California, 1853-1913, containing the reminiscences of Harris Newmark* (1st edition, New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1916).

roles in Jewish religious and organizational life for decades. Early scholarship on Jewish Los Angeles similarly showcased the exceptional successes of Jews of Hollywood, highlighting the contributions of studio executives like Louis B. Mayer, Sam Goodwyn, and Carl Laemmle, as well as the émigré community of German and Austrian exiles who escaped the Nazis and sought refuge in Los Angeles, including Albert Einstein, Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, and Thomas Mann. Influenced by the growing interest in and scholarship about the history of the American West in the 1960s, these authors sought to showcase aspects of the Jewish experience that were unique to the West and to redeem the contributions of Jews to the development of the city, the state, and the region. Although most did not hold professional degrees in history, they amassed incredible details about the lives of these extraordinary men that have inspired dozens of further studies over the past fifty years.⁵

⁵ Recent works on the pioneer generation of Jews in Southern California include Frances Dinkekspiel's *Towers of Gold: How One Jewish Immigrant Names Isaias Hellman Invented California* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008) and Karen Wilson "On The Cosmopolitan Frontier: Jews and Social Networks in Nineteenth Century Los Angeles," PhD Dissertation, UCLA Department of History, 2011. Studies of the studio executives include Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988); Michael Paul Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); the Southern California Jewish Historical Society's volume, *History of the Jewish Presence in Hollywood: From Cowboy to Corporate Leader* (Los Angeles: Jewish Historical Society of Southern California, 1987); Frank Krutnik ed., *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); and Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh Samuelson, *Hollywood's Chosen People: the Jewish Experience in American Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013). Books about the anti-Nazi émigré community include Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (New York: Viking Press, 1983); Sergio Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and Carol Merrill-Mirsky ed., *Exiles in Paradise*, Catalog of the Exhibition "Exiles in Paradise" at the Hollywood Bowl Museum (Los Angeles: Hollywood Bowl Museum, 1991).

However comprehensive the work of this initial wave of scholars, they very rarely made the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who settled in Boyle Heights the subject of their historical inquiries. They offered extensive details about the Jewish elites' responses to the arrival of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century and the various charitable organizations they built to serve them, including Kaspare Cohn Hospital, Julie Ann Singer Nursery, and the Home for the Aged. But their studies emphasized the poverty and neediness of the Eastern European immigrants, positioning them as recipients of the charity rather than as historical actors themselves. Some of these early scholars, including Vorspan and Gartner, credited the neighborhood's Yiddish-based organizations with having provided the "moral and financial backing" to local Yiddish culture, but argued that they were "heavily political, shot through with the strife of the 1920s between sympathizers and opponents of Soviet Russia."⁶ Along with their contemporaries, they dismissed the contributions of local Jewish unions "under Communist dominance" and cast the bulk of Yiddish literary and organizational life as "propagandist activity, citing the Yiddishists' "isolation... from the mainstream of political and cultural life" as the reason for their "considerable pro-Communism."⁷ Rather than explore the development of the organizations or the lives of the men and women who founded them, scholars of their generation largely treated

⁶ Max Vorspan and Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1970), 141-143. In discussing the Yiddish cultural life in the 1930s, they similarly praised the Yiddish speaking community, noting that the "creative activity" of Jewish cultural life in Los Angeles was conducted in Yiddish, but again insisting that in Yiddish "politics and culture were inextricably intertwined," 214.

⁷ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 186-187, 198, 202.

the city's Yiddish-speaking immigrants as objects of history rather than as subjects, relegating them to a marginal role in Los Angeles' Jewish history.

A second wave of studies of Boyle Heights' Jewish history emerged in the late 1990s in tandem with historical preservation efforts spearheaded by local historical societies and the Los Angeles Jewish Federation. The Southern California Jewish Historical Society launched a massive campaign to preserve the remnants of the neighborhood's largest synagogue, the Breed Street Shul, which after decades of being unused, fell into disrepair and decay. In conjunction with their campaign, they worked with the Japanese American National Museum to organize the Boyle Heights Oral History Project, collecting artifacts and memories from the neighborhood's aging former residents through a series of interviews, which later became the basis for an exhibit at the museum in 2002. Most of the Jewish interviewees were the children of Eastern European immigrants who were born or raised in the neighborhood in the late 1930s and 1940s and offered stories from their childhood and anecdotal accounts of their parents' lives. These preservation efforts have inspired a new interest in Boyle Heights and its Jewish past, resulting in a series of new academic studies and popular histories. But like those that came before them, none of these new studies have focused directly on Yiddish culture or the Yiddish-speaking immigrants who built the Jewish organizations and institutions in the neighborhood.

Two overlapping tropes have emerged from this new wave of accounts that have greatly influenced public perceptions of the neighborhood's history. The first is that Boyle Heights was the "Lower East Side of Los Angeles," identical to the working-class

Jewish immigrant neighborhoods that emerged in the industrial capitals of the east.⁸ Scholars and popular observers alike have repeatedly cited the neighborhood's vibrant Yiddish culture, its Jewish unions and Yiddish-based fraternal organizations, along with the preponderance of Jewish-owned businesses along Brooklyn Avenue, as having given the neighborhood a distinctly Jewish flavor. Historian Mark Wild has even gone so far as to propose that in the 1920s, parts of Boyle Heights were essentially "monoethnic," dubbing it "the eastside Jewish ghetto."⁹ Even those studies that acknowledge the reality that Jews never comprised a majority of the population in Boyle Heights, credit the neighborhood's Jewish community – its tradition of radical politics and trade unionism, as well as its synagogues and kosher restaurants – with having created a uniquely "Jewish ambiance in a multicultural neighborhood."¹⁰ Rather than make Yiddish life in Boyle Heights their focus, scholars and journalists alike have simply cited its presence as evidence that its residents were working-class, unassimilated immigrants like those in other "Jewish ghettos" on the east coast. These studies fail to recognize that Boyle Heights' Jewish residents varied considerably in

⁸ In the late 1970s, William Kramer published a series of articles about Boyle Heights in his weekly column in *Heritage*, dubbing it "Los Angeles' Upper (Lower) East Side." His findings were echoed by George Sanchez in his article "'What's Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews': Creating Multiculturalism on the Eastside during the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2004): 633-661, in which he described that the neighborhood "came to be known as Los Angeles' "Lower East Side," p. 635. Journalists seeking shorthand ways to describe the neighborhood's Jewish heritage use the appellation most frequently, for example Dvora Meyers's recent article in *Tablet Magazine*, "Viva Pastrami! A Jewish deli favorite endures in a Mexican-American neighborhood that was once L.A.'s Lower East Side," February 6th, 2013.

⁹ Wild described that only "the vicinity of Brooklyn and Soto Streets" could "reasonably be called monoethnic." See *Wild Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth Century Los Angeles*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 30.

¹⁰ The phrase here is taken from the title of Wendy Elliott-Scheinberg's dissertation, "Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood," PhD Dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 2001.

their income levels and professions, and that for most, speaking Yiddish was a choice, an expression of their ideological beliefs rather than a necessity. They have overlooked significant structural and demographic realities to draw a direct line between the experiences of the neighborhood's Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants in the 1920s and those of its current Spanish-speaking majority.¹¹ Instead of examining the unique aspects of Jewish life in Boyle Heights, they have perpetuated the neighborhood's reputation as the "Lower East Side."

The other consistent tendency among historians and commentators has been to romanticize early 20th century Boyle Heights as a haven of multiculturalism and interracial cooperation. Using the interviews conducted with former residents, these studies have emphasized the "great feelings of friendship," "intergroup tolerance" and "pan-ethnic affiliations" that existed between Jews and their multiethnic neighbors.¹² In most cases, these authors take for granted that the feelings of inter-ethnic harmony resulted from the residents' shared status as "working-class" and their shared experiences with racism as "non-white" ethnic minorities. As this study will show, for many years the Jewish immigrants who settled in Boyle Heights excluded non-Jews

¹¹ George Sanchez identified this tendency as imposing a model of ethnic succession on the neighborhood in his article, "Race and Immigration in Changing Communities: The Case of Boyle Heights," in *The Boyle Heights Oral History Project: A Multiethnic and Collaborative Exploration of a Los Angeles Neighborhood, Interview Summaries and Essays* (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 2002).

¹² Herschel Rosenthal used the phrase "great feelings of friendship" in describing his time at Roosevelt High School when interviewed for the Japanese-American National Museum's Boyle Heights Oral History Project. Allison Varzally used "panethnic affiliations" in her study *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3. The Breed Street Shul Project claims that the neighborhood fostered "a remarkable degree of intergroup tolerance and understanding" in the early twentieth century on their website, <http://breedstreetshul.org/about-us/history>.

from their community organizing efforts in order to build a separate, Jewish ethnic community in the multiethnic neighborhood. While the more left-leaning members of the Yiddish-speaking community consistently tried to incorporate the non-Jewish residents into their activism, how to include them was a source of conflict and ideological tension among the area's Jewish immigrants, and the multiethnic coalition-building that did emerge over time was a result of the activists' ideological commitments not their shared material circumstances. Instead of exploring the reasons why the neighborhood's Yiddishists pursued multiculturalism and interethnic cooperation, scholars, journalists and politicians alike have explained the attitudes of the neighborhood's Jewish residents as natural by-products of where they lived, isolating those attitudes to a particular moment that ended when "The Last Jews of Boyle Heights" left the area.¹³

Both of these overlapping versions of Boyle Heights' Jewish history come from the desire among scholars and popular observers alike to contrast the experiences of the neighborhood's Jewish residents with those of Jews in the more affluent, "white" neighborhoods they moved to in the postwar era. Los Angeles's sprawling suburbs figure prominently in the historiography related to postwar Jewish life, the bulk of which focuses on Jewish upward mobility and ethnic identity, showing how Jews "became white folks" in "suburbs [and] Sunbelt cities" like Los Angeles, "places where

¹³ This phrase is taken from the title of an article written by Danny Weizmann for the *Los Angeles Reader* called "In Search of the Last Jews of Boyle Heights: A Cultural Odyssey," Sept. 1st, 1995.

whiteness itself [eclipsed] Jewish racial salience.”¹⁴ Even those scholars like Deborah Dash Moore who argue that local Jewry developed unique forms of organizational life that maintained community cohesion and Jewish identity in the postwar era draw strong distinctions between the experiences of Jews in their new neighborhoods west of downtown from their experiences of poverty and diversity in their previous homes.¹⁵ They position Boyle Heights alongside the other “ghettos” that Jews left behind as they embraced their upward mobility and moved to the suburbs, emphasizing that the neighborhood was multiethnic and working-class as compared to white, middle-class neighborhoods in other parts of town. This is not to say their characterizations are entirely incorrect, but by privileging contrast over continuity, these scholars have failed to recognize that the realities of life in Boyle Heights challenged the Jewish residents’ understanding of their ethnic and class based identities from the earliest days of Jewish settlement in the 1910s. For example, many members of the bakers union owned their own homes, their own cars and, in some cases, their own businesses, and while they were avid socialists and trade union activists, they certainly were not “proletarian.” Although some Jewish immigrants faced residential and occupational discrimination,

¹⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 188. See also Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Become White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Moore argues that innovation was possible because “Los Angeles lacked accepted patterns of deference to entrenched leadership,” that the city’s community life was “malleable and welcoming.” See Moore, *To The Golden Cities: Pursing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 2-3. Neil C. Sandberg also highlighted the innovative strategies of LA Jewry in his study, *Jewish Life in Los Angeles: A Window To Tomorrow* (University Press of America, 1986), as have Ellen Eisenberg, Ava Kahn and William Toll in the final chapter of their book *Jews on the Pacific Coast: Reinventing Community on America’s Edge* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

the bakers also had advantages in navigating the city's racially segmented labor market and excluded unskilled and non-Jewish bakery workers from their union well into the 1930s. As I will show, these realities caused conflicts in the union and influenced the forms of their activism as well as Yiddish-based labor and community organizing in the neighborhood more broadly. By failing to consider these important differences between life in Boyle Heights and "Jewish ghettos" elsewhere, scholars have perpetuated the neighborhood's reputation as the "Lower East Side of Los Angeles."

William Kramer characterized this tendency among his peers as "the superimposition of the New York model," urging them to recognize that the neighborhood was fundamentally different:

"Boyle Heights... was never an American ghetto, a place of poverty where immigrant Jews were huddled together seeking employment, speaking a foreign tongue or desperately trying to adjust to the *goldene medina*. Most of the Jews who moved to Boyle Heights were already American-born or Americanized... Most were middle-class, education oriented and lived there as a matter of choice... It was a suburb of Los Angeles that Jews favored because it was thought to be the healthiest place in the city for recovering victims of the white plague of tuberculosis and the sufferers of asthma."¹⁶

To a certain extent, Kramer mischaracterizes the demographics of the neighborhood's Jewish population and their motivations for settling in the neighborhood, and overlooks the radicalism of the community. But as this study will show, the fundamentals of his logic are sound: only when historians attempted to fit Boyle Heights into "phases" in American Jewish history based on the model of New York did Boyle Heights earn its reputation as the "Lower East Side of Los Angeles."

¹⁶ Kramer, "Myer Pransky: the Man Behind the 'Spirit of Boyle Heights'" *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly*, vol. xx no. 3 (April, 1988): 238. Kramer has previously referred to the neighborhood as the "Lower (Upper) East Side of Los Angeles" but after more careful examination, turned away from that characterization in his work.

Like the actual “Lower East Side” in Manhattan, Boyle Heights’ meaning has changed over time as each generation of Jewish Angelenos inserted it into their collective pasts.¹⁷ For Vorspan, Gartner and the generation of scholars who first wrote Los Angeles’ Jewish history in the 1960s and 1970s, Boyle Heights represented a radical, militant, immigrant past, one that was “isolated from the mainstream” of Jewish life and therefore unworthy of significant scholarly attention.¹⁸ For the generation raised in the neighborhood in the 1930s and 1940s who contributed their memories to the various oral history projects of the neighborhood, Boyle Heights represented a nostalgic, multiethnic past, the “good old days of poverty” before they became white, middle-class suburbanites. They have largely stripped the history of the neighborhood of the radicalism and communism that Vorspan and Gartner described, pointing to the its trade unions, fraternal, cultural and political organizations as contributing to the area’s Jewish atmosphere, but not as engines of social mobility, political activism or community cohesion.¹⁹ Each set of memories and representations of the neighborhood

¹⁷ I borrow this analysis from a conversation between Hasia Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth Wenger that inspired their book, *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000). In it, Beth Wenger artfully described the Lower East Side as “a constant battleground for giving meaning to the Jewish experience. Within each generation, simultaneous versions of the neighborhood existed: there was a left-wing East Side, replete with labor organizing and strikes; a religious East Side that housed hundreds of congregations; a Yiddish East Side, home of leading writers and artists and a flourishing café society; a commercial East Side, where shoppers flocked for bargains; an ethnic East Side that provided traditional Jewish foods and music; and the list goes on,” 4.

¹⁸ In their *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, Vorspan and Gartner described the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights as having been isolated “from the mainstream of political and cultural life,” 202.

¹⁹ Suzanne Wasserman, “Re-creating Recreations on the Lower East Side: Restaurants, Cabarets, Cafes and Coffeehouses in the 1930s,” in *Remembering the Lower East Side*, 156-157, 160-161.

has been invoked by politicians, community activists, journalists and historians alike to fit the neighborhood into their versions of Los Angeles' history.

Unfortunately, although Boyle Heights has garnered an increasing amount of attention, the memories and experiences of the neighborhood's Yiddish-speaking immigrants themselves have been lost to history. To date, there have been no scholarly investigations of the local Yiddish language press or the neighborhood's various Yiddish newspapers and literary journals; no biographies written about the men and women who founded the local Yiddish-based organizations or the local Yiddish poets, writers and artists. There are no available translations of locally published Yiddish literature, beyond a few, scattered poems, and only one partial bibliography of locally published works.²⁰ There have been some studies of the neighborhood's various Jewish unions and institutions, but these have relied primarily on the anecdotal accounts, the brief mentions of the neighborhood by Vorspan, Gartner and their colleagues, and English language materials rather than the voices of the creators of the organizations themselves.²¹ As a result, much of Boyle Heights' Jewish history remains untold.

²⁰ Yiddish Language Department, Los Angeles Jewish Community Library, "Bibliography of Yiddish Periodicals." Library Publications no. 4, March 31st, 1958. Excerpts of translated poetry appear in Vorspan and Gartner's *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 116 and in Norma Fain Pratt's article, "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers in America, 1890-1940," in ed. Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).

²¹ Kenneth C. Burt, "Yiddish Los Angeles and the Birth of Latino Politics: The Polyglot Ferment of Boyle Heights" *Jewish Currents* May-June, 2008, and "The Jewish Labor Committee: Seventy-Five Years of Activism and Historical Achievements" Program, California/Western States JLC Annual Recognition Brunch, Century City, June 14, 2009. John H. M. Laslett and Mary Tyler, *The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988* (Inglewood, CA: Ten Star Press, 1989) and Laslett, "Gender, Class, or Ethno-Cultural Struggle? The Problematic Relationship Between Rose Pesotta and the Los Angeles ILGWU." *California History* 72, no. 1 (1993): 20-39.

This dissertation will instead draw primarily on these Yiddish-language materials to reconstruct the history of Yiddish-based labor and community organizing in the neighborhood. I will focus on the cohort of immigrants who spearheaded the creation of Yiddish public culture in the neighborhood, highlighting the activism of the members of the Jewish Bakers Union. The written records of their lives are far from complete as only partial runs of local Yiddish newspapers and organizational records have been preserved and most available accounts of their activities were written long after the events they describe took place. The Yiddish-language materials tend to emphasize their work together, not their collaborations with the non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood, which makes it difficult to assess the nature of those relationships. But I have combined these materials with careful examination and interpretation of their actions, using the forms of labor and community organizing to offer a more comprehensive portrait of the Yiddish-speaking population in the neighborhood. I do so with several important research questions in mind: How did the Yiddishists understand their class and ethnic identities in the multiethnic environment of Boyle Heights? What impacts did Boyle Heights' unique physical geography, pattern of settlement, and socio-economic and racial hierarchy have on labor and community organizing in the neighborhood? How did their identities change as Los Angeles' economy and population grew in the 1920s and 1930s? This dissertation probes Boyle Heights' reputation as "Los Angeles' Lower East Side" by offering a more intimate and in-depth portrait of the Yiddish-speaking intellectuals, activists and workers who

worked to foster collective identity and community among the neighborhood's Jewish residents.

Understanding the activism of the bakers and their cohort depends most fundamentally on considering the three basic ideological principles that motivated them: nationalism, socialism and Yiddishism. The intellectual origins of these principles will be examined at length in the first chapter, but here I will outline them briefly and identify the sources that I have used to elucidate them in this dissertation.

Nationalism, Socialism, Yiddishism - Definition of Terms

Because of the stridency of contemporary debates about Israel, the term "Jewish nationalism" has become widely associated with Zionism and Jewish statehood. But in order to understand nationalism in the way that the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Boyle Heights did, one must see the term as part of broader discussions among intellectuals in 19th century Europe about the legitimacy of imperial rule, the secularization of politics, natural rights and popular sovereignty. In this context, Jewish scholars across Europe sought to refashion traditional religious understandings of Jewish peoplehood along secular lines as a means of asserting the Jews' rights to self-determination not as a religious minority, but as a nation. A variety of nationalisms emerged, each one casting Jewish nationhood as historically conditioned and maintained throughout centuries in the diaspora by Jewish communal institutions, self-government, and cultural and social autonomy. Some scholars lamented this historical condition, attributing it to forceful isolation, marginalization, persecution and anti-Semitism, while others argued that it should be understood a source of strength, offering particular models for securing legal

self-determination and cultural autonomy for the Jewish nation. These scholars and activists vigorously debated whether Jewish nationhood could be sustained without an autonomous Jewish state or territory, but on the most basic level, their various Jewish nationalisms were premised on the shared notion that Jewish difference was a positive value. The Yiddish-speaking immigrants who settled in Boyle Heights had been immersed in these debates in Europe and, to varying degrees, believed that Jewish nationalism was important to advancing Jewish interests and achieving Jewish self-determination.

My understanding of Jewish nationalism draws on an abundance of scholarship in the past two decades exploring Jewish nationalism in both the European and American contexts. While these studies traditionally focused on the nationalisms advanced by particular individuals or organizations, recently scholars including Kenneth Moss, Simon Rabinovitch and Yosef Gorny have elegantly put wide varieties of Jewish nationalisms in dialogue with one another by highlighting their similarities and differences.²² Scholars of Jewish nationalism in the American context have illuminated the ways in which these national sentiments informed Jewish responses to both American nationalism and a variety of American institutions including race,

²² See Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia: From Its Origins to 1905* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972); Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); David Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Haim Zhitlowski, Simon Dubnov, Ahad Ha-am and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1996); Zvi Y. Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003); Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Yosef Gorny *Converging Alternatives: The Bund and The Zionist Labor Movement, 1897-1985* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Simon Rabinovitch, *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism: Writings of Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012); and Joshua M. Karlip's forthcoming book, *The Tragedy of A Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

capitalism, politics and mass consumption. Moving beyond the linear narrative of progressive, generational assimilation advanced by their predecessors, these scholars, including Matthew Frye Jacobson, Eli Lederhendler, and Hasia Diner have shown the ways in which Jewish immigrants selectively incorporated hegemonic American cultural, social, and political values and fused them with their Jewish national identities. In turn, they have shown that Jewish immigrant writers, activists, artists and intellectuals exerted tremendous influence on the discourse surrounding nationality and nationalism in America.²³

This dissertation aims to build on these works by exploring how Jewish nationalism animated labor and community organizing among the Eastern European Jewish immigrants of Boyle Heights. I argue that the bakers and their allies rejected assimilation and sought instead to maintain their culture and their collective identity as Jews in their new American homes in the hopes that by doing so, they would contribute to the wellbeing of the global Jewish nation. Certainly theirs was in some ways, an “imagined community” as Benedict Anderson described: even though their material, social and political circumstances differed dramatically from those of Jews living

²³ See Jack Wertheimer ed., *Imagining the American Jewish Community* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1994) and his *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism: From Caste to Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Noam Pianko, *Diaspora Jewish Nationalism and Identity in America, 1914-1967*, Doctoral Dissertation, Yale University, 2004 and his book *Zionism: The Roads not Taken, Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance, Mass Consumption and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

elsewhere, and likewise from one another, they believed that they shared interests as Jews.²⁴ But however “imagined” their nation may have been, the Jewish immigrants who built Boyle Heights’ Yiddish-based fraternal, educational, cultural and labor organizations in the early twentieth century did so out of a fundamental commitment to maintaining national self-consciousness and group identity among the neighborhood’s Jewish residents. Their commitment to Jewish nationalism encouraged them to create an autonomous Yiddish-based organizational and cultural life in the multiethnic neighborhood.

The desire of this cohort of immigrants to cultivate collective identity among the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights was also a by-product of their commitment to socialism. Again, this term’s meaning has been abstracted over time and must be understood in the context of debates among Jewish intellectuals in the late 19th century. While it later became the basis for the soviet system of governance, Marx’s philosophy in its origins was a materialist framework for understanding European history: that each historical epoch was defined by a prevailing mode of production which created systems of social relations that dictated the organization of civil society. These social relations had throughout history been hierarchical and unequal, giving rise to a series of revolutionary class struggles that had propelled the progress of mankind and that would inevitably bring about the collapse of the capitalist order. Jewish scholars who applied Marx’s framework to their own history attributed the Jews’ century-long struggle for survival to their marginalization in various economic systems and argued

²⁴Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991).

that only by hastening the end of the capitalist order could Jews achieve national self-determination and equality. Along with other socialists, they sought to prepare the working-class to lead this revolutionary change by organizing unions and political parties among workers that would foster their class-consciousness and harness their collective power. Socialist leaders offered a variety of political and economic models to replace the capitalist system, all of which centered on the principle of “production for use” and the ideal of workers controlling the means of production. Many members of the cohort of Jewish immigrants who settled in Boyle Heights in the early twentieth century had joined the socialist movement in Eastern Europe, some participating in the failed Russian revolution of 1905, and they became leaders of the socialist movement in Los Angeles. Like socialists elsewhere, they argued over how to achieve their goals and became deeply divided after the Bolshevik Revolution. But they shared a commitment to achieving socialism’s most basic goal of replacing capitalism with a more judicious economic system that better served the interests of the working-class.

My exploration of socialism among the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Boyle Heights builds on a wave of recent scholarship about left-wing politics in America that has moved beyond the communist versus anti-communist dichotomy advanced by Vorspan and Gartner. During the Cold War, scholarship on left-wing political movements in America was colored by anxieties about espionage and subversion, and focused largely on exposing the connections between American communists and the Soviet Union.²⁵

²⁵ See Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite*, (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic

Even those who sought to emphasize the positive influence of socialists and communists on American politics and the labor movement centered their evaluations of left-wing intellectuals and activists on their relationship to the “party line.”²⁶ Scholars of the Jewish labor movement similarly drew strong distinctions between socialists and communists, often praising the contributions of more moderate socialists while condemning the communists’ disruptive influence.²⁷ More recently, however, historians of the American left and the labor movement have shown that in local contexts, particularly those outside New York, intellectuals and activists operated somewhat independently of their parties and often strayed considerably from the directives issued by the national bodies of their organizations. Scholars including Randi Storch, Robin Kelley and Daniel Hurewitz have aimed to recapture the intimate, ground level experiences of leftwing activists in the early twentieth century rather than obsess over the intricacies of their ideology.²⁸ Studies of the Jewish left, like those of

Books, 1984); Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1972).

²⁶ Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: the conflict that shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881- 1924* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); David Cauté, *The Fellow-travellers; A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

²⁷ Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers: the Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1976); Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.: An industrial, political and cultural history of the Jewish Labor Movement, 1914-1952* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1953); Isaiah Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* vol. xi (1976), 342-393.

²⁸ Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005); James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

Jewish nationalism, have put varieties of socialism, communism and radicalism in closer dialogue with one another, emphasizing overlap and interrelation rather than stark partisan distinctions.²⁹ These scholars have, as a result, highlighted how debates between intellectual leaders of various leftwing movements filtered down to the grassroots, and forged new ways of showing how socialism, communism and everything in between influenced American politics and culture.

This dissertation similarly explores socialism and communism as part of a broad spectrum of left-leaning ideology within the Yiddish-speaking community. The group of Jewish immigrants who helped to build Boyle Heights' Yiddish-based fraternal and educational organizations, unions, and left-wing political parties did so as a means of cultivating class-consciousness and mobilizing the neighborhood's residents to foster a change in the capitalist order. While the high-ranking members of these organizations maintained close ties to the Socialist and Communist Parties and the ideological debates that emerged between them, most of their members cared less about the "party line" than they did about fighting to improve the lives of the Jewish "folks masses." As I will show, this fight was particularly intense in the context of Los Angeles' highly stratified political economy as trade unionists and radicals faced tremendous opposition to their efforts in the early twentieth century. Far removed from the central party apparatuses in New York, local left-leaning activists pursued their own strategies to fit this

²⁹ See Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* and his edited volume, *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Steven Cassedy, *To the Other Shore: the Russian Jewish Intellectuals Who Came to America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) and his edited volume, *Building the Future: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and the Making of Tsukunft* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1999); David Philip Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx: Folk Ideology and Folk history in the Jewish Labor movement* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999); Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

particular context, especially in the 1930s, and were often criticized by national leaders for doing so. Rather than draw fine distinctions between communists and anti-communists, I will present their beliefs as varieties of Jewish socialism, ideologies that in a different ways, combined a commitment to fostering Jewish national self-consciousness with a commitment to fostering working-class consciousness among the neighborhood's residents.

The primary medium through which these nationally-minded socialists cultivated both class and national consciousness among the Jews of Boyle Heights was by developing *yidische kultur* (Yiddish culture). They embraced a revolutionary attitude toward cultural reformation, insisting that forging a new, more modern Jewish national culture, free of all vestiges of religious superstitions and hierarchies, was integral to achieving social change. Initially, the Jewish intellectuals of Eastern Europe embraced Yiddish as the medium for cultural reformation pragmatically; while many of them had received a formal education in Hebrew, Russian or Polish, most of the Jewish "folks masses" they sought to reach primarily spoke, read, and wrote in Yiddish. But some leading figures came to believe that as the *folkshprakh* ("the people's language"), Yiddish was *the* most authentic form of Jewish culture, and that if elevated and developed, it could serve as the foundation of a modern, secular Jewish national civilization. They sought to promote a Yiddish cultural renaissance by expanding the Yiddish press, publishing and theater, forming literary societies and schools and using Yiddish in their labor and political organizing. The Eastern European Jewish immigrants who settled in Boyle Heights embraced these ideals, and as Yiddishists worked to develop a rich

yidische kultur in the neighborhood. They did so not out of necessity, as many had already spent years in America and were fluent in English, but rather as a choice, their Yiddishism an equally important a part of their ideological principles.

Although the number of native Yiddish speakers has declined precipitously in the decades since World War Two, the number of academics choosing to study Yiddish in a variety of disciplines has steadily increased, their works providing a strong foundation for this dissertation. Both the death and destruction of the Holocaust and Stalin's dismantling of the Soviet Yiddish program dealt fatal blows to the institutions that drove the academic study of Yiddish language and culture before the war, and for many years afterward, scholars of Yiddish advanced the notion that the language was on the verge of extinction.³⁰ As Jeffrey Shandler noted in his seminal study *Adventures in Yiddishland*, for new scholars studying Yiddish, who, like myself, are not native Yiddish speakers, the use of the language is "postvernacular," fundamentally different in its nature and intent than the native Yiddish speakers that we study, our motives no longer laden with nationalist sentiments.³¹ But choosing Yiddish, rather than inheriting it, encourages scholars of this new generation to take innovative, interdisciplinary approaches using new methodologies and frameworks that have revitalized the field. The expanded study of Yiddish has been crucial to the aforementioned scholarship on Jewish nationalism and socialism, and new studies of the American labor movement by

³⁰ See Lara Rabinovitch, Shiri Goren and Hannah S. Pressman's "Introduction," to their edited collection of essays, *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

³¹ Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Steven Cassedy, Tony Michels and Daniel Katz. Recent works have also highlighted Yiddish's influence on American literature, theater, cinema, and music, and redeemed the enduring role of Yiddish in American society.³² I hope that this dissertation will contribute to this rich and vibrant field, and encourage others to focus future explorations of Yiddish culture on Los Angeles.

By focusing my study of Yiddish in Los Angeles on labor and community organizing, however, I am choosing to explore an aspect of Yiddish life that was inherently ideological. For the subjects of this dissertation, speaking, writing, and organizing in Yiddish were acts deeply intertwined with their socio-political values, intended to maintain Jewish cultural autonomy and national self-consciousness, to educate the "folks masses" about the injustices of capitalism, and to mobilize their community to make real social change. To other Yiddish-speaking residents of Boyle Heights, particularly its large Orthodox community, the language likely had different meanings. For some, it was simply their preferred vernacular, their *mame loshn* ("mother tongue"), not something deeply invested with meaning that needed to be preserved and passed on to their children. But for the members of the organizations I describe in this dissertation, including the members of the Jewish Bakers Union, using

³² See Edward S. Shapiro ed., *Yiddish in America: Essays on Yiddish Culture in the Golden Land* (Scranton, PA: Weinberg Judaic Studies Institute, University of Scranton, University of Scranton Press, 2008); Stefan Kanfer, *Stardust Lost: the Triumph, Tragedy and Mishugas of Yiddish Theater in America* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Sarah Blacher Cohen, *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Sol Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English: The Story of Yiddish in America* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Marc Miller, *Representing the Immigrant Experience: Morris Rosenfeld and the Emergence of Yiddish Literature in America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Emanuel Goldsmith ed., *Yiddish Literature in America, 1870-2000* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2009); Ruth R. Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Yiddish was an act of signification, Yiddish an instrumental vehicle for communicating their ideals and their identities. They believed that Yiddish should and could not be given up, even as they became fluent in English and assimilated into American society in other ways. As I will show, while they argued vehemently about their socialism and their nationalism, they were united in their Yiddishism.

This dissertation explores how these three ideological principles – nationalism, socialism and Yiddishism - diverged and converged in the activism of the bakers and their cohort, over the thirty-year period between their first meeting in 1908 and the outbreak of the Second World War in the early 1940s. The various components of their ideologies were in constant tension: as socialists, they sought to foster a universal class-consciousness that transcended ethnic, racial and national differences but as Jewish nationalists, they emphasized the shared interests of all Jews as Jews throughout the global diaspora, placing positive value in Jewish cultural and ethnic difference. Using Yiddish in their activism helped to reconcile their socialism and Jewish nationalism, but also limited their outreach among the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents and in the eyes of some, their ability to achieve revolutionary social change. I will argue that in their earliest days of settlement in the neighborhood, the Jewish activists largely excluded the non-Jewish residents of the area from their organizing efforts, purposefully cultivating an organizational and cultural life separate from the area's other residents to resolve the tensions in their ideology. These exclusions, however, created intense conflicts within and between the Yiddish-based organizations in Boyle Heights, conflicts driven by the difficulty of resolving the tensions between their

ideological principles, rather than by the specifics of partisan debates. But in the three decades that comprise this dissertation, they slowly recalibrated the balance between their socialism and their nationalism, and increasingly expanded the scope and scale of their organizing efforts. While in their earliest days, they sought to replicate the strategies that had proven successful elsewhere, over time, they increasingly strayed from the platforms of the national and international bodies with which they were affiliated to innovate their own organizations and movements to realize their ideological goals in the particular multiethnic context of the neighborhood. As I will show, a combination of structural forces, local and global developments encouraged their inclusion of the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents in the organizing and their efforts to build multiethnic coalitions; their embrace of the neighborhood's multiculturalism was part of their process of becoming Americans.

The most basic premise of this dissertation is that the efforts of these workers, activists and intellectuals to build Yiddish public culture in Boyle Heights constructed a collective identity among a Jewish population in the neighborhood that differed in their backgrounds, their income levels, and their religious and political affiliations. Through their community organizing efforts, they created a distinct ethnic community in a multiethnic neighborhood. Boyle Heights' Yiddish-based organizations, unions, schools and community activism were as important to Jewish life in the neighborhood in the early twentieth century as its Jewish-owned businesses and synagogues. Yiddish public culture gave Boyle Heights a tangible Jewish atmosphere, and recovering its origins is crucial to understanding the neighborhood's Jewish history. Over time, the

Yiddishists incorporated the area's non-Jewish residents into their organizing efforts, but their commitment to building Yiddish public culture endured. By making Yiddish life in Boyle Heights its primary focus, this dissertation provides new insight into the experiences of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who settled there and their contributions to the history of Los Angeles.

In my first chapter, I explore the origins of Boyle Heights' Jewish community by tracing the lives of the small cohort of Eastern European immigrants who settled there in the 1910s, a group I describe as Yiddish socialists. I outline their involvement in revolutionary movements in Europe and the ideological debates they were exposed to, as well as their reasons for coming to Los Angeles. I recount their work to create a modern, secular Jewish national culture based in socialism and *yidische kultur* in their new home, and the contours of the literary circles, cultural organizations, fraternal and mutual-aid societies, unions and left-wing political parties they created. But, I argue, the realities they confronted in Los Angeles complicated their efforts. While they had brought with them ideals about nations in multiethnic empires, in Los Angeles they encountered a socioeconomic hierarchy where race was in many ways determinative of class. Although Boyle Heights was incredibly diverse because it was one of a few neighborhoods that did not enforce strict racial segregation, the Jewish residents of the neighborhood had access to jobs and economic opportunities because of their skills and their skin color that their non-Jewish neighbors were denied. I argue that as a result, the Yiddish socialists forged a cultural and organizational life that was separate from both the Jewish immigrants who preceded them and their non-Jewish neighbors, fusing

their ethnic and their class-based identities to construct a collective identity as the “Jewish working class.” I show that as the Jewish population in the neighborhood grew in the late 1910s and 1920s, intense ideological and personal conflicts erupted between and within organizations the organizations that they had created because of these exclusions, conflicts that endured well into the 1930s. Chapter One explores both the principles that united the Yiddish socialists and those that divided them in their early efforts, probing the particular challenges of organizing the Yiddish-speaking community in Boyle Heights.

In Chapter Two, I focus in on the story of the Jewish Bakers of Local 453 to more closely examine Jewish community organizing in Boyle Heights, showing how the bakers’ activism constructed a distinct Jewish commercial infrastructure within the multiethnic marketplace in the neighborhood. I argue that the bakers used their three strategies – union label campaigns, their Cooperative Bakery and gift-giving – to inject the buying and eating of food with national and class-based meanings, substituting the traditional religious values attached to food with the secular values of Yiddish socialism. Their activism aligned the interests of producers and consumers and harnessed the “purchasing power” of the Jewish community by giving non-wage earners and those outside of trade unions and political parties, particularly non-working women, roles in their organizing campaigns. By doing so, they cultivated a model of class-consciousness based on shared interests in the market for bread, rather than a shared relationship to the mode of production, and provided a means for all of the neighborhood’s Jewish residents to express a working-class Jewish identity in the

way that they shopped for food. As a result, they navigated the factionalism in Boyle Heights to build a broad-based coalition that included bakery owners and customers, socialists and communists, the religiously observant and the secular, and maintained high wages and full unionization in their sector of the baking industry in the notoriously anti-union atmosphere of early 20th century Los Angeles.

But, like the organizing efforts of their fellow Yiddish socialists, the scope of the bakers' activism was limited to the Jewish community. They narrowly defined their craft and excluded unskilled workers and non-Jews from their union. In Chapter Three, I show how the economic downturn of the Great Depression exposed these limitations of the bakers' model of activism, highlighting the conflicts that erupted within the union when their strategies failed in the early 1930s. I argue that a powerful combination of grassroots community organizing and the federal policies of the New Deal encouraged the bakers of Local 453 to adjust their organizing model over the course of the decade. I highlight two grassroots movements among the unemployed that emerged in Los Angeles during the depths of the Depression: the Communist Party's "fight for bread" and the cooperative movement. Each of these movements echoed the strategies the bakers had employed in the 1920s by using the shared struggles of every life as vehicles of community mobilization, and in different ways, helped the bakers and the other Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights to build relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors. The programs of the New Deal then channeled the solidarity forged between neighbors during the depths of the Depression into trade union organizing by providing new protections for collective bargaining to

Los Angeles' long beleaguered unions. While a considerable portion of the local workforce was exempted from these protections, the New Deal also initiated a wave of union organizing in Southern California that brought thousands of new workers into the city's unions, including many of those who lived in Boyle Heights. While they had previously rejected the merits of industrial unionism, by the end of the decade, the bakers opened their membership to include unskilled workers and non-Jews and refashioned their identities as American bakery workers. Chapter Three explores the transformation of the bakers' union in the 1930s as a means of understanding how the Great Depression and the New Deal changed both the attitudes and the organizing styles of the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights.

Chapter Four highlights another component of Yiddish socialists' activism in the 1930s that played an equally formative role in encouraging the Yiddish socialists to expand their activism beyond the Jewish community of Boyle Heights: their "Popular Front Against Fascism."³³ As I show in the chapter, the Yiddish socialists confronted a paradoxical reality in the late 1930s: on the one hand, they were more upwardly mobile and integrated into American society than ever before, both the protections of the New Deal and the expansion of Los Angeles' economy providing them opportunities that increased the economic disparities with their non-Jewish neighbors and allowed some

³³ The term "Popular Front" refers to a change in the policies of the Communist Party International, who, in response to Hitler's rise to power in Germany, fascist movements in Spain and Italy, and increasing Japanese Imperialism, chose to end their organizational isolation and collaborate with other liberal, socialist and leftwing parties to form a "Popular Front against Fascism" in 1935. My use of the term here borrows from the work of Michael Denning, who has argued that it is better to think of the Popular Front as a broad social movement, "a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching." See *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20th Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1996), 4. I will be tracing a similar "historical bloc" within the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights.

to move into more affluent, white neighborhoods. On the other hand, rising anti-Semitism at home and abroad made Jews living throughout the city feel vulnerable in ways that they hadn't in previous decades, the support shown for Hitler in Los Angeles convincing many that even as they ascended into the ranks of the middle class, they would always be considered something "other" than white Americans. Chapter Four examines how this reality informed their anti-Nazi activism in the late 1930s, showing that while the Yiddish socialists had long been divided over how to incorporate their multiethnic neighbors into their activism, in waging their fight against fascism, they set aside longstanding ideological conflicts and worked together to forge multiethnic coalitions to raise public awareness about the dangers of fascism, anti-Semitism and all forms of racial discrimination to American society. They also worked together to expand and fortify the Yiddish culture they had created in the neighborhood, and fortified their ethnic collective identities. In both spheres of activity, the Yiddish socialists positioned themselves among the other ethnic and racial minority groups in the neighborhood, even though many no longer lived there, and consecrated a new model of community organizing that served as a foundation for their activism in the 1940s, 1950s and beyond. Through their Popular Front Against Fascism, they forged a new collective identity as American Jews.

By telling the story of the bakers and their cohort in this way, I hope to complicate our understanding of the dynamics of racial and class formation in the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights. My study amends the traditional narrative of the gradual and natural assimilation of Eastern European Jewish

immigrants into the American mainstream, showing that many of the dichotomies that have dominated studies of Jewish immigration and urban history – working class versus middle class, ethnicity versus whiteness, Yiddish versus English, urban versus suburban - did not apply in Boyle Heights. The neighborhood was for its residents, a liminal space between the “ghetto” and the “suburbs,” providing fertile terrain upon which to rethink their community organizing strategies and reimagine their Jewish identities. As such, it provides a provocative example of how activism like that of the bakers and their cohort serves to construct class and ethnic identity in local contexts.

In turn, I aim to contribute to a volume of works exploring the Americanization of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century. As this study will show, while the Jewish immigrants of Boyle Heights created a Yiddish-based organizational and cultural life in the neighborhood as a means of resisting assimilation, they also capitalized on the privileges afforded them by their skin color and in some ways absorbed the racist logic of Los Angeles’ racially segmented labor system. Only over time did they expand their organizing to include the neighborhood’s other multiethnic residents; their embrace of multiculturalism was part of their forging their American identities. Their acculturation was owed both to their involvement in unions, radical political parties and social movements as well as to structural forces and global developments far beyond their control; as historian Gary Gerstle has described, both “liberty and coercion” served to make them Americans.³⁴ Their shift in attitudes was also in part generational: while this study focuses primarily on the foreign-born

³⁴ Gary Gerstle, “Liberty, Coercion and the Making of Americans,” *The Journal of American History*, 84 no. 2 (Sept., 1997): 524-558.

immigrants of the neighborhood, their American-born children influenced the direction of their organizing and their outlook, and the interactions between the two generations are highlighted in Chapters Three and Four. By exploring how their organizing styles and understanding of their ethnic and class-based identities shifted over time, I hope to provide new insights into how the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who settled Boyle Heights became American Jews.³⁵

This dissertation also adds new and original details about the Yiddish-based unions and organizations in Boyle Heights that enrich existing scholarship about the history of the labor, left-wing and radical activism in early twentieth century Los Angeles. For many years, historians of the labor movement in Los Angeles placed primary emphasis on the power of the city's anti-union business leaders and their organizations, the Chamber of Commerce and the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, and their repression of radical and labor activists in the early twentieth century. As historians Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry put it in their seminal study, for workers in early twentieth century Los Angeles, "freedom [did] not exist politically, industrially, or socially."³⁶ This study recognizes the power of the city's business interests and the Los Angeles Police Department's repression of radicals, but shows that

³⁵ James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom-Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working-Class in the United States," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (December 1992): 996-1020; James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1997): 3-44; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics And The Patterning Of Class In The United States* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

³⁶ Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 163.

their authority was not absolute and that workers found ways to exert their own influence over the political economy in the city. It also underscores the importance of the federal government's role in the labor movement's ability to exert that influence, and highlights how federal labor legislation helped create new opportunities for upward mobility for the bakers and other Jewish trade unionists. My dissertation complements similar studies of the city's longshoreman, cannery workers, garment workers, and agricultural workers, all of which have greatly enhanced our understanding of the experiences of trade unionists and radicals in early twentieth century Los Angeles.³⁷ It also adds to these studies because many of the leaders and activists that appear in them were raised in the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights, providing new insights about their upbringings and ideological influences.

And finally, this dissertation redeems the role of Boyle Heights' Yiddish-speaking community in Los Angeles's Jewish history and American Jewish history more broadly. The scholarship concerning Yiddish culture and Yiddish-based community organizing has been almost entirely focused on New York and other American cities in the east as well as on the cities and small towns of Eastern Europe. As a result, while Yiddish culture in the tenements of the Lower East Side looms heavily in the American imagination, the experiences of the Yiddish-speaking immigrants in the

³⁷ See Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); John H. M. Laslett, "Gender, Class, or Ethno-Cultural Struggle? The Problematic Relationship Between Rose Pesotta and the Los Angeles ILGWU," *California History* vol. 72, no. 1 (1993): 20-39 and *Sunshine was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

single-family homes of Boyle Heights have been lost to history. This dissertation shows that the dynamics of Yiddish cultural, social, and political life played out differently in local contexts, and that while connected to transnational organizations and movements, local Yiddishists also innovated their own organizing, artistic and intellectual styles that merit further academic study. Although the Jewish population in early twentieth century Boyle Heights was small compared to other cities, Los Angeles' Jewish population today is the second largest of any city outside of Israel, and Yiddish culture continues to thrive. My hope is that with this dissertation, I will both highlight the contributions of the Boyle Heights community to the global Yiddish world and invite further scholarship about in Yiddish life in Los Angeles.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE ORIGINS OF YIDDISH PUBLIC CULTURE
ON THE EAST SIDE OF LOS ANGELES

In 1908, a small group of Eastern European Jewish immigrants gathered at Burbank Hall in downtown Los Angeles to discuss the possibility of forming the city's first Yiddish cultural club. Though most were in their twenties, they were experienced community organizers and veteran activists, some of whom had left their homes in Europe under threat of detention for their revolutionary activities, as well as writers, intellectuals, and craftsmen. They were, as one attendee described "national-minded people, pervaded with socialist aspirations" who had come to Los Angeles after spending years in the industrial cities of the east.¹ At the meeting, they shared their experiences, debated their ideals and offered their visions for how to organize their small community. The meeting closed with a reading by Chaim Shapiro, "a young slim chap with thick, black curly hair and big expressive eyes," who rose and recited a passage from a play by socialist and Zionist David Pinski about the Kishinev pogrom. "His Yiddish was juicy and rich," wrote one of those present, "and all of us were enthusiastic. The dark little room was entirely lit up."² After Shapiro's rousing call to action, the attendees vowed to work together to develop Yiddish life in Los Angeles.

This cohort of revolutionaries focused their activism in Boyle Heights, the neighborhood east of the Los Angeles River where many of the Eastern European

¹ I. Sh. Neumov, "The Blessings of Concentration," in *Hayyim Shapiro in der opshaytsung fun zeine freint (Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life)*, ed. Rose Nevodovska (Los Angeles: the Jubilee Committee (the Pacific Press), 1937), 37-38.

² Abraham Maggid, "Chaim Shapiro Twenty-Eight Years Ago" in *Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of his Life*, 33.

Jewish immigrants settled. They aimed to cultivate national self-consciousness and class-consciousness among the Jewish “folks masses” there using Yiddish, the *folkshprakh* (“people’s language”) as an engine of community mobilization. But the realities of life in Boyle Heights complicated their efforts. While they had brought with them ideals about nations in multiethnic empires, in Los Angeles they encountered a socioeconomic hierarchy where race was in many ways determinative of class. Through a combination of public and private policies, the city’s business leaders and developers engineered an intensely racialized and stratified socio-economic hierarchy in the city that was built into its physical geography. Boyle Heights was one of a few neighborhoods that did not enforce strict racial segregation and it became home to a diverse group of working-class residents that included those of Mexican, Japanese, Armenian and African-American descent. Because of their skills, their education and their skin color, the Jewish residents of the neighborhood had access to jobs and economic opportunities that their non-Jewish neighbors were largely denied. Life in Boyle Heights thereby challenged the Jewish residents’ understanding of their ethnic and class-based identities. What did it mean to be Jewish and working-class in Boyle Heights? Were their organizing efforts for Jews alone or should they attempt to organize all of the neighborhood’s multiethnic workers? As the neighborhood’s Jewish population grew, the Yiddish socialists who settled in Boyle Heights often came up with very different answers to these questions, causing intense ideological and personal conflicts and a series of organizational fractures and collapses that have obscured the community’s history.

This chapter aims to examine how the Eastern European Jews who settled in Boyle Heights forged their ethnic and class based identities in this particular context by exploring the contours of Yiddish-based labor and community organizing that emerged in the neighborhood. Using Yiddish-language biographies and testimonials, I will reconstruct the lives of the cohort of immigrants who gathered in 1908 and the various fraternal, labor, cultural, educational and social service organizations that they built. I begin by tracing their experiences in Europe, highlighting the variety of nationalist and socialist ideologies they were exposed to in their years before heading west, and the life experiences that informed their beliefs. I then explore the new environment in which they found themselves, highlighting how the cohort who gathered together in 1908 forged a collective identity and organizational life that was separate from both the Jewish elites who preceded them and their non-Jewish neighbors by fusing their ethnic and their class-based identities. And finally, I examine the conflicts that emerged among these activists as the Jewish population grew, showing how the neighborhood's residents struggled to balance their ideological commitments to socialism, nationalism and Yiddish. While these were heated conflicts, they were largely conducted in Yiddish, and served to reinforce and animate Yiddish public culture in the neighborhood. In this chapter, I show that the collective effort of these activists constructed a distinct Jewish community life in the multiethnic neighborhood.

European Origins

“They crossed the same paths and carried the same baggage, of economic poverty, but also full of ideas and ideals, and in California became a new Yiddish community... they devoted themselves to making a new Yiddish life.”³

- Harry Lang describes his cohort in 1952

In order to understand the group of men who spearheaded the creation of Yiddish public culture in Los Angeles, we must first examine the experiences and ideologies that drove their efforts. All of them were born in the tumultuous years that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, and were immersed in a transnational dialogue that erupted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the meaning of Jewish identity, how to preserve Jewish peoplehood in the context of the multiethnic empires in which they lived and how to best ameliorate the conditions faced by Jews around the world. This dialogue gave rise to a variety of new nationalist, socialist, radical and revolutionary movements in Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe through which these young men were exposed to new ideas and cut their teeth as organizers and activists. By exploring the social and intellectual atmosphere in which they came of age, we can better understand the ideals that drove them to attend the initial meeting in 1908 and animated their activism throughout the 1910s and beyond.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Russian Jews had been prohibited from certain professions and prevented from living outside the Pale of Settlement, a territory encompassing present-day Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine, most residing in

³ H. Lang, “The Judge,” in *Fuftsik yor geselshaflich tetikayt fun Judl Lewit in der opsaytsung fun zeine freint (Julius Levitt, Fifty Years of Social Activities; Souvenir Book)* (Los Angeles: Julius Levitt Book Committee, 1952), 7.

small towns near larger urban areas known as *shtetls*. While Alexander II had initiated important political and economic reforms during his reign, his assassination resulted in further restrictions on Jewish mobility. It ignited a wave of violent and destructive mob attacks on Jewish communities throughout the Pale, known as pogroms, that devastated local Jewish populations, particularly those in Kiev, Odessa and Warsaw. His successor Alexander III then used the resulting violence to introduce a series of new laws that stripped Jews of their rights to own property, further limited their residence to urban areas, established a strict quota system for schools and universities, and prohibited their participation in local elections. He empowered his tsarist police to crackdown on the revolutionaries responsible for the assassination and anyone who resisted his new policies. In combination with the pogroms, the new restrictions, known as the May Laws, drastically reduced Jewish mobility and economic opportunity and resulted in thousands of forceful evictions and the displacement of Jewish communities throughout the Pale. In turn, they initiated a period of global Jewish immigration out of Eastern Europe that brought some three million Jews to America between 1880 and 1924.

In this increasingly hostile environment, Jews throughout Europe sought to refashion Jewish peoplehood along secular lines to bolster their claims to political self-determination and civil rights not as a religious minority, but as a nation, a people. Some rooted their conceptions of Jewish peoplehood in religious tradition, specifically in the concept of *galut*, or exile (*golus* in Yiddish, Russian and German), which holds that modern Jews are the descendants of the Israelites, the chosen people, who had been

scattered throughout the diaspora to live in exile as punishment for their sins but who would ultimately be redeemed by God.⁴ While Jewish theologians had debated the meaning of exile and redemption for centuries, new contemplations emerged in the 19th century among followers of the *Haskalah* (Jewish enlightenment), a social and intellectual movement in which Jewish scholars called for deeper engagement with secular philosophy and European intellectual traditions. These scholars criticized the insularity and isolation of traditional religious community life and came to believe that the *galut* mentality and interminable hopefulness for redemption perpetuated the Jews' marginalization and their ill-fated state. But other followers of the *Haskalah*, including Perets Smolenskin, asserted their positive role in maintaining Jewish nationhood throughout centuries of living in the diaspora. In his essay, "The Eternal People," Smolenskin argued that the Jews' hope for redemption from exile had encouraged the preservation of their shared language and culture, and that as a result, Jews had "never ceased being a nation" despite not living in the same geographic location. Smolenskin insisted that the freedom and equality that Jews desired was impossible without preserving their national difference, and called for a national reawakening among his peers. As historian Simon Rabinovitch has shown, Smolenskin's reimagining of Jewish nationalism gave rise to a variety of ideologies, all of which shared the goal of securing formal, legal autonomy for the Jewish nation.⁵

⁴ See Simon Rabinovitch, "Introductory Essay" in *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, ed. Simon Rabinovitch (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), xvii-xxii.

⁵ Smolenskin's essay and Rabinovitch's analysis in *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism*, ed. Simon Rabinovitch, xxii-xxiii, 3-22. For more on Smolenskin, see Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The*

The most notorious of these emergent Jewish nationalisms was Zionism, which claimed that ensuring Jewish self-determination required building an independent territory governed by a Jewish national state in Ottoman Palestine. Although groups of Russian Jewish refugees began migrating to Palestine after the pogroms of the 1880s, the Zionist movement accelerated after 1897 when lawyer and journalist Theodore Herzl organized the first International Zionist Conference in Basel, Switzerland, and formed the World Zionist Organization. After witnessing the violence of the pogroms in Russia and the anti-Semitism that erupted in France during the Dreyfus Affair - two states where Jews had been granted equal rights as citizens - Herzl came to believe that Jews would never be safe from persecution when subject to the sovereignty of non-Jews. Like Smolenskin, he argued that Jews "are a people - one people" and that the problems they confronted could not be solved through assimilation. But Herzl identified emancipation as the source of modern anti-Semitism, arguing that Jewish ascendance into the ranks of the middle-class created economic competition that had inflamed latent anti-Semitic anxieties. In his essay *Der Jundestaat (The Jewish State)*, he outlined a detailed plan for building a new Jewish colony in Palestine that would become an independent Jewish state, highlighting its benefits to Jews and anti-Semites alike.⁶ While not all Zionist intellectuals accepted Herzl's plan and offered their own ideas as to where and how that state would be created, all believed that the only means

Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State (New York: Basic Books, 1981), Chapter 5, "Smolenskin: From Enlightenment to Nationalism," 156-164.

⁶ Theodor Herzl, "The Jewish State: An attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question," trans. Sylvie D'Avigdor (London: H. Pordes, 1972).

of achieving Jewish self-determination was to have Jewish sovereignty; in order for Jews to exist as a nation, they must have their own territory.

Dr. Leo Blass, who came to Los Angeles in 1908, attended Herzl's First Zionist International Conference in Basel while attending medical school at the University of Bern. Blass, born Lieb Isaac Shilmovich, was raised in Rostov-on-Don in Southern Russia, the son of a local rabbi who was "deeply involved" in the *Haskalah* and ran the local Jewish education district. Blass received both a religious and secular education, and went on to study medicine and philosophy at Frederick's University Halle-Wittenberg (Prussia) and then at University of Bern where he became interested in emerging Zionist ideology. Blass eventually joined the Zionist workers' movement (which will be discussed at length below), and left Europe in 1905 to join his family in St. Louis where he graduated from medical school. He moved west to complete his residency at a Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco and moved to Los Angeles to start his own practice. Throughout his life, he maintained a deep commitment to advancing Jewish nationalism and promoting the creation of an independent Jewish state.⁷

Other Jewish scholars of the late 19th century rejected Herzl's arguments and the premise of Zionism and insisted that Jewish nationalism could be maintained in the diaspora. Foremost among these was Simon Dubnow who, in his essay, "Theory of Jewish Nationalism," argued that Jews could and should assert their historical claim to

⁷ "75 Yoriker Yubl, fun dem onkumen fun di ershte Yidn in Kalifornie, (75 Year Jubilee of the Beginnings of Jews in California)," *Zunland*, 3 (1925), 85; Hoffman, David B. and Sonia R., "Social Action, Yiddish Culture and Zionism: Leo Blass and the Eastern European Influence," *Roots-Key: Newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles* 23, no. 2-3, (Summer and Fall, 2003): 13-17; Y. L. Malamut ed., *Southwest Jewry*, vol. III (Los Angeles, 1957), 61.

lands in Europe like other national groups and that for Jews to renounce their national individuality and assimilate into French, German or Russian society in the hopes of gaining equal civil rights would be to commit “national suicide.” Dubnow’s conception of Jewish nationalism highlighted a crucial distinction between “nations” and “states”: while states, he reasoned, were man-made sociopolitical groups, formal legal unions of which every individual could choose to become a member, nations were “internal, psychological and existential” unions, into which members were born.⁸ By his logic, Jews could easily maintain both their loyalty to the Jewish nation and their loyalty to the multiethnic states in which they lived, so long as two preconditions were met. First, in order for Jews to share a sense of mutual, “civic solidarity” as members of sociopolitical states, the states’ laws must apply equally to Jews. In addition to equal rights as citizens, Jews must also be given “rights as a nation” – the freedom to organize their own, independent communal, educational, and religious institutions, to maintain their own customs, culture and language, and to choose their own political representation. Dubnow advised that instead of creating an independent Jewish state, Jews should fight for this national-cultural independence in their home states, pushing themselves and those states to “jointly submit to a higher principle of equal worth of all citizens.” If they did so, Jews across the world could exist as “a nation among nations” in all of the multiethnic states in which they lived. By drawing a distinction between

⁸ Dubnow’s essay, “Theory of Jewish Nationalism,” in *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, ed. Simon Rabinovitch (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 23-44.

nations and states, Dubnow created a framework for Jewish diaspora nationalism as an alternative to Zionism that was broadly influential in Jewish politics.⁹

The second and equally powerful ideological influence on the men who gathered in downtown Los Angeles in 1908 was socialism. As the fervor of the Russian revolutionary movement grew in Eastern Europe, an increasing number of Jews came to believe that they could only achieve true civil economic and political equality through a radical re-ordering of society. They embraced Marx's materialist interpretation of history: that each historical epoch was defined by the prevailing mode of production and system of exchange, which in turn determined social relations and dictated the organization of families, civil society and the legal and political superstructure. The hierarchies created by each mode of production had given rise to a series of revolutionary class struggles that had driven the progress of mankind and would inevitably bring about the collapse of the capitalist order. Jewish scholars influenced by Marx argued that the centuries-long struggle for Jewish survival in the diaspora was the result of their marginalization in various economic systems. Like Herzl, Jewish socialists like Nachman Syrkin argued that the origins of the "Jewish problem" lay in the Jews' increasing integration into the capitalist bourgeoisie as economic competition intensified anti-Semitism. But, Syrkin argued, the ultimate tragedy of this integration was that as a result Jews helped "to maintain an order whose victims they are" - they became part of the very system that was ultimately to blame for the material conditions of the Jewish people. The suffering of the Jewish working-class,

⁹ Rabinovitch, *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism*, 23-25.

he argued, could only be alleviated by the destruction of the capitalist order and a revolutionary change in the mode of production. He and other Jewish socialists called on their fellow Jews to join with the rest of the global proletariat and become the “vanguard of socialism.”¹⁰

The socialist movement had a profound impact on the cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who came to Los Angeles in the 1910s. As Harry Lang, who came to Los Angeles from Russia in 1907, described, he and his peers made their own personal transformations part of their revolutionary goals:

“We were already the children of the *Haskalah* and we sought to propel the revolutions of the *Haskalah* deep and broad...Socialism was for us a new mentality, a new morality: socialism was a faith, with books instead of *sforim* (religious texts), with Marx instead of the Talmud, with world-languages instead of one tongue, with [an] outlook to all peoples instead of insular focus on ourselves, with...scholarly academies instead of Yeshivas, with global blending and global freedom instead [of] detention by ones fathers. The impetus of revolution carried us...”¹¹

The socialists argued that the cultural, political and social isolation of traditional Jewish religious communities made them more vulnerable to capitalist oppression. In order to achieve revolutionary change, they must break down the hierarchies and superstition of Judaism to prepare the masses to lead the socialist revolution. They sought to educate the Jewish workers of Eastern Europe and organize them in revolutionary workers’ parties, the largest of which was the Bund (General Jewish Labor Union of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia).

The Bund began as an educational movement among members of the Russian intelligentsia in the 1880s who sought to agitate among the Jewish workers, but soon

¹⁰ Nachman Syrkin, “The Jewish Problem and the Socialist Jewish State” (1898), in *Essays on Socialist Zionism* (New York: Young Poale Zion Alliance of America, 1935).

¹¹ H. Lang, “The Judge” in *Julius Levitt Fifty Years of Social Activity*, 7.

evolved into a wider-scale effort to mobilize Jewish communities in mass protest against the Tsar's repressive policies. Officially formed in 1897, the Jewish Labor Bund aimed to represent Jewish interests in the socialist movement, providing an umbrella organization for Jewish trade unions and socialist parties throughout Eastern Europe. Activists affiliated with the Bund organized strikes among Jewish workers and massive protests, and after the Kishinev pogroms in 1903, formed armed self-defense committees to guard against attacks on *shtetl* communities. They published newspapers to disseminate their ideals, often using Yiddish, a vernacular language that combined Hebraic, Slavic and Germanic linguistic forms, to speak to the masses in their own *mame loshn* (mother tongue). Through this aggressive community organizing, they hoped to empower the Jewish masses and bring about a revolutionary social change that would result in the end of the capitalist order and the ascendance of a more egalitarian, socialist one.

Los Angeles became home to several veteran Bundists in the first decade of the twentieth century who had joined the party in its earliest years. Pinches Karl was born outside of Lodz (Poland), one of eighteen children, and was sent to apprentice with a local shoemaker at the age of twelve. He joined the Bund two years later and showed a talent for public speaking that attracted attention from the tsarist police. In 1902, at the age of twenty, he fled to Patterson, New Jersey to avoid arrest; there he helped to organize the first branch of the *Arbeter Ring* (*Workmen's Circle*), a mutual-aid fraternal

organization created by Bundists in America.¹² Julius Levitt was born in Disne province (located in modern-day Belarus), to a family of wealthy, landowning timber-dealers. After the passage of the May Laws, his family was stripped of their land and forced to move to Vilna where Levitt, age of fourteen, worked as a clerk to support the family. In Vilna, he became involved with local literary and intellectual circles, and began publishing articles in local Yiddish-language newspapers. At age sixteen, he joined the Bund and helped to organize a strike among his fellow clerks. Levitt was arrested and imprisoned six times by the tsarist police for his revolutionary activities (apparently because his height made him stand out in a crowd), and came to America in 1906 to escape his seventh arrest. He settled in Newark, New Jersey, where he found work at a company that manufactured electrical fixtures and helped to build the first trade union in his industry. He also began writing for the *Forverts (Forward)*, the largest Yiddish-language newspaper in America, founded by a group of Bundists in New York. Levitt was such an effective leader in Newark that the *Arbeter Ring* administration eventually sent him to Los Angeles to build the organization in California.¹³

The ideological quandary that the Bund and other Jewish socialist parties confronted was how to reconcile their beliefs with Jewish nationalism. According to orthodox Marxist doctrine, the national differences between workers were based on material conditions and the civic and economic barriers between Jews and non-Jews

¹² See Julius Levitt and Harry Lang eds., *Pinkhes Karl in der opshatsung fun zeyne freynt: Yuvel-Bukh tsu zeyne zibetsik yor (Pinches Karl: Seventy Years of Life and Labor)*, (Los Angeles: Published by the Southern California District Committee of the Workmen's Circle 1951).

¹³ I. Tillet, "A Half Century at the Helm of Social Life (Biographic Notes)" in *Julius Levitt: Fifty Years of Social Activity*, 5-10. See also Y. L. Malamut ed., *Southwest Jewry vol. III*, 160-161.

would fade into a universal, international proletarian culture after the demise of the capitalist order. Some Bundist scholars rejected the necessity of Jewish nationalism entirely, arguing it was an impediment to their goals while others, like Vladimir Medem, adopted a position of neutralism: that the Bund should not concern itself with the Jewish national question. In his essay, "Social Democracy and the National Question," Medem argued that the socialist states that would emerge after the revolution would be inherently multicultural and allow for the right of ethnic groups to develop their national particularism on a cultural basis as Dubnow described. Instead of engaging in debates about Jewish nationalism or investing themselves in national projects like Zionism, he argued that the Bund should focus on *doikayt*, ("here-ness"), devoting their efforts to bettering the lives of the Jewish proletariat in their local communities. Medem's position was soon adopted as the official stance of the Bund.¹⁴

Other Bundist scholars were more eager to combine their socialism with a nationalist platform, or as historian Jonathan Frankel put it, "build a bridge between the Prophetic past of the Jewish people and the messianic future promised by socialism."¹⁵ A leader among these was Chaim Zhitlowsky, the son of a wealthy Russian merchant who was a follower of the *Haskalah*. Like other Bundists, Zhitlowsky argued that socialism offered the only means of achieving the true equality of the Jewish people and that anti-Semitism would continue without a radical social, economic and political

¹⁴ See Simon Rabinovitch, *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism*, 105-107, and Yosef Gorny, *Converging Alternatives: The Bund and the Zionist Labor Movement* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2006), 29-46.

¹⁵ Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 266.

upheaval both within Jewish society and without. But Zhitlowsky also believed that Jewish national existence had more than a material basis and that his fellow socialists risked committing “national suicide” as Dubnow had described. Instead, they should apply Marx’s notions of cultural formation to Jewish nationalism and forge a new, modern, secular Jewish culture that could serve as the basis for Jewish national cohesion in the new socialist society. Zhitlowsky rejected the bourgeois culture of Jewish elites and intellectuals (in which he had been raised), and instead embraced the folk traditions of Eastern Europe as the authentic Jewish national culture. He argued that Yiddish as the *folkshprakh* (“the peoples’ language”) should be the basis of this new national culture, and that by developing a vibrant cultural life based in Yiddish - including Yiddish schools, publishing, theater, and unions - would foster national self-consciousness among the Jewish folks masses. This cultural transformation, he argued, was equally integral to achieving the radical change that they desired. He called on his fellow Bundists to work towards a Yiddish cultural renaissance; that in addition to mobilizing the Jewish masses in protest, he and his fellow Bundists should elevate *yidische kultur* so that it could serve as a new secular national culture of a global Jewish community in the diaspora.¹⁶

Peter Kahn, who came to Los Angeles around 1906, developed a strong relationship with Zhitlowsky in London and travelled with him to New York in 1903. Kahn’s background was similar to Zhitlowsky’s: he was born in Kiev (Ukraine), the descendant of a family of famous rabbis, and had a privileged childhood that included

¹⁶ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

an education in Russian and Hebrew. Kahn attended university in Kiev, but dropped out only a few months later to join the revolutionary activism of the Bund. After a fellow freedom fighter set herself on fire while being held by the tsarist police, he helped to organize a series of student demonstrations for which he was eventually exiled to a labor camp in Siberia. Kahn escaped and travelled across Europe undercover until he eventually reached London, where he worked in the library of famous anarchist intellectual Peter Kropotkin and became acquainted with Zhitlowsky and his ideals. After travelling with Zhitlowsky to New York and then spending several months in St. Louis, Kahn came to California with a loved one who was suffering from tuberculosis (according to one account, Kahn himself was suffering from “wanderlust”) and began working in the fields in the Imperial Valley.¹⁷

Socialism also greatly influenced Zionist intellectuals, including those who had attended Herzl’s conference in Basel such as Dr. Leo Blass and intellectual leaders such as Nachman Syrkin. Departing from Medem and other Bundist scholars, Syrkin argued that Jews could not invest all of their hopes in socialism’s utopian vision, as the social democratic parties that had emerged among non-Jews in Europe were riddled with anti-Semitism. Nor could the Zionist movement relieve all of Jewish suffering if it ignored the realities of class struggle and economic difference. But if the Jewish state were created on socialist foundations, rather than on the capitalist model that Herzl proposed, it would solve the problem of social inequality and satisfy “the wishes and

¹⁷ Details on Kahn in Bonnie Rogers, “The Founders: The Story of the City of Hope,” *Roots-Key: Newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles* Vol. 23, No. 2-3 (Summer and Fall, 2003), 23 and Y.L. Malamut ed., *Southwest Jewry*, 30.

hopes of the Jewish masses." He called for a "fusing" of socialism and Zionism that would cultivate great "national passion" and become the "ideal of the entire Jewish people."¹⁸ Syrkin's synthesis of socialism and Zionism gave rise to several organizations in Eastern Europe that aimed to mobilize and educate the Jewish masses and prepare them to lead the creation of a new Jewish national society on socialist foundations in Palestine. These included the Zionist Workers' Movement, *Poalei Tzion*, and the Jewish National Workers *Farband*, all of which I will collectively refer to as Labor Zionism.¹⁹

Several of the attendees at the 1908 meeting in downtown Los Angeles were veterans of what they described as the "*national-radical bevegung*" (national-radical movement) and had been involved with Labor Zionist organizations before coming to Los Angeles. These included Aaron Shapiro and his brother, Chaim, the youngest in attendance at the meeting who delivered the stirring oration at the end. The Shapiro brothers' father was a merchant in Kharkov (in present day Ukraine) and both boys attended both *cheder* (religious school) and Russian gymnasium and were fluent in Russian, Hebrew and Yiddish. But when Aaron turned eighteen, he was rejected from the local university because of the quotas imposed after Alexander II's assassination. Instead, he joined the revolutionary movement, and along with his younger brother Chaim helped to form a branch of the Workers' Zionist Organization in Kharkov. When rumors spread of an impending pogrom in Kharkov, the brothers, age eighteen and

¹⁸ Syrkin, "The Jewish Problem and the Socialist State," 27-28.

¹⁹ For more, see Yosef Gorny, *Converging Alternatives*, esp. Chapter Two, "Between Eretz Israel and the Diaspora," 49-83.

fifteen respectively, organized a self-defense brigade, their father insisting that Aaron carry a gun for his protection.²⁰ Aaron was soon arrested for his revolutionary activities and fled to New York where he worked at a newspaper stand and joined a branch of *Poalei Tzion*. Chaim remained in Kharkov, continuing his agitation and activism until he was arrested for his involvement in a strike at the local “soda-plant” during the height of the 1905 Revolution, known as the “Gelfrich Protests.” After serving six months in Odtiker Prison, Chaim followed his brother to New York where they split a paper route so that both could continue their education. Chaim joined a socialist-territorialist workers’ organization and became an admirer of David Pinski, a leading intellectual of the Labor Zionist movement in New York whose work Chaim chose to read at the meeting in Los Angeles in 1908. Aaron headed west first, following a young woman he had fallen in love with, and set up a small store downtown and Chaim followed within months.²¹ Both brothers would subsequently attend law school at the University of Southern California.

²⁰ See “Hollywood Blacklist: Interview of Paul Jarrico,” Center for Oral History Research, interviewed by Larry Ceplair, July 29th, 1988, tape 1, side 1. See also Rogers, Bonnie, “The Founders,” *Roots-Key*, 24.

²¹ From Rose Nevodovska, “Chaim Shapiro – The Fellow-Traveller of the Yiddish *Yishev*,” in *Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life*, 13.



Chaim Shapiro upon his release from Odtiker Prison, 1905. Courtesy of Bonnie Rogers.

Although the Shapiro brothers and their fellow Labor Zionists differed from the Bundists in their beliefs about nationalism and the necessity of a Jewish state, they also shared some important and overlapping ideological principles. Both groups of activists believed that by cultivating national self-consciousness among Jews in all of the multiethnic states in which they lived, they could ensure the freedom and self-determination of the Jewish community. As socialists, they also believed that ensuring such freedom demanded a fundamental reordering of society, both within the Jewish community and without, a complete economic, cultural and social transformation of the capitalist order that would be led by the Jewish working-class. Both groups believed that culture played a vital role in that transformation, and sought to forge a new, modern, secular Jewish national culture based in Yiddish language and Eastern European folk traditions, what they regarded as the authentic culture of the Jewish

people. They believed that *yidishe kultur* could serve as a vehicle for molding and mobilizing the Jewish “folks masses” to bring about revolutionary change and for fostering socialist Jewish nationalism. The ideological differences between them were significant, and over time would become increasingly contentious, but together, the Shapiro brothers and their fellow Labor Zionists along with Levitt, Karl, Kahn and the other Bundists comprised a cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants whom I will describe as Yiddish socialists.²²

These young men who settled in Los Angeles in the first decade of the twentieth century brought this ideological “baggage” with them, and, beginning with their meeting in 1908, devoted their lives to building a rich Yiddish cultural life that would promote both national self-consciousness and class-consciousness among the Jewish “folks masses” in their new home. But in Los Angeles, they encountered a fundamentally different world than the one they had left behind. In Europe they had been an intensely marginalized, disenfranchised national minority population living in a highly multiethnic empire, under near constant threat of imprisonment, displacement or death. In Los Angeles, they encountered a markedly different socioeconomic and political hierarchy that placed a premium on race and confused their understanding of their ethnic and class-based identities. The next section explores the world they encountered when they came west to Los Angeles in the first decade of the twentieth century.

²² Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*; Daniel Katz, *Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 5.

Jewish Life in "The Southland by the Sea"

"I came from the cold of Newark to warm sunny Los Angeles. It [was] quite a contrast."
Julius Levitt, 1934.²³

The first thing that the Yiddish socialists noticed when they arrived in Los Angeles was that the Jewish population of the city was significantly smaller than those of the industrial cities of the East Coast and Midwest in the same period. Although Jewish settlement in the city began as early as California's statehood, the Jewish population had only reached 2,500 by the turn of the century and remained under 20,000 until 1920. Almost eighty percent of these Jewish residents were of Northern and Western European descent, and only a few thousand had come to Los Angeles from Eastern Europe.²⁴ By contrast, the population of Jewish immigrants living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan alone had risen to around 540,000 by 1910. Abraham Maggid wrote of his first days in L.A., "We had many palm trees then, but only a few Jews...."²⁵

The Eastern Europeans' arrival was preceded by another generation of Jewish immigrants who had come to Los Angeles in the mid-19th century, primarily from Germany and France, and helped to build the city during its transition from Mexican to American rule. These men had found great financial success in Los Angeles: Isaias W. Hellman founded the city's first bank (the Farmers and Merchants Bank), and

²³ Levitt's comment appears in *25th-Yoriker Yubilem A. R. Brentshes in Suthern Kalifornie, Martsh 23rd, 1934 (Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring in Southern California, March 23rd, 1934)*. Los Angeles: Pasifik Cooperative Press, 1934. The Section Title "Southland by the Sea" comes from a poem titled "Los Angeles" written by Ben Ein in 1915, published in *Di Yiddishe Presse*, July 19th, 1935.

²⁴ Wendy Elliott-Scheinberg, "Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood," PhD Thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2001, 102.

²⁵ A. Maggid in "Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life," 33.

merchants like Harris Newmark, Solomon Lazard, Maurice Kramer, Jacob Baruch and Herman Haas created large wholesale enterprises.²⁶ They had accumulated massive real estate holdings, which they sold and subdivided into residential districts and towns throughout Southern California. They served as members of the Los Angeles City Council from its founding in 1850, and provided finances to develop its streetcar system and its first power and water lines. They also founded the city's first synagogue, its first fraternal organization, and its first charitable organizations beginning with the Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1854, which worked to ensure that all of the city's Jewish residents received a proper Jewish burial.

Although they had built the beginnings of organized Jewish life in the city, these "prosperous and acculturated" Jews had been fully integrated into the city's Anglo elite.²⁷ They lived in affluent neighborhoods north and west of downtown and joined prestigious social clubs and businessmen's organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce and the Merchant and Manufacturers' Association and the Oddfellows and the All-Year Club. In an effort to grow the state's population and economy, these organizations used their funds to promote a fantasy-laden image of the city and the region as a modern Garden of Eden, a haven of health and homeownership free of the overcrowded, disease-ridden slums, labor unrest and racial conflict that plagued the industrial urban capitals of the east. They also used their social and political capital to

²⁶ See Karen Wilson, "On The Cosmopolitan Frontier: Jews and Social Networks in Nineteenth Century Los Angeles," PhD Dissertation, UCLA Department of History, 2011, and Frances Dinkelspiel, *Towers of Gold: How One Jewish Immigrant Names Isaias Hellman Invented California* (New York: St. Martins' Press, 2008).

²⁷ According to Vorspan and Gartner, "More prosperous and acculturated Jews settled westward in such areas as Wilshire, West Adams and Hollywood." See Max Vorspan and Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1970), 118.

enforce the city's pro-business reputation, helping to pass a harsh anti-picketing ordinance in 1909 and working closely with the Los Angeles Police Department to monitor and suppress labor activism in the city. Jewish immigrants of this previous generation, as well as their descendants, served in leadership roles in these powerful business organizations and participated in their promotional campaigns. They became part of a small but powerful white elite that exerted tremendous influence on the city's development, its economy and its culture.

These more established Jewish residents regarded the Eastern European immigrants who came to the city at the turn of the twentieth century with suspicion, and in some cases, disdain. Articles in the city's largest Jewish newspaper, *The B'nai B'rith Messenger*, expressed embarrassment over their "exotic attire" and concern that "immense hoards of Jewish immigrants" would flood the city and overwhelm local charities.²⁸ They were particularly troubled by the large numbers of health seekers flocking to the city, including those suffering from tuberculosis and other chronic lung diseases who had come west seeking relief. The city's boosters, some of whom suffered from tuberculosis themselves, promoted the dry, warm local climate's curative potential, showcasing Southern California as "Nature's Great Sanatorium."²⁹ By some estimates, twenty-five percent of those who settled in Los Angeles around the turn of

²⁸ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 112-113.

²⁹ The tagline, "Nature's Great Sanatorium" was given to Southern California as a whole by I.M. Holt, the Secretary of the Immigration Association of San Bernardino County. As Emily K. Abel noted in her study, *Tuberculosis and the Politics of Exclusion*, Charles D. Willard, the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, suffered from tuberculosis his entire life and eventually died from the disease, as did his successor Frank Wiggins, who had "arrived in Southern California in 1886 so sick with consumption he left the train on a stretcher." See *Tuberculosis and the Politics of Exclusion: A History of Public Health and Migration to Los Angeles* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 1-8.

the twentieth century came seeking to cure their own illness or those of their loved ones, including Peter Kahn and Aaron Shapiro and a significant portion of the new Eastern European Jewish arrivals.³⁰ The more established Jewish residents viewed this growing population with concern, warning that the city might be “overrun with people who have come from all parts of the world in quest of health, with little health and little means.”³¹ They expressed similar anxieties about the 2,200-2,300 Jewish immigrants sent to Los Angeles by the Industrial Removal Office (IRO), an organization based in New York that sought to relieve congestion in eastern cities by relocating Jewish immigrants to other parts of the country. The local coordinators of the program voiced concern about the immigrants being sent to Los Angeles, often requesting that the IRO stop sending certain types of immigrants they deemed “undesirable.”³² While they built charitable organizations to support these new arrivals, all of which became part of the Jewish Social Service Bureau (JSSB), they often refused to administer aid to those who they did not believe were sufficiently healthy or hardworking, sometimes buying

³⁰ See John E. Baur, *The Healthseekers of Southern California, 1870-1900* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1959), and Sheila Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 132. For details on Kahn, see Bonnie Rogers, “The Founders: The Story of the City of Hope,” *Roots-Key*, 23. Aaron Shapiro’s son, Paul Jarrico (nee Israel Shapiro) described that his father came west after falling in love with Jennie Kraus, whose husband, Edward, and her two young children, suffered from tuberculosis. See “Hollywood Blacklist: Paul Jarrico” UCLA Center for Oral History Tape 1, Side 1, July 29th, 1988.

³¹ The first article appeared in 1900, the second in 1902, both cited in Emily K. Abel book, *Tuberculosis and the Politics of Exclusion*, 36-37.

³² Vorspan and Garnter, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 111-112. According to Benjamin Louis Cohen’s study of the JSSB, the organization repeatedly refused tailors and other types of workers who they did not believe were suited for Los Angeles’ economy. See *Constancy and Change in the Jewish Family Agency of Los Angeles: 1854-1970*, PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1972, 17-19.

those deemed “unfit” to receive aid train tickets to send them back to New York.³³

While the JSSB should be recognized for their efforts, its leaders, like the rest of the city’s established Jewish residents, worried that the new arrivals would drain Jewish community resources and threaten their status among the city’s Anglo elite; thus they were sometimes unwilling or unable to provide support to the city’s new arrivals.

To the Yiddish socialists, these Jewish elites represented everything they had spent their lives fighting against: they were highly assimilated super-capitalists who had, as Julius Levitt described, “snobbishly erected a partition between themselves and their brethren in need.”³⁴ They had, as Nachman Syrkin cautioned, become part of “the order whose victims they are” – their efforts to promote the city and increase their profits had served to attract the very immigrants they were reluctant to help and their efforts to suppress the labor movement perpetuated the capitalist exploitation of the city’s workers. And by immersing themselves in the social and cultural world of their Anglo business partners, instead of building their own authentically Jewish cultural life, they had committed the type of “national suicide” described by Simon Dubnow.

This mutual distaste for the Jewish elites and the community life they had created helped to motivate the Yiddish socialists’ first meeting together in 1908. Each came to the city hoping to join the movements they had been dedicated to since they

³³ According to Benjamin Louis Cohen, applicants had to demonstrate what he described as a “Protestant work ethic”; one woman, for example, was refused because “she could secure employment if would exert herself,” *Constancy and Change in the Jewish Family Agency of Los Angeles*, 17-19. According to Jack Glazier’s work on the Industrial Removal Office, it was common practice for local social service organizations across the country to purchase train tickets home for immigrants sent by the Industrial Removal Office they felt were undesirable. See Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto: The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants Across America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 170-177.

³⁴ In his biography of Pinches Karl, Julius Levitt described the “sharp” criticisms of the Jewish elites offered by Karl and his fellow Bundists, *Pinches Karl: Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 69-75.

were teenagers, but had difficulty finding like-minded Jews to work with. I. Sh.

Neumov, a Labor Zionist who came to Los Angeles in 1907, described the effect that the small size of the population had on the meeting in 1908:

“Between the few *mentshn* found themselves: diaspora-nationalists of the Bundist type, National-minded anarchists and *Poalei Tzion*. All of the familiar groupings but not any one could create a separate organization. They all lacked a *minyán* [quorum of ten males], even a half a *minyán* was hard to bring together. The hour required a “united front” ... not called forth by a directive and the pressure of a particular party, it was voluntary and ideal... [a product of] their own desires, the encouragement of the freedom-loving young lads of the Yiddish national socialist-mindset, the healthy instinct of self-defense.”³⁵

While the Yiddish socialists may have come to Los Angeles with the intention of developing independent organizations to represent their distinct ideologies as they had in their previous homes, because the Yiddish-speaking population was so small, the Bundists, the Labor Zionists and the other revolutionaries who settled in Los Angeles collaborated in their early efforts. They formed the “National-Radical Club” and vowed to work together to build an alternative form of Jewish community life to that offered by the city’s Jewish elites.

Their earliest efforts focused on creating means through which impoverished Jews could uplift themselves through mutual aid and cooperative self-help instead of depending on the charity of local synagogues and the Jewish Social Service Bureau. Just months after their initial meeting, Aaron Shapiro, Abraham Maggid and others worked to secure a charter for the first branch of the *Arbeter Ring* (*Workmen’s Circle*) in Los Angeles, branch 248, to provide proper Jewish burials when members passed away, death benefits to their families, and sick-man’s benefits when they fell ill and couldn’t

³⁵ I. Sh. Neumov, “The Blessings of Concentration” in *Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of his Life*, 37-38.

work.³⁶ They also worked together to mobilize the first trade union organizing among Los Angeles' Jewish workers, which began in 1909 when a handful of "Ladies' Tailors" who were members of the *Arbeter Ring* formed their own Tailor's Union.³⁷ The Tailor's union subsequently organized a similar union for cloakmakers, and in 1910 the two groups banded together and filed a charter with the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) as Local 52.³⁸ Jewish craftsmen in the building trades also formed unions in the 1910s, including Jewish branches of the Carpenters' Union (Local 1976) and the Painters' Union (Local 1348) and affiliated themselves with the Los Angeles' Central Labor Council.

The Yiddish socialists who had attended the initial meeting in 1908 also became the charter members of a Yiddish-language branch of the Socialist Party, one of several foreign language branches organized as part of the campaign to elect socialist Job Harriman as mayor in 1911.³⁹ When his election failed, Harriman and a group of his most devoted supporters left Los Angeles to form a utopian socialist colony in Llano, California, and the local socialist movement was left in shambles. The Jewish branch of

³⁶ Initial attempts to organize an *Arbeter Ring* branch in Los Angeles had been made in 1905 and 1906, both having been rejected by the *Arbeter Ring* national offices in New York. As Julius Levitt described, it was only when a group of New Yorkers arrived who had already "long been members" and developed ties to the New York office, particularly David Lubin and H. Citrin, that the branch in LA received its own charter. See *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring*, 12.

³⁷ Julius Levitt recalled the history of the "Ladies Tailors" in *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring in Los Angeles, March 23rd, 1934*, 12.

³⁸ A branch of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) had emerged in 1907, but lasted only 3 months due to a lack of organization and membership. See John Laslett and Mary Tyler, *The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988* (Inglewood, CA: Ten Stars Press, 1989), 15.

³⁹ The campaign also produced branches for Mexicans, Germans, Italians, Hungarians and Scandinavians. See Paul Greenstein, Nigey Lennon and Lionel Rolfe, *Bread and Hyacinths: The Rise and Fall of Utopian Los Angeles* (Los Angeles; California Classic Books, 1992), 63, 68.

the Party survived by capitalizing on personal relationships formed in their years in the east and joining the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF) in New York.⁴⁰ Those committed to wedding their Jewish nationalism to the socialist movement had formed the JSF in 1912, carving themselves an autonomous Yiddish space in the American Socialist Party. The primary medium through which the JSF propagated *yidische kultur* was its publication, *Forverts* (The Jewish Daily Forward), which was distributed in Los Angeles by the local branch of the JSF. Julius Levitt, who had worked for the *Forverts* offices in New York, helped to sign up new subscribers and expand the paper's distribution in Southern California, and became an official correspondent and manager of the *Forverts* office in Los Angeles.

While initially the Yiddish socialists based their organizations downtown, in the 1910s they increasingly shifted their efforts and their organizations to Boyle Heights, a residential neighborhood east of the Los Angeles River southeast of downtown. At the time of the initial meeting, the neighborhood was home to just a handful of Yiddish socialist families, including those of Abraham Maggid and Dr. Leo Blass, but by the 1910s was "rapidly settling up" as the area's large landowners, including Isaias W. Hellman, began subdividing their estates, ranches and orange groves into planned housing developments and selling them off as unimproved lots.⁴¹ The city built a series

⁴⁰ In his retrospective account of the earliest days of the Arbiter Ring, "The Founding of the First Branch," E. L. Neishtein's recalled that it wasn't until the arrival of Sam Raskin, Aaron Shapiro, and the Alpert brothers who had prior experiences the New York's offices that the socialist movement got off the ground. See E. L. Neishtein, "The Founding of the First Branch" in *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring*, 4.

⁴¹ Wendy Elliott Scheinberg, "Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood," PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2001, 96.

of bridges over the river in the 1880s as well as a series of streetcar lines constructed at Brooklyn Avenue, 1st street, 4th street, and 7th street, providing easy access to downtown. The neighborhood offered a variety of affordable housing options: in “the hills,” there were large lots available for purchase between \$1000 to \$1500 homes for rent for \$35 to \$40 per month, and “the flats” offered cheaper lots for \$600 to \$800 and smaller homes for rent under \$10 a month. Over eighty-percent of these residences were single-family homes, and because they were offered at a variety of prices, the area became an appealing place to live for wage earners and professionals alike.⁴² The growth of the area’s Jewish population accelerated after two institutions moved to the neighborhood: in 1910, the Hebrew Benevolent Society built a small hospital for victims of tuberculosis, Kaspere Cohn Hospital, which gave the neighborhood a reputation for healthfulness and attracted tuberculars seeking to cure their ills; and in 1913, the city’s largest Orthodox synagogue, Congregation Talmud Torah, moved to Breed Street in Boyle Heights, encouraging many of the city’s religiously observant Jews to relocate to the area.⁴³ As these two institutions grew, Boyle Heights increasingly became home to the Jewish “folks masses” the Yiddish socialists sought to organize, and they refocused their efforts there.

⁴² Cloyd Gustafson, “An Ecological Survey of the Hollenbeck Area,” Masters Thesis, University of Southern California, 1940, 104.

⁴³ I base this claim on Sheila Rothman’s study of the Saranac Lake Sanatorium in her book *Living in the Shadow of Death*. In her chapter “In the Shadow of the Sanatorium,” she shows that tuberculars often travelled to famous sanatoriums in the hopes that they might be admitted and when they were refused, simply chose to live in tents and shacks in the close vicinity, hoping that the curative effects of the climate there would be enough to heal their disease, 211-225. When Cloyd Gustafson surveyed the neighborhood in 1940, he asserted that a single real estate promoter named Heinemann had “made Boyle Heights Jewish” by advertising its healthful climate to Jews in New York, “Ecological Survey,” 44-45. It seems likely that some combination of real estate promoters and the presence of Kaspere Cohn hospital gave the neighborhood a reputation among sufferers of the “white plague.”

Boyle Heights was also one of only a few neighborhoods in Los Angeles that was not governed by a restrictive residential covenant, and therefore attracted a diverse group of residents, including large numbers of Mexican and Mexican-Americans, Japanese immigrants, Russian Molokans (a Christian sect), Armenians, and African Americans.⁴⁴ Many of the city's developers and industry leaders embraced the racist ideals of the eugenics movement, and sought to make the region the "white spot of America," a haven for white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They envisioned Los Angeles as an antidote to the degenerative effects of urbanization on the Anglo Saxon race, and sought to build neighborhoods that combined the virtues of rural life with the conveniences of modern urban living.⁴⁵ These subdivisions enforced strict racial segregation, barring non-whites, and in some cases Jews, from renting or owning property in the area. Racist attitudes towards California's Asian immigrants motivated the state legislature to codify these discriminatory practices into law by passing a series of Alien Land Laws between 1913 and 1923 that barred non-citizen aliens from owning property in the State. As a result of this combination of private and public policy, the vast majority of Los Angeles' neighborhoods, and most of the city's schools, restaurants, theaters and public spaces were highly segregated white spaces, including those where the Jewish immigrants of the previous generation lived. Boyle Heights, by contrast, was home to "a dozen or more nationalities" with a concentration of Armenian immigrants

⁴⁴ Commission on Immigration and Housing of California, "A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City" (San Francisco, 1924). In her dissertation, "Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in A Multicultural Neighborhood," Wendy Elliott-Scheinberg estimated that by 1920, Russian-born Jews comprised 14% of the area's residents, the neighborhood's largest foreign-born population, 112.

⁴⁵ Garcia, Matt, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 30-35.

in the “flats” around Second Street, a “Japanese colony” on the western part of East First street towards downtown, and large numbers of Mexicans and some African Americans on the east side near the adjoining subdivision of Belvedere.⁴⁶ The neighborhood’s central business district in the area around Brooklyn Avenue and East First Street was home to a multiethnic group of business owners and both its schools and its public spaces open to all of the area’s diverse residents.

Each of these other communities brought with them their own unique religious traditions, languages and customs, and like the neighborhood’s Jewish residents, sought to retain their cultures in their new American homes. They also held their own radical and nationalist ideals, having fled social unrest, and in some cases violent persecution, in their home countries like their Jewish neighbors. Boyle Heights’ Armenian residents were part of a Christian minority living under Ottoman rule that had been subject to waves of state sanctioned violence and systematic massacres now referred to as the Armenian Genocide. The area’s Russian Molokans had, like Jews, been persecuted minorities under the Russian Imperial authorities because of their unwillingness to conform to the Russian Orthodox Church. And many of the area’s Mexican residents had been displaced by President Porfirio Diaz’ campaign to modernize the Mexican economy, some having been involved in resistance movements that eventually led to the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Indeed, Los Angeles became the epicenter of the Partido Liberal Mexicano, an anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary movement led by expatriates Ricardo, Enrique and Jesus Magon who moved to the city

⁴⁶ Commission on Immigration and Housing of California, “A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City,” 14-15.

in 1904.⁴⁷ The Yiddish socialists saw in Boyle Heights an opportunity to build their own, distinct ethnic community in a multiethnic context and exist as a “nation among nations” as Dubnow envisioned.

But outside of Boyle Heights, these various “nations” occupied different positions in Los Angeles’ highly stratified socio-economic hierarchy because of the significant racial discrimination that prevailed among the city’s employers. As historian Mike Davis has shown, many of the city’s business leaders held similar attitudes to those of the city’s developers and sought to maintain Anglo-Saxon hegemony in the workforce. Most employed exclusively “efficient” Anglo workers in skilled manufacturing jobs and “obedient” Mexicans, Asians and African-Americans in lower skilled, lower paying jobs, creating a racially segmented, dual labor market in the city.⁴⁸ While Northern European and American-born craftsmen dominated the city’s building trades, the city’s non-white minorities were employed primarily in agriculture and food processing, as domestic workers or unskilled laborers earning abysmally low wages, some less than two dollars per day.⁴⁹ This dual labor system also involved ruthless anti-union tactics, extensive blacklists, and other efforts to prevent the “un-

⁴⁷ For more on the Magonistas, see George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicago Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933); Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and John Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁴⁸ Mike Davis, “Sunshine and the Open Shop: Ford and Darwin in 1920s Los Angeles,” in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Thomas Sitton and Bill Deverell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 118.

⁴⁹ See Frances Noel’s testimony to the Commission on Industrial Relations of the United States Congress during their investigation of the “Open Shop Controversy in Los Angeles” in 1914 in “Final Report and Testimony Submitted to the Congress by the Commission on Industrial Relations,” 64th Congress, 1st Session, Doc. No. 415, vol. 4 (1916), 5729.

American types of foreigner which infests and largely controls Eastern cities” from taking over in Los Angeles that likely resulted in the discrimination of Eastern European Jews as well.⁵⁰ But because of the craft skills and English language fluency they brought with them to Los Angeles, and likely their skin color, most of the city’s Jewish workers found jobs in high skilled trades and joined the “aristocracy of the manual laboring class.”⁵¹ These economic disparities among the neighborhood’s residents grew over time, and as we shall see, complicated the efforts of the Yiddish socialists.

By relocating their efforts in Boyle Heights, the Yiddish socialists positioned themselves among these “nations” of exploited workers and signified their solidarity with the rest of the city’s multiethnic working-class. Rather than assimilating into the white mainstream as the Jewish immigrants who came before them had, they chose to base their efforts among the city’s multiethnic proletariat and the Jewish “folks masses” in the neighborhood. The area’s affordable real estate provided the opportunity to create physical spaces to house their organizations and to expand them: the *Arbeter Ring* purchased a home on Evergreen Avenue as its headquarters, and the Labor Zionists of the National Radical Club, which by 1912 grew into a branch of *Poalei Tsion*, bought a

⁵⁰ The quotation is from Charles Lummis, who proudly boasted that such “un-American types” were “almost unknown” in Los Angeles, appears in Mike Davis, “Sunshine and the Open Shop,” 116-117.

⁵¹ The phrase was used by the California Commission on Immigration and Housing to differentiate between the various types of workers in the city, describing those in this “aristocracy” as “skilled workmen (mechanicians, electricians, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, cooks, bakers, painters, etc.)” as compared with the “lowest group of day laborers... the diggers and delvers who have nothing to offer but their bodily strength.” See “A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City,” 56.

building on Soto street to serve as the center of the Labor Zionist movement.⁵² In describing their early days of organizing in the neighborhood, the Yiddish socialists consistently referred to Boyle Heights as a *yishev*, the Yiddish word for colony or settlement. There, they could forge an ethnic, working-class identity in a multiethnic context and realize their socialist Jewish nationalism. By building Yiddish public culture, they could make their *yishev* “a branch of Yiddish life of the entire world.”⁵³

Boyle Heights Yiddishkayt: Orange Blossoms and Organizing

While their initial efforts had focused on forming mutual-aid organizations and unions for Jewish workers, the Yiddish socialists’ efforts in Boyle Heights expanded to include a plethora of Yiddish-based cultural and educational activities, each designed to mobilize and mold the Jewish “folks masses” in the neighborhood. Both the *Arbeter Ring* and *Poalei Tzion* offered adult educational class and hosted public lectures, the first of which was given by eminent Bundist scholar Baruch Charney Vladeck in 1911, and was attended by over two hundred neighborhood residents.⁵⁴ These lectures aimed to educate local workers and to expose them to new ideas, particularly the revolutionary principles of socialism. They often featured visitors from abroad who offered personal updates on activities in Europe unavailable in local newspapers or labor leaders from the east coast who shared strategies and organizing tactics. Not all speakers were

⁵² Details on the formation of *Poalei Tzion* come from *Zunland*, 89.

⁵³ Phrasing used by Rose Nevodovska in her essay “Chaim Shapiro – The Fellow-Traveller (Accompanier) of the Yiddish *Yishev*” in *Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life*, 13. Several other essays in the Souvenir Booklet, including those by A. Maggid, and I. Sh. Neumov refer to Boyle Heights as a *yishev*.

⁵⁴ *Zunland*, 84.

visitors: Chaim Shapiro quickly developed a reputation as a forceful orator, “preacher” and “people’s propagandist,” and became the most popular local lecturer.⁵⁵ As he had at the initial meeting in 1908, Shapiro and the other speakers helped to spread awareness of the plight of the Jews in Europe, particularly during the tumultuous years of World War One, and to foster Jewish national self-consciousness among the neighborhood’s residents.

These cultural activities became important parts of social life for the Yiddish-speaking Jews in Boyle Heights. They formed reading groups and cultural clubs, gathering at each other’s homes to perform plays together and discuss literature, poetry and the politics of the day. Local Yiddish writers formed literary salons to share their work, beginning with the “Social Literary Club” in 1908, while others read the works to nationalist and socialist scholars and intellectuals, unpacked their ideals and debated their merits. The reading circles provided a forum through which the Yiddishists could ritualize their national self-consciousness and advance and develop local *yidishe kultur*, elevating Yiddish in the way Zhitlowsky had described. They became physical and social embodiments of the Yiddish socialists’ desire for cultural autonomy, a space where both men and women could celebrate their cultural heritage while getting acquainted with one another, and sometimes falling in love.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ “Preacher” and “people’s propaganda” are terms used by the Chairman and Secretary of the Jubilee Committee in their “Greetings” in *Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life*, 7.

⁵⁶ According to *Zunland’s* description of the “Social Literary Club,” in the club “young folks at the same time got acquainted with the fairer sex and in so doing established friendships, fell in love, and got married,” 84.



Arbeter Ring Picnic in Alhambra, 1920s. Dr. Leo Blass is seated in the center, next to the woman with the large hat. Outings like these were an important part of social life for the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights. Photo courtesy of *Zunland* (1925).

The reading circles and cultural clubs were particularly popular among women, many of whom were denied access to formal education in the traditional Orthodox communities in which they were raised. The clubs provided an education, exposure to new ideas and new opportunities for political and intellectual engagement. They served as forums for women to express themselves in the language in which they felt most comfortable and, for non-working women, provided social outlets away from the home. In 1911, a group of young women spearheaded the creation of a “Progressive Musical and Dramatic Union,” performing classic works of Yiddish drama, including plays by Jacob Gordin, Sholem Asch, and Peretz Hirschbein.⁵⁷ They formed a Progressive Mandolin Orchestra and a Peoples Chorus, both of which were loosely affiliated with

⁵⁷*Zunland* specifically hailed performances of Peretz Hirschbein’s “*Di Neveyle*” (“The Carcass”) and Ossip Dimov’s “*Sh’ma Yisroel*” (“Hear O Israel”), *Zunland*, 108.

the *Arbeter Ring*, and provided entertainment at their fundraisers and celebrations. Women in Boyle Heights also organized groups centered on their shared domestic responsibilities, including knitting circles, “the East Side Mothers Club,” and the Jewish Consumers League, a cooperative buying club founded by women affiliated with the Socialist Party. The efforts to build local Yiddish culture created opportunities for women to build their own institutions, to express their ideals, and to play prominent roles in public life.⁵⁸

The cultural organizations also created an audience for a homegrown Yiddish-language press, which the Yiddish socialists built in Boyle Heights. While the *Arbeter Ring* and the Socialist Party funded the distribution of the *Forverts*, relying on the New York-based publication as an organ for their organizing efforts was difficult. One writer complained, “New York is so far away, and publishes its newspapers first for itself, and if something is sometimes written about Los Angeles, it takes a week before one manages to see it in print.”⁵⁹ Attempts to establish a local Yiddish-language press began in 1912 when Dr. Ezekiel Vortsman, a wealthy Zionist journalist from the Poldosk province in Russia, called on local writers and intellectuals to invest in his “Corporation” and support his new newspaper, the *Kalifornie Idisher Shtime* (*California Jewish Voice*). But after the outbreak of World War One, Vortsman left Los Angeles and the paper lost its connections to the local Yiddish literary community and its financial base. Two subsequent attempts were made to create local weeklies that could serve as a

⁵⁸ For more see Mary McCune, “Creating a Place for Women in a Socialist Brotherhood: Class and Gender Politics in the Workmen’s Circle, 1892-1930,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 585-610.

⁵⁹ *Zunland*, 96.

forum for Yiddish socialist activity, including *Der Progrese (Progress)* in 1915 and *Der Tsayt (The Time)* in 1918, but both faced financial obstacles and quickly folded.⁶⁰

Frustrated, a handful of local Yiddish community activists, including Peter Kahn, Julius Levitt, Aaron and Chaim Shapiro, and writer Israel Friedland, decided to reorganize their efforts to build a Yiddish press around the principles of mutual aid and cooperative self-help. They established the Pacific Cooperative Press, a small printing house on Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights, selling shares in the press so that both individuals and organizations could have a stake in the operation. In 1920, they began publishing a new weekly newspaper, *Der Pasifik Folks-Zeitung (Pacific People's Newspaper)*. Socialist Party member Jacob Ginsburg was the first editor of the weekly and the first manager of the printing shop, which was run under strict union conditions. The *Folks-Zeitung* provided an important cultural resource for the burgeoning social and organizational activities developing in the city, and a shared cultural outlet for local proponents of *yidische kultur*.

The Cooperative Press also became an important engine of the local literary scene as several local writers, including Henry Rosenblatt, Israel Friedland, Shia Miller, and H. Goldovsky, began using the Press to publish their work. Some wrote memoirs of their experiences in Europe, but many also wrote about the contrast between Southern California and their previous homes in both America and Europe, highlighting the

⁶⁰ Details on the origins of the Yiddish press in Los Angeles come from *Zunland*, 93-96. The first issue of *Der Progress* was published March, 19th, 1915. *Zunland* also details the history of another small publication that emerged in 1918 under the leadership of Abe Rabinovitsh called *Der Tsayt (the Time)*, which attracted the involvement of Raskin, Kohn, Shapiro, Blass and other community organizers. As *Zunland* describes, however, Rabinovitch and *Der Tsayt* got caught up in the battles surrounding the administration of the Sanatorium and alienated its supporters that will be described later in this Chapter. *Zunland* described in 1925 that *Der Tsayt* "neither lives nor dies," 94.

area's awe-inspiring landscape.⁶¹ The reverence for the natural beauty of Southern California could be seen in the titles of their poems and books, including *Unter Got's Himlen* (*Under God's Sky*), *Preyri-Land* (*Prairie Land*), and *Kveytlach* (*Little Blossoms*).⁶² They formed a local literary salon they called *Meyrev* (*West*), whose members helped to publish journals they named *Zunland* (*Sunland*) and *Pasifik* (*Pacific*). But in addition to exalting in Los Angeles' beauty, the work of local Yiddish writers also articulated the homesickness that many poets felt in their new homes. An excerpt from one of Joseph Katzenog's poems in *Kveytlach* gives a glimpse of the literary styles that emerged:

"Far-
 From the narrow New York streets, Chicago clouds, Pittsburgh smoke -
 Los Angeles!
 You are intoxicated by the smell of orange blossoms, blinded by the
 towering mountains, refreshed by the straight proud palms.
 Worn out.
 They have built for themselves bright, sunny little cottages, decorated
 With greens, and they stroll calmly. Contented.
 The light white night falls, greater desires awake.
 They live always unsatisfied.
 But the streets are silent, windows - blind, doors - shut."⁶³

Expressing themselves in Yiddish provided both the poets and their audience a means of making sense of their new experiences and combating the maladjustment they may

⁶¹ Among the first locally published works was A. Kimelfeld's pamphlet, "My Military Service in Russia: A Daily Diary of a Jewish Soldier," (1916) which along with sixteen other titles appears in a "Bibliography of Yiddish books published in Los Angeles between 1916 and 1928" in *Pasifik* no. 1 (March, 1929). Vorspan and Gartner have characterized the work of Los Angeles Yiddish writers as "fantasy... explicitly stated. The writers seemed bewitched by the drastic contrast between Southern California and their earlier homes," *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 140- 141.

⁶² *Kveytlach* (little blossoms) by Joseph Katzenog (1925), *Preyri-Land* (*Prairie Land*) H. Goldovsky (1927), and *Unter Got's Himlen* Under God's Sky (published by Sholem Aleichem Branch of Jewish National Workmen's Order, 1919), H. Rosenblatt, are all included in "Bibliography of Yiddish books published in Los Angeles" in *Pasifik* no. 1 (March, 1929), 43.

⁶³ Joseph Katzenog's poem is taken from his book *Kvetlakh* (*Little Blossoms*) (Los Angeles, 1925) in Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 116.

have felt in such a new and different environment. They exposed the realities of life in Los Angeles that differed from the fantasy-laden images of the city perpetuated by the boosters. Poems like Katzenogý's, like the titles of the books and journals the published, reflect a conscious desire on the part of local writers and poets to create a western school of Yiddish literature that would give voice to the unique experiences of the Jews in Los Angeles and the American West.

The local poets' preoccupation with Los Angeles' natural beauty and their own restlessness may in part have owed to the fact that some of them were suffering from tuberculosis. W. Lossman, who contracted the disease after moving to New York from Russia, came to Los Angeles seeking to relieve his condition in 1914 and wrote a series of poems about his experiences that were published after he died of the disease just four years later under the title *Troymen un Fantazies (Dreams and Fantasies)*.⁶⁴ Another young local poet Mattes Lune wrote an entire collection of poems on the topic he called, *Der Vayser Prints fun der Vayser Plag (The White Prince of the White Plague)*. His poems, while short, captured the sharp contrast between his personal feelings of isolation and confinement and the fertility, richness and freedom of the nature that surrounded him. In poems like "Morning," "Lily," "The Bee," and "Into the Mountains" he expounded on his mother's grief and the emasculating, infantilizing effects of his dependency.⁶⁵ The works of Lune and Lossman, along with those of many of the local Yiddish poets,

⁶⁴ W. Lossman's work was described by Vorspan and Gartner as "flashes of insight" marked by "brevity" and "fantasy," *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 141.

⁶⁵ See Lune, Mattes Luniansky, *Der Vayser Prints fun der Vayser Plag (The White Prince of the White Plague)*, (Los Angeles: Pacific Cooperative Press, 1927).

expressed both their sadness and their hope that the Los Angeles' beautiful natural environment might cure their own ills and those of the global Jewish community.

The local Yiddish writers also played important roles in helping to develop a comprehensive system of Yiddish education for children in the neighborhood. The only form of Jewish education offered in the area was a religious school (Talmud Torah) operated by Solomon Neches, the rabbi of Boyle Heights' largest Orthodox synagogue, the Breed Street Shul, who provided a traditional curriculum focused on Jewish law and ritual, Hebrew language, and the scriptures. The secular Yiddish socialists worked to develop schools of their own that would reflect their ideological values and foster a Yiddish-based Jewish identity among their children.⁶⁶ In 1913, Dr. Leo Blass, one of the founding members of the neighborhood's branch of *Poalei Tzion*, spearheaded the creation of a *folkschule* (people's school) at their headquarters on Soto Street, for a time single-handedly supplying the funds to pay its teachers' salaries. When the school finally got on its feet, he hired Chaim Shapiro to serve as principal and local writers Shia Miller and Rachel Schwab to serve as teachers.⁶⁷ They substituted the Talmud Torah's curriculum with lessons on the principles of socialism, secular philosophers, and Yiddish literature, folk tales and folk songs.

⁶⁶The Labor Zionists in New York pioneered Yiddish-language education for children when they opened the first Yiddish-language school for children in the U.S. in 1910. See Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 74.

⁶⁷ As *Zunland* describes, the eventual *folkschule* at 420 North Soto was actually the fourth amalgamation of the school. The first had failed because "The population was however still too small at that time and the school couldn't last very long." But, as the journal described Dr. Blass was the only one who "didn't cave," offering his own money to fund the school's creation. See *Zunland*, 89-90.

In 1918, the district conference of the *Arbeter Ring* decided to open a school of its own because some members believed that the curriculum at the *folkschule* was too heavily Zionist.⁶⁸ Jacob Ginsburg, editor of the *Folks-Zeitung*, and socialist activist Harry Sherr served as the school's first teachers and decisions regarding the school's operations were to be approved collectively by the district committee. After a few months, the facility was expanded to a larger building on Brooklyn Avenue so as to accommodate their ever-growing population of students.⁶⁹ For the Eastern European immigrants of Boyle Heights, the schools ensured that their American-born children would retain their ties to Jewish history, folk culture, and Yiddish.

By far the largest-scale organizing campaign of the Yiddish socialists in Boyle Heights was their effort to build their own sanatorium where those suffering from tuberculosis could receive care free of cost regardless of their religion or creed. As the legend goes, the call to action had been initiated after two young tuberculars died homeless on the streets, prompting a group of Yiddish socialists, including Dr. Blass, the Shapiro brothers and Peter Kahn to form the Jewish Consumptive Relief Association (JCRA) to "organize for the purpose of raising funds and establishing suitable quarters for the aid, cure and comfort of our brothers and sisters afflicted with tuberculosis."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 74-78. Shandler points out two types of schools emerged following World War One: non-Zionist, socialist Arbeter Ring schools and non-political, secularist Sholem-Aleichem and Folks-Institutes. The *Arbeter Ring* school in Los Angeles followed the guidelines set forth by the New York offices in 1918.

⁶⁹ As *Zunland* points out, by 1920, the number of students in the *Arbeter Ring* school had risen to over 100 and the facility was moved to a larger building on Brooklyn Avenue. *Zunland*, 102-103.

⁷⁰ From the Preamble to the JCRA appeared in a 1913 article by Dr. Leon Shulman, "The California Consumptives' Relief Association: A Historical Sketch," [publication unknown] in the *Western States*

The JCRA held a series of mass meetings and mobilized virtually every Jewish organization in Boyle Heights, raising enough money by 1914 to purchase a ten-acre plot of land in Duarte, California, just twenty miles east of the city. Leader of the city's existing Jewish charities vocally criticized the JCRA's efforts, arguing that building such an institution would attract even more helpless tuberculars to the city and appealing to the Los Angeles County Board to Supervisors to intervene.⁷¹ But despite this opposition, the JCRA's sanatorium continued to grow. Local Yiddish-based organizations and unions reached out to their international affiliates to erect their own buildings, the first of which were built by the local branches of the *Arbeter Ring*. The JCRA also established branches of their organizations in San Diego, San Francisco, Cleveland and Chicago, which paid for the construction of a large medical center, a recreation hall, and a library named for Yiddish writer Sholem Alechem, who himself suffered from tuberculosis. By the 1920s, the Sanatorium served over 250 patients per year, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and became known as the City of Hope.⁷² And in the 1940s, after the advent of streptomycin, an antibiotic that cured tuberculosis, the City of

Jewish History Archive, UCLA Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library, Box 86, Folder 5.

⁷¹ According to an account by JCRA member Mendel Silverberg, the Board of Supervisors attempted to pass an ordinance that would have required new sanatoriums and institutions obtain the permission of seventy-five percent of residents within a mile of the proposed location before they were allowed to build. The JCRA realized that previous bills regulating cemeteries had a "grandfather clause" allowing preexisting facilities to avoid the regulations. Within three days, they erected their first tents on the land they had purchased in Duarte and moved a cook, and orderly and one patient to the new site. The Board of Supervisors subsequently dropped their legislation. Silverberg's account appears in Bonnie Rogers, "The Founders" in *Roots-Key*, 26. Emily K. Abel also addresses this controversy in her book, *Tuberculosis and the Politics of Exclusion*, 36-37.

⁷² Details come from a "Yearly Report of the Jewish Consumptives' Relief Association - from Jan. 1st, 1922 to May 1st, 1923" that appears in the WJSHA, Box 86, Folder 5.

Hope evolved into a modern medical research hospital and today is currently one of the premier cancer centers in the world.



The campus of the JCRA Sanatorium, "The City of Hope," in the 1920s. The central quad of the campus was known as "Sunshine Lane." Courtesy of the City of Hope.

In combination, the Sanatorium, the schools, the press, and the cultural clubs, along with the trade unions, the Yiddish branch of the Socialist Party and fraternal organizations, comprised a vibrant Yiddish public culture in Boyle Heights. The Yiddish socialists had successfully transformed the traditional Jewish religious community structure into a secular, modern form of community based in *yidische kultur*. Instead of *minyán*, they formed reading circles; instead of weekly sermons, they offered public lectures; instead of *sforim* (religious texts), they developed their own Yiddish-language press; and instead of depending on charity, they built mutual-aid based fraternal organizations and the Sanatorium. They provided the means through which the local Jewish population could resist assimilation, retain their national identity as Jews in their new American home and work together to improve their lives. These efforts had been fueled by idealism and ideology, and their faith that Boyle Heights

could become a major outpost of Jewish life in the diaspora, a site of renewal and rebirth for the entire global Jewish community. Chaim Shapiro captured these sentiments in an essay in honor of *Pesach* (Passover) he wrote in 1913 in which he linked the story of Moses and the liberation of the Jewish slaves of Egypt to his own generation's struggles, saying, "those for whom *Pesach* was truly sacred once, [so] must be the holy work for socialism – the *Pesach* spirit of the future." Like the local poets, he reveled in the natural beauty of his *yishev*, comparing the liberation and rebirth of the Jewish community to the blossoming flower buds and the gentle sunbeams around him.⁷³ Shapiro's ode certainly expressed his love for the holiday, but also revealed the idealism that motivated him and the other Yiddish socialists and the utopian potential they saw in their new home. Together, they had realized their visions of socialist Jewish nationalism in Boyle Heights.

But while Shapiro and his cohort had successfully achieved their goals for the Jewish community of Boyle Heights, their efforts had excluded their non-Jewish neighbors, if for no other reason than their use of Yiddish. Although the Sanatorium was a non-sectarian institution, non-Jews were exempted from membership in the *Arbeter Ring* and the Jewish unions that had been established in the needle and building trades. For example, although the ILGWU had been successful in organizing highly skilled male Jewish tailors and secured contracts for nearly 80% of the workers in the suit and cloak sectors, they had excluded those garment workers making dresses and

⁷³ The article by Shapiro appears in, *Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life*, 48-50, in a greetings from the editors of the *Frayheynt*, who reprinted the original article from April, 1913 instead of offering their own testimonial, saying only that Chaim Shapiro had stayed loyal to the ideas he expressed in the article until the present day.

sportswear, a group of some 2,000 “unskilled” women, most of whom were of Mexican descent. They prided themselves on being “more progressive” than other ILGWU locals, but had in some ways accepted the racist logic of the dual labor system, arguing to their superiors that their Latina coworkers were “impossible” to organize because they were only casual workers, willing to endure the most debased conditions.⁷⁴ Indeed, race and racial inequality been entirely left out of the Yiddish socialists’ discussions about the future of their community, suggesting that some may have viewed the disparities of wealth between them and their non-Jewish neighbors as natural by-products of their cultural differences. Their expectation was likely that each of these other ethnic communities would pursue their own forms of “national” organization.

And in some ways, that expectation was affirmed as the efforts of the Yiddish socialists mirrored those that emerged among Japanese and Mexican populations. These communities also operated their own language schools and cultural programs designed to foster national self-consciousness and ethnic identity among immigrants living in Los Angeles. In both cases, however, the programs were largely funded and engineered by government officials and representatives of the state. As George Sanchez has shown, in Belvedere, the area just east of Boyle Heights, the Mexican consulate founded La Escuela Mexico to teach Spanish language and Mexican heritage and built libraries with Spanish language books and newspapers. But these projects were designed by an elite group of officials and intellectuals who sought to legitimize the

⁷⁴ See John Laslett and Mary Tyler *The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988*, 15-21.

new ruling government established after the revolution and promoted a conception of Mexican nationalism designed to tamp down on threats to that legitimacy posed by revolutionary groups like the Partido Liberal Mexicano. As a result, the nationalism they promoted served particular interests that sometimes conflicted with the ideals and identities of the immigrants themselves.⁷⁵ The Japanese consulate operated dozens of similar schools throughout the city designed to teach the American-born children of Japanese immigrants their language and culture, but constructed their curriculum with “primary emphasis on America and secondary on Japan” to assuage the concerns of the city’s vocal nativists about the city’s Japanese population.⁷⁶ The consulate officials viewed these programs as means to fight the racist treatment of their countrymen: by changing the behaviors of the immigrants, they could help to change the way they were perceived by the city’s Anglo developers and business leaders. But most of the programs stopped short of addressing the structural causes of their poverty. The Mexican and Japanese immigrants who lived in Boyle Heights worked within these constraints to form their own understandings of their American identities.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 110-112.

⁷⁶ Zevi Gutfreund, “Beginning Bilingual Education: Race and the Remaking of Language in Los Angeles, 1900-1968,” PhD Diss., UCLA, 2013.

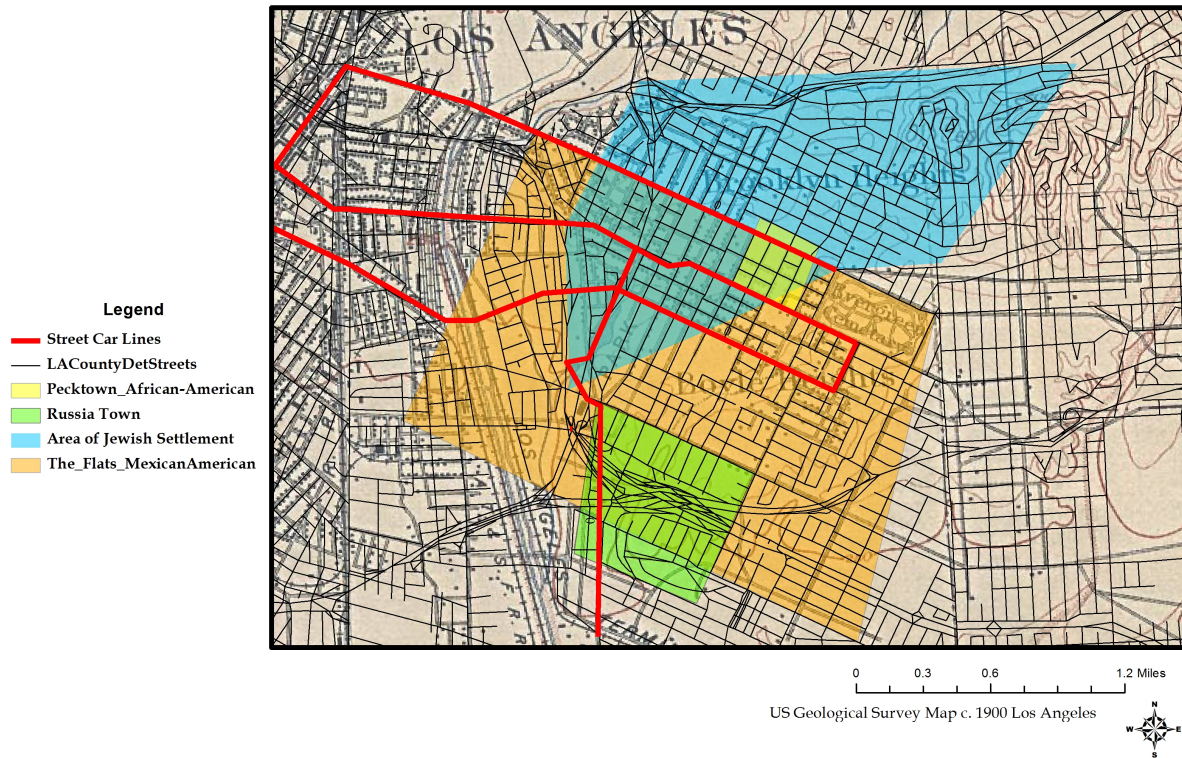
⁷⁷ For more, see Brian Hayashi, *‘For the Sake of Our Brethren’: Assimilation, Nationalism and Protestantism Among the Japanese of Los Angeles, 1895-1942* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995); Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Chavez, Ernesto, *Mi Raza Primero! (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

As the city's economy and population grew, the inequalities of the dual labor system manifested themselves into the physical geography of Boyle Heights. Despite their antagonism towards them, the successes of the Jewish immigrants who came to Los Angeles before the Yiddish socialists afforded them economic opportunities unavailable to many of their non-Jewish neighbors. Because of their skills and their skin color, Jewish tradesman worked in skilled trades, joined the city's few existing unions, and had access to higher education, home and business loans. A 1924 survey of Boyle Heights conducted by the California State Commission on Immigration and Housing captured these economic discrepancies among the neighborhood's residents. The survey estimated that a majority of these residents worked as "common day laborers" and settled in the "flats" and the eastern part of the neighborhood towards Belvedere where rents and home prices were cheapest. The Jewish residents of the neighborhood by contrast were employed as "skilled workmen" or worked as professionals or "clerical and semi-intellectual" workers, and nearly a quarter of the area's Jewish residents were identified as being self-employed small business owners. The study estimated that over seventy-five percent of the Jewish residents could read and write English, the largest percentage of all other immigrant groups in the neighborhood, and that over a third of the neighborhood's Jewish residents owned their homes, largely in the "hills" north of Brooklyn Avenue towards City Terrace.⁷⁸ Although their wealth and power paled in comparison to the Jewish elites, the Jewish residents of Boyle

⁷⁸ Commission on Immigration and Housing of California, "A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City" 54-62, 70.

Heights comprised the top of the socio-economic hierarchy, embodied by their residence in the hills.

Population Distribution in Boyle Heights c. 1920s



Population Distribution Boyle Heights, in 1920s. Based on estimates provided by Cloyd V. Gustafson, "An Ecological Analysis of the Hollenbeck Area of Los Angeles." Masters Thesis, University of Southern California, 1940, 90-95.

Rather than address these growing disparities, the Yiddish socialists had created a Yiddish-based community life and collective identity that was distinct from both that of Jewish elites and from their non-Jewish neighbors. Importantly, they continued to mix and mingle with the neighborhood's other residents in the shared spaces in the area, particularly in the commercial district between East First Street and Brooklyn

Avenue, on the area's streetcar lines, in its parks and schools, all of which were tremendously diverse environments. But by developing Yiddish-based culture and organizational life, they also carved an independent Jewish community in the multiethnic neighborhood. They had fused their ethnic and class based identities, defining themselves and the residents of their *yishev* in Boyle Heights as "the Jewish working-class," in between the Jewish elite and the rest of the city's multiethnic working class.⁷⁹

But in the early 1920s, a new group of Jewish activists arrived in Los Angeles who recognized the contradictions of that self-definition. They viewed the Yiddish socialists' unwillingness to reach out to the neighborhood's other residents and tackle racial inequality as fundamental failures to live up to their professed goals. The economic and demographic realities of Boyle Heights prompted the new arrivals to pose important questions about their goals that their predecessors had largely ignored: who were the neighborhood's true "folks masses"? Shouldn't they, as socialists, include all of the neighborhood's multiethnic residents in their organizing efforts? As the growth of both Los Angeles' economy and the population of Boyle Heights accelerated in the early 1920s, contentious ideological debate and deep conflicts erupted in their *yishev* of Boyle Heights.

"Di Mageyfe (The Plague)"

The growth of Los Angeles' population in the 1920s went hand in hand with the city's economic development. In 1921, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and the

⁷⁹ See James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of Ethnic History*, 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1997): 3-44.

Merchant and Manufacturers Association (M&M), working with railroad owners and the Department of Water and Power, used their political influence to rezone the area south of downtown along the eastbound railroad lines as a new Central Manufacturing District. They launched a promotional campaign to encourage eastern corporations to open branches of their operations in Los Angeles, highlighting the city's reputation as the "citadel of the open shop" and offering business and engineering assistance to manufacturers in exchange for their investment. Led by a thriving oil industry and an emergent film industry, the city's industrial economy grew dramatically, becoming the eighth largest in the country by 1924. Its population more than doubled, topping 1.2 million by the end of the decade, and the manufacturing workforce grew tenfold to over 66,000.⁸⁰ The city's Jewish population grew significantly as well, rising from 20,000 residents in 1920 to over 70,000 by 1929, over 10,000 of whom were of eastern European descent.⁸¹ Like their predecessors, these new Jewish arrivals came to Los Angeles after spending several years in the industrial capitals of the East and the Midwest and brought with them ideas about and experiences with Yiddish-based community organizing from their time in Europe and other American cities. As Julius Levitt described, this second wave of migrants, like the generation before them, had come to

⁸⁰ Statistics from Mike Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 97, 106-108.

⁸¹ Vorspan and Gartner hold that in 1920, there were 20,000 Jews among Los Angeles population of 576,000 and that by 1929, Jews comprised 70,000 of the city's 1,238,000 residents, over 10,000 of whom lived in Boyle Heights, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 109. In her study of the 1920 census Wendy Elliot Scheinberg grouped those of Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Yugoslavian and Hungarian descent to total some 15,139 of Los Angeles' residents. Factoring in that some portion of these populations must not have been Jews, she surmises that the Eastern European Jewish population had risen to over 10,000 by 1920. "Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood," 102-3.

Los Angeles seeking to impose “their dreams, their knowledge, and their authority” on the local Yiddish-speaking community.⁸²

Included among the new arrivals were an increasing number of class-conscious Jewish workers who had been electrified by the success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks, encouraged all socialist parties of the world to join in their revolution and become members of the newly formed Comintern. Believing that the global socialist revolution was imminent, some Yiddish socialists – both Labor Zionists and Bundists – decided that the Communist movement was the best vehicle for their twin goals of inspiring a Yiddish cultural renaissance and a social revolution. In May, 1919, broke from the Jewish Socialist Federation to form their own organization within the Workers (Communist) Party of America (CPUSA). But because the Party agitated against the unions of the American Federation of Labor, including its Jewish unions, an additional group of *linke* (left-wing) Yiddish communists remained in the JFS, hoping they could push the Socialist Party in a more radical direction. Months of intense conflict ensued, and by 1921, the national offices of the *Arbeter Ring*, the United Hebrew Trades and *Forverts* in New York had decided to withdraw from the JSF entirely. The various *linke* factions joined together to create the Jewish Communist Federation (JCF) within the Comintern, and the JSF collapsed.⁸³ In the months that followed, a group of these newly militant activists

⁸² Levitt used the Yiddish words *viln*, *kentshaft*, and *oistortet* which I have translated as dreams, knowledge, and authority. *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbeter Ring*, 10.

⁸³ Details concerning the Jewish Socialist Federation’s role in the conflicts of the early 1920s are detailed in Tony Michels’ *A Fire in Their Hearts*, see especially Chapter Five.

arrived in Boyle Heights, joining other *linke* militants who preceded them, and the Yiddish-speaking community was engulfed in similar conflicts.⁸⁴

Some of the factionalism that erupted was entirely based on partisan politics. Because there had not been “enough *mentshn* to form a *minyán*” in the 1910s, the Yiddish socialists had opted to work together, but as the Jewish population grew, they were able to form separate organizations to represent their various party lines and their “united front” was fractured. This partisan factionalism had its strongest impact on the *Arbeter Ring*, where at least ten new branches representing a variety of ideological camps emerged: two anarchist branches (branch no. 512 and branch no. 413, known as the Kropotkin Branch), a Labor Zionist branch (no. 443), the city’s first English-language branch (no. 601 named for American poet Walt Whitman), a Boyle Heights Branch (no. 655), and branches in Long Beach (no. 643) and Pasadena (no. 654). After 1921, four local branches, including branch 248 (the city’s first branch), branch 512 (Anarchist), the branch in Long Beach, and the Boyle Heights’ Branch, declared their allegiance with the *linke* and joined their “Independent” *Arbeter Ring*.⁸⁵

But *linke* activists also offered two critiques of their predecessors specific to what they had accomplished, or failed to accomplish, in their *yishev* of Boyle Heights. The first was that the leaders of the neighborhood’s Yiddish-based organizations had placed too much emphasis on cultivating Jewish national self-consciousness and not enough

⁸⁴ In her unpublished autobiography, Ida Freidin Gertzoff tells of how she and her husband, along with a group of other veterans of the Russian Revolution of 1917 came to Los Angeles directly from Russia in 1918.

⁸⁵ The first split in the *Arbeter Ring* came in 1912 when members of branch 248 severed their ties and formed their own branch, number 443, *Zunland*, 103. Details concerning the splits are also in “From Our Archives,” *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring*, 8.

on cultivating class-consciousness with the neighborhood's other residents. At the heart of this critique was the *Arbeter Ring's* school, where decisions were to be agreed upon by all branches affiliated with the district committee. During one such district committee meeting in the fall of 1923, an aggressive "group of twenty" *linke* members of branch 248, led by S. Globerman and H. Kaminker of the Workers' (Communist) Party, directly challenged the leadership of the school's administrators, socialists Harry Sherr and Isidor Farber of branch 443.⁸⁶ They complained that school's curriculum placed too much emphasis on *yidische kultur* and it did not go far enough to cultivate class-consciousness among the students. They charged that the school's leaders were "bourgeois" and incapable of representing the interests of neighborhood's workers. And indeed, the veteran activists who dominated the leadership of the school and most of the neighborhood's Yiddish organizations were far from being class-conscious proletarians. The Shapiro Brothers attended law school at the University of Southern California, and opened their own law practice together as did Harry Sherr and Isidor Farber, the top officials at the school. Pinches "the shoemaker" Karl opened his own artisan cobbler shop in 1913, which by the 1920s had grown into a lucrative franchise, and Peter Kahn earned enough money working in the fields to buy his own orchard, which he expanded into a "very successful" wholesale produce company.⁸⁷ For the

⁸⁶ The events were recounted in a letter by Globerman to the Central Executive Committee of the CPUSA written Jan. 13th, 1926. Globerman was at that time describing a conflict that had erupted within the *linke* school over the central question: "shall the teaching in the Jewish *schule* be mostly Jewish or communist?" But in his description of the conflict in 1926, he repeatedly insists that the very same conflict had been at the center of their choice to form their own Jewish *schule* in the first place. See Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives [microform], Roll 48, Delo 683.

⁸⁷ Peter Kahn's company, Kahn and Simmonds Wholesale House, was described as a "very successful" by Bonnie Rogers, in her article "The Founders," *Roots-Key*, 23. By the 1950s, Karl owned over 150 stores

“group of twenty,” who were members of virtually all of the neighborhood’s Jewish unions, this professional and financial success alone made these veteran activists “unfit” to lead working-class organizations. They labeled the leaders of the school as *rekhte* (right-wing) and called for the election of new school administrators and the creation of a new curriculum that would better balance Jewish interests with those of the broader, multiethnic working-class.⁸⁸

The second, and interrelated component of the *linke* critique was that the local Yiddish socialists had failed to address the deep-seated racial inequality in the city. Although they were written a few years after the conflict in 1923, a series of letters by Isador Brooks to his superiors in the CPUSA offer the clearest articulation of this criticism. Brooks faulted “the liberals and petti-b[ourgeoisie] elements” who dominated Yiddish organizational life in Boyle Heights for not doing enough to “fight Jim Crowism and segregation” in the city, and failing to “mobilize the entire working-class.” The rampant racial inequality seemed obvious to him from his first day in the city, and yet his predecessors had largely ignored it in favor of organizing their fellow Jews. He called on his fellow *linke* to reach out to their non-Jewish neighbors, arguing that, “the Party must... wipe out all traces of white chauvinism within our own ranks and combat it sharply among the broad masses of white workers.” Regardless of their achievements, because the veteran Yiddish socialists had neglected to cultivate class-

across West Coast, his business described as a “multi-million dollar concern,” in *Pinches Karl: 70 Years of Life and Labor*, 72.

⁸⁸ The unions represented by the “group of 20” included the ILGWU Local 52, Carpenters’ Union Local 1976, Tailors’ Local 64, Painters Local 1348, Milliners Local 48, Cigar Makers Local 225, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers local 248, and Bakers’ Local 453. Nov. 11th, 1926 report, Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives [microform], Roll 48, Delo 683.

consciousness among all of the residents of the multiethnic neighborhood, according to Brooks and the rest of the *linke*, failed to achieve a revolutionary change in the social order.⁸⁹

This particular ideological critique was articulated most vocally and militantly within the area's Jewish unions, which were riddled with ideological infighting in the 1920s. Until 1928, the Communist Party employed a strategy of "boring from within," organizing through existing AFL unions to push them in more radical directions rather than forming independent unions of their own.⁹⁰ Local communists organized workers' committees in the needle trades, the building trades, and at the Port of Los Angeles, aiming to mobilize local unions as vehicles for revolutionary activity. They condemned the conservatism of the Central Labor Council and local labor leaders, arguing that the strength of the anti-union influence in the city demanded more aggressive action by local unions. *Linke* members of the local branch of the ILGWU, for example, criticized the union's leadership for failing to organize the Latina dressmakers, dismissed their insistence that they were too difficult to unionize and called on the organization to help them form their own local. While the record of their efforts is thin, the unions' existing

⁸⁹ The Miriam Brooks Sherman collection at the Southern California Library for Social Science Research includes drafts of essays that her father, Isador Brooks, wrote to his superiors in the CPUSA upon his arrival in Los Angeles in the 1920s. The letters are undated, however in the second letter he makes reference to the 10th Plenum of the ECCI (Executive Committee of the Communist International) which was held in 1929 and Brooks' rhetoric is laced with the language used by the Party to explain their change of strategy in the "Third Period." But because very few records exist of the *linke* activities in 1923, these letters are representative of the Party's commitment to inter-racial activism even though they come from a later period.

⁹⁰ CPUSA, under the leadership of William Z. Foster, subsequently adopted a policy of "dual unionism," forming their own militant unions through their Trade Union Educational League to rival those of the American Federation of Labor in 1928. See Barrett, James R. *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

leadership charged that the communists mounted a campaign to secede from the local if their demands for change were not met, prompting the President of the ILGWU International, Abe Plotkin, to revoke Local 52's charter, ordering a re-organization of the union with a new constitution and charter as Local 65.⁹¹

In the eyes of the union leaders, school administrators, and more moderate members of the *Arbeter Ring*, the *linke* were disruptive troublemakers, a "*mageyfe* (pestilence or plague)" on their organizations.⁹² Members of Jewish unions complained that the radicals disrupted meetings and focused on national and international politics rather than collective bargaining and trade union affairs.⁹³ The *linke* members were too ideological, too political and overlooked the practical, day-to-day logistics of running an organization. Veteran leaders like Levitt, Sherr and others who had been working for years to develop *yidische kultur* in Los Angeles may also have resented the criticism of their leadership abilities, particularly those offered by newcomers who had only been in the city for a few months. Whatever their reasons, the more moderate and centrist members of the *Arbeter Ring* and *Poalei Tzion*, the *rekhte*, renewed their commitment to Jewish nationalism by forming a branch of the Jewish National Workers *Farband*, a Zionist socialist organization. They built their headquarters in a two-story facility on St. Louis Street in Boyle Heights, which they named the Vladeck Center.

⁹¹ See John Laslett and Mary Tyler *The ILGWU in Los Angeles*, 22-25.

⁹² The term *magayfe* appears in an account "From our Archives," in *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring*. In his own account in the same booklet, Julius Levitt went so far as to describe the conflicts of the 1920s as a "*comunistisher fargvaldigung* (communist rape)."

⁹³ John Laslett and Mary Tyler recount these and other complaints about the Communist members of the ILGWU mentioned in interviews they conducted with former ILGWU members. See *The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988*, 24, 68.

In the eyes of the *linke*, however, multiethnic solidarity and class-consciousness were vital to achieving the goals of Yiddish socialism. They criticized the “conservatism” of the *rekhte* leaders and sought to innovate and experiment with new strategies to fit their new environment. By the end of 1923, the *linke* had withdrawn from the school entirely and built their own set of Yiddish-based organizations and cultural groups. They formed a Yiddish-language fraction of the Workers’ (Communist) Party of Los Angeles (CPLA), and raised enough funds to purchase their own large building on Brooklyn Avenue they named the Cooperative Center.⁹⁴ The Center housed two auditoriums (a ballroom with room for 1,000 and another with space for 500) and meeting rooms for the various organizations affiliated with the Center including the Consumers’ League, Carpenters’ Union, and the Painters’ Union, and the four branches of the “Independent” *Arbeter Ring*. The Cooperative Center also became home to a *linke* Yiddish *folkschule*, youth groups including the “Young Workers League” and the “Juniors,” cultural organizations including a “Freedom Song Union” and a “Freedom Mandolin Orchestra” as well as a bakery and a small café that catered the Center’s events.⁹⁵ They formed *linke* reading circles and distributed their own weekly

⁹⁴ The Jewish branch was reorganized as a semi-autonomous Jewish fraction in July, 1926 after the CPUSA ended their policy of allowing independent language federations to affiliate with their organization. The shift in policy resulted in the end of the Jewish Communist Federation and the merger of its membership as “fractions” of the central CPUSA.

⁹⁵ Details concerning the groups who met at the Cooperative Center come from *Zunland* and are supported in the works of Kenneth C. Burt in his article, “Yiddish Los Angeles and the Birth of Latino Politics: The Polyglot Ferment of Boyle Heights,” *Jewish Currents* (May-June, 2008): 22. The bakery and café will be explored in more depth in the next two chapters.

Yiddish-language newspaper, *Di Frayheyt* (Freedom), to replace the socialist *Forverts*.⁹⁶ In April, 1927, the front page of *Frayheyt* boasted that in the Center, “you can easily feel the pulse of the local labor movement...[it is] a manifestation of the soul of the leftist movement never before seen among the Jewish workers... a giant fortress of the *linker bevegung* (left-wing movement).”⁹⁷

While the *linke* continued to foster *yidische kultur* at the Center, they supplemented their efforts with campaigns to organize their Mexican, Japanese, Armenian, and African American neighbors, particularly as the Party shifted its structure away from foreign language fractions in its “Third Period” in the late 1920s.⁹⁸ The *linke* activists agitated in the new factories downtown and at the Port at San Pedro, distributing propaganda materials in Yiddish as well as Spanish, Japanese, Russian and Chinese.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ The paper was run by I. Neumov and A. M. Mandelbaum, who had both been in Los Angeles since the 1910s and had written for the *California Jewish Voice*. *Zunland*, 93-96.

⁹⁷ N. Krupin, “Los Anzeles A Rizige festung fun der linker bevegung (Los Angeles - Giant Fortress of the Leftist Movement,” *Frayheyt*, April 12th, 1927 in a collection of Krupin’s articles housed in the Jewish Secular Collection of the Southern California Library for Social Science Research, Box 7, Folder 27.

⁹⁸ Following the 6th World Congress of the Comintern in 1928, the Communist International ushered in a shift in its economic policies advocated by ascendant Party leaders Joseph Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin. Stalin’s had risen to power following Lenin’s death in 1924, and his personal and ideological rivalries with Trotsky resulted in a wave of expulsions of Trotsky and his supporters, as well as social democrats and moderates in communist parties throughout the world. Stalin described the history of the Communist Party as falling into three periods, the “First Period” of revolutionary upheaval and defeat of the working-class that followed World War One, a “Second Period” of capitalist consolidation and retrenchment in the first half of the 1920s, and a coming “Third period” which would supposedly bring the final defeat of the capitalist system. In the CPUSA, this “Third Period” ushered in the creation of the Trade Union Education League (TUEL) under the leadership of William Z. Foster and a policy of forming dual, revolutionary unions rather than “boring from within” as well as a shift from neighborhood and language based “fractions” to organizing around “shop nuclei.”

⁹⁹ In a letter from the May 8th, 1925 to the Central Executive Committee of CPUSA, local leaders requested that the Party send them materials in Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, noting the available languages – English, Polish, Greek, Ukrainian, Italian, Hungarian, Finnish, Russian, Swedish, German, Lithuanian – were insufficient for their organizing efforts. The national leadership was forced to contact their comrades in Mexico and China to fulfill the request. See Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives [microform], Roll 33, Delo 496.

Women's Work Director Mayna Reiss reorganized the Consumers' League as the "Women Workers and Housewives Council of Los Angeles," expanding the Party's outreach among the Mexican and Russian Molokan women in Boyle Heights.¹⁰⁰ And in 1930, the "Independent" branches of the *Arbiter Ring* created their own "proletarian" fraternal organization, the International Workers Order (IWO), extending their mutual-aid based insurance to all of the neighborhood's residents.¹⁰¹ While the *rekhte* directed most of their activism within the Jewish community, the *linke* made it a priority to cultivate class-consciousness among all of the neighborhood's workers.

Ultimately, the conflicts that erupted in the 1920s were the result of inherent tensions in the Yiddish socialists' ideology that had existed since their earliest days in Europe. Both Bundists and Labor Zionists had persistent difficulties in reconciling their socialist claims with their attempts to articulate a vision of Jewish nationalism. The aim of the socialist movement was to foster a universal working-class consciousness that would transcend ethnic, racial and national differences and mobilize the global proletariat. But Jewish nationalism emphasized the particular interests of Jews as Jews throughout the global diaspora, placing positive value in Jewish cultural and ethnic difference. The tension between their two goals – between working-class universalism

¹⁰⁰ Ms. Reiss requested 2,000 leaflets in English, 1,000 in Spanish, 500 in Russian, , Feb. 24th, 1928 – Memo re: 2nd meeting of International Women's Day Conference, Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives [microform], Reel 108, Delo 1438.

¹⁰¹ The IWO was formed by a group of 5,000 *Arbeter Ring* members after the 1930 Convention when the socialist leadership of the organization began expelling left-wingers and abolishing their branches. By 1947, the membership had risen to 184,000. See Roger Keeran, "National Groups and the Popular Front: The Case of the International Workers Order" *Journal of American Ethnic History* vol. 14 no. 3 (Spring, 1995), 23-51.

and Jewish particularism, between socialism and nationalism - created fundamental contradictions for Yiddish socialists that were by no means limited to Los Angeles.

These contradictions were, however, amplified in the context of Boyle Heights where the neighborhood's particular racial and socioeconomic composition challenged the Yiddish socialists' understandings of their class and ethnic identities. Certainly, the neighborhood was home to Jewish wage earners, but in the context of the dual labor system that prevailed in the city, these workers did not share a relationship to the means of production, either with one another or with their non-Jewish neighbors. Owning a home or a business was for some a "radical act of self-invention," fundamentally altering their worldviews.¹⁰² Others may have absorbed the racist, eugenicist logic of their employers, and regarded themselves as fundamentally different or superior to the "unskilled," non-white workers in their industries. The *rekhte* leaders of Yiddish-based organizations, particularly those whose ambitions included the creation of a Jewish state, likely felt that in the context of Boyle Heights, it was more important to build solidarity among the eastern European immigrants than it was to build solidarity with their multiethnic neighbors and prioritized their nationalist activities. But to the *linke* that multiethnic solidarity was crucial to achieving the goals of Yiddish socialism. They too worked to develop *yidische kultur* but forged a different balance between their commitments to nationalism and socialism that placed a premium on cultivating class-consciousness, believing that in order to be a "nation

¹⁰²Harriet Rochlin "Boyle Heights Was Widely Viewed As An Unsavory Neighborhood" in *Boyle Heights: Reflections and Remembrances*, Abraham Hoffman ed. (Los Angeles: Western States Jewish History, 2011), 69.

among nations” they had to fight harder to change the American system to all for equal rights of all.

However intense the conflicts between the *rekhte* and the *linke*, their activism of both groups contributed to the project that the cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants had devoted themselves to at their initial meeting in 1908: the development of Yiddish public culture in Los Angeles. The Jewish radicals of every partisan stripe conducted the bulk of their activism in Yiddish and focused their organizing efforts on the same population in the same space. Together, they created a vibrant Yiddish life in Boyle Heights, the epicenter of which was located in a five-block radius around Brooklyn Avenue where the Labor Zionists built their *folkschule* (420 Soto), the Jewish Socialist *Farband* and its affiliated organizations set up their Vladeck Center (126 N. St. Louis) and the *linke* Yiddish communists built their Cooperative Center (2708 Brooklyn Avenue). The streets themselves became sites for debate, the corner of Brooklyn and Soto in particular serving as an impromptu pulpit for Yiddish orators espousing a variety of nationalist and socialist ideologies. Although they argued over how to appropriately balance their nationalism with their socialism, the *rekhte* and the *linke* were united in their commitment to developing *yidische kultur* in Boyle Heights. And as a result, they ultimately worked in tandem with one another, bringing new energy and fervor to the Yiddish public culture in the neighborhood. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the debates between them served to push the activists in new ways, forcing them to complete their strategies and encouraging them to innovate. The efforts

of both the *rekhte* and the *linke* served to fortify a distinct Jewish ethnic community in the multiethnic neighborhood.

In order to better understand how the efforts of the *rekhte* and the *linke* coincided and overlapped, the next chapter will examine how one union managed to navigate the factionalism and rivalries that plagued other Yiddish-based organizations. I will focus in on the Jewish Bakers Union Local 453, showing how they responded to the imposition of a dual labor system in their industry. As the next chapter will show, the bakers constructed an organizing model that set them apart from their fellow bakers and fused their ethnic and class based identities. By using food as the medium of their activism, they infused Jewish food culture with the values of Yiddish socialism, helping to make food part of *yidische kultur*. As a result, participating in their activism became a means for all of the neighborhood's residents to express their identity as members of the "Jewish working-class." They became central players in the Jewish labor movement and provide a fitting case to explore the dynamics of Yiddish-based community organizing and class formation in Boyle Heights.

CHAPTER TWO:

“KOIFN BROIT BOYLZ MITN UNION LEYBEL” (BUY BREAD EXCLUSIVELY WITH THE UNION LABEL”): THE JEWISH FOOD CHAIN AND THE JEWISH BAKERS UNION OF BOYLE HEIGHTS

On May 1st, 1926, the ninety members of the Jewish Bakers Union Local 453 walked off their jobs. Along with the members of their Ladies’ Auxiliary, they formed picket lines in front of the retail bakeries on Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights, distributing flyers in Yiddish protesting their employers’ recent decision to reject their longstanding contract and hire non-Jewish bakers to replace them. Within two days, the bakers’ pickets convinced six of the sixteen Jewish bakery owners involved to sign union contracts. The remaining employers filed an injunction against the union, arguing its strike campaign constituted libel, and called for support from the Merchant and Manufacturers Association, a powerful anti-union employers’ group they had recently joined. The Los Angeles Police Department descended on the neighborhood to patrol the area for any “possible outbreak on the part of radicals” and arrested several protesters, including a handful of women, charging them with violating the city’s anti-picketing ordinance. Alarmed by the arrests, business and civic leaders from the neighborhood, including Rabbi Solomon Neches of the Breed Street Shul, formed an “impartial committee” to assist in the contract negotiations. After two weeks, a new contract was drafted and the strike was resolved. The union succeeded in maintaining

the high wages afforded by their contract, and had even won slight increases in their holiday hours.¹

The success of the bakers' strike was due to their ability to earn the support and solidarity of a broad-based community coalition that included professionals, business owners, and wage earners, Communists and Socialists, the faithful and the secular. Their three strategies – a union label campaign, their Cooperative Bakery and gift-giving – emphasized the mutual interests of Jewish producers and consumers, providing a means for all of the neighborhood's Jewish residents to express a working-class Jewish identity in the way that they shopped for food. The Jewish residents of Boyle Heights had an abundance of affordable food options in the multiethnic neighborhood, and could easily have avoided the picket lines entirely by buying their bread somewhere else. But the bakers' activism injected the buying and eating of food with national and class-based meanings, substituting the traditional religious values attached to food with the secular values of Yiddish socialism. At a time when the Yiddish-speaking community was divided over the politics of proletarian identity, they cultivated a market-oriented model of class-consciousness, and in doing so, created a

¹ Details on the strike come from "Bakeries Adopt Open-Shop Plan," *Los Angeles Times* May 2nd, 1926; "Ovens not Cooled by Walkout," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4th, 1926; and "Fallen Leaves," Herman Robbins recollections in *The Hebrew Food Journal*, October, 1966. According to "Three Given Jail Terms as Pickets" *Los Angeles Times*, May 6th, 1926, the arrests occurred at Boston Bakery, 2320 Brooklyn Avenue, and included: Mrs. Yetta Gilbert, Mrs. F. Feldman, Mrs. Ida Gerwitz (wife of William Gerwitz, Local 453 president), and Mrs. Gussie Miles. Three union members, Ben Levene, Harry Kaufman, Phil Alter, were also arrested and sentenced to jail terms of 130 days. The strike was also covered in a cover story in *The Bakers' Journal*, May 22, 1926, and *The Los Angeles Citizen*, June 5th, 1926.

distinct Jewish commercial infrastructure within the multiethnic marketplace in Boyle Heights.²

This chapter will explore how this small union of Jewish bakers came to unite the Jewish community in the neighborhood and play a central role in the Jewish labor movement and Yiddish community life. The members of Local 453 were in many ways representative of the other Jewish workers who lived in Boyle Heights. Most were born in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and other areas of the Russian Empire during the violent pogroms and restrictive legislation of the 1880s, and had spent several years in other American cities where they acquired special baking techniques and, in many cases, learned to read and write in English before coming to Los Angeles.³ They too had been exposed to nationalist and socialist ideologies before they moved to Los Angeles, and were dedicated both to fomenting a revolutionary change in the capitalist system and to fostering Jewish nationalism based in *yidische kultur*, but they were, as Chaim Shapiro

² I build my analysis here on the work of John R. Hall, whose essay "The Reworking of Class Analysis" called on scholars to move away from a strict Marxist interpretation of class formation and towards a "Neo-Weberian" and "institutionalist" way of engaging in class analysis. This "reworking" of class analysis substitutes "action" for "structure" and emphasizes both the material and discursive bases for social action that serve to construct meanings of class as they unfold in social life. See John R. Hall, "The Reworking of Class Analysis," in *Reworking Class*, John R. Hall ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³ Details about the bakers come from a combination of sources: the 1920 and 1930 Federal Censuses, the *Bakers Journal*, the organ of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union, and the Souvenir Booklet from the 15th anniversary Jubilee celebration of the Jewish Bakers Union, *Fufts n yortog and tsharter festung (Fifteen Year Anniversary an Charter Celebration Thursday Eve., April 6th, 1939, Hebrew Sheltering Home, 325 South Boyle Avenue, Los Angeles, California)*, Los Angeles: Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union of America, Local 453, 1939. Only forty of the union's 100 or so members appear in the Census, but of those 17 were born in Poland, (42.5%), 14 in Russia (35%), 3 in Austria (7.5%) and 4 in America (10%). Twenty-seven out of the 40 who responded came to Los Angeles with children who had been born in other American cities. 26 of the bakers listed Yiddish as their mother tongue (65%), 4 listed Russian (10%), 4 Polish (10%), and 1 each Hebrew, German, Magyar. 95% of the bakers who responded to the Census claimed English-language literacy, but it is presumable that the figure would be lower among the bakers who did not respond to the Census.

described them, “practical idealists,” not highly partisan, highly educated intellectuals.⁴ Like the other Jewish workers in the neighborhood, they had advantages in Los Angeles’ racialized dual labor system because of their skills and their skin color and rather than organize alongside unskilled, non-Jewish bakery workers, sought to preserve those advantages by pursuing their own independent model of unionism. But unlike other Jewish unions in Boyle Heights that were riddled with factionalism and infighting in the 1920s, the bakers of Local 453 successfully navigated these conflicts and maintained ties to both the *rekhte* and the *linke*. Their success makes their union a compelling subject through which to explore Jewish identity and class formation in the neighborhood.

While the primary focus of this chapter is the bakers’ activism in the 1920s, in order to understand their model of trade unionism, we must first examine the union’s origins. I begin by exploring the bakers’ role in the traditional commercial infrastructure of the Jewish communities in Europe, what I will describe as the Jewish food chain, and how that role was undermined by a variety of forces in the multiethnic context of Boyle Heights. I then examine their earliest organizing efforts as a Jewish branch of the city’s larger baking union, Local 37, and the different ways that the Jewish bakers and their parent union responded to the rise of industrial baking in Los Angeles. And finally, I return to the strike of 1926 to explore the strategies that defined the

⁴ Chaim Shapiro offered his description of the bakers in a speech given at the dedication of the Bakers’ Building at the City of Hope in December 1927, in which he described the Bakers’ Building as an example of the union’s “practical idealism.” The text of that speech appeared in “Cornerstone in Place Now,” *The Bakers Journal*, Dec. 17th, 1927.

bakers' activism throughout the 1920s, showing how they recreated the Jewish food chain in Boyle Heights.

The Jewish Food Chain and Baking in Early 20th Century Los Angeles

In the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, food and eating served as vital sources of Jewish community cohesion. Traditional Jewish religious observance included abiding by kosher dietary laws, or *kashrut*, which emphasized cleanliness and sanitation, offering prescriptions as to which foods to eat and how to properly prepare them. The kosher dietary laws endowed the preparation and consumption of food with sanctity and the week's most important meal, the Sabbath dinner, provided a moment of religious transcendence during which the eating of food itself brought Jews closer to God.⁵ Observance of the laws placed community overseers, both rabbis and ritual slaughterers (*shochet*), in charge of adjudicating problems of *kashrut* and determining how to feed the poor. These rabbinical authorities levied taxes on certain foods, known in Russia and the Pale as *korobka*, which financed communal activities, including rabbis' salaries. The taxes increased the prices of food, placing immense burdens on consumers and made the eating habits of Jewish communities subject to rabbis and community leaders. But because they were ultimately responsible for purchasing, cooking and serving food to their individual families, women also exercised a great deal of responsibility in upholding *kashrut*. Merchants who provided food to the community were dependent on both the business of female consumers and the judgments of rabbinical authorities. These mutual interdependencies created what historian Ruth

⁵ Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 151.

Ann Abusch-Magder described as a “Jewish food chain,” a distinct commercial infrastructure in eastern European *shtetls* that sustained Jewish communal life.⁶

While their craft was not as tightly governed by kosher dietary laws as that of butchers, bakers played a crucial role in the traditional Jewish food chain because of the importance of bread and baked goods in Jewish diets.⁷ In the 19th century, the Russian Empire expanded its production and processing of wheat, and its close relative rye, and per capita wheat consumption tripled, lowering the prices of flour, bread and baked goods dramatically.⁸ *Rozover* bread, a hearty, dark black bread made with thick-ground rye flour, became a fundamental part of Eastern European Jewish diets.⁹ As Alexander III’s restrictive legislation further limited Jewish mobility and employment options

⁶ Hasia Diner has described the complicated “communal infrastructure” of *shtetl* communities as a “pyramid...with rabbis and rabbinic courts at the top... [and] at the bottom, the wide base of the pyramid, the individual women in their homes (with husbands hovering on the sidelines) buying, cooking and serving as the front line sentinels of observance...” But as Ruth Ann Abusch-Magder argues, the lived experiences with *kashrut* observance were far from the hierarchical pyramid that rabbis and communal authorities envisioned. She instead proposes to conceptualize the relationships between kosher overseers, consumers and merchants as a “Jewish food chain” which suggests “how component parts are linked, the ease with which the links can be broken, and the impact on the endeavor as a whole if one of the links is broken.” See Ruth Ann Abusch-Magder, “Kashrut: The Possibility and Limits of Women’s Domestic Power,” in *Food and Judaism*, eds. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Gerald Shapiro (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 173. Abusch-Magder argues that rabbis sat outside this Jewish food chain; that the primary links in the chain were between those who supplied the Jewish community with food, those women who worked in kitchens, and those who gathered around Jewish tables to eat. I have fused Abusch-Magder’s description with Diner’s pyramid. Diner’s description appears in Abusch-Magder’s article, but is echoed in her book *Hungering For America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), Chapter 6.

⁷ According to historian Paul Brenner, “Of particular relevance is the Talmudic law of *pas akum* which assured the observant against accidental use of pork products or mixing of meat and dairy, by generally forbidding consumption of baked goods prepared without at least the supervision of a practicing Jew.” See Paul Brenner, “The Formative Years of the Hebrew Bakers’ Unions, 1881-1914,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* vol. xviii (1983), 40.

⁸ Maria Balinska, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 50.

⁹ The term *rozover* referred specifically to the round shape of the loaves. See John Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 148.

following Tsar Alexander II's assassination, bread became an even more important source of cheap calories. Since dairy products, sugar, meat and grease were expensive and hard to find, most Jews served their bread alongside vegetable soups and sours, including beet-based *borscht*, cabbage-based *sauerkraut* and sorrel soups called *schav*.¹⁰ By supplying breads – both those that were part of religious ritual observance, including *challah* and *matzo*, as well as those that were staples of Jewish diets like bagels, *rozover*, and rye bread – bakers provided their communities with both physical and spiritual sustenance. One Yiddish proverb advised, “*besser dem beker vie dem dokter*” (“better to give to the baker than the doctor”), reflecting the importance of the bakers’ roles in Jewish community life in the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe.¹¹

As millions of Eastern European Jews came to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they brought with them this particular commercial infrastructure and recreated their traditional foodways in their new homes. As historian Hasia Diner has shown, Jewish immigrants who had struggled to eat in Europe welcomed the opportunity to expand their diets afforded them by America’s cheaper food prices, regularly enjoying foods once reserved for special occasions.¹² They added meat to their *borscht* and included smoked, fried and pickled fishes in their dinners. Bread continued to be a staple item in Jewish kitchens, but they added lighter ryes and whiter wheat-based white breads to their diets instead of subsisting only on cheaper, darker

¹⁰ Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 156-157.

¹¹ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 52-53.

¹² Diner, *Hungering for America*, 194.

ryes. Eastern European Jewish immigrants also purchased sweeter baked items including coffee cakes, fruit pies, and treats like *ruggalach* and *hamantashen*, added more sugar to their *challahs* and ate their bagels with toppings and spreads.¹³ For many Jews and other immigrant consumers, capitalizing on the affordability and abundance of food was a part of embracing a new identity as Americans.¹⁴ Catering to the appetites of Jewish immigrants gave rise to the vibrant Jewish marketplaces in neighborhoods throughout the country, most famously on Maxwell Street in Chicago and Hester Street in New York, food becoming a defining feature of the Jewish experience America.

Although Jewish owned delicatessens, butcher shops and bakeries first emerged in Los Angeles on Central Avenue and Temple Street around the turn of the century, by the 1920s, the commercial district between Brooklyn Avenue and East First Street in Boyle Heights became the epicenter of the Jewish food chain, home to dozens of Jewish-owned food-related businesses serving some ten thousand Jewish residents.¹⁵ Bakeries, delicatessens, restaurants, butchers, pickle barrels, fishmongers and groceries lined both Brooklyn Avenue and East First Street and the streets between them. Most Jewish small business owners were themselves foreign-born immigrants and catered their wares to the particularities of kosher dietary laws as well as offering both Eastern European and

¹³ The darker ryes used rye grains that had only been ground once, while lighter ryes used flour that had been through more grinding and processing, making them more costly. In her study, Hasia Diner asserted that "Pumpernickel, rye bread, distinctive rolls formed the core of the immigrants' food repertoire," *Hungering For America*, 208.

¹⁴ See Diner, *Hungering for America*; Heinze, Andrew, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) and Braunstein, Susan L. and Jenna Weissman Joselit, ed., *Getting Comfortable in New York: the American Jewish Home, 1880-1950* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1990).

¹⁵ Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1970), 117-118. By their estimate, the Jewish population of Boyle Heights did not reach 10,000 until 1929.

American Jewish specialties. They advertised and conducted business in Yiddish, and decorated their products and storefronts with *Mogen Dovid* (Stars of David) and offered lines of credit to their customers.¹⁶ They published their advertisements in local Yiddish-language newspapers, including the *Kalifornie Idishe Shtime* and *Folks-Zeitung*. By encouraging local residents to “buy Jewish,” the Jewish food vendors and merchants of Boyle Heights attempted to reconstruct the *shtetl* market and maintain their role in the Jewish food chain.

The business district in Boyle Heights, however, was home to a diverse group of small business owners offering an abundance of tempting treats that enticed the neighborhood’s Jewish residents to violate kosher dietary laws and buy their food from non-Jewish business owners. The neighborhood’s Armenian, Mexican, Japanese residents all brought their own culinary traditions with them to Los Angeles, and like the area’s Jewish residents, recreated them in the neighborhood. The blocks between 1500 and 2500 Brooklyn Avenue, for example, were home to two Japanese grocers, Armenian and Italian owned bakeries, a Mexican owned bakery and several Mexican and Mexican-American owned restaurants in addition to dozens of Jewish-owned businesses. Jewish residents could buy a nice rye from a grocery store or bakery, or opt for tamales or tortillas from Ismael Rodriguez or Jovita Campos, lavash from Joe

¹⁶ An article by Ruel McDaniel in the *Der Yidisher Biznesman Firer* (Jewish Merchant and Guide) (Los Angeles : United Jewish Retail Grocers Association of Southern California) in April, 1929 warned of the pitfalls of extending credit to ones customers. See also Schames, Morris. *Mayne fin fun tsvantsig yor mit di yidishe beker, 1914-1939 (Twenty-five Years with the Jewish Bakers)* (New York, 1939).

Bajkowski, or rice noodles or dumplings from Orange Blossom Bakery.¹⁷ Grocers from these ethnic communities carried particular ingredients familiar to their customers, and the delightful aromas emanating from their stores and restaurants lured many passersby. Although Jews comprised the majority of the neighborhood's food-related business owners, the marketplace between Brooklyn Avenue and East First Street was as diverse as the neighborhood's population. For the sake of price or culinary curiosity many neighborhood residents chose not to buy Jewish.

The area's small businesses, both Jewish and non-Jewish, also sold an increasing amount of name-brand and processed foods in the 1920s, often at significantly cheaper prices than those made by local craftsmen. Although products like Coca-Cola had been well known for years, in the 1920s, the number of nationally-distributed food brands skyrocketed as Wall Street investors acquired local and regional brands and expanded their distribution. Capital investment in the processing and manufacturing of food tripled between 1914 and 1929, giving rise to massive food conglomerates, the two largest of which were General Foods and Standard Brands Inc.¹⁸ General Foods and Standard Brands often distributed their processed foods through another new phenomenon of the 1920s: national grocery chains. These chain-store grocery operations had centralized distribution headquarters and multiple retail units with standardized inventories composed largely of brand-name goods, a phenomenon *Ladies*

¹⁷ These estimates are based on names listed in the 1929 City Directory that I have cross-referenced with the 1930 census.

¹⁸ The two largest were General Foods, formed when cereal tycoon C. W. Post purchased 14 other food companies, and Standard Brands Incorporated, formed when J.P. Morgan's acquired Chase and Sanborn Coffee Company and Royal Baking Powder. Harvey Levenstein, *A Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 151.

Home Journal described as “the Grocery Revolution.”¹⁹ By 1929, chain grocery stores like Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P) and Kroger’s accounted for one third of food sales across the country, and established their own bakeries to service their outlets.²⁰ Although the chain groceries in Los Angeles remained concentrated downtown, as demand increased for the familiar processed foods they offered, neighborhood grocers included them in their inventories. Many of the cheapest, most readily available foods in Boyle Heights were processed, name-brand goods, rather than those handcrafted by Jewish producers in the neighborhood.

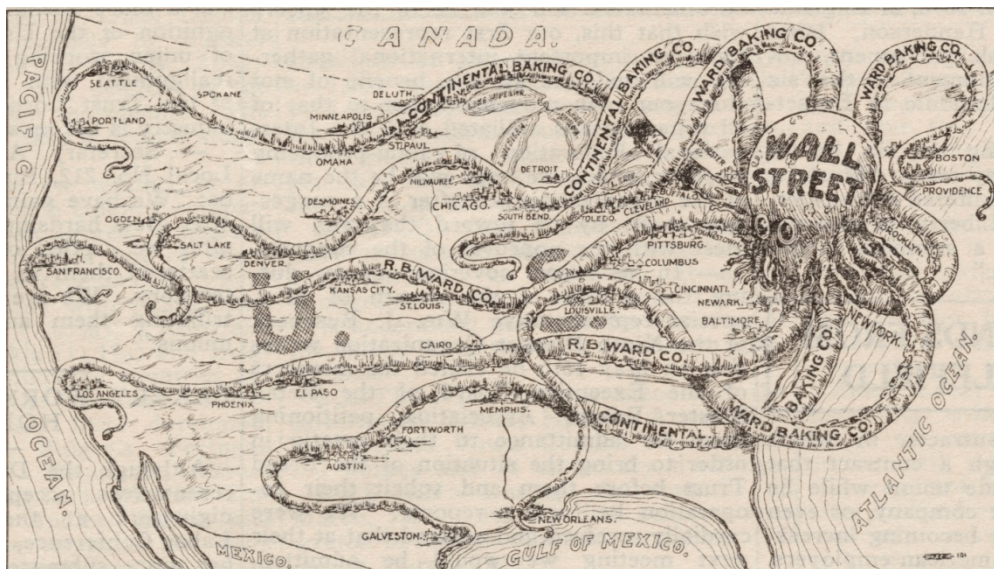
The American baking industry was similarly dominated by a group of large conglomerates in the 1920s. Just five firms - Federal Biscuit Company, National Biscuit Company (NABISCO), General Baking Company, Continental Baking Company, and Ward Bread Company - collectively referred to as the “bread trust,” produced 90% of the nation’s crackers and 40% of the nation’s bread.²¹ These firms had pooled their resources to create the American Institute of Baking (AIB) and “put science to work for the baker,” recruiting engineers to perfect the science and chemistry behind bread and

¹⁹ “The Grocery Revolution” appears in the November, 1928 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, as appears in Harvey Levenstein, *A Revolution at the Table*, 163.

²⁰ The retail statistic comes from Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 107. According to William G. Panschar, A&P alone operated thirty-five baking plants throughout the country by 1930, *Baking In America, Volume One: Economic Development* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1956), 138.

²¹ The Ward Baking Company, for example, began with a small plant in Pittsburgh and expanded to include 19 bakeries in 13 cities, its largest plants in New York, Pittsburgh and Boston operating more than 30 ovens each. Continental controlled forty massive plants in thirty-five cities. See Carl Alsberg, *Combination in the American Bread-Baking Industry; with some observations on the mergers of 1924-1925*, (New York: Arno Press, 1926), 125-127. In 1926, Ward Baking Company attempted to absorb General Baking Company and Continental into a new company, to be called Ward Food Products Corporation, but the merger was halted by an injunction from the Federal Trade Commission. See Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread: A Social History of the Store Bought Loaf* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 27-28.

baking. The AIB calculated the exact amount of time and moisture needed for dough to rise to make the proofing process more efficient, and developed special steam boxes and conveyor belt systems to carry proofed loaves directly to the oven. They developed gas-powered “tunnel” ovens that maximized capacity with fifty-foot long trays and rotating ovens that increased the yield of each individual oven fire and made baking time shorter.²² By applying assembly-line techniques and the principles of scientific management, the AIB “de-skilled” the baking process, allowing the owners of industrial baking plants to hire unskilled bakery workers to operate their machinery rather than relying on the expert touch of master bakers. As a result, the bread trust firms could reduce their labor costs while expanding their daily output, and the nation’s largest bakeries were able to produce over 100,000 loaves per day by 1930.²³



“The Bread Trust” from *The Bakers Journal*, March 13th, 1926, courtesy of the University of Maryland.

²² Panschar, *Baking in America*, 114-120.

²³ Panschar asserted that while bakeries produced 15,000 loaves per day in 1900 they had expanded production to over 100,000 loaves per day by 1930, an increase of over 600%, *Baking in America*, 123-24.

The bread trust firms also invested their large capital reserves into advertising to convince the public that their mass produced bread was as tasty and high quality as the loaves of their local baker. They used the research of the AIB to bolster slogans like “Eat more toast” with scientific claims that store bought bread was part of a nutritious American diet.²⁴ They emphasized cleanliness and argued that their mechanized production techniques were more sanitary than those of craftsmen bakers who continued to bake everything by hand. Their advertising fostered name-brand recognition for the bread recipes they distributed and helped to make their breads familiar consumer commodities like radios and Model Ts. Ward bakeries distributed the three most widely available brand-name breads “Butter-Nut,” “Tip-Top,” and “Holsum,” showcasing their consistency and quality.²⁵ And because of the volume of bread they produced, the bread trust companies could sell their brand-name loaves at significantly lower prices than the handcrafted loaves of local Jewish bakers. Lighter, whiter breads like “Tip-Top” and “Holsum” were available at many of Boyle Heights’ grocery stores, enticing some Jewish consumers away from their local Jewish bakeries.

The efforts of national food companies to expand the market for their products often worked in tandem with the Americanization programs run by Progressive-era reformers seeking to change the eating habits of the immigrants of Boyle Heights. These social workers and domestic engineers, most of whom were middle-class, college educated, Anglo-American women, believed that many of the social problems in

²⁴ Panschar, *Baking in America*, 111.

²⁵ Panschar, *Baking in America*, 166.

working-class neighborhoods like Boyle Heights could be solved by reforming the domestic culture of immigrants to better reflect “American” norms. Using the principles of domestic science, they targeted the hygiene, table manners, and diets of immigrant families, emphasizing cleanliness and stressing women’s responsibility in ensuring that their families ate nutritious meals.²⁶ Most assumed that malnourishment was not a problem of poverty, but rather a consequence of the poor food choices made by immigrant mothers and believed the problem of hunger could be solved through education. At settlement houses throughout the city, they offered classes on cooking and household management to teach immigrant women how to maximize calories and nutrients and minimize cost. Their tips included incorporating more “American” ingredients into their recipes: local reformer Pearl Ellis, for example, advised immigrant mothers to send their children to school with sandwiches made of store brought bread, mayonnaise and “minced meats” or “commercial spread” so that their hunger wouldn’t make them “lazy.”²⁷ Domestic reformers like Ellis insisted that if good mothers “shopped properly,” they could feed their families healthier meals for less. But in order

²⁶ Harvey Levenstein explores the development of college programs in domestic management and nutrition science, arguing that the programs created a specific educational avenue for the increased number of women seeking higher education in the late nineteenth century. See *A Revolution at the Table*, especially Chapters 4,5 and 6. For more, see Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 20-30.

²⁷ Ellis’ pamphlet, *Americanization Through Homemaking*, was specifically catered to the Mexican community, her lunches designed to replace the “folded tortilla with no filling” that most Mexican mothers provided. Ellis’ advice is riddled with cultural and racial stereotypes: she warned that these un-nutritious lunches made Mexican children “lazy” and that if “unappeased,” the Mexican child might steal food from the “more fortunate children” in his class. See Pearl Ellis, *Americanization Through Homemaking* (Los Angeles: Wetzel Publishing Co., 1929), pp. 26-29, 40-41. For more, see Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists and the Politics of Food: the 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests,” *Feminist Studies* vol. 11, no. 2 (Summer, 1985): 255-285.

to do so, they would have to change the types of foods they served and replace exotic ethnic ingredients with cheaper, processed American ones.

The more wealthy and established members of the Jewish community in Los Angeles participated in many of these Progressive reform efforts out of their general concern for the behaviors of the city's Eastern European immigrants. In an article describing her trip to the "corn beef belt," for example, dietician Sonia Kochman Davis expressed her disgust at the eating habits of the neighborhood's residents, insisting that if the Jews of Boyle Heights did not change the ways they ate, they would contribute to the "all too large Jewish army of diabetics."²⁸ The Jewish Social Service Bureau (JSSB) launched programs to teach immigrant mothers how to feed their families, including classes in proper child rearing and cooking at their Julia Ann Singer nursery and their Home for Jewish Working Girls.²⁹ The Los Angeles Council of Jewish Women published handbooks like their "Helpful Hints for Housewives" with recipes, tips for planning dinner-party menus and table settings. Their "Helpful Hints" included recipes for Virginia ham, pork chops, oysters and other non-kosher recipes as well as advertisements for Best Foods Mayonnaise, Maxwell House Coffee, S-Y brand canned vegetables and other processed foods. The city's more affluent Jewish residents thereby encouraged their fellow Jews to assimilate into "American" ways of eating and opt for cheaper, name-brand products and sometimes *treyf* (non-kosher food), rather than

²⁸ Sonia Kochman Davis, "As A Dietician Looks At the Kosher Delicatessen Store and Its Customers: In the Corn Beef Belt, an understanding of Proper Eating and Exercise is Sorely Needed," *California Jewish Voice* March 13th, 1928.

²⁹ Benjamin Louis Cohen, *Constancy and Change in the Jewish Family Agency of Los Angeles: 1854-1970*, PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California, Dept. of Social Work, June, 1972, 17.

foods made by local Jewish producers.³⁰ Their assimilationist advice served to undermine the traditional Jewish food chain in Boyle Heights.

The pressure to assimilate was also applied in social contexts where the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors. Many former residents of the neighborhood remember their mothers swapping recipes and cooking tips with female neighbors, and being introduced to new cuisines at their non-Jewish friends' houses.³¹ In some cases, their maintenance of traditional Jewish eating habits became a source of ridicule. For example, Fred Okrand remembered that at his elementary school:

“... The kids would make fun of me...because they would be eating sandwiches on white bread, on what we would call *koachehdikeh*, soft white bread. But my mother was a Jewish woman; she would go to the *varsheveh* bakery on Brooklyn Avenue and get good Jewish rye bread. And I remember being ashamed somehow, that I was eating rye bread and the other kids weren't...”³²

As Okrand's story suggests, the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights felt pressure from their peers to “eat like Americans” by opting for white bread. While his mother did her best to maintain the traditional Jewish food chain and abide by kosher dietary laws, her

³⁰ The Los Angeles Council of Jewish Women's “Helpful Hints for Jewish Housewives” (1928) is housed at the Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.

³¹ In their essays for the Western States Jewish History's collection *Reflections and Remembrances of the Boyle Heights Jewish Community*, sharing food and recipes with neighbors was mentioned in the essays written by Erna Toback, Leonard D. Davis, Marshall Robert Nathanson, and Max Fine among others. Sharing food was also mentioned in several interviews with the Japanese American National Museum's Boyle Heights Oral History Project, including Kate Bolotin, Ray Aragon, and Ruth (Fujii) Brandt among others.

³² The Anecdote appears in Fred Okrand's interview with the UCLA Center for Oral History Research, “Forty Years Defending the Constitution, Oral History Interview” Tape 1 side 2 – Feb. 4th, 1982. Okrand was speaking of his classmates at Lorena Street School which was outside of Boyle Heights (he lived closer to Temple street) but surely similar dynamics prevailed in Boyle Heights. Okrand's story is also cited in Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread*, 96.

traditional Jewish shopping behavior marked their status as something “other” than his Anglo-American peers.

Local religious leaders attempted to fight this assimilation and reassert their control over the eating habits of the Boyle Heights’ Jewish residents by rebuilding the traditional structure of the Jewish food chain in the neighborhood. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Los Angeles lacked the communal tax system and rabbinical courts that had governed the distribution of food in Europe and other American cities. Rabbi Solomon Neches, leader of Temple Talmud Torah, the largest Orthodox synagogue in Boyle Heights (also known as the Breed Street Shul) was troubled by the lax observance of kosher dietary laws he observed upon his arrival in 1913 and spearheaded efforts to rebuild the mechanisms to govern the community’s eating habits. He pushed for the establishment of the Orthodox Rabbinate, of which he served as president, and for Los Angeles to join the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (UOJC).³³ Neches saw no inherent contradiction between American society and the ethical and moral foundations of Jewish identity, instead arguing that America was “the land where [one] can legally have equality of opportunity and at the same time not make any concessions as to his religion.”³⁴ Rather than adapting the traditions of Judaism to fit the American context, Jews should instead return to their traditions to create a “modern Orthodox” American life. According to Neches, by observing kosher

³³ Los Angeles joined the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (UOJC) in 1926. Neches’ leadership in the effort to join was noted in Y. L. Malamut ed., *Southwest Jewry* vol. 3, (Los Angeles: Published by Los Angeles Jewish Institutions and their Leaders, 1957), 155-56.

³⁴ Neches, “The Jew and American Citizenship” (Los Angeles, 1924), 15.

dietary laws, the Jews of Boyle Heights would assure the retention and renewal of their community; restoring the Jewish food chain would strengthen the local Jewish community as a whole.

But while strengthening the observance of *kashrut* redeemed the role of rabbis and rabbinical courts in the Jewish food chain, buying kosher didn't necessarily mean "buying Jewish." After the UOJC developed its official *kashrut* supervision and certification program in 1923, national food companies and distributors eagerly worked with the organization to earn kosher certification and capture the Jewish market. One of the first to do so was Maxwell House, whose advertising executive Joseph Jacobs launched a campaign to convince religiously observant consumers to make their kosher coffee part of their Sabbath celebrations. H.J. Heinz Company similarly began marketing a variety of kosher beans, incorporating a unique "U" symbol into their packaging to indicate its certification from the UOJC, which the organization later adapted as their official certification logo.³⁵ These *kosher* products were sold in both Jewish and non-Jewish businesses throughout the neighborhood as other immigrant business owners adapted their offerings to serve the area's growing Jewish population.³⁶

The Jewish residents of Boyle Heights thereby encountered a variety of social and economic forces encouraging them to change their ways of eating which

³⁵ Joan Nathan, "A Social History of Jewish Food in America," in *Food and Judaism*, eds. Greenspoon, Simkins, and Shapiro (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2005), 7-8.

³⁶ In his "Ecological Survey" of Boyle Heights, Cloyd Gustafson asserted that a Protestant name Henry Lawrence was the first business owner on Brooklyn Avenue to sell to Jews. He also quoted Mexican-America business owners the Ortegas who said they adapted their business to serve the area's Jewish population because, "we couldn't stand the flood." See Gustafson, "An Ecological Survey of the Hollenbeck Area of Los Angeles," Masters' Thesis, University of Southern California, 1940, 45.

collectively undermined the traditional Jewish food chain. By fostering brand recognition, the business strategies of the nation's largest bakeries and food companies were designed to create a market for their goods in immigrant communities, their efforts largely reinforced by domestic reformers and affluent Jewish elites. Name-brand goods were cheaper than many handcrafted foods and were widely available in markets and groceries throughout the neighborhood to those eager to signify their identities as Americans. In addition to these processed foods, the neighborhood's vendors offered a multitude of different ethnic cuisines and baked goods for the more adventurous eater. Both the area's rabbis and Jewish small business owners attempted to combat these new influences, but they often found it difficult to convince Jewish consumers to "buy Jewish." The interdependencies that connected Jewish religious leaders, consumers, and merchants weakened in the multiethnic context of Boyle Heights and the particular commercial infrastructure that had been central to Jewish community life in the *shtetl* dissolved.

For the Jewish bakers working in the "corned beef belt," the erosion of the Jewish food chain threatened not only their jobs, but also their traditional status in the Jewish community. In Europe, their specialized skills and baked goods they produced had been sources of respect, affording them good wages and workplace autonomy. They had played a crucial role in the maintenance of Jewish community life, more important than the doctor as the Yiddish idiom above suggested. But with the abundance of food options and varieties of name brand and ethnic baked goods in Boyle Heights, their traditional value in the community waned. Like the neighborhood's religious leaders

and small business owners, they had an interest in preserving the Jewish food chain and encouraged local consumers to “buy Jewish.” As we shall see later in this chapter, the bakers did so by recasting the relationships between producers and consumers as being based on mutual interests rather than dependency or religious obligation. Their activism rebuilt the Jewish food chain around the principles of Yiddish socialism, constructing an alternative form of commercial infrastructure to both the mass consumption-oriented, assimilationist one offered by national food companies and domestic reformers and the multiethnic one that prevailed in Boyle Heights. In order to understand the activism of the Jewish bakers and the forms that it took, however, we must first explore the origins of their union.

Baking Unions in Los Angeles and the Coming of the Bread Trust

Samuel Holtzman, William Gewirtz and Frank Epstein, three of the founding members of the Jewish Bakers Union, were all born in 1883 in various parts of Poland, and immigrated to America as young men. Gewirtz and his wife met as teenagers and moved to New York together where William worked in a basement bakery and Ida gave birth to three sons and a daughter. Frank Epstein was involved in the socialist movement in Eastern Europe and left his home after the failed Russian revolution in 1905. After falling in love with a Latvian immigrant he met in New York (also named Ida), he moved to Detroit where earned enough money for the family to head West and realize the “American Dream” of home ownership. He bought a house in the hills east of Wabash Avenue in City Terrace, and began training his son Eli to follow him into his craft. Sam Holtzman left New York after the birth of his daughter and lived in Chicago

and Philadelphia before finally coming to Los Angeles in 1915. He purchased a home on Breed Street in Boyle Heights large enough to house his own three children as well as his wife's two nieces and nephew who had come with them to Los Angeles. All three of the men considered Yiddish to be their *mame loshn* ("mother tongue") but arrived in Los Angeles as naturalized citizens, able to read and write in English.³⁷ While their paths from Poland to Los Angeles differed, their stories converged in Boyle Heights.

Upon arriving in Los Angeles, these men and other Jewish bakers found work in the small retail bakeries in and around Brooklyn Avenue - including Warsaw Bakery, Thompson Brothers Bakery, Boston Bakery, Brooklyn Rye Bakery and Feinberg's - which were family enterprises owned by Master Bakers who worked alongside a few skilled craftsmen bakers and sons or relatives who served as apprentices. Some worked in larger shops in and around downtown, including Union Maid, Weitz Brothers and White Palace, the largest Jewish wholesale bakeries in town. These larger shops employed some divisions of labor - with individual bakers in charge of mixing and kneading the dough, portioning it into loaves, and loading it into and out of the oven - but the main difference between the wholesale bakeries and the retail ones was the scale of their operations and the size of their workforces, rather than the work process itself.

³⁷ The details of these men's lives come from a combination of sources: the Federal Censuses of 1920 and 1930, Los Angeles City Directories from 1923, 1928, and 1936, and California Voter Registration Records from 1928, 1932, 1936, and 1940, all accessed at Ancestry.com. While only forty of the union's 100 or so members appear in these sources, their stories are representative of the bulk of the union's membership.

The larger bakeries also employed foremen to oversee their operations and truck drivers to distribute their goods to groceries and restaurants throughout the city.³⁸



Armenian bakers in downtown Los Angeles, 1902, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library.

Even though these bakeries were not in unventilated basements like those in the east, bakers in early twentieth century Los Angeles faced difficult working conditions. Their employers often required that they work fourteen to eighteen hour days, seven days a week, to keep up with consumer demand. Some bakery owners paid their employees in lodging (allowing them to sleep in storage rooms or near the ovens) or in food (from the bakery), and others paid less than \$10 per week in wages. A bar downtown on Hill Street served as a hiring center, bakers gathering there while they waited for their dough to rise before returning to work late at night to bake the next day's bread. Those who didn't make it back from the bar were quickly replaced. Even the largest-scale bakeries in Los Angeles employed crews of five to ten bakers and a few

³⁸ A study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics delineates the various divisions of labor in the baking industry, which in many cases included a variety of shop ranks, including foremen, "oven men," "benchmen" and "mixers." But in the case of the "Hebrew Shops" in Los Angeles, the only tiers noted are foremen and journeymen, indicating that such extensive divisions had not been implemented in the city's Jewish bakeries. See "Union Scales in the Bakery, Millwork and Newspaper Printing Trades," *Monthly Labor Review* vol. VIII, no. 1 (Jan., 1919): 172-177.

bakers' helpers, making it difficult for the bakers to exert pressure on their employers or strike effectively without risking their jobs.³⁹ To protect their skills and harness their collective strength, the Jewish bakers joined Los Angeles' only baking union, Local 37 of the International Bakery and Confectionery Workers Union (B&C) of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), becoming one of several Jewish union branches created in Boyle Heights in the 1910s.

Formed in 1886 by a group of German-born bakers in New York, the B&C developed from a long tradition of craft guild organizing among bakers that extended back to fifteenth century Europe.⁴⁰ The union's earliest leaders were heavily influenced by Marxism and believed that the emancipation of the working class could only be achieved through egalitarian working-class solidarity and revolutionary workers' organizations. The B&C openly endorsed socialism, offering explications of socialist philosophy and endorsements of socialist candidates in the pages of their official organ, *The Bakers Journal*.⁴¹ But like the other craft unions of the AFL, the members of the B&C

³⁹ The conditions mentioned here come from two retrospectives by Local 37 officers: an interview with Local 37's oldest living charter member, Fritz Wild, in *Local 37 News* (Aug., 1959), 3 and a profile of Roy Barber celebrating his 40 years of leadership in Local 37 that appeared in *The Baker's Journal*, Feb 6th, 1926.

⁴⁰ The union was originally named the Journeymen Bakers Union, formed from an amalgamation of the Bakers' Progressive Club (a group of German socialist bakers) with several organizations of English-speaking bakers in the Knights of Labor. See Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *A Vision of Unity: The History of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union* (Kensington, Maryland: Published by the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers International Union, 1986).

⁴¹ Examples of the union's support for socialism include its coverage of the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910: *The Bakers Journal* vigorously denied rumors that the bombing had been perpetrated by local trade unionists and published a copy of a resolution passed by Local 37 and the other California branches of the B&C to study socialist principles and work with "progressive forces" to help elect Job Harriman, the socialist candidate for mayor. A cartoon on the cover of the *Bakers Journal* on October 15th the following week depicted a ballot box full of Socialist Party tickets with the caption, "The Bomb They Fear the Most."

built their solidarity on their shared status as craftsmen - their physical strength and their mastery of technique - limiting their membership to "skilled" bakers and controlling access to their craft through apprenticeships. The Los Angeles local was primarily composed of white ethnic immigrants of Northern European origin under the age of forty who baked bread as well as a smaller group who baked pies and fancy cakes, and excluded any bakers who did not conform to their culturally-specific understanding of the craft.⁴² They exempted the city's Mexican tortilla makers, Chinese dumpling makers, and Japanese and Italian noodle makers from their organizing drives, as well as all of the city's "unskilled" bakery workers, most of whom were Mexican immigrants. The union also exempted female bakery workers from its ranks, articulating a strictly masculine, "muscular" understanding of their craft.⁴³ By narrowly defining their craft and disciplining their membership, the bakers of Local 37 attempted to control the labor market in Los Angeles' baking industry.

Unlike some of their non-Jewish neighbors, Gewirtz, Holtzman, Epstein and the other Jewish bakers of Boyle Heights were able to join Local 37 because of the culinary traditions (baking ryes and pumpernickels) and skin color they shared with the German

⁴² Local 37 began as two separate national units - one for English-speaking bakers (Local 88) and the other for German-speaking bakers (Local 45) - which merged into one amalgamated local. As Paul Brenner has noted in his work on baking unions, Jewish bakers easily integrated into German-language locals because many spoke German or Yiddish, which is largely derived from German. See "The Formative Years of the Hebrew Baking Unions, 1881-1914." The union's "cosmopolitan" composition was described in an article about one of their smokers which highlighted the diversity of the music performed: "Bro. James Chapman from Long Beach sang Scotch melodies, Bro. Joe Geddis gave a little Irish, and Bro. Pagowitz sang songs in Jewish." See *The Bakers Journal*, July 26th, 1913.

⁴³ In a 1927 article entitled "Men Have Always Done the Baking" in their official organ *The Bakers' Journal* for example, the B&C lamented that women were entering their industry, arguing instead that employers should "pay their male employees sufficient wages to enable them to keep their wives at home and rear a family." See *The Bakers' Journal*, October 15th, 1927.

and American bakers who dominated the union. The union afforded them protections that the neighborhood's other bakers were denied and improved their wages to over \$20 a week, a significantly higher wage than the non-white minorities in the neighborhood employed in agriculture or as unskilled laborers, some of whom earned less than \$5 a week. Like the other Jewish workers in Boyle Heights, their skills and their fluency in English afforded them advantages in the racialized dual labor system that prevailed in the city, as described in Chapter One, and along with craftsmen in the building trades and the garment industry, they became part of the "aristocracy of the laboring class."⁴⁴

Those wage protections were, however, hard fought as the bakers and other trade unionists in the city faced formidable opposition from local business interests, particularly those affiliated with the Merchant and Manufacturers Association (M&M) an employers' association formed in 1894 by members of the Chamber of Commerce. Under the leadership of Harrison Gray Otis, the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, the M&M poured their social, political, and financial capital into quelling labor activism in the city, helping to pass a harsh anti-picketing ordinance in 1909 which effectively made street speeches and public protest illegal. Otis was vigorously anti-union, arguing closed shops (workplaces that were 100% union) were inherently "un-American"

⁴⁴ In her testimony, to the Commission on Industrial Relations of the United States Congress during their investigation of the "Open Shop Controversy in Los Angeles" in 1914, Frances Noel noted that many of the city's workers were making less than \$5 per week, and argued that \$20 per week would constitute a "living wage." Frances Noel's testimony in "Final Report and Testimony Submitted to the Congress by the Commission on Industrial Relations," 64th Congress, 1st Session, Doc. No. 415, vol. 4 (1916), 5729. The detail on the bakers' wage comes from "Union Scales in the Bakery, Millwork and Newspaper Printing Trades," *Monthly Labor Review* vol. VIII, no. 1 (Jan., 1919): 172-177. The phrase, "aristocracy of the laboring class" was used by the California Commission on Immigration and Housing, "A Community Survey Made in Los Angeles City" (San Francisco, 1924), 56.

because they restricted the individual worker's right to negotiate his own contract. In order to gain membership in the M&M, business owners had to vow never to sign a union contract or face a forfeiture penalty of \$500 and in turn, the M&M provided crucial support for its members when conflicts erupted over their anti-union policies. For example, during one of Local 37's strikes against Gordon Bakery, the M&M gave the bakery's owner an armed vehicle and personal bodyguards and enlisted the Los Angeles Police Department to guard his bakery. As labor historians Louis and Richard Perry described in their seminal study, "it is doubtful that the labor movement has ever faced antiunion employer groups so powerful and well organized as those in Los Angeles."⁴⁵

The owners of the city's smaller independent bakeries were less resistant to the union's efforts and Local 37 had some notable early success in improving wages and conditions in their industry. Many bakery owners had themselves been members of baking unions before opening their own businesses and continued to work alongside their employees, including Ike Notelowich, the owner of Union Maid Bakery.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵ The characterization appears in the introduction of Perry and Perry's book, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), vii. Perry and Perry also provided the description of the support provided by the M&M during the strike at Gordon's, 157. The M&M's membership policy was detailed in an article, "Los Angeles Anti-Unionists Fight Jewish Bakers" from *The Bakers Journal*, May 22nd, 1926. For more on the anti-union efforts of the M&M, see Mike Davis's article "Sunshine and The Open Shop" in *Metropolis in the Making*, eds. Thomas Sitton and Bill Deverell, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Ruth Milkman's study of the Los Angeles labor movement, *LA Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), Chapter One.

⁴⁶ Notelowich had risen to the position of foreman before retiring from the union and opening his business on Temple Street. His story and a vivid account of the Jewish baking industry in the early twentieth century appears in a series of articles entitled "Fallen Leaves (Chapters from My Notebook)" by Herman E. Robbins that appeared in *the Hebrew Industrial Food Journal*, September-October, 1965, November-December, 1965, January-February, 1966, March-April, 1966, and September-October, 1966.

cost of opening a bakery was relatively cheap and most of the bakery's expenses were labor-related, so competition between bakeries was based largely on sales price.⁴⁷ Signing a union contract guaranteed that all firms had to pay the same wages to their employees, allowing the bakery owners to compete on the merits of their products rather than by undercutting one another's labor costs, which made both workers and their employers eager to establish some form of "craft governance."⁴⁸ Signing with the union also meant bakery owners could sell their products with union labels, small versions of the B&C logo imprinted on their packaging, and capture the patronage of solidarity-minded and working consumers who comprised the lion's share of the market for store-bought bread.⁴⁹ The bakers called on fellow trade unionists and their families to "look for the union label," published "Do Not Patronize" lists in the *Los Angeles Citizen* (the organ of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council), and encouraged grocery stores, lunch counters and food trucks near worksites and in working-class

Dale Weber had similarly been a member of Local 37 since 1904 and opened Weber's, one of the city's largest wholesale bakeries. See *Local 37 News*, August, 1959.

⁴⁷ In his 1926 study, Carl L. Alsberg estimated that the average capital spent on opening bakeries was \$21,000 compared to nearly \$153,600 spent to open other manufacturing enterprises. Carl Alsberg, *Combination in the American Bread-Baking Industry; with some observations on the mergers of 1924-1925*, (New York: Arno Press, 1926), 38-39.

⁴⁸ As Andrew Wender Cohen describes in his book, *The Racketeers Progress*, both business owners' associations and unions creating informal governance mechanisms in their crafts by negotiating agreements that determined standard prices, wages and hours and "legitimate workers." See Andrew Wender Cohen, *The Racketeers' Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47- 51.

⁴⁹ Single male workers played an important role in the consumer market for baked goods as they often lived in kitchen-less rooming houses, forced to buy their meals from nearby bakeries, restaurants, delicatessens and particularly cafeterias, where one could spend 15-20 cents for a hot meal. Dorothy Sue Cobble explored how the rise of kitchen-less rooming houses helped to create a restaurant boom in the 2nd and 3rd decades of the 20th century. See Cobble, "Sisters in the Craft: Waitresses and their Unions in the Early 20th Century," PhD diss., Stanford, 1986, 29-30.

neighborhoods to carry union label bread. When boycotts failed, the bakers sometimes resorted to extra-legal means of exerting their influence on their employers: they were accused of slashing tires, cutting wires, pouring acid on bread, and other forms of sabotage.⁵⁰ Although many large employers remained hostile to union labor, Local 37 had much success with the owners of small retail bakeries like those in the Jewish sector, securing themselves a citywide contract with a 9-hour day by 1911. When Notelowich signed the citywide agreement, the rest of the city's Jewish bakery owners followed suit.⁵¹



Advertisements from the *California Jewish Voice*, 1922, courtesy of the New York Public Library.

But the industrial peace in baking was broken when, in 1915, General Baking Company bought out Bradford Bakery, one of the city's largest wholesalers, and the bread trust firms began expanding their operations in Los Angeles.⁵² The encroachment accelerated as the Chamber of Commerce and the M&M, working with the city's

⁵⁰ In a strike against Gordon's Bakery, one non-union worker alleged that he had been kidnapped and beaten, held prisoner and eventually dumped in the desert. Accounts appear in Perry and Perry's *History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 157.

⁵¹ Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 43-44.

⁵² Bradford continued to operate under the Bradford name but eventually went out of business. See "Big Trust Bakery Closes its Doors," *The Bakers Journal*, Jan. 22, 1916.

railroad interests and the Department of Water and Power, used their political capital to re-zone the area south of downtown along the eastbound tracks as a new Central Manufacturing District. To eastern manufacturers like the bread trust firms who opened branches of their corporations in the city, they offered engineering assistance and logistical support in exchange for their investment. They also used the promise of abundant cheap labor in the city to attract investors, boasting Los Angeles' reputation as the "citadel of the open shop."⁵³ The new industrialized bakeries they built imposed highly tiered divisions of labor, employing only a very few skilled Master Bakers as foremen and hiring mostly unskilled, largely non-white bakery workers to operate the mechanized mixers, kneaders, industrial-sized ovens, and wrapping machines they used at their plants. By 1923, Standard Bakeries Corporation had taken over four of the city's largest wholesalers, broken their union contracts and, along with the owners of other large, mechanized bakeries, formed the Southern California Master Bakers Association, affiliating their organization with the M&M.⁵⁴

⁵³ Mike Davis has described this "branch-plant industrialization" model in his article, "Sunshine and the Open Shop." While the baking corporations of the baking trust tended to buy-out existing bakeries rather than build new plants, many of the small principles applied. See "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 106-108. Robert Fogelson cites the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce for coining the title "Citadel of the Open Shop" in 1926, See *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 130.

⁵⁴ The 1923 merger included Purity Bread Company, Pacific Bread Company, Long Beach Bread Company and Beverly Hills Baking Company. After several additional mergers, they were taken over by Continental Baking Company in November, 1924. See Panschar, *Baking in America*, 156-157, also Perry and Perry, *History of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles*, 223.



Mixers at an industrial baking plant in the early twentieth century, courtesy of thefreshloaf.com

As their 1911 city-wide agreement crumbled, the leaders of Local 37 decided that organizing all of Los Angeles' bakery workers was vital to their ability to combat the increasing influence of the bread trust, even if they were not, by the union's definition, craftsmen. Their exclusion of unskilled bakery workers left a large pool of "scabs" willing to work for lower wages that could employers could easily hire as replacements as they mechanized their bakeries. In anticipation of the B&C's Annual National Convention in 1923, which was to be held in Los Angeles, the union launched its first industry-wide organizing drive offering reduced dues and other financial incentives to members who brought any non-union bakers or "unskilled" bakery helpers into the union.⁵⁵

At the Convention, Local 37, along with B&C locals in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and New York, submitted a resolution calling for all locals of the B&C to adopt an

⁵⁵ The drive resulted in two attempts to create branches and unions for the Mexican bakers, one in October 1924 (as reported by International Organizer Rudolph Schirra in *The Bakers Journal*, Oct. 25th, 1924), the other in 1926 (as reported by District Organizer Roy Barber in *The Bakers Journal*, Oct. 9th, 1926).

“industrial form of organization,” and organize all bakery employees regardless of skill.⁵⁶ They advocated for regional and national approaches, calling for contracts that would govern all bakers who worked for a particular corporate baking firm rather than negotiating separate contracts at each individual subsidiary and in individual cities. Even though the B&C’s leadership rejected the resolution and dismissed the idea of industrial unionism, the 1923 Convention marked a fundamental shift in attitudes among Los Angeles’ bakers: they embraced a solidarity based on their shared employers and workplaces rather than their shared status as craftsmen. The leaders of the union had elected to broaden their model of class-consciousness to fight the bread trust bakeries’ attempt to impose the open shop on their industry.⁵⁷

But at the same convention in 1923, the Jewish bakers rejected Local 37’s new approach, and with the support of Jewish baking unions from all over the country, submitted a resolution requesting their own independent charter, over protests from Local 37’s leaders. The resolution was short, citing simply their desire to conduct their own business, so it is difficult to know exactly why they wanted their own union.⁵⁸ But their choice to do so, in the face of criticism from their former union brothers, suggests

⁵⁶ The minutes of the 18th Convention of the B&C in Los Angeles in *The Bakers Journal*, Oct. 27th, 1923.

⁵⁷The B&C Executive Board asserted that, “only logical solution of the problem [of the bread trust] ... is to maintain the present campaign form of our organization.” See “Minutes of the 18th Convention” in *The Bakers Journal*, Nov. 17th, 1923. The B&C would not adopt an industrial organizing style until the 1930s, as will be explored in the next chapter.

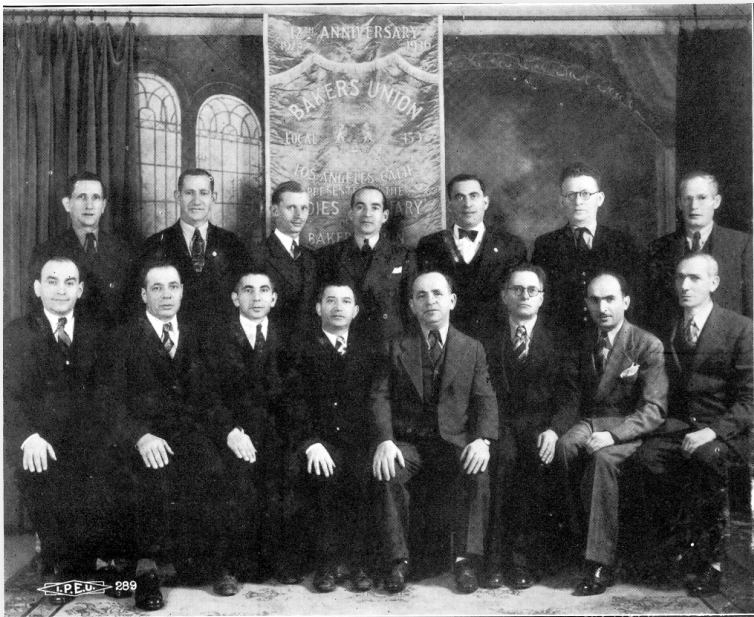
⁵⁸ See “Minutes of the 18th Convention” as appears in the *The Bakers Journal*, Nov. 17th, 1923. Local 37 submitted a resolution “protesting the granting of an independent charter...” because they felt that it would undermine their goal of organizing all of the bakers of Los Angeles into one “industrial” union. But the resolution proposing independence for the Jewish bakers of Los Angeles was introduced by other Jewish baking unions who used Yiddish in their activism: Local 45 (Boston), Local 115 (Montreal), Local 163 (Brooklyn), Local 169 (Bronx), Local 201 (Philadelphia), Local 237 (Chicago) and Local 305 (New York), and eventually won approval despite Local 37’s protest.

both practical and ideological motivations. On the most basic level, they may simply have believed that negotiating contracts with “unskilled” bakery workers would threaten their wages and hours. Although some may have supported the merits industrial unionism, most members of the Jewish branch continued to work in small, un-mechanized bakeries that employed exclusively skilled Jewish bakers. Their wages had risen to over \$55-60 per week and they had successfully maintained “closed shops” in their sector of the industry.⁵⁹ They likely worried that if they negotiated their contracts with workers at industrial baking plants, their wage standards would fall. Some may have absorbed the racist logic of the dual labor system that prevailed in the city, and believed that as skilled “craftsmen,” they were fundamentally superior to unskilled, non-white bakery workers. They may not have wanted to surrender their status as Master Bakers or worried that they might risk losing the advantages it afforded them. They likely wanted to maintain the status quo in their industry because it was working well for them.

The timing of the B&C convention also suggests that the bakers’ choice to pursue their own union was motivated by their commitment to Yiddish socialism and their desire to wed their organizing efforts to the project of cultivating Jewish national self-consciousness in Boyle Heights. The B&C convention coincided with the height of the conflicts that erupted among the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights described in Chapter One, and the bakers likely became part of the vociferous debates between individuals and organizations based in Boyle Heights about how to balance their dual

⁵⁹ The wage statistic comes from the California Department of Industrial Relations, *Special Bulletin* no. 4 (1931).

goals of fostering working-class solidarity and Yiddish-based Jewish nationalism. While the leaders of their parent union believed their shift to an industry-wide organizing model to be an extension of the B&C's socialist philosophy, the Jewish bakers likely felt it would limit their ability to use Yiddish, and in turn, their efforts to build Jewish nationalism in their union and the local community. Having their own union would allow them to pursue their own model of class-consciousness, fusing their class-consciousness as workers with their national self-consciousness as Jews as a means of balancing their dual goals. Instead of changing their strategies to fit the mass production model, the Jewish bakers would preserve their traditional understanding of their craft by reinventing the Jewish food chain to reflect the secular principles of Yiddish socialism. After a B&C mandated trial period of six months, the Jewish bakers of Los Angeles were granted their own charter as Local 453, electing William Gewirtz as their first president and Sam Holtzman as their first business agent. In February 1924, they submitted their by-laws in Yiddish.



Members of Local 453's executive Board at their 12th Anniversary in 1936, as appeared in the Souvenir Journal from their 15th Anniversary Celebration in 1939. Courtesy of the Doheny Library, University of Southern California.

The Jewish Bakers Union Local 453

For three years, the Jewish bakers of Local 453 proudly boasted that their sector of the baking industry was 100% organized. But by 1926, the alliance between Jewish bakery owners and the employees was broken when, under the competitive pressures of the bread trust, the bakery owners formed the Hebrew Master Bakers League and joined the M&M, pledging their commitment to the open shop. Eleven bakery owners who had signed a contract with Local 453 in the previous year joined the League, including former ally Ike Notelowich, severed their ties to the union, pledged their commitment to the M&M's "American" plan and refused to accept the wage and benefits standards of the union contract.⁶⁰ The League members vowed that they would "never again" work under "union domination" and maintain open shops even if

⁶⁰ "Bakeries Adopt Open-Shop Plan" *Los Angeles Times* May 2nd, 1926. See also "Fallen Leaves," Herman Robbins recollections in *The Hebrew Food Journal*, October, 1966.

the union accepted changes to their contract. The union members had not requested any changes in their wages scales or conditions, but the employers in the League began hiring non-union, non-Jewish replacement workers before the union contract expired. Insisting that the “meddling of outside influences, hostile to organized labor” had caused the conflict, the members of Local 453 immediately went on strike.⁶¹

Local 453 employed three strategies in the strike of 1926 that defined their model of trade unionism in the 1920s: a massive union label publicity campaign, their Cooperative Bakery, and gift-giving. All three built on ones they had inherited from their parent union and infused them with the spirit of Yiddish-based Jewish nationalism. Each strategy cultivated shared interests between workers in Jewish food businesses and workers in Jewish homes, harnessing the “purchasing power” of the Jewish public by empowering women to assert their role in the Jewish food chain. And each emphasized the importance of the Jewish bakers role in the Jewish community serving to reframe the interdependencies between Jewish producers and consumers around the principles of mutuality, cooperative self-help and Yiddish socialism. Using Yiddish, they encouraged the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights to resist assimilation and mass consumption and to shop as an expression of their ethnic identity. Their activism served not only to cultivate ethnic class-consciousness, but also to construct a Jewish commercial infrastructure based in *yidische kultur* in the multiethnic marketplace of Boyle Heights.

⁶¹ Details on the strike come from several articles in various local newspapers, including “Ovens Not Cooled by Walkout,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 3rd, 1926, *The Bakers’ Journal* May 22, 1926, and *The Los Angeles Citizen*, June 5th, 1926.

The first of the bakers' strategies built on one that the locals of the B&C had used for decades: they launched a publicity campaign to boost for the union label. Local 453's union label campaign capitalized on traditions of Jewish eating related to the observance kosher dietary laws, asking Jewish consumers, already accustomed to scrutinizing how their food was made, to "*koifn broit bloyz mit'n union leybel*" (buy bread exclusively with the union label) as a means of supporting the bakers. They published advertisements with the union label in local Yiddish-language newspapers and distributed flyers and leaflets appealing the their neighbors sense of national self-consciousness as Jews by framing the B&C's emblem with Yiddish-language appeals. They encouraged the buying public to see that a union label was a stronger indication of a loaf of bread's quality and sanitation standards than a brand-name, and that if they wanted to "buy Jewish" as a means of supporting the local Jewish community, they should "buy union." Mimicking the corporate logos of national firms and emergent brand name goods, Local 453 encouraged visual recognition of union label, forging an association of the label with *yidishe kultur*.



"*Bekers Union Local 453 Apelirt tsu koifn broit und cake productn mit dem union leybel*" ("Bakers Union Local 453 appeals to [you] to buy bread and cake products with the union label") appeared in *Di Yiddishe Presse*, Aug. 7th, 1936. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

Unlike their parent union, Local 453 allowed women to direct their union label campaigns. Although women were barred from membership in the union, Local 453 created a Ladies' Auxiliary for their wives, daughters and mothers who wanted to involve themselves in the union's activism, with Ida Gewirtz serving as its first president. The union's leaders recognized that women had access to the semi-private networks formed through shared domestic duties within the neighborhood, and could mobilize members of the community who shared an interest in food prices but might have been ideologically opposed to other forms of activism, particularly religiously observant women less involved with local workplace politics.⁶² During the strike of 1926, the members of the Auxiliary made house-to-house visits throughout the neighborhood, distributed flyers and walked the picket line alongside union members. The women of Boyle Heights used the union label to define their own version of "proper" consumption and to teach the neighborhood's residents how to shop with a social conscience.⁶³

Local 453 not only mobilized the members of their Ladies' Auxiliary, but also the members of the Jewish Consumers League, a cooperative buying club formed by female members of the Socialist Party in 1918. The League was part of a vibrant cooperative movement in the city, one of over one hundred cooperative stores and clubs associated

⁶² "Formation of Women's Union Label Leagues" *The Bakers Journal*, Feb. 8th, 1913. The B&C advocated for women to be mobilized in union label campaigns by arguing that, "undoubtedly the women are in a better position than men to destroy among the members of their own sex existing prejudices against union matters."

⁶³ Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Meg Jacobs' *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

with the Los Angeles Cooperative League (LACL).⁶⁴ The groups associated with the LACL aimed to restructure the means through which goods and services were distributed, cutting out capitalist “middle men” by pooling their members’ resources to purchase staple items in bulk. Members of the Jewish Consumers’ League formed reading groups to discuss the socialist principles of the cooperative movement and their held own classes and seminars on household management.⁶⁵ Although its membership included men, the League provided an additional avenue through which the women of Boyle Heights could articulate their own version of “proper” American buying habits.

While domestic reformers and religious leaders criticized the food choices made by working-class women, Local 453 empowered the women of Boyle Heights to assert the importance of their role in the Jewish food chain by working closely with local Yiddish-based women’s organizations. They highlighted their shared interests, teaching the bread purchasers of Boyle Heights that the union label was a symbol of quality, cleanliness and purity, an alternative to the “U” of the kosher overseers. As historians Paula Hyman and Dana Frank have shown, consumer organizing had been a tradition among Jewish women extending back to the bread riots of nineteenth century Europe that helped housewives to find their political voices. Since many immigrant women couldn’t vote because of citizenship or literacy, protests surrounding the cost of food and the “struggle for fair prices” provided a vehicle for their political

⁶⁴ Originally formed to provide food for striking railroad workers in the 1890s, the LACL had grown during the First World War to include over 9,000 members by 1919. See Florence Parker, *The First 125 Years: A History of Distributive and Service Cooperation in the United States, 1829-1954*, (Chicago: Cooperative League of the U.S.A., 1956), 83-84, 97, 127. Details on the Consumers League come from *Zunland 3* (1925), 104-105.

⁶⁵ *Zunland*, 105.

mobilization.⁶⁶ By allowing women to take the lead in their union label campaigns, Local 453 showed the Jewish women of Boyle Heights that their struggle for fair prices and the union's struggle for fair wages were one and the same, cultivating solidarity among producers and consumers. Women became militant agitators at Local 453's events: they faced arrests like those during the 1926 strike and sometimes physical violence: one member of the Auxiliary was beaten so badly at a strike in 1936 that she lost the use of her left eye.⁶⁷

Local 453's relationship to the women of Boyle Heights was also crucial to their second strategy: their Cooperative Bakery. The Jewish Consumers' League had originally opened the Bakery on Temple Street in 1919 to expand their cooperative buying activities, allowing its members to buy shares that would guarantee them bread at a reduced price. The League and members of the Socialist Party were given equal representation on the bakery's Board of Directors, which managed the Bakery's day-to-day operations, and the Bakery employed exclusively union bakers.⁶⁸ In addition to

⁶⁶ Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests," from *Feminist Studies* vol. 11, no. 2 (Summer, 1985): 255-285; Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History*, vol. 70, no. 1 (Sept., 1980): 91- 105.

⁶⁷"*Beker Union Anerpent 'Folks-Zeitung' als fartaydiker fun folks interest*" ("The Baker's Union recognizes the 'People's Newspaper' for its Defense of the People's Interests"), *Di Yiddishe Presse* Aug. 7th, 1936. According to the article, Mrs. Lubitzer, wife of long-time member Mandel Lubitzer, was viciously beaten at the strike, as was Local 453 member Joe Bronstein.

⁶⁸ The Board of Directors' structure was designed to "balance" the interests of both the *rekhte* and *linke* of the Socialist Party as well as the League by allotting them equal numbers of seats. The events of the Bakery are described in a series of letters and memos between William Schneiderman and the CP national offices. He recommended eliminating the bakery in a memo on the "LA Controversy" in November, 1926 that was a response to the National office's complaints about the failures of the Center to report on its activities. The Central Executive Committee then advised Schneiderman that the problems with "certain small business establishments" would be solved by shifting the Party's activities away from the Cooperative Center and towards factories and shops. See Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives [microfilm], Roll 48, Delo 683.

serving its members, the Cooperative operated a large wholesale distribution network to local grocers and restaurants, at its peak maintaining a fleet of six delivery trucks.⁶⁹ But the members of Local 453 who worked at the Bakery grew frustrated with the workers' lack of control, particularly the bakery's foreman Max Davidson. Davidson was a member of the "group of 20" *linke* activists that had been at the center of the conflicts at the *Arbeter Ring* school (see Chapter One) and had spent several years working as a member of Local 201 in Philadelphia, where the union had waged a successful strike against the Ward Baking Corporation by opening a cooperative bakery.⁷⁰ Along with Joe Bronstein, Frank Epstein, other *linke* members of Local 453, Davidson called for a restructuring of the Board of Directors so that the management of the Bakery's daily operations would be in the hands of its workers. They proposed moving the Bakery to the Cooperative Center on Brooklyn Avenue, home of the Yiddish branch of the Workers (Communist) Party (CPLA). The Board of Directors quickly fired Davidson and rejected the proposal of the left-wingers. But the shareholders of the Cooperative Bakery sided with the union, voting at a meeting in early 1926 to move the Bakery to the Cooperative Center and replace its Board of

⁶⁹ Herman E. Robbins, former editor of the *Hebrew Industrial Food Journal*, described the Cooperative Bakery as "one of the largest in the city," noting its six trucks in a series of articles he wrote between 1965 and 1966 reflecting on his experiences as in the early 20th century, which were later consolidated into short article on "Jewish Bakery History Los Angeles" by the editors of *Western States Jewish History*. See "Jewish Bakery History Los Angeles, 1849-1926," as appears in *Western States Jewish History* vol. xxxv, no. 2 (Winter, 2003): 122- 143.

⁷⁰ Bernard Weinstein, *Di Yiddishe Unions in Amerika* (Jewish Unions in America) (New York: United Jewish Geverkshaften, 1929), 439.

Directors. Davidson was re-appointed as manager of the Bakery, and Local 453 took control of the Bakery's operations.⁷¹

Increased control over the Bakery's affairs allowed the union to use it as the site of their work-sharing program and prolong their strike in 1926. Rather than pay out benefits to unemployed members as their parent union had done, Local 453 asked all regularly employed members to donate one to two hours of work a week to those without jobs, ensuring that every member could have at least three days of work per week.⁷² But the strike left almost two-thirds of the union's members out of work, and the bakers of Local 453 did not have enough positions at the few union bakeries that remained to find work for their striking members. Expanding production at the Cooperative Bakery not only created additional jobs for out-of-work union members, but it also allowed the bakers to distribute food to anyone seeking to cross their picket lines. By increasing production at the Bakery during the strike of 1926, the union flooded the market with union-label bread, applying additional pressure to the members of the Hebrew Master Bakers Association by luring away their customers.⁷³

⁷¹ Davidson and Bronstein were both members of the "group of 20" who had caused so much conflict at the *Arbeter Ring* school. Details concerning the shake-up caused by the "group of 20" come from a handwritten letter Jan. 13th, 1926, from a CPLA member named Globerman to the CPUSA's president Charles Ruthenberg, see Files of the Communist Party, Roll 48, Delo 683. Details on the conflicts at the Cooperative Bakery come from a report Aug. 12th, 1926, Files of the Communist Party, Roll 48, Delo 683.

⁷² "Unemployment in the Local Unions," *The Bakers Journal*, Sept. 29th, 1928.

⁷³ Herman E. Robbins noted this strategy of flooding the city with union-made bread during the 1926 in his articles "Jewish Bakery History Los Angeles, 1849-1926," 126, 138-139. Robbins, who had played a formative role in organizing the new, anti-union Hebrew Bakers League, was highly critical of the Cooperative, charging that the bakery was "dominated" by the "leftist element" and had built its "extensive wholesale business with propaganda and coercion." He argued that they offered to expand the union's role at their Bakery to "flood the city with Union-produced bread and crush the small "bosses" who would dare to defy organized labor." This he said was part of their plot to eliminate

The Cooperative Bakery embodied the bakers' alternative model of the Jewish food chain. Absent were the hierarchical relationships of the commercial infrastructure of the *shtetl*, in their place a version of interdependency built on mutual interests and the socialist principles of the cooperative movement. At the Cooperative, "workplace" concerns resulting from women's labor in the home – their struggle for fair prices – and the workplace concerns of craftsmen – their struggle for fair wages – were equally important.⁷⁴ While the union label campaigns maintained gendered hierarchies and relegated women to a secondary (albeit complementary) role, women served in the Cooperative's administration, transforming the power dynamic between producers and consumers. At the Bakery, interdependency was a positive value, a benefit to producers, consumers and the community as a whole. And the Bakery was a success, growing from an estimated 150 members and \$50,000 a year of business in 1925 to over 700 members and \$81,461 in annual sales in 1928.⁷⁵

The restructuring of the Cooperative Bakery also strengthened the ties between Local 453 and the *linke* affiliated with the Cooperative Center just as their union-label campaigns strengthened their ties to women's and consumer groups in the neighborhood. The Bakery included a small café, their clientele including not only the 150 Bakery shareholders but also people using the Center's meeting halls, auditoriums,

competition so that they could "[entrench] deeper into Jewish groceries, thereby gaining greater distribution."

⁷⁴ See Frank, Dana *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929*, 60.

⁷⁵ From California State Relief Administration, "Handbook of Consumer Cooperatives in California," September, 1935 (San Francisco: State Emergency Relief Administration Research Project), 45.

and offices, including the neighborhood sub-district of CPLA.⁷⁶ But after the re-organization of the bakery, it operated under union control, not beholden to CPLA and certainly not the Communist Party International. The City Executive Committee lamented their lack of control over the Bakery, withdrawing their support from the Bakery and criticizing the Center's "small business activities."⁷⁷ The Party similarly complained that the members of the Consumers' League were too focused on "consumer" issues and weren't sufficiently involving themselves in trade unions or political campaigns.⁷⁸ Both the union and the League conducted their activities at the Cooperative Bakery independent of CPLA's endorsement and financial backing, and in spite their criticism.

The Cooperative Bakery also served as an outlet for any potential conflicts that might have erupted between the union's more moderate leaders, like Gewirtz and

⁷⁶ Details on the relationship between the Cooperative Bakery and CPLA come from a lawsuit filed against the LAPD by the Cooperative Consumers League in 1932. While the shareholders of the League acknowledged that the Bakery paid them rent, the LAPD alleged that the Bakery received financial support. Details surrounding the lawsuit appear in Files of the Communist Party, Roll 225, Delo 2917. I have found no evidence to support the LAPD's claim that the Bakery received funds from the sub-district and considering the CPLA leaders' severe critique of the Bakery during the 1926 controversy, it seems most likely that the Bakery largely operated independently.

⁷⁷ In a letter from Albert Brooks, who managed the Café in the Cooperative Center, he lamented CPLA's lack of control over its various affiliated businesses, including the bakery and the Cooperative Press and bookstore. Letter appears in the Miriam Brooks Sherman Collection, Southern California Library for Social Science Research. CPLA District organizer William Schneiderman recommended eliminating the Bakery as a response to the National office's complaints about the failures of the Center to report on its activities in a memo from November, 1926 on the "Los Angeles Controversy." The Central Executive Committee then advised Schneiderman that the problems with "certain small business establishments" would be solved by shifting the Party's activities away from the Center and towards factories and shops. See Files of the Communist Party, Roll 48, Delo 683.

⁷⁸ In a 1927 letter, the leaders of CPLA criticized the Consumer's League for becoming faction and lamented that its membership was only involved in consumer issues and not in trade unions or politics. The District Executive Committee elected Rose Rubin as a sub-district (Jewish fraction) organizer in March, 1928 to increase their control over the League. See memo regarding Rubin's appointment, April 1st, 1928, Files of the Communist Party of the USA [microfilm], Reel 108, Delo 1435.

Holtzman, and its *linke* members like Davidson and Brownstein. Its proximity to CPLA was controversial and not all members of the union worked at the Bakery. While other local *linke* unions rented offices in the Center, Local 453 held its meetings several blocks away on East First Street. But by incorporating the Bakery into their existing organizing efforts, Local 453 forged a means through which both the *rekhte* and the *linke* members of the union could collaborate. As a result, they largely avoided the partisan bickering and factionalism that divided most of the neighborhood's Jewish unions in the 1920s. The Bakery did become a more contentious issue among the union members when the Cooperative Center became a target in the anti-communist crusades of the LAPD's Red Squad in the early 1930s, as will be explored in Chapter Three, but in the 1920s, it was a crucial component of the bakers' activism.

The bakers of Local 453 used the ovens at their Cooperative Bakery to fuel their third strategy: gifting baked goods. Members of Local 453 donated food - pies, loaves of rye, fancy cakes and bagels - to striking members of local unions, including both Jewish unions in the neighborhood and their parent union, Local 37. Their delicacies served as raffle prizes at fundraisers for the Home for the Aged, dessert at banquets and dances in honor of and the City of Hope, and food for fundraiser picnics for the Mt. Sinai Home for Incurables.⁷⁹ Local 453 also donated *challah* and *matzoh* neighborhood synagogues, reaching out to the neighborhood's religiously faithful population who may have otherwise rejected the bakers' disruptive activism and left-wing politics. And all of the donated bread and treats came in packaging emblazoned with the union label.

⁷⁹ *The Bakers' Journal*, Sept. 19th, 1931 and May 29th, 1937.

Like the Cooperative, gift-giving highlighted the mutual interests between the bakers and the neighborhood's Jewish community, and underscored the union's commitment to cooperative self-help. Local 453 donated their baked goods to organizations across a wide ideological spectrum - religious and secular, philanthropic and proletarian, Zionist and anti-Zionist, apolitical and radical - allowing Local 453 to build a broad-based coalition that transcended personal and organizational rivalries. Local 453's gift-giving in turn became a common pursuit and source of unity among the union's membership, who had different beliefs and experiences, and different understandings of the goals of Yiddish-based community mobilization. All the union asked for in return for its gifts was that the recipients "*koifn broit bloyz mit'n union leybel*" (buy [their] bread exclusively with the union label). Despite their left-wing associations, Local 453's gift-giving earned them the support of Rabbi Julius Leibert of Temple Sinai and Rabbi Solomon Neches whose support proved a crucial source of leverage against the Hebrew Master Bakers during their 1926 strike.⁸⁰ Thanks to the rabbis' support, buying union-label bread became a part of living a "modern Orthodox" American life in Boyle Heights.

The combination of the bakers' union label publicity campaign, their Cooperative Bakery, and their gift-giving strategy served to construct a secular alternative to the traditional Jewish food chain based on mutual aid and cooperative self-help. The bakers encouraged the neighborhood's residents to see their interdependence as a positive value, and that through collectivism and mutuality, they could ameliorate the

⁸⁰ Both rabbis spoke at a mass meeting in support of Local 453 during a strike in 1932. See *The Bakers Journal*, Jan. 30th, 1932.

lives of all of the neighborhood's Jewish residents. They appealed not only to their community's material interests, but also their interests in Yiddish-based Jewish nationalism and Jewish community renewal, showing them that by buying union, they could shop with a social conscience. Their activism injected the buying and eating of food with social meaning, substituting the traditional religious values attached to food with the secular values of Yiddish socialism. They combated the influence of the bread trust and the imposition of mass production in their industry by making food part of *yidische kultur* in the neighborhood. And in doing so, they constructed an ethnic market within the neighborhood's multiethnic one, fortifying their employers' pleas that the local community "buy Jewish." Buying union-label bread became a tradition among the Jewish community of Boyle Heights: in the three years that followed their 1926 strike, Local 453 applied union labels to over 13 million loaves, ranking them fourth among all B&C locals.⁸¹

And, in a time of conflict surrounding the politics of Jewish identity in Boyle Heights, the bakers' activism cultivated class-consciousness among a Jewish population who differed in terms of income, religious and ideological beliefs, and background. Their strategies defined consumption as a class interest, positioning their version of the Jewish food chain in opposition to the capitalist organization of the market for bread based on mass production and mass consumption of commodities. Their campaigns translated shared interests into collective social action, providing means for the

⁸¹ The top three locals were much larger unions in Chicago, St. Louis and New York. The totals of their union-label sales appear in the Report of the General Executive Board at the 20th Convention of the B&C in Pittsburgh, reprinted in the *Bakers Journal* Sept. 21st, 1929.

residents of the neighborhood to engage in class-based actions without demanding that they were “members” of a Marxist conception of the “working class.” Their practices became socially established, what John C. Hall would characterize as “institutional,” structuring the meaning of shopping and eating among the Jewish community of Boyle Heights in new secular ways.⁸² As a result, the Bakers Union became a significant force in Yiddish-based community organizing and the Jewish labor movement in Los Angeles.

The centrality of the role that the bakers played in Boyle Heights was physically embodied in their Bakers’ Building at the Jewish Consumptive Relief Association’s Sanatorium, known as the City of Hope, which was dedicated during their annual celebration in May 1928. Tuberculosis and other chronic lung diseases were common among bakers in the early twentieth century because most worked in basement bakeries with wood-burning ovens that lacked proper ventilation and plumbing.⁸³ Local 453 had levied taxes on their members since the union’s founding to support the building’s construction and solicited over \$10,000 in donations from other B&C locals, local bakery owners, and Yiddish-based community organizations and members of the Jewish Carpenters, Painters, Electricians, Plumbers and Bricklayers unions had all donated

⁸² As Hall described in his article, “Reworking Class Analysis,” when practices like “buying union” become socially established, they take on an power of their own; like institutions, social practices can “structure ever new conditions under which individual and group class meanings, interests and actions develop.” See “Reworking Class Analysis,” in *Reworking Class*, ed. John C. Hall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 16.

⁸³ According to an article in *The Bakers Journal* from April 16th, 1910, approximately 250 out of every 100,000 workers in the baking industry died of consumption and 117.4 out of every 100,000 died of pneumonia. The article estimated that while on average, 110 out of every 100,000 Americans died of chronic lung disease, 367.5 out of every 100,000 bakers did.

their time to help with its construction. Over 1,000 of their supporters gathered to dedicate the building and the President of the California State Federation of Labor, the Secretary of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, organizers from the B&C International, and representatives from several local Jewish organizations and synagogues gave speeches in their honor.⁸⁴

However successful, the activism and achievements of the bakers of Local 453 were limited to the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. The bakers' narrow definition of their craft and commitment to using Yiddish in their activism, while in some ways crucial to their success, also confined the scope of their influence. While their parent union recognized the pitfalls of their exclusionary organizing practices, the bakers continued to limit their membership to Jews and separate themselves from the broader labor movement by isolating themselves in Boyle Heights. However radical their strategies and ideologies may have been, their continued prioritization of Jewish nationalism made them somewhat conservative. As the next Chapter will show, the economic collapse of the early 1930s and arrival of thousands of destitute migrants in the city exposed the weaknesses of the bakers' approach. The unprecedented unemployment of the early 1930s initiated a period of reflection and re-evaluation for the Jewish Bakers' Union and all of the individuals and organizations engaged in mobilizing Los Angeles' workers. And as we shall see, the bakers and their allies applied their consciousness-raising strategies in new ways, waging a "fight for bread" that transformed their activism forever.

⁸⁴ The dedication ceremony was highlighted in a full-page article with an image of the building in *The Bakers Journal*, May 28th, 1928.

CHAPTER THREE:

MAKING AN AMERICAN UNION: THE JEWISH BAKERS, THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE NEW DEAL

“By supporting organized bakery workers and demanding the label of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers’ International Union of America you are doing your bit to assure the union bakery worker a good living for himself and his family. You are guaranteeing the United States a future generation of normal and healthy young men and women... You will be doing your duty as an American citizen and as consumers to help raise a group of people to a higher place in this life...Make sure that your daily bread is union made.”

- Union Label Radio Broadcast, *The Bakers Journal*, April 2nd, 1938.

In the 1920s, like other Jewish unions in the neighborhood, the Jewish Bakers of Local 453 had narrowly defined their craft, exempted non-Jews from their membership, and focused their activism within the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. They had used their three strategies to heighten the national self-consciousness of the neighborhood’s residents, calling on them to “buy Jewish,” and worked to construct a distinctly Jewish commercial infrastructure in the multiethnic marketplace in the neighborhood. At the B&C Convention in 1923, the Jewish bakers rejected industrial unionism and instead opted to break from their parent union so that they could conduct their affairs independent from the other union bakers in the city. But over the course of the 1930s, the rhetoric, organizing style, and attitudes of the members of the Jewish Bakers Union fundamentally changed. The Depression forced the bakers to confront the limitations of their activism and renegotiate the balance between their dual commitments to socialism and Jewish nationalism. By the end of the decade, the Jewish Bakers Union had opened their membership to include unskilled workers and non-Jews and adopted an industrial organizing style. As the above passage suggests, the bakers came to embrace new understandings of their craft and their identities; although they never changed the

name of their union, in their rhetoric they cast themselves as American bakery workers, serving not only the welfare of their Jewish community but also American society as a whole.

The federal government played an instrumental role in the bakers' transformation. A combination of new agricultural and industrial policies established by the New Deal served to institutionalize mass production in all food related industries and facilitated the market dominance of national food companies like the bread trust, and the Jewish food chain the bakers had created in the 1920s was absorbed into a national food system. The policies of the New Deal also established a national system of industrial relations and protections for collective bargaining designed to boost workers' wages as a solution to the economic crisis. These new protections empowered the long beleaguered unions of Los Angeles, initiating a wave of organizing activity that increased wages and improved working conditions for thousands of workers. The legislation also exempted a considerable portion of Los Angeles' workforce and extended privileges to the bakers and the other Jewish workers in Boyle Heights that some of their non-Jewish neighbors were denied. As several scholars have shown, the protections of the New Deal remade European ethnic immigrant workers like the bakers into a new, white American working class.¹

¹ Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: an Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

But the bakers' adoption of industrial unionism and their new identification as American workers were also owed to their involvement in two grassroots movements among the unemployed that emerged in Los Angeles during the depths of the Depression: the Communist Party's "fight for bread" and the cooperative movement. Each of these movements emphasized mutual interests and used the shared struggles of everyday life as vehicles of community mobilization, echoing the strategies that the bakers had used in the 1920s. The bakers and the other Jewish workers in Boyle Heights joined these two movements through their Yiddish-based fraternal organizations, the *linke* International Workers Order and the *rekhte Arbeter Ring*, but both organizations, in different ways, expanded the scale and scope of their activities in the early 1930s beyond the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. Participating in the activism of these two movements cultivated a sense of solidarity that was both interethnic and intra-ethnic, heightening the bakers' collective identity with their fellow Jews and with their non-Jewish neighbors.² And both movements had a particularly powerful impact on the younger American-born residents of Boyle Heights giving rise to a new generation of unionists who played crucial roles in the organizing drives that followed.

This chapter will examine how this powerful combination of grassroots community activism and the policies of the New Deal changed the attitudes and approaches of the members of the Jewish Bakers Union Local 453. I begin by exploring the impact of the Depression on the union and the Jewish community of Boyle Heights,

² Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 32.

highlighting a failed strike in 1931-32 that resulted in intense ideological debates and the near collapse of the union. I then examine the bakers' involvement in CPLA's "fight for bread" and the cooperative movement, showing how these movements reoriented the bakers' activism and their understandings of how to make social change. I argue that while the ideological debates between the *rekhte* and the *linke* deepened in the early 1930s, both the International Workers' Order and the *Arbeter Ring* forged new relationships with non-Jewish organizations in the neighborhood through their involvement in community organizing among the unemployed. And finally, I highlight the impact of the New Deal on the bakers' activism and the labor movement in Los Angeles, and how the structural support of the state facilitated their adoption of industrial unionism and the growth of the labor movement in the city. Although even at the peak of its growth in the end of the decade, the Jewish Bakers Union remained a small organization with less than two hundred members, exploring their transformation in the 1930s allows us to better understand the effects of Great Depression and the New Deal on the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights.

Unemployment and the Baking Industry in the early 1930s

While the effects of the stock market crash on Los Angeles' economy were somewhat delayed, by April 1931, over 100,000 of the city's workers were unemployed, roughly 20% of the labor force. Los Angeles' unemployment problems were made worse by the arrival of thousands of destitute migrants who had been displaced by the economic downturn, including "Okies" and "Arkies" displaced by drought and

evictions, and migrants from the east and Midwest.³ By 1932, the California State Unemployment Commission estimated that the total number of unemployed living in Los Angeles had risen to over 344,000, almost 30% of the city's eligible workers. A large encampment of unemployed workers and their families, or "Hooverville," developed south of downtown near 85th Street and Alameda, and another near the Plaza downtown. Even those who managed to keep their jobs saw their wages and hours decline: the average per capita income of employed workers dropped over 30% between 1929 and 1933, from \$1480 annually to \$995. Confident that the city's charities could provide for the needs of the truly disadvantaged, Mayor John Porter and the Los Angeles City Council refused to expand the city's direct relief programs, instead channeling city funds to the development of the aqueduct in the Owens Valley and the construction of the Los Angeles Coliseum in advance of the 1932 Olympics.⁴

The effects of the Depression hit the Mexican community in Boyle Heights particularly hard. Racist and xenophobic attitudes toward Mexican immigrants flared during the Depression as American born workers and employers blamed their economic woes on Mexican "scab" workers. Even President Hoover went so far as to criticize Mexicans as having "[taken] jobs away from American citizens" and threatened to ramp up the government's deportation efforts. Although fewer than 300 Mexicans were actually deported in the ensuing years, threats from Hoover and local city officials were enough to induce other Mexican residents to leave voluntarily. The Mexican

³ See James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 30.

⁴ William H. Mullins, *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 56, 91. His description of Mayor Porter's responses appears on page 35.

Consulate became actively involved in the repatriation campaign, offering a special discounted train fares on the Mexican National railroad to Mexican citizens who wanted to return home. By 1935, over 13,000 Mexican residents of Los Angeles had returned to Mexico, resulting in a depopulation of the city's Mexican community by as much as 30% between 1930 and 1935.⁵

But the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights were rocked by the impact of the Great Depression as well. Because of their skills and their skin color, they had since the 1910s been among the most affluent residents of the neighborhood, comprising a majority of the neighborhood's small business owners and professionals. As the Depression deepened, however, small businesses collapsed and wages dropped, and Jewish workers like the bakers who had comprised the "aristocracy of the laboring class" in the neighborhood faced life "on the rolls," forced to seek assistance from government relief agencies and the breadlines, soup kitchens and food banks operated by local charities. The Jewish Social Service Bureau (JSSB) reported that there had been a "huge increase" in the requests for aid in 1932 that were "breaking all records," estimating that they received over seventy-five applications for aid per week.⁶

The uncertainty and instability caused by the Depression changed the way nearly all of the residents of Boyle Heights ate. As budgets tightened, families often cut dairy products, meat, fresh fruits and vegetables from their diets, instead opting for

⁵ See George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213-214. See also Mullins, *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast*, 71.

⁶ "Jewish Charity Works for All," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16th, 1932.

canned goods and processed foods with longer shelf lives and cheaper price tags.⁷ Chain retailers as well as independent food-related business owners scrambled to maintain their customer bases, igniting fierce competition that drove down prices dramatically: between 1929 and 1933, the prices for basic food staples dropped over 40%.⁸ The price wars in the local baking industry were particularly cutthroat because many consumers of store bought bread returned to home baking when their budgets tightened: even as prices plummeted, the volume of bread consumed remained basically the same.⁹ Because they employed electronic mixers and kneaders, large scale ovens and assembly line techniques, the city's largest bakeries, many of which were subsidiaries of the baking corporations of the bread trust, could slash their labor forces and continue to produce the same volume. In 1930, Paul Helms, a former executive of Ward Baking Corporation (the largest of the bread trust firms), opened a massive new baking plant in Culver City outfitted with cutting-edge baking technology. His Helms Bakery required only thirty-two employees to bake nearly 400,000 loaves of bread per day.¹⁰

⁷ See E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Worker: A Study of The Task of Making a Living Without a Job* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 268. See also Janet Poppendeick, *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 20. Department of Agriculture, "Family Food Consumption and Dietary Levels, Five Regions," Urban and Village Series, Misc. Publication no. 452 (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1941), 8.

⁸ M. Ada Beney, *Cost of Living in the United States, 1914-1936*, NY: National Industrial Conference Board Studies Number 228 (1936), 46-47.

⁹ According to William Panschar, per capita consumption fell less than 5%. See Panschar, *Baking in America Vol. 1* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1956), 186.

¹⁰ Helms served as Secretary-Treasurer for the Ward Baking Company, the largest of the bread trust firms, and as President of Ward's expanding operational empire, General Baking Company. When he moved to Los Angeles in 1930, Helms opened a 200,000 square foot plant that was 100% automated, and employed only non-union, unskilled labor. Details on Helms come from the Helms' museum (in the

Helms and the city's other large industrial bakeries employed primarily unskilled bakery workers, many of who were non-white minorities and an increasing number of who were female. They broke existing union contracts, and maintained strict anti-union policies in their plants, allowing them to drastically reduce their labor costs. But smaller bakery owners could not afford to decrease their prices without cutting production levels and laying off their workers, and tight credit markets made it difficult for some to purchase supplies. Consolidations and buyouts in the baking industry accelerated in the early 1930s, including the merger of several of the oldest and largest wholesalers in Los Angeles to form Western Bakeries Incorporated.¹¹ When Helms' Bakery was named the official bread-provider of 1932 Olympics held in Los Angeles, it marked the ascendance of the "open shop" in the local baking industry.

The rise of Helms and the effects of the Depression destroyed the alternative commercial infrastructure that the bakers of Local 453 had created in the 1920s. As Chapter Two described, their activism injected the buying and eating of food with national and class-based meanings and created a Jewish market distinct from both the mass consumption encouraged by national food companies and the multiethnic marketplace that prevailed in Boyle Heights. But as it did for others, the Depression limited the Jewish residents' ability to make choices about what to consume, and many increasingly opted for the cheapest products they could find. Boyle Heights' Jewish

lobby of H.D. Buttercup) and an essay by Michael F. Currier based on interviews with former Helms' employees and promotional materials he collected, entitled "The Helms Company," that appears in the David L. Clark Collection of Oral Histories, UCLA Special Collections, Box 6, Folder 18.

¹¹ The merger included Webers', Gordon's, Four S and Dolly Madison and was announced in *The Bakers Journal* Dec. 20th, 1930. William Panschar estimated that chain bakeries of the bread trust increased their market share from 11% of all bread sold in 1929 to 16% by 1935, *Baking in America* Vol. 1, 201.

bakery owners suffered substantial losses as well as Jewish consumers stopped “buying Jewish,” and instead purchased their food from the “big Down Town firms” rather than the smaller Jewish-owned shops in the neighborhood.¹² Some bakery owners attempted to increase their sales among the non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood by increasing their production of lighter wheat and white breads, but their businesses still struggled to survive. Several older union bakeries folded and were replaced by new bakeries of the “modern type” that employed mechanized, mass production techniques.¹³

As the residents of Boyle Heights stopped “buying Jewish,” the particular model of trade unionism that the Jewish Bakers Union Local 453 had used to maintain their high wages and working conditions in the 1920s collapsed as well. The bakery closures and layoffs throughout the city created a massive labor surplus in the baking industry that made it easier than ever for bakery owners to find workers without hiring them through a baking union. The neighborhood’s new Jewish bakeries affiliated themselves with the Hebrew Master Bakers’ Association and employed unskilled, sometimes non-Jewish employees in their shops, workers that the union had for years and regarded as “scabs” and refused to incorporate into their ranks. In December 1931, these bakery owners broke the contract they had maintained with the union since 1926 and cut their

¹² An article called “Let Us Have Some Understanding” in Dec., 1929 Joseph S. Soocher noted the fact that Boyle Heights’ Jewish consumers preferred downtown firms as evidence that they recognized the importance of offering competitive prices, unlike the small retail bakers in Boyle Heights. See *The Jewish Merchant and Guide* (Dec, 1929).

¹³ In addition to mechanized mixers and larger industrial ovens, an article in *The Jewish Merchant and Guide* in August, 1929 called “The Modern Type of Jewish Bakery” written by the Hebrew Master Bakers Association identified “professional” salespeople (i.e. not family members or relatives), glass display cases (that prevents customers from touching the products), and refusing lines of credit as features of “modern” bakeries. They subsequently identified New Modern and Chicago bakeries as “modern” types.

employees' hours and decreased their wages over 30%.¹⁴ The bakers of Local 453 immediately went on strike, attempting to use the strategies that had proven effective in the 1920s. They launched a union label publicity campaign in conjunction with their Women's Auxiliary and picketed at all the non-union bakeries. After weeks of striking in January 1932, they organized a rally of over 400 of their supporters on Brooklyn Avenue, including Rabbi Solomon Neches of the Breed Street Shul, Rabbi Julius Leibert of Temple Sinai, Julius Levitt the editor of *Forverts (Jewish Daily Forward)* and Chaim Shapiro, the leader of the Jewish Socialist *Farband*, who pleaded with the bakery owners to work with the union and praised the bakers union's long service to the community. But despite ample support from Yiddish-based community organizations and the Los Angeles Central Labor Council and dozens of arrests, the bakery owners continued to refuse negotiations with the union.¹⁵ The months-long strike of 1931-1932, and the bakers' traditional model of unionism failed.

The long, drawn out failure of the strike in 1931-1932 ushered in a period of intense conflict in the union that B&C regional organizer Gus Becker described to his superiors as a "disastrous situation."¹⁶ In the eyes of many of the union's members, the

¹⁴ *The Bakers Journal*, Dec. 12th, 1931.

¹⁵ The details of the strike in 1931-1932 appeared in articles in the *The Bakers Journal* on Dec. 12th, 1931, Dec. 26th, 1931, Jan. 2nd, 16th and 30th, 1932, February 6th, 1932, and May 2nd and 14th 1932. The speakers at the rally included Fannie Reinhardt, a popular local Yiddish musician and radio personality, representatives from the Jewish Consumptive Relief Association and the Mt. Sinai Home for Incurables, M. Rabbitz, editor of the *California Jewish Voice*, and J. W. Buzzell of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council. The article about the rally appeared in *The Bakers Journal* Jan. 30th, 1932.

¹⁶ On Sept. 17th, 1932, B&C district organizer Gus Becker reported that a "disastrous situation" prevailed in local 453 and requested that the B&C send Jacob Goldstone, a veteran organizer who helped to unionize the Jewish bakers of New York to calm the tensions, but by then Goldstone was critically ill and could not travel to Los Angeles. Becker's reports appear in *The Bakers Journal*, Sept. 17th, 1932.

failed strike had exposed the limitations of their organizing model and the consequences of their unwillingness to organize the unskilled and non-Jewish bakery workers who were now replacing them at the neighborhood's bakeries. They criticized the union's refusal to accept new members even as the labor surplus in the baking industry grew, particularly their exclusion of other union bakers arriving on travelling cards from other areas.¹⁷ The more militant members of the union, including Max Davidson and Frank Epstein, both of whom were members of the Communist Party (CPLA), demanded that the union take more aggressive action in the face of the unemployment crisis, while some of the older leaders of the union seceded from the organization entirely and formed their own baking *verein* (union).¹⁸ Although Local 453 had avoided the ideological struggles and factionalism that plagued other Jewish unions in the 1920s, by 1932, they threatened to destroy the union.

The conflicts in the union had initially erupted over the decision on the part of Local 453's leadership to abandon the union's involvement at the Cooperative Bakery just months before the strike. As Chapter Two described, the Bakery had been a crucial weapon during Local 453's strike in 1926, allowing them to provide jobs for their striking members so they could prolong their strikes and to flood the market with union-label goods to strengthen their boycott campaigns. The Bakery was housed next to the Cooperative Center, headquarters of the neighborhood branch of CPLA and was

¹⁷ The leadership of the B&C also repeatedly scolded Local 453's leaders for refusing to accept travelling cards and refused their request for exemption from the program. See *The Bakers Journal*, Nov. 8th, 1930, Nov. 29th, 1930.

¹⁸ Gus Becker reported the formation of the *verein* to the B&C International on Sept. 17th, 1932, suggesting in his report that the secession had been done out of protest and could be rectified if the International sent Jacob Goldstone to help contain the controversies in the union. See *The Bakers Journal*, Sept. 17th, 1932.

owned by the shareholders of the Consumers' League, who voted to give the bakers' union control of its day-to-day affairs.¹⁹ But beginning in the fall of 1930, the Bakery's proximity to the Center became increasingly problematic as the Los Angeles Police Department and its Red Squad, led by Captain John Hynes, launched a series of destructive raids on the building as part of a broader crackdown on leftwing activism (discussed below). The raids got so bad that the members of the Consumers' League eventually filed a lawsuit and injunction against Captain Hynes and the Red Squad to stop them, seeking damages of over \$50,000. In the complaint, they recounted several incidents in which the LAPD had trashed the Center's Bakery and the adjoining Café, throwing tear gas bombs to drive out customers and harassing anyone seeking to enter the businesses. They charged that the LAPD had "directly and proximately" decimated the Bakery's business, estimating that sales at the Bakery, which had been rising, had fallen significantly from \$9,000 per month to \$3,500 per month, forcing the League to close the Bakery.²⁰

¹⁹ The vote establishing the union's control of the Bakery appears in a report about the Bakery's operations, Aug. 12th, 1926, Files of the Communist Party USA [microfilm], Role 48, Delo 683.

²⁰ The Cooperative Consumers League filed the lawsuit against LAPD Chief Roy Steckel, Captain William Hynes, and various unnamed members of the Red Squad in July 1932. In their complaint, they listed a series of specific occasions on which the LAPD disrupted affairs at the Center, including barring members of the Mandolin Club and Frayheyt Singing Society from holding their rehearsals. The Injunction appears in the Files of The Communist Party, Reel 225, Delo 2917. Details of the injunction also appear in "Fifteen Years on Freedom's Front: The Story of the Struggle for civil liberties in Southern California from 1923 to 1939" by Dr. Clinton J. Taft (director) published by the ACLU June 10th, 1939, 25-26. According to Taft, the injunction, filed July 25th, 1932 in Federal Court with Judge Harry Holzer and argued by attorneys John Beardsley, Abraham Lincoln Wirin, David Ziskind, Clore Warne, J.A. Frankel and Leo Gallagher, all of whom were affiliated with the American Civil Liberties Union. The attorneys won an injunction to prevent the LAPD from interfering with a meeting of the Friends of the Soviet Union to be held later that evening, but did not win the claim for damages filed by the Consumers' League. According to Taft, the injunction was the first successful legal victory over the LAPD.

As the LAPD's presence increased and sales declined, the leaders of the union distanced themselves from the Bakery, and by June 1931 it had been sold to a new owner. Details concerning the sale of the Bakery are sparse and it is unclear what the union could have done to prevent the Bakery's sale, but it seems likely that the members of the union who worked at the Bakery, including manager Max Davidson, felt that the union should have fought harder to prevent its closure or perhaps that the union should have bought the Bakery itself. By August, Gus Becker reported that conflicts had already erupted in the union, conflicts that were made worse by the actions of the Bakery's new owner, William Heirshberg: he immediately refused to honor the union's contract and became one of the bakers' strongest foes during the strike that followed.²¹

The members of Local 453 confronted questions in 1931-32 that all of the Jewish workers of Boyle Heights were forced to reconsider as the Depression deepened: do we maintain to our traditional understanding of our craft and continue to exclude unskilled workers from our ranks or must we expand our membership to include them, even if that means including non-Jews in our membership? Do we expand our organizing to include all of Boyle Heights' multiethnic residents struggling to find work and food or do we protect our own? The tension between inclusion and exclusion of the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents had been a point of debate among the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights for years, but the Depression's impacts of the made the

²¹ The change of ownership at the Bakery appears in the Business Registrations at the Los Angeles City Archives. According to the 1930 Census, Heirshberg was a Russian-born immigrant who lived at 2640 Ramona Blvd in Boyle Heights. In August, 1931, Gus Becker first reported that the situation in Local 453 was "bad" and issued his first request for Jacob Goldstone's help. See *The Bakers' Journal*, Aug. 22nd, 1931.

conflicts between the *rekhte* and the *linke* more heated than ever before. The conflict in Local 453 was temporarily resolved by the removal of longtime business agents Sam Enfeld and William Gewirtz and the election of new officers, including Max Davidson and CPLA members Frank Epstein and Joe Bronstein, who worked at the Bakery.²² The union's new Executive Board balanced the rival factions within the union, helping to resolve the immediate conflict, but the tensions between inclusion and exclusion that drove the conflict endured.

When their union failed, the bakers, like all of the neighborhood's unemployed Jewish workers, leaned on their fraternal organizations - the International Workers Order and the *Arbeter Ring* - to help mitigate the effects of massive unemployment and declining wages. Through these two organizations, they invested an increasing amount of their time and energy into two spheres of activity emerging among the unemployed: the hunger-related activism of CPLA and the cooperative movement. Involving themselves in both spheres of activity helped the bakers to see that they faced the same struggles as all of the neighborhood's multiethnic residents. They reoriented the focus of their activism away from Jewish national concerns and expanded their activities beyond the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. The movements offered fundamentally different approaches to solving the unemployment crisis, but both emphasized the shared struggle to eat as a means of cultivating class-consciousness and

²² The split in the union is mentioned several times in the *Bakers Journal* by the Southern California District organizer Gus Becker Sept 17th, 1932, Dec. 10th, 1932, Jan. 7th, 1933. Becker resolved the conflict by calling for a special election of new officers. New leaders included Mendel Topper as business agent, Rubin Umansky as chairman, Ben Kodimer as treasurer. The newly elected Executive Board included veteran union leaders Morris Freeman and Jacob Fuchs, as well as left-wing members Max Davidson, the former manager of the Cooperative Bakery, Joe Bronstein, who worked at the Bakery, and CPLA member Frank Epstein.

solidarity like the bakers had done in the 1920s. The baker's participation in both spheres of activity helped to change their attitudes and encouraged their shift towards industrial unionism. In order to understand how the impact of the Depression transformed the bakers' activism, we must first examine their involvement in these two spheres of activity among the unemployed.

CPLA and "The Fight for Bread"

As poverty and unemployment rose in Boyle Heights, the *linke* Yiddishists expanded their efforts to mobilize the multiethnic residents of the neighborhood by addressing the day-to-day struggles of the unemployed through programs at the Cooperative Center. The Center offered childcare services and coordinated hikes and trips to the beach, and operated a makeshift soup kitchen out of the Cooperative Cafe. Activists affiliated with the Center aggressively fought evictions and restored water, electricity and gas when service providers shut it off for non-payment.²³ The Consumers' League was reorganized as the "Women Workers and Housewives Council" to reach a broader constituency of female consumers, offering shopping tips and money saving recipes for mothers struggling to feed their families. The International Workers Order (IWO) also actively recruited non-Jewish neighborhood residents into its organization, offering low-cost insurance to its members that provided hospital, sick and death benefits. The IWO was originally formed by the Jewish members of the "Independent" *Arbeter Ring*, and had thirty Yiddish-language branches with over 1,500 Jewish members by the 1930s. But the IWO was open to all workers

²³ See Michael Furmanovsky, "Internal Party Life, Non-White Recruitment and the "Americanization" of the CPLA" [unpublished dissertation].

regardless of their ethnicity, religion or race and also had established branches for African Americans, and a Mexican branch, the Lázaro Cardenas Society, which often held its meetings at the Center.²⁴ Through the programs at the Center, the *linke* and the IWO positioned themselves as servants of all of the neighborhood's diverse community. They sought to build solidarity among the neighborhood's residents based on the shared struggles of everyday life.

The *linke* then attempted to translate this solidarity among neighbors into political activism by mobilizing massive protests and hunger marches. Beginning with a march for "Work or Wages" on March 6th, 1930, organized in conjunction with communist parties worldwide, CPLA held protests and rallies once, sometimes twice, a month. The largest of these was held in October, 1933 when as estimated 40,000 people paraded through downtown calling for equal access to the "American Standard of Living" as depicted below.²⁵ The hunger marches drew large, multiethnic crowds, proportionately few of whom were Party members, and provided a venue for CPLA to connect the material realities of the hunger crisis to the failures of the American political economy. They were highly theatrical and ostentatious, aiming to expose the public to the fact that the hunger crisis impacted the lives of working people regardless of their

²⁴ See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998), 77. Details on the Jewish branches of the IWO come from an article by N. Krupin, "Unzer Faraynigter Proletarisher Front in California (Our United Proletarian Front in California)," that was published in the *Frayheytt (Freedom)* and appears as a clipping in a scrapbook in the Jewish Secular Collection, Southern California Library for Social Science Research, Box 7, Folder 7. For more, see Roger Keeran, "National Groups and the Popular Front: The Case of the International Workers Order," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol 14, no. 3 (Spring, 1995): 23-51.

²⁵ The march was mentioned in Shana Bath Bernstein's dissertation, "Building Bridges at Home in a Time of Global Conflict: Interracial Cooperation and the Fight for Civil Rights in Los Angeles, 1933-1954," Stanford University, Department of History, 2003, 70. The statistic on the frequency of the rallies comes from Mullins, *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast*, 58.

race or ethnicity, or the industries in which they worked. Along with their neighborhood-based activism, the *linke* used their hunger marches to highlight the shared interests of all of the city's residents struggling to eat, and to encourage them to see that the obstacles they faced were not a result of their own shortcomings, but rather consequences of the injustices endemic in capitalism. They called on their fellow citizens to help fight for a fundamental change in the capitalist system so that every American could afford his daily bread. The protests served to fortify the *linke* Yiddishists' relationships to other workers' organizations and civil rights groups and extend their activism beyond the Jewish community of Boyle Heights.



Harry Quillen, Hunger Protest, October 2nd, 1933, Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library

The *linke* Yiddishists' efforts were part of a shift in CPLA's strategy in the early 1930s to place new emphasis on the home and the neighborhood as sites of community mobilization. While the bulk of the Party's activism in the late 1920s focused on the

shop floor, in the depths of the Depression they focused on the streets, stoops and homes in working-class neighborhoods to expand their influence among the poor and the unemployed. Earl Browder, General Secretary of the CPUSA, outlined this new directive in his keynote address to the 1932 Convention, entitled “The Fight for Bread”:

“The issue of the elections is the issue of work and bread – of life or death for the workers and the farmers...The election struggle is not something separated from everyday life and problems... [it] must help conduct, the daily fight for bread, clothing, shelter for the workers and his family.”²⁶

Browder rejected the bourgeoisie glorification of the “sanctity of home” as it falsely implied that the material realities of everyday life existed in a separate sphere from those of the workplace and politics, and encouraged local activists to emphasize capitalism’s destructive effects on the domestic life of American families in their organizing efforts. He called on Party members to form unemployed councils and embed themselves in the nitty gritty problems workers faced on a daily basis. For Browder and those truly devoted to the Party and its doctrine, this activism was intended to rally an “army of the unemployed” and lay the foundation for a proletarian revolution. But CPLA, like other local communist organizations, functioned more as a grassroots organization in the early 1930s, working to mobilize the community in democratic political protest rather than fomenting a revolution.²⁷ The Party offered

²⁶ Earl Browder, “The Fight for Bread – Keynote Speech at the Communist Party National Nominating Convention Held in Chicago, May 28-29th, 1932,” (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1932).

²⁷ In the early 1930s, the Party in Los Angeles was run by leaders like Sam Darcy, who had been exiled because of their stances in controversies elsewhere, rather than by loyal Party stalwarts, and operated rather independently because of its physical distance from the Central Executive Committee of CPUSA. Several recent works have similarly emphasized that the Party’s control over the activities of its local branches, particularly those far removed from the central leadership in New York and Russia, has been largely overstated. See Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928-1935* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists*

poor workers and the unemployed an alternative to life “on the rolls”: instead of waiting in breadlines, they could “fight for bread.”²⁸

As historian Michael Furmanovsky has shown, CPLA’s activism in the early 1930s also involved concerted efforts to “Americanize” the Party and expand its influence outside of Boyle Heights and among non-Jewish populations. After 1932, the Party began actively promoting American-born, particularly African-American, recruits into positions of leadership, hoping that they might shed their image as “a primarily foreign and Jewish-led organization.” They targeted in particular the maritime workers in neighborhoods near the port of San Pedro, as well as the African-American community that had grown around Central Avenue south of downtown. The Yiddish-language fraction in Boyle Heights was reconstituted as a neighborhood section and Party functionaries were advised to discontinue their use of Yiddish in their activism and de-emphasize Jewish cultural concerns.²⁹ As we shall see in the next chapter, the *linke* Yiddishists did not discontinue their cultural activities entirely, particularly after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, but they also proactively expanded their outreach among the non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood using English in their activism.

During the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), William Powell Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

²⁸ See Van Gosse, ““To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home”: The gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars,” *Radical History Review* vol. 50 (1991): 109-141; and James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 190.

²⁹ Furmanovsky, “Internal Party Life, Non-White Recruitment and the “Americanization” of the CPLA.” Furmanovsky shows that three new, young leaders – Ezra Chase, Harold Ashe and Lawrence Ross – all native-born and non-Jewish union members, seemed to epitomize the new “American” image sought by CPLA. He points out that Ross was actually from a middle-class Jewish family, but that he hid those origins and instead claimed working-class American roots.

The young people who came into the Party's orbit in the early 1930s made these efforts to "Americanize" the Party part of a deeper personal transformation. Many had been born in Boyle Heights or had spent much of their lives there raised in the Yiddish socialist community, but as they came of age in the context of the Depression, they sought new ways to express their identities and their beliefs. Paul Jarrico (born Isidore Shapiro), whose father Aaron Shapiro was a leading Labor Zionist (see Chapter One), described the Party's appeal among members of his generation:

"I had considered myself a socialist just by inheritance, but as I reached the age of 18 or so, in 1933, it seemed to me that the socialists were not militant enough and that the communists were the ones who were leading the hunger marches and trying to organize the unorganized workers and leading demonstrations for reliefs, for welfare, and so on... it was a question of militancy about unemployment, about American social reality."³⁰

Jarrico was one of several young adults of Jewish descent raised in Boyle Heights who joined the Young Communist League in the early 1930s and became leading activists during the "fight for bread," a group including Ben Dobbs (born Isgur), Miriam Brooks (whose father Isidore ran the Cooperative Café), Peggy Dennis (born Karasick), and Dorothy Ray (born Rosenblum).³¹ As Ben Dobbs described, for these young activists, joining the Party was a conversion: "when you joined the YCL you were sort of given

³⁰ Paul Jarrico Oral History, "Hollywood Blacklist: Paul Jarrico" UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, 1991, Tape 3, Side 2 and Tape 1, Side 1.

³¹ Dorothy Ray had been born in Denver and came to Los Angeles at age fourteen with her family. Activists of Jewish descent had played leading roles in the YCL and CPLA in the late 1920s as well. Of seven YCL activists arrested while organizing at the port in San Pedro in October 1928, five including Abe Zimmerman, Louis Schneiderman, Fannie Shulman, Lillian Dinkin, Sol Evenberg were of Jewish descent. Yetta Stromberg, who was raised by Yiddish-speaking parents in Boyle Heights, had also been the first martyr of the local Communist movement: she was arrested in 1929 after a raid at CPLA's Young Pioneers Camp in Yucaipa, and at the age of 19, was convicted on two counts of subversion and given sentence of ten years in prison. Details on these YCL activists appear in "Fifteen Years on Freedom's Front" by Clinton J. Taft, published by the ACLU, 26-27, and in Michael Furmanovsky's unpublished essay "Communism as Jewish Immigrant Subculture: The Boyle Heights Years, 1920-1929."

the idea, well, this is what your life is going to be... that [became] your life direction.”³² This conversion involved embracing American identities that conformed to the Party’s self-styled image: Jarrico like the other young activists changed his name and his social circle, and eventually married a fellow Party member.³³ Although some of these young organizers continued to live with their families in Boyle Heights, they spent most of their time and conducted the bulk of their agitation outside of the neighborhood.

But while the activism of the *linke* earned them credibility with some, it also provoked a violent and brutal response from the Los Angeles Police Department and Captain Hynes’ Red Squad, resulting in a massive crackdown on left-wing activism in the city that included the raids at the Cooperative Center. The crackdown was sanctioned in part by the Los Angeles City Council who gave the LAPD new legal bases for their arrests by expanding the city’s anti-picketing ordinance to include a city-wide ban on begging and using placards or horns to panhandle (or to protest). The *linke* activists endured vicious beatings at the hands of the Red Squad that resulted in lifelong damage and even death, including that of Isidore Brooks, the manager of the Cooperative Center’s Café, who according to his daughter Miriam, died from complications from a beating he received at a protest in 1932.³⁴ The officers defended

³² Interview of Ben Dobbs, “Democracy and the American Communist Movement,” UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, 1990, Tape 1, Side 2 July 17th, 1987.

³³ Paul Jarrico later married fellow Party activist Sylvia Gussin. Dorothy Ray similarly married Party activist Don Healey.

³⁴ Miriam Brooks detailed her father’s death in 1933 in her collection, The Miriam Sherman-Brooks Family Collection at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. William Z. Foster, who visited Los Angeles during his campaign for President in 1932, ended up in a Sanatorium in Russia after his beating at the hands of the LAPD. See Foster, *Pages From a Workers’ Life* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 228-231.

their actions by citing CPLA's subversive, seditious intentions: after the rallies in 1930, for example, Police Commissioner Mark Pierce said, "The more the police beat them up and wreck their headquarters the better... Communists have no Constitutional rights and I won't listen to anyone who defends them."³⁵ Although workers and radicals had faced opposition from the LAPD for years, the brutality of the LAPD in the early 1930s was in some ways unprecedented, convincing many activists that fighting against the lawless, fascist policies of the Red Squad must be part of their broader struggle to "fight for bread."

For the members of the bakers' union and other Jewish workers in Boyle Heights dissatisfied with their unions' responses to the Depression, the activism of the *linke* affiliated with the IWO and the Cooperative Center provided new ways to pursue social change. During their "fight for bread," the *linke* recalibrated the balance between their dual goals of fostering universal working-class consciousness and fostering Jewish national self-consciousness, largely abandoning their Jewish nationalist-oriented activity and placing primary emphasis on addressing the needs of the multiethnic working-class in the neighborhood. Several of new members of the union's Executive Board were active members of the Party and involved themselves in this neighborhood-based activism as the union's power waned.³⁶ With renewed vigor, the *linke* incorporated the non-Jewish residents of Boyle Heights into their programs at the

³⁵ Mullins, *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast*, 26-27. As Mullins also noted that when CPLA applied for a permit to host a rally in 1932, the chief of police threatened that if they held their event, "then some of your people will be killed," 58.

³⁶ The *linke* members of the Executive Board included Max Davidson, the former manager of the Cooperative Bakery, Joe Bronstein, who worked at the Bakery, and Frank Epstein, who was registered Communist. See 1932 and 1934 Voter Registration Records, accessed at Ancestry.com.

Center and in their hunger marches and political agitation, and worked to draw those affiliated with the IWO and the Center out of the neighborhood and into large-scale protest actions downtown. As the bakers' had in the 1920s, their programs at the Center used shared material interests in the market for food to foster class-consciousness and mobilize the community. But in the early 1930s, the *linke* members of the bakers' union expanded their definition of that community to include the poor, the unemployed and all of those struggling to eat in Boyle Heights.

"Our Daily Bread": the Cooperative Movement and the EPIC Campaign

For the more moderate *rekhte* members of the Jewish Bakers Union who found CPLA's methods to be too militant, too aggressive, or too dangerous, the cooperative movement offered an alternative means through which they could "fight for bread." During the Depression, Southern California's cooperatives took two primary forms: farmer-labor cooperatives and cooperative buying clubs. The farmer-labor coops began informally among groups of unemployed workers in Compton who offered free labor to local farmers in exchange for a portion of the crops they picked. Soon these groups incorporated as the Unemployed Cooperative Relief Association (UCRA) and created a large-scale labor exchange and distribution network allocating millions of pounds of produce monthly to dozens of units, including several in Boyle Heights.³⁷ The UCRA solicited donations from local businesses and operated eleven large production facilities of their own to supply products to its smaller units, including two cooperative bakeries,

³⁷ Laura Renata Martin, "California's Unemployed Feed Themselves:" Conservative Intervention in the Los Angeles Cooperative Movement, 1931-1934," *Pacific Historical Review*, 82, no. 1 (Feb., 2013): 33-62, 42.

one of which was located on East Third Street in Boyle Heights.³⁸ Los Angeles was also home to several large cooperative buying clubs in the early 1930s, which sold shares that were used to distribute low cost groceries, meat and house wares through twenty-four retail cooperative stores.³⁹ The farmer-labor cooperatives were mostly composed of unemployed workers and out-of-work farmers, while the members of consumer cooperatives were mostly lawyers, doctors, teachers and other professionals, most of whom were employed but seeking money-saving ways to feed their families. And while the UCRA had units that included African-Americans, Asians and Mexican members, the vast majority of members of both organizations were middle-aged, native born, and white.⁴⁰ UC Berkeley economist Clark Kerr estimated that by 1933, some 300,000 Californians, an estimated 6% of the state's population, were involved in some form of cooperative enterprise, over 70% of which were based in Los Angeles County.⁴¹

³⁸ Statistics on the UCRA come from: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Self-Help Activities of Unemployed in Los Angeles" *Monthly Labor Review* vol. 38 no. 4 (April, 1933), 717, and California State Relief Administration, "Handbook of Consumer Cooperatives in California," (San Francisco, 1935), 46. Mullins asserted that membership in the UCRA was over 250,000 by June 1933, and that an estimated 77% of all members of self-help groups in the State of California were part of the UCRA in Los Angeles in *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast*, 122. The bakery in Boyle Heights, called Progress Baking Company, was located at 1620 E. 3rd street, see 1936 City Directory.

³⁹ Clark Kerr made these estimates in 1935, noting that all but one of the stores had opened after 1933. See Clark Kerr, "Comparative Retailing Costs of Consumers' Cooperatives" from *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* vol. 191 (May, 1937): 113-124. See also Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Self Help Activities of Unemployed in Los Angeles," *Monthly Labor Review* vol. 36 no. 4: 717, 736.

⁴⁰ See Clark Kerr, "Comparative Retailing Costs of Consumers' Cooperatives" from *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* vol. 191 (May, 1937): 113-124. Laura Renata Martin has importantly questioned Kerr's categorization of the membership in the UCRA, wondering whether his category of "white Americans" might have included Jews and other European ethnics or lighter-skinned Mexicans of Spanish origin. See, "California's Unemployed Feed Themselves," 41.

⁴¹ This statistic comes from Greg Mitchell's account of the EPIC campaign, *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair's Race for Governor and the Birth of Media Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992), 254, in which Mitchell cites Kerr's Masters' Thesis. Also supported by Mullins who estimated that 10% of all

The *Arbeter Ring* organized the bulk of the cooperative efforts among the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights and, in contrast to the *linke*, continued to focus their activities within the neighborhood's Jewish population. They too expanded their programs to meet the needs of their members, but sought means to respond to the Depression that were be consistent with their goals of fostering Jewish nationalism. In December 1930, the branches of the *Arbeter Ring* created a cooperative "Progressive Loan Association" so that the organizations' needy members, who were described as "skilled mechanics and small businessmen... hit hard by the Depression," would not have to undergo the humiliation of "*der teyp*" ("the rolls"). Two years later, the *Arbeter Ring* established a Medical Department where a group of local physicians affiliated with the organization offered their services at a discount to fellow members. Dr. Henry I. Leviton, director of the Medical Department, described the program as a "modern institution" that, "combines [the] ancient spirit of our people with the present day conception of social justice - a justice based not on charity, but on cooperation."⁴² In their rhetoric, the Jewish cooperators affiliated with the *Arbeter Ring* avoided structural critiques of the capitalist system and most members did not participate in the mass protests organized by the *linke*. The *Arbeter Ring* expanded the scale and scope of its cooperative efforts, but continued to limit its membership to Jews and conduct its programs in Yiddish,

cooperators in the nation were in Los Angeles and that 250,000 involved in cooperative relief programs by 1934. See Mullins, *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast*, 99, 122.

⁴² Details come from *25th-Yoriker Yubilem A. R. Brentshes in Suthern Kalifornie, Martsh 23rd, 1934 (Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring in Southern California, March 23rd, 1934)* (Los Angeles: Pasifik Cooperative Press, 1934). On the Progressive Loan Association, 8, 31, the Medical Department, 55-56, and I. Baskin's comments, 56. The Souvenir Journal from the *Arbiter Ring's* 25th Anniversary Jubilee 1934 appears in the Western States Jewish History Archive, UCLA Library, Box 94, Folder 6.

rather than reach out to all of the struggling and unemployed residents of the multiethnic neighborhood.

The *Arbeter Ring's* emphasis on community self-reliance was consistent with those of the city's other cooperative organizations. As historian Laura Renata Martin has shown, most of the city's cooperative organizations packaged their efforts as temporary solutions to the immediate problems caused by unemployment designed to facilitate "self-help" rather as collectivist organizations designed than to change the fundamental structure of the economy. Although some units were more radical than others, in most cases the cooperatives packaged their efforts in ways that conformed to "American" notions of community self-reliance rather than emphasizing class struggle or offering a structural critique of capitalism.⁴³ In the case of the Jewish cooperative organizations, their framing emphasized that these American values were consistent with their radical beliefs: they hailed their cooperative efforts as an extension of "the best and most honorable traditions of the revolutionary elements of our old home."⁴⁴ Like the *linke's* programs at the Center, the city's cooperative organizations fostered solidarity among their members based on their shared material struggles and offered practical solutions to day-to-day concerns. But unlike the communists, who used these

⁴³ Martin argues that this rhetorical emphasis on "American" values was in part owed to the encroachment of the city's conservative elites in the movement and their efforts to control the internal debates about the causes of poverty and unemployment at the UCRA's convention in 1933. She shows that major Republican political figures from across the state infiltrated the convention in 1933 by forming the Citizens' Committee (an outgrowth of the Better American Federation which maintained close ties to the Merchant and Manufacturers Association). These conservative elites like the cooperative movement because they considered it a temporary solution to the problem of poverty, a viable alternative to state relief, rather than an attempt to permanently restructure the local economy, like the activism of CPLA. The CPLA critique appears in Martin, "California's Unemployed Feed Themselves," 46.

⁴⁴ I. Baskin, *Souvenir Booklet from the 25th Anniversary Jubilee of the Arbiter Ring in Southern California*, 56.

shared material concerns as a vehicle to mobilize proletarian class-consciousness and revolutionary mass protests, the cooperative clubs made addressing those shared material concerns their primary goal.

Despite these limitations, the expansion of the cooperative movement in the city also provided new ways for the *rekhte* Yiddish socialists of the *Arbeter Ring* to build relationships outside of the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. The neighborhood was home to five units of the UCRA with Chinese, Japanese and Mexican members, and the Jewish cooperators linked themselves to these organizations by forming their own unit, naming it the United Jewish Unemployed Relief. While as the name suggests, the unit was largely independent, it coordinated its programs with the other units in Boyle Heights and the organizations were connected through the UCRA's distribution chains.⁴⁵ Their cooperative efforts also helped to form relationships with cooperatives formed in more affluent areas like Hollywood and Elysian Heights.⁴⁶ While these ties were not as intimate as those formed by the IWO and the other *linke* at the Cooperative Center, the organizational networks forged through the cooperative movement helped the *Arbeter Ring* to expand the scope and scale of their activism in the early 1930s.

Upton Sinclair's campaign for governor in 1934 provided an additional impetus for the Jewish cooperators of Boyle Heights to expand their outreach and activism among the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents. Sinclair based his "End Poverty in

⁴⁵ California State Relief Administration, "Handbook of Consumer Cooperatives in California," 42.

⁴⁶ California State Relief Administration, "Handbook of Consumers Cooperatives in California," 59-60. See also Kathleen W. Hau, "Consumer's Cooperatives in California" prepared on behalf of the Bureau of Public Administration, UC Berkeley *Legislative Problems* no. 2 (Jan. 9th, 1937).

California" (or EPIC) platform on the principles of the cooperative movement, outlining a plan in which the State would take control of foreclosed farms and vacated factories and use them to create jobs for the unemployed and would use tax revenue to provide pensions for the blind, disabled, dependent children, and the needy.⁴⁷ He presented his EPIC campaign as an alternative to a working-class revolution advocated by CPLA, a means of achieving a fundamental change in the capitalist social order through democratic, electoral politics. The EPIC campaign served to translate the Yiddish socialists' emphasis on community self-reliance and cooperative self-help into a broader platform of social and political reformation.

The *Arbeter Ring's* involvement in electoral politics had begun months earlier when Chaim Shapiro, leader of the Jewish Socialist *Farband* and the *Arbeter Ring*, mounted his own campaign for mayor in the spring of 1933. Dissatisfied with the responses of local elected officials to the unemployment crisis, Shapiro had run on a Socialist Party ticket, promising to enact reform, but was defeated by Democrat Frank Shaw. Upton Sinclair had also chosen Shapiro as his running mate during his first campaign for governor in 1930, and although some members of the local Socialist Party criticized his decision to run as a Democrat, rather than on a third party ticket, the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights showed strong support for his platform.⁴⁸ They saw the momentum of the EPIC campaign as an opportunity to secure a spot on the EPIC

⁴⁷ For more details on Sinclair's platform, see *I Governor of California and How I ended Poverty*, Greg Mitchell, *The Campaign of the Century*, and also Charles E. Larsen, "The Epic Campaign of 1934" *Pacific Historical Review* vol. 27, no. 2 (May, 1958): 127-147.

⁴⁸ See Mitchell, *Campaign of the Century*, 263-265, 149-50. Shapiro's involvement in the campaign of 1930 and his own unsuccessful campaign for mayor in 1933 are detailed in Y. L. Malamut ed., *Southwest Jewry*, vol. III, (Los Angeles: 1957), 67-68.

ticket for a young Jewish lawyer named Ben Rosenthal to represent Boyle Heights in the State Assembly. Because of Shapiro's previous defeats, the Yiddish socialists recognized that the votes of the Jewish residents of the neighborhood alone would not be enough to secure Rosenthal's election, and launched a voter registration drive and mobilization effort among all of the city's residents, encouraging them to come out for the EPIC ticket. While Sinclair lost his election to incumbent Republican Governor Frank Merriam, Ben Rosenthal won his and represented Boyle Heights in the state government until being replaced by his brother in 1943.⁴⁹ Their voter mobilization efforts were limited because not all of the neighborhood's residents were naturalized citizens, but their registration drive brought hundreds of the Boyle Heights' residents into the Democratic Party, including several members of the Jewish bakers' union.⁵⁰ Electoral politics became the primary means through which the *rekhte* Yiddish socialists expanded their activities among the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents, an alternative way of making social and political change to the mass protests of the *linke*.

Although the *rekhte* and the *linke* responded to the Depression in very different ways, both sets of responses showed the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights that by working with their non-Jewish neighbors they could find their own solutions to the unemployment crisis. Each used the daily struggles faced by individual families to inspire solidarity and community mobilization, just like the bakers of Local 453 had

⁴⁹ Rosenthal was born in Brooklyn in 1898 to Jewish immigrants and served in World War One before moving to California to attend law school at USC. He passed the California Bar in 1927 and made his home at 1924 E. 4th street in Boyle Heights. For more on Rosenthal, see V. E. Thurman ed., *Who's Who in the New Deal (California Edition)*, (Los Angeles: New Deal Historical Society, 1940), 35.

⁵⁰ Union members Miles Morris, Ben Raskin (previously Republican) and Sam Bleich all registered Democratic according to the 1934 Voter Registration of Los Angeles County.

done in their activism in the 1920s. Although they balanced their Jewish nationalism in different ways, both movements provided ways for the Jewish bakers to build relationships with individuals and organizations outside of the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. Involvement in the movements helped the bakers and other participants to see that they faced similar circumstances to their multiethnic neighbors and that the solutions to those problems must be collective and multiethnic as well. For the Jewish bakers and all of those who joined local unemployment councils, hunger marches, cooperatives and EPIC clubs, the “fight for bread” in the early 1930s proved that they could solve their problems by working together across divisions of race, ethnicity, political ideology and income level. The activities of both groups helped to lay the foundation for the surge of labor organizing that followed, as well as for their Popular Front against Fascism, which will be explored in the next chapter.

The activism of the early 1930s exerted a strong influence on the young people born or raised in the neighborhood. Unlike their immigrant parents, these young people grew up in the context of the neighborhood’s diversity and were educated in the neighborhood’s diverse schools like Roosevelt High, whose student body was, according to a 1936 survey, 28% “American,” 26% Jewish, 24% Mexican, 7% Russian, 6% Japanese, and 9% Italian and Armenian.⁵¹ As YCL activist Ben Dobbs described, like CPLA’s activism, the EPIC movement was, “a great radicalizing influence on their

⁵¹ The results of the survey appear in Mark Wild’s article, ““So Many Children at Once and So Many Kinds:” Schools and Ethno-Racial Boundaries in Early Twentieth Century Los Angeles,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* vol. 33, no. 4 (Winter, 2002), 457.

lives,” awakening their idealism and encouraging their political engagement.⁵² That engagement resulted in the creation of several new political organizations for young people in Boyle Heights, including the American Youth Congress, the Young Democrats of California and the Young Peoples Socialist League. It also gave rise to student activism at local schools, including an aggressive campaign to promote EPIC among the students at UCLA, and a series of student uprisings at Roosevelt High wherein discontented students criticized the school’s administration, its overcrowded classrooms and its inadequate facilities, organized protests and published their own newspaper called *The Roosevelt Voice*.⁵³ These young peoples’ experiences with student activism, in the hunger marches and the EPIC campaign had lasting effects on their lives, fundamentally altering their perspectives on how to make social and political change. And as they entered the workforce as young adults, they brought these experiences with them.

After the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in June 1933, the bakers and the other Jewish workers of Los Angeles who had participated in these movements among the unemployed redirected their organizing activities away from their fraternal organizations and back into the labor movement. The Act included a

⁵² Ben Dobbs Oral History, “Democracy and the American Communist Movement,” Tape 2, Side 1 July 22, 1987.

⁵³ For more on the activism at UCLA, see Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Chapter 6. The agitation at Roosevelt also resulted in a series of suspensions and expulsions including those of Victor Goertzel, Aida Handler, Joe Lutsky, Bertha Goldstein and Dora Smelansky, all of whom were of students of Jewish descent raised in the neighborhood who were affiliated with the Young Pioneers and the Young Communist League. Their activism was profiled in an article by Abraham Hoffman, “Jewish Student Militancy in the Great Depression,” that appeared in *Branding Iron*, a publication of the Los Angeles Westerners’ Corral, no. 121 (March, 1976): 6-10.

provision that recognized workers' rights to bargain collectively and form unions, Section 7(a), which, as *The Bakers' Journal* described, "[opened] the door to such a trade union opportunity as we have not known since the war."⁵⁴ Activists and unionists, both *rekhte* and *linke* saw an opening to capitalize on the solidarity forged through the cooperative movement, their programs at the Cooperative Center and the hunger protests and build upon organizational relationships they had formed to reach out to the unemployed and unskilled workers left out of previous campaigns. They did not cease their neighborhood-based activism entirely, and often worked in tandem with the activities among the unemployed. But the legislation persuaded many that the best means of fighting unemployment and ensuring that all workers could afford their daily bread was to organize them into unions. The state assisted in converting the solidarity forged among neighbors during the depths of the Depression into trade unionism.

The New Deal and the Rise of Industrial Unionism in Los Angeles

The bakers of the B&C were initially critical of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), calling it a "sell-out" that made the standard operating procedures of bread trust bakeries law.⁵⁵ The bill set codes of fair competition – including wage rates, hours and prices – that provided a forty-hour work week and increased the minimum wage by thirty-two percent for journeymen bakers, but exempted icers, wrappers, cleaners and other "unskilled" categories of bakery workforces from its protections and

⁵⁴ *The Bakers Journal* June 17th, 1933.

⁵⁵ Panschar, *Baking in America*, 196.

authorized wage differentials for female bakery employees.⁵⁶ The exemptions and differentials encouraged bakery owners to hire unskilled, female bakery workers in the place of highly skilled, unionized bakers, developments in their industry that the bakers had fought for years to prevent. The bill also suspended anti-monopoly restrictions, allowing the baking firms of the bread trust to buy out their competitors and to vertically integrate their supply chains, negotiating exclusive distribution contracts with large industrial farmers that maximized the New Deal's agricultural subsidies for wheat. Profits were reinvested into technological development, often through their American Baking Institute: preservatives to give their products longer shelf-lives, chemical bleaching methods that made their flour and their bread whiter and softer, slicing machines, and processing techniques to improve the texture and appearance of their loaves.⁵⁷ While the tendency towards mass production in the baking industry had begun thirty or forty years earlier, by the late 1930s, it was standard practice in bakeries across the country as well as the Jewish bakeries in Boyle Heights.

But while the leaders of the B&C insisted that the NIRA created "an industrial dictatorship the like of which America has never dreamed of," they also recognized that "the future of the labor movement depends on organization" and encouraged their locals to seize upon the protections of Section 7(a).⁵⁸ Both Local 453 and their parent

⁵⁶ See Stuart B. Kaufman, *A Vision of Unity: History of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union* (Kensington, MD: Published by the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers International Union, 1986), 106 and Panschar, *Baking in America*, 108-110.

⁵⁷ Aaron Bobrow Strain, *White Bread: A Social History of America's Favorite Loaf* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 64, he points out that the bleaching process had originally been developed in 1904.

⁵⁸ The analysis of section 7(a) appeared in *The Bakers Journal* June 10th, 1933. Calls for organization began the following week, this particular quotation appearing in *The Bakers Journal* June 17th, 1933.

union, Local 37 launched membership drives, reaching out to unskilled bakery workers, particularly women, who had been left out of previous organizing campaigns. Local 453 also attempted capitalize on the NIRA's enforcement provisions by filing a complaint against their old foe William Heirshberg. The Act provided that shops that complied with the codes could display the National Recovery Administration's "Blue Eagle" on their products, which Heirshberg did after he signed a union contract following the passage of the Act. But he immediately refused to honor the union's wage scale and continued to display the emblem at his shop. The union enlisted the legal expertise of Chaim Shapiro and his brother Aaron to file a complaint with the NIRA's Compliance Board, which ordered Heirshberg to remove his Blue Eagle, the first successful use of the NIRA's enforcement provisions in the state.⁵⁹

Local 453s' complaint and organizing drive were part of a surge in union activity throughout the city during the summer and fall of 1933 when the unions affiliated with the Los Angeles Central Labor Council organized dozens of strikes to test the limits of the NIRA's protections. The largest of the strikes was among the city's dressmakers in October, during which over 2,000 workers in eight shops went on strike, over 75% of whom were Mexican and Mexican American women. While the Jewish cloakmakers, suit makers and furriers who comprised the leadership of the local branch of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union had been reluctant to organize the

⁵⁹ The local NIRA compliance board sent the complaint to the national offices in Washington D.C., who declared Heirshberg in violation of the NIRA on Feb. 2nd, 1934. Details on the Heirshberg's case come from *The Citizen* Feb. 9th, 1934, the *Bakers Journal* Feb. 24th, 1934; and Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1970), 198-99; and Lloyd Perry and Richard Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 265.

dressmakers in the 1920s, they too saw their traditional activism fail under the weight of the Depression and, under the leadership of a young organizer named Rose Pesotta, shifted their strategies to target the Latina dressmakers using a Spanish-language newspaper and radio broadcasts. Although Pesotta was highly critical of the communist influence in her union, the strike campaign built on months of CPLA's outreach in the Mexican community, and was organized just weeks after their massive hunger march in the plaza (depicted on page 165).⁶⁰ CPLA also worked to organize those who had been excluded from the unions of Central Labor Council through its Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), targeting in particular the agricultural laborers of the central valley, the majority of whom were of Mexican and Filipino descent. Between April and December, they helped to mobilize over 35 strikes involving 50,000 agricultural workers throughout the state.⁶¹ These strikes and actions successfully translated the solidarity cultivated in neighborhoods throughout the city through the "fight for bread" and the cooperative movement into trade union solidarity. But as the bakers of Local 453 soon realized they didn't always result in "real benefits" for workers

⁶⁰ Local 65 of the ILGWU attempted a strike in the fall of 1930 after their employers rejected a work-sharing program. The strike failed, in part because of an explosion at the Garment Center Building in the middle of the strike which, although eventually found to be the result of a gas leak, was blamed on the union. See John Laslett and Mary Tyler, *The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988* (Inglewood, CA: Ten Star Press, 1989), 27-29. For more on Pesotta's role in the 1933 strike, see her autobiography, *Bread Upon the Waters* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc., 1944); Perry and Perry's *History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 251-258; George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 232; and John Laslett, "Gender, Class, or Ethno-Cultural Struggle? The Problematic Relationship Between Rose Pesotta and the Los Angeles ILGWU," *California History* vol. 72, no. 1 (1993): 20-39.

⁶¹ In a hand-drawn chart, CPLA leader Sam Darcy registered all of the agricultural strikes for the year of 1933, noting that of the 71 total strikes in the state of California, 35 were in agriculture involving 50,601 of 63,350 total strikers for the year. Darcy estimated TUUL had played a leadership role in 70% of all strikes for the year. Chart appears in the Darcy papers, Tamiment Library. His estimated are supported in Devra Weber's book, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 80.

because of the weaknesses of its enforcement powers: although they won their decision with the NIRA's compliance board, their victory could not to compel Heirshberg to uphold the conditions of the contract and he simply removed the emblem and continued to operate as a non-union shop.⁶²

The surge of labor organizing in Los Angeles continued when, in 1935, the NIRA was replaced with a much stronger piece of legislation, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, commonly referred to as the Wagner Act in honor of its author, Senator Robert Wagner). In addition to protecting workers' rights to collectively bargain like the NIRA, the Wagner Act also specifically protected workers rights to strike, boycott and picket at the firms with whom they had a conflict, and defined a variety of forms of employer interference as "unfair practices." The legislation also established a new agency to oversee elections and address violations of the Act, the National Labor Relations Board, with coercive powers that enforced employers' obligations to work with employee-elected unions. Recognizing the Wagner Act's potential, representatives from eight of the nation's largest unions signed a report calling for all unions to adopt strategies that would incorporate all workers at a given workplace into the same union regardless of skill, race, ethnicity or gender, and they presented it at the American Federation of Labor's Convention in November, 1935.⁶³ They formed the Committee for

⁶² Gus Becker, the regional B&C organizer reported that "so far little is any real benefit had come to employees that actually work," in his report on the Southern California district, *The Bakers Journal* Aug. 19th, 1933.

⁶³ The eight unions including the United Mine Workers, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and United Textile Workers, the International Typographical Union, the Mine, Mill and Smelters Workers Union, the Oil Workers Union, and the Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers Union. While the B&C never officially joined the CIO as it considered it to be a "separatist

Industrial Organization (CIO) and launched massive organizing drives across the country as a means of pressuring the nation's largest employers to sign regional and national contracts.

In Southern California, the unions of the CIO targeted the new mass production industries that moved their facilities to Los Angeles in the 1930s. Several of the nation's largest corporations, including Firestone Rubber, Ford Motors, Bethlehem Steel, U.S. Steel and General Motors opened large plants in Los Angeles, later joined by large defense contractors including Lockheed Martin and McDonnell Douglas. Hollywood also became home to the nation's largest motion picture studios as well as several large music studios, and in tandem with the growth of the entertainment industry, Los Angeles came to rival New York as a center the garment industry.⁶⁴ Organizing drives were launched among workers in nearly every sector of Los Angeles' economy, including "white collar" professionals like office workers and teachers and the writers, animators, musicians and artists of Hollywood. The massive surge in union organizing in Southern California was boosted by CPLA's abandonment of their "dual union" strategy and dissolution of their Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) in 1935 and instead encouraging its organizers, including Dorothy Ray Healey, Ben Dobbs and the other CPLA activists from Boyle Heights to direct their activism into the CIO's campaign. These activists and the unions they joined organized workers outside of the city's

movement," B&C delegate Andy Myrup signed John L. Lewis' minority report at the AFL Convention in November, 1935. See Kaufman, *A Vision of Unity*, 115-116.

⁶⁴ Los Angeles' garment industry averaged \$1,205,691 of production in 1914 and rose to \$28,104,473 in production by 1935. See *Market Week* Jan. 22nd, 1939 as appears in Federal Writers' Project collection, UCLA Special Collections, Box 115, Folder 4.

existing craft unions, particularly women and the thousands of migrants who had made their way to the city during the economic downturn. As a result of their efforts, the number of union members in the city rose from 45,000 in 1935 to 170,000 by 1939.⁶⁵ As a headline in the *Bakers' Journal* confidently declared, "The Open Shop Days [Were] Over in Los Angeles."⁶⁶

Not all of Los Angeles' workers, however, shared in the benefits of these organizing drives. The Wagner Act explicitly exempted domestic and agricultural workers from its protections, most of whom in Los Angeles were Mexican, Asian and African Americans. These workers were also exempted from the Social Security Act, and again from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which set minimum wage levels and maximum work hours in almost every other sector of the economy. As a result, those who cleaned the city's homes, cared for the city's children and the elderly, and picked the nation's crops continued to struggle with poor workplace conditions, low wages, and exploitation. And, while the unions of the CIO actively recruited black and brown workers into their ranks, some found it was still difficult to gain access to higher-paying jobs, particularly those at the Port of Los Angeles.⁶⁷ The impact of the CIO's

⁶⁵ Membership estimates appear in the Appendix to Ruth Milkman's seminal study, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the American Labor Movement* (New York: R. Sage Foundation, 2006), 195. Milkman's estimated that the rates of union membership in Los Angeles steadily rose from 45,000 workers in 1935, to 100,000 in 1938, to 170,000 just one year later in 1939. Union density in the city reached its peak in 1944 with an estimated 298,000 union workers in Los Angeles.

⁶⁶ The article that accompanied the headline from *The Bakers' Journal* on Jan. 8th, 1938, "the Open Shop Days are Over in Los Angeles," estimated that 30,000 workers had marched in the May Day parade in 1937 and that an estimated 75,000 would march that year.

⁶⁷ See Alonzo Smith and Quintard Taylor, "Racial Discrimination in the Workplace: A Study of Two West Coast Cities during the 1940s" *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 8 (Spring, 1980): 35-54, Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially Chapter Three, "Waterfront Unionism and 'Race Solidarity': From the Crescent City to the City

organizing drive was circumscribed by the New Deal's definitions of "industry," its programs' exclusions serving to institutionalize the racialized dual labor system that had prevailed in Southern California since the turn of the century (see Chapter One).

The surge in union organizing in the latter half of the 1930s had a particular strong impact on young workers in neighborhoods like Boyle Heights who came of age and entered the workforce in the 1930s. By the end of the decade, the neighborhood was home to an estimated 35,000 individuals of Jewish descent, 15,000 of Mexican descent, 5,000 of Japanese descent, as well as Russians, Slavs, Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and African Americans, a multiethnic population whose average age was estimated to be twenty years old.⁶⁸ These young people had faced similar struggles to afford food in the darkest years of the Depression, attended the neighborhood's diverse schools, and had been energetically involved in the activism of the cooperative movement and the "fight for bread." They found jobs in highly diverse workplaces where they built engines, made rubber tires, and rolled steel alongside their multiethnic neighbors, industries highly impacted by the CIO's organizing. Women of Mexican and Jewish decent, many of whom lived in Boyle Heights, came to comprise the bulk of the membership of the locals of the ILGWU and the local branches of UCAPAWA, leading a massive strike against CalSan, a canning company with a plant in the neighborhood, in 1939. As historians Vicki Ruiz and John Laslett have shown, the solidarity among

of Angels," and Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), especially Chapter Three.

⁶⁸ Population statistics come from the Home Owners' Loan Corporation's 1939 survey of the neighborhood in which they gave Boyle Heights their lowest possible rating, asserting it was "honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements" and was "hopelessly heterogeneous." See "Area Description: Security Map of Los Angeles County, Area No. D-53" April 19th, 1939.

these Latina and Jewish workers was crucial to the success of both unions, with bonds formed among “work buddies” on the street car, through helping one another with child care, and over shared frustrations with paternalistic family life fomenting their collective identity.⁶⁹ A number of Mexican-American civil rights activists also began their careers as organizers in the unions of the CIO, including Luisa Moreno, Tony Rios and Bert Corona, who would later found the Community Service Organization in Boyle Heights.⁷⁰ The trade union drives of the 1930s created a cohort of young workers in Boyle Heights - most of whom were the American-born children of European, Mexican, and Asian immigrants, as well as African Americans – that historian Michael Denning has described as the “CIO generation.”⁷¹

Although they never officially joined the CIO, the B&C launched a national organizing campaign targeting the “unskilled” workers in their industry, particularly those in cracker and candy production who were mostly female and had been left out of previous organizing campaigns, under the motto “In Unity, There is Strength.” By 1936, the B&C signed their first nation-wide contracts governing all employees at two of the nation’s largest tread trust firms, General Baking Corporation and the Ward

⁶⁹ See John H.M. Laslett, “Gender, Class, or Ethno-Cultural Struggle,” and Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*.

⁷⁰ Luisa Moreno was a crucial leader in UCAPAWA, Tony Rios began as a leader in the Utility Steel Lodge of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee and Bert Corona was active in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. See Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 242-244.

⁷¹ Denning describes the CIO generation as “the children of proletarian migrants, the second-generation ethnic workers... [who were] coming of age during the Depression and helped to create a new, militant working-class culture.” See *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1996), 6-7. Denning’s definition of the “CIO generation” includes those who entered the workforce during the late 1930s and after the outbreak of World War Two in the 1940s. I am also including those living in and around these new unionists in working-class neighborhoods like Boyle Heights.

Corporation, as well as its two largest grocery chains, A&P and Kroger's.⁷² The baking unions of Southern California, including Local 453, its parent union, Local 37 and Local 31 of Long Beach, formed the Los Angeles Joint Board to negotiate joint contracts, coordinate strikes and apply pressure to the city's largest wholesale bakeries. They helped to organize the bakery truck drivers (who also functioned as salesmen) into their own union, Local 276 of the Joint Council of Teamsters, so that they could shut down both production and distribution at fully unionized plants through coordinated strikes. Bakers from all four locals participated in two massive sit-down strikes at Brownie Pie Co. and Langendorf bakeries, and finally convinced the owners of Western Bakeries Inc. to sign joint agreements at all of their plants. By January 1938, the Joint Executive Board had signed closed shop union contracts with over 75% of all wholesale bakeries in Los Angeles and Orange County, their first region-wide contract since 1909. With over 1,600 members, Local 37 became one of the largest union locals in Los Angeles.⁷³



The B&C's new logo showcased their commitment to industry-wide organizing. Appeared in the *Bakers Journal* May, 28th, 1938, courtesy of the University of Maryland.

⁷² Details on the contract come from Panschar, *Baking in America*, 209. The campaign slogan appeared in *The Bakers Journal* June 20th, 1936.

⁷³ Statistics on the 1938 contract and local 37's membership come from Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 452, and *The Bakers Journal* Aug. 1st, 1936 and Jan. 8th, 1938.

Local 453 also adopted an industrial organizing style after the passage of the Wagner Act and worked closely with the Joint Board to sign joint contracts. Recognizing that they had to organize those who they once regarded as “scabs” in order to benefit from the Wagner Act’s protections, they expanded their understanding of their craft to include unskilled bakery workers and non-Jews, their membership almost doubling to 180 bakers by the end of the decade.⁷⁴ While in the 1920s, they had fused their model of class-consciousness with Jewish nationalism, forging a distinctly Jewish model of trade unionism, after the passage of the Wagner Act, they no longer separated themselves from the rest of the bakery workers in the city, the state and across the country, and embraced the new system of industrial relations established by the New Deal based on the mass production model of the bread trust. They rebalanced their commitments to cultivating working-class consciousness and Jewish national self-consciousness and expanded the scope of their activism beyond the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights.

The Jewish bakers acted on this new organizing model in the summer of 1936 when they renewed their action against Heirshberg’s Rye Bakery. With the backing of their legal team and the solidarity of the Los Angeles Joint Executive Board, they launched a strike and boycott at the bakery, which had moved away from Boyle Heights and into the more affluent neighborhood of West Adams. For nine weeks, the

⁷⁴ The unions’ new non-Jewish members were celebrated in an article entitled “Hebrew Bakers of Local 453 Gain Thousands of New Friends in Their Great Campaign for the Union Label” by Rubin Burakoff, *The Bakers Journal* July 10th, 1937, but in a subsequent article on Jan. 29th, 1938, he acknowledges that 98% of the union’s members were of the “Hebrew race.” In the souvenir journal from the 15th Anniversary celebration in 1939, Burakoff boasted their membership had grown to 180. See *Fifteen Year Anniversary and Charter Celebration* (Los Angeles: Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union of America, Local 453, 1939).

union, its Women's Auxiliary and its supporters picketed peacefully at the bakery pushing for unionization, distributing leaflets in English and Yiddish to the residents of the neighborhood to familiarize them with their union's goals. The bakery's manager fought back violently, roughing up the union's business agent Mendel Topper and beating one of the picketers, Mrs. Lubitzer of the Ladies' Auxiliary, so badly that she lost the use of one of her eyes. The union published the details of the brutality in local Yiddish newspapers and English-language ones, and members of their parent union Local 37 joined their lines to show their support. Because of the new protections afforded them by the Wagner Act, the LAPD was forced to protect their pickets rather than break up their events, empowering the bakers to prolong their strike. By September, Heirshberg sold his bakery to Jacob Siegelman, a charter member of local 453, who immediately signed a union contract.⁷⁵ The success of the strike against Heirschberg's demonstrated the advantages that the New Deal provided and further encouraged their commitment to industrial unionism.

The bakers of Local 453 also adapted the tactics they had used to create a Jewish commercial infrastructure to appeal to a broader, multiethnic audience. Although their Cooperative Bakery had closed, their union label campaigns endured and they expanded their scope in the late 1930s to encourage the solidarity-minded consumers of the CIO generation to "buy union" bread and baked goods. Having weathered the economic downturn, these young consumers welcomed their new opportunities to eat out and shop for food as their wages rose and their incomes recovered. With more

⁷⁵ An account of the affairs at Heirshberg's appeared the *Folks Zeitung* on August 7th, 1936. See also *The Bakers Journal*, August 1st, 1936, *Folks Zeitung*, Sept. 25th, 1936 and Perry and Perry, *History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 406.

women working and fewer baking in the home and a taste for store-bought bread, cakes and cookies, the CIO generation became the base of the market for commercially-produced baked goods. National baking companies eagerly directed their advertising to these young consumers, using new mass media forms to convince women, particularly those who worked, that feeding their families store-bought bread could help them save time and money. The Continental Baking Company featured Hollywood starlets in their advertisements attesting that eating Wonder Bread gave them “vitality” that made them more attractive to men.⁷⁶ Helms Bakery pioneered its own strategy for increasing sales among the CIO generation by becoming the first local bakery chain to offer a home delivery service, showcasing the low-cost convenience afforded mothers by having their bread delivered “Daily at Your Door.”

Local 453 attempted to counter the influence of these anti-union firms by publishing advertisements of their own and broadcasting appeals on their “Union Label Radio Hour,” a weekly program funded by the union’s members Sunday mornings on KMTR. Although they continued to make appeals in Yiddish, the radio broadcasts were in English and highlighted themes of community solidarity that had been crucial to the “fight for bread” and the cooperative movement. As one broadcast said:

“Purity and justice are stamped on the face of the union label. The Union label confirms to a strict performance of moral obligations and its freedom from any sinister motive is reflected in the condition of well-paid workmen, well-fed children and happy homes.”

⁷⁶ The Continental Baking Company ran a series of advertisements in 1937-1938 showcasing actresses Wendy Barrie, Martha Raye, Mary Carlisle, Glenda Farrell, Mary Astor, Fay Raye, and Olivia De Havilland endorsing the importance of Wonder Bread to their “vitality.” The advertisement featuring Wendy Barrie, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 27th, 1937 included a banner reading “Vital Women - They are the women that fascinate men! Says Vivid Wendy Barrie” the one featuring Martha Raye which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on May 6th, 1938, read “Vitality -not merely looks good - it makes a woman more attractive.”

The bakers invoked the union label as a symbol of working-class identity, rather than Jewish identity, and affirmed that by buying bread, cake cookies and pies with the union label, even those that were mass produced, the public would be “part of a movement that is striving to raise the standard of living of all workers.” While their appeals in the 1920s had emphasized Jewish interests in Yiddish, their radio broadcasts emphasized the shared interests of all of American workers in English. Instead of encouraging local bread eaters to resist the temptation of brand-name bread, in their “Radio Hour,” the bakers of Local 453 emphasized the morality of mass consumption and its benefits for workers, consumers, and American society, so long as the baked goods were union-made.⁷⁷

The bakers’ change in strategy was not entirely by choice. The combination of the agricultural programs of the New Deal and those governing food-processing industries accelerated the shift to mass production in baking and an increasing number of the Jewish bakers worked in industrialized baking plants alongside unskilled workers and non-Jews. The union had to work with the L.A. Joint Board to sign contracts for their members at these plants in order to capitalize on the protections afforded them by the Wagner Act. Some of Local 453’s oldest members resisted the change in strategy entirely and left the union to open their own shops including the union’s longtime president William Gewirtz, who retired in 1933 to open a bakery on

⁷⁷ The transcripts from the Union Label Radio Broadcasts were printed the following week in *The Bakers Journal*. These two passages appear in the March 12th, March 28th, and April 2nd, 1938 editions.

Brooklyn Avenue with fellow union member Samuel Rosner.⁷⁸ But their departures created openings for new members to take positions of leadership in the union, including Ruben Burakoff, Ike Fingerett and others who had come west during the darkest years of the Depression as well as younger, American-born bakers who had followed their fathers into the union.⁷⁹ These rising leaders were decidedly more “left” than their predecessors, but not all of them were CPLA-affiliated and the union’s membership included Democrats, Republicans and Socialists as well, who together restored ideological unity and consensus in the union.⁸⁰ The union’s change in rhetoric and organizing style reflect a fundamental shift in their attitudes about trade unionism that had been forged through their experiences during the Depression. The federal government provided an institutional means to act on those new attitudes by integrating their union into a new American system for industrial relations established by the Wagner Act, a privilege that not all of the neighborhood’s residents were afforded. The state encouraged their adoption of industrial unionism, and in turn, their identification as members of the American working-class.

The unity of the Jewish Bakers of Local 453 was not simply the result of their activism during the Great Depression or the influence of the New Deal. As the next

⁷⁸ According to the 1934 Business Registry of the City of Los Angeles housed at the City Archives, Gewirtz had originally purchased the bakery at 2222 Brooklyn Avenue from M&H Thompson with a partner names Silverman. By 1936, the Bakery operated under the name Gewirtz and Rosner.

⁷⁹ These union families included Louis Bashin and his son Max, Ben Raskin and his sons Harold, Morris and Sidney, and Ben Spilholz and his sons Isidor, Jack, Manuel and Pincus. See *Fifteen Year Anniversary an Charter Celebration*.

⁸⁰ A sampling from the Voter Registration records for Los Angeles County reveals the diversity of party affiliations among the leaders of the union: Morris Miles, a charter member, was a registered Democrat as of 1934, Sigmund Fenig was a registered Republican until 1942, Frank Epstein was a registered Communist from 1932 to 1940, and Louis Blumer was registered as a Socialist until 1942.

chapter will explore, the wave of union organizing in Los Angeles coincided directly with another series of events that had significant impacts on the bakers and the other Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights: Hitler's ascent to power in Germany and the beginnings of his murderous campaign against the Jews of Europe. As much as the bakers' solidarity with their fellow workers increased in the 1930s, so too did their commitment to their fellow Jews, both in Los Angeles and across the globe. At the same moment as they embraced an identity as American bakery workers, they continued to use Yiddish in their organizing as a means of fostering Jewish national self-consciousness. The next chapter will examine how the rise of fascism also influenced the collective identities of the Jewish community of Boyle Heights by exploring their fight against Nazism and anti-Semitism in Los Angeles and across the globe.

CHAPTER FOUR:

LOS ANDZHELEZER YIDDISHKAYT AND THE POPULAR FRONT AGAINST FASCISM

“I have come to believe that California is that state
of the union which has advanced the furthest
toward an integrated fascist set-up
...fascism in other words *is* happening.”
Carey McWilliams, *It Can Happen Here!* 1935.¹

In 1933, as president Franklin Delano Roosevelt began enacting the programs of his New Deal, Adolph Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany and unfolded a series of legislative changes that allowed him and his Nazi Party to take unilateral control of the German government. With complete control of the army, Hitler broke the Treaty of Versailles, executing a massive re-armament campaign that eventually resulted in the occupation of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. He turned on popular discontent about Germany's ailing economy into vitriol and rage against the Jews, and used anti-Semitic rhetoric to justify a series of new laws that barred Jews from certain professions, limited their access to education, and stripped them of their rights as citizens. He banned all rival parties and gave his secret police power to operate outside of the judicial system and to arrest political dissidents and Jews at will. After a wave of violent attacks on Jewish communities, collectively known as Kristallnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”), in November 1938, the Nazis intensified their anti-Semitic campaign, arresting Jews by the tens of thousands and forcefully deporting them to

¹ Carey McWilliams, “It Can Happen Here” (Los Angeles: Mercury Press, 1935) appears in the Carl Jacobson Collection of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League Records, UCLA Department of Special Collections, Box 2, Folder 2. The pamphlet was commissioned by the United Anti-Nazi Conference, which will be explored later in this chapter.

concentration camps, policies that culminated in the systematic, state-sanctioned murder of six million Jews by 1945.

While many of Americans were shocked by the events unfolding in Europe, some residents of Los Angeles expressed strong support for the Nazis. Several fascist organizations emerged in Los Angeles, including the Silver Shirts, the Friends of New Germany, and the German American Bund, who operated an Aryan bookstore at their headquarters, a building they called Deutsche Haus. The fascist groups targeted the Jewish community of Hollywood in particular, alleging that the “Jew Monopoly of the Motion Picture Industry with its Sex Filth Films and Jew-Communist Propaganda [in] Hollywood” was responsible for society’s ills.² Perhaps the most ostentatious display of anti-Semitism came in September, 1935 when a local group calling themselves the American Nationalist Party papered the city with copies of a “Proclamation” charging that the American Jews had manipulated the economy and the political system and constituted “a menace to our free institutions.” They stuck copies of the “Proclamation” in mailboxes and on windshields and thousands of copies were folded in the morning’s edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. Following the Proclamation, Carey McWilliams made a declaration of his own, publishing an essay about fascism in Los Angeles he titled, “It Can Happen Here,” an excerpt of which appears above.

² The quotation about Hollywood comes from a pamphlet that is part of the materials collected during the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League’s investigation of an organization called Ten Million Americans, Carl Jacobsen Collection, Box 4, Folder 5. The cover of the pamphlet calls for a boycott of “Every Motion Picture starring any member of the Pro-Communist Hollywood Anti-Nazi League - Destroy the Jew Monopoly of the Motion Picture Industry with Its Sex Films and Jew-Communist Propaganda.”



“Nazi Flag outside Downtown Los Angeles Businesses, 1938” part of California State University Northridge’s digital exhibition, “In Our Own Back Yard: Resisting Nazi Propaganda in Southern California, 1933-1945”

To the Yiddish socialists, the developments at home and abroad seemed horrifyingly familiar. They had survived the political persecution and violent pogroms in Eastern Europe that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, some fleeing to America to escape forceful threats of forceful detention that resulted from their political activism. Since their days in Eastern Europe, they had sought to bring about a revolutionary change in society that would ensure the survival of the Jewish people, working to build a new, modern Jewish culture based in Yiddish that could be a source of Jewish national self-consciousness and cultural autonomy. They had succeeded in creating an autonomous organizational and cultural life in the multiethnic neighborhood of Boyle Heights and had worked to realize their vision of being a “nation among nations” as Dubnow once described.³ But the rise of anti-Semitism in

³ As Chapter One described, Simon Dubnow argued that Jews could achieve national-cultural independence within the multiethnic states in which they lived and become “a nation among nations.” In his “Theory of Jewish Nationalism,” he drew a crucial distinction between “nations” and “states.” States, he argued, were man-made sociopolitical groups, formal legal unions of which every individual could choose to become a member. Nations, by contrast, were “internal, psychological and existential” unions, into which members were born. So long as the states’ laws applied equally to Jews and Jews were given “rights as a nation” – the freedom to organize their own, independent communal, educational, and religious institutions, to maintain their own customs, culture and language, and to choose their own

Los Angeles and in Europe created a new sense of vulnerability among the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights. Even though by the late 1930s they were upwardly mobile, some moving out of the neighborhood and into white middle class neighborhoods elsewhere in the city, the shocking displays of anti-Semitism and troubling developments abroad convinced many of the neighborhood's residents that they would continue to face persecution and discrimination as Jews no matter how wealthy or assimilated they became. They drew a direct line between the struggles they had faced in Europe and their current situation, arguing that only way to respond to "the worst hooliganism the world has ever seen" was to organize their community and bring about a "great change" in American society.⁴ Both *rekhte* and *linke* Yiddishists set aside longstanding ideological and personal rivalries to form a "Popular Front against Fascism" a broad coalition of unionists, activists, writers and everyday citizens, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who worked together to defend American democracy against the rising tide of fascism.⁵

political representation – they could maintain their national self-determination in the diaspora. Simon Dubnow, "Theory of Jewish Nationalism," in *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, Simon Rabinovitch, ed. (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 25-44.

⁴ The quotations come from an account of a mass meeting held on Aug. 28th, 1935 that appeared in *Folks Zeitung* Aug. 30th, 1935. The author noted that the speakers consistently pointed to the activism of the "radicals in Black Russia" who had made "a great change" with their activism.

⁵ The term "Popular Front" refers to a change in the policies of the Communist Party International, who, in response to Hitler's rise to power in Germany, fascist movements in Spain and Italy, and increasing Japanese Imperialism, chose to end their organizational isolation and collaborate with other liberal, socialist and leftwing parties to form a "Popular Front against Fascism" in 1935. My use of the term here borrows from the work of Michael Denning, who has argued that it is better to think of the Popular Front as a broad social movement, "a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching." See *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20th Century*

This chapter will explore the fight against fascism among the Yiddish socialists in Boyle Heights. I begin by examining the ways in which the neighborhood had changed since the 1910s, highlighting the upward mobility of its Jewish residents, the growing economic disparities with their non-Jewish neighbors, and the paradox of Jewish life in the late 1930s. I then explore how these new realities informed their fight against fascism, focusing on the two spheres of their anti-Nazi activity. First, I highlight their expansion of Yiddish cultural activity in Boyle Heights and their efforts to make the neighborhood a haven for the Yiddish-speaking world that Hitler threatened to destroy. I argue that fortifying *yidische kultur* in the neighborhood was a way for the Yiddish socialists to express and maintain their ethnic identities even as in other ways they were ascending into the white middle class. I then examine their efforts build multiethnic coalitions to raise public awareness about the dangers of fascism, anti-Semitism and racial discrimination to American society. I argue that in these coalition-building efforts, the Yiddish socialists positioned themselves among the city's other racial and ethnic minority groups, and asserted multiculturalism as a fundamental part of American democracy. In both spheres of activity, the Yiddish socialists transgressed their respective "party lines" and consecrated a new model of community organizing that they employed well into the postwar era. Through their Popular Front Against Fascism, they forged a collective identity as American Jews.

(London, New York: Verso, 1996), 4. I will be tracing a similar "historical bloc" within the Yiddish-speaking community of Boyle Heights.

Boyle Heights in the 1930s

Many of the leaders of the fight against fascism in Boyle Heights were the very same men and women who had led the efforts to build Yiddish public culture in the 1910s. They had aged – most were in their 50s by the 1930s - and had survived the worst of the economic downturn while maintaining their leadership of the neighborhood's major Yiddish-based organizations, including the *Arbeter Ring*, the Socialist Party and the Sanatorium (City of Hope). But while their leadership continued, Boyle Heights had changed around them. By the 1930s, the neighborhood was different than it had been in the 1910s in several important ways.

Most fundamentally, the Jewish population in Boyle Heights had grown significantly through the 1920s and increased from an estimated 6,000 Jewish households in 1930 to over 14,000 households by the end of the decade.⁶ Some were foreign-born naturalized citizens who, like their predecessors, had spent years living in other American cities before heading west, but these were only a minority. In 1924, the federal government enacted the National Origins Act, which established strict immigration quotas that effectively cut off the streams that had brought some three

⁶ When the Home Owners Loan Corporation surveyed the neighborhood, they estimated that the area was home to 35,000 Jewish residents, but in their study of the population, Vorspan and Gartner estimated that total was much higher, particularly because of the neighborhood's large population of children. They estimated instead that Boyle Heights' Jewish population had grown to include 14,000 Jewish households. See Vorspan and Gartner in their *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1970), 203. In his study, *Jewish Life in Los Angeles: A Window to Tomorrow* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), Neil Sandberg estimated that Boyle Heights' Jewish population reached 50,000 in the 1930s, 28. In her dissertation, "Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood," Wendy Elliott-Scheinberg cites Harry Carr's 1935 description of the neighborhood, from his book *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935), where he asserts that 60,000 Jews from "Rumania, Poland and Russia" had come to Boyle Heights. See Wendy Elliott-Scheinberg, "Boyle Heights: Jewish Ambiance in a Multicultural Neighborhood," PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2001, 150.

million Eastern European Jews to America between 1880 and 1924. The quotas were considerably higher for countries where immigration to America was slow in the late 19th century, allowing approximately 10,000 to 15,000 German and Austrian immigrants to seek refuge in Southern California between 1933 and 1941, seventy percent of whom were Jewish. But most of these anti-Nazi émigrés, including several prominent artists and intellectuals like Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, settled in affluent neighborhoods like Hollywood, Brentwood and the Pacific Palisades.⁷ Most of the new Jewish residents of Boyle Heights in the late 1930s were the American-born children of Jewish immigrants who had been raised in the urban centers of the northeast and Midwest.⁸

The increase in the Jewish population in the neighborhood was made tangible by a significant growth in the number of Jewish institutions in the area. New congregations emerged on Cornwell Street, Chicago Street and Houston Street and the membership of the Breed Street Shul (Temple Talmud Torah) swelled to over 400 families.⁹ Rabbi Solomon Neches, the leader of the Breed Street Shul, expanded the synagogue's religious school into the city's first Yeshiva, the Western Jewish Institute, where he

⁷ The statistic on the number of anti-Nazi émigrés comes from Ehrhard Bahr's study, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3, 17. For more on the anti-Nazi exiles, see Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), John Russell Taylor, *Strangers in Paradise: The Hollywood Emigres, 1933-1950* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), and ed. Carol Merrill-Mirsky, *Exiles in Paradise*, Catalog of the Exhibition "Exiles in Paradise" at the Hollywood Bowl Museum (Los Angeles: Hollywood Bowl Museum, 1991).

⁸ Vorspan and Gartner estimate that 40,000 of the 60,000 new arrivals were American-born, see *A History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 196 -197.

⁹ In her dissertation, "Jewish Atmosphere in a Multiethnic Neighborhood," Wendy Elliot Scheinberg noted the growth of the neighborhood's Orthodox population estimating that the area was home to ten Jewish synagogues. See "Jewish Ambiance in a Multiethnic Neighborhood," 152.

served as rabbi and dean, and Congregation B'nai Jacob erected a second large synagogue at the corner of Alma and Wabash in the hills of City Terrace. More secular Jewish organizations emerged in the neighborhood as well: the Jewish Community Center at the corner of Soto and Michigan expanded and, with the help of federal grants from New Deal programs, built a second Jewish Center in the hills of City Terrace, naming it the Menorah Center.¹⁰

But even as the Jewish population in the neighborhood grew in size and visibility, Boyle Heights continued to be a very diverse environment. In the 1930s, Los Angeles' population rose to over 1.5 million residents and the demographics of its population shifted. The African American population grew to steadily to over 64,000 by 1940, and while restrictive immigration policies slowed the growth of the city's population of Asian immigrants, both the Japanese-American and Chinese-American populations also increased over the course of the decade.¹¹ Similarly, while the city's population of Mexican immigrants declined significantly due to repatriation programs and forceful deportations in the early 1930s, the American-born population continued to increase, with the number of American-born Chicanos outnumbering the foreign-

¹⁰ According to Shana Beth Bernstein, the Menorah Center was one of 444 local construction projects funded by grants from New Deal programs. See Bernstein, "Building Bridges at Home During a Time of Global Conflict," PhD diss., Stanford University, 2003, 59.

¹¹ According to Josh Sides, the city's African-American population rose from under 40,000 in 1930 to 64,000 by 1940, and to over 200,000 by 1946. See *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 37. Based on her analysis of the Census, Shana Beth Bernstein estimated that the Japanese-origin population rose from 21,081 in 1930 to 23,321 in 1940 and that the Chinese-origin population increased from 3,009 to 4,736, a fifty percent growth for such a small population. See Shana Beth Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University press, 2011), 30.

born Mexican population by 1940.¹² The housing options for this rising American-born generation were, however, still limited to a handful of areas in the city, as the majority of the city's residential neighborhoods continued to be governed by restrictive covenants that prevented non-whites from purchasing or renting homes. As Boyle Heights' resident Sandie (Saito) Okada remembered, "...our parents couldn't live where they wanted to live. Every place was restricted. Asian, African American, Latino could only live in a certain area, and that's why we all ended up in Boyle Heights."¹³

By the end of the decade, when the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) surveyed the neighborhood, they estimated that in addition to a large Jewish population, the area was home to 15,000 residents of Mexican descent, 5,000 of Japanese descent, Russians, Slavs, Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and African Americans. This multiethnic population also included an increasing number of children, teens and young adults: the HOLC estimated that the average resident was twenty years old. The investigators gave the neighborhood their lowest, "red" rating, declaring that it was "hopelessly heterogeneous... literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial

¹² See George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 224-225, 228. He notes that the number of Mexican born residents fell from 56,304 in 1930 to 38,040 in 1940 while the number of American born residents rose from 45% in 1930 to 65% in 1940. In his book William H. Mullins estimated, over 13,000 people returned to Mexico between 1931 and 1934, more than 10,000 between 1931 and 1932 alone. See *The Great Depression on the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 71.

¹³ Sandie's interview was part of the Boyle Heights Oral History Project, Japanese American National Museum.

elements.” In the eyes of the HOLC administrators, the neighborhood’s diversity was cause to lower the area’s property values.¹⁴

The city’s population grew in tandem with the steady growth of its industrial economy, even during the darkest years of the Depression. As Chapter Three described, several of the nation’s largest corporations opened large plants in Los Angeles in the 1930s, including automotive companies like Firestone and General Motors, food processing companies General Foods and Armour, and defense contractors like Lockheed Martin and Douglas Aircraft Company. Another engine of economic growth in the decade was Hollywood: Los Angeles became home to the nation’s largest motion picture studios (Paramount, Loews, RKO, Warner Brothers and Fox), who managed every part of production on their large studio lots, kept employees on long-term contracts, and vertically integrated the distribution of their films by buying out most of the nation’s movie theaters. While this “studio system” was eventually declared illegal by the Supreme Court, as historian Neal Gabler has shown, it created new opportunities for Jewish writers, producers, animators, and composers, including many of the anti-Nazi exiles and new arrivals from New York, as well as Jewish carpenters, painters and tradesmen who found jobs on the lots.¹⁵ Other new Jewish residents of Boyle Heights, including an increasing number of women, found work in the city’s canneries, garment factories and auto plants alongside their

¹⁴ Population information comes from the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation’s 1939 survey of the neighborhood in which they gave Boyle Heights their lowest possible rating, asserting it was “honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements” and was “hopelessly heterogeneous.” See “Area Description: Security Map of Los Angeles County, Area No. D-53” April 19th, 1939.

¹⁵ Neal Gabler, *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988).

multiethnic neighbors. The massive growth of the industrial sector, particularly as war production increased, sustained a continued flow of migrants to the city well into the postwar era.

The residents of Boyle Heights, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were also much more likely to be union members than those of the 1910s and 1920s, as the wave of organizing activity that followed the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 rapidly increased union density in the city. The number of union members in the city rose from 45,000 in 1935 to 170,000 by 1939 and the unions of the CIO, including the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Cannery and Packinghouse Workers' Union, dramatically expanded their ranks through a series of aggressive organizing campaigns as described in Chapter Three. When the multiethnic youngsters in Boyle Heights entered the workforce in the late 1930s, they became the primary targets for the trade unions of the CIO, forming a cohort of solidarity-minded workers, most of whom were the American-born children of immigrants that Michael Denning has described as "the CIO generation."¹⁶ Expanded war production in Southern California brought even more new members into local unions and the total number of union workers in the city topped 250,000 by 1943.¹⁷

¹⁶ Denning describes the CIO generation as "the children of proletarian migrants, the second-generation ethnic workers... [who were] coming of age during the Depression and helped to create a new, militant working-class culture." See *The Cultural Front*, 6-7. Denning's definition of the "CIO generation" includes those who entered the workforce during the late 1930s and after the outbreak of World War Two in the 1940s. I am also including those living in and around these new unionists in working-class neighborhoods like Boyle Heights.

¹⁷ Membership estimates appear in the Appendix to Ruth Milkman's seminal study, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the American Labor Movement* (New York: R. Sage Foundation, 2006), 195. She

The expansion of the city's economy had also created new opportunities for occupational mobility among the neighborhood's Jewish population that were unavailable to some of their neighbors. The growth of industrial firms and film studios resulted in new mid-level management positions and the programs of the New Deal created new administrative posts in various government bureaucracies. The Jewish residents of Boyle Heights, particularly those who had attended college during the darkest years of the Depression, took these white-collar positions; the HOLC asserted that the majority of the Jews of the neighborhood worked as "professional and business men" or as clerks in the Works Progress Administration.¹⁸ Sociologist Samuel Kohs noted this shift in work patterns in his 1940 survey of the city's Jewish population: the portion of the Jewish community working as professionals increased from 3% in 1932 to over 11% by 1940, while the proportion of Jewish workers, laborers and artisans declined from 28% to 24% in the same years.¹⁹ Even those residents of Boyle Heights who continued to work for wages saw their incomes stabilize and increase: the members of the Jewish Bakers Union, for example, saw their wages rise from a low of

estimated that union density in the city reached its peak in 1944 with an estimated 298,000 union workers in Los Angeles.

¹⁸ In the "class and occupation section of their survey, the FHA described the area as including, "Jewish professional and business man, Mexican laborers, WPA workers, etc." but several sources suggest many of the city's Jewish trade unionists also lived in the area. In David Weissman's 1935 study of Boyle Heights in the *Reflex*, for example, he noted that "most of the Boyle Heightnicks are employed in the garment factories and millinery shops... or in the mercantile establishments and offices of downtown Los Angeles," see "Boyle Heights: A Study of Ghettos" in *The Reflex* 6 (July, 1935).

¹⁹ Kohs' study, "Vocational and Educational Guidance together with an analysis of the Occupational Distribution of Jews in Los Angeles," appears in Vorspan and Gartner's *History of Jews of Los Angeles*, 199.

\$30-35 per week in 1931 back to \$47-52 per week by the end of the decade.²⁰ While the American economy remained sluggish in the late 1930s, the incomes of Boyle Heights' Jewish community steadily rebounded, in part because of the privileges afforded them by the New Deal.

The upward mobility allowed some longtime Jewish residents to move out of Boyle Heights and into more affluent neighborhoods in other parts of the city. As former resident Max Fine described:

“It was said that Jewish families lived in Boyle Heights when the breadwinner earned \$25 a week. At \$30, they moved to West Adams and at \$35 it was on upward to Fairfax... I had several friends whose families made the two-step journey to Fairfax toward the end of the 30s decade, as defense preparedness opened up new job opportunities and weekly pay increases made the moves possible.”²¹

Jews were often able to transgress restrictive racial covenants because of their skin color and rising incomes and settled in neighborhoods west of downtown from which others were excluded. In the same period during which Boyle Heights' population grew to include 14,000 Jewish families, the new “Miracle Mile” along Wilshire Boulevard became home to an estimated 7,200 Jewish families, some 6,200 Jewish families moved to Hollywood and another 3,100 Jewish families settled in the Wilshire-Pico corridor.²²

This trend accelerated after the HOLC gave the neighborhood its lowest “red” ranking

²⁰ The 1931 statistic is an estimate given by the Bureau of Labor Statistics after their survey of “Wages and Hours in the Baking Industry” that appears in their *Bulletin* no. 580 (May, 1933). The second statistic comes from the national wage rates established in the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union's 1939 contracts, which imposed a variety of new job categories and established special wage rates for “Hebrew Shops” of \$52.52 weekly for “first hands” and \$7.52 weekly for “Second Hands.” See Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Bulletin* no. 673 (1940).

²¹ Max Fine related this anecdote in his essay “Wabash Playground was the Center of the Universe,” in *Boyle Heights: Reflections and Remembrances of the Boyle Heights Jewish Community in Los Angeles, 1920s-1960s*, Abraham Hoffman ed. (Los Angeles: Western States Jewish History, 2011), 153.

²² Estimates are based on figure from 1938 in Vorspan and Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles*, 203.

and property values in the neighborhood declined. Many historians have highlighted the dispersal of Boyle Heights's Jewish population in the postwar era, but the Jewish population shift out of Boyle Heights began even as the neighborhood's population growth was at its peak in the 1930s as an increasing number of residents embraced their upward mobility and settled in more affluent neighborhoods west of downtown.²³ Moving into these neighborhoods was not only a way for Jews to maximize property values, but also to signify their integration into the white middle class.

Even those who had played pioneering roles in the development of Yiddish public culture in Boyle Heights began to leave the neighborhood in the 1930s. After the passing of his brother Aaron, Chaim Shapiro moved to Los Feliz, a neighborhood closer to Hollywood that was increasingly becoming a hub for the city's leftist and progressive artists, writers, and activists.²⁴ Julius Levitt, who served as editor of the largest Yiddish-language newspaper, *Forverts (Forward)* and chair of the Jewish section of the Socialist Party, moved to Cheviot Hills, a residential neighborhood in West Los Angeles which, along with Beverlywood and Palms, was home to a growing population of Jewish residents. Pinches Karl, whose original shoe store in Boyle Heights had grown into a

²³ See George Sanchez, "'What's Good For Boyle Heights is Good for Jews': Creating Multiculturalism on the Eastside during the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 633-661 and Deborah Dash Moore, *To The Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and Los Angeles* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

²⁴ According to the 1936 City Directory, Chaim Shapiro lived at 1307 Edgecliff drive in Los Feliz. In the 1930s, the area was also home to Miriam Brooks Sherman, a young CPLA activist whose father had run the café at the Cooperative Center (see Chapter Three) and Carey McWilliams, a progressive activist and author who served as the editor of *the Nation* and wrote the pamphlet that appeared at the beginning of this chapter. See Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), especially Chapter Four, "Left of Edendale: The Deep Politics of Communist Community."

successful franchise with over twenty locations, made his home miles away from Boyle Heights in Santa Monica, a fashionable neighborhood close to the beach.²⁵ In the 1910s, these men, like the other members of the Eastern European-born generation of “Boyle Heightsniks,” had settled in Boyle Heights in order to build an organizational and cultural life that was distinct from more affluent Jewish elites who lived in other parts of town. But by the late 1930s, an increasing number of the Yiddish socialists had settled in neighborhoods among these more assimilated Jews. They too capitalized on the opportunities afforded them by their upward mobility and their skin color and moved away from Boyle Heights.

For the non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood, however, the opportunities for occupational and residential mobility were far more limited. Agricultural and domestic workers, many of whom in Southern California were Mexican-, Asian-, or African-American, were exempted from the collective bargaining protections of the Wagner Act and the minimum wage and hour protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the New Deal institutionalizing the racially segmented dual labor system that prevailed in the city since the 19th century. And although the unions of the CIO actively organized non-white workers and fought hard for the rights of their multiethnic memberships, many African American and Mexican American workers continued to face workplace discrimination, particularly in higher-skilled (and higher-paying) manufacturing jobs.²⁶

²⁵ According to the 1936 City Directory, Julius Levitt lived at 1520 Cardiff Ave near Pico Boulevard in West Los Angeles. The Directory lists 22 different branches of Pinches Karl’s shoe store as well as his offices downtown, but lists his address as Santa Monica.

²⁶ See Alonzo Smith and Quintard Taylor, “Racial Discrimination in the Workplace: A Study of Two West Coast Cities during the 1940s” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 8 (Spring, 1980): 35-54, Bruce Nelson, *Divided We*

These disparities of wealth were evident to the HOLC when they surveyed Boyle Heights in 1939: they noted that the majority of the neighborhood's Mexican residents worked as "laborers" and that in some sections of the neighborhood, "slum conditions prevail[ed]." ²⁷ And although Los Angeles never passed laws formally legalizing segregation like those in Southern states, a "de facto Jim Crow" system of segregation existed in the city well into the 1940s. Most of the city's public spaces were segregated, including swimming pools, theaters, restaurants and many of its schools, and young African and Mexican Americans of the CIO generation, particularly those who donned zoot suits, faced persistent harassment from the LAPD. ²⁸ Although some non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood benefited from the New Deal's protections, purchased homes and attended college like their Jewish neighbors, the disparities of wealth and power among the residents of Boyle Heights increased in the late 1930s.

At the same time as these disparities were growing, however, open displays of anti-Semitism in the city were also on the rise as was the public awareness of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews in Germany. The Jews of Boyle Heights and those living throughout the city faced contradictory realities in the late 1930s that historian Stuart

Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially Chapter Three, "Waterfront Unionism and 'Race Solidarity': From the Crescent City to the City of Angels," and Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003 especially Chapter Three.

²⁷ See the HOLC's "Area Description."

²⁸ Carey McWilliams noted the prevailing atmosphere of racial segregation in Los Angeles in his seminal study, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946), 219. See also Charles Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) especially Chapter Five, "United Nations in a City" and Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War Two* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Svonkin as described as the “central paradox” of Jewish life: “even as Jews were increasingly ‘at home in America’ they still felt ‘uneasy at home.’”²⁹ On the one hand, they were more affluent, upwardly mobile and integrated into American society than ever before. Although other residents of Boyle Heights continued to struggle with unemployment, for most of the area’s Jewish residents, the impacts of the Depression had been alleviated, their incomes stable and rising thanks in part to the support of the programs of the New Deal. Some moved out of the neighborhood and made their homes among the rest of the city’s white middle class. On the other hand, rising anti-Semitism at home and abroad made Jews living throughout the city feel vulnerable in ways that they hadn’t in previous decades. Although the threat of Nazism was in some ways remote, the support shown for Hitler in Los Angeles was a frightening reminder that latent anti-Semitic attitudes flared in tough economic times. Even as they ascended into the ranks of the white middle class, Jews were increasingly reminded that they were something “other” than white Americans. Especially for the *linke* who had endured brutal attacks from the LAPD during their “fight for bread,” the threat of fascism taking hold in Los Angeles seemed very real.

This paradox of Jewish life in late 1930s Los Angeles influenced both spheres of activity among the Yiddish socialists during their Popular Front Against Fascism. First, those living all over the city returned to Boyle Heights to fortify the Yiddish public culture they had worked to create in the neighborhood since the 1910s. Although nearly all of the neighborhood’s Jewish residents could read and write in English, both

²⁹ Stuart Svonkin offered his description as the central paradox of postwar Jewish life, but I believe it applies to life in late 1930s Los Angeles as well. See *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.

rekhte and *linke* Yiddish socialists expanded their Yiddish cultural activity in the late 1930s and recommitted themselves to fostering Jewish cultural nationalism. In doing so, they reinforced their ethnic identities and defended their right to cultural autonomy as principle of American democracy in opposition to fascist notions of racial and cultural purity. Second, both *rekhte* and *linke* Yiddish socialists mobilized public awareness campaigns about the threat of fascism by forming multiethnic coalitions with a variety of non-Jewish organizations. They built on relationships forged through their activism in the early 1930s and the concurrent trade union organizing drive, rallying all of the city's residents to fight anti-Semitism and racism in their local community and to use multiethnic solidarity as a weapon against fascism. Although in other aspects of their lives they embraced the privileges afforded them by their skin color, in their anti-Nazi activism they reinforced their ethnic identities as Jews.

Planting the Seeds: Yiddish Cultural Activity during the Popular Front

Since their first meeting together in 1908, the Yiddish socialists had worked to build a vibrant *yidische kultur* in Boyle Heights that would provide a means for Jews to resist assimilation and maintain Jewish national cultural autonomy to make Boyle Heights "a branch of Yiddish life of the entire world."³⁰ But with the rise of fascism in Europe, that Yiddish world was now threatened in new ways. The threat posed by Nazism was of erasure, both physical and cultural, of Yiddish-speaking Jews and the communities in which they lived in throughout Europe. Even though they were living

³⁰ Phrasing used by Rose Nevodovska in her essay "Chaim Shapiro - The Fellow-Traveller (Accompanier) of the Yiddish *Yishev*" that appears in "Chaim Shapiro: Fifty Years of His Life," 13.

in neighborhoods across the city, with “radical urgency” both *rekhte* and *linke* Yiddishists expanded their cultural activities in Boyle Heights as a means of creating a future for Yiddish in the neighborhood.³¹

In the introduction to her 1936 collection of poetry, *Azoy Ikh Bin (As I Am)*, local Yiddish poet Rose Nevodovska articulated the attitudes amongst the Yiddishists that drove their efforts to expand *yidische kultur* in the late 1930s. She related a vision of a lost country, “overgrown with trees” and with “cemeteries overgrown with stones,” a warning of the threat that Hitler’s regime posed to the physical presence of the Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe and to their historical memory. But from this devastation, “one plant sprouted in the beginning of summer, another in the autumn,” Nevodovska suggesting that Yiddish culture could survive if nurtured and developed by local poets and writers. Rather than seek to salvage the culture that was being destroyed, Nevodovska called on Yiddish poets and writers to build on top of that culture, to cultivate new plants (poems) that would ensure the survival of Yiddish life in a new cultural and physical reality. While Yiddish writers, activists and intellectuals elsewhere became pessimistic about the possibilities of Yiddish cultural nationalism in the age of fascism, Nevodovska and the other Yiddish writers in Boyle Heights remained optimistic that cultivating *yidische kultur* could be a weapon in their fight against fascism.³²

³¹ Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 28.

³² Historian Anita Norich has argued that 1938 marked a turning for Yiddish poets, after which they moved away from using Yiddish culture as a vehicle for fostering Jewish national self-consciousness for political ends and sought instead to reclaim a more intimate Jewish past. She argues that Yiddish poets

To plant those seeds, the Yiddishists of Boyle Heights sought to expand the scope of their cultural activities and engage with a wider audience. Rather than confine their work to literary journals as they had in the 1920s, the Yiddish writers published several new Yiddish-language newspapers with expanded circulations, including *Di Yiddishe Presse, Los Andzheles'er Folks Shrift* (the Los Angeles Peoples Journal), and the *Los Andzheles Idisher Buletin* (Los Angeles Jewish Bulletin). These “peoples’ journals” placed poems alongside articles about the activities of local unions and fraternal organizations, as well as weekly updates on developments in Europe, fusing literary, artistic and community life. The Pacific Cooperative Press greatly expanded their publishing of local Yiddish writers, offering retrospectives by local authors including H. Goldovsky, Shifre Weiss and Ezekiel Brownstone.³³ They also published more light-hearted and comical books, including Henry Rosenblatt’s “*Laym*” (“Clay”), a humorous follow-up to his previous book “*Harudes*” (“Lumps”).³⁴ The late 1930s also gave rise to dozens of new literary societies and reading circles, many of which paid homage to local Yiddish writers: by the end of the decade, there were groups named for H. Rosenblatt, H.

came to reject modernism as a literary style and an intellectual project after 1938. See *Discovering Exile*, 42-43. Simon Rabinovitch has similarly shown that Yiddish authors in Europe who had promoted diaspora nationalism and socialism as ways of ensuring Jewish survival became disillusioned with these ideologies in the late 1930s. He describes a “decided to turn inward, away from ideologies that, one way or another, sought Jewish integration into the European body politic.” See Rabinovitch ed., *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 189-202.

³³ Examples include H. Rosenblatt, *Harudes* (“Lumps,” 1930), Shifre Weiss, *Mayn Lebns Veg* (“My Life’s Path,” 1943), H. Goldovsky, *Udzere Teg* (“Our Time,” 1934), Sam Liftsin, *Kamflustik* (1936), Ezekiel Brownstone, *Impresies Fun A Leyener* (“Impressions of a Reader,” 1941), and I. Freidland, *Kharote* (“Regret,” 1935).

³⁴ When reviewed in *Di Yiddishe Presse*, April 12th, 1935, Rosenblatt’s book was described as a “humorous” respite from his previous work.

Goldovsky, and an all-female study group named for poetess Shifre Weiss.³⁵ These names expressed a pride in the local *yidische kultur* they had created and the enduring faith that Boyle Heights could be a beacon for the future of Yiddish culture even as Hitler threatened to destroy its roots in Europe.

The drive to expand Yiddish cultural activities in Boyle Heights was also motivated by the increasing youthfulness of the neighborhood's population: in the late 1930s, young, American-born Jews outnumbered those who had immigrated from Europe for whom Yiddish was their first, and sometimes only, language. Although many families spoke Yiddish in the home, and in some cases synagogue, these American-born Jews spoke English at school, at work, and among friends. The youngsters of the CIO generation had an abundance of choices about what culture to consume and, under increasing pressure to assimilate and conform to "American" norms, many opted to spend their leisure time reading pulp fiction, listening to radio serials, playing sports and going to movies, rather than attending Yiddish lectures or reading Yiddish literature. In the eyes of the immigrant generation, the CIO generation's embrace of American popular culture threatened the survival of Yiddish culture in Boyle Heights.

In order to cultivate Jewish national self-consciousness based in Yiddish among the neighborhood's youth, the Yiddishists expanded their programs for children and teens. The Labor Zionists created a youth organization (Habonim) at their Center on Soto Street and opened a second *folkschule* for the neighborhood's burgeoning

³⁵ The groups are listed in H. Rosenblatt 60th birthday souvenir journal, *H. Royzenblat Yoyvl-bukh, tsu zayn zibetsikstn geboyrstog* (*H. Rosenblatt Jubilee Book for his 70th Birthday*), (Los Angeles, H. Rosenblatt Jubilee-Book Committee, 1948).

population of children.³⁶ The *Arbeter Ring* opened two additional schools for Yiddish education, as well as a summer camp in Yucaipa, eighty miles east of Los Angeles, and created its first English-language branch for those who were not fluent in Yiddish but wanted to participate in Yiddish cultural life, calling it the Vanguard Branch. They also worked with the Labor Zionists to build a *mittle schule* for the teenage graduates of their children's programs.³⁷ In addition, several local writers published Yiddish-language books for children and less advanced Yiddish readers that included poems, fables and legends to be used in the schools' curriculum.³⁸ Yiddish-based education became the primary means through which local parents could ensure that their children would have a connection to their families' history and heritage, expose them to Yiddish artists, poets and writers, and ensure that *yidische kultur* would be part of their American identities. The programs were designed to make learning about Yiddish culture fun and plant the seeds for the future for Yiddish culture in the American-born generation.

³⁶ Hoffman ed., *Boyle Heights Reflections and Remembrances*, 181-182.

³⁷ The effort to create the *mittle schule* began after an "Open Letter to Members of the Workman's Circle" was published in *Di Yiddishe Presse* in 1935 complaining that the *Arbeter Ring* was not doing enough to engage the neighborhood's youth. The anonymous author noted that only one in ten of the *kinderschule's* graduates went on to join the *Arbeter Ring* because there was no program for their peak years of social development; although they could join the Youth Circle League at age 18, most left the children's program around age 13. The *mittle schule* could fill that significant gap and ensure the students retained their interest in Yiddish during those crucial years in their lives. See "Open Letter" *Di Yiddishe Presse*, Nov. 15th, 1935.

³⁸ The children's books include L. Berkovitz's *Kleynvelt* (1934), a collection of "rhymed verse, most of which was originally published in the newspaper *Frayheyt*. A few of the poems have what the author but most of the poems are about children, nature, animals, and other typical children's poetry topics"; and Hayim Goldblum's *Legenden un Mayselekh* (1935) which included "tales and legends from Jewish history during the Middle Ages about Jewish holidays, nature and children." Both were described in an Annotated Bibliography created by the Noah Cotsen Library of Yiddish Children's Literature from the collections of the YIVO Institutes and the National Yiddish Book Center (2003), 16, 30.



Class picture from the Yiddish *folkschule* on Soto Street, 1943, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library

The *linke* Yiddishists increased their cultural activity as well in the late 1930s. Although many who had joined CPLA's activities during their "fight for bread" had abandoned their use of Yiddish in order to build a more-broad based movement in English, following the rise of Hitler, the Jewish branches of the International Workers Order (IWO), known as the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, revived their Yiddish programming at the Cooperative Center. Dozens of new left-wing reading groups and study circles affiliated with the IWO emerged in the neighborhood, including ten literary clubs for women.³⁹ Many of these groups later joined the YKUF (*International Yidisher Kultur Farband*), a communist-aligned cultural organization formed at an international conference for Yiddish culture held in Paris in 1937. Rather than aim to elevate Yiddish, the *linke* Yiddish poets of the 1930s sought to end their elite isolation,

³⁹ In her autobiography, *Mayn Lebn Veg* (My Life's Journey/Path), Shrifte Weiss described the members of the study circles as "dressmakers and militant trade unionists." Details on Weiss' autobiography appear in an article by Norma Fain Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers in America, 1890-1940" in Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983, 147-148.

simplifying their Yiddish by using phonetic spellings and avoiding Hebrew-origin words to make their writing easier to read for those who were not fluent in either language. The surge in Yiddish cultural activities in the late 1930s was in part fueled by the *linke's* recommitment to using *yidische kultur* as a weapon in their fight against fascism.

The *linke* received tremendous criticism from the leadership of CPLA for their expanded Yiddish cultural activity. As Chapter Three described, in the early 1930s, CPLA leaders made concerted efforts to “Americanize” the Party, encouraging its Jewish members to cease using Yiddish in their organizing and actively recruited and promoted non-Jewish leaders, particularly African Americans, to expand the Party’s influence beyond Boyle Heights.⁴⁰ The Boyle Heights branch of CPLA was scolded for their decision-making at the Cooperative Center: on two occasions, the Activities committee at the Center had scheduled Yiddish cultural events on the same day as events scheduled by the CP International, resulting in allegations of “Jewish chauvinism.”⁴¹ The secretary of the CPLA, B. Hanoff, wrote in a letter to the Central Executive Committee of the CPUSA that the Jewish members of the Boyle Heights branch were “helping the Silver Shirts indirectly by creating anti-Party sentiment on a nationalistic basis, antagonizing the American elements and intensifying anti-Semitism,

⁴⁰ Furmanovsky, “Internal Party Life, Non-White Recruitment and the ‘Americanization of the CPLA.’” Furmanovsky’s findings are supported by his Oral History interviews with Ben Dobbs and Frank Spector.

⁴¹ The first event was in 1934, when the Coordinating Committee scheduled a concert by the *Frayheyt* Mandolin Orchestra instead of a celebration in honor of Lenin’s death on Jan. 1st, 1933. See a memo from February, 1934 that appears in the Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives [microform], Roll 280, Delo 3211. The second event was on July 5th, 1935 when the Coordinating Committee held their own celebration instead of honoring the martyrs of the San Francisco waterfront strike of 1934. See memo “Party” Oct. 7th, 1935 in the Files of the Communist Party, Roll 297, Delo 3875.

especially at this time in Los Angeles when our enemies are doing everything in their power to confuse the workers that the Party is a Jewish Party and not an American Party.”⁴² Although the CPUSA would change its position towards “national groups” in the years that followed, eventually adopting a policy that “the progressive and national revolutionary traditions and sentiments of the national groups” should be used to draw people into their Popular Front, as historian Roger Keeran has shown, the reorientation of Party in local contexts occurred gradually and unevenly.⁴³ By the end of the decade, CPLA embraced the new policy and encouraged the cultural activity of their Jewish members but their critiques caused lasting resentment among the *linke* Yiddish socialists of the Boyle Heights branch.⁴⁴

The willingness of the *linke* to expand their Yiddish cultural activity in the face of criticism from CPLA suggests that the rise of Hitler and anti-Semitism in Los Angeles heightened their collective identity as Jews and reignited their commitment to fostering Jewish national self-consciousness. Although they continued to agitate in English and offer programs at the Cooperative Center for all of the neighborhood’s multiethnic residents, they also conducted programs designed to promote *yidische kultur* in the

⁴² The full quotation appeared in a memo describing a conflict between Comrade Fishman, the local editor of the Party’s Yiddish organ, the *Frayheytt*, and the editor of the Party’s English organ, *The Western Worker*, who alleged that Fishman was refusing to share funds with the English publication and running the *Frayheytt* “as his own personal property.” See B. Hanoff, February 13th, 1934 memo, Files of the Communist Party, Roll 280, Delo 324.

⁴³ Roger Keeran, “National Group and the Popular Front: The Case of the International Workers Order,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 14 no. 3 (Spring, 1995): 23-51, 36-37.

⁴⁴ In Furmanovsky’s account, he offered the example of Meyer Baylin’s 1934 article in *Western Worker* in which he charged that “The anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Silver Shirts...has permeated some in the CP and led to an attitude that the Boyle Heights Section is unimportant except to unload with burdens of detail work and enrollment in the Party.” See Furmanovsky, “Internal Party Life, Non-White Recruitment and the ‘Americanization of the CPLA.’”

neighborhood. The expanded cultural activity of the *linke* reflected their desire to express their ethnic identity as Jews, preserve their national heritage, and “plant the seeds” for Yiddish cultural life among the younger, Jewish residents of the neighborhood.

Yiddish-based cultural activity became an important point of consensus between the *rekhte* and the *linke* Yiddish socialists in their Popular Front Against Fascism in the late 1930s. Even as the Jewish residents of the neighborhood capitalized on new opportunities for upward mobility and moved into more affluent, white neighborhoods, they continued to express themselves in Yiddish, to educate their children in the neighborhood’s Yiddish schools, and return to the area for organizational meetings and cultural events as a means of nurturing their national self-consciousness. They embraced their otherness as Jews and celebrated their distinct ethnic heritage and culture at a time when their fellow Jews in Europe were being persecuted because of it. Although the role of Jewish nationalism had once been a source of controversy between the *rekhte* and the *linke*, the growth of Yiddish cultural activities in the late 1930s shows that Yiddish socialists of all ideological persuasions believed preserving their cultural autonomy and their national identities as Jews was crucial to fighting the influence of fascism both at home and abroad. In the face of rising anti-Semitism in the city, they asserted their rights to cultural autonomy and freedom of expression using Yiddish. The expansion of *yidische kultur* in Boyle Heights reveals that both *rekhte* and *linke* Yiddish socialists believed that cultural pluralism was

a fundamental part of American democracy and made defending it a primary component of their Popular Front Against Fascism.

The Yiddish-based cultural activities in Boyle Heights fostered intra-ethnic solidarity among the Jewish community in the neighborhood but excluded the area's non-Jewish residents. Their cultural activity had since the 1910s been designed to advance Jewish national interests and to build a distinct ethnic community within the multiethnic neighborhood. But in the late 1930s, both the *rekhte* and the *linke* Yiddish socialists also made concerted efforts to expand their outreach among the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents by building multiethnic coalitions with other non-Jewish organizations. They did so through two anti-Nazi organizations formed in 1935: the Jewish Labor Committee, formed amongst the *rekhte* Yiddish socialists, and the United Anti-Nazi Conference, formed by the *linke* organizations. Each built on relationships formed in the early 1930s, and while the two organizations conducted much of their activism independently, they also collaborated in important ways. Through these coalitions, the Yiddish socialists sought to raise public awareness not only about the threat posed by fascism to the Jews of Europe but also about the connections between anti-Semitism, racism and fascism in American society.

United Against Racism: Multiethnic Coalition Building during the Popular Front

In October, 1934, the Yiddish socialists held a mass meeting to discuss the developing situation in Europe at the Shrine Auditorium featuring Baruch Charney Vladeck, the general manager of the *Forverts* for whom the Socialist *Farband* had dedicated their headquarters. Over 6,500 Angelenos attended the meeting and pledged

to join Vladeck's new anti-Nazi organization, the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC). The organization had been founded in New York by representatives of the *Forverts*, the *Arbeter Ring*, and both the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers as a vehicle through which to spread public awareness about the threat posed by Nazism. Local Yiddish socialists formed a Los Angeles branch of the JLC in 1935, appointing Julius Levitt as president alongside vice presidents Pinches "the shoemaker" Karl and Harry Sherr, an attorney and longtime administrator at the *Arbeter Ring's folkschule*. All of the organizations affiliated with the Southern California District Committee of the *Arbeter Ring* quickly affiliated themselves with the JLC, as did many of the city's largest Jewish unions, including the Jewish Bakers of Local 453.⁴⁵

As the name suggests, the JLC focused its coalition-building efforts within the labor movement, directing the bulk of its outreach toward the unions affiliated with the Los Angeles Central Labor Council and the Los Angeles CIO. Members of the JLC distributed hundreds informational pamphlets prepared by the JLC national offices to spread awareness among the workers of Los Angeles about the dangers of Nazism and the threats posed by fascism to American democracy. They detailed Hitler's treatment of organized labor in Germany and how fascism undermined workers' rights. They also rallied their fellow trade unionists to "Boycott Nazi Germany!", mimicking the strategies the bakers had used in their union-label campaigns. The JLC published "do not buy" lists of local vendors who distributed German-made goods and called on the

⁴⁵ The 1934 meeting was also recounted by Kenneth C. Burt in his article, "The Jewish Labor Committee: Seventy-Five Years of Activism and Historic Achievements" *Jewish Currents*, May-June, 2008.

public to “tell the clerk you do not wish to have anything ‘Made in Germany.’”⁴⁶ The JLC also solicited donations of clothing, medical and kitchen supplies from local unions to send to Jewish communities in Germany.

The JLC’s agitation among the city’s unions coincided with the emergence of industrial unionism in Los Angeles as described in Chapter Three and their anti-Nazi activism provided an additional avenue through which the Jewish tradesmen of Boyle Heights reached out to their non-Jewish coworkers. In the 1920s, these Jewish unions, like Local 453, had largely organized independently of other unions in the city, but in order to spread awareness about the fascist threat and build momentum for their boycott campaign, they and the other unions affiliated with the JLC increased their engagement. As the population of trade unionists in the city grew after the wave of organizing drives that followed the passage of the Wagner Act, the unions affiliated with the JLC attempted to draw them into their boycott and encouraged them to use their solidarity to “Fight Fascism and Nazism.”⁴⁷ While Jewish unions like the bakers had once avoided organizing unskilled and non-Jewish workers, in their anti-Nazi rhetoric, the JLC called on its affiliates to organize all of the city’s workers as a means of “defying fascism” and defending the “ideals of democracy and equality.”⁴⁸ It seems

⁴⁶ Burt, “The Jewish Labor Committee: Seventy-Five Years of Activism and Historic Achievements,” Paper presented at the California/Western States Jewish Labor Committee Annual Recognition Brunch, Century City, California, June 14th, 2009.

⁴⁷ The slogan comes from a poster distributed by the JLC to all of the local unions affiliated with the Los Angeles Central Labor Council. It appears in the Records of the Jewish Labor Committee [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 7.

⁴⁸ The rhetoric appeared in a memo to the unions affiliated with the JLC from the national offices, Nov. 15th, 1937. As appears in the Jewish Labor Committee Records, Part I, Holocaust Era Files, 1937-1947,

likely that the Local 453's involvement in the JLC was an additional influence on their decision to adopt a more expansive and inclusive organizing model.

The JLC also coordinated their activism with other anti-Nazi organizations formed by members of the Jewish community of Los Angeles, particularly the newly formed Community Relations Committee. The more elite members of the Jewish community had also been alarmed by the rise of anti-Semitism in the city and in 1933, a group of civic and business leaders, including Judge Harry Hollzer, attorneys Isaac Pacht and Mendel Silberberg, and studio executives Louis B. Mayer and Adolph Zukor formed the Community Relations Committee (CRC, originally named the Community Committee) to monitor the activities of local fascist groups and share their findings with the local press and police.⁴⁹ While in previous decades the Yiddish socialists had organized their efforts independent of these more assimilated, affluent Jews, by the late 1930s they had moved into neighborhoods near them and considered them important allies in their fight against fascism. They collaborated on their Boycott Campaign, and also on fundraising efforts for the City of Hope. Working with the CRC brought the Yiddish socialists into closer contact with more elite members of the Jewish community, and served to draw the Yiddish socialists into the mainstream of Jewish community life, establishing ties that would endure into the postwar era.

Tamiment Library/Robert Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

⁴⁹ For more on the Community Relations Committee, see Shana Beth Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The creation of the JLC put the *linke* Yiddishists affiliated with the IWO and YKUF in an awkward position. The leaders of the JLC in New York expressly prohibited its branches from working with communist and communist-affiliated organizations, and instead encouraged them to forge alliances with labor unions and other Jewish organizations. The leaders of the JLC in Los Angeles, including chairman Julius Levitt and vice-chairman Harry Sherr, were “absolutely opposed” to working with any communist-affiliated organizations, worried that their involvement would cause “arguing and wrangling.”⁵⁰ Their mistrust of the *linke* extended back to the upheaval at the *Arbeter Ring* school in 1923 (see Chapter One), and was amplified by the violence that erupted between CPLA activists and the LAPD during their “fight for bread” of the early 1930s. Although the *linke* Yiddishists may have been eager to set aside their disagreements with the *rekhte* socialists and embrace a “Popular Front,” the JLC’s anti-communist policies prevented the *linke* groups from joining the organization.

In August 1935, Chaim Shapiro, longtime leader of the Socialist Party, called a meeting at the Labor Zionists’ *folkshule* on Soto Street of the IWO, the Carpenters, Furriers and Painters unions, the YKUF and other *linke* organizations in the neighborhood to discuss how they might work together to form a “united front.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Julius Levitt letter to Minkoff April 3rd, 1937 appears in the Jewish Labor Committee Records, Part I, Holocaust Era Files, 1937-1947, Tamiment Library/Robert Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

⁵¹ As his nephew, Paul Jarrico (nee Israel Shapiro, Aaron’s son), described, “My uncle Chaim, I am proud to say, [was] one of the strongest supporters and builders of the united front, despite his fervent Zionism.” The quotation from Paul Jarrico appears in Larry Ceplair’s book *The Marxist and the Movies: A Biography of Paul Jarrico* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 44. Shapiro served on the State Executive Committee of the Socialist Party in 1935, and continued to be a leader of the Yiddish Socialist *Farband*.

Shapiro had forged strong ties to the left-wing Yiddishist groups in the neighborhood through his support for the Birobidzhan project, an effort to create an autonomous, Jewish republic within the Soviet Union that would serve as a socialist alternative to the Zionist settlement in Palestine.⁵² Although he remained committed to the Socialist Party, Shapiro rejected the “partisan Orthodoxy” of his fellow Yiddish socialists and was eager to include all of the neighborhood’s Jewish organizations in the fight against fascism.⁵³ The attendees at the meeting decided to create their own anti-Nazi organization independent of the JLC and CPLA. They called themselves the United Anti-Nazi Conference (UANC) and unanimously elected Shapiro to serve as the chairman of the organization.

The UANC defined their fight against fascism on much broader terms than the JLC. Their goal was not simply to raise awareness about the Nazi threat in Europe but to encourage the public to see that the same fascist attitudes that propelled Hitler to power in Germany also maintained the Jim Crow system and perpetuated racial and economic inequality in America. The UANC’s understanding of fascism was best articulated in the pamphlet, “It Can Happen Here,” that the UANC commissioned local

⁵² The IKOR (*Yidishe Kolonzatsie Organizatsie in Rusland*, Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union) was formed by *linke* Labor Zionists in 1924 and by 1928 had successfully pressured Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Comintern, to declare an autonomous Jewish territory. The Birobidzhan settlement opened in 1931. Shapiro was elected by representatives of seventy Jewish organizations in the city to serve as delegate to the American convoy, but never actually went on the trip. See *Di Yiddishe Presse* April 19th, 1935 (vol. 11 no. 10) also June 26th, 1936. For more, see Henry Felix Srebrnik, *Dreams of Nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan Project, 1924-1951* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

⁵³ The description of Shapiro’s beliefs comes from Rose Nevodovska’s testimonial about Chaim Shapiro at his 50th birthday celebration in 1937. She wrote that Shapiro had never been a fan of strict partisanship and that it was not in his nature “to tow a party line,” hailing him as the first to advocate forming a “united front.” See Nevodovska, “Chaim Shapiro – The Fellow-Traveller of the Yiddish *Yishev*,” in *Hayyim Shapiro in der opshaytsung fun zeine freint (Chaim Shapiro – Fifty Years of His Life)* (Los Angeles: the Jubilee Committee (the Pacific Press), 1937), 18.

lawyer, writer and activist Carey McWilliams to write in 1935. In it, McWilliams described how fascist leaders like Hitler, Mussolini and their American supporters used “demagogic slogans and fancy proclamations” to convince the public that prosperity could be achieved by “eliminating” political, racial and social minorities. Rather than enact real changes, these leaders simply fulfilled the “will of monopoly capitalism,” ginning up hate and fear “to conceal its ghastly failures.” Los Angeles was particularly susceptible to fascist influence because of its tradition of “fascist jurisprudence” – the LAPD’s arrests of those seeking to distribute literature, protest or otherwise exercise their first amendment rights – and because Hollywood was a “fertile field” for anti-Semitism because of Jewish executives’ “ruthless management” of their studios. The only way to resist the insidious influence of fascism in the city and in America at large was to unite in common struggle against all “phobias,” including anti-Semitism and racism and defend the civil rights of all Americans.⁵⁴

To wage their fight against the “phobias” of anti-Semitism and racism, the UANC forged strong coalitions with other non-Jewish organizations to mount a public awareness campaign about the dangers of Nazism. Many of these coalition-building efforts were organized in tandem with the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (HANL), an alliance of prominent filmmakers, writers, and artists, including members of the German émigré community, who sought to use their influence to spread public

⁵⁴ In “It Can Happen Here,” McWilliams, defined fascism as “any attempt to capture the discontent of the America people and to use this mass support as a means of suppressing popular indignation against the reign of finance capital,” 29.

awareness of the Nazi threat.⁵⁵ Together the HANL and the UANC hosted large educational events with speakers who offered firsthand accounts of the Nazi persecution, including Professor Harold Laski and William E. Dodd, the United States' Ambassador to Germany. They organized protest actions at the German consulate and at Deutsche Haus to draw the public's attention to events unfolding in Europe that might otherwise have been overlooked.⁵⁶ The UANC also organized mass meetings with local civil rights groups including the NAACP, *El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Espanol* (Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples), the Civil Rights Congress, the Los Angeles Urban League, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as well as with prominent African-American religious leaders. These "Inter-Racial Mass Meetings against Nazism" featured prominent civil rights activists, including W.E.B. DuBois, who returned from a trip to Europe and testified to the connections between the anti-Semitism he observed there and racism in American society.⁵⁷ Using the HANL's

⁵⁵ Saverio Giovacchini argues that the HANL was composed primarily of two communities: Hollywood New Yorkers ("the urban American intellectuals who trekked to Southern California at the beginning of the 1930s") and Hollywood Europeans ("European filmmakers who arrived in Hollywood from Nazi Germany and were keenly aware of the importance of films in the international struggle against Nazi fascism"), who formed the HANL to use their influence in Hollywood to produce creative works that would "spread strong sentiments against Nazism." Prominent members included Paul Muni, Eddie Cantor, Irving Pichel, Dorothy Parker, Francis Faragoh, Herbert Biberman and Gale Sondergaard, as well as anti-Nazi émigrés Ernst Toller, Fritz Lang and Thomas Mann. Giovacchini argues that as a result of their efforts, a particular type of "democratic modernism" emerged in 1930s Hollywood. See *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal*, 2. Ehrhard Bahr offered a similar origin-story in his book, *Weimar on the Pacific*, 19. According to the FBI's investigation of the League, however, the creation of the League had been spearheaded by militant members of the Communist Party under the directive of the CPUSA to organize a "cultural front" in Hollywood. I find Giovacchini's and Bahr's accounts to be more credible.

⁵⁶ For example, a "big protest" against the "bloody program against the Jews of Poland" that brought together members of 130 organizations affiliated with the United Anti-Nazi Conference was described in an article in the March 6th, 1936 issue of *Folks Zeitung*.

⁵⁷ The event organized by the UANC and the Interracial Commission of the HANL also included speeches by with Prof. Ken Nakazawa, Prof. of Oriental Studies Dept. at USC and educational advisor to

newspaper, the *Anti-Nazi News*, and their weekly radio broadcasts, they published the results of investigations of local fascist groups, providing specific examples illustrating the fact that the same people propagating vitriolic rhetoric against Jews also spread hatred against African Americans, Mexican Americans and other local minority groups.⁵⁸ While the JLC limited much its coalition-building effort to the local labor movement, the UANC forged multiethnic coalitions with those left out of the organizing drives of the late 1930s by framing their fight against fascism as a struggle against all forms of racism and discrimination.

The UANC also attempted to encourage the involvement of the young people of the CIO generation in their fight against fascism. They coordinated events with American Youth Congress, the Young Democrats of California and other youth groups that had emerged in the neighborhood in the early 1930s in order to channel their energy towards fighting Nazism.⁵⁹ They worked to make the cause of anti-Nazism

Japanese embassy, Rev. Clayton D. Russell of the Peoples Independent Church, William Grant Still, an African-American Composer. Those scheduled in attendance included Rabbi Harry Merfeld (Temple Israel of Hollywood), Bert MacDonald (city prosecutor), P. C. Morantte (Philippine newspaper correspondent), Charles Upton (president, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), Judge Isaac Pacht, Floyd Covington (LA Urban League), Curtis C. Taylor (Pres. Of Prairie View College Alumni Asso.), Rev. Fletcher Homan, Prof. Ordean Rockey of UCLA, Bishop Sara Butler (Negro Zion Temple). The event announcement appeared in the *Anti-Nazi News*, a publication of the HANL, Jan. 5th, 1937 that appears in the "Publications of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League" Collection at UCLA Special Collections.

⁵⁸ An investigation of white supremacy at Kingdom Church exposed that Pastor Joe Jeffers directed his vitriol at both Jews and African Americans. His sermon of Jan. 22nd, 1939 included the following comment: "Get this straight, because a half dozen hooked-nosed kikes who own Beverly Hills and run Los Angeles, objected to the things I say about their negroid blood. Their kinky hair stands as everlasting proof of their negroid blood. But they have been associating with Aryans so long they have whitened up a bit and stolen Aryan names and practically enslaved their former masters." Text of the sermon appears in Carl Jacobson Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 and was published in the *Anti-Nazi News* the following week.

⁵⁹ An event at the Wilshire Ebell Theater brought together 500 youth delegates from various organizations, including the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League's Youth Commission, the UANC and the Young People's Socialist League of Boyle Heights, as described by Reuben Davis in an article in the Nov. 20th, 1936 issue of *Folks-Zeitung*.

fashionable among the CIO generation using the star power of the members of the HANL: the weekly radio broadcasts of the HANL featured comedy sketches by the organization's celebrity members and prominent female members of the HANL encouraged their fans to boycott of German-made goods.⁶⁰ Through their youth-related activism, the UANC attempted to influence the CIO generation's attitudes about racism, civil rights, and equality and making anti-fascism part of their American identities.

The UANC's affiliations to these other left-leaning groups convinced some leaders of the JLC, including vice president Harry Sherr, that UANC was "communistically controlled" and could not be trusted because its members "[did] not have the cause truly at heart."⁶¹ Sherr and the leaders of the JLC attempted to keep their distance from the UANC and organize their events separately, in keeping with the policies of the national offices. But the members of the JLC did not share the leadership's skepticism. Chaim Shapiro's leadership of the UANC proved crucial in assuaging their concerns. Just weeks after the formation of the UANC, he organized an "Anti-Nazi Peoples Conference" at the Philharmonic Auditorium, his longtime involvement in the *Arbeter Ring* helping to convince some 3,000 members of the JLC, the UANC and other organizations to attend. Speakers at the Conference ranged from local Rabbis to Jewish communist leaders, as well as Clinton J. Taft of the American Civil

⁶⁰ The members of the Hollywood League of Women Shoppers appear in an April 28th, 1939 letter accounting the "famous celebrities" who were signing on to a boycott of silk. The names listed included Dorothy Tree, Stella Adler, Dorothy Peterson, Gale Sondergaard, Tes Slesinger, Helen Gahagan, Dorothy Parker, Lucille Gleason, Mrs. Ira Gershwin, Gloria Stuart, Luise Rainer, Sylvia Sidney. See letter, April 28th, 1939, Carl Jacobson Collection of Hollywood Anti-Nazi League Records, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁶¹ Sherr was so concerned about the influence of the left-wing on the JLC that he continued to express his concern to the New York office even as the UANC and the JLC mounted their fundraising drives. The quotations here come from one such letter, written Aug. 17th, 1937 to Baruch Charney Vladeck as appears in Jewish Labor Committee Records, [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

Liberties Union, who all agreed to set aside their “clannish-politics” and unite in defense of the “Jews as a people.”⁶² Shapiro, who had delivered the stirring address at the original meeting of the Yiddish socialists decades before in 1908 now became a central force in encouraging the “united front” among the Jewish residents in Boyle Heights.

As developments in Europe escalated, the UANC and the JLC increased their work together by organizing joint fundraisers to aid their fellow Jews in Europe. After the government in Poland began seizing Jewish-owned businesses and hosted a visit from Herman Goering, the commander-in-chief of the Nazi Gestapo, the two organizations hosted an event to “Help the Jews of Poland” in conjunction with the JLC’s national campaign.⁶³ Fraternal organizations including the *Arbeter Ring* and the IWO, cultural organizations like the IKUF, and local unions like Local 453 proved crucial to these efforts, soliciting funds from their members as well as tapping their own organizational networks for support. Together these organizations raised over \$4,000 at the event, which they sent to the JLC’s national offices to be distributed to Polish unions and relief organizations. Similarly, when the Nazis increased their support for the fascists in the Spanish Civil War, the JLC and the UANC organized an event to “Save

⁶² The details of the event appeared in *Di Yiddische Presse* in their Aug. 23rd, 1935 and Aug. 30th, 1935 issues. According to an article about the “People’s Conference” published in *Di Yiddische Presse* Aug. 28th, 1935, the organizations began their collective effort after the event, pledging to work together on the boycott.

⁶³ The 1937 fundraiser to “Save the Jews of Poland” serves as an example of the Popular Front formed in the JLC: the program for the evening included addresses by Julius Levitt and Chaim Shapiro, as well as Rabbi Isaak Werne of the Rabbinical Tribunal, performances by both the Arbiter Ring’s Choir and the Frayhayt Mandolin Orchestra, and an address by H. Himelfarb, a working class leader who had recently arrived in Los Angeles after escaping Nazi persecution in Poland. The Souvenir Program from the Save the Jews of Poland event, June 9th, 1937, appears in JLC Records [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

the Jews of Spain” raising even more money to aid in the evacuation of civilians caught in the war zone who were being slaughtered by thousands.⁶⁴ The fundraising efforts built on the mutual-aid based strategies the Yiddish socialists had used to raise funds for the City of Hope and were enhanced by the community’s increasing job security and income levels, which allowed them to contribute money and goods they might have previously found hard to spare and flex their increasing economic power as a means of fighting the Nazis.

While they were happy to receive the money raised at the fundraising events, the national leaders of the JLC were highly critical of the *linke* involvement, ordering Julius Levitt and the other leaders of the JLC to break ties with the UANC immediately.⁶⁵ But Levitt defended the UANC’s involvement and the contributions of the left-wing groups. After their “Save the Jews of Poland” event, he wrote to the New York offices that the *linke* organizations:

“...worked whole-heartedly and actually did most of the work for the big meeting we held. The IKOR branches alone donated over \$500 at the meeting. A similar sum was donated by the International Workers Order branches...If the other cities follow our example, I am confident that these Communist groups will jump in and will work their heads off to make every affair if the Jewish Labor Committee a success.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The \$4,000 was pledged and gathered over the course of several months. The final total was reported in an Oct. 12th, 1937 letter to the national offices. While the records of the JLC do not contain an exact figure for the amount of money raised at the “Save the Jews of Spain” event, in the same letter, the JLC leaders estimated that they would raise even more money than they had in their first events, as some \$5000 had already been pledged. See the JLC Records, Tamiment Library, [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

⁶⁵ Baruch Charney Vladeck, president of the JLC told Levitt in a personal letter that it was impossible for the JLC to build their organization without “a sound foundation on principle” and that they could not allow “such action in Los Angeles when we refused to do it anywhere else.” The letter from Vladeck to Levitt August 11th, 1937 appears in the JLC Records [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

⁶⁶ The contributions of the UANC and its member organizations were communicated to I. Minkoff, General Secretary of the national Jewish Labor Committee in a letter, June 17th, 1937, as appears in JLC Records [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

As the national office's criticism continued, Levitt noted that the UANC was not a "strictly Communist" organization and warned that if the local branch disrupted their relationship to the UANC, it would likely destroy their organization.⁶⁷ Even Harry Sherr, who vehemently criticized the collaboration with the UANC, acknowledged that the bulk of the JLC's membership supported the united front with the UANC and that he and the other critics were an "insignificant minority."⁶⁸ Though Sherr, Levitt and the other leaders of the local JLC were hesitant at first to involve the UANC and other left-leaning Yiddishist groups in their efforts, the support for the "united front" among their membership helped to change their attitudes of toward working with the *linke*.

The collaboration between the UANC and the JLC in their fight against fascism reached its peak in November 1938 when members of both organizations staged a massive protest in Boyle Heights to honor of the victims of Kristallnacht. Under the aegis of the UANC, some 10,000 to 15,000 people marched down Brooklyn Avenue, gathering on the steps of the Breed Street Shul for a massive rally, at which both Rabbi Osher Silberstein and Chaim Shapiro denounced the "savage terrorism," "inhuman atrocities," and "massacres of the Nazis." The crowd primarily consisted of the neighborhood's Jewish residents, who carried signs with Yiddish slogans and performed skits in Yiddish and English reenacting acts of Nazi persecution. But non-Jews, or "sympathizers" as the *Los Angeles Times* described them, joined the protest as

⁶⁷ Letter from Levitt to Vladeck, Aug. 16th, 1937, JLC Records [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

⁶⁸ In an Aug. 17th, 1937 letter to Vladeck, Sherr charged that he and Levitt were the "only two representatives of the Social-Democratic forces" because the "so-called legitimate unions and W. C. [Arbeter Ring] branches" had "packed" the JLC's annual conference and "elected an executive of their own choosing." Sherr included the *Arbeter Ring* among the "communist" organizations. See, JLC Records [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 8.

well and both Rev. Floyd J. Seaman and Democratic Congressman Charles Kramer spoke about the threat Nazism posed to American peace and democracy at the rally. The attendees signed a pledge calling on President Roosevelt to sever all economic and political relations with Germany, and vowed not only to work to fight the “horrible savagery against the Jews in Nazi Germany” but also to work to create a “secure haven” for refugees in America.⁶⁹



Pictures from the “Anti-Nazi Parade in Los Angeles, CA, Nov. 22, 1938” appear in the *Los Angeles Daily News* Negatives Collection, UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections, Young Research Library

⁶⁹ The details on the protest come primarily from two sources: a front page article in the *Los Angeles Times* from Nov. 23rd, 1938, who characterized the attendants as “Jewish citizens and sympathizers” and these photographs of the event that appear in the Collection of *Los Angeles Daily News* Negatives, UCLA Library Department of Special Collections.



The willingness of the local JLC to work with *linke* organizations in the face of continued criticism and orders to cut their ties coming from the national offices suggests that many of the organization's members, like Shapiro, were willing to abandon the "party line" in favor of working together in their fight against fascism. The protest in

1938 was a clear expression of the heightened sense of collective identity among the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights and their belief that “all Jewish must unite in the struggle against Hitler.”⁷⁰ The combination of their rising awareness of the atrocities being committed by the Nazis, and increased incidents of anti-Semitism in the city signaled to the city’s Jewish residents that no matter how integrated into the middle-class they became, they would always be regarded as something other than white Americans. Like their Yiddish cultural activities, the unity shown in their coalition-building efforts suggests that their heightened national self-consciousness as Jews motivated their work together.

The work between the JLC and the UANC also suggests that many of the organizations’ members shared the UANC’s broad understanding of threat posed by Nazism and supported their efforts to fight racism as part of their fight against fascism. In the years before 1935, *rekhte* and *linke* Yiddish socialists had argued intensely over the necessity of reaching out to the non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood, resulting in intense factional battles and the splintering of the neighborhood’s Yiddish-based organizations. In the late 1930s, however, both the JLC and the UANC worked actively to build multiethnic coalitions as part of their fight against fascism. Their embrace of multiethnic coalition building was in part pragmatic, a means of rallying even broader public support for the government to take aggressive action in support of the Jews in Europe.⁷¹ And it was limited as both *rekhte* and *linke* Yiddish socialists continued to

⁷⁰ The phrase was taken from a sign carried at a protest Nov. 22, 1938.

⁷¹ Stuart Svonkin challenged the notion that the roots of American Jewish liberalism could be traced to a tradition of cosmopolitan liberalism in historical Judaism, which, he argues, was instead generally

cultivate Jewish national self-consciousness and promote Jewish national interests, their Yiddish cultural activity often seeping into their coalition-building activities, as reflected in the signs at the 1938 protest. But the enduring collaboration between the JLC and the UANC suggests that as a result of the increasingly open displays of anti-Semitism in the city, the majority of the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights of all ideological persuasions came to accept the salience of racism and other “phobias” in Los Angeles. In their rhetoric, they did not equate their experiences with those of their non-Jewish neighbors, but instead identified a common source of oppression and emphasized the interdependence of their struggles: only by fighting fascism together could they protect their right to be different. Over the course of the 1930s, the Yiddish Socialists of Boyle Heights came to understand that ensuring that Jews would not be vulnerable to persecution required that they work with other minority groups to fight discrimination and secure full civil rights for all of the multiethnic residents of the neighborhood. As the JLC’s creed adopted in the early 1940s described, “The security of the Jewish community is inextricably tied to the civil rights of all minority groups.”⁷²

The emphasis on coalition building among the Yiddish socialists was new to their activism in the 1930s. Since their first meeting in downtown Los Angeles in 1908, they had excluded their non-Jewish neighbors from their community organizing efforts and built an autonomous Jewish cultural and organizational life in the multiethnic

“insular, even conservative,” He advanced the argument that the efforts to fight prejudice in the postwar era were motivated by pragmatism not principle. See Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice*, 7.

⁷² A copy of the JLC’s creed appears in the JLC Records [microfilm], Roll 56, Box 21, Folder 19. While the creed was undated, it likely came from a slightly later period as it appears among other documents from the early 1940s.

neighborhood. They had benefited from the racially segmented dual labor system that prevailed in the city and avoided the topics of race and inequality entirely. But beginning in the early 1930s, they had begun to recalibrate the balance between their Jewish nationalism and their commitment to socialist, working-class solidarity. Both the cooperative movement and CPLA's "fight for bread" had emphasized the mutual interests of all of the neighborhood's residents and forged solidarity among participants based on the shared struggles of everyday life. The programs of the New Deal channeled this solidarity among neighbors into trade unionism, pushing the Jewish Bakers and other Jewish unions to incorporate unskilled and non-Jewish workers into their organizing drives. While the programs of the New Deal had in some ways increased the disparities of wealth in the neighborhood, they also encouraged the Yiddish socialists to expand the scope and scale of their activism and to initiate relationships with non-Jewish organizations and those outside of Boyle Heights. As Nazis' persecution of the Jews and open displays of anti-Semitism in Los Angeles increased, the Yiddish socialists built upon these relationships to forge multiethnic coalitions both within the labor movement and without. Just as they knew they could not capitalize on the New Deal's protections without organizing all of the city's workers, so too they knew they would never build the level of public awareness about the Nazi's persecution of the Jews in Germany without expanding their activism beyond the Jewish community. For both practical and principled reasons, they made outreach among the neighborhood's non-Jewish residents a defining feature of their Popular Front Against Fascism.

Even as they did so, however, the Yiddish socialists in Boyle Heights and those living throughout the city also increased their Yiddish based cultural activity and maintained their commitment to Jewish nationalism. Their interracial activism in the late 1930s was not based on the notion that the differences between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors should or could fade; indeed, as Chapter One described, their diaspora nationalism was instead based on the principle that Jewish difference was a positive value that should be maintained in order to ensure the survival of Jews as a people. The Yiddish socialists had strengthened their autonomous Yiddish-based cultural life as part of their fight against fascism. What had changed by the late 1930s was that they came to realize they would have to transform Los Angeles and American society more broadly in order to achieve their goals of Jewish national-cultural autonomy. They understood, as Simon Dubnow once described, that in order for Jews to exist as a “nation among nations” in multiethnic Boyle Heights, they would have to push themselves, the state, and the people of Los Angeles to “jointly submit to a higher principle of equal worth of all citizens.”⁷³ To do so, they had to challenge the racial hierarchy in the city, even though it was largely working for them, and expand the scope of their activism by forming multiethnic coalitions to affect a deeper, more lasting change in American attitudes about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as part of their fight against fascism.

Staging their protest in 1938 on the streets of Boyle Heights, rather than at the Germany Embassy or Deutsche Haus, was an act of signification, a way for the Yiddish

⁷³ Dubnow, “Theory of Jewish Nationalism,” in *Jews and Diaspora Nationalism*, 23-25.

socialists to situate themselves and their Jewish community among the other racial and ethnic groups in the neighborhood. Because the neighborhood was the epicenter of Yiddish life in Los Angeles, they could show their solidarity with the Jews of Germany who had just endured such brutal attacks and with the rest of the global Yiddish-speaking community. And because of the neighborhood's diversity, they could demonstrate their solidarity with all of the minority groups in the neighborhood, draw them into their protest and express their commitment to multiculturalism. Even though the leaders of the JLC and the UANC had moved away from the neighborhood years before and had in most aspects of their lives assimilated into the white middle class, in both their cultural and coalition building activities during the Popular Front, they reinforced their ethnic, immigrant identities.

These attitudes were the strongest among the American-born Jewish residents of the CIO generation. These young people had been raised in the neighborhood, educated in its diverse schools, and "actively intermingled" on its street corners and in the restaurants along Brooklyn Avenue, and in recalling their experiences growing up in the neighborhood, consistently emphasize multiculturalism as a defining feature of life in the neighborhood.⁷⁴ As Leo Frumkin, described of his youth in Boyle Heights:

"It was a fellowship... I don't know what term you would use, except that would become internationalists... You grew up in a community that was a multi-racial

⁷⁴Allison Varzally described that the multiethnic teenagers in Boyle Heights "did not simply coexist but actively intermingled. Minorities argued, empathized, fought, allied, collaborated, and then revised their notions of community to accommodate these complex interactions," *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside the Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3. See the Boyle Heights Oral History Project, Japanese American National Museum and *Reflections and Remembrances of the Boyle Heights Jewish Community, 1920s-1960s*, Hoffman, Abraham, ed., (Los Angeles: Western States Jewish History Association, 2011).

community so you learned to appreciate –not tolerate – but appreciate other cultures. You became socially conscious.”⁷⁵

Frumkin’s was raised by Yiddish socialists and was indeed “socially conscious,” helping to organize a student walkout at Jefferson High when the school hosted Gerald L. K. Smith, a notoriously racist and anti-Semitic preacher, and his attitudes may not have been shared by all of his fellow American-born Jews. And even as some recalled that, “no one had any bad feelings about the other person’s color,” former Jewish residents noted the enduring racial “antipathy” and “animosity” in the neighborhood, citing frequent fights between gangs of young males of Mexican and Jewish descent.⁷⁶ The racial tensions in the neighborhood, as throughout Los Angeles, flared in the 1940s, and the residents’ embrace of multiculturalism had its limits. But even more so than their parents, the American-born Jews in Boyle Heights asserted themselves as ethnic members of a multiethnic community, and made multiculturalism part of their identities as Americans.

Through the cultural and coalition building activism of the Popular Front, the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights articulated a set of shared American values that

⁷⁵ Frumkin’s interview appears as part of the Boyle Heights Oral History Project of the Japanese-American National Museum. He described his parents, born in the Ukraine and Russia, as “social democrats” involved in the *Arbeter Ring* in contrast to his aunt who was active in the Communist Party. Frumkin attended the *Arbeter Ring*’s summer camp and joined the Socialist Youth Club at the age of 16. He was expelled for his leadership of the Jefferson High walkout and was subsequently elected to lead his local of the United Auto Workers at age 19. He offered the above quotation on page 21 of his interview transcript, housed at the JANM.

⁷⁶ In his interview with the Boyle Heights Oral History Project, Hershey Eisenberg said both that Roosevelt High “was really a melting pot. No one had any bad feelings about the other person’s color, their religion, their beliefs,” and that there were frequently “gang fights” between Mexicans and Jews in the neighborhood, including those instigated by his cousin Archie who was “a tremendous street brawler.” His interview reveals the contradictions of the attitudes among the CIO generation. See his interview with the Boyle Heights Oral History Project, JANM, 24. The gang culture in the neighborhood was also mentioned by in essays that appear in the volume, *Boyle Heights: Recollections and Remembrances*, including those of Don Hodes (44) and Larry Goldman (111).

helps to understand how they conceived of their identities in the paradoxical reality of the late 1930s: cultural pluralism, anti-racism and anti-discrimination, and equal civil and labor rights. In both spheres of activity, they expressed a heightened sense of ethnic identification and Jewish nationalism, and an intense concern about the rising anti-Semitism at home and abroad. They largely abandoned their hope that the ethnic and racial differences might fade to a universalist, socialist culture and instead came to view their Jewish community as one of several distinct ethno-racial minority groups in the neighborhood. But with new vigor, they defended that multiculturalism as a fundamental part of American democracy under attack from the influence of fascism. They largely abandoned the language of the “Jewish working-class” and instead adopted the language of Americanism, positioning themselves as defenders of both their fellow Jews and American democratic values. Through their activism in the late 1930s, they defined themselves as both American and Jewish, showing that they had formed a new collective identity as American Jews.

Unfortunately for the Yiddish socialists, their Popular Front did not stop the march of fascism in Europe. Nazi troops invaded Czechoslovakia and, in the fall of 1939, much to the dismay of American Communists, the Soviet Union signed a non-Aggression Pact with the Nazis, vowing not to intervene as Hitler invaded Western Poland and captured Warsaw. The Nazis began forcefully deporting German Jews to Poland, forcing hundreds of thousands of Jews into densely packed ghettos in Warsaw, Lodz and other Polish cities, and sending others to die in concentration camps. France and Britain soon declared war on Germany and its allies, marking the beginning

of the Second World War. After the U.S. entered the war in 1941, the Yiddish socialists invested all of the momentum and resources of their Popular Front into supporting the war effort, forcefully asserting their new American identities. The IWO erected a "Victory House" on the corner of Brooklyn and Soto and, along with the JLC, mounted a massive war bonds drive in the neighborhood. Between the summer of 1942 and April, 1944, they sold over \$10,000,000 worth of War Bonds. The U.S. Army awarded them for their efforts by dedicating one of their B-17 Bombers "as proof of their patriotism," naming it the "Spirit of Boyle Heights."⁷⁷

In some ways it is impossible to know why the local members of the JLC have been willing to set aside their ideological differences and work together with the *linke* groups because in the postwar era, the IWO, the YKUF, and the other organizations affiliated with the United Anti-Nazi Conference were labeled "Communist Fronts" by the California State Committee on Anti-American Activities.⁷⁸ The UANC disbanded as the investigations began and many of the Yiddish socialists, even those who had been members of the organization, disavowed their ties to the *linke* and their involvement with the "communist front" organizations. While the Chaim Shapiro, Julius Levitt and other Yiddish socialists at first defended their colleagues from the anti-Communists'

⁷⁷ Congressman Chet Hollifield gave a speech in to the U.S. Congress detailing Boyle Heights' efforts in 1943 he called "Boyle Heights Demonstrates Faith in Democracy." Text of the speech appears in William Kramer's article, "The Man Behind 'The Spirit of Boyle Heights'" *Western States Jewish History* vol. xx no. 3 (April, 1988), 240-241.

⁷⁸ The Committee was originally created by the California State Legislature in 1940, and although investigations had been launched as earlier as 1935, the bulk of their investigations occurred after the war's end. In their 4th report on Communist Front organizations in 1948, the Committee described the YKUF, the IWO and other *linke* Yiddish groups as having used "strategic trickery... to capitalize on the sorrows and oppressions of the Jews of the world," and that their efforts were, "a contemptible abandonment of all concepts of decency and humanity...vile and depraved." See "4th Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities" published by the California State Senate, 1948.

attacks, they, like Jewish organizations across the country, began to conduct their own investigations of their affiliated organizations as the massive crackdown on “Un-American” activity in Southern California by state and federal officials intensified in the postwar era. The leaders of the Jewish Labor Committee, despite having collaborated with the *linke* in the 1930s, declared the Communists a threat to their organization and purge communists and sympathizers from their ranks. As the director of the JLC’s Anti-Discrimination Department described them, the purges were necessary “to strengthen and arm [the JLC] against communist infiltration while building legitimate progressive movements seeking genuine social and economic betterment.”⁷⁹ The more moderate, *rekhte* Yiddish socialists cut their ties to the *linke* organizations and individuals they had once collaborated with and increasingly invested their time and energy into the more “legitimate” organizations affiliated with the Los Angeles Jewish Community Council. The organizations and individuals affiliated with the Communist Party were similarly purged from the unions affiliated with the AFL and the CIO, and were increasingly isolated and marginalized from Jewish community life.

⁷⁹ Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform*, 167.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has shown that through years of labor and community organizing, a cohort of Eastern European Jewish immigrants established their American identities in the multiethnic neighborhood of Boyle Heights. From the time of their first meeting together in 1908, these Yiddish socialists pursued a model of community organizing in the neighborhood that was independent from both the Jewish immigrants who preceded them and their non-Jewish neighbors. Because of their dual commitments to Jewish nationalism and socialism, they sought to organize and mobilize the neighborhood's Jewish immigrants by using Yiddish to build mutual-aid based alternatives to the charity of Jewish elites. Rather than address the disparities of wealth and opportunity that existed between the area's Jewish population and their non-Jewish neighbors, the organizations they formed excluded the non-Jewish residents of the neighborhood. Even though many of the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights worked as professionals and owned their own businesses, they fostered a collective identity as the "Jewish working-class" and created a distinct Jewish organizational and cultural life in the multiethnic neighborhood.

But over the course of two decades between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second, the Yiddish socialists gradually reconfigured their model of community organizing and their collective identities. Through their involvement in movements among the unemployed during the depths of the Depression, the trade union organizing that followed the passage

of the New Deal and their fight against fascism, the Yiddish socialists forged both organizational and personal relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors and expanded the scope of their activities beyond the Jewish community of Boyle Heights. By the late 1930s, building multiethnic coalitions both within the labor movement and without became defining features of their activism. They continued their Yiddish cultural activity to cultivate their national self-consciousness as Jews, but supplemented that activity with community outreach and public awareness campaigns in English to promote multiculturalism, anti-racism and equal rights as fundamental parts of American democracy. In doing so, they situated themselves among the neighborhood's other ethnic and racial minority groups and made multiculturalism part of their new collective identities as American Jews. The Yiddish socialists never abandoned their revolutionary principles, but developed new ways to balance their commitments to Jewish nationalism, socialism, and Yiddishism in Boyle Heights.

The evolution of the activism of the Jewish Bakers Union Local 453 demonstrated this steady transformation of the Yiddish socialists' attitudes and organizing style. Like the other Jewish unions in the neighborhood in the 1920s, the bakers had excluded non-Jews from their membership. They used their three strategies to encourage the area's Jewish residents to "buy Jewish" in order to construct an autonomous Jewish commercial infrastructure in the multiethnic marketplace of the neighborhood. But the bakers' strategies failed during the Depression, and through their involvement in the cooperative movement and the

Communist Party's "fight for bread," they had come to see their fates as tied to all of those struggling to afford their daily bread. While they had once rejected the merits of industrial unionism and refused to organize the unskilled bakery workers in their industry, by the end of the 1930s, they expanded their understanding of their craft to include non-Jews and worked closely with the city's other baking unions to sign joint contracts governing all of the city's bakery workers. The programs of the New Deal encouraged their change in strategy, both by establishing a new national food system that consecrated the hegemony of mass production in the local baking industry, and a new national system of industrial relations that afforded the bakers new protections for collective bargaining. While these protections were not extended to all of Los Angeles' workers, the New Deal ignited a wave of union organizing the Jewish bakers and other Jewish workers in Boyle Heights actively participated in that brought thousands of new people into the city's unions. The members of Local 453 came to see themselves not just as Jewish bakers, but as part of the broader, American working-class, and in the late 1930s, they worked to foster multiethnic trade union solidarity as a bulwark against fascism's influence in American society.

Together, the bakers and the rest of the Yiddish socialists developed a model of community organizing based on trade unionism, multiethnic coalition-building and Yiddish cultural activity that endured well into the postwar era. As several historians have shown, Jewish activists became leaders in the fight for civil rights in the 1940s when racial tensions flared in Los Angeles. The work of

Shana Beth Bernstein and others has shown that left-wing Jews and those affiliated with the Jewish Community Relations Committee were “particularly prominent” in the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, formed to raise legal defense funds for the young Mexican American men falsely accused of murder in 1943.¹ While her study highlights other members of the organization, Julius Levitt, Pinches Karl, Harry Sherr and Chaim Shapiro all served on the executive board of the Jewish Community Relations Committee in the 1940s, helping the organization to become the leading engine of the Jewish community’s civil rights campaigns. Kenneth Burt’s work has shown that the Jewish Labor Committee spearheaded the campaign to form the Committee to Combat Intolerance in Los Angeles in the Central Labor Council and that the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights became crucial players in the multiethnic coalition that elected Los Angeles’ first City Councilman of Mexican heritage, Edward Roybal, in 1949.² And as George Sanchez and others have highlighted, the Yiddish socialists also continued to “create multiculturalism on the eastside” in the 1940s, working with the Japanese American Citizens League and the Community Service

¹ See Shana Beth Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth Century Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 88. See also Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), especially Chapter Five, “The United Nations in a City.”

² Kenneth Burt, “Yiddish Los Angeles and the Birth of Latino Politics: The Polyglot Ferment of Boyle Heights.” *Jewish Currents* (May-June, 2008): 22-26; “The Jewish Labor Committee: Seventy-Five Years of Activism and Historic Achievements” (paper presented at the California/Western States Jewish Labor Committee Annual Recognition Brunch, Century City, California, June 14th, 2009); and “The Fight for Fair Employment and the Shifting Alliances among Latinos and Labor in Cold War Los Angeles,” in *Labor’s Cold War: Local Politics in a Global Context*, Shelton Stromquist ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 79-109.

Organization, a civil rights group formed by Edward Roybal and other Mexican-American residents of the neighborhood, to host “Friendship Festivals” and other intercultural events for the neighborhood’s teenagers, often held at the Soto-Michigan Jewish Community Center. The more left-leaning Yiddish socialists in the neighborhood hosted similar “Festivals of Nationalities” and formed a Los Angeles branch of the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born to offer legal protection to those threatened with deportation. As Sanchez noted, articles written in the early 1950s hailed the neighborhood as an example of “democratic progress,” claiming that “few districts in America are as ethnically dynamic, religiously and politically tolerant, and community proud.”³

While these studies often take for granted that this model of community organizing and feelings of interethnic solidarity had always existed among the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights, this dissertation has shown that the Yiddish socialists’ commitment to multiethnic coalition building emerged only after decades of hard fought ideological conflicts during the interwar period. From their earliest days in the neighborhood, the Jewish residents had advantages over their non-Jewish neighbors because of the racially segmented dual labor system that prevailed in the city, resulting in conflicts between the Yiddish socialists over who were the neighborhood’s true proletarians. Debates about how to

³ The quotation was excerpted from an article in *Fortnight* magazine in October 1954 and appears in George Sanchez, “‘What’s Good for Boyle Heights is Good for Jews’: Creating Multiculturalism on the Eastside During the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 633-661, 642, 652. See also Allison Varzally, *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside the Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

appropriately balance their dual commitments to fostering Jewish nationalism and cultivating socialist working-class consciousness caused deep factions between the *rekhte* and the *linke*, who had for years pursued much of their activism separately. Although the *linke* had consistently worked to incorporate the area's non-Jewish residents into their organizing efforts, they too had difficulty balancing those efforts with their Yiddish cultural activity. The programs of the New Deal structured the readjustment of their strategies, but as this dissertation has shown, so too did the ideological tensions and the rivalries within and between the Yiddish socialists of Boyle Heights drive them to experiment with new strategies and to stray from the platforms of organizations with which they were affiliated. Because both the *rekhte* and the *linke* focused their activism toward the same population in the same neighborhood, the ongoing dialogue between them fueled the transformation of their activism and influenced the attitudes of the area's Jewish residents. By the late 1930s, members of both *rekhte* and *linke* organizations collaborated in their efforts and worked together to defend the neighborhood's multiculturalism. And through both the conflict and their collaboration, the *rekhte* and the *linke* Yiddish socialists forged strong ties to the neighborhood and what they had created there and returned to Boyle Heights to conduct much of Yiddish cultural and community organizing activity even after they moved into other, more affluent neighborhoods.

By highlighting these debates and the evolution of the Yiddish socialists' attitudes and organizing styles, this dissertation has enhanced our understanding of labor and left-wing community organizing in early twentieth century Los Angeles. For many years, historians have assumed that Yiddish life and community organizing among the Jews of Boyle Heights followed the same course as in Jewish communities elsewhere and that the neighborhood was "Los Angeles' Lower East Side." But as this dissertation has shown, the Yiddish socialists who settled in Boyle Heights confronted unique challenges in the multiethnic context of the neighborhood that influenced their identities and the forms of their activism. The realities of life in the neighborhood both intensified their Jewish nationalism and, over time, their commitment to multiculturalism. Tracing the activities of the Yiddish socialists between their arrival at the turn of the century and the beginning of the Second World War has shed new light on that process of adjustment, and shown that the formation of the Jewish immigrants' class-based and ethnic identities followed a particular trajectory in Boyle Heights. This dissertation has thereby highlighted the fact that community organizing among Los Angeles' workers took different forms than in "the Lower East Side" and other urban areas, and that historians must adjust their frameworks in order to better understand the experiences of workers and radicals in early twentieth century Los Angeles.

When the Yiddish socialists reflected on their lives in the postwar era, however, the hard fought debates of the interwar period seemed less formative

of their activism and identities than other developments. The annihilation of the communities that they had left behind in Europe and the atrocities Hitler inflicted on their fellow Jews seemed far more significant and impactful than their work together in Boyle Heights. An essay written by Harry Lang to honor the contributions of his friend Julius Levitt in 1952 reveals how the members of their cohort reset the timeline of their lives in their twilight years. Lang marked five defining moments of his generation: the first was their choice to revolt against the Tsar and embrace socialism in their teenage years. The second, Lang asserted, was their immigration to America and their choice to move to California and build a new Yiddish life there. Lang's third defining event, however, was the Second World War and the "hellish fires of Nazism" and his fourth, the Jews' redemption, or in his words *golus*, in the creation of the State of Israel. And finally, Lang described, was the moment in which he wrote in 1952, when he and the rest of his generation came together to celebrate the "institutions, temples, centers, councils, hospitals and Yiddish culture" they had created.⁴ The details of their efforts to build those institutions, the conflicts and debates that had informed their development, and the influence of those events on their collective identities had no place in Lang's account. Although they had devoted much of their adult lives to building Yiddish culture and organizational life in Boyle Heights, in the postwar era, those efforts seemed insignificant parts

⁴ H. Lang, "J. Levitt- The Judge" in *Fuftsik yor geselshaflich tetikayt fun Judl Lewit in der opsaytsung fun zeine freint (Julius Levitt, Fifty Years of Social Activities; Souvenir Book)*, (Los Angeles: Julius Levitt Book Committee, 1952), 6-10.

of their collective past rather than defining features of their generation's experiences.

And as those details faded from their collective memory in the postwar era, the Yiddish socialists' physical presence in Boyle Heights and ties to the multiethnic community in the neighborhood seemed less important as well. As Chapter Four described, Jewish residents began to move out of the neighborhood and purchase homes in more affluent parts of the city in the late 1930s, but these departures accelerated in the 1940s after the Home Owners' Loan Corporation gave the neighborhood its lowest, "red" ranking. When the neighborhood was devalued by the HOLC, the local and national governments began to seize the land in the area and use it for more "public" purposes. Five freeways were constructed in and around the neighborhood between 1943 and 1960, the first of which, the Interstate 10, cut right through Brooklyn Avenue and paved over the headquarters of the Jewish Bakers' Union on East First Street. The construction of the freeways and the East Los Angeles Interchange that connected them resulted in the removal of almost 3,000 dwellings in the area and the displacement of some 10,000 residents. Those who could afford to left the neighborhood, and by 1955, Boyle Heights' Jewish population had declined by seventy-two percent.⁵ Although for some years these recently departed residents returned to the neighborhood to hold events and activities at the institutions they had built in the area, by the 1950s, most of those institutions closed. The *Arbeter*

⁵ Sanchez, "Whats Good for Boyle Heights is Good for Jews," 633-34.

Ring purchased a new building for their *folkschule* on Pico Boulevard, closer to the burgeoning Jewish populations in Beverlywood and the Miracle Mile, and in 1958 constructed a new headquarters on Robertson Boulevard nearby. The Labor Zionists similarly purchased a new building near the Fairfax District and sold their *folkschule* on Soto Street. The *linke* Yiddish socialists remained in the neighborhood far longer than the others, but as the crusades against “un-American Activity” flared in the early 1950s, they sold their Cooperative Center as well. By the 1960s, the epicenter of Yiddish cultural and organizational life had shifted elsewhere and the sights and sounds of *yidische kultur* no longer filled the streets of Boyle Heights.

That they recreated these institutions in their new neighborhoods, however, speaks to the endurance of the ethnic identities the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights had crafted during their years living there. While the traditional narrative of Jewish immigration emphasizes gradual assimilation into the white American mainstream, the Jewish residents of Boyle Heights maintained the Yiddish-based organizational life they created in the early twentieth century even as they embraced their upward mobility and moved out of the neighborhood. The process of renegotiating their class-based and ethnic identities began from their first days in Boyle Heights, the neighborhood’s unique diversity forcing its Jewish residents to reconsider what it meant to be “working-class” in a neighborhood where the Jewish residents owned their own homes, their own cars, or their own businesses, and comprised the top of the

socioeconomic hierarchy. Through years of labor and community organizing, the Yiddish socialists had adapted their revolutionary principles to fit this particular context, and adjusted their strategies to build a model of organizational life and coalition-building oriented activism that was easily recreated in the new, more affluent neighborhoods they moved to. In Boyle Heights, they had not simply replicated the forms of identity and community that had marked their pasts, but rather forged new forms they carried with them into the future.

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