

Cultural Networking in the Aftermath of Destruction: Szmerke Kacerginski's Postwar Itineraries and Activities

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Kacerginski's postwar trajectory (1944-1954)

When the Second World War ended, the Yiddish poet and former partisan Shmerke Kacerginski, born on 28 October 1908 in Vilna, was already a well-known figure within the Yiddish cultural world for various reasons. On one hand, he had been an active organizer of Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna), a group of about twenty writers and artists that became characteristic of the prewar Jewish literary environment in his native city. Among Kacerginski's friends were the poets Chaim Grade and Avrom Sutzkever, both of whom also survived the genocide.¹

On the other hand, he became known as one of the few surviving members of the Paper brigade.² Kacerginski remained imprisoned in the Vilna ghetto from April 1942—after seven months of wandering disguised as deaf-mute Pole—up until September 1943. There, he was recruited for forced labor by the official agency for the confiscation of Jewish cultural property, together with a team of Jewish intellectuals. This team was assigned the task of choosing the most valuable items to be shipped to Frankfurt. But instead, they dedicated to smuggle cultural artefacts back into the ghetto and hide them; for this reason, they were deemed in the ghetto “the Paper brigade.” The team rescued more than a million documents. After the liberation of Vilna by the Soviet Army, in which he enrolled as a volunteer, Kacerginski became the director of the newly founded Vilna Jewish Museum. Soon later it was shut down by the authorities and the recovered materials, again in danger, had to be rescued for a second time and many made their way to YIVO in New York.

¹ Cammy, Justin D., “The Emergence of Yung Vilne,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 14, 2001, p. 170–91.

² The subject has been thoroughly researched by historian David Fishman in *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis*, Lebanon NH, ForEdge, 2017.

Kaczerginski had also been a member of the Vilna ghetto underground. As reconstructed by David Fishman, once the attempt of uprising in September 1943 failed, Kaczerginski fled from the ghetto with other members of the unit. As a partisan fighter in the forest, he kept a diary later used as basis for his memoirs *Ikh bin geven a partizan. (Di grine legende)* [I Have Been a Partisan (The Green Legend)] (Buenos Aires, independent edition, 1952). He also wrote songs and compiled song lyrics that he heard from others, as he had previously done in the ghetto, which would become the basis of his Holocaust song anthologies (see *infra*).

In 1946, after he left Vilna, Kaczerginski became member of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Łódź.³ Since his arrival in Poland, he systematically spoke and acted as representative of a group of refugee writers who had survived the genocide, mostly in the Soviet Union, and who were looking for a place to settle together after their repatriation to Poland in 1946. For instance, in a letter addressed late 1946 to the Yiddish writer H. Leivick based in New York, found at YIVO archives (RG 315 H. Leivick collection) Kaczerginski affirmed:

The solitude of the Yiddish writer in Europe has never been so great as it is now. To alleviate their solitude, that is the huge task Yiddish writers outside Europe should face. [...] We are dealing with the life and work of some twenty Yiddish writers. Maybe you could, dear friends, discuss this with colleagues of the PEN and after a (rapid) discussion of this issue, bring it out to the public until a practical solution should be found.

The role of representing and animating the community of writer-refugees would continue in Paris. Upon his arrival in this city late 1946, he soon became one of the main organizers and lecturers of cultural events that took place in a regular basis at the refugee center for artists and writers located on 9, rue Guy-Patin,⁴ even though he did not consider France his permanent residence.

³ Lipphardt, Anna, "Communities on the Move: Reconsidering the History of East European Jews After the Holocaust From a *Landsmanshaftn* Perspective," *East European Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 2-3, 2014, p. 225-240.

⁴ Chinski, Malena and Pâris de Bollardière, Constance, "Un foyer artistique et intellectuel yiddish pour migrants rescapés, le 9 rue Guy-Patin (1947-1950)," *Archives juives*, Vol. 54, 2021/1, Dossier "Les migrations juives d'Europe centrale et orientale en France au lendemain de la Shoah," pp. 65-88.

Indeed, after a long application process for obtaining a visa, he moved to Buenos Aires together with his spouse Meri Kaczerginski and his four-year-old daughter Libele in 1950, and became staff member of the South American branch of the World Congress for Jewish Culture, a transnational anti-communist network founded in 1948 to foster Jewish culture in Yiddish⁵, from where he further traveled to several cities and towns in South and North America.⁶

From his new basis in Buenos Aires, Kaczerginski contributed to the settlement in that city of a large group of refugee writers and artists still in transit in Paris, including significant figures such as Yiddish writers Avrom Zak, Yitskhok Janasowicz and Moyshe Knaphais, and puppet theater artists Simkhe and Ruth Schwartz.⁷

As it results from recent archival research, after having quitted his post at World Congress for Jewish Culture, Kaczerginski became an independent traveling lecturer. He remained an itinerant intellectual and Yiddish cultural activist up until his sudden death in an airplane crash on April 23 1954.

The following table summarizes Kaczerginski’s postwar itineraries, from Liberation until his death:

Period	Place of Residence	Travels
Aug. 1944 – Nov. 1945	Vilna, Lithuania	
1946	Lodz, Poland	Germany
Nov. 1946 - June 1950	Paris, France	DP Camps in Germany United States Israel Switzerland
June 1950 - April 1954	Buenos Aires, Argentina	Brazil Uruguay Ecuador Interior of Argentina Canada United States

Kaczerginski’s postwar itineraries, 1944-1954
Chronology based on archival work

⁵ Rojanski, Rachel, “The Final Chapter in the Struggle for Cultural Autonomy. Palestine, Israel and Yiddish Writers in the Diaspora 1946-1951,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 July 2007, p. 185–204.

⁶ Werb, Bret Charles, “Shmerke Kaczerginski: The Partisan Troubador,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 20, 2007, pp. 392-412.

⁷ Chinski, Malena, “Yiddish Culture After the Shoah : Refugee Writers and Artists as ‘Fresh Creative Energies’ for Buenos Aires” in Chinski, Malena and Astro, Alan (ed.), *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 42-68.

A bridge between two worlds

A year after his death, forty-eight Yiddish intellectuals and activists paid homage to Kacerginski in a 500-page volume dedicated to his memory, the *Shmerke Katsherginski ondenk-bukh* (Shmerke Kacerginski Memorial Book, Buenos Aires, 1955). This volume showcases a network of social relations one decade after the end of the war and reflects how Kacerginski's peers understood his position within the cultural sphere in the aftermath of the genocide. Kacerginski's death was perceived as a turning point by his contemporaries, in a context in which each surviving Yiddish intellectual from Eastern Europe had become one of the few remaining members of a last generation.

The expression "cultural networking in the aftermath of destruction" evoked in the title of this paper points to Kacerginski's skill to bonding people and far-flung centers of the Jewish diaspora in a period extremely dynamic in respect with the cultural geography of Yiddish. Indeed, the main Yiddish centers in Eastern Europe had disappeared as such, and the Yiddish language would soon fade out as a major vernacular language.⁸

One of the means through which Kacerginski created connections were precisely his itineraries. Following the prewar tradition of Yiddish writer travelers, Kacerginski became one of the last itinerant writers throughout the centers of the Yiddish-speaking diaspora at a time when this practice was disappearing. His travels in 1945-1946, featured in the aforementioned memorial volume and in Kacerginski's correspondence, first included visits to former sites of destruction (such as Majdanek and Auschwitz), and literary tours to small postwar Jewish communities in Poland, often accompanied by his fellow survivor-writers from Yung Vilne, Haim Grade and Avrom Sutzkever.

In November-December 1947, a year after his settling in Paris, Kacerginski left for an independent two-month tour to the Displaced persons camps in the American zone of occupied Germany, where he did more than twenty literary presentations. A detailed chronic of the tour composed by Kacerginski in several installments appeared in the Parisian organ of the Linke Poale Zion, *Arbeter vort*, since early 1948.

⁸ Shandler, Jeffrey, *Adventures in Yiddishland. Postvernacular Language & Culture*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 2008.

If numerous Yiddish writers from the Americas, such as H. Leivick, Haim Shoshkes, and Yankev Pat, undertook tours to Eastern Europe and the DP camps after the genocide⁹, Kacerginski's case differs from theirs insofar as he was himself a survivor from the Vilna ghetto and a former partisan. This fact likewise made his tours to the Americas particular, in that he became a bridge between two worlds: one that had experienced firsthand Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, and one that had not been directly scathed. For example, in a lecture delivered in New York late 1948 drawn from YIVO archives (RG 601 Leon Feinberg collection), Kacerginski addressed the American Jewish public in such terms:

On the day I had to fly from Paris to New York, I remembered that exactly five years before, on the same date, I and a group of armed fighters ripped through the nocturnal darkness of the Vilna ghetto with the purpose of reaching the Bielorussian forests, in order to unite with the partisans. Only 180 kilometers separated us from our goal. Our way there, which for us was full of thousands of concealed dangers, lasted 10 days and 10 nights. If one of the fighters had said to me, only as a figment of the imagination, that five years later I would be in New York and would fly 18 hours to reach this distant place, I would have certainly considered that person as someone who was not in possession of a clear mind... But I survived and having escaped from hell, I have lived to be in New York and to meet this large Jewish community.

Through his travels, which included personal accounts, lectures and songs, Kacerginski brought Jewish experiences during the war closer to the Jewish communities in the Americas. Moreover, one may even posit that he was one of the first survivors to position themselves as Holocaust educators within the Jewish world.

In a different example which does not involve travel, Kacerginski addressed a letter to a famous writer settled in America since the end of the 19th century, Dovid Pinski, whom he had never met (YIVO RG 204 David Pinski collection). In this letter dated 1947, joined

⁹ Cohn, Robert, "Early postwar travelers on the future of Jewish life in Poland," *The Polish Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2008, pp. 317-340; Lewinsky, Tamar, "Un az in Treblinka bin ikh yo geven iz vos ? H. Leyvik und die Sheyres-hapleyte," in Marion Aptroot; Efrat Gal-Ed; Roland Gruschka; Simon Neuberger (Eds.), *Leket: Yiddish Studies Today*, Düsseldorf University Press, 2012, pp. 545-563.

by the delivery of a cultural artefact, Kaczerginski made an effort to bring past ghetto life closer to Pinski through engaging him personally and inviting him to share and become part of the Jewish experience under the Nazi occupation of Vilna:

Very esteemed writer Doved Pinski,

A member of the Sheerit Hapleitah, of Yerushalaym d'Lite and of Yung-yidish, is glad to celebrate the birthday of Yiddish literature, of Yiddish culture; that is, your 75th birthday. In the fire of hell, you were also with us. Your 'Eternal Jew' allowed us spritually to raise ourselves from the depths of annihilation, and sowed in our hearts the flame of revolt. On the occasion of your, my, and the Jewish people's birthday, a modest remembrance from those terrible years, which will show you how dear you were to us. These are photocopies of your piece 'The Eternal Jew,' which the Hebrew drama studio in the Vilna ghetto performed.

According to various testimonies, Kaczerginski used to perform songs in his presentations across the world. This was another means for bridging the gap between the audience pertaining to the "free world" during the war, and himself as a survivor of the destruction of Eastern European Jewish communities. In the following testimony, included in Kaczerginski Memorial Volume, his colleague Yisroel Aszendorf (p. 24) recalled:

Who would have thought that a person who had gone through so much pain, who had seen so much cruelty, would still be able to open his mouth and sing? And who would have believed that after all those years of disempowerment and humiliation of language, human beings could still be so deeply moved by song?

[...] A few months ago I had the chance to go to Mendoza and San Juan. These places are in exactly the same region Kaczerginski toured in his last travels. He had been there a few times earlier. As soon as I arrived, I was asked: 'Did you bring any new song?'. It seems that during his visit he taught the Jewish community various songs, which people still sing together at celebrations.

Kaczerginski's correspondence also enables us to look at the moment when cultural relations that predated the Holocaust were reactivated after the war ended. For instance, in a letter addressed from Lodz in April 1946 to the acclaimed literary critic Shmuel Niger in New York (YIVO RG 360 Shmuel Niger Papers), Kaczerginski also made a reference to Niger's symbolic presence within the ghetto walls, while transmitting the tense atmosphere in Poland only a few months before the Kielce pogrom:

Dear and esteemed friend Sh. Niger,

I am glad to read again your articles again in *Tog*. And like me, many, many more readers, survivors from the ghettos and camps, and partisans. You should know that we remembered you every time we talked about Yiddish writers. I remember that one evening dedicated to Sholem-Aleichem in the Vilna ghetto we read your work about him. I remember how often Kalmanovitsh used to debate with you in his handwritings, which [awaited publication] in his drawer and almost [got lost].

[...] Things are gloomy here because of the past. The present is a little more uplifting: we must be careful not to be shot in the back (and sometimes in the chest, why not?). Partisan life goes on. True, we can't carry a rifle openly. The gun is inside the pocket or hidden somewhere else, ready to be shot. And when one is weak, one must be even more purposely stubborn against the enemy, so we build, we create, but we want to leave. Leave where? Is there anywhere? Nobody cares.

However, the resumption of relations did not always happen smoothly. In the next example, I would like to discuss a case in which the distance among the two parties was harder to remedy and would require more time and bonding efforts. Kaczerginski's correspondence with Ephim Jeshurin (YIVO RG 451 Ephim H. Jeshurin ca. 1900-1960s), an active member of the Jewish Labor movement in America, begins in 1937 and is suddenly interrupted for ten years after 1938. In a letter addressed to Jeshurin from Paris in 1948, Kaczerginski wrote:

You will understand for sure my extraordinary surprise at receiving, after eight years, a letter from you. I wouldn't have been surprised, had I received a letter from you even a couple of years ago when I was in Poland. However, although my first outcry after having secretly escaped from Vilna was addressed in a long letter to you ("To whom other?" -I thought to myself), I didn't receive any reply from you, to my great surprise. [...]

To tell the truth, after I learned that you had received my letters, I decided not to write to you anymore. But I could not help it and frequently wrote again; your likewise frequent response was silence.

This letter reflects not only the interruption of a relationship due to force majeure during the years of occupation, but also a deeper breakage between the two close friends. Inevitably, wars, authoritarian regimes and genocide deeply transform human relations and Kacerginski was not ready to pretend that a decade of silence did not exist. Interestingly, subsequent letters bear signs of a subtle recomposition of the relationship, through the delivery of Kacerginski's books to Jeshurin.

Researching and remembering the Holocaust

A particular chapter in Kacerginski's postwar activities is associated with the postwar development of *khurban-forschung*, early "destruction research" undertaken by Jewish survivor-scholars,¹⁰ not only because of his contribution to the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Łódź, and his involvement in the activities of the Center for the Study of the History of Polish Jews, founded by survivor-scholars Michel Borwicz and Joseph Wulf in Paris in late 1947¹¹, but because of his work as a *zamlar* (collector) more broadly.

The practice of collecting folklore was made popular by the YIVO Institute in the interwar years. Even though Kacerginski did not have a scholarly background, it is quite

¹⁰ Jockusch, Laura, *Collect and record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹¹ Chinski, Malena, "A New Address for Holocaust Research: Michel Borwicz and Joseph Wulf in Paris, 1947-1951," in Aleksion, Natalia; Kubatova, Hana (Eds.), *Place, Spaces, and Voids in the Holocaust*, Göttingen 2021, p. 189-217.

likely that his contact with Jewish intellectuals in Vilna before the war had a long-lasting influence on his later trajectory, to the point of his becoming the most important collector of songs composed by Jewish victims in the ghettos and camps.

Although he had not been directly involved with YIVO, we learn through a later testimony published in the Memorial Volume (p. 47) that Kacerginski had indeed attended a YIVO conference in 1935. After the war, YIVO director Max Weinreich collaborated with Kacerginski and Sutzkever in the transfer of rescued items from YIVO to New York, as researched by David Fishman. In addition to this, Kacerginski remained in close contact with Weinreich, who composed a preface to Kacerginski's study *Khurbn Vilne* [The Destruction of Vilna] (New York, Cyco Farlag, 1947). Moreover, right before his death, Kacerginski was organizing a tour for Weinreich to Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil, as it comes out from archival work undertaken at YIVO (RG 584 Max Weinreich).

The *zamlers' ethos* is present in Kacerginski's work in a different form: the collection of more than a thousand names and biographical information of murdered Jews, which takes up some hundred pages of the aforementioned *Khurbn Vilne*. But this *yizkorleksikon* is also telling of the collective dimension of the work, which necessarily relied on networking between the author and dozens of informants.

Other projects envisioned by Kacerginski reveal this same spirit of *zamlen* as a means of remembering the victims of the Holocaust. For example, in 1949 Kacerginski submitted the World Congress for Jewish Culture a detailed proposal for the elaboration of a memorial book dedicated to murdered Yiddish writers (proposal reproduced in the historiographical journal *Problemen* 1, pp. 8-9).

Since he was not a formal musician, his method consisted in memorizing melodies. After the war, he sung all these songs back to musicians for transcription, and kept collecting songs from survivors. These materials were disseminated particularly in the anthology edited by H. Leivick in New York, *Lider fun di getos un di lagern* (Cyco Farlag, 1948), which came to light during Kacerginski's time in Paris. The local survivors' milieu, as well as Kacerginski's broad transnational relations, are embedded in this volume. Indeed, writers, composer, singers, activists, photographers, and ordinary people who acted as *ibergebers* (those transmitting information in the place of others), played an important role in the collection but remain invisible behind the author-title schema. Paratexts of this volume open

a window to visibilize a large network of Jewish survivors involved in the multi-faceted memorial and scholarly projects undertaken by Kaczerginski.

Closing remarks

Pinski's reflection included in Kaczerginski's memorial volume (p. 18), opposes the topics of movement and rest, where "movement" is associated with life:

He was bubbling with life. Wherever he was, there was life, movement, endeavor, activity, organization.

[...]

I regretted when he left Israel after having spent a short time there. Yiddish in Israel needed him deeply. Had he stayed in Israel, there would have been struggle for Yiddish. He would have brought awakening, organization. No rest would have been allowed. [...]

Has he left anyone capable of taking his place, of pushing further the wagon of Yiddish and Yiddish literature? I don't think so.

Through his constant moving across the globe, through imagining strategies to bonding with others, through Holocaust research and memorial projects, Kaczerginski contributed to the construction and reconstruction of the Yiddish space after the Holocaust. His postwar itineraries and activities help us better understand breaks and continuities between prewar and postwar Yiddish culture.