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PRIMARY SOURCES

*In Southern States: Historical Texts from
the Arbeter Ring's Southern District
(English Translation from Yiddish)*

by

Josh Parshall*

**Leadership List, Arbeter Ring Southern District,
September 1949¹**

**Mitchell J. Merlin, "Left and Right in the Arbeter Ring,"
September 1949²**

The Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle) was founded in 1900 in New York City as a left-wing fraternal order for Yiddish-speaking immigrants. Developing out of a small precursor society, the organization provided similar mutual aid and educational opportunities as other groups, but under the rubric of a general labor or radical viewpoint without religious affiliation, Zionist orientation, or assimilationist pressure. By 1918 it boasted chapters across the country with total membership reaching sixty thousand.³ Although the organization is most often associated with heavily industrialized cities in the North, branches in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Texas sprang up starting in 1908. These branches organized a range of activities including charitable and fundraising endeavors, Yiddish education for children, and political and cultural events. Shortly after World War I, the branches in these states formed two regional districts, the Texas-Louisiana

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District and the Southern District, which ultimately merged in 1946.⁴

Arthur Liebman has written that Arbeter Ring membership “provided friendship, mutual aid, and moorings in a strange society” to recent Jewish immigrants with progressive and radical views, who had “found it difficult” to take part in “associations in which their politics were continually subject to challenge.”⁵ These motivating factors do not seem to have differed according to region or community size, but branches in the South—generally in smaller cities with less powerful labor movements—operated in different contexts than counterparts in New York City and other major urban centers. In the translated article below, Mitchell J. Merlin claims that the branches in his region were the only “radical organizations” in their cities and “did not have the help and sympathy of unions.”⁶

Members in northern cities were often wage laborers who belonged to unions and Socialist Party branches, and their local chapters existed within a vibrant network of left-wing and Yiddish cultural institutions. In these locations, branches often organized as *landsmanshaftn* comprised of immigrants from a particular city or region in eastern Europe.⁷ In the South, by contrast, many participants owned their own businesses, and Arbeter Ring branches had fewer organizational allies in cities with smaller Jewish populations and relatively weak labor movements. While branches in the South often included several members of one extended family, the lower Jewish population precluded separate branches organized around *landsmanshaftn*. Regardless of region, however, the organization faced opposition from already acculturated Jews who feared that these new arrivals would draw unwanted attention to the Jewish community, as well as from Orthodox institutions that objected to the group’s secular proclivities.

In regard to clashes between radical and moderate factions within the organization—the topic of the excerpt below—some sources suggest that branches in the South may have contained more than their fair share of hardline leftists, although the evidence for such a claim is far from conclusive. Liebman has

argued that Arbeter Ring chapters in less populated areas like the South were the only source of Jewish identity for members, that sharply drawn lines divided the group from other Jewish institutions in these communities, and that, because more isolated Arbeter Ring branches depended on official organizational publications for news and opinions, they were isolated from the increasingly moderate viewpoints of average members in larger cities.⁸ Although Merlin's account is neither impartial nor comprehensive, his closing comments suggest that a lack of moderate socialist organizations in southern cities strengthened the hardline leftists in the district, so the evidence presented here provides some support to Liebman's claims.

Historians of Jewish history in the South have not given sustained attention to Arbeter Ring branches and tend to characterize secular Yiddish life in the region as culturally rather than politically oriented. Mark Bauman, for example, has written, "identity with labor unions, socialism and communism . . . only took root in the South as an intellectual exercise and as reverence for Yiddish culture through such organizations as the Arbeiter Ring/Workmen's Circle."⁹ *In Southern States*, especially in the excerpt translated below, does reflect an organizational life centered on ideological debate and what many people would call cultural activities, but it also demonstrates engagement with global Jewish trends, national and local labor movements, and electoral politics. The journal provides a starting place, then, for a deeper exploration of Arbeter Ring's branches in the South that might, in turn, lead to a reappraisal of the organization's activities and legacies in the region.

While conducting oral history interviews for the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life from 2009 to 2013, I spoke with former students of Houston's Arbeter Ring school and other people connected to Texas Arbeter Ring branches and their members. In addition, a few interviewees shared documents: Henrietta Bell of Houston loaned me a copy of *In Southern States*, a journal that was distributed to delegates at the thirtieth conference of the Southern District of the Arbeter Ring in 1949 in Houston. This essay uses information from the

1949 journal to outline the history and activities of branches in the South in order to provide context for the extended excerpt that follows: an account by Mitchell J. Merlin, a grocery store owner and branch leader in Atlanta, of how vicious infighting between hard-line communists and more moderate members during the 1920s played out in the original Southern District of the Arbeter Ring.¹⁰

The Journal

The title, *In Southern States*, was not only used for the 1949 publication but also for copies of slimmer programs distributed at district conferences through 1950.¹¹ Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich, for example, cites the Yiddish title, *In Dorem Land*, for the years 1928 and 1943, in her book *Passionate Pioneers: Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910–1960*.¹² A few of the conference programs, as well as the 1949 journal, can be found in the Joseph Jacobs papers in the Southern Labor Archive at Georgia State University.

The 1949 edition of *In Southern States* is a bilingual publication. Held with the binding to the right, it appears to be a Yiddish text, but when it is flipped over, the reader sees an English-language cover with the spine on the left. Behind each cover, a corresponding section includes its publication information and a contents page. The English portion has 48 pages of text, and the Yiddish side has 156. Joseph Duntov, assistant secretary of the district and a member of the Miami Beach branch, served as editor.

The English section includes a variety of information: a history of the Workmen's Circle; articles on the activities and potential of the organization; histories of the youth branches in Houston and Miami; proposals for more action by young members in the region; information on the Jewish Labor Committee, antisemitism in America and abroad, global socialism, and Jews displaced by World War II; updates on labor struggles in the United States and rising corporate profits; and data on Jewish immigration to the United States, national and local Jewish populations, and Workmen's Circle chapters by city.

In Southern States, *published by*
the Arbeter Ring Southern District, 1949.
(Photo courtesy of Josh Parshall.)

The Yiddish section is more extensive. It begins with names and addresses of district officials and branch secretaries (provided below in translation). Following the table of contents are a foreword and opening remarks by editor Joseph Duntov; lyrics to the "Arbeter Ring Hymn" and other songs of the Jewish left; a greeting from the organization's national executive committee to the state of Israel; commemorative texts on the Warsaw ghetto uprising and Nazi genocide; essays by national Arbeter Ring leaders; resolutions from the 1948 Arbeter Ring conference in Boston; histories of the district and individual chapters; photographs of district officers and local branches; a report on the 1948 district conference in Chattanooga; articles on Yiddish education, the socialist movement in the South, the Jewish Labor Committee, YIVO (the leading institution for Yiddish scholarship), and the Jewish Culture Congress; a table of figures for Arbeter Ring member dues, benefits, and assets from 1900 to 1948; memorial photographs and short biographies of deceased leaders of Southern District chapters; and greetings and congratulations from constituents and partner organizations. Of the Yiddish section's 156 pages, around 60 cover local and regional history of the Arbeter Ring. Another thirteen are devoted to the memories of late founders and leaders. Most of the information in this essay comes from the historical pieces.

Among the contributing authors in the journal, Merlin stands out for having written three pieces: a general history of the original Southern District, a description of the left-right split in the 1920s (translated below), and a cowritten history of Branch 207 in Atlanta. He is usually referred to in the text as M. J., but also appears as Mikhl, Michael, or Mitchell in other sources. Merlin was born around 1885 in Dubrovna in northwestern Russia (today, Belarus) and immigrated to the United States in 1905.¹³ At the time of the 1910 census, he lived with his widowed mother and three younger siblings in Atlanta. Shortly thereafter, he married Bessie (or Betsy) Yampolsky, the daughter of fellow branch-founder Samuel Yampolsky, with whom he had two daughters.¹⁴ Eventually eight Merlin brothers and a

sister settled in Atlanta, but not all of them joined the Arbeter Ring. Several of the Merlins held socialist or communist views, while the oldest brother, Lazar, “was so religious that he ran the only kosher restaurant in town and sold religious artifacts.”¹⁵

The Southern District

The organizational life of the Arbeter Ring in the South began with the founding of the Atlanta and Dallas branches in 1908.¹⁶ According to Merlin, the first chapters were founded in isolation from one another. In the case of Atlanta, the founders were immigrants from Russia and Poland who hoped to start a local branch of the Socialist Party but settled for a chapter of the Arbeter Ring after reading about the organization in the *Jewish Daily Forward*.¹⁷ The early history of the Dallas chapter provides fewer details, but exclusion by the German Jews prominent in the downtown business district seems to have motivated the local founders.¹⁸

Twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Arbeter

Ring branch in Nashville, Tennessee, 1949.

(From In Southern States, photo courtesy of Josh Parshall.)

Branches in other cities followed quickly. By 1916, new chapters had appeared in Alabama (Birmingham), Florida (Jacksonville), Georgia (Savannah and Macon), Louisiana (Shreveport), Tennessee (Memphis and Chattanooga), and Texas (Galveston, Waco, Houston, and San Antonio).¹⁹ Many

started with a small group, often between ten and twenty young immigrants, but grew significantly over the first decade or so. According to the history written by Wolf Bell, Houston's chapter began with fifteen members in 1915 but reached ninety-four members at its peak. At the time of the 1949 journal, he reported that the group had shrunk to seventy-three.²⁰ In Shreveport, a smaller city, the group peaked at sixty members, only a handful of whom remained in 1949.²¹ It is not clear from the journal when membership attained its highest numbers, either generally or in specific cities, but chapters seem to have been most active in the 1920s and 1930s, and national membership peaked in the mid-1920s.²² The membership of a given chapter over time likely depended in part on the general growth of Jewish populations in each area. Galveston's branch, for example, started before Houston's and actually helped found the nearby chapter in 1915, but was soon overtaken in size as Houston experienced tremendous population growth.²³

In 1920 the Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee chapters organized into the Southern District to better coordinate their activities, especially lecture tours by prominent Yiddish authors. According to Merlin, leaders from the

two greatest cities in the Southern District, Atlanta and Memphis, corresponded about this matter (Comrade P. Block, currently the manager of the *Forward* in Boston, and Mitchell J. Merlin, the sec. of Atlanta Branch 207). The arrangements took a long time. We had no inkling what we would achieve or how it would work. We just decided that a conference should be called, and we would work out our plans there. The first conference, the first Sunday and Monday in September 1920, was held in Atlanta.

The first meetings with unknown people from other cities, yet with whom we had so much in common, placed new souls in all of us. It was a *yontifdike* mood that I cannot forget to this day. We saw then that we were only isolated within our cities, but we had brothers and friends in all the surrounding cities. We decided communally to work for our ideals. The largest cities should take on larger obligations, and the smaller cities

should benefit from them, as equal partners. This system still works today with great success.²⁴

Simultaneously, the Texas and Louisiana branches combined into another district, only to unify with the Southern District in 1946 as previously indicated. Annual conferences originally lasted for two days but were extended to a third in later years.²⁵

Activities

Branches raised funds for themselves and on behalf of outside organizations and established facilities known as "lyceums," often houses that had been converted for organizational use and served as spaces for meetings, social events, lending libraries, and Arbeter Ring schools. In addition to after-school Yiddish classes for children, branches coordinated lectures, concerts, and plays, and they participated in activism around labor struggles and politics. The details of these activities as well as their success varied between cities and over time, but cultural and educational endeavors seem to have taken precedence. In an article devoted to a general history of the original Southern District, Merlin describes how nearly every branch was able to obtain a building and open a school, but he adds, "I see that we achieved everything that we undertook, but one must acknowledge that while we have done much in the realm of culture, the organization-work has been neglected."²⁶

Arbeter Ring branches counted fundraising as one of their central missions. Members collected money for a range of organizations and causes, placing special emphasis on relief work for Jews affected by the wars in Europe, the advancement and preservation of Yiddish culture and language, and socialist and labor-oriented politics. Whereas members' work on behalf of left-leaning aid groups like the People's Relief Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee demonstrates a commitment to international Jewish causes, they also contributed to local labor struggles by collecting money for striking union members.²⁷ Additionally, although the organization was initially non-Zionist, chapters raised funds for the settlement of Jewish

refugees in Palestine and for other projects in what became the State of Israel.²⁸

Collecting money for international Jewish causes not only fulfilled ethical obligations and maintained connections with Jewish communities worldwide, but also earned chapters a place within local Jewish communities. According to Harry Sokol's history of Branch 303 in Birmingham, Alabama, the group faced strong opposition from both assimilated Reform Jews and the more recently arrived Orthodox population at the time of its founding in 1909. While observant Jews criticized the Arbeter Ring on religious grounds, more acculturated elites voiced political objections, perhaps out of a concern that Yiddish-speaking radicals would cause trouble for the Jewish community as a whole by fomenting antisemitism. Sokol recalls how Jewish leaders pressured him to leave town, warning that "in America, one does not start a revolution" and that it would be "a peril" for a new immigrant to do so.²⁹ Sokol adds, however:

Soon after that, as the "People's Relief" was being organized, our branch was the first and the only in our city which spoke up and organized money-collection for the good of the Jews on the other side of the ocean. Every Sunday morning our members used to go out from house to house with Arbeter Ring ribbons and collect money for the relief organizations. This made us very popular among the Jewish population, and we won acknowledgment and gratitude.³⁰

"People's Relief" refers to the People's Relief Committee, a left-wing organization that joined the recently formed American Joint Distribution Committee in 1915 in response to the devastating effects of World War I on European Jews.³¹ By Sokol's account, Arbeter Ring members' participation in such campaigns earned them acceptance in the broader Jewish community. Bryan Edward Stone notes a similar dynamic in San Antonio, where Hebrew teacher Alexander Gurwitz wrote disparagingly of labor Zionists and Workmen's Circle members for their lack of religion while commending their charitable activities.³²

Chapters initially met in members' homes or businesses but increasingly obtained their own lyceums after 1920.³³ Early on, local Jewish elites' objections to hosting socialist content (real or perceived) in Jewish education alliances, community centers, or YMHAs contributed to the need for Arbeter Ring branches to establish their own meeting places.³⁴

Although many Arbeter Ring schools in the South were short-lived, they were "the vital nerve of the whole Arbeter Ring organization." The commitment to teach Yiddish language and culture was often an impetus for a local branch to purchase or construct its own building, and the labor associated with operating after-school lessons and maintaining a facility drew participants together. Furthermore, Yiddish teachers trained in Yiddish pedagogy through the central Arbeter Ring offices in New York helped to invigorate local cultural and intellectual life for members.³⁵

The lending libraries that branches established held Jewish and general books in Yiddish.³⁶ When chapters did not have their own buildings, library collections were housed in private homes or Jewish educational alliances, referred to as "community centers" in the 1949 text.³⁷ In Galveston, the establishment of a library actually preceded the formal organization of an Arbeter Ring branch.³⁸ Merlin wrote of the libraries as central to the organization's missions of mutual help and self-education: "We founded libraries with Yiddish, and kept the library open every evening. Each one of us took for his enjoyable duty to come read in the hall (and meanwhile have a chat also), taking along books to read at home and prevailing upon acquaintances that they should set out to educate themselves."³⁹ In addition to the libraries' practical and communal value, they reflected many Arbeter Ring members' roots in the Bund—the common name for the General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, a Jewish leftist political party—as most Bundist circles had operated illegal libraries.⁴⁰

In line with their cultural and educational goals, branches arranged lectures, concerts, dramatic performances, and other events. They hosted speakers sent from the central office in

*Arbeter Ring Local 207, Atlanta. Above, the lyceum building.
Below, students at the Arbeter Ring school, c. 1920.
(Arbeter Ring Records, courtesy of the Cuba Family Archives for
Southern Jewish History of The Breman Museum, Atlanta.)*

New York, providing a rare chance for Yiddish speakers to hear a lecture in their native language and drawing audiences from outside the group.⁴¹ Prominent Yiddish thinkers like Chaim Zhitlowsky and Shmuel Niger toured the cities, giving talks on “politics, society, literature and, especially, Jewish subjects.”⁴² After the establishment of schools, teachers also served as lecturers. In the area of music, “Concerts with New York musicians became a must for each city and town.”⁴³ Branches also took advantage of local talent, organizing “Yiddish concerts, their own dramatic groups, and choirs.”⁴⁴ A drama troupe from the Houston branch even performed in other cities, including Waco, Shreveport, New Orleans, Galveston, and San Antonio.⁴⁵

*Yiddish drama group sponsored by the
Houston branch of the Arbeter Ring, 1949.*

(From In Southern States, photo courtesy of Josh Parshall.)

Although cultural and educational activities dominated the Arbeter Ring’s work in the Southern District, branches did participate in leftist politics and labor activism. Members collected funds for Jewish unions in the Northeast as well as for

local non-Jewish strikers.⁴⁶ According to Merlin, “we used to obligate ourselves to pay a set weekly amount for the strikers, and we earned the recognition of the local unions.”⁴⁷ They also belonged to local branches of the Socialist Party and supported socialist presidential candidates Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas in their numerous presidential campaigns between 1900 and 1948.⁴⁸ When Debs was imprisoned in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary from 1919 to 1921, the Atlanta branch met with his visitors from other cities and “was always represented in the visits in prison.”⁴⁹ In later years, “when Comrade Norman Thomas, the Socialist candidate for president, came to Atlanta or in other cities of our district, he was always the guest of Arbeter Ring, and in the lyceums he was received as one of our own.”⁵⁰

The Left-Right Split

The following excerpt is my translation of an article, “Left and Right in the Arbeter Ring,” that appears in the Yiddish section of *In Southern States*. From the vantage point of the original Southern District, author Mitchell J. Merlin describes conflicts between radical and more moderate factions within the group, a battle that raged in the national organization from 1921 to 1930.⁵¹ The regional debate was linked to a national struggle over whether the Arbeter Ring should be a Jewish fraternal organization with socialist leanings or a Yiddish-speaking subsidiary of the international communist movement. While devoted communists—“the Left”—hoped to align the Arbeter Ring with the Third International, others whom Merlin refers to as “loyal” members—“the Right”—wanted to maintain the organization’s status as an independent entity that accommodated a wider range of left-wing viewpoints.⁵² Because the moderate faction ultimately won nationally and in the South, its perspective tends to be better represented in organizational histories like *In Southern States*.⁵³

In his account of the decade-long battle between Left and Right in the region, Merlin alludes to national and international events that contributed to the struggle. Early on, he describes

the group's feelings about the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which initially found support among many American Jewish leftists, especially those who had experienced czarist oppression firsthand.⁵⁴ Merlin also mentions "Palmerism," indicating the policies of United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who led a wave of raids against communist and communist-sympathizing groups in 1919 and 1920.⁵⁵ Palmer's raids coincided with a rise in reactionary politics and nativism that raised the stakes for political radicals in the United States and pushed communist activities underground.⁵⁶ A third expression, "the famous twenty-one points," refers to the Conditions of Admission to the Communist International, a set of commitments that was established in 1920 and required for any group that wished to join the umbrella organization for global communism, known variously as the Communist International, Comintern, or the Third International.⁵⁷ While the issue of whether or not to join the Comintern was a significant element of internal conflict for American socialists, Jewish or not, most histories of the conflict do not stress the importance of the Conditions of Admission.⁵⁸

Merlin's recollections not only point to the historical circumstances for the split but also suggest that the conflict played out similarly in the South and other regions. Although the Arbeter Ring enjoyed strong membership through the 1930s, enrollment peaked during the years of conflict before losing both radical leftists discouraged by the organization's increasing moderation and neutral members who had simply tired of the endless debates.⁵⁹ According to Merlin and other contributors to *In Southern States*, the infighting had similar consequences in the South, where divisions within and between branches drained the group's energy and depleted membership.⁶⁰

The following translation and other histories from *In Southern States* provide important insights about Jewish life in the South in general and the Arbeter Ring's Southern District in particular, even as they raise new questions for further study. In keeping with recent scholarship on Jewish history in the South, these histories demonstrate once again how Jews in the

region, both as individuals and through Jewish organizational networks, interacted with major events and movements across the Jewish world. These histories also indicate that, as in other parts of the country, the Arbeter Ring provided opportunities for acculturation and “self-improvement,” but under conditions that fit with the sensibilities of their membership.⁶¹ Branches fostered an internal community that sustained elements of secular *Yiddishkeit* while also providing resources for prospering in America and, in these cases, southern society. Finally, the history of Arbeter Ring activities in the South raises issues for further study, especially regarding the role of women (many of whom are listed as branch and district leaders on the following page) in this ostensibly left-leaning organization and the extent of the members’ involvement in labor rights and racial justice causes.⁶²

*The Southern District Committee of Arbeter Ring, 1949.
Vice President Mitchell Merlin of Atlanta
is pictured in the top row, second from the right.
(From In Southern States, photo courtesy of Josh Parshall.)*

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**Leadership List, Arbeter Ring Southern District,
September 1949**

The Southern District Committee of Arbeter Ring

W. B. Bell, Houston <i>President</i> 212 Stratford St. Houston, TX	H. Applebaum, Savannah <i>District Secretary</i> 5 W. Perry St. Savannah, GA	H. Hoffman, Savannah <i>Treasurer</i> 409 W. Broad St. Savannah, GA	Louis Platt, Houston 2201 Truxillo St. Houston, TX
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Mitchell J. Merlin, Atlanta <i>Vice President</i> 413 Formwalt St., SW Atlanta, GA	J. Duntov, Miami Beach <i>Assistant Secretary</i> 2008 Alton Rd. Miami Beach, FL	Freida Weiner, Galveston 3790 Ave. R Galveston, TX	M. Gleiberman, Miami 1235 SW 6th St. Miami, FL
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Evelyn Weiner, Miami 1243 SW 6th St. Miami, FL	Boris I. Bell, Houston <i>Youth Secretary</i> P.O. Box 6013 Houston, TX
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The Southern District

Branch 207 M. J. Merlin 413 Formwalt St., SW Atlanta, GA	Branch 530 Joseph Kessler, <i>Sec'y</i> 2007 Ruth St. Houston, TX	Branch 692 J. M. Freedman 500 15th St. Miami Beach, FL
Branch 207B B. Merlin 413 Formwalt St., SW Atlanta, GA	Branch 530Y Boris I. Bell P.O. Box 6013 Houston, TX	Branch 641 S. Shymlock 1117 Jefferson St. Nashville, TN

Branch 303
[Birmingham]
M. Fierman
122 19th St.
Bessemer, AL

Branch 441
S. Carasik
421 W. 6th St.
Jacksonville, FL

Branch 94
Mrs. Anna Berniker
2224 General Talor St.
New Orleans, LA

Branch 495
J. Zawels
525 Palmetto St.
Chattanooga, TN

Branch 393
L. Weinberg
499 Hall St.
Macon, GA

Branch 427
H. Udansky
408 Warren St.
San Antonio, TX

Branch 234
I. Anders [Andres]
4719 Junius St.
Dallas, TX

Branch 312
J. Scheinberg
1225 McLemore
Memphis, TN

Branch 383
Harry Dun
36 Drayton St.
Savannah, GA

Branch 307
Mrs. F. Weiner
3709 Ave. R
Galveston, TX

Branch 699
Ch. Weintraub
11 Sidonia Ave.
Coral Gables, FL

Branch 415
B. Frumer
115 Texas Ave.
Shreveport, LA

Branch 1050
Kitty Laber
1243 SW 6th St.
Miami, FL

Branch 242
Ph. Stupack
1927 N. 6th St.
Waco, TX

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**Mitchell J. Merlin, "Left and Right in the Arbeter Ring,"
September 1949**

In the "good times" of the 1920s, the branches consisted entirely of socialists, *heymishe* socialists. The leadership consisted of such socialists who, even in the old country, were leaders of socialist circles. When someone suggested a member, one first asked him if he knew the candidate well, if the candidate had a socialist past and, if he was a laborer, if he was a union man. And when

one received [the candidate] in the end, the [branch] secretary asked him personally if he knew that the Arbeter Ring was a socialist organization and if he would submit to all of the obligations that were attached to a socialist organization. To this very day, I am familiar with a large number of *Yidn*, decent people, whom we once rejected because we were not certain in their socialist *kashres*.

I will here bring up one characteristic fact: a member from Atlanta's branch proposed an Arbeter Ring candidate who we were not sure was an appropriate person. Two members were selected to visit him at home, and one of them gave a report at a branch meeting. He told in detail how he visited the candidate at home, found out that he had no sickness in the family, that he made a very good living, that he was a wholly honest man, and he soon thought that he would be able to give a favorable report about [the candidate]. But here a good idea suddenly occurred to him; he asked the candidate what compelled him to become a member of the Arbeter Ring? Because the candidate did not give a satisfactory answer, the member did not recommend his acceptance!

And one must remember another thing when speaking of that time. It was just after the revolution in Russia. We were all inspired by the revolution. The enthusiasm lasted for years afterwards, even when we became disappointed in the behavior of the leaders of Soviet Russia. The arguments were that the revolution was still ongoing and that the bad practices were the fault of evil forces that fought against the revolution. If only the time of trouble passed, there would be socialist justice instead, which would be an example for the entire world.

I can mention myself as a defender of Soviet Russia. When someone threw all the ugly deeds of the Communist leaders in my face and I had used up all of my partisan arguments, I would shout with fervor: surely they will one day come to their senses, and we will have to reconcile with them, so let us not be so aggressive!

It was the time of Palmerism, of the greatest reaction that we can remember in our years in this country. The [reactionary politics] of Palmerism were generally despised in our Arbeter Ring

circles and especially because Comrade Eugene Debs happened to be in federal prison near us in the South, in Atlanta, which added an especially bitter taste to our mood. It is then no wonder that every revolutionary slogan appealed to us. Aside from the Arbeter Ring branches, we also had in the larger cities, in the background, [independent] socialist branches, and often the members of the purely socialist branches set the tone in the Arbeter Ring.

At that time—around 1920—the famous twenty-one points came to the Socialist Party branches, which one had to adopt as did the Jews at Mount Sinai.⁶³ You either took on all of the points and could have the honor of joining in the Third International, or—you could go straight to hell. The majority of the points were accepted without difficulty. When it came to the point that there must exist an underground organization that should be disciplined like an army, though, a diversity of opinions arose. We did not know of any reason for this. We had all been underground in Czarist Russia, because the government had not let us agitate openly for socialism. But we came to America, a land where all were free to agitate for their ideals. We could do it freely and openly, without plots and conspiracies. We did not, though, reject it right on the spot; we wanted a little time to think it over. A few individuals immediately recognized the danger of it. Conversely, others accepted it all with the style of “we will do and we will hear,”⁶⁴ and the *apikorsim*⁶⁵ were no longer invited to the meetings.

Those of us who did not adopt the twenty-one points never suspected that the struggle would transfer into the Arbeter Ring. Therefore, when the next elections came for officials of the branches and many members gladly accepted posts, we elected them with contentment. Then, and even years later, we did not know that they received orders from New York to capture all the offices.

When the Left became the authorities in the branches it ignited a fight. Each meeting became a battlefield. They used every demagogic tactic: appealing to justice, to brotherhood, and friendship. After this came the shrill cliché, that not taking their path negated the entire revolutionary past. The best device, though, was to bring new friends to the meetings, friends who did not un-

derstand for themselves and did a "favor" for one of their own, voting just as they were asked. The loyal members realized that fighting was the only means, and they had to organize and also mobilize their own crowd. But this strategy proved unsuccessful. The passive members could not tolerate the quarreling and fighting. The sheer fact is that they became bored of friends arguing and stopped coming to the meetings entirely. We could not stoop to tactics like coercing passive members into coming to meetings, would not even exploit feelings of kinship, and so forth. They, however, brought "hands" to the ballots at the meetings, and they won.

The time came for the big convention, the 25th anniversary, in 1925, in New York. The convention would decide if the Arbeter Ring would remain its own organization or if the Communist Party would take over. We in Atlanta prepared ourselves. We made a forty-eight-person committee that should see that the Arbeter Ring would not fall into communist hands in Atlanta and also to prevail upon the whole district that the delegates to the convention should be loyal Arbeter Ring members. There were passive members who had the intelligence to be leaders but who had stood to the side on account of the fight. [Abraham] Landau from Atlanta serves as an example, who agreed to become active if we assured him that he could act in a nonpartisan manner.⁶⁶ We were satisfied with this, knowing that he was a loyal member of the Arbeter Ring and he would therefore see that our side was correct. The other faction was also satisfied with him. They were sure that they would win him over to their side. Such impartial people were in all the branches. If they were only politically mature, they would have to realize that the Left was out to capture the Arbeter Ring for their party, while we only wanted the Arbeter Ring to remain an independent organization.

In the branches there were different elements from both sides. However, in the leadership of the district then, there were only loyal members from the Arbeter Ring. In those years the leadership of the district was chiefly in the hands of the district secretary and vice secretary. We had connections in every branch besides the branch secretary. Understand that we plunged into

*This and successive images contain the original text of Mitchell J.
Merlin, "Left and Right in the Arbeter Ring," from
In Southern States, 1949.
(Courtesy of Josh Parshall.)*



the struggle in preparation for the 25th convention. The result was that from all the branches there came only one leftist delegate, from Macon. In Atlanta itself the election passed with a very small majority to our advantage, but the delegate was a loyal member.

After the 25th conference, the fight brought about even greater bitterness in Atlanta. We had a large Arbeter Ring school [a supplementary school, not full-day], a lyceum, and led extensive activities. When we saw that we could not work together in one branch and they required a separate branch, we gave in. A distinct chapter was created for the leftists. The teacher in the Atlanta school, Comrade Lazarson—today one of the most loyal members of the Arbeter Ring and one of the best teachers—played a large role then.⁶⁷ He was a leftist then and did everything to defend the left wing.

The climax came at a conference in Jacksonville, where, besides the delegates, there were about ten teachers from all of our schools. Comrade Lazarson always held a distinguished place at the conferences. On behalf of and with the prestige of the Atlanta school, he exerted a very great influence on all the delegates. The leaders of the district were full of enthusiasm, because we brought the greatest number of teachers to the conference. As long as we could remember, they had been honorary delegates with voting rights, and they used to rule the conference in spirit. We, leaders from the branches, had to enhance their prestige, even when we sometimes opposed their actions or decisions. At that conference, delegates from the schools, youth-delegates, and child-guests were also represented.

The delegates from the newly founded leftist branch were the leaders of the left wing; some delegates were still under their influence, and a number were “impartial” on general principle. The air felt as if a “storm” could break out any minute. We found out that a caucus had decided that all the teachers should march out of the conference in demonstration at an appropriate moment, and that the signal would be given to them by the leader of the leftist branch in Atlanta.

This took place during my turn to be the district secretary. It was my duty to maintain the unity of Arbeter Ring. I became

upset at the teachers, who did not need to get mixed up with branch politics through their resolutions. In great anger, I interrupted the session in the middle and revealed the teachers' plot for the whole audience of delegates and guests. They did not have the audacity to reply with anything and stood as silent as schoolboys. Thus the moment caused a great upheaval. All the delegates, even the impartial ones, realized how they wanted to break the Arbeter Ring in general and the district in particular, and the Left lost any chance to rule the conference.

Still, though, the Left did not give in. They did not permit a vote. They took up the method of holding long speeches, making proposals without a reason in the world, and delaying the debate so that the conference would not be able to adjourn. The shouting was terrible. Each side would yell over the other. When I came home hoarse, a medical specialist took it for a cancer of the throat. For a few months, I could not speak a word. We had won the fight, though. Meanwhile, Comrade Landau became the district secretary. In his position, the once impartial one could not remain impartial long, when he saw that someone aimed to split the organization.

After Comrade Landau's term, I took the office of district secretary once again. The Left had already hinted that they would not remain in the Arbeter Ring much longer. Anyhow, the leaders already anticipated that they would not put up with us much longer. They would still seek to lure away anyone on whom they could have an effect. Because of this, I had loyal members in every branch who were prepared to take directives. Strong groups of the Left formed in Atlanta, Chattanooga, Memphis, and Miami. The Atlanta leftist branch also united with all the cities, but they did not have a strong following everywhere. In Memphis, Comrade Block paid good attention, and I did not need to give any instructions there. The same in Birmingham with brother Sokol at the head. The situation in Miami and West Palm Beach was entirely different. The great devotion of Morris Jacobs, who stood in service like a soldier, and the loyalty of Comrade Elkins should be mentioned here.⁶⁸ The branch in Miami did everything out of

spite. When they would not carry out a task from the national office or from the district, and I turned to Comrade Elkins to undertake the same task under the supervision of the district, it was done in the finest manner. The same with Comrade Jacobs; he abandoned his work in West Palm Beach and traveled wherever was required on missions from the district.

In Chattanooga we had Comrade Y. Press with a group that stood on watch. In Jacksonville there was the late Comrade Sovits, who stood on watch, often traveling to Atlanta to have a discussion. A unit of devoted leaders was formed, which was prepared for any call. Thus the moment finally came when the Atlanta branch suddenly left the Arbeter Ring. Instead of biweekly official letters, they were sent virtually daily. Separate instructions were sent to the secretaries and the devoted leaders about how to act in each given case. The time came that my letters, copies of which were always sent to the office, were suddenly printed in entirety on the front page of the *Forward* as very important news. Now, with a clean conscience I can assert that without the district we would not have an Arbeter Ring in the South today. Like a cancer, they invaded each branch. Were it not for the leaders of the district that cut it out in advance, the branches would not exist today.

Miami suffered the most. They bled heavily, and only a skeleton remained of the branch. Several years passed before they recovered. It is a delight for us that today the Arbeter Ring in Miami is a secure fortress. Today in Miami we have four branches, two branches of older members, one in Miami and one in Miami Beach, and they are the largest branches in the district. We also have two youth branches there, a blooming branch in Miami and a weak one in Miami Beach.

The leftists succeeded in founding branches in Atlanta, Miami, Chattanooga, and Memphis. In Atlanta, they even tried to establish a school, which did not last even a year. One does not hear any more from the former branches in Chattanooga and Memphis. Our Arbeter Ring branches have no connection with the Left.

Because of a lack of space I have entirely left out the emotional side of the history. It boiled the blood of both sides. It divided brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. It led to hatred in many cases. We, the Right, sought to emphasize that it was a fight over ideals and that personal attacks should not be used, but we could not convince the other side of this. This is already just the past, history—a piece of the life of our district—events that played out in a terrain where there were no other radical organizations and we did not have the help and sympathy of unions, as was the case in larger centers.

NOTES

¹ Membership List, *In Southern States: Issued on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Conference of the Southern District of the Arbeter Ring*, ed. Joseph Duntov (September 1949), 2, translated from Yiddish by the author.

² Mitchell J. Merlin, “Left and Right in the Arbeter Ring,” in *In Southern States: Issued on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Conference of the Southern District of the Arbeter Ring*, ed. Joseph Duntov (September 1949), 35–38, translated from Yiddish by the author.

³ Maximillian Hurwitz, *The Workmen’s Circle: Its History, Ideals and Institutions* (New York, 1936), 14, 18, <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015009219703;view=1up;seq=1>, accessed February 17, 2014; Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York, 1979), 284–288.

⁴ Wolf Bell, “Memories of the Texas-Louisiana District,” in *In Southern States*, 42; Mitchell J. Merlin, “The Arbeter Ring in the South,” in *In Southern States*, 32. Although there were also branches in Virginia, they did not participate in district activities, and their histories are not considered here.

⁵ Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 285.

⁶ Merlin, “Left and Right,” 38.

⁷ Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 285–286. See also Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880–1939* (Detroit, 2001); Michael R. Weissner, *A Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanshaftn in the New World* (Ithaca, NY, 1985).

⁸ Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 290–291. Liebman cites two works by Melech Epstein: *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.: an Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement* (New York, 1950), 311, and *The Jew and Communism: The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Community, U. S. A., 1919–1941* (New York, 1959), 145.

⁹ Mark K. Bauman, Introduction to Part V: Identity, in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, ed. Mark K. Bauman (Tuscaloosa, 2006), 354.

¹⁰ Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Fulton County, Georgia.

¹¹ The “journal-program” for the 1950 regional convention can be found in the Joseph Jacobs Papers, series III, box 36, folder 1, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

¹² Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910–1960* (Teaneck, NJ, 2010), 334, 284.

¹³ Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Fulton County, Georgia; Mitchell J. Merlin, “Merlin Family in America” (October 18, 1967; in Yiddish), item 05-049 V/F M, Cuba Archives and Genealogy Center, Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta. The document is also available in translation at <http://merlinfamilycircle.org/MFCfamilyHistory.pdf>, accessed March 28, 2014.

¹⁴ Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Fulton County, Georgia; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Fulton County, Georgia.

¹⁵ Joe Jacobs interview, quoted in Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, MA, 1996), 129. Greene also quotes Lazar Aaron Merlin’s daughter, Sonny Epstein. Merlin, Yampolsky, and the Arbeter Ring also appear in Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845–1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), 123.

¹⁶ Mitchell Merlin, Moshe Bloshtein, and David-Bear Faynshteyn, “The Arbeter Ring Branch 207 in Atlanta,” in *In Southern States*, 53; I. Andres, “Arbeter Ring Branch 234, Dallas, Texas,” in *In Southern States*, 65.

¹⁷ Merlin, “The Arbeter Ring in the South,” 29.

¹⁸ Andres, “Arbeter Ring Branch 234, Dallas, Texas,” 65.

¹⁹ A list of active chapters and dates of establishment can be found in *In Southern States*, 154.

²⁰ Wolf Bell, “The History of A. R. Branch 530, Houston, Texas,” in *In Southern States*, 67.

²¹ B. Frumer, “Arbeter Ring Branch 415, Shreveport, Louisiana,” in *In Southern States*, 95.

²² Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 288.

²³ Freida Weiner, “Arbeter Ring Branch 307, Galveston,” in *In Southern States*, 64; Joseph Keeper, “The Arbeter Ring Branches in Galveston and Houston,” in *In Southern States*, 96.

²⁴ Merlin, “The Arbeter Ring in the South,” 30–31.

²⁵ Bell, “Memories of the Texas-Louisiana District,” 42; Merlin, “The Arbeter Ring in the South,” 32.

²⁶ Merlin, “The Arbeter Ring in the South,” 31.

²⁷ Merlin, “The Arbeter Ring in the South,” 29. Y. Press, “Arbeter Ring Branch 495 in Chattanooga,” in *In Southern States*, 74. See also Selma Lewis, *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt: The Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee, 1840s–1960s* (Macon, GA, 1998), 99.

²⁸ Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 304; Press, “Arbeter Ring Branch 495 in Chattanooga,” 76.

²⁹ Harry Sokol, “The History of Branch 303, in Birmingham,” in *In Southern States*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

³¹ Michael Beizer, “American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/American_Jewish_Joint_Distribution_Committee, accessed March 28, 2014.

³² Bryan Edward Stone, *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas* (Austin, 2010), 153. For more on Gurwitz, see Bryan Edward Stone, ed., *Memories of Two Generations: The Autobiography of Alexander Z. Gurwitz of Russia and San Antonio* (Tuscaloosa, forthcoming).

³³ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 31.

³⁴ Sokol, "The History of Branch 303, in Birmingham," 59. Mark K. Bauman describes the origins of the Jewish Educational Alliance of Atlanta in "The Emergence of Jewish Social Service Agencies in Atlanta," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 69 (Winter 1985): 505.

³⁵ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 31; Freidenreich, *Passionate Pioneers*, 114.

³⁶ Joseph Duntov, "Introduction," in *In Southern States*, 6.

³⁷ Sokol, "The History of Branch 303 in Birmingham," 59; Press, "Arbeter Ring Branch 495 in Chattanooga," 76.

³⁸ Weiner, "Arbeter Ring Branch 307, Galveston," 62.

³⁹ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 29.

⁴⁰ Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Workers' Movement in Tsarist Russia* (Cambridge, England, 1970), 153; Viktor Shulman, "The 'Bund' in Lite," trans. Tina Lunson, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lita2/Lit092.html>, accessed January 12, 2014; Daniel Blatman, "Bund," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>, accessed March 28, 2014.

⁴¹ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 30.

⁴² Duntov, "Introduction," 6.

⁴³ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 31.

⁴⁴ Duntov, "Introduction," 6.

⁴⁵ Oscar Silbert, "The Yiddish Dramatic Group of Branch 530 Arbeter Ring, Houston, Texas," in *In Southern States*, 73.

⁴⁶ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 29; Lewis, *Biblical People*, 99.

⁴⁷ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 29.

⁴⁸ Debs ran for president in 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920; Thomas in 1928, 1932, 1936, 1940, 1944, and 1948. Robert Constantine, "Eugene V. Debs: An American Paradox," *Monthly Labor Review* 114 (August 1991): 30; Raymond F. Gregory, *Norman Thomas: The Great Dissenter* (New York, 2008), 1, 80.

⁴⁹ Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, IL, 1982), 93, 393; Merlin, "Left and Right," 34.

⁵⁰ Merlin, "Left and Right," 34.

⁵¹ Hurwitz, *Workmen's Circle*, 57–78.

⁵² Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 297–298, 300–302; Hurwitz, *Workmen's Circle*, 57–58.

⁵³ See, for example, Hurwitz, *Workmen's Circle*, 57–58.

⁵⁴ Merlin, "Left and Right," 36; Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 56–57.

⁵⁵ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 220. Liebman also points out that Palmer was assisted by J. Edgar Hoover, then "head of the Justice Department's alien radical division." Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 56.

⁵⁶ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 220–221; Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 56.

⁵⁷ Robert Vincent Daniels, ed., *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, rev. ed. (Hanover, NH, 1988), 44.

⁵⁸ Hurwitz, *Workmen's Circle*, 57–58; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 217–227.

⁵⁹ Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 288, 302.

⁶⁰ Merlin, "Left and Right," 38; Phillip Stupack, "Arbeter Ring Branch 242 in Waco, Texas," in *In Southern States*, 73.

⁶¹ Merlin, "The Arbeter Ring in the South," 29.

⁶² Activist Don West, for example, remembers receiving support from leftist Jewish business owners in Chattanooga and Atlanta while conducting civil rights work during the 1930s. Interview with Don West by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, January 22, 1975, E-0016, Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁶³ "*vi di yidn untern barg saynay.*" Merlin's biblical reference here is intentionally ironic.

⁶⁴ Merlin uses the Hebrew, "*na'aseh v'nishma,*" which comes from Exodus (24:7).

⁶⁵ "Heretics," from Aramaic. Used ironically.

⁶⁶ The memorial section of *In Southern States* features a photograph of Landau and a brief description of his personality. Duntov, *In Southern States*, 128.

⁶⁷ Lazarson does not appear in Atlanta census records. Merlin gives his first initial as the character *yud*, which could correspond to a 'J,' 'I,' or 'Y' in English.

⁶⁸ Morris Jacobs was a leader of the Miami Beach branch who had lived in Atlanta at one point, where his son Joseph became a labor attorney and a longtime Arbeter Ring leader. Morris's daughter Henrietta, who lent the author her copy of *In Southern States*, married Boris Bell of the Houston branch. Interview with Henrietta Bell and Susan Ganc by author, May 21, 2012, Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, MS; Finding Aid for the Joseph Jacobs papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, <http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/findingaids/id/1163>, accessed March 28, 2014.