

# Introduction

The novel *Ordinary Jews* by Yehoshue Perle was originally published in Yiddish in 1935 in Warsaw, Poland. Literally, the title means “Jews of a whole year.” This novel stands as one of the finest achievements of Polish-Yiddish literature.

*Ordinary Jews* is an autobiographical coming-of-age novel. It is the story of a pre-Bar Mitzvah boy, Mendl Shonash, who grows up in squalid poverty in the provincial city of Radom at the end of the nineteenth century. Radom—or Rudem as it is pronounced in the Yiddish dialect of Central Poland—is where Yehoshue Perle was born and spent his early years.

The novel scrupulously recreates a complex society at the end of the nineteenth century. We meet beggars, porters, tailors, doctors, maidservants, tavern keepers, teachers, gravediggers, rabbinical students, mental defectives, and a whole range of people living close to the bottom of the social scale.

The economic, social, and occasional ideological conflicts depicted in *Ordinary Jews* are now long gone, but the social hierarchies, intrigues, and shady dealings, the pretensions, grotesqueries, and superstitions still engage us, because Perle has invested his characters with a deep humanity that brings them to life before us.

## *The Economic and Political Status of the Jews*

*Ordinary Jews* is set in the period before World War I, when most of Poland was still under Russian rule. Jews had lived in Poland for more than nine hundred years. They had privileges and obligations and some rights. Among their obligations was that of paying an arbitrary and disproportionate amount of taxes. Because they received no services in return for their taxes, Jews had to provide their own.

Over the preceding centuries, a whole range of community institutions and charitable organizations had been created and refined, including

bathhouses, cemeteries, and a network of mutual aid societies, such as free loan societies, orphan and old-age homes, and societies for the burial of the dead, for the provision of dowries for impoverished brides, and for visiting the sick. Later times saw the establishment of separate religious and secular schools, sports and exercise clubs, scouting and youth groups of all kinds, libraries, summer camps, theaters, newspapers, books and publishing houses that issued books in several languages.

By the late nineteenth century, most of the world's Jews lived in Eastern Europe, mainly in Poland. By Russian law, they were permitted to live in a geographically defined area known as The Pale of Settlement, in distinct areas but they were not separated from their Gentile surroundings. Often they lived side by side with the local population. Among themselves they spoke their own language—Yiddish. But by the 1880s, cracks began appearing in this enclosed world that had, until then, been resistant to external influences.

By the 1880s, Jewish life was undergoing drastic changes because of several factors. The birth rate among Jews had risen significantly, contributing to greater poverty for increasing numbers of Jews. A decree in 1882 further restricted the areas in which Jews were permitted to live. Rapid urbanization and industrialization uprooted large numbers of Jewish tradesmen and artisans from their tradition-bound villages and small towns and thrust them into the larger and more overcrowded towns and cities.

Social and cultural changes occurred as well. A significant minority had already become modernized and politically active; they gravitated to the larger centres from the outlying provinces. Political forces had a deeply unsettling effect. On the one hand—anarchism, Polish nationalism, Jewish socialism, Zionism, the push for civil rights to be granted to Jews; and on the other hand, the imposition of harsher legal restrictions. Some Jews turned to assimilation and conversion as a way out of the turmoil. Hundreds of thousands fled to safer havens in North America and other parts of the world.

Although a few Jews became renowned as professionals and intellectuals and were admired for their roles in business, the vast majority of the Jews in Poland were mired in poverty, suffering hardship and restrictions. They remained for the most part simple, pious Jews; plain people who prayed three times a day, observed the traditional customs of Jewish life, spoke Yiddish, and knew enough Polish, Russian, or other local languages, sufficient to conduct transactions with the non-Jews among whom they lived.

By the turn of the twentieth century, there were a substantial number of Jews who had moved from the villages and small towns into the

cities. They were mainly shopkeepers, workers in small factories, and craftsmen. Although some became urban or even cosmopolitan types, most, like the people depicted in *Ordinary Jews*, remained provincial, uncomprehending of the ideological ferment swirling around them. They were consumed by the daily struggle for survival, and they carried on as they had always done. But Jewish life was crumbling.

To the Jews the Poles were a given, they were simply “the goyim,” the Gentiles, the unavoidable circumstance of their lives, as pointed out by Ruth Wisse.<sup>1</sup> Even though the two groups remained apart socially, their daily habits and their cultures—including languages, foods, and music—inevitably intermingled, and these had a considerable mutual influence. Jews and Poles lived in similar dwellings, sometimes side by side. The Yiddish language was infused with Polish terminology, and Goyim who had dealings with Jews learned to speak a rudimentary Yiddish. Jewish musicians and klezmer bands played at Polish festivities, and Polish and Gypsy musicians played at Jewish weddings.

Radom, where *Ordinary Jews* is set (the city is not named, but its landmarks and the neighboring towns are identified), was a fair-sized city for its time, a railway junction and an industrial center. It manufactured chemicals, glass, leather goods, metal, textiles, and tobacco products. It was located in the geographical heartland of Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe and had connections to a network of similar towns. About 30 percent of its inhabitants were Jews. They were mainly self-employed as merchants and craftsmen; they dealt in agricultural products and were the carpenters, furriers, shoemakers, tailors, house painters, peddlers, blacksmiths, and wagon drivers of the area.

In the aftermath of World War I, the Poland where Yehoshue Perle came of age as a writer was transformed from a territory under Russian rule to the newly independent republic. This change had a harsh effect on its more than three million Jews. International treaties aimed at protecting national minorities in Eastern Europe offered Polish Jews the expectation of equality in their native land, but these treaties were more often ignored than observed. Jews faced officially sanctioned discrimination, including boycotts and quotas for university entrance, as well as frequent outbursts of unrestrained anti-Semitism. Polish nationalists portrayed Jews as obstacles to their own aspirations.

At the same time, the political situation in interwar Poland created a fertile ground for Jewish intellectuals and artists, who responded to these new challenges with energy and enthusiasm. The main influences on them were the Jewish Labour Bund, which advocated social and cultural autonomy for the Jews in Poland in the Yiddish language; the Zionist movement, which advocated a Jewish homeland in Palestine

and favored Hebrew as a language for Jews; the Jewish section of the Communist movement, which was invigorated by the Russian Revolution next door; large Jewish religious groupings, which championed a whole range of views from traditional to modern orthodox; and a movement toward Polonizing the Jews of Poland. All of these groups except for the Communists were represented in the Polish Sejm (parliament).

Although most Jews continued to speak Yiddish, the use of Polish was growing. According to Celia Heller,<sup>2</sup> in the census of 1931, almost 80 percent of Poland's Jews declared Yiddish their mother tongue; by 1939, an increasing number of Jewish high school students were reporting Polish as their mother tongue. By the late 1930s, most Jews spoke Polish as well as Yiddish, and they were attending Polish gymnasia (state secondary schools and Polish-language Jewish schools) in greater numbers than ever before.

By the 1930s, Poland was crumbling economically, politically, and socially, and conditions for the Jews were deteriorating rapidly. Poland, at odds with neighboring Germany, the USSR, Lithuania, and Czechoslovakia because of territorial disputes, harassed its Jewish population; traditional anti-Semitism was the prod. The Austrian-Jewish writer Joseph Roth, traveling through Poland and observing the unsettled situation of his fellow Jews in the 1930s, wrote: "They managed to refute the proverb that says when two quarrel, the third is the winner. The Jews were always the third party and they always lost."<sup>3</sup> On the eve of World War II, Jewish life in Poland was divided between the old ways and the challenging promise of the new. Yet even though life was exceptionally difficult and Jews were no longer able to emigrate either to America or to the recently created Soviet Union, the barriers to their political and economic progress in the interwar period were strong enough to present a resurgence and flourishing of Jewish culture, most of it in Yiddish.

### *The Yiddish Language and Its Literature*

The Yiddish language and its culture formed one of the major achievements of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Almost one thousand years old, Yiddish came of age in the past five hundred years. As a literary language its major achievements occurred from the mid-nineteenth century until the advent of World War II.

Yiddish is characterized as a fusion language. It had its origins in the Rhineland when Jews migrating from northern France began speaking a Germanic vernacular laced with Hebrew, Aramaic, Old French, and Old Italian. With the movement into Poland, Slavic elements were introduced. Written phonetically, with the letters of the Hebrew

alphabet, Yiddish became an authentically Jewish language that by the end of the eighteenth century was spoken in Jewish communities from Holland to the Ukraine.

Yiddish and Hebrew-Aramaic complemented one another, Hebrew, the language of the Bible and Aramaic, the language of the Talmud. Together, they form the sacred language known as *loshn-koydesh*, used for prayer, for study of the Bible and the Talmud, and as well, for scholarship, official documents, community records, and formal correspondence. Jews functioned in three languages. Yiddish was used for everyday concerns—family life, trade, education in the schools, community meetings, storytelling, and all forms of oral communication. Additionally, Jews had at least a smattering of the various languages of their non-Jewish surroundings. An entire way of life sustained the Yiddish language and also provided a barrier against the pressures of assimilation. Even though speech patterns and pronunciation varied from region to region, Yiddish was understood throughout the Yiddish-speaking world.

Until the late nineteenth century, Yiddish literature consisted mainly of folk tales, popular rhymes, and religious tracts for people with limited education. Benjamin Harshav points out that “Yiddish had no tradition of a high-style literary language . . . Yiddish . . . was colloquial, ‘juicy,’ expressive and powerful.”<sup>4</sup> Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, however, under the influence of German, Russian, and Polish literature, Yiddish became a vehicle for significant cultural expression. In an explosion of creativity Yiddish poets, novelists, essayists, and dramatists began to explore and examine the social and political challenges of modern life. This development not only enriched modern Yiddish literature but Hebrew literature as well.

Yiddish literature had an impact on modern Hebrew literature because most of the modern Hebrew writers had Yiddish as their mother tongue. Remarkably, the earliest modern Yiddish writers, Mendele Mokher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, as well as later Hebrew writers like Chaim Nachmen Bialik and Yehoash, produced much of their work in both languages, sometimes starting in Hebrew and then switching to Yiddish to reach a wider audience. Most scholars describe Mendele as the “father” of both modern Hebrew and modern Yiddish literature. Mendele called this bilingual creativity “breathing through both nostrils.” According to Benjamin Harshav, the interaction between Yiddish and Hebrew literatures “within one hundred years created the most powerful contribution to Jewish culture since the Bible.”<sup>5</sup>

Modern Yiddish literature reflected the decline of religious faith, the disintegration of cohesive communities, and the weakening of ethnic ties.

The critic Reuven Brainin describes Mendele Mokher Sforim as having evoked a world that was coming to an end—ghetto schools, teachers and their helpers . . . abandoned women; widows and orphans; victims of fires; bankrupts; beggars (especially on the days before Shabbes and holidays); natural and unnatural disasters; charity boxes; the feeling of being cramped and confined; and weird ways of trying to make a living.<sup>6</sup>

This is the world in which Yehoshue Perle grew up, and which his novel mirrors.

### *Perle's Life and Times*

Yehoshue Perle was born in Radom, Poland in 1888, into the family of an impoverished hay dealer. He studied in a cheder until the age of twelve and later studied with a tutor. He was a diligent student and mastered the curriculum of a Polish gymnasium. Like Mendl, the hero of *Ordinary Jews*, Perle came from a complicated family. He was the only child of his parents, but had several half brothers and half sisters. According to Rokhl Oyerbakh<sup>7</sup> who knew him in Warsaw, his early life was difficult and he left home at age fourteen, found work as a manual laborer, and later worked for a manufacturer and then for a locksmith. In 1905, after a romantic disappointment, he went to Warsaw where he first became a bookkeeper in a bank and later in a large mill. He remained in Warsaw until the onset of World War II. Perle didn't find bookkeeping especially appealing but he wasn't ready to forego a steady income for the uncertainties of an author's earnings, so he chose to hone his growing literary skills in his spare time.

Aspiring young Jewish writers were streaming into Warsaw from the smaller cities and towns, and Perle quickly became acquainted with members of the existing literary circles. The most influential figure of the era was the Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz. According to Ruth Wisse,<sup>8</sup> Peretz charted a course that would lead Jews away from religion to a secular Jewish existence; he strove for a natural transition from the religious, small-town, communal life of the past to the individual and secular life that young Jews aspired to. He encouraged his followers to gather folk material—the stories, songs and sayings of ordinary Jews that he argued were as important to the creative life of a people as the more formal works of their writers. Influenced by the Polish ethnographers, Peretz wanted to shift attention away from the Jewish intellectual aristocracy of rabbis and Talmudic scholars to the common people and he sought to strengthen the claim that Jewish culture was distinct. He believed that folk material would supply fresh inspiration for Jewish creativity.

From the mid-1880s until his death in 1915, Peretz was a mentor and guide to young writers. More than any other Hebrew or Yiddish writer, he shaped Yiddish literature and he influenced modern Hebrew literature also. He viewed Yiddish as an instrument of national cohesion and tried to fashion a modern Jewish culture that would be rich enough to compensate for the decline of religious tradition, the absence of political power and the steadily rising waves of hatred, social ostracism, and violence directed at the Jews. His vision energized Jewish institutions—choirs, drama groups, literary circles, musical societies, open universities, and theater companies, all of which involved ordinary Jews in the creation of culture rather than handing it to them ready-made.

Perle was influenced by Peretz's modern treatment of traditional life and by his narrative style. He also was influenced by Sholem Aleichem and Sholem Asch. Perle's early work reflects his admiration for Asch's delicate Polish romanticism, his gritty lyricism, and his sober view of Jewish family life. Later, Perle adopted a more realistic approach, influenced by the Russian writer Maxim Gorky.

By the time Perle entered the Yiddish literary world of Warsaw in 1905, it was already a vibrant center of journalistic and literary activity and a unique phenomenon in the context of Jewish cultural life. Perle immediately immersed himself in reading, in attending literary gatherings and in the Polish theater. In the pre-World War I period from 1905 to 1915, there were three major literary salons that were presided over by I. L. Peretz, Hillel Tsaytlin, and Noyekh Prilutski. Perle preferred the salon of Noyekh Prilutski (1882–1941). Prilutski was a multifaceted personality: a lawyer, politician, linguist and journalist, and the associate editor of the Yiddishist daily newspaper *Moment*, which had been founded by his father, Zvi-Hirsh Prilutski. The younger Prilutski played host to young people who were interested in theater and folklore, as well as in good literature. Because he also was an ethnographer, he recruited volunteers to reach out among Warsaw's underworld and collect examples of the speech patterns—of the vernacular spoken by the extortionists, hustlers, thieves, pimps, and prostitutes of that city. Through his exposure to Prilutski, Perle refined his interest in and respect for ordinary Jewish life.

Despite holding down a full-time job, Perle was nevertheless very productive. He began writing at age sixteen and his early literary activity consisted in translating Russian and Polish works into Yiddish and writing poetry in Russian, but when he turned exclusively to Yiddish, his writing expanded to include novels, short stories, literary sketches, criticism, and articles. He published work in most of the Yiddish literary journals and publications in Warsaw. Perle found a following

among those readers who were prepared to accept literary coarseness and grittiness on the grounds of honesty. He took Tolstoy's words to heart: "The more we devote ourselves to beauty, the further we get from truth."

In the 1920s, Perle began hosting literary gatherings of his own, attracting and encouraging the younger Yiddish writers. Perle was well liked in the Warsaw literary family. He was affable, charming, a good friend always ready to lend a hand. He insisted on speaking the particular regional Yiddish vernacular he grew up with, sometimes to the chagrin of his literary colleagues who spoke a more deliberately cultivated language, but his honesty, sincerity and easy laughter were contagious. His friends called him by the affectionate diminutive, Shi'ele (literally, little Yehoshue).

Despite the regard in which Perle was held, his writings evoked criticism. Isaac Meir Weissenberg, a harsh critic, would jab Perle from time to time, calling him: "a watchmaker of a writer." By that he meant that the little wheels turn, the hands move, the bells sound, but there is no soul in the writing. Perle was not a man to carry a grudge. When Weissenberg died, Perle wrote a heartfelt article about him, praising his work.

When Perle arrived in Warsaw, it was the largest Jewish community of Yiddish-speaking Jews in all of Europe (Warsaw boasted 260,000 Jews in 1906). After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Jewish Warsaw became more important as Jewish creativity in such centers as Kiev and Odessa in the USSR came under increasingly harsh political restrictions. By contrast, Warsaw in the 1920s presented abundance and variety. Clubs, parties, and organizations covered the political spectrum.

Warsaw also was a vibrant center of Yiddish publishing. It boasted a number of Yiddish daily newspapers, literary journals, and popular magazines. More than 1,500 Yiddish newspapers, periodicals, and miscellanies were published in Poland between the two world wars, 650 in Warsaw alone. There were dailies in all of the major cities in Poland. The two largest newspapers were the Zionist *Haynt* (Today) and the Jewish nationalist *Moment* (Moment), both founded before World War I. The Yiddish press in Warsaw provided an important forum for Yiddish literature in all its forms, ranging from trash to highly sophisticated and experimental writing.

Aspiring artists and writers gathered in cafes, meeting rooms, and literary salons to exchange ideas and debate literary and political ideologies. Theater groups and cabarets played to full houses. A Yiddish film industry flourished and news-vendors sold Yiddish dailies, Hebrew periodicals, and cheap, paperbound romances.

Perle became a member of the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists that began operating in Warsaw in September 1918. It later merged with the Yiddish PEN Club, which was affiliated with the International PEN Association. The Yiddish PEN Club became a major cultural institution for Eastern European Jews in the interwar period and it stimulated translation into Yiddish of all the major western European works from fiction to philosophy. It also promoted good writing by publishing annually the most promising first book by a local author.

Wanting to improve his material circumstances, Perle wrote several lurid romances that were serialized in the Yiddish newspapers. This type of work paid well, but Perle did not want to put his own name to it so instead he signed it with three asterisks. Perle was hardly unique in dealing with this type of material. Although I. L. Peretz had complained as far back as 1888 that, “Yiddish has no words for sex appeal and for the things that lovers feel,”<sup>9</sup> later Yiddish writers were able to find the vocabulary to describe erotic and romantic feelings. Perle’s mentor Prilutski published an anthology of erotic verse in 1908. Members of the PEN Club in Warsaw were producing similar works, but it seems they were more circumspect. Perle was attacked on all sides and *dray shterndlekh* (three little stars) became a term of contempt.

At a literary conference sponsored by YIVO in Vilna, Perle was not allowed to read from one of his novels. Although this distressed him, it did not deter him. “Everyone writes, so I can too. I don’t want to be more saintly than anyone else.” Sometime later, Yiddish writer Joseph Opatashu complained, “We have talented writers who have become rich, but they breed nothing more than literary trash.”<sup>10</sup> Perle took these words to heart and abandoned sensational material. His dedication to his craft steadily increased, and the creation of an individual, supple prose style, more naturalistic and hardened by life, became the moving ambition of his life.

In Warsaw, Perle was also exposed to the half-assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie. He ridiculed the entrenched snobbish belief in the “higher culture of better education,” a slogan of the times. He showed up the ludicrous habits, the callousness and the lack of spiritual values of this stratum of Jewish society. His sympathy for the plain, simple people incited him to rebel against the “congealed intelligentsia,” who boasted of their lack of engagement with the world around them. He depicted as a horror the yawning life of petty ambition, weakness, and worthlessness.

Yiddish literature began to concern itself not only with the comic and sentimental, but also with the dark, underground forces that impel great literature. Perle belonged to that generation of writers who stood

at the crossroads between the old and the new eras. Before he began writing *Yidn fun a gants yor*, Perle talked about the powerful impression made on him by Maxim Gorky's autobiographical trilogy, *Childhood, In the World and My Universities*, which depicted the wretchedness of the lower depths of Russian society:

I understand that he has unclothed himself and stands before the world Adam-naked, writing about everything honestly and openly; he didn't even spare his own parents. That's a great writer!<sup>11</sup>

Perle viewed Yiddish literature as a bridge between a stagnant past and an uncertain future. He asks us to consider the most ordinary circumstances in the lives of his characters as an extraordinary achievement.

Perle's first successful writing venture was the romantic, sentimental portrait, "Shabbes" (1908), which appeared in Noyekh Prilutski's journal, *The New Spirit*. In the following years his literary output included the following: *Under the Sun* (1920), a novel about the big city; *In the Land of the Vistula*, (1921) a prose poem about Jewish life in Poland; the novel, *Sins* (1923), and *Nine O'clock in the Morning*. His short story "An Honourable Woman" received an award in 1927 from the newspaper *der tog* (The Day) in New York. The novel *Mirl* (1920) was dedicated to his wife, Sarah, then translated into Hebrew. (*Sins*, "An Honourable Woman" and *Mirl* contained lurid elements.) The novel, *naye mentshn* (New People), was also published originally in the newspaper and then reworked into a three-act play called, *mentshn* (People), which was staged by Ida Kaminska at the Novotshni Theatre in 1936. Many of Perle's stories, including *hintergasn* ("Back Streets") and *di goldene paveh* ("The Golden Peacock"), were published in the Yiddish newspapers. The latter story appeared in *folksaytung*, (the People's Newspaper) in Warsaw in 1937–1938 and won an award from the Yiddish PEN Club of Poland and also the Prize for Literature from the Jewish Labour Bund. His literary and critical essays appeared in *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages) and in *Di tsukunft* (The Future) published in New York.

Initially, Perle wrote lyrical poetry and prose pieces, later, romantic stories. He was quite prolific, achieving his literary zenith with naturalistic descriptions of the petit bourgeoisie, big-city types, office workers, officials, and the impoverished masses. In writing about love, he emphasized the erotic.

*Yidn fun a gants yor* (Ordinary Jews) was widely read and received prizes from both the Jewish Labour Bund and the Yiddish PEN Club.

Additionally, this novel received the prestigious Peretz Prize awarded by the Jewish PEN Club of Poland.

In *Ordinary Jews*, Perle wrote honestly about his own childhood and early youth. He did not gloss over the fact that his father was unlettered or that his mother was flawed and weak. Perle disclosed everything unsentimentally, refusing to exploit either quaintness or charm. Of these plain people with worried faces, bent backs, and threadbare clothes, Perle said: "These are my people."

Unlike most Yiddish writers of his generation, Perle ignored politics, even though he was surrounded by a world in turmoil. In the world outside, Marxists, Socialists, Communists, Fascists, and Hitlerites battled for control, but Perle the writer remained aloof from every ideological impulse. He did not interest himself in national or social issues and exhibited distaste for Zionism. He used to say:

I'm Luzeh Shonash's son. In my native city, the Zionists were all well-fed Jews wearing holiday top hats on their heads. They avoided my father's poor house, so I avoid them today.<sup>12</sup>

Perle was a sympathizer of the socialist Jewish Labour Bund, and in the late 1930s, he joined this party.

Most Yiddish writers of the time were indifferent if not actually hostile to religion. Even though many of them no longer lived in religious communities, they were nevertheless, surrounded by religion, and they often responded to it contemptuously. Perle, on the contrary, had respect for Talmudic scholars and felt an especial affection for traditional Judaism. He loved to sing religious songs and enjoyed spending Saturday evenings at rabbinical gatherings, listening to Hassidic teachings. When the Yiddish essayist and short story writer Hersh-Doved Nomberg died, a deathwatch was held with most of the people bare-headed; Perle however stood with his head covered. "This is the Jewish way of honouring the dead," he said.

Perle married. It is believed that I. L. Peretz brought the pair together. Perle's wife Sarah, the daughter of a gravedigger, had long braids and was considered a beauty. She was active in a drama group. She and Perle lived together amiably and had one son, but according to the Yiddish writer Meylekh Ravitch, their neighbor and close friend, something more than sadness emanated from Sarah's eyes. Ravitch goes on to say:

One evening in 1926, as Perle and I were walking home together, Sarah greeted us and began asking me about youthful

exploits of a sexual nature. . . . The next day, at noon, the whole literary family ran to Perle's house alarmed. He lay on the floor, prostrate with grief.<sup>13</sup>

Sarah had hanged herself. She left no word to explain her action. Their son Lolek was then seven years old. After the tragedy, according to Rokhl Oyerbakh,<sup>14</sup> Perle lived in dread that misfortune would threaten his son and he kept a close watch over him to the end of their lives. The son became an engineer and when he married a fellow engineer, Perle took the young couple into his home. Perle formed no other romantic attachments, devoting himself entirely to his family and his literary pursuits.

When World War II broke out, Perle fled with his family from Warsaw to Soviet controlled Lemberg, where until 1941 he was the chairman of the Writer's Union. Some time later, he went to Kiev, where part of his work about the plight of refugees was published. He returned to Lemberg, but when that city fell to the Nazis, he went back to Warsaw illegally, working until 1942 in a ghetto shop and actively participating in literary circles.

Leo Finklestein says that Perle felt a glimmer of hope when he obtained forged U.S. citizenship papers, because this promised to allow him and his son to go abroad and to receive better treatment in Warsaw while they waited. But Rokhl Oyerbakh<sup>15</sup> says that Perle fell victim to a scam that pretended to provide him and his son with papers enabling them to escape to South America. (His daughter-in-law Yiddehs had already been picked up by the Nazis in the first round-up of Jews in Warsaw.) In fact, Perle and his son were sent to the infamous 'Hotel Polski,' ostensibly to await transport to Switzerland, but in reality they were sent to Bergen-Belsen. Even here, he was active in literary circles. On Simkhat-Torah of that year, Oct. 21, 1942, separated from his son, he was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau to the ovens. Perle was fifty-five years old. Leo Finklestein, in paying tribute to his friend and colleague, states that Perle went into the ovens together with "his" Jews and adds:

Allow me to shed a tear publicly on the grave of my kindly, amiable comrade and fellow townsman, Yehoshue bar Elieyze, z.l. (of blessed memory), a tear that soars off into the empty void, because just as one says after all martyrs, one can also say of Perle in the words of the Bible in describing the death of Moses: "*v'loy yado ish kevoroysoy,*" and no one knows where he is buried.<sup>16</sup>

Part of Perle's literary output from the Warsaw Ghetto years was found after the war in the Emmanuel Ringelblum *Oyneyg Shabbes* archives, a secret buried repository whose name reflects that its materials were collected during the weekly celebration of the Sabbath. Some of this work by Perle was published in anthologies in 1951 and 1955.

Rokhl Oyerbakh<sup>17</sup> relates that in 1939, Perle had completed the manuscript that was to be a sequel to *Yidn fun a gants yor*. It takes up the story of the hero Mendl, and his transition from the provincial town in which he grew up to the big city of Warsaw. Perle envisioned this as the second in a series of three volumes that would complete his autobiographical novel. This manuscript was to be published in autumn 1939 but with the outbreak of the war that plan had to be abandoned. Upon departing for Lemberg, Perle left this manuscript with friends and when he returned, he retrieved it. In 1940, he asked Oyerbakh to read the manuscript but before she could finish reading it, the second roundup of the Jews of Warsaw took place from Jan. 18 to Jan. 21, 1940. In the ensuing turmoil, Perle's manuscript was placed amid some bed linen to be spirited out of the ghetto for safekeeping. But a robbery took place at the ghetto gates and the bed linen with the manuscript hidden inside it, disappeared. Efforts to retrieve it by bribing the ghetto police and the city constabulary failed and the manuscript was never found. Disheartened, Perle accepted this blow with stoicism.

Perle perished in his prime with his creative talent fully matured. It is fair to speculate that he probably had great works of literature still to impart. There remains the hope, however slim, that the lost manuscript, a sequel to his masterwork *Yidn fun a gants yor* may yet be found.

## The Novel

Yehoshue Perle sets *Ordinary Jews* in the period around 1900. He makes his narrator, the twelve-year-old Mendl, roughly the same age that Perle himself was in that year. In deceptively simple prose, in the language of a child, the autobiographical line pulls us into the novel. Perle captures the worldview of a preadolescent boy who lives, as children do, in the present, and he succeeds in fleshing out this boy on the threshold of manhood. Mendl devours the facts and the experiences of life around him; he revels in them and assimilates them but he is not yet capable of evaluating them.

Perle portrays the broad canvas of Jewish poverty and the peculiar style of life of ashen-faced Jews—the dreary life rhythm of an impoverished layer of Jewish society that was always waiting for a miracle and believing that fate would finally deliver good fortune. This varied grouping of figures lived out their lives in faith and superstition, wrestling with continual worry while constantly polishing their poverty to make it look festive. Poverty bred the unrealized longing and the un-lived possibilities.

Perle describes his setting in gritty detail; on the opening page, Mendl wakes up and smells his father's sweaty body while cats yowl outside. Perle's characters speak in the unvarnished vernacular of the streets, but he often hints at the raw and the ribald rather than presenting it directly. The book's strong realism supports Perle's identification with the suffering masses of demoralized Polish Jews. Although Perle's insights into individual character are often striking, the strength of the novel comes at least as much from the portrayal of a particular segment of Polish Jewry as it stood on the cusp of crisis.

Perle avoids ornamental language. He is not given to moaning, wailing, or gnashing of teeth. His language is colloquial, expressive, juicy, and powerful, full of regional expressions and usages, Hebrew allusions and scraps of Polish and Russian. He uses understatement, naming each experience and emotion plainly, accurately, without varnish, and without pretense or embellishment.

Several powerful themes emerge: the harsh daily struggle with unremitting poverty and the fatalistic attitude toward life on the part of many of the characters; the dislocation of most of the adults who long to be somewhere else; and the yearning for education by the young narrator, Mendl, who is the center of the novel and obviously speaks for the author in expressing quiet pride in the life of his people.

We meet the Jewish boy Mendl, who lives with his parents in squalid circumstances in the slums of Radom where the author himself spent his early years. Through Mendl's eyes, we see both ugliness and beauty, the terrors of poverty and the power of sexual awakening. We are spared nothing of the crudeness of life under these crowded conditions. Despite the wretchedness and hopelessness of his life, Mendl absorbs two of the deepest values of Jewish religious culture: a passionate hunger for learning and the intense devotion to family life. Although Mendl is the novel's center of consciousness and the book is written from his point of view, Perle never steps outside Mendl's angle of vision, using Mendl's observations to describe the other characters. Perle establishes the emotional pattern that dominates Mendl's life. His family's warmth and love, however flawed these may be, conveys

a sense of worth and meaning that is never entirely eradicated by the degrading and all encompassing poverty.

Several Yiddish writers have lashed out at the demoralization with which types such as Mendl's father confront the world. In his story *Bontshe Shvayg*, (Bontshe Meek) for example, I. L. Peretz rails against the grotesqueness of suffering in dumb silence. Perle chooses to depict the suffering of Mendl's father in more measured and sympathetic tones. Perle is not critical of this burdened man. He has Mendl describe his father, during an idyllic summer interlude in the village of Leniveh, as follows:

Here my father was not just Reb Luzeh with the . . . absent-minded grey eyes that never demanded anything more than what was destined. . . . Here, Tattch was one of God's Jews, one of those who together with Moyshe Rabeynu went out from ancient Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai.

Perle's treatment of women also exhibits empathy. Mendl's mother, Frimmet, is a woman who has come down in the world, yet she maintains the pretensions of a rich woman. Perle sees her weaknesses, her constant waffling between unrealized hope and wretched reality, but he also is sympathetic to her. She is a doomed, tragic figure, toiling for the sake of her daughter Tsippeh, Mendl's half-sister, who is unworthy of her mother's self-denial. Yet she uncomplainingly takes on the burden of marrying off her husband's four daughters. Perle describes the social contrasts in class-conscious terms, for instance, the wrongs, injustices, and insults Mendl's half-sister Toybeh endured as a servant in a wealthy household.

Perle depicts the envy and hostility of disgruntled, rag-tag cheder boys of the smartly dressed, Jewish gymnasium students in their uniforms—short jackets with shiny silver or brass buttons, and caps with visors and insignia. Uncle Ben-Tsion, the sedate and self-satisfied community official and scribe, is one of a class of various characters—pious, well-to-do Jews living comfortably but insensitively amid the squalor. In depicting these characters, Perle allows himself, however modestly, to criticize the well-to-do members of society for their callousness.

Perle depicts remarkable characters, for example, the feverish speculator, Mordkkeh-Mendl, the *luftmentsh*, the dreamer undaunted by the daily experience of misery and frustration, who lives his whole life pursuing get-rich-quick schemes. His poverty and lack of real opportunity are matched only by his complete faith in his own abilities. Sholem Aleichem's Menachem-Mendl is a similar type who is subjected

to humorous and gentle criticism, but Perle draws his character more sympathetically and does not chastise his luftmentsh for living on air. Mordechai Richler's Duddy Kravitz seems like a direct descendant of Perle's Mordkkeh-Mendl.

Throughout *Ordinary Jews*, these characters move to the rhythms of the Jewish calendar. The novel powerfully evokes the various holidays, particularly Pesach, as well as the weekly observance of Shabbes. To a lesser extent, the novel also spans the Christian holidays and we are shown how these two sets of holidays intersect.

Perle describes the credulity and insularity of these Jews who are mired in old traditions and folklore, and are unable to see beyond their legends and superstitions. For example, the primitive rite that Mendl's mother Frimmet uses to chase away evil demons from her roomer Hodel, and the key that is placed under the head of Toybeh's husband to minimize, if not avert, the seizures he is subject to. Benjamin Harshav describes such characters as "inhabitants who lived in an imaginary universe, a mishmash of folklore and snippets of learning."<sup>18</sup>

The various teachers, from the cheder teacher through the teachers in the later "modern" school, are by turns irascible, petty tyrants, and sadists, characters acting out what appears to be an almost Dickensian parody of a religious education. Yet these people are neither caricatures nor grotesques. Mendl's teachers manage on rare occasions to rise above themselves and instill in at least one pupil, Mendl, the sense of the heroic Jewish past, as well as giving a lyrical description of the Exodus from Egypt, and praise of the nascent Zionist movement.

Perle depicts the town Mendl grows up in as harboring a number of modernized, secularized Jews, like Reb Menakhem the bookkeeper and his wife Rayzeleh the wine dealer. They read modern books, refuse to wear traditional garb, neglect religious observance, and seek escape from confining and stultifying religious belief and practice. Their children attend secular schools wearing smart new uniforms, and boys and girls associate openly with each other. Oyzeh, an older boy, the son of these enlightened parents, is rebellious and cynical. He whispers subversive thoughts to Mendl, questioning the truth of the Bible stories. Mendl, whose life until now, was circumscribed by traditional Jewish faith and religious observance struggles to resist. By the novel's end, one is left with the feeling that little by little and in time, ideas and images of a freer Jewish world would seep into Mendl's consciousness and feelings of rebelliousness and romantic yearnings would begin to throb. A curious boy such as Mendl will probably adopt modern ideas of worldly knowledge, romantic love, and sexual desire. More than likely, his hunger for learning will take a secular form; but the novel ends just

as Mendl begins to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah by learning the laws pertaining to the donning of tfiln, the act signifying his acceptance of the role of a Jewish man. We are left with the sense that life continues beyond the confines of this story.

Perle's social criticism in this novel is both unsparing and implicit. But Perle looks at the lives of his people without condescending or flinching; he is not repelled by what he sees and remains fascinated by his inexhaustible, sometimes tawdry, often depressing, and always unique characters. Leo Finklestein, Perle's close friend, considers *Yidn fun a gants yor* to be Perle's most mature work, distilled from his intimate knowledge of his world, but he offers this criticism of the novel:

The main characteristic of Perle's writing: he's too peaceful, too restful, too idyllic, too friendly with everyone and through it all, with the good as well as the bad, he is calm and his heroes are also calm. He doesn't rouse them, and he doesn't demand anything of them. Of course, he sees the social contrasts—the struggle for more air and more bread; the wrongs, injustices and insults that the servant girls, for instance, had to withstand from their wealthy householders. He depicts it all, but he is not involved ideologically.<sup>19</sup>

The family that Mendl grows up in appears unaware of the great social and political upheaval taking place around it. There is no reference to the mass migration of Jews then in full swing. The great 'isms'—Anarchism, Socialism, Zionism; or the modern religious ideas and the ultra-orthodox reaction to them—that affected Jewish lives are barely if at all remarked upon by any of the characters in the novel. Most of them are people whose vision is dominated by what the Yiddish novelist Doved Bergelson called: "*al kidesh hakopekeh*, the sanctification of the penny"—the worship of the penny in the incessant struggle for daily existence.

Perle does not mask or veil his people. His method of narrative is open and extremely realistic. He describes a distinct way of life and complex relationships in a naturalistic style, avoiding the extreme of brutish frankness. The critic Shloime Bickel has said that the uncovering of both the soul and the body of his characters in *Yidn fun a gants yor* "works in the same way as the bare nakedness of children at play on a hot, summer day,"<sup>20</sup> that is to say, unselfconsciously and unrestrainedly. Perle's language, while simple, is richly playful, with dialogue that is acutely authentic, reflecting Polish-Yiddish speech patterns. This vernacular expressiveness and ability to craft conversational

sentences with which he mines the irridiscent, often comic, surface of things, are also used to plumb its ominous depths.

The way of life portrayed in *Ordinary Jews* is now frozen in time, irretrievably lost to us except in historical accounts and in literature. The critic I. I. Trunk remarks of *Ordinary Jews* that:

This epic of a vanished generation now stands in the shadowy darkness of the past, but [Perle's] depiction of these . . . [Jews] still stands in the warm, bright light of the present.<sup>21</sup>

Time and circumstance render us distant from Mendl's world and yet, there are bonds that connect us to it. Perle has made it possible for us to see his characters as people: "in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting," to borrow Faulkner's formulation.

Perle's novel opens for us a window on a vanished world and the achievement is all the more remarkable for its modesty. Perle is an honest witness to time and place. He shows us the conflicts that lie under the surface of seemingly ordinary lives and takes mundane events and invests them with vivid human life. He has processed memory into art and embodied that art in simple but powerful language. In doing so, Perle demonstrates that even the most ordinary of lives is worthy of consideration.