

# The Continuity of Community *Landsmanshaftn* in New York and Tel Aviv

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The examination of patterns of participation in Jewish ethnic voluntary associations known as *landsmanshaftn*, organizations based on members' shared origins in an East European city or town, makes it possible to trace and interpret paths of ethnic affiliation taken by Jewish immigrants in their new countries of settlement. My aim is to understand the apparent role of these organizations as vehicles of cultural continuity and change, in order to elucidate the changing meaning of ethnicity and the process by which the boundaries of the ethnic group are shaped and transformed.

Although *landsmanshaftn* have recently been declared the most innovative of American Jewish immigrant institutions (Howe, in Berger, 1983), they have not been properly represented in descriptions of contemporary Jewish life.<sup>1</sup> This paper reports on one aspect of a larger study of American *landsmanshaftn*, also involving fieldwork in Tel Aviv that benefited the U.S. study with comparative data on Israeli *landsmanshaft* groups. A cross-cultural perspective on these transplanted region-based groups illustrates how the expression of group distinctiveness is communicated.

In general, examining the organizational and institutional complexity of associational life highlights the changing interests and orientations of immigrant-based ethnic minorities. Ethnic voluntary associations, because they represent an adaptive response, reflect and contribute to the formation of community affiliations, activities and norms (Chyz and Lewis, 1949; Ware, 1931).<sup>2</sup> As a key to understanding the process of ethnic socialization at the grass-roots level, the *landsmanshaft* community is a valuable and untapped source.

To date, little of the research on this sector of the American Jewish community extends beyond brief descriptive accounts (Baker, 1978; Curchak, 1970; Doroshkin, 1969; Howe, 1976, Levitats, 1959). Several unpublished MA theses contributed to the field (Applebaum, 1952; Levinthal, 1932; Milamed, 1980; Soyer, 1985). However, a comprehensive survey of *landsmanshaft* activities has not been pursued since the investigation led by Rontch, the full results of which were published in Yiddish (Federal Writers Project, 1938) and summarized in English (Rontch, 1939). The 1938 data, gleaned from the questionnaire responses of approximately 2,500 organizations surveyed in New York, were gathered under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. An accompanying volume described Jewish family clubs, a more recent involvement in America of the original town-based *landsmanshaftn* (Federal Writers Project, 1939), which were later treated by Mitchell (1978).

As for Israeli *landsmanshaftn*, even less has been documented about these immi-

grant associations, despite the existence of numerous federations and a central office for Polish landsmanshaftn with headquarters in Tel Aviv (Losh, 1961; Porat-Noy, 1983; Tsanin, 1958; York, 1979).

Landsmanshaftn provide a suitable area to observe what Park and others have claimed about ethnic groups in America, that their voluntary associations "are not, in fact, pure heritages, but the products of the immigrants' efforts to adapt their heritages to American conditions" (Park and Miller, 1921, p. 120). This approach typifies the development of landsmanshaftn, whose changing expressions of ethnic affiliation were confirmed by intensive personal interviews I conducted with leaders of 68 American and Israeli organizations from six European locations: Antopol, Bialystok, Czechochowa, Lodz, Minsk (White Russia), and Warsaw. These data were supplemented by an examination of reports on landsmanschaft activities in the Yiddish press and by information gathered from the organizations' own documents and publications.

The record of the work of American landsmanshaftn, beginning in the 1880s to the present, embodies the concepts of social organization and community which Jewish immigrants brought with them to this country (Baron, 1945; Glicksman, 1976). European Jews newly arrived in America banded together in associations of fellow townspeople. Hailing from the same city or town, which they referred to in Yiddish as *di alte heym* (the old home), immigrants drew support from the landsmanschaft. These newcomers and their self-appointed leaders organized themselves to help ease the process of adapting to their new culture, leading to the creation of mutual aid societies variously known as benevolent associations, lodges, *fareyns*, landsmanshaftn, or simply 'the society'.

Among their activities, landsmanshaftn founded synagogues, provided financial assistance and insurance benefits, supplied burial services and raised money to send aid to their hometowns. In addition to these economic functions, landsmanshaftn are also marked by cultural, literary and political activities, serving as social centers for people from the same city or village. Though somewhat patterned after aspects of the European Jewish community structure which provided similar services, these organizations reflect the acceptance of American traits. This is evidenced in the adoption of procedures and formalities that characterize American clubs and fraternal orders, in changing patterns of language use (predominantly Yiddish and English) and in the varying responses to issues and events.

The outpouring of communal energies in America is reflected in the large assortment of landsmanshaftn, numbering some 3,000 groups in New York City alone during the first years of this century. Community surveys conducted in New York (Council of Jewish Communal Institutions, 1914; Federal Writers Project, 1938; Kehillah, 1918) produce divergent counts, some as high as 10,000. Indeed, the landsmanschaft experience is striking in its scale and in the evidence of the development of numerous societies comprised of immigrants from the same hometown, where simultaneously existing landsmanshaftn of descendants from one locale operate as autonomous groups.

Customarily, for the same town or city, there exist congregational societies formed around synagogues, independent men's associations and their sister organizations, relief groups, federated bodies, and branches of national Jewish fraternal orders. This typology of landsmanshaftn was reported by Rontch in 1939. Not only as a result of regional loyalties do we find diversity, but also among sectors of the same town-based

community transplanted in America. As many as 24 landsmanshaftn are cited from the city of Warsaw (Federal Writers Project, 1938). When charted, the types of landsmanshaftn bodies reveal the multiple stages through which the immigrant passed, reflecting the resultant variations in social class background, political view, economic status, religious affiliation, and age.

The archival evidence points to an array of diverse landsmanshaftn groups for immigrants from the same birthplace. The historical records confirm the predilection for working individually, a pattern which is corroborated in numerous reports of efforts to unite the landsmanshaftn organizations for purposes of cooperative action, most visibly in times of mass disaster such as World War I or World War II.<sup>3</sup> Widespread calls for support and recognition of the need for consolidation appeal to members to make a joint effort at setting aside different outlooks and render aid for European brethren. However, once the crises pass, collaboration is not likely to continue, and many federated relief groups eventually disband.

One other notable activity which landsmanshaftn undertake, and which also points up the importance of the independent nature of their work, is the preparation of memorial (*yisker*) books. The publication of the *yisker* books, volumes prepared to honor the memory of townspeople killed in Europe during World War II, often replaced the self-help and relief functions of the landsmanshaft once it became clear that plans to rehabilitate a town and its citizens were futile (Baker, 1979–80; Friedman, 1951–52; Kugelmass and Boyarin, 1983; Schulman, 1967–68; Shatzky, 1955).

Although these albums are often a shared project of all landsmanshaftn from a particular location, even this effort does not always result in a successful show of unity. In some cases, for the same town or city, there exist several *yisker* books distributed by the different groups. Moreover, conflicts in memory and varieties of self-definition inevitably leave members dissatisfied with any one final product (Hoffman, 1983).

How are we to interpret the recurrence of this pattern of diversity and intragroup heterogeneity as a theme of landsmanshaft organizational dynamics? In my view, this response signals the ability of landsmanshaftn to adapt and redefine their organizational purpose as ethnic voluntary associations. Landsmanshaft records and ledgers, for example, exhibit the evolution of priorities and goals. These documents show an eventual shift from local and regional orientation to collaboration with national bodies, as well as affiliation with other American organizations and those institutions concerned with the State of Israel.

More than anything else, it was World War II and the shocking destruction of Jewish life in Europe that reshaped the character of the landsmanshaft's orientations. The focus of landsmanshaft affiliations now would encompass the well-being of Israel, in addition to relations with the country of origin and the country of settlement. This triangle of concerns appears in one group's meeting notice of September 1948, written in Yiddish, urging members to attend the meeting to help decide:

- (a) Should we help the Jews in Israel?
- (b) Should we also help our *landslayt* (fellow townspeople) in the old home? If so, how?
- (c) Should we join the central relief organizations of American *landslayt*, or should our relief efforts be conducted independently?<sup>4</sup>

This document aptly represents the concerns of most landsmanshaftn, especially

after World War II, upon witnessing the destruction of their European hometowns and the rise of the State of Israel.

For depicting the current scene, publications, programs, newspaper accounts, and participant observation at landsmanshaft events helped assess influences on the diversity of associations and their various expressions of ethnicity. Given the scant information that we have on individuals' concerns and experiences as members of landsmanshaftn, in-depth exploratory interviews were utilized. These interview data, which form the base of the ensuing discussion of landsmanshaft life, highlight the range of backgrounds which characterize landsmanshaft leaders today, the growing Americanization of organizational orientation, and the increased role of Israel as a focus of concern.

The organizations under study, while not chosen as a fully representative sample of the total universe of New York landsmanshaftn, nonetheless cover a range of types. The current operation of simultaneously existing landsmanshaftn from each location and the availability of written records for as many of these groups as possible resulted in the purposive sample choice of six sites. For the six groups of organizations, the bias is to larger cities. However, the common supposition that only urban centers would naturally foster greater organizational involvement is challenged by the example of Antopol, a shtetl whose members generated as high a level of varied organizational activity in America as the five prominent cities mentioned above. In short, the sample reflects the complexity of the landsmanshaftn network today.<sup>5</sup>

A significant dimension of my research includes the study of landsmanshaftn in Israel, which mainly involved conducting interviews with local representatives of landsmanshaftn stemming from the towns of origin in my sample. The contrast between the Israeli and U.S. groups will be discussed in a later section. For now, it is interesting to note that despite the American landsmanshaftn sector's commitment to aiding Israel, many of the New York representatives do not have direct contact with Israeli landsmanshaftn groups, nor have they visited the country. In addition, judging by the inability of American leaders to furnish Israeli references in some instances, there is presently only a weak alliance between the organizations of American and Israeli compatriots.<sup>6</sup> The lack of communication between the two communities has consequences for the nature of participation and identification in landsmanshaftn on both continents.

For participants in the American landsmanshaft world, the connectedness of members to their city or town of origin varies, as does awareness of the historical position of the town in Europe. The younger American-born leaders of today's organizations do not necessarily know the geographical or historical dimensions of the communities. In the case of Lodz, one of my six sites, this major urban center is mistakenly referred to as a small town by some of the second and third generation members. As for the first generation immigrants, such as the survivors of the Holocaust who settled in New York in the 1940s, their Lodz is different from the city remembered by the pre-World War II immigrant generation. There is a group of Lodz *landshtayt* who choose to recall their home in Lodz only in terms of their incarceration in the Lodz Ghetto during World War II, and have named their landsmanshaft accordingly. For others, Lodz is remembered for its religious Orthodox community, whose commemoration and preservation is the basis for a separate organization. Finally, activists from two Lodz women's associations point out that organizational dedication and activity is not

related to any favorable attraction to Lodz. On the contrary, memories of the city are of unpleasant and difficult experiences that precipitated the journey to America.<sup>7</sup>

Landsmanshaftn exhibit differences in their manifest goals, be it prayer, social welfare, memorializing or political action. Yet, ultimately, they all provide the opportunity for fellowship and companionship. Their primary function is to maintain communication among *landslayt* and, thereby, a feeling of community. With regard to ethnicity in landsmanshaftn, reconciling American and East European Jewish identities remains an ongoing task for these groups and their leaders. The process was and is complex and puzzling to the participants themselves; they claim a special attachment to Jewry's East European past, yet see themselves as members of the American Jewish community.<sup>8</sup> To some degree, the generational distribution of landsmanshaftn members contributes to this intricacy; the composite includes immigrants, themselves, their children and grandchildren.

In fact, there is not a direct correspondence between age and immigration, so that veteran landsmanshaft leaders may well be American born. This finding challenges the researcher to reconsider the influences on organizational responses to issues and events. My original aim was to compare the orientation of different American landsmanshaftn to their city or town of origin, to the United States, and to the State of Israel. Rather than this triangle of relationships, the associations' priorities are mainly shaped by the society in which the group presently resides, be it the United States or Israel.<sup>9</sup> According to the data on the American groups, this was the case even in earlier years when immigration and the old home were much more a part of recent memory. Landsmanshaftn may have originated as hometown-based, hometown-oriented associations, but they owe their endurance in America to other factors. What might these be?

Informants cite the practical advantages of membership: health benefits, loan privileges, burial services. Moreover, the obligation to continue participation was often strongly conveyed by the parent generation. In addition to landsmanshaft adherence to the practice of mutual aid and the securing of burial plots, another common and central tenet is philanthropy. Contributions are made locally to Jewish and non-Jewish American organizations, and Israel is the other major recipient of landsmanshaft funds. One group's records, the Associated Lodzer Ladies Aid Society, show that allocations in 1969 were distributed to aid *Magen David Adom* (Israel's equivalent to the Red Cross), March of Dimes, research in cancer and muscular dystrophy, and the United Jewish Appeal.<sup>10</sup> As for the native country, this concern has largely been abandoned today, understandably, although organizations still support the few Jews that may remain in their European communities.<sup>11</sup> Since World War II, however, Israel's enterprises and institutions have largely replaced the prior charities.

The norms and goals that characterize landsmanshaftn in America are varied and changing. Post-World War II realities, specifically the destruction of their European Jewish communities, dramatically altered the path of landsmanshaft concerns. Reconstruction of the organization's city or town of origin has given way to commemorating and honoring its martyrs and its past. Gatherings and publications for the purpose of memorializing have become a major activity. Immediately after the war, aid was distributed to the surviving remnant of compatriots still in Europe or now in Israel.

The arrival of Holocaust survivors to the United States constituted for many landsmanshaftn their last chance to welcome new immigrants from their former

hometowns. These newcomers frequently became the successors, either within the framework of previously established groups or by forming new organizations of their own.

The new circumstances force a re-evaluation of priorities and concerns. One striking shift in orientation is the increasing support for Israel. This norm is diffused by the press, often acting as an arm of the philanthropies for Israel that canvas the societies and lodges.

The nature of participation in *landmanshaftn* can be tracked in the alliance of these groups with fundraising bodies for Israel. Although histories of the United Jewish Appeal (Karp, 1981; Lurie, 1961; Raphael, 1982) virtually ignore the division which solicits monies from the *landmanshaftn* and other lodges, called the Council of Organizations, this office was instrumental in bringing the masses of the American Jewish public into the Jewish fundraising arena. The *landmanshaft* sector's commitment to aiding Israel is highly visible. In the past they financed the institutions and needs of their hometowns (Szajkowski, 1965; 1970). Today, their names appear on projects and buildings in Israel.

An overwhelming majority of *landmanshaftn* in this study are recruited to join various campaigns for Israeli projects. Solicitations on the part of the United Jewish Appeal and the Bonds for Israel, as well as from the Jewish National Fund or the Israel Histadrut Campaign, on a smaller scale, occur in many forms. There is little question that the centrality of support for Israel has presently been accepted by *landmanshaftn*. Yet, generalized giving to Israel has virtually overtaken a sense of personal obligation to Israeli *landslayt*, who consequently express disappointment that their American counterparts show little interest in communicating directly with them.

My comparison of Israeli and American *landmanshaftn* groups, presented below in summary form, points up interesting similarities and significant differences in the expression of community identification. One factor that regulates the present condition of the Israeli *landmanshaftn* is their age and maturation level. The relatively younger stage of development at which Israeli *landmanshaftn* are found, in contrast to most of the New York organizations, means that the groups in Israel resemble more the earlier status of American *landmanshaftn*, when primary ties to fellow townspeople from the old home were a salient factor in formal affiliation. In addition, the Israeli immigrant organizations are still a one-generational phenomenon, not having yet generated new activity on the part of the offspring of the immigrant cohort.

Furthermore, the Israeli groups are mainly headed by Holocaust survivors who came to Israel after World War II, with the war being their main reference point, and the nucleus of *landmanshaft* organizations. There is also only one official *landmanshaft* for each European location, unlike the situation in New York. Thus, affiliation is with one exclusive organization that carries the name of the specific birth-place.

The ethnic identification of *landmanshaft* members as Jews from a particular locale in Europe is colored by various factors that come into play alongside this attachment to the hometown. In a manner analogous to the situation of the American groups, Israeli *landmanshaftn* attempt to balance multiple identificational concerns. Their course is marked by virtue of their position as organizations whose members

are at once Israeli citizens, Jews of Polish descent, and former residents of a particular city or town.

What we find in Israel is that government channels for memorializing the victims of the Holocaust exist, and national responsibility replaces functions traditionally associated with landsmanshaft work in America. Associations there have taken on the goal of educating the public about Polish Jewry through projects in neighborhood schools, for example, having implemented these programs as early as twenty years ago (Shtekhl and Hurvitz, 1965).

Another difference we find is that burial functions and social services are typically not provided by Israeli landsmanshaftn, but rather by the State. In this regard, the landsmanshaft in Israel functions differently in its role as a social haven in which to congregate and crystallize one's identity as an immigrant. Moreover, as a representative of the Bialystok landsmanshaft in Israel stated: "As soon as we help them...we are interested in seeing them become Israeli... We must not try to make out of landsmanshaft an ideology. It must be temporary, transitory."<sup>12</sup>

Related to this need to assert Israeli national identity, the language of communication in most groups is the official language of the greater society, Hebrew. This practice reflects the ideological value placed on the language and facility in using it. In America, the shift from Yiddish to English was more gradual than the analogous shift from Yiddish to Hebrew in Israel.

In conclusion, the imperatives of contemporary life in Israel and America, and the institutional arrangements for the transmission of cultural norms and values, lead to divergent interpretations of ethnic affiliation on the part of landsmanshaft organizations, even as certain basic functions remain the same in both countries. Social fellowship, financial self-help and commemoration are shared elements to varying extents for both Israeli and American associations, but the constellation of issues and the total complex of concerns reflect different patterns of communication.

For our study, historical circumstances and the social structural position of members converge to create different manifestations of 'landmanshaftness'. Though rooted originally in ties to the old home, the new country of settlement has a significant influence on the direction which landsmanshaftn take. In a sense, these groups must conform to the larger culture while nurturing consciousness of their own special bond. This duality has repercussions that result in the categories of associational behavior we have seen, where 'Americanness' or 'Israeliness' will color the path of ethnic organizational life in the respective culture.

The changes that can be traced in the character of landsmanshaft affiliation show that the boundaries of ethnic community identification are not fixed, but rather flexible. It seems that the landsmanshaft has adjusted these boundaries to incorporate new priorities as they present themselves. The ability to do so, as original goals are displaced and as the meaning of participation changes, is a major factor in organizational continuity.

### **Acknowledgements**

At various stages during this research, I have received the financial support of the

Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the American Jewish Archives. I also wish to acknowledge the Penn-Israel Exchange program at the University of Pennsylvania for twice facilitating my travel to Israel, to expand the comparative base of my study and to report my results to the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, August 1985.

### Notes

1. The present availability of landsmanshaft materials facilitates the study of people whose life experiences have been neglected for too long. The recent collecting effort by the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, a research center for the study of Jewish life in Eastern and Central Europe and in the areas to which Jews migrated, provides an assemblage of records for over 800 landsmanshaftn mainly from the New York City region. I also extended my archival search to the American Jewish Historical Society in Waltham, the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, and the New York Public Library's Jewish Division.
2. Instructive guidelines on the role of voluntary associations were obtained from comparative studies on the associational life of numerous ethnic minorities (see for example Bodnar, 1973; Juliani, 1971; Lopata, 1954; Sengstock, 1977; Treudley, 1949; Yu, 1980).
3. Yivo Landsmanshaftn Archive, RG 123; Committee of Jewish Landsmanshaftn and Societies; Council of Jewish Fraternal Federations; United Committee for Jewish Societies and Landsmanshaftn Federations.
4. American Jewish Archives, Box 1811: United Brahiner and Vicinity Relief Committee of Philadelphia.
5. The selection of the sample was not intended to produce a survey or even a cross-section of landsmanshaftn. The absence of any one central coordinating bureau for landsmanshaftn, as well as limitations on accessibility to some groups and their officers, made it unlikely that a completely representative sample could be attained. For a fuller description of the research design, see Kliger (1985).
6. This finding was confirmed by the testimony of landsmanshaft leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. The World Federation of Polish Jews in Israel is especially frustrated about the lack of reciprocal signs of support from the American organizations.
7. The following list of Lodz landsmanshaftn which were studied shows the range of organizational affiliations which are possible for descendants of a particular East European locality: Masada Branch 403 – Farband Labor Zionist Alliance, Lodz Branch 324 – Workmen's Circle. Lodzer Ladies Branch 324B – Workmen's Circle, Associated Lodzer Ladies Aid, Lodzer Chevra Agudath Achim, Lodzer Friends Benevolent Society, Lodzer Young Ladies Aid Association, Lodzer Young Men's Benevolent Society, American Research Council to Commemorate the Jewish Community of Lodz, American Society of Jews Liberated from Ghetto Lodz, World Gathering of Lodzer Holocaust Survivors, Lodzer-Williamsbridger-Chenstochover-Middle Bronx Fraternal Society of the Jewish Cultural Clubs and Societies.
8. This unresolved ambivalence is discussed by Soyer (1985), who relegates the landsmanshaftn to a position somewhere "between two worlds" during the first decades of this century.
9. This approach is adapted from the study of Polish-American voluntary associations in Chicago by Lopata (1954), who looked at the relations of the community to the national culture of Poland and of America.



10. Yivo Landsmanshaftn Archive, RG 966: Associated Lodzer Ladies Aid Society.
11. *Bialystoketr Shtimme* (The Voice of Bialystok), 1984.
12. Interview. *Irgun Yotsey Bialystok* (Association of Immigrants from Bialystok), Tel Aviv, January 1984.

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