

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
March 18, 1986, Designation List 184  
LP-1419

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FORWARD BUILDING, 173-175 East Broadway, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1912: architect George A. Boehm.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 284, Lot 23.

On April 12, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Forward Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Constructed in 1912, the ten-story Forward Building remains to this day a towering presence within the context of its immediate Lower East Side neighborhood. Its only competitor for dominance, apart from the modern high-rise Seward Park Houses, was and is the late 19th-century S. Jarmulowsky's Bank located a short distance west at Canal and Allen Streets. For the newspaper which avowed, "The Forward will be a socialist paper and its first duty is to spread the ideas of socialism among the Jewish masses," the height of its new office building was a considered and deliberate response to that bank, capitalism's major monument on the Lower East Side.<sup>1</sup>

Designed by George A. Boehm and built just fifteen years after the 1897 founding of the Jewish Daily Forward, the Forward Building is a richly ornamented terra-cotta and brick-clad Beaux-Arts style structure. It is comparable to the eminence attained by the world's preminent Yiddish-language daily and to the Forward's role as a significant determinant in the political, cultural and social history of the immigrant community it served, a history which the Jewish Daily Forward's own history parallels.

Historical Background

The efflorescence of the Yiddish-language press at the turn of the century is a telling reflection of decisive changes which had taken place in the migratory history of European Jews. The numbers of Jewish immigrants entering the United States before 1870 was not large; during the 50 years preceding that date an estimated 7,500 had arrived.<sup>2</sup> Of central European, principally German origin, they formed an indistinguishable part of a general migratory movement to the New World.

The points of departure began to shift eastward beginning in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Circumstances and events in the Austro-Hungarian provinces of Galicia and Bukovina, Rumania and the Pale of Settlement -- that portion of Czarist Russia where Jewish residency was permitted (it included the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania and part of Poland) -- stimulated what has been described as a "mild emigration fever" which

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brought some 40,000 Jews from those areas to these shores by 1880. <sup>3</sup>

Although a significant increase, it was but a trickle preceding the great tide of emigration which followed the assassination by socialist revolutionaries of Czar Alexander II in 1881. The repressions, mitigated to some degree during his reign, were in retribution resurrected and attended by violence. Pogroms, legislated economic deprivation, forced resettlement and drastic curtailment of educational opportunity -- these events of the 1880s were again repeated in subsequent decades. Emigration was the response for an estimated third of Eastern Europe's Jewish population. During the thirty-three year period between 1881 and 1925 when the Johnson Act effectively terminated this immigration, approximately two million Jews of East European origin disembarked in American ports. Of these some 75% found their first New World home on the Lower East Side.

In contrast to the German spoken by the majority of the Jews who had preceded them, the language shared by these later immigrants was Yiddish. A close kin to middle-high German dialects with borrowings from other languages and transcribed in the Hebrew alphabet of the sacred texts, Yiddish possesses an accommodating receptivity which reflects the migratory history of the Jewish people. A language initially scorned as jargon by many of the recently arrived Russian-born radical intellectuals, Yiddish in its new environment acquired (along with the English words it soon incorporated) renewed vigor and was transformed into a literary tongue. The Yiddish-language press was instrumental in this process.

Unable initially to support a daily press, the immigrant community was originally served by Yiddish-language periodicals. The first of these, the Yiddishe Zeitung, both appeared and disappeared in 1870. It and its successor, the similarly short-lived Yiddish-Post (1870-71) and the early issues of the more enduring Yiddishe Gazetten (1870-1928) were, however, highly dependent on European sources for content and oriented to the place of departure rather than arrival. <sup>4</sup> While a total of seven Yiddish periodicals appeared in the 1870s, a daily press was not feasible until the following decade. Established in 1885 by Kasriel Sarasohn, the Yiddishes Tageblatt was the first of some twenty Yiddish dailies which appeared between that date and the mid-1920s. <sup>5</sup> Espousing a politically conservative and religiously Orthodox viewpoint, the Yiddishes Tageblatt was to become the archrival of the fifth daily established, the socialist Jewish Daily Forward. Competition between the Yiddish-language dailies was fierce; many had brief lives or were merged with others. When the Yiddish press attained its zenith in the mid-1920s, there were but five dailies remaining; the giant among them was the Jewish Daily Forward.

Brought into being by a dissenting faction of the Socialist Labor Party, the debut of the Jewish Daily Forward in 1897 not only marked a decisive moment in the tumultuous history of political radicalism in America, but the new newspaper was also instrumental in reshaping the course that history thereafter took. From the mid-19th century on, radicalism had been a small but lively part of the American political scene. While there was agreement among political radicals (many were German born or of German descent) on general goals -- attainment of economic, political and social equity for the working class -- there were often fractious disagreements among them regarding the means to that end. Those who advocated the revolutionary overturning of capitalism contended

with those who believed that, by working within, they could reform existing institutions. The radicals grouped themselves under a variety of banners -- anarchist, syndicalist and socialist in many guises: Marxist, Lassallean, Owenite and Utopian. Banners united only to separate and regroup. Individual allegiances shifted too from socialism to anarchism and back. The history of political radicalism is one which also has a symbiotic and parallel history, that of the trade union movement as it emerged and developed during the second half of the 19th century.

These were circumstances in American political and labor history immediately relevant to many among the growing numbers of East European immigrants arriving on the Lower East Side in the 1880s. The diminution of the entrepreneurial opportunity enjoyed by many of the earlier German Jewish and East European immigrants, the related rise of exploitative sweatshop industries, the increasing abuses of the contractual labor system and, the impoverished origins of many of the later immigrants yielded conditions which demanded immediate and pragmatic remedies. At the same time, some of those arriving brought with them a fervent commitment to radicalism, one formed close to the source and sharpened in certain cases by the threat or actuality of political persecution. A handful numerically, these immigrant radicals, by enthusiastic proselytizing in a variety of forums and dedicated organizing had soon enlisted a substantial constituency on the Lower East Side. The Socialist Labor Party was an existing entity which offered a natural home for much of this activity.

First constituted in 1876 as the Workingmen's Party and renamed the following year, the Socialist Labor Party was an amalgam comprised originally of "Marxian" socialists affiliated with the just-dissolved First International (the International Workingmen's Association formed in England by Marx and Engels in 1865) and socialists influenced by Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1865), founder of the German Workingmen's Association and the Social Democratic movement in Germany.<sup>6</sup> Although some 10,000 persons in 25 states belonged to the party in the late 1870s, fragmentation was inevitable. Led by Frederick Sorge, the Marxists departed in 1878 to establish the International Workers Society, and anarchist contingents withdrew in 1881 and attained their maximum influence in this decade. A boost in the party's fortunes, however, was to be provided by Yiddish-speaking radicals.

Formed in 1885 with the goal of advancing the nascent Jewish labor movement, the Yiddische Arbeiter Verein was dominated by socialists. Following the withdrawal of its anarchist members in 1887, the Arbeiter Verein voted to politicize its endeavor through an alliance with the Socialist Labor Party; as the Yiddish-speaking Branch 8, it brought new vigor and increased membership to the party. Although most political radicals theoretically rejected traditional trade union organizing, in actuality that endeavor took up much of their time. Many individuals and organizations were active on both levels simultaneously. For example, the new organization formed in 1887 to fill the role of the Yiddische Arbeiter Verein, the United Hebrew Trades, was comprised of Branch 8 and Branch 17 of the Socialist Labor Party (Russian-speaking Jews belonged to the latter branch) and a small handful of unions.

## The Yiddish Press and Radicalism

The appearance of a radical Yiddish-language press in the late 1880s was an unsurprising accompanying development. The first such publication was the short-lived anarchist oriented weekly, Naye Tsayt, of 1886. Abraham Cahan, its editor and co-publisher, would some eleven years later be instrumental in the founding of the Jewish Daily Forward and, as editor, would determine its course for nearly fifty years. While other radical publications appeared briefly at the end of the decade (the socialist Naye Welt, the anarchist Wahrheit and the independent radical Volksadvocat), greater longevity followed by a rise to prominence as the leading Yiddish-language weekly was the achievement of the socialist Arbeiter Zeitung, first published in March, 1890 under the aegis of the United Hebrew Trades. Cahan, who had renounced anarchism as elitist utopianism and joined the Socialist Labor Party in 1887, was at first a major contributor to the paper and later became its editor; his anecdotal articles personalizing the class struggle drew many readers and foreshadowed the orientation he would give to the Jewish Daily Forward after the turn of the century. The new weekly's governing body, the Arbeiter Zeitung Publishing Association, was predictive of the organizational structure which would manage the Forward; its fund-raising efforts (money was obtained principally through many necessarily small donations from potential readers) were to be duplicated by the Forward as well.

Since a readership capable of sustaining a socialist daily existed by the early 1890s, the Arbeiter Zeitung Publishing Association also mounted a fund-raising drive for a paper that would serve, in effect, as an organ of the Socialist Labor Party and, as such, could challenge the conservatism of the highly successful Yiddishe Tageblatt. The new daily, the Ovend Blatt first appeared in October 1894. The logical candidate for its editorship was Abraham Cahan, but he had refused the position, a refusal which stemmed from his growing antagonism to the political course charted for the Socialist Labor Party by Daniel DeLeon, the controversial figure who had by then consolidated his leadership role within the party and gained control of the Arbeiter Zeitung Publishing Association.

Born in Venezuela to a wealthy Jewish family, DeLeon arrived in this country about 1875. Having studied and taught law at Columbia University, he entered the political arena through an involvement with the Knights of Labor, a conventional trade-union organization; that was followed by an attachment to Bellamyite or utopian socialism. In 1890 he joined the Socialist Labor Party convinced by then that the traditional unionism was but a palliative ensuring the continuation of capitalism. Described as having a "brilliant mind and an incisive pen," together with a "domineering personality" driven by an "unyielding singleness of mind," DeLeon had acquired a fervent commitment to a revolutionary imperative.<sup>7</sup> Through manipulation of the power structure he had assembled, DeLeon sought to gain control of, thereby transforming, the American trade-union movement. His Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance was to be a highly centralized, class-conscious organization closely linked to a now revolutionist Socialist Labor Party and composed of socialist-dominated unions affiliated with it as well as their parent bodies, the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor. DeLeon envisioned industry-wide organization rather than the craft-level unionization promulgated by the American Federation of Labor. The

United Hebrew Trades, now under the influence of DeLeonites, was the principal constituent of the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance. However, even more pivotal to DeLeon's power structure was his lodging of ultimate control in the Executive Committee of the Arbeiter Zeitung Publishing Association; it, in actuality, exercised decisive authority over the United Hebrew Trades, its unions, and the Socialist Labor Party.

In the interest of promoting socialism, however, the DeLeonites and their opponents within these various groups -- those socialists who were less doctrinaire and therefore less reluctant to accept reformist methodologies -- temporarily avoided a schism through a series of compromises entailing the editorships of several publications. The final break occurred at a meeting of the Arbeiter Zeitung Publishing Association on January 7, 1897, when the opposition, rebuffed in its attempt to enlarge the membership of the Association and thus its voice, led by Abraham Cahan and Louis Miller withdrew, reassembled, and formed a new organization, the Press Federation. A ringing declaration was prepared by Miller calling for a convention of "all organizations based on socialism and of trade unions based on class struggle...in order to work out a platform and a plan on how to launch a paper which shall honestly and devotedly serve the movement and not be the property of a clique..."<sup>8</sup>

Swearing continuing allegiance to the Socialist Labor Party, the convention assembled at the end of January in Valhalla Hall on Orchard Street; twenty-three organizations from New York City participated and there were representatives present from other major cities. A resolution pledging to hold the "banner of the international class struggle aloft" was approved and a name for the paper proposed by Louis Miller.<sup>9</sup> Although "Forverts" was not, it has been said, "altogether idiomatic in workaday Yiddish," it was chosen in emulation of the world's most successful socialist newspaper, the Vorwaerts of Berlin; approval was unanimous,<sup>10</sup> and Abraham Cahan was unanimously approved as its editor.

Like those received by the Arbeiter Zeitung before it, many small, laboriously earned donations were gathered for the new newspaper; Cahan and others travelled to other cities as well seeking funds from potential readers of the Jewish Daily Forward. Conciliatory gestures made by the Socialist Labor Party, including a proposal that both the Forward and the Arbeiter Zeitung be recognized as official party organs, were spurned, and the first issue of the new paper appeared on April 27, 1897.

The birth of the Forward had a significance which far exceeded the inaugural of a new newspaper; its inception marked the end of the uneasy coalition which constituted the Socialist Labor Party and the beginning of the party's subsequent decline. The birth of the Forward also coincided with the formation in Chicago of the Social Democracy of America, a coalition forged from the shattered remnants of Eugene V. Debs' American Railway Union (its demise was the result of support lent to the striking workers defeated by the notoriously anti-union Pullman Company), Midwestern Socialist Labor Party clubs, religious organizations, and groups interested in establishing cooperative colonies. This coalition at the turn of the century would reconstitute itself as the Socialist Party. Inspired by the new organization which had selected Debs as its head in June 1897, a large number of Jewish socialists convened in New York at little more than a month later to form an allied group; among those representing 1200

Socialist Labor Party members and 10,000 trade unionists, there were many supporters of the Jewish Daily Forward; by common consent the paper became the unofficial organ of the incipient Socialist Party.

Bitter verbal warfare ensued between the Arbeiter Zeitung and the Forward. DeLeon excoriated the departed as utopians and worse. Cahan recommended that the Arbeiter Zeitung's fulminations be ignored, but his colleagues continued their polemics with zest. As a result Cahan resigned from the editorship of the Forward not to return finally for close to five years. In the interval the process of his Americanization was completed; it was a process he then imposed upon the Jewish Daily Forward.

#### Abraham Cahan and the Americanization of the Forward

In this and in many other ways, events in the life of this most formidable man parallel, in microcosm, the pre-history and history of the Forward. Born near the Lithuanian city of Vilna in 1860, Cahan, like many young Russian Jews, was consigned to an inferior education; his was obtained at the Jewish Teachers Institute in Vilna. But it was there that his first encounters with socialist theory took place, and he became associated with the Narodnaya Volga. (Members of this revolutionary group were responsible for the assassination of Alexander II.) Fearful of reprisals, Cahan fled from his teaching position and joined the first great wave of emigration from Eastern Europe. Arriving in New York at the age of twenty-one in 1882, Cahan quickly learned English, a skill which allowed him to leave his first job in a cigarette factory and become a night-school English teacher. His days were largely devoted to political activities, first as an anarchist and later as a socialist and member of the Socialist Labor Party. His championship of Yiddish was also an early endeavor; he is said to have given the county's first lecture in Yiddish on the subject of socialism in 1882. 11

From the very beginning Cahan was also deeply involved in literary and journalistic pursuits. An article describing the coronation of Czar Alexander III was published in the New York World the year of his arrival. He served as an American correspondent for Russian periodicals, contributed to the English-language Socialist Labor Party paper, Workman's Advocate, and as a freelance writer provided feature articles, literary criticism and fiction to the Sun and the World, and to major periodicals including Century and Forum. (His contributions to the radical Yiddish-language press during these same years have already been mentioned.) In 1896 Cahan's first novel, Yekl: a Tale of the Ghetto, was published with the assistance of William Dean Howells; Howells' later review of the book was a glowing accolade.

Following his departure from the Forward and the simultaneous dismissal from his teaching position (a school trustee had objected to his socialist views), Cahan turned to the English-language press for a livelihood. Lincoln Steffans, then a member of the Evening Post and an admirer of Yekl, commissioned a series of articles from Cahan and also obtained for him a similar commitment from the Commerical Adviser. When Steffans became city-editor of the Commerical Adviser he added Cahan to his staff. Cahan's varied assignments during his four-year stint as a reporter (ranging from covering fires and murders to interviews with Buffalo Bill

and William McKinley) exposed him to an enlightening slice of life beyond the ghetto. It was that experience, it has been said, which "...stripped him of many of the prejudices of the Russian Jew and chastened his view of American life." <sup>12</sup> The man who left the Commerical Advertiser in 1902 to return to the Forward had become, this assessment continues, "in the eyes of the immigrant community...a real American whose advice was heeded."

What Cahan found on his return has been described as "an obscure sectarian newspaper with six thousand readers." <sup>13</sup> His arrival was predicated on assurances that he would have the absolute latitude needed to shape a new newspaper, one which could fulfill the journalistic and political goals which he had gradually distilled from his earlier experiences. Regarding those assurances as less than complete, Cahan again departed; when he returned in 1903 that was no longer the case.

It has been said that Cahan "transformed the Forward almost singlehandedly...into the pacemaker of Yiddish journalism." <sup>14</sup> Circulation figures are one measure of that success. From 60,000 in 1906 (the renewed influx of East European immigrants following upon the Kishinev pogroms in 1903 brought the Forward many new readers), paid circulation continued to rise until the mid-1920s when it peaked at over 250,000. The Forward was at that point the largest circulating foreign language newspaper in the country; in New York City its daily circulation exceeded that of four English language dailies and nearly equalled that of four others. What Cahan had brought into being was a multi-faceted phenomenon but above all it was, as Cahan himself said, an "Americanized" Forward, a newspaper which would play a significant role in the comparable transformation of its readers.

Language was an important instrument in this process. Cahan insisted that what have been described as the paper's "German distortions of Yiddish" and convoluted sentences be replaced by a simple prose style which could be readily understood by the average man in the Lower East Side street. English words which had gradually replaced their German equivalents in the spoken language were given printed recognition by the Forward. While the Forward has at times been accused of writing down to its readers, the contribution it made to the emergence of so-called "American Yiddish" and its effective use of this language as a medium of popular education are widely acknowledged.

A related revision of content was another striking feature of the rejuvenated Forward. Polemical exegesis of socialist doctrine was eliminated. Cahan instructed his staff in this manner: "If you want to public to read this paper and to assimilate Socialism, you've got to write of things in everyday life..." <sup>15</sup> He regarded the paper as a "mirror" where readers would find their own lives and the lives of their neighbors reflected. News stories and human interest features began to emanate from the shop, the street, the marketplace and the home. As noted in the often quoted observation made by the Evening Post, "The East Side began to read about itself in the news columns of the Forward." <sup>16</sup>

This approach also explains the invitation which the Forward extended in 1906, asking its readers to make their own personal lives a part of the paper. "Under your tenement roofs," Cahan said, "is real life -- the very stuff of which the greatest books are written. Let us read in this book

together. Let us write more of it together." <sup>17</sup> The solicited letters flowed into the offices of the Forward; they spoke of youth, of age, of husbands and wives, of etiquette, of love, of work, of jealousy, of - in short - "real life." The often poignant missives and the editor's judicious responses to them, described as "combining social casework and advice to the lovelorn," appeared in the paper as the "Bintel Brief," a bundle of letters. <sup>18</sup> Inimitable, despite the efforts of competing newspapers to duplicate it, the "Bintel Brief" was one of the Forward's most popular and enduring features.

A remarkable aspect of the Forward was its inclusive range. There was the sensationalistic reporting inspired by the English language press and papers such as Pulitzer's World and Hearst's American. But the Forward was also a paper devoted to serious literature. Works by major Yiddish poets, short-story writers and novelists appeared in its pages. The roster includes Morris Rosenfeld, Abraham Liessen, Abraham Reisin, Sholem Asch, Zolman Schneour, I.J. Singer, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Asch and Reisin served as members of the Forward staff as, more recently, did Elie Weisel.

Of equal consequence is the Forward's political legacy. Shorn of theoretical treatises, the new Forward ceased preaching to the converted and set about promoting an Americanized and pragmatic socialism among the masses. Summarizing its success in this endeavor, Daniel Bell has noted that, "The Forward bound together the Jewish community and made it socialist." <sup>19</sup> While not an official organ of the Socialist Party, the Forward generally espoused the party's viewpoint and supported its candidates (the paper stood, for example with the party in its opposition to World War I and its mailing privileges were, as a result, temporarily revoked); in the period between 1920-1932, it was, according to Bell, the most powerful influence within the party. <sup>20</sup> As in other areas of concern, the Forward also took an active role in shaping the events it reported. Refusing to accept advertising from "capitalist" candidates, the Forward acted, in effect, as a campaigner for the challengers to the Tammany Hall power structure. It has been said that, "The Jewish socialists fought these campaigns with a with a selflessness akin to religious fervor and the Forward was their bugler and drum major." <sup>21</sup> A major triumph, Meyer London's election to Congress in 1914 from the Lower East Side district (only one other socialist before him had been elected to that body) was a success tallied up on display boards hung from the facade of the Forward Building, and thousands were there in the small hours of the morning as London claimed victory from its balcony.

The Forward's merging of reportorial and activist roles in related endeavors has been summarized by Jewish labor historian Melech Epstein. "No student of Jewish history in the United States," he observed, "can underestimate the leading part played by the Forward in directing the young Jewish labor movement and in molding the opinions of a large segment of the community. The Forward and Jewish labor are indivisible...The Forward fulfilled the mission of an organizer of Jewish labor." <sup>22</sup> The pages of the Forward reported all -- the daily life of sweatshop workers, the momentous strikes of the early 20th century (the 1909 strike of 20,000 shirtwaist makers, the 1910 cloakmakers strike, the 1913 clothing workers strike), the tragedies (the 1910 Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire which took 146 young lives) and the emerging labor union movement (the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing



Workers and the United Garment Workers). And the Forward acted -- unlike other papers it refused to accept advertisements explaining an employer's side in a strike, it supported striking workers by organizing soup kitchens and starting strike-fund subscription lists, boards bearing strike bulletins were posted on the building, members of the staff served and provided guidance to strike committees, and special strike editions were printed.

In the Forward Building there were to be found the offices of two major socialist-dominated labor-supporting organizations. One, the United Hebrew Trades, had been formed in 1887 as a federation of Jewish labor unions; in the early 20th century its energetic organizing efforts were reflected by the more than 40 unions it embraced and their thousands of members. The other, the Workmen's Circle (its parent was the Arbeiter Ring established in 1890), was a national mutual-aid order chartered in 1901; by the mid-1930s it had 700 branches in 38 states. Provision of assistance in times of sickness, assurance of burial places and decent funerals, and the furtherance of education were its general purposes. Specific activities included the opening of a tuberculosis sanatorium in 1910, sponsorship of lectures and forums, operation of socialist Sunday schools, schools for secular Jewish education and Yiddish-language schools, establishment of summer camps, and a decades-long subsidy of an amateur theater group, the Folksbeine (the second-floor auditorium of the Forward Building was its home).

The Forward Building has been described as "...the principal nerve center of the entire Jewish quarter," a perception seconded in these comments by another author:

The many thousands of young men and women flocking into the branches of the Workmen's Circle, into social and cultural clubs and societies and the locals of the new unions, created a lively and exciting atmosphere in all Jewish neighborhoods. Hundreds of meetings were held every Friday, concerts and balls on Saturday and Sunday. Between 15,000-20,000 attended. The new Forward Building met this need. The Forward became the hub of a pulsating movement and gained immensely in influence and prestige. 175 East Broadway became synonymous with Jewish labor and the socialist movement. <sup>23</sup>

The Forward Building is no longer that although the Jewish Daily Forward survives. An ever-declining readership after the mid-1920s was the inevitable product of assimilation; today circulation runs just above 30,000. Since 1976 the Forward has occupied offices in the modern Workmen's Circle Building on East 33rd Street. Its former home has housed several Chinese religious organizations; conversion to residential use now seems to lie ahead.

### The Forward Building

Like the newspaper, the quarters occupied by the Forward in its early days were humble indeed. Since production was given out to a commercial printer on Duane Street, a nearby location for the editorial offices was a necessity. The editor, writers and compositors shared a sub-divided loft in an old building on the same street. For the business office, proximity

to the readership was important and it was located in a rented storefront on East Broadway just opposite the existing building. (Buildings on this side of the street were later demolished to create Seward Park.)

In 1904 the Forward's offices, and the printing press it had acquired in 1901, were brought together in the tenement building which the paper had purchased at 175 East Broadway. The acquisition caused the Forward to declare itself temporarily bankrupt but the continued dramatic rise in circulation had produced sufficient profits by 1910 to permit consideration of a replacement for an already cramped space.

An adjoining tenement at 173 East Broadway was bought and planning initiated for a new building. Practical needs were to be met but there was also a programmatic goal. Jewish labor-historian Melech Epstein records that, "Some of the enthusiastic members of the Forward Association, spurred on by the erection of Yarmalofsky's twelve-story bank building on Canal -- they did not relish the idea of a capitalist symbol rising so high on the East Side -- came forward with a bold plan to erect an elevator building on the Lower East Side, a ten-story edifice to tower over the surrounding tenements." <sup>24</sup>

Available sources do not reveal the reasons for the choice of architect George A. Boehm and the conceptual prototype he followed, the Evening Post Building at 20 Vesey Street completed in 1906 to the designs of Robert Kohn. <sup>25</sup> The relative proximity of the Evening Post Building, its recent date and Cahan's earlier contributions to the Evening Post may have been influential factors. The Evening Post's evident interest in the Forward supports the idea of a connection between the two structures. A 1912 article about the Forward and its editor makes mention of the new skyscraper, and in 1922 an article by Oswald Garrison Villard (former Evening Post editor) appeared in the Nation, a publication affiliated with the Evening Post.

Although there are formal differences between the two buildings, certain aspects of their design also suggest a general kinship. A ten-story skyscraper provided far more space than the Forward then or ever required for its own use. Practicality as well as symbolism dictated this choice; rental revenues would cover operating and maintenance costs. Perhaps the early use of eight of the Evening Post Building's twelve floors by some twenty business tenants (insurance companies and lawyers predominated) provided an inspiration. Garment-making shops were first proposed as possible tenants for the Forward Building but, according to Melech Epstein, the more "farsighted" members of the Forward Association, "visualizing the tremendous impact of one center on the expanding movement, insisted that the new building be solely devoted to labor organizations and their view won out." <sup>27</sup> And thus the principal tenants of the Forward Building came to be the United Hebrew Trades and the Workmen's Circle.

Major functions required by a newspaper were distributed within the structures in a similar manner as well. The upper stories or attic level of both housed the composing rooms. Business offices took up a portion of their main entrance levels. Presses were located in the basements and sub-basements.

The missions of both newspapers is made manifest through the

programmatic sculpture and ornament displayed on the facade. Decorative panels at the center of the Evening Post Building's projecting bays represent 15th- and 16th-century printers' marks. The sculpted figures occupying the attic-level niches represent what the Evening Post called "the four periods of publicity." <sup>28</sup> Reading from right to left they are the spoken word, the early written word (a scribe or illuminator), the printed word ( a printer of the Gutenberg era) and an editor in modern garb "suggesting the potentialities of the paper." At the Forward Building we find, in contrast, representations of the men popularly referred to as "the four socialists." Low-relief images of Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, Friedrich Adler, and Friedrich Engels are contained within the roundels of the base section frieze. <sup>29</sup> (These are presently obscured by panels bearing Chinese characters.) A flaming torch, emblematic of the socialistic vanguard depicted in the roundels and a role to be perpetuated by the aptly named newspaper, is a repeated and prominent motif. Torches appear on the escutcheon placed above the main entrance and on the facade parapet where they flank wreath-like oculi, an arrangement which has triumphal overtones. So too does the design of the lower portion of the building which with its wide central and flanking openings, classically inspired ornament, and crowning pedimented portico evokes a triumphal entryway.

Although far taller structures were then being built, the claim of the Forward Building and the Evening Post Building to skyscraperhood is clearly expressed. Vertical elements of both shaft sections are stressed; imposing attic levels contribute to the sense of a towering presence. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that both have been provided with abundant and ample window openings; airy light-filled spaces are universally appreciated but possibly more so in buildings which housed facilities such as composing rooms.

The architect for the Forward Building, George A. Boehm (1874[?]-1959) was an 1898 graduate of Columbia University; he later studied architecture in Paris and Rome. Beginning practice shortly after the turn of the century (his collaboration with Clinton and Russell on the Acker, Merrall & Condit Building of c. 1907 is his earliest identified work), he maintained a partnership with his younger brother Henry until about 1927. Although Boehm remained in practice for nearly fifty years, relatively few of his designs have been identified to date. His 12-story office building of 1910 for the Retaro Realty Company at 140-144 West 22nd Street is distinguished by the emphasis placed the vertical elements of the shaft section and the employment of tall columns at the attic level; these are features he repeated in his design for the Forward Building, an important work of his early career. Cited for his designs for public buildings and schools in particular, Boehm's later work includes the Peck & Peck shop front and office building (1921) at 587 Fifth Avenue, the Greenpoint Hospital Nurses Training School (1944), the Fire Department Headquarters (1945) on Lafayette Street and the Mapleton Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library (1950). A Westchester resident toward the end of his life, he was the author of the Mount Vernon Building Code and designed a number of that city's schools.

## Description

Constructed in 1912, the Beaux-Arts style Forward Building is a ten-story skyscraper employing a facade design which evokes the tripartite (base-shaft-capital) division of a classical column, an arrangement characteristic of many tall office buildings constructed around this date. Since the upper stories are visible above the adjoining structures, the capital or attic level is demarcated on the eastern and western elevations as well.

The design of the seven-story shaft section of the facade emphasizes the effect of verticalism conveyed by the building. Extending through the full height of the shaft, a wide, obliquely set white terra-cotta frame, the edges defined by moldings, encloses the four-bay-wide center section. Rectangular sections containing raised oval-shaped panels mark the divisions between stories. In the intervening sections moldings create diamond-shaped divisions which enclose flaming torches in low relief. Emblematic of the Jewish Daily Forward's political and social mission, the torch appears at several other locations as well. White elements (frames and torches) are set against a tan background; this is essentially the coloristic contrast used for comparable juxtapositions throughout the facade. The center section is further emphasized by the white terra-cotta cladding which expresses the framing system and defines the wide window openings. Horizontal elements are bordered by moldings; large double X's mark the junctures of the structural grid in the lateral bays and flank the diamond shapes appearing along the center axis. Panels with molded borders define the verticals; smaller X's mark their terminals. The short spandrel sections below the windows are unadorned. The dominance of the window opening is a striking feature of this center section. Early photographs show one-over-one sash; existing sash is four-over-four.

Laid in Flemish bond, the tan-colored brick of the outer bays contrasts with the white terra-cotta cladding of the center section. The narrowness of the outer bays, the relatively slender windows and the flat flanking pilasters which rise uninterrupted through the shaft section -- all contribute to the effect of verticality. Horizontally-set two-over-two sash has replaced the earlier one-over-one.

The two center bays at the base of the shaft section are given prominence by the large, elaborate projecting portico-like surround. It accents the main portal below and in combination with the base section of the facade reads as the attic story of a triumphal gateway. The surround is terminated by a tall segmentally-arched, denticulated broken pediment; the pediment partially obscures the lower portion of the center windows in the story above. It is carried on attached coffered pilasters (the frames are white and the background tan) with foliate capitals; the pilasters are set on relatively tall plinths. Buttress-like pilasters atop plinths are attached to the outer lateral faces of these pilasters. Originally the balustraded railing linked the plinths.

Two reclining classically draped figures of white terra cotta, female and male on the left and right respectively, fill the deeply recessed tympanum; the bright blue background provides a striking foil. Exchanging glances, they serve compositionally as guardians of the flames they flank.

A bright golden aureole is splashed against the blue background of the tympanum; its source is the group of torches which crowns the large scrolled swag-flanked escutcheon just below. Its white terra-cotta oval-shaped face bears a flaming torch held aloft by an extended arm.

The outer pilasters flank a two-bay-wide arcade carried on colonnettes of polished granite atop tall plinths. The arcade openings enframe the full-length window openings behind them; these are topped by decoratively filled round-arched transoms. A short slender sidelight-like window is framed by the paired central colonnettes. Vines, wreaths and medallions constitute the frieze and spandrel ornament. The triumphal overtones of the sculpture and decorative motifs are unmistakable.

Emphasizing the main portal immediately below, the pediment arrangement at the foot of the shaft also provides a dramatic culmination for the pilaster-delineated portion of the facade base. A flight of granite steps leads up to the shallow landing of the entry foyer. The granite plinths which flank the staircase and rise from its lowest level once supported multi-globed lamp standards; the granite plinths midway up the flight are topped by sturdy columns of polished granite. Their white terra-cotta bases are located at the landing level. The columns carry a broad entablature of white terra cotta; it is embellished by a wide foliate frieze. The profile of the wide, round-arched opening above is accentuated by a broad band of white terra cotta; the concentric tan-colored foliate molding at the center of this band repeats the coloristic contrast employed elsewhere; so too, most probably, did the slightly recessed spandrel sections. These are now painted a dark brown. The foliate frames enclosing the spandrel sections duplicate the foliate banding around the entryway arch.

Giant coffered pilasters with foliate capitals enframe the entryway; identical pilasters also terminate the bays flanking the main portal section. Because the outer pilasters are placed beneath the inner brick pilasters of the shaft section, the width of the base section they define exceeds that of the ornamentally enframed center portion above; the pilasters strongly suggest, therefore, a base from which that four-bay-wide section of the shaft rises. The pilasters are set on tall granite plinths placed at grade. White frames originally contrasted with tan backgrounds. The frames were recently repainted gold; silver-colored inserts bearing Chinese characters and vine-and-leaf motifs now form the backgrounds.

The entablature carried by the four pilasters is topped by a modestly projecting multi-level cornice and frieze. The frieze section is comprised of several elements; four roundels placed above the pilasters (these contain images in low relief of the "four socialists" -- today they are covered by panels ornamented with Chinese characters), a panel above the entryway with the legend "Forward Building," and flanking that, rectangular panels embellished with white bordered tan-colored strigils.

The bays flanking the entryway are divided into two stories; small square windows suggest an "attic" level. Ornamental surrounds composed of white terra-cotta panels and tan-colored foliate and spiral moldings enframe these openings. Below, there are the continuations of the entablature carried on the entryway columns; since these elements lie in a plane behind the coffered pilasters, they provide a strong horizontal link

between the central and lateral bays.

The lower story of these bays consist of deep, rectangular shaped openings which originally extended to grade. (Modern panelling partially screens these openings today.) Windows appear in the rear wall of the recesses. Above the granite dado, which is the height of the plinths, the walls are clad in terra cotta; white borders create a lattice pattern and enframe tan-colored panels. The terra-cotta clad ceilings repeat this contrast; white center medallions stand out against the darker backgrounds.

The main doorway and "attic-level" window grouping above it comprise the rear wall of the entry foyer. The doorway and transom framing elements are adorned by a series of small elongated ovals; all members are painted white, possibly not the original color. Four panels of five lights (the inner two are the operative doors) are flanked by slender sidelights. The transom consists of a rectangular section above the actual doorway, with flanking square lights and sidelights. The entablature is ornamented by a foliate frieze. Above, multi-paned sash fills the round-arched opening of the "attic" level.

The terra-cotta faced lateral walls of the entry foyer feature window-like blind arches with foliate spandrels. Keystones are embellished with winged flaming torches. The multi-sectioned terra-cotta clad foyer ceiling is deeply coffered. The coffer enframements of white, tan, and blue employ a number of classicizing motifs -- egg-and-dart, fretwork, bead-and-reel and foliate ornament.

The outermost cast-stone clad bays of the base section contain large rectangular openings equal in height to the recessed opening they flank. Originally these openings featured large transoms above the doorways; in their place are modern inserts with Chinese characters and metal doors of recent date. The small rectangular "attic-level" windows of these bays, however, are not aligned with those of the adjoining bays.

The two-story attic section of the building merits the term "crown" often applied by contemporaries to this section of early 20th-century skyscrapers. Its height is further increased by a tall stepped parapet which is terminated by an enormous circular clock surmounted by an elongated palmetto. (Earlier photographs also show a huge billboard set at an angle on the roof; the side facing southwest, i.e. toward downtown Manhattan, read "Jewish Daily Forward;" the side oriented toward the community conveyed the same message in Yiddish.) The white terra-cotta cladding of the attic level provides further emphasis and differentiates it from the darker tonality of the shaft section below.

Five attached columns with foliate capitals rise through the attic stories; they define and terminate the four center bays. Attached pilasters with similar capitals flank the lateral bays. Columns and pilasters carry a broad entablature ornamented by a panelled frieze. Because the lateral bays are treated as end-pavilions, pediments top the entablature sections above them. Projecting balustraded balconies carried on large scrolled brackets at the base of these bays contribute further to their end-pavilion character. The balconies also enframed the large Hebrew letters once attached to the decorative metal fencing at the base of the center section; it read "Arbeiter Ring" or Workmen's Circle. Six-over-six

sash now appears in the second story of the attic level; more modern metal frame windows appear below. Earlier photographs show one-over-one sash. The spandrel sections between stories are adorned by bronze-colored panels with embossed geometricized circular ornament at their centers. On the parapet wall large gold Hebrew letters spell out "Forverts." The legend is flanked by large oculi; these suggest wreaths. Flaming torches appear on both sides of each oculus.

On the eastern and western elevations of brick the first bay of the attic level is delineated by open-centered, white terra-cotta frames. A modest stone bandcourse divides the shaft and attic sections along the remainder of these elevations. Brick corbelling appears below the roofline. The large painted panel at the northern end of the eastern elevation (it is headed by the word "Forward") is still dimly visible; at the corresponding position on the western elevation, newly applied white paint provides a background for Chinese lettering. Numerous windows appear on these elevations; some would appear to have early vertically-set two-over-two sash. Others contain horizontally set five-light sash. Fenestration on the southern elevation is of greater interest; the structural openings are filled with three and four units of sash depending on the location; the banks of windows created provide an abundance of light to the interior. Frames and sash appear to be of an early date. So too do the fire escapes on the southern and western elevations.

#### Conclusion

The Forward Building survives as a vivid reminder of the Lower East Side when it was the center of Jewish immigrant life. Home until 1972 of the world's preeminent Yiddish-language newspaper, the building in its iconographic program of sculpture and ornament expresses the newspaper's affirmed goal of "spread[ing] the ideas of socialism among the Jewish masses." The Forward not only reported on, but in many significant ways shaped, the life of the immigrant community it served. The paper gave reportorial and direct support to the labor-union movement as it developed in the early decades of the 20th century, and the building housed offices of major Jewish trade-union related organizations, the Workmen's Circle and the United Hebrew Trades. A beacon symbolizing "socialism" and "labor" for this community, the Forward Building, by its height and design, still dominates its neighborhood.

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## NOTES

1. Melech Epstein, Jewish Labor in the U.S.A.: 1882-1914 (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950), p. 323.
2. Moses Rischin, The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 19.
3. Ibid., pp. 19-20. Cholera epidemics, Polish famines, and the Odessa pogrom are cited among the events which initiated East European emigration.
4. Ibid., p. 118. Having absorbed a number of its competitors, the Yiddishe Gazetten became the leading Yiddish-language weekly in the late 19th century.
5. Mordecai Soltes, The Yiddish Press: an Americanizing Agency (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1924), p. 182. The Yiddishes Tageblatt was something less than a daily in that it is published but three to four times a week; see Rischin, The Promised City, p. 123.
6. Harry W. Laidler, History of Socialism (London: Routledge & Paul, 1968) p. 578. In order to thwart a takeover by anarchists, Marx had transferred the headquarters of the First International to New York in 1872. Continuing arguments among its various sections concerning strategic goals led to its dissolution in 1876.
7. Ibid., p. 580. Epstein, Jewish Labor, p. 250.
8. Epstein, Jewish Labor, p. 264.
9. J.C. Rich, The Jewish Daily Forward (New York: The Forward Association Inc., 1967), p. 20.
10. Ibid.
11. Ronald Sanders, The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 62.
12. Rischin, The Promised City, p. 126.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. "An East Side Editor," Evening Post, July 27, 1912.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Rischin, The Promised City, p. 126-127.



19. Daniel Bell, Marxian Socialism in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 98.
20. Ibid.
21. Epstein, Jewish Labor, p. 334.
22. Ibid., p. 318.
23. Sanders, The Downtown Jews, p. 5; Epstein, Jewish Labor, p. 323.
24. Epstein, Jewish Labor, p. 323.
25. Minutes of the Forward Association (in Yiddish) would surely provide further information concerning these matters; they are located in the present offices of the Jewish Daily Forward.
26. "An East Side Editor," Evening Post, July 27, 1912; The Nation article of September 27, 1922, is reprinted in Oswald Garrison Villard, Some Newspapers and Newspapermen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), pp. 82-94.
27. Epstein, Jewish Labor, p. 323.
28. "The New Home of the Evening Post," Evening Post, April 13, 1907.
29. Identifications of the four socialists were kindly provided by Jewish Daily Forward staff members. Friedrich Adler, son of Austrian Social Democratic leader Victor Adler, was also an important figure in that country's socialist movement.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Forward Building has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Forward Building, a ten-story Beaux-Arts style skyscraper completed in 1912, is a major early work of architect George A. Boehn whose nearly fifty-year practice was distinguished by designs for public buildings in New York City and Westchester; that the Forward Building housed until 1972 the offices and printing plant of the Jewish Daily Forward which, at the apex of the Yiddish-language press in the mid-1920s, was the world's preeminent newspaper of its kind; that the founding of the Jewish Daily Forward in 1897 both marked and influenced a significant moment in the history of political radicalism in this country, the point at which a more Americanized socialism, as embodied by the Socialist Party, emerged; that the iconographic program of the sculpture and ornament appearing on the facade of the Forward Building expresses the newspaper's affirmed goal in the early 20th century of "spread[ing] the ideas of socialism among the Jewish masses;" that the Jewish Daily Forward not only reported on, but in many significant ways, shaped the life of the immigrant community it served; that among its contributions were the forging of an Americanized Yiddish accessible to the ordinary person and the use of that language as a means of popular education, the legitimizing of daily life on the Lower East Side as appropriate journalistic content, the advancement of Yiddish literature through inclusion of works by major poets, short-story writers and novelists, the promulgation of socialism in general and active support given to the Socialist Party and socialist candidates; and the related reportorial and direct support provided to the labor-union movement as it developed during the early decades of the 20th century; that the Forward Building also housed the offices of major Jewish trade-union related organizations, the Workmen's Circle and the United Hebrew Trades; that the Forward Building, for these reasons, provided a major focus for Lower East Side life; and that the Forward Building was a beacon symbolizing "socialism" and "labor" for this community.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 Section 534 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Forward Building, 173-175 East Broadway, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 284, Lot 23, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Archive: The Forward Association.



Architect: George A. Boehm  
Built: 1912

FORWARD BUILDING  
173-175 East Broadway  
Manhattan

Photo Credit: Carl Forster  
Landmarks Preservation  
Commission