A whole generation of Jewish artists came to maturity at the time of the Russian Revolution and achieved remarkable successes in the realm of theater design. It is an area of study, however, which, with the notable exception of Béatrice Picon-Vallin's detailed study, has been largely neglected by Western and Soviet historians of twentieth-century Russian culture. This situation is to be regretted as Jewish artists played a prominent role not only in theater design, but in the evolution of the Russian avant-garde in general. While it is erroneous to write of a well-defined, religiously conscious Jewish faction within the ranks of the avant-garde, there was an undeniable resurgence of interest among artists of Jewish descent in their own Jewish artistic heritage. In the field of theatre design, Marc Chagall played an important role in pioneering Jewish stage designs in the Soviet Union in the years immediately following the Revolution.

The abolition of restrictions on minority groups and the subsequent legality of Jewish institutions resulting from the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 provided unprecedented opportunities for Jewish artists in the Soviet Union. The establishment of Jewish theatrical enterprises, which later came under the auspices of TEO, attracted the talents of many Jewish actors, writers, and artists. Artists of Jewish descent, who contributed a substantial number of the artistic personnel to the Russian avant-garde, responded eagerly to the challenge of creating a truly Jewish avant-garde theater. Thus significant contributions in the development of theater design were made by artists such as Marc Chagall, David Shterenberg, Isaak Rabinovich, Natan Al'tman and Aleksandr Tyshelev, and a tradition of high standards was established in Jewish theater design that was to influence stage design in the Soviet Union for the next twenty years.

The proliferation of Jewish theaters that occurred immediately after the Revolution was a manifestation of the age-old desire for theatrical self-expres-
tion among the Jewish people inside Russia. Prior to the revolution of 1917, Jewish theater was, to all intents and purposes, outside the law. Both the institutionalized anti-semitism of the tsarist state and the religious restrictions of the faith ensured that Jewish theater remained, since the fifteenth century, basically an underground movement. Avraam Gol'dfaden's theater in the second half of the nineteenth century was the exception rather than the rule.4 Although the works of "the father of modern Jewish theater" were translated into Russian from Yiddish and staged in Odessa and Moscow between 1878 and 1883, the repressive anti-semitic legislation of 1882, prohibiting Jewish theatrical rights and reinforcing the laws governing Jewish resident restrictions,5 precipitated Gol'dfaden's emigration to New York and curtailed the development of a permanent Jewish theater in Moscow. Despite the prohibitive tsarist laws against the Jewish theater, which were even more strictly enforced after the Beiliss affair of 1913,6 and despite the religious objections by the rabbis, Jewish touring groups did manage to survive. Indeed, on the eve of the revolution there were some fifteen of such troupes, mostly in the south of Russia, often posing as German theatrical companies to avoid harassment and prosecution from the tsarist authorities.

The rigorous suppression of most forms of Jewish self-expression helps to explain the post-revolutionary commitment by Jewish artists to the creation of a permanent legalized theatre which had been denied them for so long. The sense of fulfillment experienced by the Jewish community during the early days of the Jewish Studio Theater in Petrograd is intimated by the most celebrated Jewish actor and occasional playwright Solomon Mikhoels: "At the very time that worlds were falling apart, perishing and being replaced by new worlds, a miracle took place; a minor one perhaps, but magnificent for us Jews—the Jewish theater was born."7

The desire to create a genuine Jewish theater raised a fundamental problem of what a Jewish theatre should be. Different responses to this crucial question resulted in the simultaneous development of two types of theater in Moscow—the Habima (Hebrew for "stage"), established in 1918 and led initially by Evgenii Vakhtangov, and the Jewish Studio Theater, founded in 1919 in Petrograd and transferred to Moscow on 20 November 1920, becoming the Jewish State Chamber Theater in 1921. Habima was a Hebrew-speaking, religiously

5. Permits for Jews wishing to live outside of the fifteen official residence zones were limited to merchants belonging to the first Guild. Membership of the guild was contingent upon a subscription of 1,000 rubles and a university diploma.