

The Rise and Fall of Yiddish

Lucy S. Dawidowicz

"I'M always sorry when language is lost because languages are the pedigree of nations." Thus Samuel Johnson on his tour of the Hebrides. History does treat us sometimes to a nation, like the Swiss, without a common or predominant language by which to chart its pedigree, but this is the anomalous case; usually every nation or people has its own language. The Jews, being like everyone else only more so, have had more languages of their own than any other people.

The linguist who applies the scholarly methods of his discipline to a particular language can not only extract from it the data on how the spoken and written elements originated and developed, but can also—from the pronunciation of vowels and diphthongs, from shifts in stress, and from changes in verbal forms—mine information that will illuminate a larger canvas of social and cultural history. Language in this sense is the accumulated culture of the nation, and to understand it fully is to know the nation's pedigree. Such a work of understanding, a work of breathtaking scope and scholarship, has just been published: Max Weinreich's *History of the Yiddish Language*.*

Max Weinreich, who was born in Courland (Latvia) in 1894 and died in New York in 1969, was a founder and director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (originally called Yiddish Scientific Institute, YIVO being its Yiddish acronym) in Vilna from 1925 to 1939 and, after 1940, in New York. His genius expressed itself in his extraordinary passion for the Yiddish language and its culture, a passion which he tried to subdue within the straitjacket of Germanic academicism. It was not simply that Weinreich loved Yiddish; he was, as this work shows, in love with Yiddish. Through YIVO, through his teaching, and through his writing, he succeeded in retrieving for Yiddish the prestige of which it had been deprived for much of its own lifetime. In this masterwork of his, a precious legacy to those who will never know the language as he did, Max Weinreich reclaimed for Yiddish its central place in the mainstream of Jewish history.

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With a staggering range of learning Weinreich unfolds the social history of Yiddish against a richly figured background of the history of all Jewish languages. The story he tells is fundamentally a kind of success story, the dramatic account of a language that rose as it were from rags to riches, maturing out of obscure origins in a tiny space to consummation as a full-fledged language spoken by millions throughout the world, with its own vigorous and respected literature. By means of his magisterial scholarship, Weinreich disproves the old cavil against Yiddish, that it was not a true language but only a jargon, a garbled version of German spoken by ignorant Jews. For so long regarded as the ugly duckling among languages, Yiddish emerges from this study as a graceful swan.

THOUGH no summary can suggest the richness of Weinreich's history or do justice to its subtlety, the bare facts may be briefly sketched.

Yiddish had its origins in a small strip of territory along the Rhine and the Moselle, which the Jews in their writings then called Loter, probably from Lotharingia. The Jews who settled in Cologne, Mainz, Worms, Speyer, Trier, and Metz about a thousand years ago came from Northern France and Northern Italy. Linguistic evidence suggests that some of them were descended from Jews who had already lived in the Rhineland in the days of the Roman empire, but who had, together with the Romans, retreated to Arles in the

* University of Chicago Press, 833 pp., \$45.00. The translation from the Yiddish, a heroic undertaking in view of the complex multilingual text, was done by Shlomo Noble. While the effort is admirable, the execution often falls short. The style is graceless, and the sense is sometimes obscured by a slavish literalism and by the translator's penchant for archaisms and Latinate words.

The 98-page index, prepared by Bella Hass Weinberg, combines a name-and-subject guide with an index to all the words and phrases of the many Jewish languages which appear in the text. A virtuoso accomplishment, it unfailingly located any word or topic I wanted to track down.

Astonishingly, there is no scholarly apparatus. The original Yiddish work, which the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research published in 1973, consists of two volumes of text and two volumes of notes, the latter containing bibliography, references, and additional commentary with which Weinreich presumably did not wish to burden his text. The present volume does not even direct its readers to the apparatus available in the Yiddish edition.

5th century when the Germanic tribes began to overrun them. As the Jews spread beyond the limits of Loter, they called the whole region Ashkenaz, an old Hebrew word which they now designated to mean "Germany." They referred to themselves as Ashkenazim, in distinction to the Sephardim on the Iberian peninsula (Sepharad).

Further to the east lay Knaan, the Hebrew name for Canaan, which had now been appropriated to refer to the Slavic lands. By the 13th century, Ashkenazim were living in places where the inhabitants spoke Slavic tongues, probably Old Czech and early forms of Byelorussian, Polish, and Ukrainian. The Ashkenazic center of gravity was shifting eastward: first from Worms to Regensburg, thence to Prague and thereafter to Cracow, Lublin, and Vilna. By the 16th century, records indicate the presence of Ashkenazic Jews in Miedzyborz in the Ukraine, later to become the cradle of Hasidism. The term Ashkenazim eventually came to refer to all the Jews who were descended from those first Ashkenazim, even though the geographical center had moved. As Weinreich says, "The name Ashkenaz was stripped of its territorial connotation; geography was transformed into history."

WHEREVER the Jews had lived, they had had their own language. Hebrew is the first Jewish language we know of, and for many centuries, though no one is quite sure how many, it was the only one. But a new Jewish language pattern emerged with the Babylonian exile (586-516 B.C.E.), after the destruction of the First Temple. In Babylonia the exiles adopted the local variant of Aramaic and brought it back on their return to Palestine. Ever since then the Jews have been bilingual and occasionally trilingual.

In time Aramaic displaced Hebrew as the spoken language and became the medium through which the sacred texts were made accessible to people who no longer understood the Hebrew. From the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, public readings of the Hebrew Bible required also the reading of its Aramaic translation. But Aramaic also encroached on Judaism's sacred texts. Parts of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic and so, of course, was the Talmud—the Babylonian Talmud in Eastern Aramaic, the Jerusalem Talmud in Western. Aramaic also intruded into the liturgy, as in the universally familiar example of the Kaddish. Finally, Aramaic words and phrases invaded Hebrew itself and in time became incorporated into post-biblical Hebrew. This merged Hebrew-Aramaic tongue Weinreich calls *loshn-koydesh*, "the sacred tongue," no longer a spoken language but reserved only for sacred texts and written communication.

The Jews who settled in German-speaking Loter brought as their linguistic baggage variants of the languages of their previous residences—Old French or Early French, Gallo-Latin or General Vulgar Latin, with admixtures of words and phrases of *loshn-koydesh* which they needed for the conduct

of their lives as Jews. The encounter of these linguistic elements with the German that was then spoken in Loter launched the Yiddish era in Jewish history.

Weinreich's periodization of Yiddish looks like this:

- Early Yiddish, from the 9th century to 1250; expanding beyond Loter to the basins of the Main, the Upper Rhine, and the Upper Danube; no writings extant.

- Old Yiddish, 1250-1500; extending to the basin of the Middle Danube, to Bohemia-Moravia, Poland, and Lithuania. The Slavic element enters into the fusion of Yiddish; early writing in Western Yiddish appears.

- Middle Yiddish, 1500-1700; extending westward into Alsace, Holland, and Northern Germany; eastward into Courland. Western Yiddish, used by Jews in German-speaking lands, becomes differentiated from Eastern Yiddish; parallel dialectal systems emerge in Eastern Yiddish; elements of Eastern Yiddish penetrate into written Western Yiddish.

- New Yiddish, 1700- ; expanding into the large cities of Eastern Europe and overseas (Palestine, North and South America); the rise and flowering of written Eastern Yiddish, with the concomitant formation of a standard language and a literary culture.

The fusion of the four components that comprise Yiddish—*loshn-koydesh*, early Romance languages, German, and Slavic—entailed a continuing, cumulative, and systematic process of selection and adaptation. Fusion transformed the original elements into a distinctive language whose stress and sound system, vocabulary and word formation, syntax and grammar no longer resembled the stock languages out of which it had emerged. This process, with its high degree of linguistic systematization, produced Yiddish.

A single Yiddish word may suffice as illustration. *Shlimeszalnik* means "hard-luck guy," "poor slob." The prefix comes from the German *schlimm*, "bad" or "sad." The stem comes from the Hebrew *mazal*, "luck." The suffix is a Slavic ending to designate "one who." Thus, three disparate elements from three stock languages are fused into one word which exists in none of those languages but is uniquely Yiddish.

In its millennial lifetime Yiddish became the most widely spoken of any of the Jewish languages in all of Jewish history.

WHAT made Yiddish a Jewish language, beside the fact that it was a mother tongue of millions of Jews? To this question Weinreich devotes a major chapter, surely the most original and brilliant of the whole.

Wherever the Jews migrated, they picked up the local language. In good times as even in bad, Jews were always in contact with the Gentiles among whom they lived, buying and selling, working for and with one another. The grownups gossiped to-

gether in the streets and shops, while the children played together outdoors. To live in the community at large and to take part in its economic life, Jews had to know the language. Why then did they attach themselves to a Jewish language, to Yiddish?

Various theories have been advanced to account for the rise of Yiddish and other Jewish languages (like Dzhudezmo, the vernacular of the Sephardim). Weinreich cites Matthias Meises's seminal work, *Die Entstehungsursache der jüdischen Dialekte*, published in 1915, which concluded that the common creative force in shaping and differentiating all Jewish languages was to be found not in the oppression of the Jews, or in their specific economic functions, or in their separatism, or in their common origin, but in the powerful role of the Jewish religion.

Conscious of their obligations to worship their God in accordance with His law, the Jews regulated their lives by that law, their seasons by the Jewish calendar and its cycle of festivals and fast days. The circuit of their week differed markedly from that of the Gentiles; each of their days was punctuated by prayer at three appointed times. They sanctified their homes in obedience to the laws of *kashrut* and educated their children to go in their ways. Their way of life demanded its own language. Names were needed for ritual objects, for celebrations, rites of passage, for the operation of the entire religious system. Language was needed for the performance of ceremonial acts, for abiding by moral precepts, obeying divine commandments, and fulfilling community responsibilities. The Jews perforce created a Jewish language.

Weinreich calls this language, which became the vehicle for the diffusion of Ashkenazic Judaism, "the language of *derekh ha-shas*," a term which he appropriates from Rashi, the illustrious 11th-century Talmudist and exegete. Rashi had used the term in its primary sense, "in the manner of the Talmud," defining a method of reasoning characteristic of the Talmud. Weinreich stretches it to apply to the whole culture of Judaism as circumscribed by the Talmud. In Yiddish this culture is called *yidishkayt*.

No single English word satisfactorily conveys the meaning of *yidishkayt*. The word "Judaism," in its contemporary connotations, is too narrow a concept. The distinguished Yiddish scholar Shlomo Birnbaum, the author of *Yiddish: A Survey and a Grammar*,* defines *yidishkayt* as "the sum total of the ideas and practice of traditional Judaism." Weinreich himself, back in 1953, used the word *yidishkayt* in his text without translating it, but defined its all-embracing character in Mordecai M. Kaplan's lapidary phrase, "Judaism as a civilization." (Regrettably, Weinreich's translator renders *yidishkayt* as "Jewishness," a featureless word which commonly suggests a watered-down quality of Jewish ethnic identity and whose secular overtones drown out the resonance of religious tradition in the original Yiddish.)

AS THE expression of *yidishkayt*, Yiddish exemplifies the statement of the American anthropologist Edward Sapir that "language is the perfect symbolism of experience" and that "in the actual context of behavior it cannot be divorced from action." A few random illustrations out of the profusion of Yiddish words and phrases marshaled by Weinreich show how integrally Yiddish incorporates the culture and values of *yidishkayt*. I have deliberately chosen examples from the everyday Yiddish spoken by average Jews, that is, nothing erudite or derived from learned sources.

Consider the contrast between *shabesdik*, the adjective for Sabbath, and *vokhedik*, the adjective for weekday. *Vokhedik* describes whatever is ordinary, quotidian, humdrum, and drab. *Shabesdik* always reflects the radiance of the Sabbath. *Shabesdik ongeton*, "dressed for the Sabbath," is equivalent to "in one's Sunday best," "all dressed up."

A man will present his son to a new acquaintance as *mayn kadish*, a loving term that defines the son's obligation to recite the mourner's *Kadish* after his father's death. (On hearing the phrase any good Jew will respond, *biz hundert un tsvantsik*, "till one hundred and twenty," may he live until the age at which, according to Jewish legend, Moses died and which is consequently the limit of any Jew's life expectancy.)

When something happens in a twinkling, it's over *in eyn shma yisroel*, in the time it takes to say the Shema, "Hear, O Israel." When someone comes late to a party or meeting, people say: *er iz gekumen tsu aleynu*, "he arrived at *Alenu*," the prayer recited at the end of the regular service. Something short-lived or a person without stamina is said to last *fun ester-tonis biz purim*, "from the Fast of Esther to Purim," that is, barely from one day to the next.

Kosher means something that is good, lovely, proper, rightful: *Host dos kosher fardint*, "you rightfully deserved it." *Treyf*, "impure," also means "illegitimate," "shady." *A treyf gesheft* is a shady business. *Treyfene skhoyre* may refer to forbidden goods or even stolen goods. *Pareve*, the word for food or vessels that are neither meat nor dairy, means "insipid," "namby-pamby."

When you question something, you ask: *Vu shteyt es geshribn?*—"where is it written?"—that is, what is your written authority for so doing? The expression comes from the Hebrew *kakosuv*, "as it is written," a word commonly used in the Talmud and other learned religious texts to cite the ultimate authority on any given subject or procedure. *A gemore-kop*, "a Gemara head," someone who has an aptitude for studying Talmud, is used as high praise for brains. *Dreyen mitn grobn finger*, "gesticulating with one's thumb," the stereotyped gesture of talmudic disputation, is a pejorative term, like "splitting hairs."

Finally, two expressions that embody the quin-

* University of Toronto Press (1979), 399 pp., \$37.50.

tessence of *yidishkayt*. *A yid iz in goles*, "a Jew is in Exile," epitomizes resigned acceptance of one's fate, the word *goles* here being used in its transcendental sense, meaning the exile of the Divine Presence from the world and consequently the Jew's helplessness in a disordered universe. Still the Jew perennially hopes to be redeemed, hopes that he will *derlebn meshiekhn*, "live to see the Messiah." In fact, at unexpected good fortune, when, for instance, Gentiles redress an injustice done to Jews, they say with indomitable optimism and at least a trace of wry humor: *Meshiekhs tsatyn*, "the days of the Messiah," the millennium has arrived.

HAVING originated and matured as the language of *yidishkayt*, Yiddish underwent an extraordinary turnabout in the last century or so when it became identified as the vehicle of Jewish secularity and secularism. The language of *derekh ha-shas* suffered the same indignities, injuries, and pressures to which the world of *derekh ha-shas* was itself exposed under the assault of modernity.

Once an organic community, indivisible as a people and a religion, the Jews were split apart by religious and class wars, and became estranged from one another by new national loyalties. Although observant Jews continued to use Yiddish as the language of *yidishkayt*, their world appeared to be shrinking and growing more isolated from the larger society, Jewish as well as Gentile. In the rush of history Yiddish now came to be appropriated by a self-reliant labor movement, committed by its revolutionary fervor to make war on Jewish traditionalism and "clericalism." The secularists took over Yiddish to reinforce their identity as an ethnic community with a political agenda.

As politics moved to the center of Jewish communal life in the 19th century and thereafter, Yiddish, invigorated by its new functions, acquired new energy. Its lexicon became enlarged and modernized, its horizons were extended far beyond the world of *derekh ha-shas*. A great Yiddish press came into being in Eastern Europe and America; secular school systems with Yiddish as the language of instruction competed successfully with government schools and also with the *heder* and the *yeshiva*. Yiddish literature and theater flourished on both sides of the Atlantic. Yiddish became the language of the working class. It was the language, too, of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz.

In the remarkable success of Yiddish as a secular vehicle lay the seeds of its decline. But other reckonings must first be made in charting its rise and fall. In 1939 nearly two-thirds of the world's eighteen million Jews spoke Yiddish; it was the principal language of more than half of them. It

is thus not mere rhetoric to say that Yiddish did not die, but was murdered by the Third Reich. Had its speakers lived out their lives *biz hundert un tsvantsik*, Yiddish too would have survived, and Eastern Europe would have continued for some time to have nourished the Yiddish-speaking communities in America and Israel. For how long, it is idle and melancholy to speculate.

Evidence is in any case at hand that Yiddish began to decline somewhat after it became a secular language and after its function as a vehicle for *yidishkayt* was reduced. In America and even in pre-war Eastern Europe, the secular Yiddish press, the secular Yiddish schools, and modern Yiddish literature hastened rather than retarded the acculturation of the Jews to modern urban Gentile society. Yiddish as a vehicle of Jewish secularism eased the Jews' transition from the world of tradition to the world of modernity.

For the half-century that Yiddish served as an adjunct of ideologies of cultural nationalism which sprouted in Eastern Europe and were even transplanted to America, it never attained that transcendent authority with which *yidishkayt* had endowed it in an earlier age, and it never mustered the dedication which Hebrew commanded as an adjunct of Zionism. Yiddish could never become a substitute for Judaism or for a Jewish state, though probably some ideologues hoped that it would.

Nowadays sociolinguists talk of "language loyalty," referring to the immigrant's wish to retain in the New World the language of the Old Country. But the concept is artificial and sentimental. Once a language loses its function as a vehicle of systematic communication, it loses its voice. Language has never succeeded as the echo of an echo. The tiny enclaves of Yiddishists in America who believe that their "loyalty" to Yiddish will keep it alive bring to mind the groups of *Auelei Zion*, "Mourners of Zion," who continued for centuries to mourn the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. by living apart from the Jewish communities in secluded asceticism.

Though Yiddish still functions as a *lingua franca* all over the world, the irrefutable demographic fact is that fewer and fewer Jews claim it as their mother tongue or their principal language. Instead of being a living spoken language, Yiddish is now becoming a language of Jewish study. In many of today's *yeshivas*, Yiddish—or a macaronic Yiddish-English-rabbinic Hebrew—is the language of instruction, a key to the Talmud. In secular Jewish studies in the universities, and increasingly for the Jews as a people, Yiddish has become a key to the past. The language that a mere forty years ago was spoken by two-thirds of the world's Jews, the pedigree of the Ashkenazim, has reached the end of its era.