

Yiddish in the University - Comments on The State of The Field

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I'm afraid that as the years go by, my trust in free enterprise outstrips my hope for statism as the guarantor of excellence, industry, and progress.

What I mean to say by this is that the future of Yiddish Studies - as of so much else - probably lies, as it has until now, in the hands of individuals who have determined, for the widest variety of personal reasons, to build their careers, to earn their living, to express their creativity, in this area. Yiddish is taught, where these people have settled and found or created jobs. It is taught well, where these people teach well, and badly where their good will is greater than their knowledge or talent. While this brief paper will address itself to collective undertakings and suggestions for furthering the field, experience suggests that there is only so much organized effort will do as compared with the personal ambition of honest scholar-teachers, each pursuing his or her own interests and ends.

I

The results of a survey conducted for the World Council for Yiddish Culture have not yet been compiled or finally analyzed, but some of the data available for North America may be interesting as preliminary background. Of 21 responding institutions, 15 offer Yiddish instruction as part of the regular curriculum, 3 have Yiddish available at Hillel or in extension programs, and 3 offer no courses in the languages or culture at all. Of the 15 institutions where Yiddish forms part of the regular

curriculum, thirteen offer Beginners Yiddish, 9 offer both Beginners and Intermediate Yiddish, but only 2 offer a complete range of courses including Beginners, Intermediate, and Advanced. In only one of these institutions are there more than one full time person in the Yiddish program. Advanced courses in Yiddish literature, folklore, and linguistics, are taught in institutions where there is no formal Yiddish language sequence. Conversely, the presence of a Yiddish language program is rarely accompanied by an advanced program of textual courses.

The field of Yiddish appears to be exceptionally fragmented and haphazard. A consolidation of efforts may not be possible, but exchange programs for interested students are certainly indicated, given the numbers of potential advanced students as compared with the small number of institutions than can accommodate them.

## II

The spread of Yiddish teaching over such a large geographic area, the relative isolation of people in the field from one another, and the strong need for intellectual cross-fertilization between disciplines and areas of research suggest the need for a scholarly organization that will provide at the very least, "an adres" - a small executive committee that will keep track of our activities, and whereabouts, and handle requests for information from interested parties. Discussions about this venture took place during the First World Conference for Yiddish Studies in Oxford, England two years ago, and it is certainly an

idea whose time has come. If the budget required for such an operation cannot be secured from one of the University Centres of Yiddish, this would be one area where WJC help would be most appropriate and welcome.

In addition to keeping a record of appointments in the field of Yiddish and current mailing addresses, this executive committee should be charged with at least two major functions: the organization of periodic conferences, such as the one that brought together a community of scholars at Oxford, and the publication of a newsletter, listing current publications and dissertations, academic conferences and exhibitions, and similar matters of ancillary interest. It goes without saying that the newsletter would become whatever its editor(s) saw fit to make it, but initially, a modest clearing house of information would be sufficient to create the reality of an international "field." The occasion of this meeting in Jerusalem should be used, if possible, to choose a working executive for the central body until one can be ratified by a larger convention; to choose a location and date for a Conference two years hence; and to appoint the editor of a newsheet or newsletter, who may or may not be identical with the secretary of the working executive.

### III

In place of further concrete suggestions, perhaps I would share several concerns about the state of the field as a whole that may then elicit a wide range of practical applications. I will put the issues more boldly than necessary in order to provoke either immediate recognition or - if I am mistaken - general dismissal.

a) Most of the students who come to study Yiddish at the university are interested in learning the language while most of the trained teachers are concerned with literary, historical, linguistic, folkloristic, etc. problems. Except for The Uriel Weinreich Summer Program in New York, there is no university program devoted primarily to the intensive study of Yiddish as a language. I would guess that at least part of the success of that program is due, not only to its excellent organization and the available resources, but to the degree that it satisfies the expectations and the stated goals of its students which are to learn to speak Yiddish. Where I teach, by contrast, we move after the first full year (Introductory Yiddish: 6 credits) to emphasis on literary and historical texts and although our Yiddish classes are conducted in Yiddish, although we aim to engage the students by the marvellous quality of the material and of our interpretation of it, although we succeed to a degree, we are clearly trying to move the students to our interests rather than meeting and building on theirs. The majority of university Yiddish programs tend toward this model.

This condition is not unique to Yiddish, of course. The same holds true for most language departments at the University, and for Hebrew as well. Most students want something resembling a University Ulpan, and most universities try to emphasize as early as possible, the language as a key to exploring written texts, or the language as a subject of higher comparative study.

Nonetheless, this comparison with Hebrew (and with other national languages) shows up the particularly weak state of Yiddish language instruction. The ideological - not to speak of the Israeli governmental - investment in Hebrew has produced and continues to produce a wealth of texts, materials, and instructors with the exclusive

purpose of teaching the language. Yiddish has not fared so well. Except for Uriel Weinreich's youthful and spirited College Yiddish, all the other texts for the teaching of the language, including the most recent anthologies I have seen, seem to me to be the product of reluctant duty rather than inspired interest. The scarcity in the field of Yiddish of good teachers of Yiddish is as striking as it is regrettable. Since most of us are more concerned with the furthering of Yiddish within our own disciplines and we cannot ourselves meet this challenge, but since we depend on students of Yiddish for our professional happiness, we are directly affected by this problem.

b) Yiddish Studies, in themselves, do not attract enough good students, even among those specializing in Jewish Studies. Those of us in the field are often overwhelmed by all there is to be done, and I need hardly add that the burden of transmission weighs heavier on us with the death of each native East European Jew, who was the repository of Yiddish language and culture. With all this urgency, however, we do not attract enough new excellent students, and given both the general decline of graduate enrolment, and liberal arts enrolment, as well as the precarious economic future of the Yiddish teaching profession, who knows how much better we will be able to do in the immediate future? We badly need a cadre of trained workers, but cannot guarantee employment even to those we have.

One area we have not even begun to explore, in this connection, in the definition of Yiddish as an ancillary, as well as primarily, field of academic specialization. Individual students from related areas

have made their occasional way to Yiddish, but institutionally, as a field, we have not pressed our advantage in such obvious related fields as Slavic Studies, Germanic Languages and Literatures, European history, American Studies, etc. Perhaps it is possible to design short-term program of study in Yiddish for academics in other areas, or for graduate students in related fields? Perhaps we could consider a more active definition of Yiddish in relation to fields of study beyond the Jewish sphere? Even within Jewish Studies, Yiddish is not yet accorded its natural status as a research tool. Beyond Jewish Studies, in the general academic community, the scope of Yiddish Studies is not properly understood or appreciated. Before Yiddish is accorded a more prestigious status in the world academic community, we will have to do more to interpret its interrelatedness to all the areas where it naturally belongs.

I think I am speaking of more than merely myself when I suggest that the field of Yiddish has for me a certain national (what Americans call ethnic) importance, and therefore finds its most comfortable expression in the context of Jewish Literature, Jewish history, Jewish Studies. Yet, paradoxically, unless we can prove the universal relevance of Yiddish Studies, it cannot be guaranteed a place in the university curriculum much less win for itself the expanded role we would wish for it. The national importance of Yiddish to the Jews may be sufficient to guarantee its enhancement in Israeli universities, but elsewhere, it

should prove its value in a comparative atmosphere. We are challenged, I believe, to make the case for Yiddish Studies along much broader and universal lines, in order to ensure the continuation of Yiddish Studies where they now exist, to encourage their inclusion in at least as many more universities, and to attract (even from among Jewish students) the calibre and number of new recruits that we so desperately require.

In defining what remains to be done, I hope that we can also pause to take pride in what has been accomplished so far. Compare the Field of Yiddish today with what it was fifteen years ago, and there will be cause for celebration as well as ongoing concern.