

# MAPPING A CULTURE

By URIEL WEINREICH

It is regrettable that the recent upsurge of foreign study in this country has so far tended to bypass a language and a culture from which millions of Americans are but a generation removed. The United States Office of Education has until now rejected the suggestion that the study of European Jewish society, its language, and its literature, is in the national interest and deserves support under the National Defense Education Act. Show us the country in which Yiddish is an official language, say the strategists in Washington, and we will gladly include it in the list of critical tongues along with Gujerati, Khalkha, Twi, and the like. But merely because an exclusive Yiddish area does not appear on any administrative map, is the humanistic relevance of this culture to be denied? Fortunately, in other quarters more enlightened counsels have prevailed, making it possible for the facilities of a major graduate school to be used in the advancement of Yiddish scholarship; one urgent research project now under way at Columbia University is the preparation of an atlas of European Jewish culture.

Just before World War II, it is estimated, there were over seven million Jews in Eastern and Central Europe. They made up the bulk of the so-called Ashkenazic, Yiddish-speaking branch of Jewry. Today, after Germany's war against the Jews, which took six million civilian lives, and after a decade and a half of Soviet cultural repression virtually unrelieved by de-Stalinization, the surviving offshoots of this society are growing increasingly apart.

The desire to know and understand this society for its own sake would be reason enough for the development of Yiddish studies on the university level. Central and East European Jewry by and large determined the face of the vigorous "colonial" Jewry, notably in America and Israel, and this alone commends the mother society to the attention of the scholar. But that society also has facets that make its study engrossing on other, more general grounds. The historian cannot fail to note that the economic and cultural tone of a substantial part of Europe would have

been different during many centuries if the Christian rural society had not lived symbiotically with Jewish market towns (*shtetlekh*) in the thousands. They provided the growing cities in Poland, Lithuania, Rumania, and western Russia with entrepreneurship and labor forces. They gave us a diversified literature of considerable proportions—a literature rooted in tradition, yet consciously universal and modernistic—a literature rich in folklore and famous for its humor. They developed a fiber of character resilient in perennial crisis, firm in intellectualism, and gentle in humanitarianism. Without them our educational horizon would be darker.

The very lack of a self-contained territory that has so far disqualified the study of Yiddish from NDEA support endows Ashkenazic Jewry with exemplary value for a particularly crucial problem in social history: the effect of communication channels and barriers on the diffusion of cultural innovations. Despite the emphasis in modern social science on the structural cohesion of linguistic and cultural phenomena, it is still safe to assume that substantial portions of language and culture develop at random. If a society splits into several isolated groups, random innovations will cause each group to evolve differently. On the other hand, if contact remains, at least some innovations in one will be transmitted to the other. The geographic fragmentation of a culture and a language thus yields an opportunity to reconstruct the influences of neighboring localities upon one another.

Relatively few societies have so far been linguistically analyzed from this geographic point of view; and even when they have been, the relation between lines of cultural divergence and communication barriers ordinarily remains hypothetical: we cannot prove that without the mountain range, the ecclesiastical boundary, or the political frontier the split would not have developed anyway. One way of diminishing the possibility of accidental correlation, of course, would be to show that the presumed obstacle to communication prevented the spread of innovations in two cultures in the same territory. But (territorially overlapping cultures) are not easy to find, and this is where the study of the Jewish society is richly rewarding. For the "Old Coun-

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try" of Ashkenazic Jewry is a rare instance of temporal and spatial overlapping on a sweeping scale. The Ashkenazic society took shape, it is reckoned, in the middle Rhineland about the year 1000. There the Yiddish language first grew out of a combination of local German dialects with several forms of medieval Judeo-Romance and the Hebrew-Aramaic of traditional Jewish culture. The Ashkenazic Jews spread eastward into southern and central Germany and then into the Slavic lands, eventually coming to occupy a European area second in size only to the Russian one. Because of the uninterrupted multilingualism in which the society functioned, it is possible, for every part of Europe once inhabited by Ashkenazic Jews, to pursue a "bilingual dialectology" and a "bicultural geography"—that is, a coordinated analysis of two languages and two cultures in the same territory.

The geographic interlocking of two cultures becomes instructive when we consider, for example, the relation of religious codification to customary practice. On the one hand, it is well known that the Jews in the cities and small towns of Europe formed a profoundly religious society. The Talmudic way of life determined not only every aspect of religious dogma and ritual, but codified economic law, family relations, education, clothing, diet, and many other aspects of daily behavior, often in detail.

On the other hand, there were details of life that in practice escaped religious reach. In dietary law, for example, there was room for considerable variety in cuisine. For a Jew building a house, the religious code prescribed that in every room a corner of a wall remain unplastered in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple, and that the doorposts be equipped with special amulets; but the architecture and the internal furnishings of Jewish houses did not particularly matter. The solemnity of Bible reading and the dignity of prayer were secured by careful regulation of the pronunciation of the Hebrew liturgy; at the same time, the vast domain of the vernacular Yiddish developed without much religious interference.

Now, it might be expected that the peripheral, profane aspects of the culture would develop solely by local improvisation. Whereas the basic outline of the wedding ritual, for example, is given to all Ashkenazic Jews alike, the pre-wedding entertainment, festive foods, music, dances symbolizing fertility and wealth—all these, according to one widespread view, should differ from family to family or from *shtetl* to *shtetl*. Still another theory predicts that in its

uncodified aspects, the culture is under influence from the various local cultures. The wedding music, for example, will be Polish among the Jews of Poland, Ukrainian in the Ukraine, Rumanian in Rumania, and so forth.

Neither of these theories is correct. In the domains of culture not explicitly codified by religion, we now find that variation is not individual or local, but conforms to definite regional patterns. And what is more, where cultural borrowing has taken place, the regional patterns in the recipient culture are not necessarily congruent with the corresponding distributions in the Christian source cultures. Apart from the implications for Jewish cultural history, this overlapping autonomy suggests that the role of exclusive territory in the general definition of society may have to be reconsidered.

Enough is known about Yiddish to make possible the formulation of many such problems, at least in their broadest terms. But we lack the full and precise geographic data that are necessary if we are to move toward solutions. Ethnographically authentic descriptions of how Jews behaved and spoke in the scattered regions of the Old Country are relatively scarce. The literature they brought forth, which is still being added to, remains a permanent monument to their creative centuries, but like any created work, it is liable to distortion. Moreover, tracing internal differentiation in a society depends on the availability of negative data, and these are unlikely to be obtained from written sources. It is not enough to learn from a novel, an epic poem, or a book of memories that a certain custom was current in a given place; we must also know where else it was current, and where it was not. This can be established only through direct oral inquiry; and so, what was too obvious for study only yesterday has suddenly become precious. The opportunity for face-to-face descriptive study of European Jewry, rapidly slipping from us, is bound to the remaining lifetime of surviving emigrants from those areas. What we do not collect in the coming decade or so will be lost forever. Hence the urgency with which the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry is now being compiled at Columbia.

After several years of preparation, field work for the Atlas was begun in 1959 and is now nearly half complete. The work is planned to be more comprehensive in content and coverage than the small Yiddish language atlas of the Soviet Union, published in Minsk in 1931. In the search for comparable materials on non-Jewish languages, consultations have begun with scholars in Eastern Europe.



Figure 1, showing the Yiddish plurals of the word for "nose," may serve as a preview of the way in which the distribution of a lowly linguistic fact unearthed by the Atlas lends itself to significant historical interpretation. We see two types of plural formation: in the center and extreme southwest, as shown by vertical bars, the plural of *noz* (or, regionally, *nuz*) is formed by a change in the vowel (*neyz*); in the rest of the area, the plural is obtained by a vowel change and the addition of the suffix *er*. It should be noted that although the noun base is of Germanic origin (cf. German *Nase*) and though both patterns of plural formation occur in German (e.g. *Nacht*, *Nachte*—"night[s]"; *Wort*, *Wörter*—"word[s]"), the association between this particular noun and these particular plural patterns is unknown not only in standard German, where "noses" is *Nasen*, but also in any German dialect so far described. The Germanness of some of the materials of which Yiddish vocabulary is made up thus contrasts with some of the very un-

of Yiddish dialects in Eastern Europe can be reconstructed so: Until the strengthened union of the Polish and Lithuanian states in the middle of the 16th century, Poland and Lithuania (which then included the Ukraine) constituted fairly autonomous basins of Jewish colonization and of Yiddish dialect consolidation. It was then that the *neys* form probably became predominant in Poland and *nezer* in the Grand Duchy. After the Union of Lublin in 1569 the Ukraine passed to the Polish sector of the joint state. The new Lithuanian-Ukrainian boundary that was formed may have been only administrative, but its effect on further regionalization of Jewish society was profound. In Jewish communal autonomy, for example, it was the boundary between the Council of Lithuania and the Council of Four Lands. In the area northeast of this boundary, effective from the middle of the 16th to the end of the 18th century, the old diphthong *ey* was shortened, yielding (among many other local developments) a new plural form, *nezer*. Figure 1 thus illustrates



Figure 1

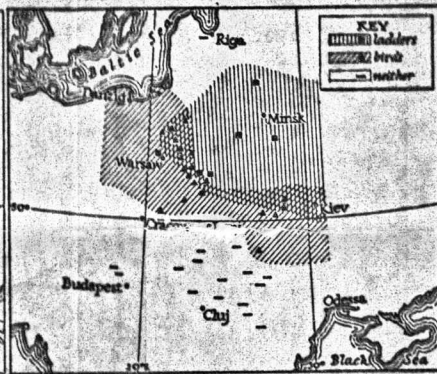


Figure 2

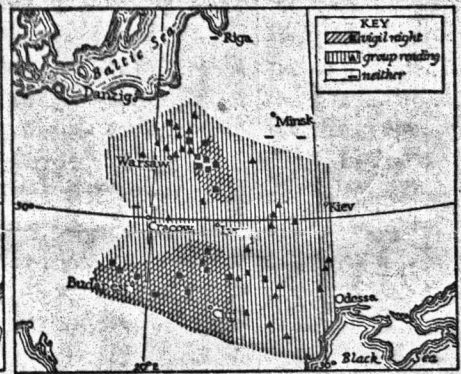


Figure 3

German schemes according to which its elements are composed.

Now look at the location of the isogloss, or boundary line, between the two Yiddish forms, *Neys* and *neyzer* (or *nezer*). What nonlinguistic boundaries does this isogloss follow? It does not agree with any political delimitation of the most recent 150 years, cutting as it does across the part of Poland that went to Russia at the end of the 18th century; nor does it relate to the partition between Russia and Austria-Hungary. To find support for this isogloss in political geography we must go back much farther in time—to a period before the middle of the 16th century when the kingdom of Poland was separated from the gigantic Grand Duchy of Lithuania by a boundary represented on this map by a solid line.

It seems to me that the geographic evolution

the relative antiquity of Yiddish isoglosses, their unpredictability from etymological to East European political history.

Geographically differentiated reactions of co-territorial societies to each other can be observed, of course, not only in language, but in non-linguistic domains of culture, too. A rich body of illustrative materials, different in detail but consonant with the overall pattern, is found in the field of cookery, a well-developed Jewish folk art. By ancient custom, the benediction over bread or the Sabbath and on holidays requires *hallah*, a special loaf of fine white flour, decoratively twisted and made shiny by daubing with egg before baking. It has been reported that on some holidays, the *hallah* was further embellished by twists of dough representing hands, keys, and other objects. Ladders and birds, for example, were used symbolically to speed the ascent of



south and southwest there are hardly any hallah cycle. The eight days between the birth of a boy prayers to heaven. Figure 2 shows some specific regional distributions of these ornaments. In the figures; the ladder as an ornament has its own territory; the birds partly overlap in distribution with the ladders. If ornamental bread forms are a Jewish innovation based upon Slavic baking habits, their endowment with religious symbolism largely unknown to the Christian neighbors testifies to the subtlety and creativeness of the cultural adaptation process.

Finally, take an item from the Jewish life and his circumcision, like the eve of any rite de passage, are a perilous time. The child, already a human but not yet a Jew, is an easy prey for evil demons. It is well known that the orthodox religions have incorporated pagan beliefs and customs of this sort and given them dogmatic sanction. In Judaism, too, we find evidence in the rabbinical literature from the Middle Ages of a vigil night, or *vakhnakht*, celebrated by group study in the house of the newborn just before the circumcision. Figure 3 shows that the full-fledged *vakhnakht* custom survived in Hungary and Slovakia. In the major central and south-eastern areas is survived in watered-down form as a reading of the *krishme*, or credo, by a class of schoolboys, invited to the house of the newborn on the eve or the morning of the circumcision, but in the northeast it appears to be extinct. It is hard to hope for a more graphic picture of the "slope" of decreasing conservatism in Jewish culture.

Whether similar patterns have been traced by innovations in the non-Jewish cultures of the same areas remains to be seen through the superimposition of suitable maps and their interpretations. In any case, the comparison of Jewish with the non-Jewish practices of Central and Eastern Europe promises us a highly unusual, if not unique, chance to test the effect of communication barriers, centers, and channels by examining their influence on materials of varying "communicability" in two cultures.

An important respect in which the new Atlas departs from established methodology is that the field work is conducted entirely among emigrants. In the areas under study, there are few Jews left, and for political reasons, too, the prospects of field work in Eastern Europe today are hardly encouraging. But emigrants from those areas are easily accessible to the scholar in America. Emigrant organizations (*landsmanshaftn*) are assisting field workers in New York City and Israel

to locate suitable representatives of appropriately spaced sample communities on the map of European Jewry.

The full questionnaire takes up to fifteen hours of oral interviewing to administer; but there are abridged regional versions also in use. The conversation with the informant intersperses questions on customs and vocabulary with items designed to elicit local phonetic and grammatical peculiarities of the Yiddish language. Some informants are astonished that their plain speech should be of interest to scholars. Others are fully aware of the preciousness of their testimony to the recapturing of a culture.

Those who hear of this research for the first time commonly question its reliability. Can the details of culture and language in the Old Country be reconstructed from the testimony of aging emigrants at a distance of thousands of miles and several decades from the time and place under study? It is enough to interview a single native of each sample town, even if he is the son or daughter of native parents? The selection of suitable informants is beset with many difficulties, but the ultimate answer to the question of reliability is an unequivocal affirmative. The very maps shown here give proof that cultural geography at a distance, with a sample of one informant per locality, is indeed possible. The data fall into excellent configurations, yielding sharp boundaries. Failures of memory among the emigrant informants, or linguistic contamination by contact with emigrants from other areas, are random; they might have blurred the isoglosses, but they could hardly have produced an illusory displacement of sharp lines. Well-formed isoglosses such as those that appear on many of the preliminary maps of the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry cannot be anything but accurate representations of the formative period of the informants' lives. This principle is not only the cornerstone of our investigation; it is also a general methodological discovery, an early bonus of the project.

The compilation of the Atlas, although a highly technical affair, is typical of the whole field of Yiddish studies both in the richness of the results anticipated and the multidisciplinary rigor of the training demanded of the prospective researcher. The field can use all the strength that responsible scholarship affords. For when it comes to things Jewish vague familiarity with the emigrants' world still qualifies as expertise; pedantic professors and critics finicky about other subjects here tolerate sentimental know- ingness in lieu of knowledge. How many trans-



lators from Yiddish can write a correct sentence in the language, or identify half a dozen modern Yiddish poets? How many admired raconteurs of Jewish stories can step up to a map and point out the birthplace of their parents? The lack of taste and discipline in the arts is matched by a lack of accuracy in much scholarly writing on modern Jewish subjects.

The strengthening of standards in this field is a long-term task too long neglected. Specialized

organizations can help: the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, for example, has vast collections of material and decades of research experience to share. But in the advanced training of scholars, a crucial role must be filled by universities with staffs capable of providing inspiration as well as caution. They must show the way, beyond technical analysis, to an ampler representation of the modern Jewish heritage in the American humanistic curriculum.

## "THE JOYS OF YIDDISH" REVISITED

Ben-Yehude-Gershn's "The Joys of Yiddish," an article highly critical of Leo Rosten's book, appeared in the Winter 1969/1970 issue of *Freeland*. Here the author lists some corrections and replies to queries about his article.

### AUTHOR'S CORRECTIONS

- p. 16: Delete "Webster's Third . . . ."  
p. 16, ft. 3: Read, "Mencken's treatment of Yiddish was termed 'very unsuccessful . . . .'"  
pp. 16-17: Words Not of Yiddish Origin. Delete *doppess*, *shmegege*.  
p. 19 Appendix A, par. 2: Read, "Are Yiddish words really spelled 'quite simply, according to the way they are pronounced'? Does this mean that each dialect has its own spelling system or that speakers of Standard Yiddish spell differently from dialect-speakers? Actually, Yiddish spelling is older than the emergence of the dialects themselves, one spelling system serving all speakers."

### QUERIES

To the Editor of *FREELAND*:

I wonder whether Ben-Yehude-Gershn is not in error when he lists *mish-mash* as one of the English words Leo Rosten mistakenly derives from Yiddish. Uriel Weinreich's *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* does list this word, as does Stutchkoff's *Oytser fun der yidisher shprakh*.

Mendl Weinberg

Ben-Yehude-Gershn replies:

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *mish-mash* has been used in English for at least five hundred years. It gives a quotation from the mid-fifteenth century ("But, ser, I prey yow his

question to claryfye: Dryff-draff, mysse-masche."), as well as others from 1585, 1600, 1634, 1676, 1694, 1806, 1860 and 1876, long before Yiddish had any influence on the English language. The word seems to be generically Germanic (cf. Scottish English *mixtie-maxtie*, Danish *miskmask* and German *Mischmasch*). For German the Grimms' dictionary gives a quotation from as early as 1680. It is therefore quite clear that Yiddish is not the source of this word.

The two Yiddish reference works do indeed list *mish-mash*, but I am not at all certain that this is a Yiddish word of long standing. The oldest Yiddish citation I have is from a book printed in Vilna in 1908, though several native-speakers could not recall having heard this word in Eastern European Yiddish. Perhaps readers can provide older Yiddish citations or tell us whether this word was in common use in the spoken language.

To the Editor of *FREELAND*:

I wonder whether *get lost* is not, after all, of Yiddish origin *pace* Ben-Yehude-Gershn. It is certainly an expression much used by Jews and the use of the imperative *get* plus a past participle seems quite un-English.

Yours truly,

Ezra Greenwald

Ben-Yehude-Gershn replies:

Hardly. First, the expression *get lost* is a general English expression (used in the United Kingdom as well, and, as in the United States, by