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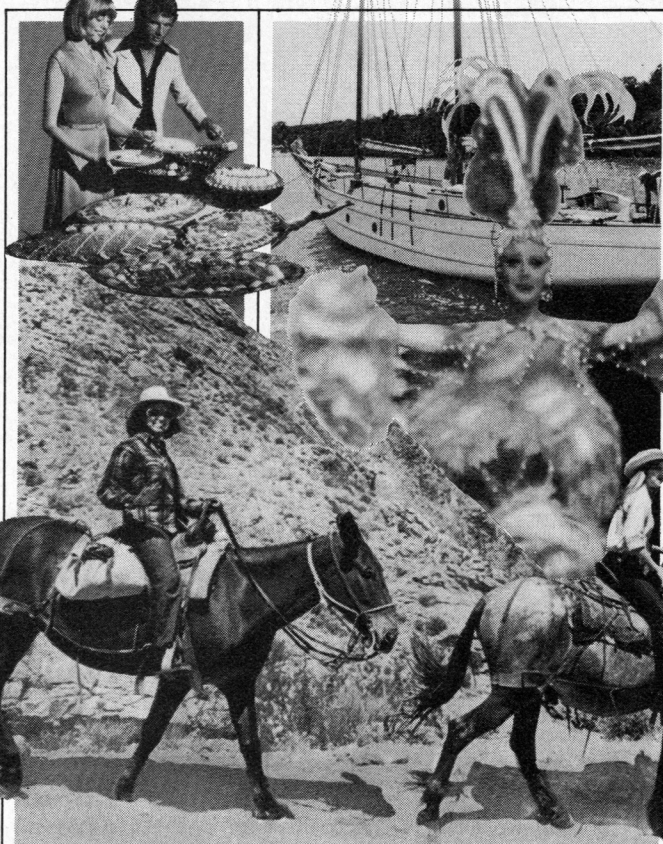
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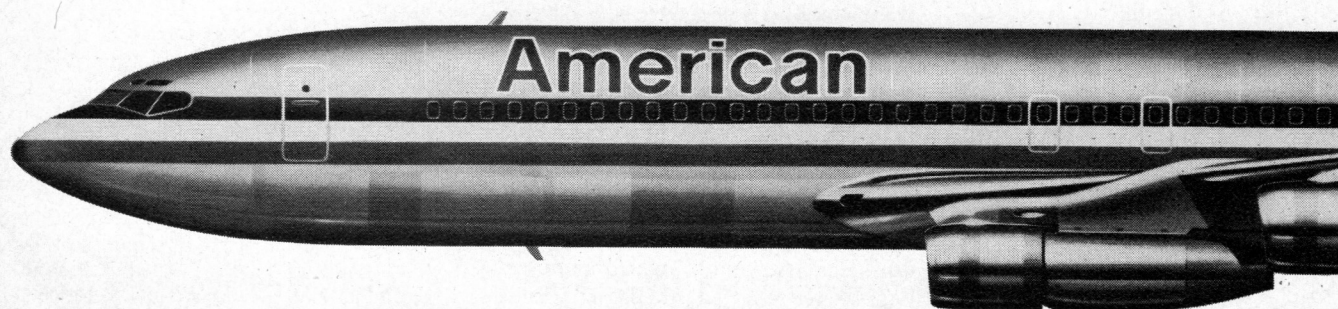
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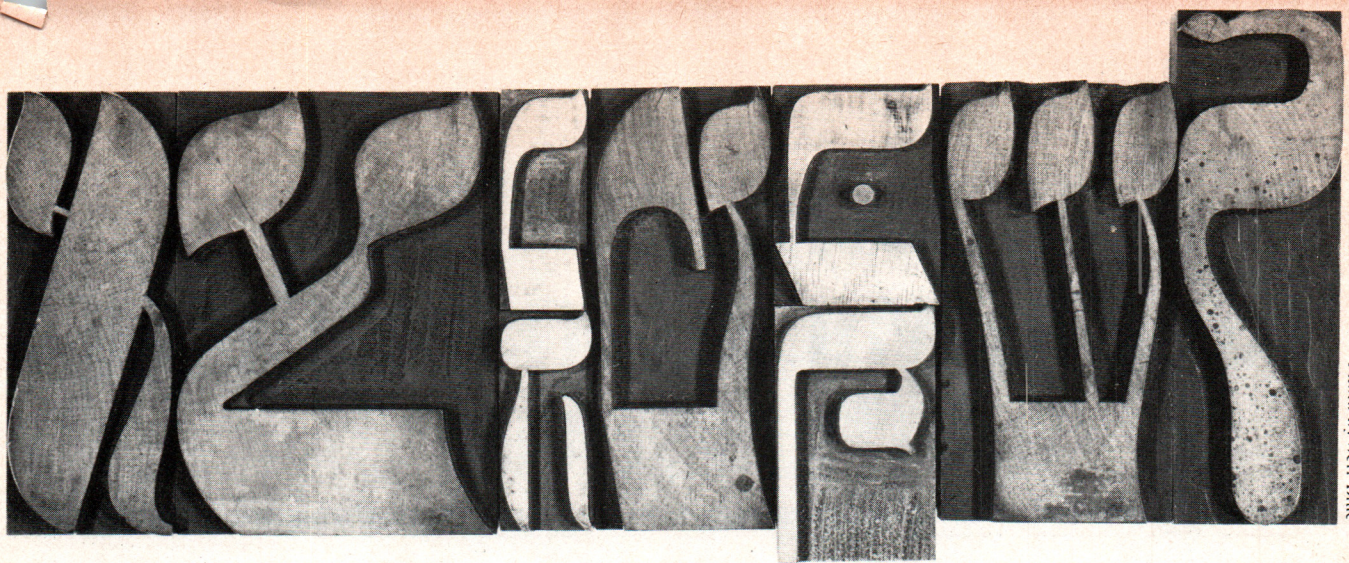


Photo by Jeff Blue

Hebrew characters taken from various fonts used for printing Yiddish theater posters around World War I.

Yiddish in the Underworld

Where the shamus is never kosher
and zex spells danger

by Isidore Haiblum

NEW YORK

The spirits of Yiddish past haunt my footsteps: They stroll with me through the streets of New York offering advice. They are not the doddering, dim-eyed spooks one might expect, but a bunch of keen-eyed youngsters. I see an agile, whiplash-lean Peretz Hirshbein in the days when he wrote *Green Fields*. His great friend Sholem Asch, black-haired and beaming, strides by his side. Here is a tall, erect Yudel Mark years before he began work on the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*. Maurice Schwartz, the John Barrymore of the Yiddish stage, glumly mutters lines from Jacob Gordin's *The Yiddish King Lear*, while Aaron Lebedoff belts out a stunning rendition of *Romania, Romania*.

This ensemble and their throng of cohorts could fill an auditorium. I never tire of their company for these are lively shades. They are keepers of my other self, the one that resides in the kingdom of Yiddish.

Isidore Haiblum, a Yiddishist, is a science fiction writer whose latest book, The Wilk Are Among Us, was published by Doubleday last year.

I am Brooklyn-born; Yiddish was my mother tongue and, as a child, I basked in its warmth, humanity and wry humor. As an adult, I studied Yiddish language and literature at CCNY with Dr. Max Weinreich—a short, white-haired man with a twinkle in his eye, a roll to his gait, and a mind which seemed to encompass a good deal of the world's knowledge. He wrote scholarly papers in six of the twelve languages he knew; and he was the foremost Yiddish linguist of his generation.

Under Weinreich's inspired instruction, I began reading Yiddish books. I developed favorites such as poets Mani Leib, Moishe Leib Halpern, A. Lutzky and Jacob Glatstein—a foursome who captured the Yiddish strut of our fathers. Sholom Aleichem and his jaunty crew—Tevye, Mottel, Menachem Mendel, Rafchik the Jewish Dog—have trekked along with me, offering a Yiddish sigh, a chuckle and a tear. Chaim Zhitlovsky is my five-star philosopher of Yiddishism whose idiom-laced essays still sparkle, even if the ideas behind them have begun to dim. Isaac Bashevis Singer is a talespinner I turn to every Thursday and Friday

in the pages of the *Forvertz*. He keeps me posted on the doings of my favorite relatives, ancestors and contemporaries—products of Singer's nonpareil imagination, yet as real as the buttons on my shirt.

These are but a few of the Yiddish authors who have become dear to me; they take their place in the phalanx of writers from whom I have borrowed, stolen and sought inspiration.

By trade, I am a writer, and with one exception—an interview with Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein (his last)—my output has been confined to English. Of my five completed novels, four are pop-culture fantasies marketed as science fiction. These works show the influence of detective story writers Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler—a pair who shared with the Yiddish writers I revere a heady delight in idiom and a sense of language as magic. Comparisons must end there. For while a good deal of Yiddish writing is governed by the tradition of *edelekeit* (refinement, delicacy), Hammett and Chandler are noted for their "poetry of violence."

I had often thought that the worlds

of Yiddish and tough-guy writing intersect only in my mind. But Dr. Weinreich himself once confided to me that he was a follower of a certain notoriously hard-boiled writer. I was shocked, for Weinreich was the gentlest of men. In retrospect, it makes sense: Some kind of violent animal lurks in each of us. Reading about mayhem and derring-do is a dandy substitute for actually engaging in it—a way of letting off steam, and, in fact, preserving one's *edelkeit*.

In researching my novels, which often deal with a variety of unsavory types, I have kept away from real live hoodlums. What I do to capture the lingo of my criminals is simply (and safely) reach for a trio of dictionaries: *Dictionary of American Underworld* Lingo was compiled by three convicts serving time in the big house, Hyman E. Goldin, Frank O'Leary and Morris Lipsius (published in 1950 by Twayne in hard cover and in 1962 by The Citadel Press in soft); *A Dictionary of the Underworld* is the work of noted lexicographer Eric Partridge, published in this country by Bonanza in 1949 (and again in 1961, with an addenda); *The Pocket Dictionary of American Slang* was put together by two college professors, Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner (published in hard cover by Thomas Y. Crowell Co. in 1960 and by Pocket Books in soft in 1967).

These volumes have lead to some surprises. While looking up *gonger* (an opium pipe), I ran across *goniff*. *Tumul* turned out to be next to *tumble* ("an interruption by police or others during the commission of a crime"). And *shiv* (a knife) was next to *shlepp*. My interest aroused, I proceeded to go through all three dictionaries.

No doubt about it, Yiddish has infiltrated the American underworld. But what a Yiddish! The Sholom Aleichems, Zhitlovskys and Hirshbeins would have been hard-pressed to feel at home with my finds, and some of these transplanted words would have been a total puzzle to them. Words, like people, often undergo vast changes during their migrations; none more so than a Yiddish word that began in Lublin and ended up in Sing Sing.

Tumuler, for instance, is a thoroughly innocuous word. In Yiddish, it means someone who makes noise. But on the lips of an American criminal? *Dictionary of Underworld Lingo* (Lingo from now on) defines *tumuler* as "1. a criminal of the crude rough-and-tumble variety; 2. a non-criminal who enjoys a fight or free-for-

all combat; a ruffian." The following sentences are used to illustrate the verb *tumul*: "I'm wrapping up (going straight) after this bit (this prison sentence is completed). Ain't nothin' but headaches tumulin' around." A far cry from *mameloshn*, but certainly not without a charm of its own.

I am offering here a compilation of Yiddish words that have found their way into the American underworld. In their new Yankee garb, some will no doubt seem outlandish. But these are now American words, not unlike the innumerable Greek, Latin and French words that have, in time, acquired startlingly new English definitions.

I have retained the sometimes diverse spellings of the various dictionary editors. The original Yiddish has been checked out in Uriel Weinreich's (Max's son) *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary*, published by McGraw Hill and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

We begin with a word that has undergone no change; with meaning identical in Yiddish and English: *yold*. In Weinreich, it means a "chump, dupe, sucker." Lingo offers *yuld*: "a fool; a sucker; an easy mark." Slang gives us *yold*: "a gullible person, a dupe."

Yold, to my ears at least, is a clown of a word which seems to trip over its own feet, roll its eyes comically and then procede to tumble down the staircase. Small wonder that it has been adopted not only by denizens of the underworld but by numerous law-abiding citizens. So far, it is not found in standard dictionaries.

Eppes in Weinreich is "something, anything."

Partridge's addendum singles out a twist that is also present in the Yiddish: "eppus . . . implying either contempt or irony as in 'He is *eppes* an expert'"—meaning that "he is far from being one."

Lingo takes us a step further and comes up with "Eppis. Something of inconsequential value; practically nothing. 'You suckers go out tumuling (in strong arm work) and packing a heater (carrying a gun), so you get eppis for your end (share) and maybe a long bit (sentence).'"

Eppes, brought to the rackets by Yiddish speaking hoods, went on to achieve an identity of its own.

Shmek in Weinreich is obviously innocent of all wrongdoing, being merely "sniff, . . . whiff." *Shmek tabik* is "a pinch of snuff."

So what does *shmek* mean in Ameri-

can slang? Can we possibly *shmek* daisies, the aroma of coffee, an exotic perfume? No way, if we consult our three authorities.

Slang: "Shmeck; shmack; smack. *n.* Heroin, *Addict use*."

Partridge: "schmecken. *Narcotics*."

Lingo elaborates: "Schmeck. (Yiddish-American) *Narcotics*, especially powdered drugs in the form of snuff." Then: "Schmeck, on the. Under the influence of, or addicted to the use of narcotics." Naturally, this results in a "Schmecker. A snuffer of powdered drugs." The word is quite common on the street of New York; appears regularly on TV, in detective novels, and even news stories. Few users seem to know or care about its origin. While some Jews were active in the rackets—Mickey Cohen, who according to Ben Hecht was known as the Bookie Emperor of California; or Jacob Shapiro of Murder, Inc., ill fame; or Arnold Rothstein, a rackets general of the 1930s—narcotics was hardly a Jewish specialty. Yet a Yiddish name graces one of its major products.

Yiddish-speaking crooks were never much of a rarity. They can be found not only in real life but in books such as Isaak Babel's *Benya Krik Gangster*, Sholem Asch's *Motke the Thief*, and Joseph Opatoshu's *Romance of a Horse Thief*.

In Weinreich, *ganef* is simply "thief." Then: "*Ganeyve*; theft; larceny.

"*Ganeyvish*: thievish; sneaky, shift, furtive, stealthy."

This Yiddish word appears in all three of our slang dictionaries; it is nigh universal, as is the profession it defines.

Partridge: "gon(n)of(f): a thief . . . goniva: A stolen diamond, South African . . . via Hebrew *genavah*." Gonnof as a verb: "To wheedle out of, to cheat; also to steal, esp. by pick-pocketry . . . arch gonnof. 'The chief of a gang of thieves.'"

Lingo: "Goniff. (Yiddish American) 1. (Carnival) A fool; a chump. 2. A gangster; a thief. 'That lousy goniff put the glom on (borrowed and didn't return) my rod (gun).'"

Slang: "Goniff. *n.* A thief; a crook; one who, though not a professional thief, will take advantage of another when in a position to do so; an unethical businessman . . . Verb: to steal; to cheat; especially applied to petty thievery."

In its supplement of new words, Slang comes up with a surprise: "Gonif *n.* A homosexual."

Continued 19

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YIDDISH Continued

Kojak uses *gonef* from time to time; perhaps everyone does by now. The word, in all its forms, seems destined for immortality.

Weinreich has *kibitz* as kibitzing; *kibitzer* as kibitzer.

Kibitz, as we can see, is the same in Yiddish and standard English. So much so that Weinreich considers a definition superfluous. This, however, is not the case in *Lingo* which has: "Kibitzer. 1. A thief who attracts attention by superfluous movements and actions while at or near the scene of crime. 'That Kibitzer is poison. He'll get us all in a mopey jackpot (foolish trouble)'. 2. (P) A convict who makes a nuisance of himself by playing pranks, or by being jovial at the expense of others. 'I'm going to get a bug on (get angry) some day and dump (assault) that kibitzer.'"

Kibitzer, as defined by *Lingo*, could not easily be used in everyday speech or for that matter in fiction. Only a seasoned crook could understand its hidden meaning. Which is probably, all things considered, just as well.

Partridge: "kabitz, kibitz. *n.* Unwanted advice . . . kabitzer or kibitzer. 'One who volunteers advice and who endeavors to conduct another's affairs.'"

Slang: "Kibitz . . . To give unwanted advice or opinions; specifically to watch a card, chess, checkers, etc., game from behind a player while offering opinions and advice on the plays to be made; to offer advice or opinions to a team, coach or manager. *Orig.* A cardplaying term; common since c. 1935. From Hebrew 'kibutzi' = a member of a group."

In Yiddish, *zex* is simply the number six.

Lingo goes way out: "Zex. 1. (Jewish-American, variant of 'secks,' abbr. of six-to-five). The exclamation of warning of danger, or equivalent gesture or sound. 2. (Imperative) Look out! Danger! Police! Stop! . . . Zex-man. A lookout."

Slang does not attribute *zex* to Jewish-American. It offers: "Zex! interj. = Cheese it!"

Even the great Peretz would have trouble understanding this entry. I suspect the editors of *Lingo* got their numbers crossed. Whatever the case, this one has me beat — Partridge, too, probably, since he ignores *zex* com-



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pletely.

Shlep is another word that has travelled the globe in various guises.

Weinreich: "*shlep*. pull, jerk . . . *shlepper*, tramp, vagabond, hobo, bum . . . *shlepp zikh*. drag, trudge, stagger."

Slang: "Schlep. v.t. Drag, carry, tote, haul. *From the Yiddish*. n. A stupid or awkward person—per. n. One who is always looking for a bargain; one who always has something he wishes to sell; one who expects many small favors, free merchandise, gifts, or the like."

Lingo: "Shlepp, the. The act or profession of stealing packages from automobiles. 'They clipped (stole) a slum-peddler's (jewelry salesman's) turkey (satchel) full of ice (diamonds) on the shlepp.' Shlepp v. To operate *The Shlepp*. Shlepper. A professional thief engaged in the shlepp."

Partridge: "schleps, make the. To 'get the bundle.'"

Kosher is a word used by all three English compilers.

Lingo: "Kosher (Hebrew) Loyal; trustworthy; okay; right. 'Solly's strictly kosher himself but that ain't

saying this touch (robbery) he's got lined up is kosher.'"

Partridge: "kosher . . . Innocent, guiltless; irreproachable, clean . . . 'Listen, shamus, you got me wrong. I'm strictly kosher.'"

Slang: "Kosher . . . Honest; authentic; valid; ethical; fulfilling the minimum requirements of honesty or ethics."

Kosher's career has been predictable. Not so with *shamus*.

Partridge: "shamos. n. A detective; a cop."

Shamus is a word which has been used scores of times in tough-guy capers. It turns up in Raymond Chandler's 1939 *The Big Sleep*, private eye Philip Marlow's first book length appearance.

Here's what Partridge says in his addenda: "Shamos whence *shamus*, a (private) detective . . . the word could very well derive, via Yiddish, ex Hebrew *shamos*, with Classical pronunciation *shahmos* and colloquial pronunciation *shammus*. The *shamos* in a synagogue is an unpaid, unofficial

(though permitted) servant of the congregation; barely tolerated. In the U.S.A., as elsewhere, detectives are, by many people, regarded as useful, yet slightly contemptible." *Slang* gives approximately the same definition. Only who would believe it?

Lingo: "Finif (Yiddish-American) see Fin." *Fin* means five bucks. So how come *tsan* (10) and *fiftsan* (15) never made it?

Partridge: "goy n. and adj. A Gentile non-Jewish. 'The mob's strictly goy, see.' . . . Goy. Hobo who can work the Jewish agencies."

The latter definition caught my fancy. Do the Jewish agencies know about this? Does anyone?

Shmeern in Weinreich is "to smear grease, lubricate."

Lingo: "Schmear, n. 1. A bribe. 2. Mollifying talk or flattery. 'Give the rat (informant) the schmear till we can cop a heel on him (beat him up).'

"Schmear v. To bribe. 'Schmear. He's a businessman (he'll do business with crooks).' 2. To flatter: mollify.

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'Schmear the screw (guard). Maybe we can get him to pull off (withdraw) Harry's pinch (report against Harry).'"

Slang has essentially the same definition.

There is no *shlub* in Yiddish but there is *zhlub* which means essentially the same thing.

Weinreich: "Zhlub. yokel, hick, boor."

Lingo: "Shlub (Yiddish-American) A dolt; a fool."

Slang has combined *shlumperdik*—which Weinreich translates as "dowdy"—with *zhlub* to come up with: "schloomp; schlump; schlub. n. A foolish, stupid, or unknowing person; a jerk. v.i. To idle; to waste time; to relax . . . Adj. second rate, inferior"—which, by any other name, is still a *zhlub*. And not necessarily Jewish.

Slang: "Shmeikle v.t. To swindle, to con, to fast-talk. From the Yiddish!"

Uh-uh. Not from the Yiddish, all my learned friends agree. This word appears neither in Weinreich nor Alexander Harkavy's 1928 *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, published by Hebrew Publishing Company in New York. It is not to be found in Nahum Stutchkoff's *Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language* published in 1950 by YIVO. I have never run across it in English despite my extensive readings in tough-guy detective literature. The entry, while attributed to the American underworld, is absent from Lingo and Partridge, as well as Berrey and Van Den Bark's *The American Thesaurus of Slang* published by T. Y. Crowell in 1943. Does *Slang* mean *shmaykhl*, which is Yiddish for smile? Presumably, a con man would be smiling a good deal while trying to bilk his victim—then again maybe not.

What kind of essay would this be without at least one nomination for a Yiddish word worthy of inclusion in underworld lingo—or, for that matter, in standard American English? It is the fourth word in the fourth line of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimple the Fool*, Yiddish edition, published by CYCO in 1963.

Weinreich defines it as dummy or yokel—words whose Yiddish synonyms we have already encountered. But this one has more kick to it, and so I take my leave with it:

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THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

The message of the Princeton Conference

Under the sponsorship of the joint Bicentennial Committee of B'nai B'rith and B'nai B'rith Women, and in cooperation with the Program Department, an unusual conference took place a few weeks ago in Princeton, N.J. The atmosphere and the surroundings were delightful. More than 100 scholars, leaders and staff members gathered for three days to discuss "The Unfinished Agenda" for the American and the Jewish communities.

Leon Jick, Director of Brandeis University's Lown Graduate School of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Chairman of B'nai B'rith's National Program Committee, observed that our Princeton Conference constituted "an outstanding example of leadership education—which is today the most desperately needed kind of adult education in the Jewish community." Proof of the rightness of his remark came in the unanimous enthusiasm generated among the leaders who participated. Led by Philip Klutznick, B'nai B'rith's Honorary President, who played a decisive role as Conference Chairman, they included Mrs. Louis Kash—the newly elected President of B'nai B'rith Women, Maurice Weinstein—founder and former Chairman of B'nai B'rith's Commission on Adult Jewish Education, as well as Board of Governors members, Commission Chairmen, District Officers, and alumni of B'nai B'rith Institutes of Judaism.

B'nai B'rith, Professor Jick said, long ago completed its first business of Americanization and charitable activities; over the decades, the organization has demonstrated its ability to meet the challenges of a fast-changing community—taking on in turn, as needs arose, the struggle against antisemitism, the Jewish education of youth and adults, the defense of Israel's right to exist, the interrelatedness of Jews the world over. Professor Salo Baron, the leading Jewish historian of our generation to whom I presented the President's Medal, also praised B'nai B'rith for its fearless pioneering of areas of service and activity and its latent power to update

its priorities and re-focus its resources on pressing contemporary issues.

But praise for our potential strength is not enough: Many delegates felt that if B'nai B'rith is to implement the fresh perspectives and priorities spelled out at the Conference, we will have to refuel and re-energize many of our activities, cast away some of the less useful things we are doing, and pioneer in new fields vital to the continuity and survival of the Jewish people.

It is interesting to observe that both the B'nai B'rith leaders and the outsiders (that is, leaders of Jewish organizations and scholars), while paying tribute to B'nai B'rith, joined in our feeling that there are many things B'nai B'rith ought to stress more than it does at present. Here is a selection of opinions that emerged in the course of the three days of pleasurable intensive discussions.

Everyone agreed that Jewish education was the area of top urgency. A key question: Should we re-examine our stand on Federal aid to day schools? Should B'nai B'rith not become more involved in pressing for more quality in Jewish education; for greater support of Jewish education by Federations; for elevating the economic status of Jewish teachers?

Out of one discussion group came the suggestion that BBYO, AJE and Hillel should each appoint Commission subcommittees to analyze the problems and potentials affecting education for their respective constituencies; those subcommittees should then have a joint meeting to come up with programming recommendations to enhance the totality of Jewish education and B'nai B'rith's role in making that possible.

"This joint meeting could even be an instrumentality for creating," said one participant, "a B'nai B'rith Department of Jewish Education that would involve itself in every aspect of Jewish education in the communities."

There was at the same time universal concern for B'nai B'rith's internal structure and operations. Reference was made to the needs of new Jewish constituencies available to B'nai B'rith as members if the organization would

develop special programs for them—e.g., singles (non-married, divorced, widowed); younger family groups; members of "buffer generation"—50s to 60s—caught between dependent adult children and dependent parents; older persons. A related recommendation was that B'nai B'rith should sponsor a demographic study that would identify the new constituencies and those of their needs not presently being met in the Jewish community.

Many of the participants commented favorably on B'nai B'rith's effort on behalf of senior citizens. Three departments today work in this field: the Senior Citizens Housing Committee, the Program Department, and the Community and Volunteer Services Department. A suggestion was made that a Department of Senior Citizens be created by B'nai B'rith to cater to the needs of older members and to pull together and strengthen the various activities now being sponsored by several agencies. By expanding its offerings in this area, B'nai B'rith could make a greater impact on the needs of an aging Jewish population in the United States and elsewhere.

"Should B'nai B'rith take a more active part in the political arena than it does even now?" asked one participant. True, B'nai B'rith takes no position in favor of candidates for political office, but we are not neutral on issues, domestic and foreign, especially those that affect the welfare and security of the Jewish people.

Much more emerged from the Conference that I could report. But let me add one more: In view of the fact that the Conference demonstrated the ability of scholars and lay leaders to work together, there is great validity to the suggestion made by Philip Klutznick that top-level Jewish intellectuals and men of affairs be involved as consultants and as partners in B'nai B'rith activities and decision-making.

The Princeton Conference was the first conference of its kind that we have sponsored. I hope that it is the first of many such exciting experiences.

David M. Blumberg