

YIDDISH

Now and Then

by ISIDORE HAIBLUM



I. Haiblum and his parents — then.

Ten years have scuttled by since I climbed into my winter overcoat, put on my Yiddish hat and trudged off in the Manhattan snows to catch Isaac Bashevis Singer holding forth in Yiddish, no less, for a group of young people called Yugntruf. I wrote an article about that experience — “Yiddish Buffs Have a Bash” — and published it in this very magazine. But my second to last paragraph was cut; there was no space for it.

It went something like this:

I had left my seat a few minutes early in order to avoid the traditional stampede for the exit. As I was passing through the doorway I nodded casually at the middle-aged woman who had been collecting tickets. She was a total stranger, of course. Without batting an eye she looked at me sternly and demanded, “So *nu*, when are you getting married?”

I can still see her now, this lady on whom I had never laid eyes before, asking me a question which actually made me blush. I felt guilty, you see. The community had a *right* to know why I was remiss in this important matter. And in the world in which I grew up, any individual at all could represent the community. And usually did.

Even in those days we called them *nudnicks*. But we worried about them nonetheless. They represented the age old shtetl custom of fretting about, and even spying on, your neighbor, lest some indiscretion bring divine punishment raining down on the whole town.

The thing is, I was born and brought up in Brooklyn, New York, not *Yumpsk*. But this communal custom was still alive and kicking then in Yiddish speaking enclaves. And as recently as ten years ago, holding its own.

Only now does it show some signs of giving up the ghost. And frankly, I have already begun to miss it — even before it has entirely expired. Although not as much as one might suspect.

Every culture has its assets and liabilities. And to my way of thinking this particular aspect of Yiddishland is not one of its crowning glories. But its imminent demise has set me to brooding about the rest of the culture.

Various learned experts have, of course, been predicting the expiration of Yiddish for a hundred years now. Abe Cahan, longtime editor of the *Daily Forverts*, saw Yiddish dead and buried by 1933! But as Singer pointed out ten years ago, “In Jewish life it’s a long way between being sick and dead.” No one, however, could call the changes I’ve witnessed in the world of Yiddish during my lifetime especially heartening.

I was born in the mid-thirties. And as far as I knew, the whole of America spoke Yiddish, or at least, most of Brooklyn. My parents, who were fluent in four languages, with a smattering of two others thrown in for good measure, spoke *only* Yiddish to me. Among my earliest recollections is hearing my father sing part of the Chorale from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony to me in Yiddish.

My mother taught me a ditty which turned out to be another Beethoven opus — from his Sixth Symphony this time. The words, naturally enough, were by the early Yiddish poet, S. Frug.

If nothing else, my parents were determined. They were both Yiddishists, that is, folks who believe that the Jewish people were a nation and that their

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language should be — what else? — Yiddish.

Not all Jews, it should be noted, shared this startling notion. The assimilationists wanted to be taken for natives in whatever country they happened to reside. Most Zionists, as a rule, favored Hebrew. And a majority of American Jews — like most majorities — left these weighty issues to the experts. But my parents were hardly cranks. They had lots of company on the Yiddish side of the street.

The Yiddish press and periodicals in America had a combined circulation of 775,000 and because Jews marry a lot, were probably read by close to double that number. This was still the golden age of Yiddish literature and Yiddish books were doing a boom business. About a thousand were published each year, and all were available in the U.S. In New York alone, there were twelve full-time Yiddish theaters.

Growing up, I took Yiddish for granted. The relatives and friends who regularly filled our living room made small fuss over our shared linguistic heritage, which in their hands seemed to be a vehicle mainly for gossip and discussions about food, illness, wages

and the war. No one got up on a soap box to demand a Yiddish nation. In our living room it wouldn't have done much good anyway. The point is: Being Yiddish did not necessarily make one a Yiddishist.

The *Daily Forverts*, for instance, was the largest Yiddish newspaper in the world, with a quarter of a million circulation at its peak in 1914. It advocated Americanization, which meant — sooner or later — disposing of Yiddish. But while it praised the virtues of American culture in its editorial pages and flooded its news columns with “helpful” English words, the *Forverts* also ran serialized novels, poems, essays and short stories by some of the most gifted Yiddish writers of the day, enhancing Yiddish culture no end. Both Israel Joshua Singer (*The Brothers Ashkenazi*) and later, his younger brother, Isaac Bashevis Singer, worked for the *Forverts*. Neither were Yiddishists.

Among the thousand Yiddish books published annually were novels by the likes of Sholem Asch or Joseph Opatoshu, poems, essays and short stories by such luminaries as H. Leivick, Abraham Reisen, Mani Leib, Jacob Glatstein, and plays by David Pinsky or Peretz Hirschbein. These authors — and many of their colleagues — who used their considerable talents on behalf of their own people, would have graced the literary landscape of any nation. They were of world stature, but belonged to us.

All this was relatively new.

Modern Yiddish literature first ap-



Sholem Asch, popular Yiddish novelist, as depicted on a Russian postcard.

Forverts readers from a Yiddish production of *Awake and Sing* by Clifford Odets.



Billy Rose Theatre Collection The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center

peared on the scene in 1862, ushered in by the satirical pen of Mendele Mokher Sforim (“Mendele the Bookseller”). Mendele was joined by Y.L. Peretz, with his folk-like art tales, and Sholem Aleichem, the grand wizard of Yiddish laughter.

Then came the stampede.

Literary movements from around the globe sprang up, pell-mell, in Yiddish letters — especially poetry. It made for a heady literary stew, one served up in dozens of countries — and helped unite Jews in a common culture. In those days — the early decades of this century — both the Yiddish writer and his audience were young. They were still fairly spry by the mid-thirties.

The Yiddish theater, too, was a going concern. Sparked by a phalanx of diverse artists — the hyper-charged Maurice Schwartz, the subtle and sensitive Jacob Ben Ami, the electrifying whirlwind that was Molly Picon, Menashe Skulnik, king of the comic *shleppers*, Sarah Adler, her majesty of the Yiddish stage — the Yiddish theater touched all the bases:

The pro-Communist Artef brought Stanislavsky’s derring-do to the Yiddish stage. Its avant-garde productions attracted a host of English-speaking intellectuals, among them Elia Kazan and Clifford Odets.

The Yiddish Art Theater under Schwartz was a blazing comet: it ran some of the grandest of Yiddish and non-Jewish plays in productions which shook the rafters.

And the low-brow musicals of comic Aaron Lebedev set whole generations of Yiddish theatergoers roaring with laughter.

Yiddish movies too were in vogue, and a small number of fine ones were made — all on shoe string budgets. Many of these, including *Greene-felder*, *Tevya* and *The Dybbuk*, can still be seen today.

This was the Yiddish world bubbling around me. The Yiddish theater was already having trouble making ends meet. Most Yiddish writers saw scant profits from their books. And the Yiddish press was drawing its readers and writers almost exclusively from the immigrant generation — a condition which augured ill for the future. But I was only a kid and knew none of this.

My parents were not especially political. They wore a number of Jewish hats. Both supported the idea of Israel. And my mother was an active, lifelong member of Pioneer Women/Na’amat. (This English-Yiddish magazine — almost all Yiddish then — always found a niche in our home.)

But my parents also went along, I think, with Yiddish philosopher Chaim Zhitlofsky, who dreamed of a secular Yiddish nation living in the midst of other nations. Zhitlofsky wrote books, articles, and gave fiery speeches extolling this fine if somewhat impractical idea. A kingpin of the famed 1908 Czernowitz Conference (Y.L. Peretz was another) which first declared Yiddish a national language, he was the



Founders of YIVO outside the original, yet to be completed, building in Vilna, 1929. Zalman Reizen, far right, Dr. H. Zhitlovsky, 3rd from right, and Dr. Max Weinreich, 5th from right.

busiest and foremost exponent of Yiddishism.

Yiddishism, incidentally, should never be confused with its bitter rival, Yiddishkayt. The latter refers to the Jewish religious tradition espoused by, say, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The former is ardently secular and its adherents can probably take credit for the majority of novels, plays, short stories, poems and journalism produced in Yiddish.

Religious Jews have been known to sit *shivah* for an offspring who strayed into the Yiddishist camp. Isaac Bashevis Singer (not a Yiddishist himself) has said: "[My becoming a writer] was a great shock to [my parents] . . . They believed all the secular [Yiddish] writers to be heretics, all unbelievers — they really were too, most of them."

The thirties were a time of rampant *isms*, and Yiddishism was often promoted as part of a larger *ism*. While most such parties made their biggest splash in Europe, their *isms* all drifted across the Atlantic and caused a ripple here too. It made for lively doings, for these groups usually despised one another.

The Jewish Workers Bund operated mostly out of Poland at this time. They were anti-Zionist socialists who sought a world in which every ethnic group could pursue its own traditions regardless of national boundaries. Yiddish, the language of the Jewish workingman, was their choice for Jews. In the

Soviet Union, Lenin sent the Bund packing early in the game and exiled its leaders.

The Jewish Communists and their coterie of fellow travelers held Yiddish to be the Jewish national language. In 1934, the U.S.S.R. proclaimed Biro-Bidzhan in eastern Siberia a Jewish autonomous region. The project met with a deservedly chilly reception. The few Jews who did migrate soon found that they had scant control over their lives, cultural or otherwise. Most fled. The Hitler-Stalin peace pact of 1939 all but sank the movement abroad.

The Yiddish Territorialists wanted a state almost anywhere except

Palestine. It was their contention that Arabs would not take kindly to Jews in their midst. The Territorialists (there was more than one group) tried to procure land for settlement in various countries, Uganda among them. They met with no success.

Such were some of the political groups wrestling for the Yiddish soul.

More important for Yiddish, from the vantage point of the eighties, was the YIVO — Yiddish Scientific Institute. YIVO, devoted to Yiddish scholarship, put Yiddish on the world's academic map, and helped make it respectable.

In a time when Isaac Singer wins the Nobel Prize for literature, Leo Rosten and Irving Howe both land on the best seller charts with books about Yiddish, and Oxford University actually offers a series of courses in and about Yiddish, making Yiddish respectable may seem a bit redundant. But even today there are well-meaning folks who look askance at Yiddish, consider it a disreputable jargon.

This discredited notion dates back to the Haskalah. The 18th century Jewish enlightenment movement worked wonders in educating the Jewish masses, but made a few blunders too.

Haskalah teachers were wont to violently denounce Yiddish as a "barbarous tongue," and a barrier to worldly education; they exhorted Jews to speak the language of their adopted countries. Moses Mendelssohn, the German philosopher, was a Haskalah leader and a Jew. His grandson, the composer, Felix Mendelssohn, was a Christian. The movement became sort of assimilationist toward the end and lost a number of adherents to other faiths and cultures. But its view of Yiddish as

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This year, the Workmen's Circle held its 50th Jubilee "third seder," conducted almost totally in Yiddish. Guests are shown listening to the student's choir.



Lithograph by Moshe Pereg

"The State of Israel...will be based on freedom, justice and peace
as envisaged by the prophets of Israel" From the Israel Declaration of Independence, May 14, 1948.

"מדינת ישראל...תהא מושתתה על יסודות החירות, הצדק והשלום לאור חזונם של נביאי ישראל"
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AROUND THE COUNTRY



Grandmothers, mothers and children attended the first Mother-Child luncheon of the Shoshonna Club in Omaha, Nebraska. The event, featuring clowns and other entertainment, focused on the ties between children and parents, while emphasizing the importance of Spiritual Adoption. Next year, they plan to include fathers. From left: Chairwomen Edith Rogert and Roz Ulmer.



This proud Pioneer Women/Na'amat family has four generations of Life Members! They are: great-grandmothers Jennie Spector and Faigel Gendelman, grandmother Esther Spector, mother Sari Caplan and 6-month-old Lindsey Beth Caplan.



There was a large San Diego Council turnout at the United Jewish Federation Super Sunday fundraiser attended by over 3000 people. Many visited the Pioneer Women/Na'amat booth and were invited to join. From left: Lillian Chester, Madeline Schwartzman, Rose Rapkin, Harriet Meerson, Ann Stein, chairwoman Sally Sieve and Dora Bernstein.



Boston holds successful Spiritual Adoption luncheon. From left, seated: Dorothy Levy, co-chairwoman Ida Michelson, Anne Tenofsky and Miriam Kertzman, guest speaker and director of Stride Rite Day Care Center in Boston. Second row: co-chairwoman Anita Oberman, Lillian Kantor. Third row: Adele Epstein, Shlomo Gur, Consul of Israel in Boston, and Judith Spivack.



Long Beach-South Coast Council holds their most successful fundraiser to date aboard the beautiful Princess Louise Ship Restaurant in San Pedro, Ca. From left: Lenore Mitnick, Council president; Channi Palti, Deputy Consul General of Israel for the Western states; Rebecca Hornstein, chairwoman, and Helen Kloppe, co-chairwoman.

Maury Grabel assumes post as Public Relations Director

Maury Grabel has recently joined the staff of Pioneer Women/Na'amat as Public Relations Director. She will provide assistance to Public Relations chairwomen and coordinate national publicity with Richard Cohen Associates, a public relations agency, which has been working with the organization since the 1981 convention.

Prior to her appointment, Ms. Grabel worked in the public relations department of the Jewish Association for Services for the Aged, a social service agency for the elderly in New York City. As a freelance writer, she has written on women and education in the Jewish community.

Ms. Grabel received a Bachelor of Arts in English from SUNY at Albany and a masters degree in Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary. She studied for a year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

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some kind of evil rubbed off on future generations.

YIVO, which was founded in Vilna in 1925, helped alter the attitude. Along with its co-founder, the world-renowned linguist, Dr. Max Weinreich, YIVO held that Yiddish — the language and culture — was the very highest achievement of Ashkenazic Jewry. From the start, YIVO was abuzz with scholarly projects delving into the assorted marvels of Yiddish. YIVO had sections on philology, history, economics, psychology and education; it sponsored studies, published journals, held conferences and trained future scholars. Its main headquarters was Vilna (then Poland), but it had a small branch in New York and its influence was worldwide.

The Workmen's Circle (Arbeter Ring) — in the thirties harboring a socialist-cosmopolitan outlook — engaged in numerous Yiddish cultural activities which included afternoon grade and high school Yiddish classes, a summer camp, concerts, lectures and journals in Yiddish. The "Farband" (Socialist-Zionist) and the left-wing Jewish People's Fraternal Order worked the same side of the street, only on a smaller scale. The Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute pitched in with Yiddish classes too.

The prospects of a Jewish state in

Palestine in the mid-thirties were nothing to brag about. A large scale revival of Hebrew seemed little better than a pipe dream. And even if some venerable Yiddish institutions were starting to show signs of wear and tear, there were still eleven million Yiddish speakers throughout the world.

Today there are only about three million left — and a good deal of these stalwarts can neither read nor write the language. Among the half million Hasidim kicking around, Yiddish is widespread, but most view its secular achievements with disdain; they have little to do with modern Yiddish culture, which they consider basically wicked.

There are no dailies left in the United States. The *Tog Morgn-Zhurnal* folded in December, 1971; some of its staff formed the weekly *Algemeiner Journal*, which has a mostly religious orientation. The one-time Stalinist *Morgn Freiheit* became a weekly in June, 1981. And as of February 1983, the largest and oldest Yiddish daily, the *Forverts* — founded in 1897 — turned weekly. Its circulation has shrunk to 20,000.

About one hundred Yiddish books are published annually worldwide — no mean trick. These include reprints of classics, scholarly studies, novels, poetry and memoirs. The audience for such books is small, and many a Yiddish author spends a good deal of time praying for a decent translation into some other, more profitable, language.

Three Yiddish theater companies pop up sporadically in New York. They cater to a middle-aged and elderly crowd of Yiddish speakers and a growing number of young people who keep asking their neighbors what's happening on stage. Whether this latter development is a cause for rejoicing still remains to be seen.

All in all, around 70 Yiddish periodicals are published around the world. *Di Goldene Keyt*, put out in Israel by the Histadrut, is a sort of *New Yorker*, *Partisan Review* and *New York Review of Books* rolled into one. *Sovetish Heymland* hails from the Soviet Union and *Der Tsukunft*, dating from 1892, is published in New York by the World Congress for Yiddish Culture.

The Workmen's Circle is these days the most active supporter of Yiddish among Jewish fraternal organizations. They are currently celebrating the 65th anniversary of the Workmen's Circle schools. Most of their other activities, including concerts, journals, theater and lectures, are still going strong.

One hundred and twenty-eight children's schools taught some Yiddish

around the country in 1980; possibly a dozen were strictly secular.

Over sixty colleges offer Yiddish courses in the U.S., including Columbia University and Queens College, a rise of about 25 over the last five years. Canada and Mexico, it should be noted, have surprisingly vast Yiddish school networks.

The World Congress for Yiddish Culture, launched in the mid-forties — whose ambitious plans to promote Yiddish were undermined by lack of financial support and backing by the Jewish establishment — currently finds, to its dismay, both funds and younger members in short supply. As does — for other reasons — YKUF (Yiddisher Kultur Farband), its left wing rival. Both gamely persist in their course.

YIVO, since 1955, has been the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Still the leader in Yiddish scholarship, YIVO carries on with numerous academic and cultural projects. Its graduates form the backbone of Yiddish studies in the nation's colleges.

The recently established League for Yiddish, headed up by Yiddish linguist Mordkhe Schaechter, continues to attract enthusiasts, both young and old, who view Yiddish as an ongoing, living culture.

Yugnturf, our group of young Yiddish activists, also continues in fine fettle, publishing a journal, meeting monthly for Yiddish gab-fests and gathering for annual conventions.

Like the five-cent cigar, dime subway fare and fifteen-cent shoe shine, Yiddish, as a mass secular culture, is a thing of the past. But Yiddish buffs the world over still battle the odds. And in their hearts, the flame of Yiddish burns as brightly as ever. It does in mine. ■

Isidore Haiblum is a novelist living in New York. He has published eight books over the last decade, and has written numerous articles about Yiddish, humor and popular culture for a variety of magazines.

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