

## FROM "DAYTCHMERISH" TO YIDDISH IN AMERICA\*

Leon Kobrin

"From Daytchmerish to Yiddish and to Yiddish literature in America"—to get some sense of the transformation, one must take a little stroll, a stroll back into the past of roughly fifty years ago. To one who, like me, has himself travelled that very road, this fifty-year journey does not seem a very long one; indeed, no more than a stride, even less than a stride. We no more than close our eyes, open them again, and we have made a leap of fifty years and there we are, reading a Yiddish newspaper.

And the newspaper is an issue of the old-time *Yudishe gazeten* (January 20, 1892), the most popular Yiddish newspaper in America. What we read there is a piece of Jewish news in the following language and spelling:<sup>2</sup>

In Robert Fulermans djuleri-stor ist herayn gekommen a fayngekleynetet yungerman, als Fulermans froye ist aleyn in stor geven, und hob ferlangt, men zol ihm ohringe tsaygn. Die froye hot ihm tsvay por thayere ohringe getsaygt, velkhe er hot gut betrakhtet, und er hot dan ferlangh, zie zol ihm die drite por tsaygn, velkhe es ist gelegen in shoy vinde . . .

We discard the news and try to read the short story ("Nit umzonst gerart"), which appeared in that issue:

Und oykh Bergmans tokhter ist es nikht besser gegangen. Mit trenn in die oagn und mit ferbrokhene hent hut zie gemuzt ihr gelibten dem letstn opsheyd kuss geben, zonst volten ihm die russihe zhandarmen mit koved godel in a shvartzer karete dorthin avekgefihrt, fon vanen keyner iz nokh nikht tsurik gekomen . . .

There is also an installment of a novel, "Dos poylishe meydel, oder die leydi fun hester strit." We read as follows:

Ikh habe ayne froye und kinder. Mayne froye ist shon ayne eltere perzon un zi hote dis leben alzaytig mitgemakht und hate

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In such a manner and language, liberally sprinkled with commas, did the writers of the *Yudishe gazeten* write in those days. They wrote in that weird Germanized language in which the old-time Jewish doctor—and some Jewish doctors today—addressed their patients to impress them with the fact that he belonged to a higher order of mankind. In general, pseudo-Germanized Yiddish was then a sign of refined taste, of a cultured taste, so to speak. One needs only to remind oneself of the language of the old-time Yiddish letters that Jewish boys and girls—and ordinary Jewish women of a certain type—used to write when they wanted to demonstrate their “modernity” and education.

Even our great poet Morris Rosenfeld sang in such fashion in those days. In a poem of his, “Der skelet,” which appeared in 1892, we read such language as:

“Es hot mikh ergrifn a shoyder,  
Als ikh hob zayn otlits derzehn”

And further on:

“Zayn oyszehn var gvaldig”

In those days only one writer in the *Yudishe gazeten* wrote a good Yiddish—the Lithuanian Getsl Zelikovitch, the “Lithuanian Philosopher.” He always had a sound feeling for Yiddish, and he was the only Yiddish writer who did not Deutschify.

On the Yiddish stage of the day they also Deutschified. There was no “moon” for the Yiddish actor, only a “mond,” no “sun,” only a “zonne,” no “only” except “zondern,” no “mouth” but “mund,” no “kisses” but “kussen,” no “and” but “und,” no “of” but “fon,” no “large but” “gros,” no “was” but “var,” no “song and dance” but “gezenge und tentse.”

They “mondified” and “zonnedified” and “niekhtefied” and “zonderified” and “kussified” and “geshterbified” when they played “Ayne grosse maysterverk, mit mershe, gezenge und tense” by Professor Hurvits or by Joseph Latayner.

And why did they Deutschify so on the stage and in the press? First, because to Deutschify was a sign of refined taste among the writers of the *Yudishe gazeten*—since they all belonged to the type of old-time Maskil—as it was also among the major playwrights of the Yiddish stage, and both intended by their “German” to beautify the Yiddish language. Second, since the Yiddish readers and theater-

goers came from various countries and spoke various dialects and forms of Yiddish—Lithuanian and Polish, Volhymian and Galician and Hungarian—the Yiddish press and stage, to avoid giving preference to the Yiddish of one group and thereby antagonizing the others—took to German, both a “better language” and—what Jew does not understand German? Thus all readers and theater-goers would remain content.

Incidentally, Yoel Entin tells me that such was the reason Professor Hurvits gave him why his characters spoke German—because there are so many Yiddish dialects, the only solution is German. The same Professor Hurvits gave me a different explanation for the German dialogue of his plays. Speaking of [Jacob] Gordin and the other “literatn,” as Hurvits used to call us, the Yiddish literateurs who wrote plays for the Yiddish stage, he said roughly as follows:

Gordin and you, the other literatooters, have turned the Yiddish stage into a hog market. Your actors speak as they do on Hester Street. In my plays only the comedian speaks that way, and then only when he is playing a melamed, a shammes, an idle incompetent, or some other kind of clown. The others, however, always speak as cultured people do. My aim is always to refine the language, while Gordin and you other literatooters would even have Hamlet speak Hester Street lingo.

I remember that even several years later, when I once protested to a famous star that he was Deutschifying his role in a play of mine in which he was appearing, he replied:

“Akh. Leave off. Do you really think that when I’m playing the part of a cultured man I ought to speak like every Tom, Dick, and Harry?” And I remember that he added: “And you really ought to understand that an artist must always use a more refined language on the stage.” To use a more refined language meant to Deutschify. Ideals and business, as you see, went arm in arm.

Who knows what sort of Yiddish language we would have today and what the Yiddish press would look like, if it had not been for the Jewish radicals and their press and the Jewish labor movement.

Who were they, these Jewish radicals who, singlehanded, created a press that began to speak a *Yiddish* Yiddish and who laid the foundation for our present quality Yiddish literature? And did they originally intend such an achievement?

They were a small group of young men, intellectuals and revolutionaries, who had left Russia in the 1890s, after the pogroms, and came here with a pack of lovely ideals such as founding communist colonies, etc. These young men spoke Russian among themselves

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and at their meetings, and they knew little and cared less about Yiddish or more properly “jargonic” literature. These young men, *precisely because they thought little of Yiddish and did not believe in its survival in America* (according to the prophecies of Philip Krantz and others which I myself happened to hear, Yiddish should long ago have died)—for this very reason they were destined to lay the cornerstone of a Yiddish press that began to speak a *Yiddish Yiddish* and for a Yiddish literature of quality in America.

Why? Because the Yiddish “jargon,” as they called it, was of such little value in their eyes that it never even occurred to them to try to “improve” it and “refine” it in the manner of the *Yudishe Gazeten* or of the contemporary stage. *It was simply not worth the bother.* Had there been a Jewish audience that could read Russian, they would have become writers and publishers of Russian newspapers. Some of them did in fact found Russian-language papers, like Leon Bandess and his brother Louis Miller and their socialist *Znamia* or Yitzkhok Isaac Hurwitz and Jacob Gordin, who later founded the Russian paper *Progress*. But these Russian newspapers had had more writers than readers and fewer days than either.

There were no readers for a socialist newspaper in Russia, and since the ideal of socialism had to be disseminated among Jews, they began to think about an organ in the “jargon” of the Jewish masses. And when such a newspaper did appear, the socialist writers were especially mindful of speaking all the more simply and understandably to the masses, that is, a really jargonic “jargon” so that the worker would be sure to understand. What these writers intended above all was, of course, propaganda—to disseminate their socialist ideal and to create a labor movement for the American Jewish workers. “Respectable” German was used by these writers and socialist agitators only when they could find no suitable expression in the Yiddish “jargon.” Because of this dearth of expressions, they borrowed from German such expressions as “Fareynikte Yidishe geverkschaften,” “genose,” “anshoyung,” and other such essentially German words. But in general they strove to write simple Yiddish.

The first of these immigrant socialists who began to write a true Yiddish was Abraham Cahan. As early as 1886, he and a friend, Rayevski (later Dr. Rayevski), attempted to put out a newspaper written in real Yiddish. (In those days he was a different Cohan, a builder in our Jewish world here rather than a spoiler and destroyer, as he is today and as he has been for the past several decades.)<sup>3</sup> The name of Cohan’s paper was *Di naye tsayt*. It was a four-page paper and lasted barely two months. The financial backer of the paper was his friend Rayevski, who worked in a soap factory, where

he earned five or six dollars a week, and this was the “capital” that he invested almost entirely in the paper. The first issue appeared on Shvues and the editorial was titled “Shvues un sotsialismus.”

In the journal issued on the occasion of Cohan’s fiftieth jubilee, Alexander Harkavy recalls that when *Di naye tsayt* appeared, everyone was surprised that the articles were written in a simple Yiddish, “since in these days one did not write Yiddish but a Germanized prose and it rarely occurred to anyone that one could write in the simple language that one’s mother spoke.”

Following Cahan’s paper, *Di nyu-yorker yidishe folks-tsaytung* spoke Yiddish, too. This newspaper also began to appear in 1886 like *Di naye tsayt*. It lived for three and a half years and was edited by Moses Mintz (later Dr. Mintz) and Abraham Breslavski (later Dr. Breslow and the father of the opera singer Sophia Breslow).

The paper was a non-partisan labor paper. Every line in it, like every line in Cohan’s paper, proclaimed the pious intention of the writers to enlighten and educate the Jewish masses, especially the Jewish worker. It ran articles on various branches of science, theoretical articles on socialism as well as “Wages, Labor and Capital” by Karl Marx.

One could have called the language of this newspaper “Yiddish” in comparison with the language of such writers as those who wrote for the *Yudishe gazeten* or the language of the Yiddish stages of the day, but not in comparison to the Yiddish of *Di naye tsayt*. Since the aim of the writers of this paper was primarily propaganda and enlightenment, they had a different attitude to “zhargin” from that of others of their circle: they also wanted to “refine” and “elevate” it after their fashion. Incidentally, this paper also printed the first workers’ poems of Morris Rosenfeld.

The newspaper *Der folks-advokat*, which began to appear two years later, in 1888, wrote a much better Yiddish. It was also friendly to labor and was published by Michael Mintz (Madam [Keni] Liptzin’s husband) and a certain Broida. It contained a better Yiddish because the editor of the paper was Getsl Zelikovich, a writer with a sensitive feeling for the Yiddish language, and because it included among its regular contributors Abraham Cohan and Dr. H. Zolotarov—writers whose major purpose was to “enlighten and educate” their readers and who therefore wrote, in Harkavy’s words, as “mother spoke.”

Some time later, the publishers of the *Folks-advokat* began to publish a daily paper, the *Yidisher herold*, out of which grew, years later, in 1905, Miller’s *Di varhayt*. The *Herold*’s contributors included not only writers who strove to refine “zhargen” with Germanic

bombast, like Bukanski (pseudonym, Ben Poyoes), who was for years its editor, editorial writer, and novelist, but also such writers as the Jewish anarchist Mr. Katz (pseudonym, Ben Omoyz), who wrote an excellent Yiddish, since, like the other revolutionaries, his aim was primarily propaganda. The other writers of the *Yidisher herold* like Hermalin and Yohan [John] Paley—later the very fine editor of the *Tageblatt* (an able journalist “but too” bombastic)—they also Deutschified along in their writing. The language of the *Yidisher herold* at the time was thus both *daytshmerish* and Yiddish.

I shall skip the other Yiddish newspapers that appeared briefly in those days, like the anarchist *Varhayt*, for example, which began in 1889 and lasted five months or the anarchist *Morgenshtern*, which Ephraim London (Meyer London’s father) put out in 1890 and which lasted for 23 numbers. I shall pause on two newspapers—both propaganda papers—that, by their Yiddish Yiddish, finally drove the German out of the other Yiddish papers. These two were *Di arbeter tsaytung* and the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. Both represent the beginning of Yiddish literature in America. *Di arbeter tsaytung* was published by the Jewish social democrats and the *Fraye arbeter shtime* by the Jewish anarchists.

The *Arbeter tsaytung* was more successful than the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. Its contributors were better and livelier writers (Abraham Cohan, Louis Miller, M. Zametkin, Morris Hilkovitz—later Hillquit—and, after a time, B. Faygenboym, Jacob Gordin, Morris Winchevski, Jacob Milch). It was edited by a more experienced journalist, Philip Krantz (Yakov Rambro), who was known among the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia because he had been a contributor to the Russian-Jewish journals *Razvet* and *Voskhod*.

The Yiddish of the *Arbeter tsaytung* was for its day both pure and light. Only if a writer contributed a theoretical article was he sometimes forced by necessity to borrow from the German. As an example of the Yiddish of the *Arbeter tsaytung* let me quote some lines from a Jacob Gordin story that appeared there in 1892, that is, at the same time that the writers of the *Yudishe gazeten* were so hoch-Deutschifying:

Mayne yesurim, shrek, bizyoynes and hartsveytik kon nor farsh-teyn a muter mit kinder. Dos, vos ikh hob in yener tsayt gefilt, kon filn nor a mame. (From “A tsebrokn harts.”)

Compare this Yiddish to the language of the *Yudishe gazeten* of the time, which I quoted earlier, and you will see the great differ-

ence. And this was the kind of Yiddish that the other *Arbeter tsaytung* contributors also wrote.

In a series of articles, “A fertl Yvohundert,” which I wrote for the *Tog* in 1920-1921, I explained how and why Philip Krantz and Louis Miller fought for Yiddish in the old *Arbeter tsaytung*. Krantz once told me the story himself. It happened in this manner: There came to the *Arbeter tsaytung* a typesetter who had previously worked at the *Yudishe gazeten*. This typesetter, a Maskil from the old country, maintained that Yiddish writers and newspapers were under an obligation to beautify the “zhargon” after the manner of the *Gazeten* and he persuaded the other typesetters that when they worked on copy for the *Arbeter tsaytung*, they would improve it with German—which they proceeded to do. As a result, a dispute broke out between the editor and the typesetters. Finally the typesetters gave Krantz an ultimatum: either he lets them make a respectable language out of “zhargon” or they strike! And they actually called a strike in the *Arbeter tsaytung*!

In return Krantz and Louis Miller “scabbed” against the strikers, and Mr. Zametkin helped them out. That is, they set the copy themselves until the typesetters yielded and acceded to the demands of Krantz and Miller not to “improve” the language as they set the type.

One thing is certain—neither Krantz nor Miller nor Zametkin held out because they had such a high regard for Yiddish. In fact, they thought less of “zhargon” than did others of their circle. They did it because—I say it again—they wanted to speak a language that would be comprehensible to the “Jewish masses.”

The language of the *Fraye arbeter shtime* was heavier and stiffer despite the fact that among its contributors were such writers as David Edelstadt, M. Katz, S. Yanovski, H. Zolotarov, Marison, and others. Perhaps it was because this paper was more interested in enlightening its readers through theoretical articles that it therefore often spoke in ponderous tones.

The social-democratic *Arbeter tsaytung* and the anarchist *Fraye arbeter shtime* fought each other constantly, and it was this conflict that did so much good for the further development of the Yiddish press and Yiddish literature in this country. First of all, the adherents of one or the other worked with selfless devotion for their paper. They disseminated it in the factories and meeting halls, in the streets and in the houses, and they taught and accustomed the Jewish public to read. Secondly, in order to interest people in their paper, they began to print lighter material as well, such as novels and short stories. Since they were not at the time out to offer the reader

tawdry pulp fiction, they printed the best of European and Russian literature.

Among the first novels that ran in the *Arbeter tsaytung* were Flaubert's *Salambo* and Zola's *Germinal*. (*Salambo* was translated by Krantz and *Germinal* by Krantz and B. Gorin, if I'm not mistaken.) The first stories I read in the *Arbeter tsaytung* were by Vladimir Korolenko and Anton Chekhov (translated, I think, by Anna Braunstein, Abraham Cohan's wife).

As a consequence, they also began to print original sketches and stories by our own American Yiddish writers—Z. Libin, Yitskhok Goyde (B. Gorin), Jacob Gordin and others. Later on there began to appear sketches by Y. L. Peretz. Afterwards, when the *Arbeter tsaytung* began to issue a daily, the *Abend-blatt*, it contained work by Z. Levin (Z. Keshtz), David Pinski (D. Puls) and me. In such fashion a Yiddish literature arose that not only spoke Yiddish but thought and felt, laughed and sighed Yiddish. And the *Fraye arbeter shtime* also printed literature, as did the other Yiddish papers, which little by little became "German-free" under the influence of the Jewish socialist press.

New poets appeared in addition to D. Edelstadt and M. Rosenfeld and Morris Winchevski, and new writers of fiction. Joseph Bovchover was published in the *Arbeter tsaytung* and in the *Abend-blatt*, and in the *Zukunft* there appeared now forgotten poets: Babad, Lempert, Benjamin Rosenblum, William Kaiser and others. And later the *Zukunft* began to carry the poems of A. Liessin and H. Rosenblatt. The *Tageblatt* and the *Yidisher herold* printed the poems of Yehvash and Sharkanski and the stories of Yitskhok Rayz (later Moyshe Nadir). The *Herold* also ran the sketches of Isser Ginsburg and Z. Kornblit, and the *Tageblatt*, the sketches and feuilletons of Tashrak.

About this time, the *Filadelfier shtats tsaytung*, a daily, began to appear in Philadelphia, occasionally carrying pieces by Sholem Aleichem, S. Frug, and Abraham Reisen.

In brief, Yiddish that possessed a soul of talent began to grow and bloom in our American newspapers. Not only was a press that spoke Yiddish created, but Yiddish belles lettres and poetry of a quality not to be dismissed by the most demanding of critics.

In addition there came into being a rich literature in translation. Dozens upon dozens of works of the greatest writers of world literature were translated with the greatest respect and love for the work. Tolstoy, Turgeniev, Dostoievski, Chekhov, Andreyev, Korolenko and other famous Russian writers; Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant and others from the French; and the best of the Germans found their

way into Yiddish translation here in America in those days. Even Maxim Gorki's first stories—"Makar Chudra," "Piesnia Sokola," and others were translated into Yiddish here before they were translated into any other language.

In time, writers and poets began to believe in the future of Yiddish literature and in the rights of the Yiddish language. In this connection let me note emphatically that even before the Czernowitz language conference (1908), there had been a conference of Yiddish writers here (about 1904), at which a resolution had been adopted that *we regard Yiddish as our national language*. This resolution was later printed in the Petersburg *Fraynt*.

In such fashion our press, which began to speak a Yiddish Yiddish, and with it our American Yiddish literature were created by people who had only contempt for "zhargon," who began to speak Yiddish only out of necessity, who not only did not believe in its survival but who did not believe that it would last a score of years! These immigrant revolutionaries never dreamed, when they began to speak and write "zhargon," that they were the sowers and planters of a new Yiddish literature in America. They would have considered such a notion as wild and as mad as the suggestion that there would come a time when the circulation of Yiddish newspapers would be counted in the tens of thousands or that a Yiddish writer would some day earn more than seven or eight dollars a week in wages and payable in cash at that!

Had they been able to imagine such a thing—who knows—it might have occurred to them to act differently to the "ugly zhargon," more seriously and more respectfully—and they might also have tried to "refine" and "uplift" it, like the writers of the *Yudishe gazeten* or the writers and actors of the Yiddish stage, with German.

It is, at this point, appropriate to comment on the differences between American Yiddish literature of the period and the older Yiddish literature in Russia, to indicate the new themes we brought into Yiddish literature as a whole. It is a subject that has scarcely been explored. Even our literary critics are hardly familiar with this important area. Let me, therefore, take this opportunity to attempt briefly to touch on the major characteristics.

Our American Yiddish literature has its own history. It is not a continuation of the older literature in Russia (in fact, we, the creators of our literature here, knew nothing of the Russian Yiddish literature of the day). Our literature here was more nearly a continuation of European and Russian literature than of Yiddish literature in Russia. And ours was a literature of a new Jewish life, of a new Jewish milieu, of the tenement house in America, and of the shop,

and of the Jewish worker, and of the Jewish union man—in short, of a life that was wholly unknown to Russian Yiddish literature.

As for the Jewish revolutionary type—he found his portrayals only among us, the creators of American Yiddish literature. The same is true of the new Jewish woman. Even love as it is now depicted in Yiddish literature is an old story, too, in the literature that we created.

The worldly novel in Yiddish was created here as well. Those of our critics who are more or less acquainted with our work admit this, too.

Even Bal Makhoves,<sup>4</sup> in his *Morgen zhurnal* article “Veyn 25 yor yidishe literatur,” singled out the Jewish folk-type that we first portrayed in our literature here. We had had, he pointed out, pious Jews in our literature, Jews of the upper crust, learned Jews, but there were no strong people, no plain folk with strong muscles, until that young fisherman Yonkl Boyle<sup>5</sup> arrived with his friends; and after him, the plain people of Sholem Asch’s slaughterers came and gave Yiddish literature a people with strong men.

These same writers created the finest Yiddish theater we have ever had—a theater which was at the time regarded as the best in America, which Columbia University professors lectured about in their classes, and which writers like Israel Zangwill and John Corbin wrote about in the English press. It was just a few years ago that the same John Corbin, a historian of the American theater and for many years an associate of better plays for the American stage, wrote in *Harper’s Magazine* that the best the American stage possesses was created under the influence of the old Yiddish theater on the Bowery.

This is, briefly, the story of how our Yiddish literature here came into being.

Translated by Joseph C. Landis

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Daytchmerish” is the name applied to the pseudo-Germanic forms, structures and pronunciations to which turn-of-the-century Yiddish was subjected, mainly in America.

<sup>2</sup>The transliteration reflects the original in both language and spelling (trans.).

<sup>3</sup>Kobrin’s hostility to Cahan should be seen in the light of sharp political and personal differences.—Ed.

<sup>4</sup>Pen name of Dr. Isidore (Yisroel) Eliashev.

<sup>5</sup>In Kobrin’s *Der dorfs yunge* and in the play *Yankl boyle*, based on it.