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CULTURE GEOGRAPHY AT A DISTANCE: SOME PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF EAST EUROPEAN JEWRY

Uriel Weinreich

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. Additional millions of Ashkenazic Jews lived in western Europe, Palestine, and North and South America—most of them emigrants or first-generation descendants of emigrants from central and eastern Europe.¹ Yet the amount of anthropological study devoted to this sizable and unusual community has been pitifully small.² As long as the culture was interpreted in the "official" terms of the Jewish religion, the ethnographic realities of the living past tended to be disparaged and de-emphasized. The attention of scholars was further diverted from the folk culture by the dramatic efforts of Jews to reconstruct their own society, whether in a liberalized Europe and America or in a reconstituted homeland in Palestine. Finally, Ashkenazic Jewry fell victim to the inverse proportion that seems to hold between the familiarity of a culture and the scholarly interest it evokes. In relative terms, the attention lavished on the more "exotic" Sephardic and oriental branches of Jewry has been greater than that paid to the Ashkenazic wing.

But what is familiar in one year may be thrust to the brink of oblivion in the next. Germany lost World War II as a whole, but in its special war against the Jews, it came out virtually victorious. Six million Jewish civilians were killed. Among those who survived or escaped the holocaust, violent geographic displacement and acculturation has blurred many of the distinctive features of Ashkenazic culture. Even before the catastrophe, a century of urbanization and resettlement had seriously dissipated the vitality of the oral tradition. What was too obvious for study only yesterday has suddenly become precious. To be sure, a diversified literature of considerable proportions remains as a permanent monument to the creative centuries of central and east European Jewry. But as ethnographic evidence, this literature suffers from the familiar effects of artistically or otherwise motivated distortion. The opportunity for direct linguistic and ethnographic study of European Jewry is thus rapidly slipping from us. This opportunity is now bound to the remaining lifetime of surviving emigrants from that area. What we do not collect in the coming decade or so will be lost forever. Hence the urgency with which the work on a "Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry" is now being conducted at Columbia University.³

The desire to know and understand this society for its own sake would be reason enough for the project in which we are engaged. Among other things, it was this nearly obliterated society which by and large determined the physiognomy of the vigorously surviving Jewries of America and Israel. But there are also a number of problems in general cultural anthropology which, I feel, can be examined with special effectiveness

in the light of Ashkenazic Jewish evidence. The question of internal diversity within this culture, for example, is a matter full of broad theoretical implications. To explain what some of these implications are is the main purpose of the present paper.

Consider the problem of internal diversity in its historical context. On the one hand, it is well known that Ashkenazic Jewry in the cities and small towns (the so-called *shtetlekh*) of Europe was 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 down to minute details. There was in principle no sphere of life which was explicitly secular, exempt from religious codification.⁴ Now this religion has been strikingly uniform throughout the spread of Ashkenazic Jewry, which encompassed a territory practically coterminous with northern Europe and a history of approximately a thousand years. Even if we avoid the fallacy of a historic approach and take full cognizance of specific temporal and territorial developments, such as the codification of monogamy in the thirteenth century, the spread of Hassidic sectarianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and so forth, the pervasive religious system strikes one as remarkably uniform. Its uniformity is especially notable in the light of the highly decentralized structure of rabbinical authority and the absence of fixed channels of clerical power. If we were to study the migrations of Ashkenazic rabbis—there are ample untapped materials for such an investigation—we would find in the geographic interchangeability of religious leaders a confirmation of supraregional culture uniformity among the Jews of Europe.

On the other hand, although the jurisdiction of the highly uniform religion was in principle unlimited, there were, of course, details of life that in practice escaped its reach or its interest. Within the framework of 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. While the liturgical pronunciation of the Hebrew language was carefully regulated, the vast domain of the vernacular Yiddish was free to develop without much religious interference.⁵ Now, it might have been expected that these peripheral, profane aspects of the culture would develop by means of individual or strictly local improvisation. The basic outline of the wedding ritual, for example, is given to all Ashkenazic Jews alike. But what prewedding entertainment is offered, what festive foods are enjoyed after the marriage ceremony, what music is played, what dances symbolic of fertility and wealth are danced—all this, according to one widespread view, would differ from family to family or from *shtetl* to *shtetl*, since the official religion had nothing to say on this score. Still another theory predicts that in its uncodified aspects, the culture is completely at the mercy of influences from the various coterritorial cultures.⁶ The wedding music, for example, will be Polish music among the Jews of Poland, Ukrainian music in the Ukraine, Rumanian music in the Jewish *shtetlekh* of Rumania, and so forth. The Yiddish language, in particular, is thought to have enhanced its basic Germanic stock and its common Hebrew-Aramaic component with loanwords drawn from the numerous coterritorial languages in such a way that the distribution of a word in Yiddish was coterminous with the language which served as its source.

The accumulating data of the Jewish Language and Cultural Atlas have already shown that neither of these theories is correct. In the domains of the culture which are not explicitly codified on a religious basis, the variation which we find is not individual or local, but assumes well-defined regional patterns. And what is more, these regional

patterns are very far from being congruent with the obvious regions in the coterritorial Christian cultures.

As a first illustration,⁷ consider the lexical problem depicted in Figure 1. Yiddish terms for "ceiling" are here compared with corresponding terms in the coterritorial non-Jewish languages.

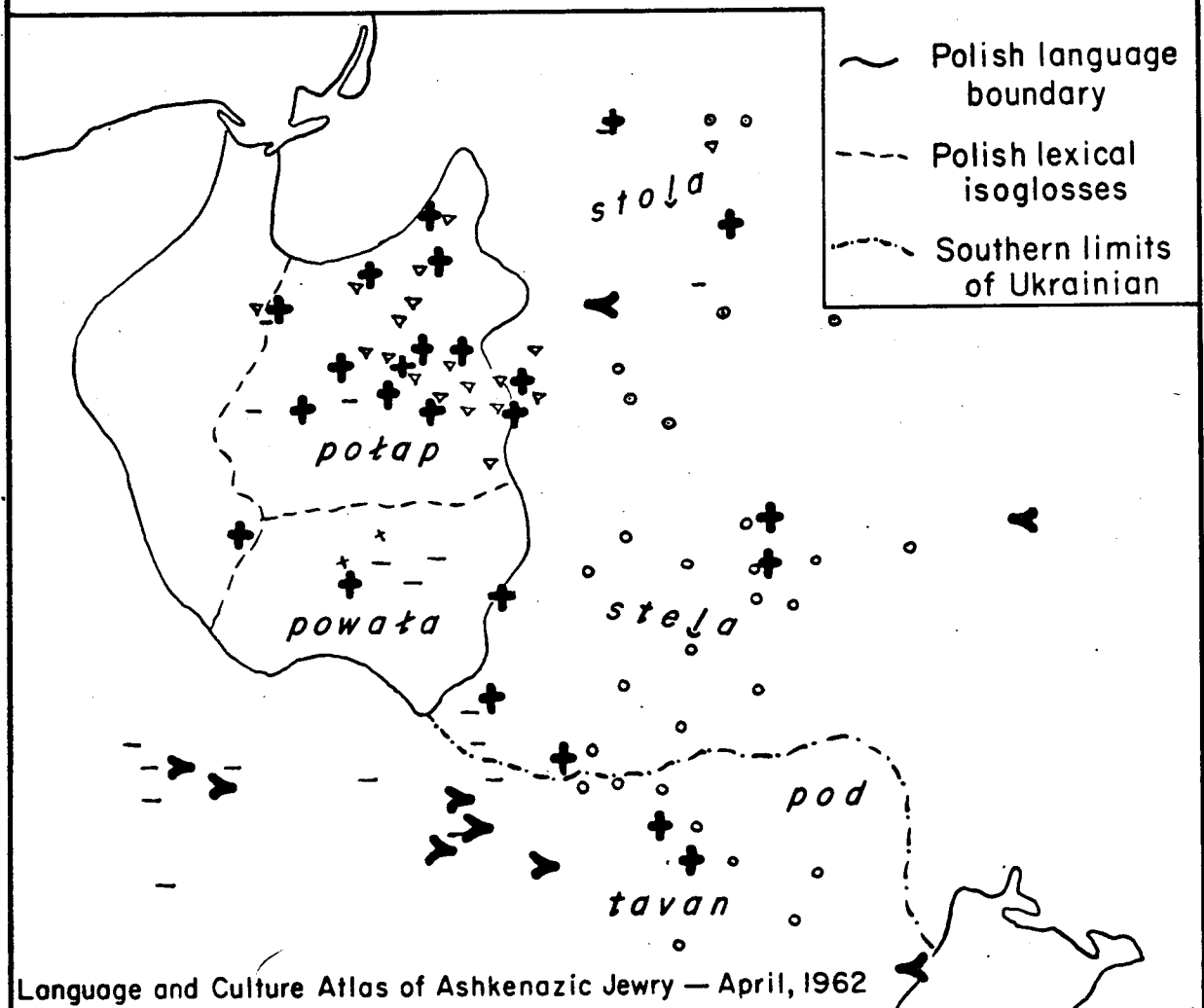
The forms spelled out on the map itself represent characteristic words for ceiling in the various dialects and languages coterritorial with Yiddish. The two relevant forms in dialectal, rural Polish are *połap*⁸ and *powąka*. For Belorussian and Ukrainian, the dictionaries list *stola* and *steła*, respectively. In Rumanian the corresponding word seems to be *tavan* (itself of Turkish origin), while in Moldavian, according to Soviet Russian-Moldavian dictionaries, ceiling is designated by *pod*. (Corresponding details for Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian have been omitted from this preliminary presentation.)

The geometric symbols on the map, which are explained in the key (page 30), in turn represent the local names for ceiling in the Yiddish language. Concentrated in the southwest but scattered also in the northeast, we see the term *balkn*, with its variant *baltn*, in which a Germanic word meaning "beam" is still easily discernible as an etymon (see German *balke*). The discontinuous distribution of *balkn/baltn* permits the deduction that this is the oldest Yiddish designation for ceiling, and is probably the one that was brought by German Jewish settlers during their eastward migrations into non-German-speaking Europe. This is, by the way, quite a suggestive finding in itself. In German dialects, the word for ceiling varies widely and *balken* occurs at best only in parts of Germany.⁹ Since the Jews who migrated to central and eastern Europe came from many parts of Germany, they quite probably brought along more than one word of Germanic origin for ceiling. Yet only one seems to have prevailed as the result of sweeping intra-Jewish leveling in the eastern Ashkenazic area.

Eventually, Figure 1 suggests, the pre-Slavic term *balkn/baltn* was superseded in Yiddish by dialectal Polish, Belorussian, and Ukrainian terms in parts of the new environment. (The occurrence of such terms in Yiddish is indicated on the map by the small symbols.) But this rough explanation, of course, leaves a number of tantalizing questions unanswered. Thus, it appears that the pre-Slavic word was very thoroughly displaced by a Slavicism in the Ukraine, not quite so thoroughly in Belorussia and northern Poland, and still less completely in southern Poland. The term *steła*, of Ukrainian origin, was transported into the Yiddish of Rumania, where it failed to be displaced in its turn by any Rumanian-origin synonym. Why were the imported terms replaced in so many parts of the area, but not in others? What was there in the relations between the Jews and non-Jews in some parts of Poland and many parts of western Russia that was conducive to borrowing, whereas in other parts of the area such borrowings did not take place? Does the distinction between *połap* and *pułap* correspond to a difference in the stressed vowels of the source word in Polish? And if so, does the isogloss between *połap* and *pułap* in Polish coincide with the isogloss between *połap* and *pułap* in Yiddish? Why was the Polish *pułap* submitted to the sound change *u > i* in some varieties of Polish Yiddish, but not in others? Does this mean that the word was borrowed by the Jews at different times, or that it was differently integrated in several varieties of Yiddish? I would not like to attempt any explanations *ad hoc*; the problems raised by a map such as this must be confronted with the hundreds of similar questions that arise from other maps of the Atlas for a consistent and plausible cultural history of Ashkenazic Jewry to be written.

In addition to the mutually exclusive distributions I have discussed so far, we also perceive a superimposed scattering of three other designations for ceiling (see the bold-face symbols on the map). The Russian language has contributed *patalók*; it is already attested on this map by circles at a few points, but it will surely be shown to have been

Fig. 1. RURAL VS. URBAN STRATA IN YIDDISH LEXICAL LOANS



YIDDISH TERMS FOR 'CEILING' BY ORIGIN

Pre-Slavic:

- balkn/baltn

Dialectal Polish:

▽ polap/pulap/pilap

x póvələ

Ukrainian & Belorussian:

○ steja

○ stol(ə)

(French→) Hungarian:

➤ plafón

Standard Polish:

+ súfit/səfit

Standard Russian:

◀ patalók

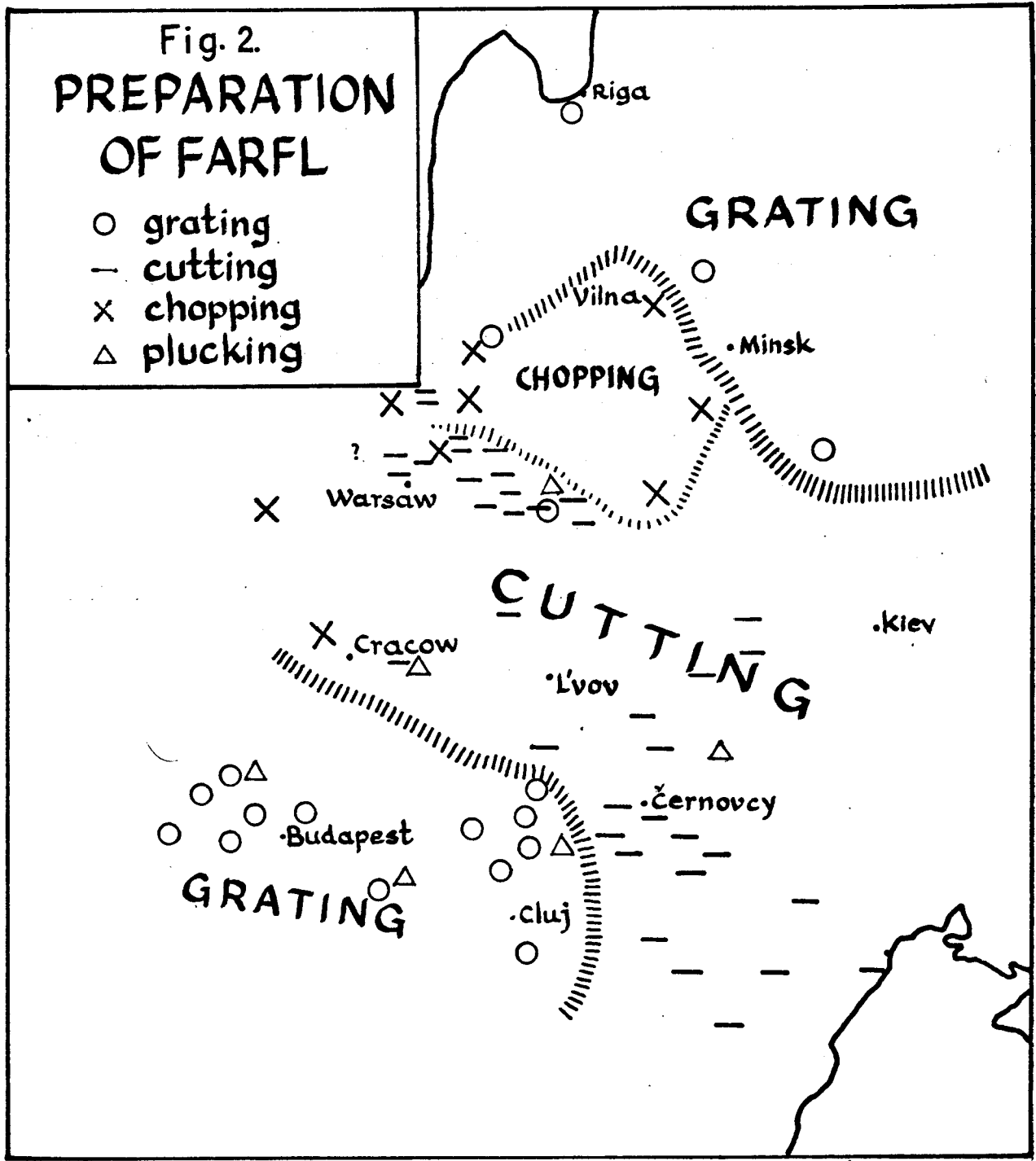
much more widespread as our field work proceeds. The standard Polish form, *sufit*, under two stress variants, is widely distributed, as the crosses show, in Yiddish, not only in Poland, but also beyond Polish ethnic territory in the Ukraine, Lithuania, and Rumania. Finally, *plafón*, diffused through Austrian-German channels or from Hungarian, is found as shown by the triangles, in many localities south of the Carpathian Mountains. More than a dozen informants have already given us ceiling designations in pairs, indicating in each case that one term designates a rough woodwork surface, while the other implies a plastered ceiling. Wherever there is a choice, it is always the word of standard Polish, standard Hungarian, or standard Russian origin that designates the novel plastering, whereas the other (*balkn*, *polap*, *stele*) is reserved for a cruder ceiling in which the beams may even still be evident. (Let us not forget that the Yiddish singular *der balkn*, ceiling, is identical with the German plural *balken* for beams.) Any generalized notion about the "Slavization" of the Jews in eastern Europe must therefore be refined into a precise historical account,¹⁰ in which the culture is shown to have been affected by its coterritorial neighbors in some parts but not in others, and innovations in the Jewish *shtetlekh* and cities are shown to have come in several waves, the first being mostly rural, the second more urban in character.

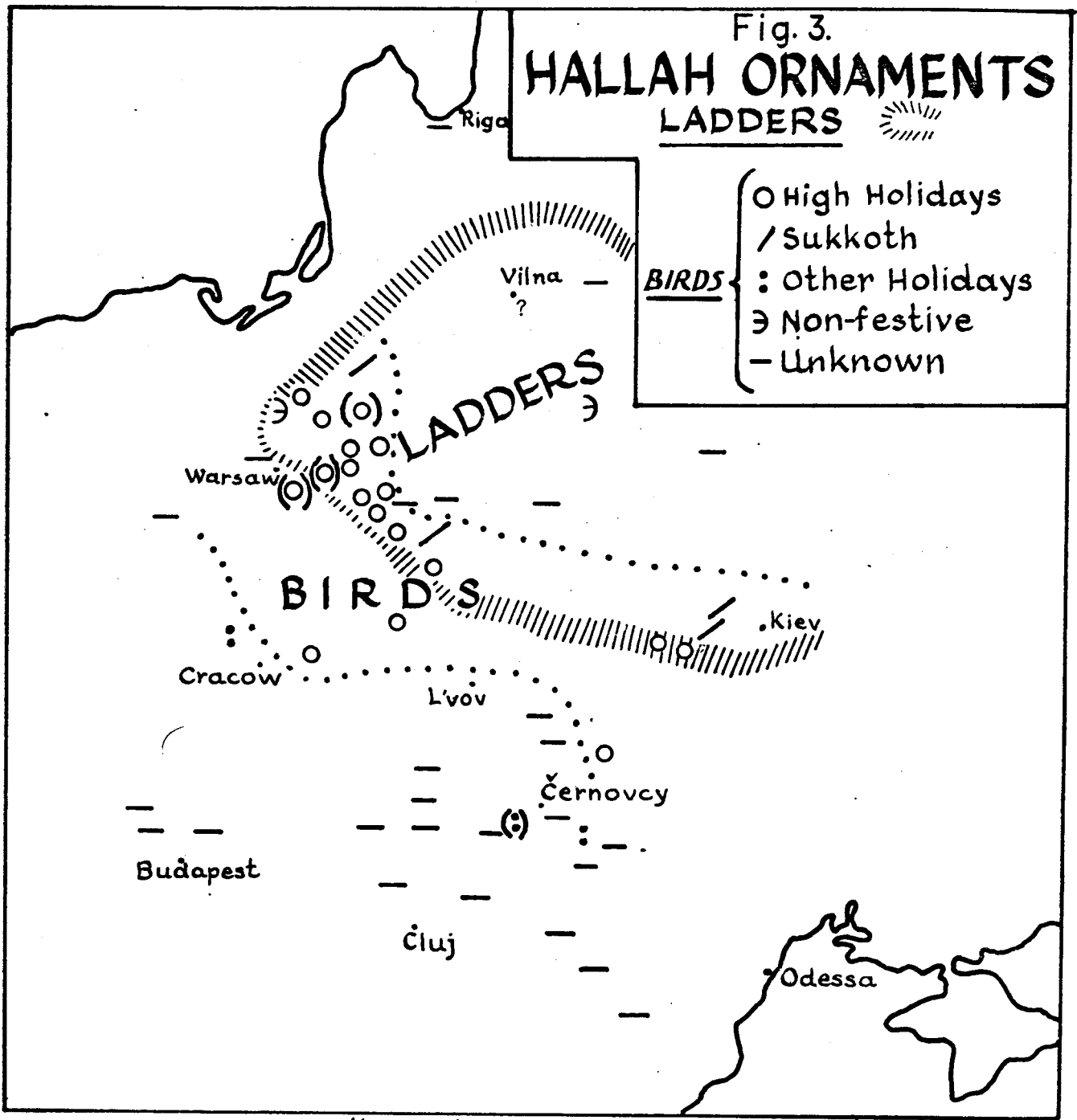
A rich body of illustrative materials, different in details but consonant with the overall pattern I have described, is being accumulated from the field of cookery—one of the outstanding Jewish folk arts. All eastern European Ashkenazim are familiar with pellets or flakes of dough, usually cooked in broth, and called *farfl* or *ferul*. As Figure 2 shows,¹¹ the method of *farfl* preparation differs from place to place. In the central, Polish-Ukrainian-Rumanian, area, the squares are cut from flat sheets of dough. In an area north of the center, where Poland passes into Lithuania, the pellets are produced by chopping the dough; whereas, in the extreme northeast as well as the southwest, there seems to be preserved the most archaic method, attested also in medieval Germany, of taking a hardened ball of dough and grating it down. The Israeli and American noodle industries, incidentally, have adopted the innovating cut-square pattern. What specific internal forces or coterritorial influences that might have brought about these culinary innovations in the center remain to be investigated in collaboration with Slavic ethnographers.

In the cases examined so far—the lexical designations for ceiling and the manner of preparing dough pellets—the Slavic cultural stimuli could have diffused among the Jews without serious resistance from the recipient system; their diffusion and nondiffusion may well reflect with considerable accuracy the communication channels and communication barriers between the societies and within Jewry. But the next example is a more complicated case, for the innovations here impinge on the domains of Jewish culture which are within the reach of official codification. By ancient custom, the benediction over bread on the Sabbath and on holidays requires *hallah*, a special loaf of fine white flour, decoratively twisted and made shiny by being daubed with egg before baking. This is known as *xalḏ* in East European Yiddish and as *barxḏs* in Western Yiddish. It has been reported in the literature that on some holidays, the *hallah* was especially embellished by twists of dough representing hands, keys, and other objects.¹² Ladders and birds, for example, have been used in season in order symbolically to facilitate the ascent of prayers to heaven. Figure 3 shows some specific regional distributions of these ornaments. The south and southwest hardly know of any *hallah* figures; the ladder as an ornament has its own territory; the birds partly overlap in distribution with the ladders, but the particular holiday with which they are associated varies on a much smaller scale. If ornamental bread forms are a Jewish innovation due to Slavic baking patterns, their endowment with religious symbolism and especially their association with particular

Fig. 2.
**PREPARATION
 OF FARFL**

- grating
- cutting
- × chopping
- △ plucking





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holidays unknown to the Christian neighbors testify to the subtlety and creativeness of the adaptation process.

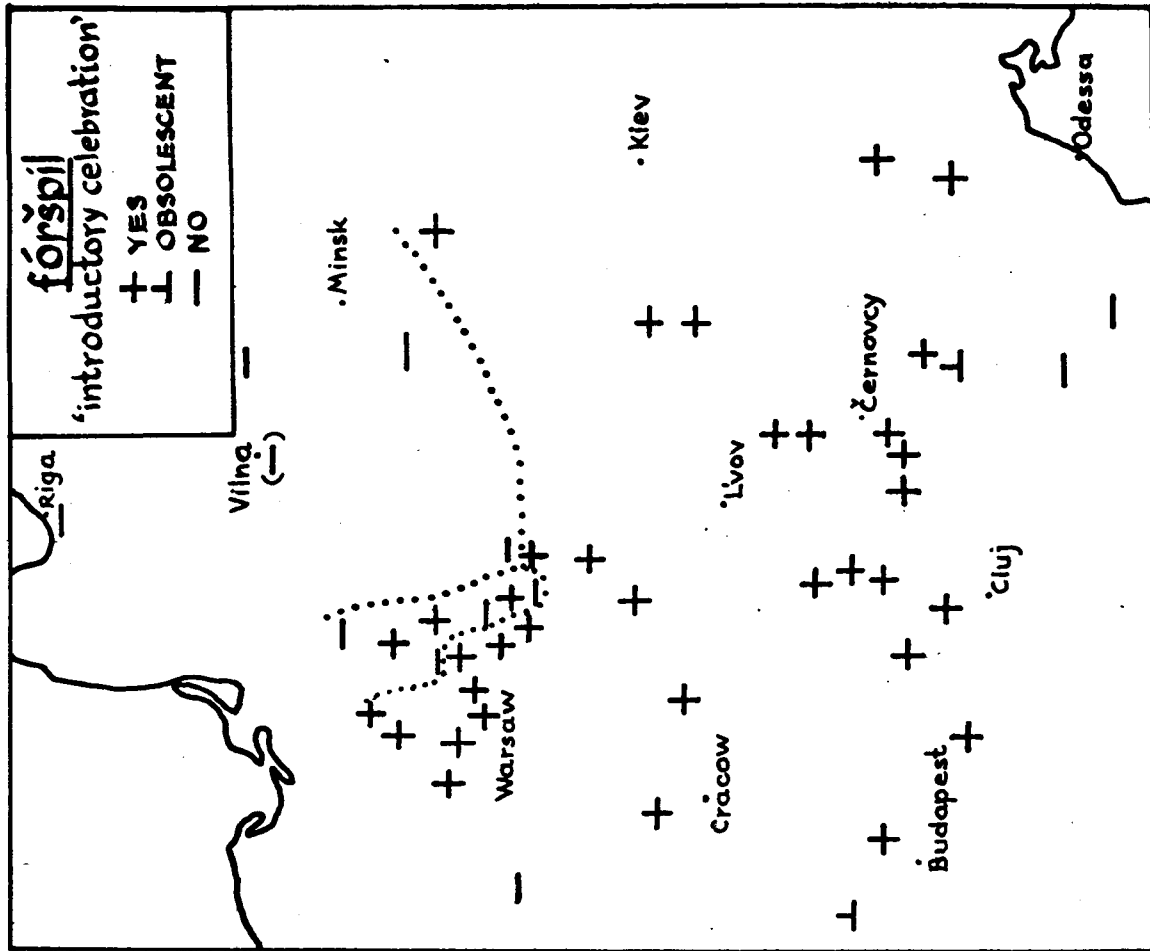
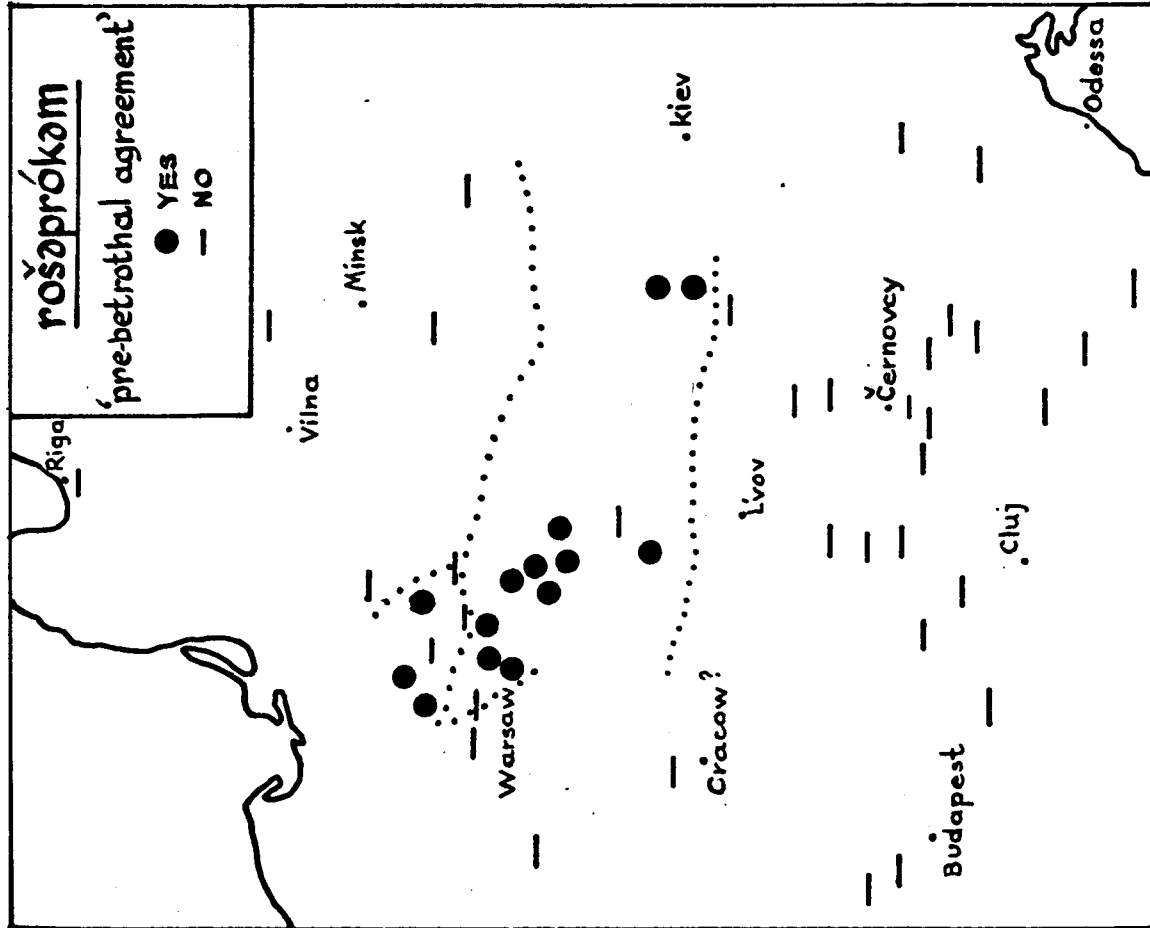
Some particularly well-defined distributions appear on the next pair of maps, (Figure 4), showing some regional components of the complex of customs surrounding Jewish weddings.¹³ Represented on the left is the custom of concluding a preliminary agreement between the parties prior to the betrothal proper; it goes under the name of *ros dprókdm*. Is it an innovation in the central area, or is it a survival there of a broader spread which at one time included the northeast as well? On the right, we have the occurrence and nonoccurrence of *fórspil* as an introductory celebration, either on the eve of the wedding or on the preceding Sabbath. (The details vary considerably and will of course be presented in full when the Atlas is finished.) But again we get a specific distribution; again the northeast appears the poorer in custom; but this time the center is united with the south by a common feature. The contrast in distributions of these two components of the wedding complex alone dictates caution in generalizing about Jewish cultural subregions, whatever forces may have led to their formation.

Finally, consider one more item from the Jewish life cycle. The eight days between the birth of a boy 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 managed to incorporate pagan beliefs and customs of this sort and to give them dogmatic sanction. In the Jewish case, too, we find evidence in the rabbinical literature from the Middle Ages of a vigil night, or *vaxnaxt*, celebrated just before the circumcision by group study in the house of the newborn.¹⁴ Figure 5 shows that the full-fledged *vaxnaxt* custom survived in Hungary and Slovakia; it was completely extinct in the northeast, while in the major central and southeastern areas, it survived in watered-down form as a reading of the *krišm d*, or credo, by a class of schoolboys invited to the house of the newborn on the eve or the morning of the circumcision.¹⁵ It is hard to visualize a more graphic picture of the "slope" of decreasing conservatism, along a southwest-northeast axis, in Jewish culture. But it is far from obvious whether the types and loci of cultural fragmentation in Jewish culture correspond to those in the coterritorial non-Jewish cultures. The comparison of the Jewish evidence with the data concerning the non-Jewish cultures 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 impact on two cultures at the same time. The danger of an accidental congruence between, let us say, a mountain range and an isogloss is here substantially less than in the usual, unilingual, or unicultural case.

These theoretical benefits promised by a study of internal Ashkenazic differentiation depend, of course, on the gathering of the perishable oral evidence in which we are now engaged. For while the written monuments that remain may allow us to compile cumulative lists of all traits that existed somewhere, at some time, in the culture, the study of its internal differentiation is dependent on the availability of *negative* data, and these are unlikely to appear in written sources. It is not enough to learn from a novel or a book of memoirs that a certain custom, like *vaxnaxt*, or a lexical form, like *balkn*, was current in such and such a place; we must also know where else it was current, and where it was unknown.

In the areas represented in these maps, there are few Jews left, and the prospects of successful field work on the spot are not encouraging. But the scholar in America does have easy access to emigrants from those areas. The question then arises: Can the details of internal cultural differentiation in the Old Country be reconstructed from the evidence of surviving emigrants? I could easily have devoted a separate paper to the

Fig. 4. REGIONAL COMPONENTS OF THE WEDDING CUSTOM COMPLEX



difficulty with which such a task is beset. But the ultimate answer to the methodological question would still be an unequivocal "yes." The proof that cultural geography at a distance is possible is simple enough and is contained in the very maps here presented. For the data, as has been seen, fall into excellent areal configurations, yielding boundaries of admirable sharpness. Memory failures among the emigrant informants, or contaminations due to contact with persons from other areas, are random processes: they might have blurred our isoglosses, but they could not have produced an illusory displacement of sharp lines. Well-formed isoglosses such as these, therefore, must be accurate representations of the facts as of the formative period in the informants' lives.

Columbia University

NOTES

1. Because of noncomparable and usually inadequate census procedures in the numerous countries concerned, precise population statistics concerning Jews have always been difficult to compile. See Hersch, 1939, pp. 332f.

2. For a selective bibliography of research on Jewish culture, see U. and B. Weinreich, 1959.

3. On the design of the Atlas, see U. Weinreich, 1960, 1962a. This project has had the financial support of the National Science Foundation (grants G-8685 and G-16,497) and the American Philosophical Society (grant 2986-P). Among the able collaborators whose field and editorial work has contributed to the present report, it is a pleasure to thank Marvin I. Herzog (chief interviewer), Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter, Meyer L. Wolf, and Beatrice S. Weinreich.

4. See, e.g., Heschel, 1950, pp. 62f.; M. Weinreich, 1951; Zborowski and Herzog, 1952, p. 68.

5. The problems of uniformity and diversity in Ashkenazic Hebrew are discussed in detail in U. Weinreich, 1962b. On the impact of religion on the formation of the Yiddish language, see M. Weinreich, 1953.

6. Thus, the editor of Funk and Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (1950) found it possible to dispense with an article on Jewish folklore, while permitting the following passage to appear under the heading "Semitic folklore": "Modern Semitic folklore, including especially that of the Arabs and Jews, has been excluded, on the grounds that so much of it is due to direct borrowings from other peoples and can therefore not be described as distinctive," Gaster, 1950, p. 981.

7. Additional maps illustrating geographic noncongruence between Slavic source languages and the distribution of Slavic loanwords in Yiddish appear in U. Weinreich, 1962. For Fig. 1, Jofen's (1952) Map No. xxii was utilized in addition to the materials of the Atlas. The Polish lexical isoglosses were drawn according to Nitsch, 1957, I, Map 8.

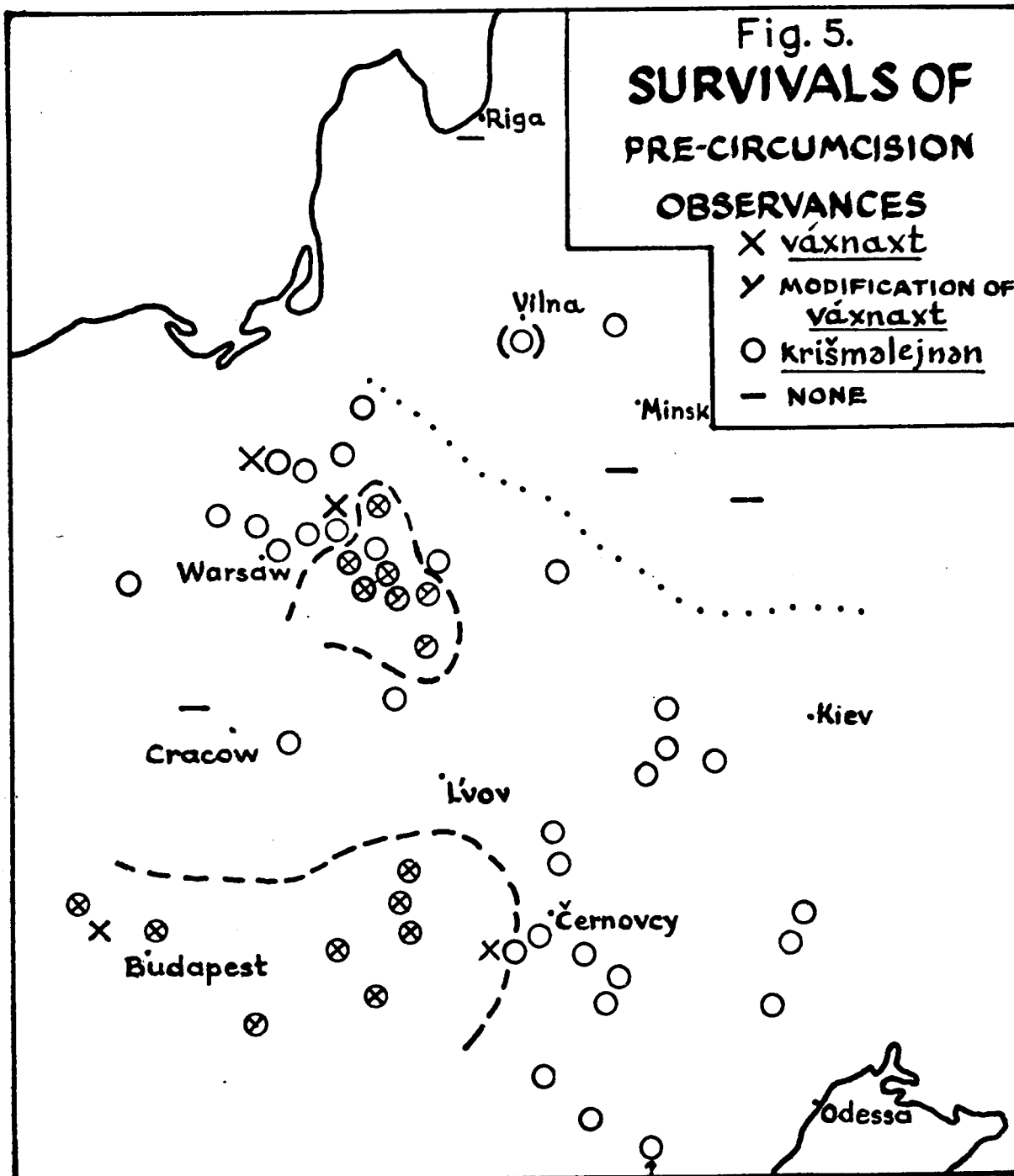
8. Fig. 1 generalizes over the Polish variants *połap*, *pułap*, and *pulep*, and over the Yiddish variants with dark and light *l* and with differing stressed vowels. The completed Atlas will, of course, present the material in full detail.

9. Götze, 1939, I, 221, cites *balken* in the meaning "ceiling" for *baden* only.

10. See U. Weinreich, 1958.

11. A version of this map compiled several months earlier than the present one appears in U. Weinreich, 1962a, p. 17. Careful comparison of the two versions shows how the accumulating evidence is confirming the rough outlines of distributions sketched at an earlier stage.

12. For illustrations, see Rekhtman, 1955, p. 45.



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13. The most systematic and reliable survey of customs connected with the Jewish life cycle is probably Schauss, 1950; but since he was himself from the northeast area, he omitted, in describing recent usage from memory, some of the patterns which were alive only in other regions. The custom of *rosəprókəm* is registered by Anski, 1914, No. 1038. It seems often to go under the alternative, and less formal, name *vort* ("word, promise"); see Liliental, 1900, p. 64. On *foršpil*, see Anski, 1914, Nos. 1101-6; Lerer, 1924, p. 392. Prilutski's attempt to correlate the East Ashkenazic *foršpil* with the now almost extinct West Ashkenazic *špinholts*, 1939, pp. 126f. is confirmed by an explicit statement to this effect in *Leket jošer*, a rabbinical compendium on rituals and customs of the fifteenth century, Freimann, 1903, p. 110. The possibilities of utilizing rabbinical sources in combination with modern descriptive materials for Jewish ethnographic study have recently been demonstrated by Kosover, 1958, in connection with some aspects of Jewish cuisine.

14. Anski, 1914, Nos. 138-44; Schauss, 1950, pp. 32f., 56; Liliental, 1927, p. 15.

15. While there are references in the literature to the reading of prayers by school children at the bedside of the newborn, e. g., Anski, 1914, Nos. 125-27; Schauss, 1950, p. 54, I have so far found no identification of the custom as a self-contained ceremony with a name of its own (*a krišmələjənan, a krišmələjənam, a krišmələjənaxc*).

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