

The Fate of Yiddish in America

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IN the welter of argument that has been raging in some quarters over the future of Yiddish in the United States, reference to fact has been conspicuously absent. Certain commentators—rumored no friends of the language—have, since the stoppage of immigration, incessantly prophesied without great regret the imminent disappearance of Yiddish. A similar belief has been expressed by men whose loyalty to the language and interest in its survival are unquestioned: in desperation they contemplate the complete dissolution of their beloved Yiddish overnight and cast about frantically for some remedial magic. But there are others, more sanguine or more insensitive to omen, or more capable of self-deception, who stoutly deny—with what seems conviction but may merely be compensation for an inward fear—that Yiddish is weaker. Nay, they insist, it is stronger—and, maintaining strenuously that it is on the threshold of an unprecedented efflorescence on these shores, they chant grandiose schemes for its future here.

To the detached observer the discussion so far may well seem more instructive as symptom than as diagnosis, and in the confusion of claim and counterclaim he can be sure of only one thing: whatever its extent or direction, some farreaching and profound change is taking place in the position of Yiddish here. In the belief that a sounder interpretation of this social phenomenon will emerge from an appeal to fact than from recourse to dialectic this paper is presented.

Since it is a widespread fallacy, it might be well first to correct the impression that Yiddish is a mere jargon, a sort of sub rosa dialect that sprung up under Ghetto conditions, a language without dignity or without tradition. The truth is that Yiddish is an ancient language whose origin is as old and whose tradition is as honorable as such modern tongues as French and Italian, and that it arose out of similar historical conditions. Its foundations were laid in the fifth century when the Jews were assimilated linguistically by the Germanic invaders of the Roman Empire. When, barred from war and agriculture, the German Jew took to the highways as a merchant, his German began to evolve into a separate tongue. Wandering over the great trade routes through many foreign countries he found substantial Jewish communities speaking strange tongues. In these communities he rested and established trade connections, and his language was

that time she had no reason to disbelieve, dear and wise H. von K. said: "Well, if you are a Don Juan nature, you are. You're not the first!" "Dear friend," I answered, "I am, curiously enough, that less than anything else in the world. Today and in New York Don Juan drinks bootleg gin and indulges in easy sensations. He hasn't even to dodge a duenna or own a rapier or trick himself out in a dark cloak. I am looking for something which is supposed to be common but which is in fact exceedingly rare. Yet that is not a strange circumstance. All the very great and supposedly common things of life are tragically, unbelievably rare. Therefore men embrace the supposedly uncommon because it is easy and cheap and to be found for the asking along Forty-Second Street. How easy to scatter bright paradoxes; how hard to seek truth. I don't want prohibition whisky, but my share of the wine of an ancient hillside. Love is a hard word to use at all today. For either it is a lie that gilds legality and stagnation or it is the name for a brief sting of the senses or a cloak for neurasthenic wrangling. But love, like a beautiful style, need not be the less gay and exquisite for having at its heart austere delicacies, sober thoughts, the purpose that allies a union between a man and a woman to the enduring sanctities of humankind. Because hitherto I have had nothing I shall not be content with less than the best. I have fed on husks and bilge-water. Pastry and gin will not sustain me. I want my share of bread and wine. Of course I shall be misunderstood since most people have experience of nothing but irking legality or the naked hunt for sensations. They understand the legalized adultery of a relation continued through social pressure; a minority understands the technique of 'affairs' and will not admit, quite naturally in America, how empty these leave the heart and the mind. Few understand love." . . .

The winter passed and that sullen summer drew to its close. But to me the seasons brought no change; time seemed to stand still and a petrified world to tower grey under the steel bell of a hard, unstimulating sky. And then on a certain day, in the twinkling of an eye, the stone of the world melted and the bell of heaven began to sway. Thelma had come to me.

(To be continued)

influenced by Hebrew and the numerous foreign tongues with which it came in contact. These changes were perpetuated under the shelter of religious and political autonomy enjoyed by Jewry in the early Middle Ages; the result was Yiddish. Yiddish, then, was no product of oppression, but an ancient tongue born freely at a time when Jewish faculties were exercising full self-expression. The Ghetto only quickened and perfected a process which began in the open world. Yiddish originated in Germany, and there, with the emergence of a new set of controlling economic forces, it first began to decay. Caravan trade went out, Jewish autonomy disappeared, the medieval guilds broke down, and the modern age was ushered in. With political and economic emancipation the Jew began to enter crafts, the retail trade, and the liberal professions. In the new arena of national and international commerce, Yiddish was of limited value and soon discarded.

But before it went out altogether in Germany, it found a haven of refuge in Poland and the Ukraine, where it flourishes. From Eastern Europe it came to the United States with the mass emigration.

THIS paper will attempt to analyze the present status of Yiddish in America by evaluating, chiefly on the basis of available statistics, the strength of the factors which are likely to perpetuate or destroy it. Ten factors will be considered: the exclusively Yiddish-speaking home; the Yiddish-English home; the Yiddish newspaper and magazine; the Yiddish book; the Yiddish circulation of books in public libraries; the Yiddish writer; the Yiddish stage; the Yiddish school; the orthodox synagogue; the awakening national consciousness of the Jew.

The exclusively Yiddish-speaking home. In this category are included all families whose habitual medium of conversation is exclusively Yiddish, where not only the parents but the children, many of whom were born in this country, speak no English in the home. The group is composed of two classes: recent arrivals, who have not yet had time to learn English, and immigrants here for some time who, because of lack of economic pressure or intellectual curiosity or because of racial introversion, have made no effort to learn it. The size of the latter class, the sediment, so to speak, left over by each wave of immigration, is of course impossible to estimate, but it is certainly not great. Moreover, the virtual cessation of immigration, the immediate effect of which obviously is to decrease the number of new Yiddish-speaking immigrants, will also decrease the number of residual Yiddish-speaking Jews. Since the number of Jewish immigrants barely exceeds ten thousand a year, the exclusively Yiddish-speaking home cannot count on substantial reinforcement in the future. Its strength as a factor in the perpetuation of Yiddish promises to be almost negligible.

The Yiddish paper is being supplanted by the Yiddish-English paper, with a marked trend toward the use of more and more English. According to the American Jewish Year Book for 1917-1918, there were then thirty-nine Yiddish and Yiddish-English publications in the United States. Of these, thirty were all-Yiddish, five were Judeo-Spanish, three were Hebrew, and one English-Yiddish. Ten years later the same source records thirty-seven publications, of which twenty were all-Yiddish, two Judeo-Spanish, two Hebrew, and thirteen Yiddish-English. These figures do not take into account the fact that the *Day* now carries a daily English column and a weekly English page, and that the *Forwarts* publishes a weekly English supplement. In 1917 both of these papers were all-Yiddish. Incidentally, even the so-called immigrant organs, such as *Der Ferband*, organ of the Federation of Polish Jews in America, and *Der Freind*, organ of the Workmen's Circle, have recently introduced English sections.

The Yiddish trade paper has almost vanished. The *Butcher's Trade Journal*, the *Jewish Business Record*, the *National News Dealer*, the *Waste Material*, *Junk and Metals*, the *Grocery and Modern Business Man's Guide*, have all passed from the Yiddish field. Some have turned English; some have disappeared altogether. Their news is now published by the big Yiddish daily papers which hope thus to hold the Jewish business man. But the movement in the trade journal field is of unavoidable significance: the Yiddish business man has learned English and follows his trade in English trade journals.

The Yiddish book. A generation or so ago few Yiddish books were sold and still fewer published here. There were ritual books, and the serial novels—Jargonische Maase Bichlech—peddled by itinerant booksellers along with such religious paraphernalia as *tzizith*, *tephilin* and *taletchim*. For the more discerning reader there were condensed and vulgarized editions of the great European novels, published by Malin. *Anna Karenina*, for example, appeared as a small brochure, and Shakespeare was available. Later with the development of the radical Yiddish labor movement came the great period of the Yiddish book. The anarchists, even more than the socialists, contributed to its development through their campaign of idealistic education.

The Hebrew Publishing House and Maisel were among the first Yiddish bookmakers; Maisel brought out Spencer's *Education*, the first book not a siddur published in Yiddish in America. After 1905, as mass immigration reached its height, publishing houses great and small sprung up. Some sold their books on pushcarts at radical meetings, a few adopted American business methods—travelling salesmen, the instalment plan for paying—and the business grew. It centered, of course, in New York, although there was one Yiddish publisher in Boston.

The war, which ended the importation of Yiddish books, and gave the immigrant extra cash, greatly stimulated Yiddish book publishing in America, and a score of new houses were established which brought out such books as the complete works of Isaac Hourwich, the works of A. Raisin (twelve volumes), Heine (eight volumes), works by Nietzsche, Anatole France, Jacob Wassermann, Edgar Allen Poe, David Ignatiev, Roboi, Opatashu, Dymov, Jack London, Mani-Leib, Forel, Artzibashev, Dostoevsky, Hugo and others. Collections of works by Sholom Aleichem, H. Jitlovsky, Peretz Hirshbein, Kropotkin, Yehoash, and others were brought out. The *Forwarts* published fifteen volumes of de Maupassant, Sholom Asch complete, Rosenfeld, Olgin, Rogoff, Shakespeare, A. Bebel, a history of the United States in two volumes, A. Cahan, Tolstoy, and many others. The *Day*, the *Morgen Journal*, the *Warheit*, the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, the Workmen's Circle, the Socialist Federation, all turned publisher. But with the end of the war one after another of these houses closed down, and only the Hebrew Publishing House, Maisel and Co., and Yankevitch have survived. The former two operate large book stores dealing in books of all languages, but do no more Yiddish publishing; Yankevitch brings out an occasional book.

For this sudden decline Yiddish writers have many explanations. Dr. K. Vornberg blames the publisher. Olgin finds the books too expensive. Dr. Coralnik thinks too few scientific books are published. Schklarsky in a pamphlet entitled "The Yiddish Book in America" thinks reading in general is on a decline. But the root of the matter lies deeper than any of these explanations go. It is to be found in the assimilation of the immigrant and in the de-proletarianization of the Jewish masses, both of which processes, begun long before the war, were intensified and quickened by it and its aftermath.

The decrease in publishing is not exactly paralleled by the volume of circulation of Yiddish books in the New York Public Libraries. Yet last year's circulation was the smallest since 1916; while the number of Yiddish books available for circulation increased 18.9 per cent during the twelve years, the total reading dropped 71.8 per cent. The aggregate circulation by years follows: 1916, 102,087; 1917, 95,546; 1918, 77,463; 1919, 74,493; 1920, 80,107; 1921, 104,761; 1922, 103,724; 1923, 97,346; 1924, 100,433; 1925, 82,695; 1926, 74,755; 1927, 73,228.

The greatest decline has occurred in the East Side branches of the Library. The Seward Park Branch, for example, dropped from 27,553 calls for Yiddish books in 1916 to 16,926 in 1927, a decrease of sixty-one per cent. The calls at the Hamilton Fish Park Branch dropped from 12,137 to 7,000; those at the Rivington Street Branch dropped from 16,894 to 11,080; those at Ottendorfer Branch from 3,961 to 196; those at Chatham Square Branch

from 5,340 to 564. The same trend may be observed in the branches of the upper East Side: calls at the Aguilar Branch fell from 13,844 to 6,012, while at the 96th Street Branch they fell from 9,120 to 4,869. Only two Branches—both in the Bronx—reported increases in Yiddish book circulation. Tremont increased its circulation from 5,638 in 1916 to 13,219 in 1927, and Woodstock from 4,127 to 7,651. But even these reached their high point several years ago and have since been on the downgrade.

The Yiddish writer. The lexicon of Yiddish literature and press compiled by Zalmon Raisin and published in Vilna in 1927 reveals that there live in America now not less than 286 Yiddish writers—exclusive of those whose names begin with W, X, Y, or Z, letters included in a volume not yet published. Of these, not one was born in America. Most of them arrived here at a mature age after they had established literary reputations in Europe.

Analysis reveals that the median age of the Yiddish-American writers is forty-four years. In other words, exactly half of them are between forty-four and eighty-two years of age, and (since the second quartile is fifty-four years and nine months) just 25 per cent of the total are above fifty-five years of age. Only six of the 286 are in the twenties, and sixty-five are between thirty-one and thirty-nine years of age. That is to say, the youthful element is all but entirely lacking, a sure indication of impending disaster for the profession. America has failed to produce a single Yiddish writer of its own.

The Yiddish stage. It has been the fate of the Yiddish theater in America to be born, to reach its height, and enter on its decline all within one generation. In the late nineties New York did not have a single permanent, legitimate Yiddish theater. An itinerant band of actors, which included a number of future stars—Kessler, Lipzin, Moscowitz, Torenberg—played Sundays at the Thalia and took to the road during the week. There were several vaudeville houses, and one hundred actors had already organized the Union of Yiddish Vaudeville Actors. In 1903 the Grand Theater was built, and in 1905 an unsuccessful attempt was made to erect an uptown Yiddish theater. Since 1905 every other year has seen the building of a new theater. Of the twenty-four Yiddish theaters in the United States and Canada, twelve are in New York. The others are distributed as follows: Philadelphia, 1; Chicago, 2; Newark, 1; Boston, 1; Cleveland, 1; Toronto, 1; Montreal, 1; Detroit, 1; Los Angeles, 1. The Yiddish Actors Union has grown since 1905 from forty to 345 members.

The Yiddish theater has grown into a great capitalistic enterprise requiring not less than half a million dollars per season for running expenses.

More than 120,000 people visit Yiddish theaters in America weekly, four times the number which attended twenty years ago. The prices of seats have gone up tremendously in the interval. Once the best seat was a dollar, the cheapest ten cents, and few dollar seats were sold. Now the cheapest seat is a dollar (frequently the gallery is empty) and the orchestra is \$2.75. The 1905 minimum actors' wage of \$18 per week has gone up to \$70, and most actors receive far above the minimum. Salaries range generally from \$150 to \$200, some actors get between \$300 and \$400, and several get as much as \$600 a week.

Superficially, then, the Yiddish theater seems to be a sound institution, which has profited by the fact that the Yiddish-speaking immigrant has grown wealthy more quickly than he has assimilated linguistically. But the force which built the Yiddish theater is rapidly spending itself; already a decline has set in. The columns of all the Yiddish papers (even the Communist *Freiheit*) are filled with first-aid advice to the Yiddish theater. The Socialist paper, *Der Worker*, ascribes the decline to the decay of the Yiddish book and to the high wages of the Yiddish actors. Dr. A. Mukdoni, leading Yiddish dramatic critic, in an article in the Hebrew *Hadoar*, blames the "crisis" on the theater owners, who have provided magnificent structures and expensive stars but thoroughly bad plays. Yet it was the very worst of the plays, the mawkish, bloody melodramas of the People's Theater and the senseless operettas of the Second Avenue Theater, not the plays of the Yiddish Art Theater or last year's earnest artistic effort at Irving Place, which carried the Yiddish theater to its pinnacle. No, the theaters are plenty good enough—perhaps too good.

Whence, then, the decline? Samuel Goldenburg, a leading Yiddish actor, has answered the question: the cause is the merciless grinding of the wheels of American industrialism. The immigrant, for whom Yiddish was once an indispensable economic asset, now finds English of supreme importance. The Yiddish immigrant made the Yiddish theater; as he becomes the English-speaking citizen, he will abandon it. It may rest for a while on its present peak of development; but there is no higher pinnacle in view. The movement in the future must be downward.

The Yiddish schools. In 1925 only 10,292 Jewish immigrants were admitted to America; in 1926 only 10,267. Of these, about 16,000 were Yiddish-speaking. Where is the next generation of Yiddish-speakers to come from if not from abroad? Some say from the Yiddish schools and the numerous Talmud Torahs into which Yiddish has recently been introduced. How genuine is this hope, on which the future of Yiddish presumably rests?

In the United States and Canada there are about 215 Yiddish elementary schools, six Yiddish high schools, two teachers' institutions, and one

workers' Yiddish university. Their total enrolment is not more than 16,000.

These schools are more or less uniform in curricula and method of approach. They are secular and radical, and ignore religion and Biblical history. Despite this general uniformity, they may be classified in five different groups.

1. The Workmen's Circle has between ninety-six and 100 schools (twenty-one in New York), three high schools, pedagogical classes, and a summer childrens' camp.

2. The Independent Workers' have thirty-eight elementary schools (thirty in New York), three high, five kindergartens, and one camp. These are a recent development resulting from the 1926 split in the Workmen's Circle when the communistically inclined sections seceded.

3. The National Workers' Alliance with twenty-six schools (six in New York).

4. The Sholom Aleichem Institution with twenty-two schools (twenty in New York), one high school, and two children's camps.

5. Twenty independent schools with no affiliations (two in New York, four in Chicago, three in Detroit, three in Montreal, two in Winnipeg, one in Los Angeles, one in Pittsburg, one in Peabody, Mass., and one in Windsor, Ontario).

These schools, without exception, are very small. Their average enrolment is seventy pupils, and the entire teaching staff (Canada included) does not exceed 270 members, of whom 183 form the Yiddish Teachers' Alliance No. 196, a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Sixty belong to the Workmen's Circle Teachers' Association, and the rest are unorganized. Two Yiddish magazines are edited for the school-children (*Unser Chaver* and *Der Kinder Journal*).

Besides the schools there are three Yiddish institutions of higher learning: the Yiddish Teachers' Seminary in New York, with 150 students enrolled for a three-year course; the Workmen's Circle Teacher Courses at the Rand School, where forty students are registered for a two-year course; and the Yiddish Workers' University of New York (with branches in the Bronx, Brownsville, and Philadelphia), with 300 students in New York alone, and courses in literature, economics, sociology and cognate subjects.

All this, of course, is a ludicrously small apparatus for the perpetuation and spread of Yiddish among the 12,000,000 (estimated) Jews of America. Only 215 schools, of which more than ninety-five per cent are one-teacher schools, with a total enrolment of 16,000, can hardly Yiddishize the American-Jewish child. New York, which has more schools for religious instruction than all the Yiddish schools in this country and Canada together, reaches not more than 30 per cent of the Jewish school population. At most,

the Yiddish school system can reach between 2 and 2.5 per cent of all American-Jewish children of school age, and many of these are touched only for a moment. Of the total enrolment of the Yiddish elementary schools, only about 350 pupils annually enter secondary schools. The rest are hardly future readers and speakers of Yiddish.

It is significant that the Yiddishists themselves do not think of these school-systems as primarily concerned with the perpetuation of Yiddish and Yiddish culture. With the exception of the Sholom Aleichem Institute, the members of which champion Yiddish for its own sake, the schools are interested only in bringing the Yiddish child nearer to his father, the Yiddish worker, so that the younger generation may develop a sympathetic appreciation of the Yiddish-American labor movement. Yiddish teachers are, for the most part, drawn from the Yiddish socialist-radical group, for whom Yiddish is only a convenient vehicle for revolutionary propaganda. When Yiddish passes away in America, these Yiddishists will neither mourn it nor attempt to revive it. They will take up their work in English. As for the Talmud Torahs, some of which have recently introduced Yiddish into their curricula, these medieval institutions will probably have no more success in teaching Yiddish than they have had in teaching Hebrew.

The Orthodox synagogue. The synagogue in the Diaspora, though primarily a place for Hebrew worship, was always a stronghold of Yiddish. The old synagogue is our most conservative institution, yielding to innovation only under great stress, internal and external. So the introduction of English into the service, the abandonment of the Yiddish *maggid*, and the substitution of the English sermon tell only too eloquently of the fate in store for Yiddish. Perhaps even more significant is the care with which all rabbinical institutions train their students in English. Not even in the arch-orthodox Yeshivah of Rabbi Isaac Elchonon is a course in Yiddish given; the teaching is in English. Our social service schools teach some Yiddish. But the Jewish social workers deal with living material (the dying also live), while the rabbis deal with eternal values and apparently *sub specie aeternitatis* Yiddish in America is not important.

There is little data on this highly important trend in the synagogue. But the censuses of religious bodies of the United States (1906 and 1916) show languages used in services. While both censuses are incomplete they are useful and valid for purposes of comparison. In 1906, out of 1,062 religious organizations reporting language of service, 185 or seventeen per cent reported English and Hebrew, while 111 worshiped exclusively in English. One decade later 326 or twenty-one per cent of all congregations reporting used Hebrew and English. The number using only English was not given in this census. On the other hand, the pure Hebrew congregations

had dropped from 746 (70.2 per cent of the total) in 1906 to 521 (33.8 per cent) in 1916. Thus the conservative synagogue is being invaded by English, and the former Yiddish-speaking worshippers are now speaking English in addition to Hebrew during their services.

The awakening of Jewish national consciousness. If present indications may be trusted, the awakened Jewish national consciousness will not strengthen the position of Yiddish in America. For the Jews here it is Hebrew not Yiddish which is considered the medium of Jewish national consciousness. Scattered through the world and speaking as many languages as there were countries, the Jew fervently clung to the exiled tongue, and when modern nationalism came, which everywhere else exalted the plain tongue of the masses, it was Hebrew and not Yiddish that was given a new lease on life. The pre-Zionist and Zionist periods saw an unprecedented efflorescence of Hebrew; it is nationalism projected into speech. Such energies as Zionism will turn to the encouragement of a specifically Jewish language in the United States will be directed toward Hebrew.

If Jewish nationalism cannot keep Yiddish alive in the United States, what can? Certainly utility will not work in its favor, for we have seen that changing conditions in America are increasingly restricting its use. Yiddish thrives in Jewish communities in which social and economic contacts with other people are slight. Such communities have become rare in the United States, and even in those that remain the pressure towards standardization which American civilization exerts seems irresistible. The Jew of the mass immigration has attained a higher standard of living; he has acquired a new business environment; he lives in a new home neighborhood. His range of possible economic activities has widened. He no longer works only in all-Yiddish shops or deals exclusively with Yiddish-speaking customers.

With its old strongholds disintegrating as population shifts, the decline of Yiddish has already set in. That this decline bids within another generation to wipe out Yiddish as a common medium of speech in the United States is a conclusion towards which the facts mustered in this article seem clearly to point.