

Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter:**Talking About Yiddish: Past, Present and . . . ?**

Interviewed By
ISIDORE HAIBLUM

HAIBLUM: The attitude toward Yiddish has changed somewhat over the generations, hasn't it?

SCHAECHTER: It has, indeed. There was a division in Jewish life at one time whereby Hebrew, the language of the Holy Scripture, was used for prayer and for business correspondence, and also to a certain extent in community minutes. Yiddish was the spoken tongue in everyday family and business life and the language of instruction in Talmudic disputation; it was the spoken Jewish language and, as such, had a certain amount of holiness. However, with the beginning of the Haskola (the Enlightenment Movement), Yiddish became the black sheep of the family. The Haskola, you see, wanted the Jewish people to discard Yiddish and to adopt the language of their country of residence. Yiddish was portrayed in the very darkest colors, with all imaginable and imagined defects, and some of the arguments shamefully came straight from the anti-Semitic arsenal.

I remember years ago reading the introduction to a German-Yiddish dictionary published at the end of the 18th century whose author—a baptized Jew—gave his motivation for publishing this Yiddish dictionary. He said, "I want the general population to understand the language the Jews have artificially constructed in order to be able to cheat the Gentiles and dominate the world." And if I'm not mistaken, he actually used the word *jargon*, which, of course, means language of a special group, used in order for other people not to understand it: thieves', students', or soldiers' *jargon* are good examples. So Yiddish was portrayed by some anti-Semites as the language to be used in anti-Gentile conspiracies. Now it seems that the Enlightenment Movement picked up this argument—or rather picked up the term *jargon*—and from there on every bad thing that could conceivably be said about Yiddish was said. One prominent leader of the Haskola called it an animalistic language; another said that the immorality of the Jewish people was to a large extent the result of speaking Yiddish. And these were prominent people—not just anybody, but central figures. And of course the general Jewish community—especially in Western Europe—accepted these absolutely ridiculous accusations.

HAIBLUM: Well, today Yiddish is recognized as a full-fledged Jewish language, one that has aroused keen interest among students and scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish. What would you say are some of the special values associated with Yiddish for the Jewish people?

SCHAECHTER: First of all, Yiddish reflects Jewish life and experience of the last thousand years. In other words, not the Jews of Biblical times, or Talmudic times, but our very own fathers and grandfathers whom we

know by name and with whom we can associate more easily.

HAIBLUM: You're saying that there is a continuity in Yiddish—a living continuity from one generation to another that holds some sort of meaning for Jewish people today?

SCHAECHTER: Yiddish reflects the emotions and habits of our parents, their way of life. For example, there is an interesting study by Dr. Theodore Gutmans, published several years ago, a comparison of a Sholom Aleichem translation into five different languages—English, German, Hebrew, Russian and Ukrainian. Unexpectedly, the closest—the best translation—was the Ukrainian. Now this might seem surprising—a native linguist would no doubt think that the Hebrew translation would turn out closest to Sholom Aleichem. But the Ukrainian and Yiddish lan-

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Born in Cernauti, Rumania, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Vienna and settled in the U.S. in 1951. His home, on a quiet tree-lined avenue in the Bronx, is a Yiddish oasis, a meeting ground for all sorts of Yiddish enthusiasts.



guages both shared the same geographic boundaries. Their cultures rubbed shoulders, so to speak. Now I'm not trying to give an accolade to the Ukrainian language. But it is a fact that we Jews lived in Eastern Europe and developed along the lines of an Eastern European peo-

ple (within the context of Jewish civilization, of course). The Yiddish language reflects this fact of community. Our knowledge of Jewish life 2-3000 years ago is derived almost entirely from the Bible.

Another example: much has been said about Yiddish humor—about



DR. SCHAECHTER

Jewish humor. There are eleven Jewish languages, you know. We usually think only of Hebrew and Yiddish, but there was Aramaic, in which the Talmud and very important prayers were written, Western and Southern Laaz, and Dzhudezmo, better known

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Talking About Yiddish

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as Ladino, and so on. Among these eleven or twelve languages—and perhaps there were even more—Yiddish is the *only* one that developed this special tendency of humor.

HAIBLUM: So you'd say, that Yiddish is a receptacle of Yiddish culture, values and the Jewish experience of the last thousand years?

SCHAECHTER: Yes, precisely, and it has lately become—and I do not mean only in the last two or three years—a means of identifying oneself with the Jewish community at large. This is one of the reasons, I think, Yiddish has become so popular on the American campus, after having been neglected for so long.

HAIBLUM: Just how popular? How many colleges offer Yiddish?

SCHAECHTER: Literally dozens. Our main problem is not students, but teachers. We do not have enough qualified teachers for college courses.

HAIBLUM: Aside from the colleges, there are a number of other institutions spreading Yiddish, aren't there?

SCHAECHTER: There is, first of all, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research founded in Vilno in 1925. It is the main center for scholarship in Yiddish and about Yiddish, as well as Eastern European Jewish history and social life. We have *The Congress for Jewish Culture*, which does literary work, offers a Leivik Prize, the most prestigious Yiddish literary award. *The Congress* publishes a magazine, incidentally, and various important and good books. We have

Benyumen Shekter Foundation for the Advancement of Standard Yiddish, an interesting attempt to raise the funds necessary to help in the standardization and development of the Yiddish language. Usually this task is performed by governmental agencies, but since Yiddish is a language without a government, the necessary funds for its development have to be raised from private sources. There is a youth group, *Yugntruf*, which publishes a magazine written and edited by high school and college students; it is a tremendous success, both psychologically and socially. I should mention the *Goldene keyt* published in Tel Aviv, which is generally considered

to be the best Yiddish literary magazine in the world today, a quarterly edited by A. Sutskever. And, of course, the scholarly publication, *Yidishe shprakh*, about Standard Yiddish.

HAIBLUM: Edited by you. If one were a *meyvin* of Yiddish prose styles, would it be possible to detect the ideology of a speaker from his style of language?

SCHAECHTER: Yes, surely. Sometimes even the words have a different meaning. For example, the word *er-lekh*, if used in a religious context, means *religious*. Spoken by a secular Jew, it means *honest*. If found in a Communist publication, it is used to denote a docile follower of the Party line. The same word has at least three different meanings, depending on who's using it.

HAIBLUM: Yiddish is pretty rich as languages go, yet people keep asking peculiar questions. One is that Yiddish doesn't really have any names for plants or birds. True or false?

SCHAECHTER: No, it is absolutely not true. Of course, Jews are an urban people who have had less contact with nature than some other nations. But we've had Jews working in agriculture all over Eastern Europe, as well as, of course, in Israel, Argentina and Canada, etc. We have Jewish wood choppers in Carpatho-Ukraine; we've had foresters, teachers of botany and so on. Names of plants and animals were never lacking. As far as birds are concerned, in the late 1920s, a list of 510 names of birds in Yiddish was published. As for the names of flowers, trees and other plants, I have been collecting them for the last eight years and I will shortly publish a book which lists thousands of Yiddish botanic terms. So the notion that the Jews only know apples, pears, onion, garlic and horseradish, or something like that, is of course nonsense.

HAIBLUM: How old is Yiddish?

SCHAECHTER: Around a thousand years. If you look up this bit of information in older encyclopedias, they usually say Yiddish originated in the 16th century, but Dr. Max Weinreich and before him Dr. Schloyme Birnboym have authoritatively proved that Yiddish should be dated from the 10th, or even 9th, century.

HAIBLUM: Where did the language originate?

SCHAECHTER: In Western Germany, the region comprising the basin of the Moselle and the left bank of the Rhine, more or less between Cologne and Speyer.

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SCHAECHTER: They were Jews who had immigrated from France and Italy into the above-mentioned region. In other words, they were people speaking the languages that Max Weinreich calls Western Laaz ("Western Judeo-French") and Southern Laaz ("Judeo-Italian"). The fusion of these two languages, as well as Hebrew, with the language they encountered in the region they

ponent was greatly overstated as far as numbers were concerned; the figures given were 20 or 25%, which is simply not correct.

There is something else that should be mentioned in this connection. As we said earlier, many languages consist of several components: English has an Anglo-Saxon, a Romance, a Scandinavian component and so on, along with many words of Indian or other origins. Nobody, however, would hold that against English. The same applies to the components of French, Russian or Rumanian. With Yiddish, however, some people complained that these components made it not really a language. This is quite peculiar, as are many things connected with Yiddish.

the development of the technical vocabulary in Yiddish.

HAIBLUM: Many of these terms have found their way into Uriel Weinreich's Modern Yiddish-English, English-Yiddish Dictionary.

SCHAECHTER: Yes, of course, and some of these terms are now being collected by the Committee on Yiddish Terminology at YIVO. We go through all the source materials and we hope to publish a series of booklets and books on technical terms in Yiddish.

HAIBLUM: Could you give us a word about Yiddish literature perhaps?

SCHAECHTER: Literature is not really my field, but it certainly is my favorite relaxation; one of my greatest pleasures is reading such literary

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settled—various medieval German dialects—produced Yiddish.

HAIBLUM: Then Yiddish began to travel. Can we follow its course?

SCHAECHTER: Certainly; it spread over Central and Southern Germany, Austria, Italy and then into Eastern Europe as far as the Dnieper. Afterwards Yiddish spread to Israel, with the settlement of mystics in the 17th century, and to North and South America, South Africa, and Australia in the 19th and 20th century. Today Yiddish is one of the few languages spoken on all continents, except Antarctica.

HAIBLUM: Isn't Yiddish, like most modern tongues, made up of a number of components?

SCHAECHTER: The main components of Yiddish are Germanic, Hebrew-Aramaic and Slavic. The oldest component was Romance—as I've already pointed out, the Jews came from Romance-speaking countries. A few words that are very common even today are at least a thousand years old, like *bentshn*, to bless, or *tsholnt*, and names like Yente, Shprintse, Bunem, Shneyer hail from this pre-Germanic age and belong to the once very numerous Romance component. But as of today, there aren't more than 40 or 50 words left of this particular component.

HAIBLUM: Some percentages?

SCHAECHTER: Probably over 80% Germanic, about 10% Slavic and—surprisingly—well under 10% Hebrew-Aramaic. In a study undertaken by Yudel Mark, the editor of the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*, he and his assistant, J. Noskowitz, as well as a group of students of the Jewish Teachers Seminary, counted three million running words in various Yiddish texts and they came up with only 160,000 words of Hebrew-Aramaic origin; very small indeed.

The role of Hebrew-Aramaic is much larger, however, than its percentage would indicate. Some of the most crucial concepts of Judaism, as well as a number of very important terms of business and family life, are expressed in this component. But in many old reference books the com-

Jews, you see, were not always proud of their linguistic heritage, of their Yiddish language, and one of the reasons given was the merged character of Yiddish; it was called *the mixed language*, which was supposed to be something shameful. I can't imagine why.

HAIBLUM: At its peak, how many spoke Yiddish?

SCHAECHTER: Between 10 and 11 million before Hitler began his war of extermination against the Jewish people.

HAIBLUM: And today?

SCHAECHTER: Around four million.

HAIBLUM: Those 11 million lived where?

SCHAECHTER: Around seven million in Eastern Europe, but the rest all over the world, in North America, South America and so forth. Israel had 700,000 Yiddish speakers before World War II.

HAIBLUM: Today, the Yiddish centers are?

SCHAECHTER: In the U.S., Israel, the Soviet Union—as far as numbers are concerned—and smaller centers in Argentina, Canada, Mexico, Australia, South Africa.

HAIBLUM: Tell me, Dr. Schaechter, did ORT make any contributions to the development of the Yiddish language?

SCHAECHTER: Yes, this is most interesting. ORT was a pioneer, not only in teaching trades, but also in developing technical terminologies in Yiddish. An article was published in the current issue of *Yidishe shprakh* by Leybl Kahn on the various committees on Yiddish terminology, groups that worked for the development of technical terminology in Yiddish, and Kahn devoted an entire chapter to ORT. ORT in Kiev in 1918 first collected the terminology of many diverse Jewish trades, and then helped coin the new words which were needed for its courses, its technical schools in Eastern Europe. What I just said about the ORT terminological commission in Kiev also applies to the ORT schools in Poland and Lithuania and so on. ORT, by its involvement with the technical training of Jewish youth, has definitely contributed to

giants as Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Elyezer Shteynbarg, Bergelson, Kulbak, Leyeles, Manger, Glatshteyn, Bashevits-Singer, Sutskever, Grade. I mention these names with joy and sadness—joy, that they are available to Yiddish readers; sadness, that only some are available in English. Perhaps soon they will be.

HAIBLUM: How about a final statement on attitudes?

SCHAECHTER: The attitudes toward Yiddish are not good, even though they have improved significantly. Yiddish is still the underdog in Ashkenazic Jewish life. Yiddish publications are not subsidized while publications in English—Anglo-Jewish publications—are. Yiddish schools, especially in New York, remain unsupported by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. There is a long list where we are able to point out fact after fact of discrimination against Yiddish; and not merely imponderables—but in dollars and cents.

HAIBLUM: In other words, the old unscholarly prejudices still seem to exist.

SCHAECHTER: And how!

HAIBLUM: Do you think Yiddish has a future?

SCHAECHTER: The future of Yiddish looks bleak, but unlike the weather, something can be done about it. It is bleak, not only because Hitler has exterminated a vital and creative part of the Jewish people (and Stalin finished his job), but because the remaining millions of Jews are not emotionally enough involved in the survival of Yiddish, do not make the necessary efforts and sacrifices, financial and otherwise, do not do their share to preserve this enormous treasure of Jewish life. If we could change this attitude, if we could engage Jewish youth in larger numbers, if we could drag along the old and tired leadership, Yiddish might have a brighter future. Right now I must tell you that when I enter my Yiddish classes at Columbia—I have three classes there—and when I see the enthusiasm of the students, their willingness to learn and to do, their declarations of love to Yiddish, I must say I become an optimist again.

THE FILM REPORTER

(Continued from page 4)

party at Nuremberg, emerges from Ophuls' film unscathed and indeed barely mentioned is a mystery.

And finally, it lasts too long without ever becoming focused. Ophuls uses such quick juxtapositions (short excerpts from interviews with Albert Speer and Daniel Ellsberg in quick succession) that he rarely allows the mind time to grasp what the eyes and nerves react to.

As well, for a film on the Nuremberg Trials, "The Memory of Justice" contains surprisingly and distressingly little about the Holocaust save for some of the usual still shots of mass graves and other concentration camp horror scenes. The sense of righteous wrath manifested by the likes of Telford Taylor in the film clips from the Trials selected by Ophuls seems curious given this lack of sufficient historical and emotional perspective.

Even more curiously, Ophuls spends a great deal of time on the effects—or lack thereof—of the Holocaust and the Nuremberg Trial on modern German life, especially in an oddly effective scene shot in a mixed sauna among a group of young, and nude, Germans. Except for a few passing references to the Eichmann Trial, however, almost no footage is devoted to the aftershocks of the Holocaust and the Trial on modern Jewish life in general and on Israeli society in particular. Rather, almost the entire second half of the film is devoted to analogies between Nuremberg, and Vietnam and Algeria.

If much of Ophul's documentary footage is extraordinary, if his interviewing is usually both skillful and subtle, both these facts cannot hide the unfortunate fact that this film is almost completely lacking in focus.

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