

From the Folk to the Academics: Study and Research of Yiddish after the Holocaust

Abraham Novershtern

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE LOSS

In the late 1950s, with the first indications in the United States that Yiddish would be given academic status, the poet H. Leivick gave a speech in which he warned of the fate of the language as follows: "I said to myself: look, Yiddish and its literature is soon to reach the upper echelons. But isn't there some fear stirring in your heart, since at the same time Yiddish is departing from the lower echelons of the people?"¹

Leivick's words at the time were echoed widely since they gave precise expression to what seems even now to be the paradoxical fate of Yiddish: the language whose exponents were so proud of its being a language of the masses and of its wide usage, characteristics which made it a bridge between different Jewish communities, is fast disappearing from the marketplace and byways of life, and only small, specialized groups work towards maintaining it.

As expected, Leivick concluded his speech with a plea not to accept this situation, and to try to preserve Yiddish as a spoken language for the Jewish people in its dispersion. But this call, and many others like it, fell on deaf ears. The decline of Yiddish as an everyday language is an ongoing process which seems irreversible. Only among groups of the ultra-Orthodox does Yiddish preserve its status as a spoken language, as another component conferring a unique quality on this way of life which is impermeable to changing times. The Yiddish which until a generation ago was heard in the streets of New York and Buenos Aires, Kiev and Paris, Tel Aviv and Melbourne has retreated to much more limited pockets: it has become the possession of aging groups of speakers, and in the best of cases is the object of yearning of a few of their children or grandchildren, whose ears still catch a Yiddish song and enjoy it, even though in most instances they no longer speak the language fluently.

How can one maintain the treasures of the spoken language and pass on its flavor, nuances, and subtleties to a generation which no longer speaks it? This almost Sisyphean aim was and remains one of the main goals of research on Yiddish, which has exercised more than two generations of scholars.

Those who took up this burden, propelled by a deep sense of urgency, were that very generation for which Yiddish occupied a central place in its cultural world and served as its prime channel of cultural expression: those Jewish intellectuals who were educated in Eastern Europe, although a large part of their research work was carried out elsewhere. The first to sense that time was running out and who geared up for the task of collecting and preserving Yiddish intensively, even at the beginning of the 20th century, were the folklorists (of whom we will speak in detail below). In other disciplines one must note the linguists Solomon Birnbaum, Judah A. Joffe, Yudel Mark, Max and Uriel Weinreich, the historian Jacob Shatzky, and the literary critics Nahum Baruch Minkoff and Samuel Niger. Some of them did not have formal academic training, and their ongoing work was not carried out in the framework of any academic institution at all; there is no doubt that this deficiency has left its traces in their work, but despite that they did have one decisive advantage — intimate acquaintance with the deepest levels of the language and all of its complex byways as well as rootedness in the world from which the new cultural identity of Yiddish had developed and grown.

Both the capabilities and limitations of this generation can be seen in the important, post-Holocaust project intended to perpetuate Yiddish literary activity: in 1956 the first volume of the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* ("Biographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Litera-

ture") was published in New York City and only a full generation later, in 1981, was the undertaking completed. A supplementary volume was published in 1986 by Berl Kagan. These books are brimming with rich, varied material which make them a primary resource for anyone dealing with this field. However, the bibliographical underpinning is often lacking, and many biographies were written without proper critical perspective. The deaths of the original editors, Niger and Shatzky, prior to the appearance of the first volume, left a decided gap which could not be filled as the work progressed. Thus, the reader can easily see through the course of the volumes just how pressing the hour was with regard to comprehensive projects such as these in the field of Yiddish.

That same generation which grew up against a natural backdrop of Yiddish can claim to its credit after the Holocaust two first-rate lexicographical projects: in 1950 there appeared under the auspices of the YIVO in New York, *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* ("Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language") by Nahum Stutchkoff, edited by Max Weinreich. This was the first collection of the lexical treasurehouse of the language, including words, idioms, and sayings, listed according to subjects along the pattern of a thesaurus. Then, once the rich corpus of the Yiddish language had been gathered in a manner which was much more valuable than any previous dictionary of the language, the need was felt even more urgently for additional works.

The material which Stutchkoff had collected did indeed serve as the cornerstone for a multifaceted lexicographical undertaking, *Groyser verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh* ("Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language"), the first volume of which appeared in 1961 under the editorship of Judah A. Joffe and Yudel Mark. After the death of Joffe, Mark became the sole editor: towards the end of his life he transferred the project from New York to Jerusalem, and there appeared after his death a fourth volume (1980) of the dictionary, after which no more have as yet been published. The four current volumes have some 80,000 lexical entries, words, expressions, and sayings, completing the entries for the letter *alef*. On the surface one might think that this project is still near the beginning, but because the *alef* is employed for a number of the most common functional, grammatical particles in Yiddish, particularly as the prefix of many verb roots, it is reasonable to assume that the volumes now available contain about one-third of the entire vocabulary of Yiddish.

These volumes are impressive testimony to the ability of a generation of researchers who grew up within the world of Yiddish to interpret and explain its finest nuances to the point of unlocking the hidden treasures of the spoken language. Even when at times the reader is surprised to find that the editors have given an additional meaning for a specific lexical entry, one which does not at first glance add to the previous definition, it turns out after looking again that the editors have discerned an additional shade of meaning which otherwise would have totally escaped the user and which would be irretrievable.

If one compares the method of definition of entries in the *Groyser verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh* to that employed in similar dictionaries in other languages it is immediately noticeable that the editors did not follow a goal of limiting themselves in their definitions, but in most instances this turned out better than would be expected; the overly lengthy definitions contain invaluable linguistic and cultural information, and turn those volumes of the dictionary which have appeared thus far into a first-rate document for becoming acquainted with the widely variegated world of speakers of Yiddish throughout its history and in its different centers.

Yet, in certain areas faults are revealed which are the result of the lack of a wide enough research base, the kind needed for such a comprehensive project. Since Yudel Mark was Lithuanian, in many instances there is noticeable a certain lack of drawing upon other dialects of Yiddish, particularly the documentation of Polish Yiddish. There are also gaps in citations from literary material which are in addition inconsistent. Moreover, the editors faced an almost insurmountable difficulty which is inherent in the language and the conditions under which it developed. Yiddish developed by contact with the surrounding languages in each and every place; it absorbed from them various influences and borrowed many words — some which took root in the language and others which soon fell into disuse. In the distribution of Yiddish outside of Eastern Europe the speakers added many words from English, Spanish, French, and Modern Hebrew, and some of them entered the written language as well, especially in newspapers which did not take care to maintain a fitting level of literary language. The editors of the dictionary faced a serious problem in deciding what standard to apply to such words — to include a great many or to exercise caution in listing words, taken from the surrounding languages, whose right to existence in normative, literary Yiddish is doubtful. In most instances the editors dealt with these words quite graciously, frequently "hosting" them — but it is not possible to say in every instance that their decision is acceptable beyond any doubt.

Following the death of Yudel Mark the dictionary project was continued jointly by a number of academic institutions: Columbia University, the City College of the City University of New York, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in association with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York). This cooperation is intended to insure the continuation and completion of this enor-

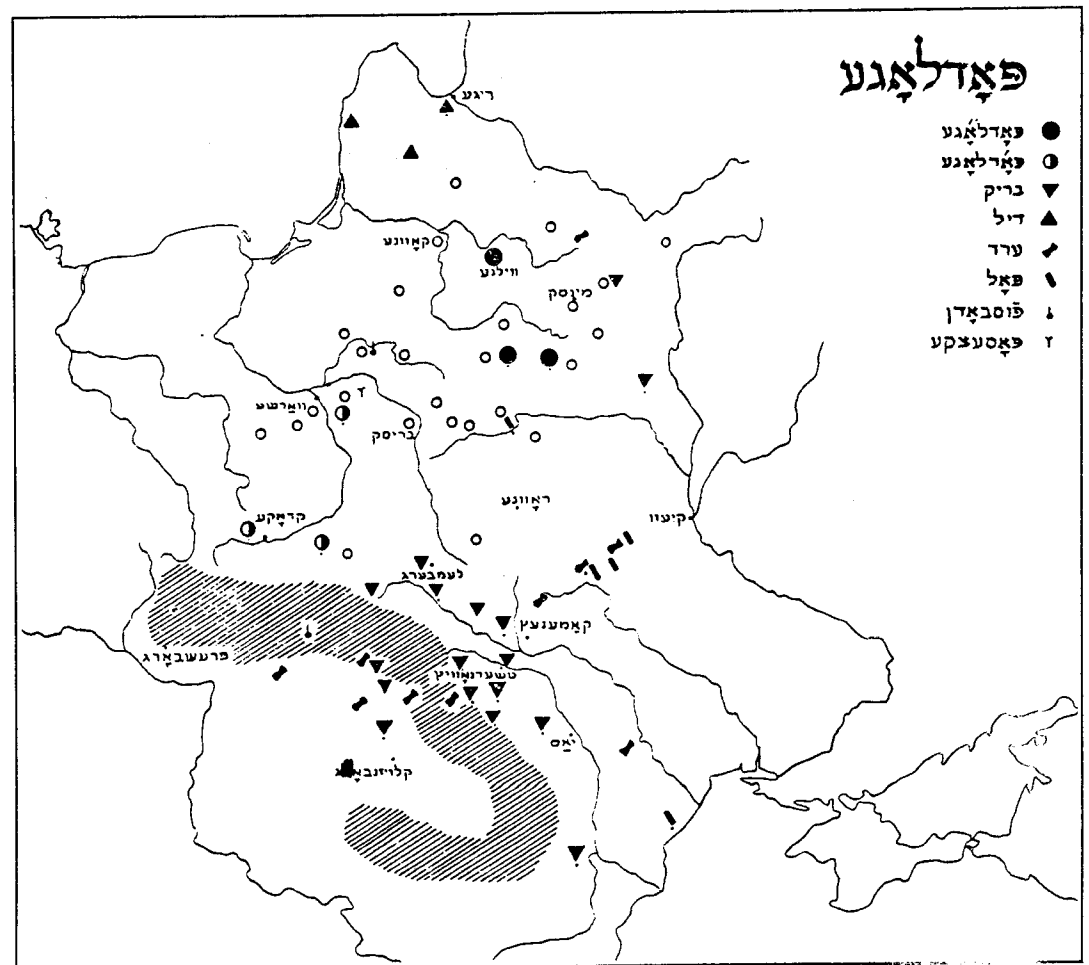


Yudel Mark

mous undertaking which will offer the future generations a rich panorama of the treasures of the language at its different levels and will rescue them from the threat of extinction; this is a task whose importance and urgency is almost impossible to overstate.

Yet, the continuation and completion of this huge project does not fully pay its debt to research or fulfil its obligations to the spoken language. The variety of dialects in Yiddish is a basic fact of the existence of the language, and it is seen at its every level beginning with the phonological — the ways of pronouncing the consonants and vowels — by the fact that in different areas different words were used to name the very same object, and ending with various grammatical differences. The documentation of this great linguistic richness was the main object behind *The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry*. The aims, scope, and methodology of this project were determined by Uriel Weinreich in 1959, and after his untimely death in 1967 has been under the direction of Marvin I. Herzog at Columbia University (New York). Tens of informants were carefully chosen in order to give balanced representation to the geographical distribution of Yiddish. They were given a detailed questionnaire to complete, the answers to which document all of the aspects of use of the language and the different, varied ways in which it expresses the dimensions of the material and spiritual existence of its speakers. It is obvious that the atlas drew most of its material from Eastern European speakers, but it also documented the remnant of the spoken language from the western part of the continent — Holland, Alsace and Switzerland — and the data gathered now indicate links, which have not as yet been sufficiently studied, between different centers of Yiddish over a very wide territory in Europe. As time passes and the speakers of the language become evermore distanced from their places of origin, from the locations in which their spoken language was in its natural setting, the value of the abundant oral documentation gathered thus far in the atlas increases. The anticipated appearance of its first volumes in the near future will add another element in the ongoing struggle between research plus the collecting of the treasures of the language and the destructive processes of forgetting and decline.

Another area which is nearing the zero hour is that of collecting Yiddish folklore from every aspect — folksongs, sayings, jokes, folktales, folkplays (the "Purim shpil"). Awareness of the urgency of the situation certainly became more critical after the Holocaust and the ensuing linguistic assimilation, but in actuality this is not a new phenomenon, and was the motivation for the



Distribution of different Yiddish words for 'floor' — one of the maps prepared for *The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry*

researchers of Jewish folklore at the outset. Even prior to World War I Y. L. Cahan wrote, in the introduction to a large collection of Yiddish folksongs which he had gathered and published, of the slow decline of the genre, particularly in the big cities, to the point that "it seems to me that it will not be long before the original folksong will become a thing of the past."² If this were true at a time when the sounds of Yiddish were heard everywhere in Jewish Eastern Europe, it is quite obvious how much the recent decades have made the issue of preserving the fruits of Yiddish folklore ever more pressing. New systems of methodology in the study of folklore and the technical means now available to the researcher make possible today more authentic documentation. Thanks to the efforts of Ruth Rubin, Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and others we now have hundreds of recordings of Yiddish folksongs, which are housed in different collections in Canada, the United States, and Israel. The Jewish Folksong Archives, founded by Meir Noy, which is located in Bar-Ilan University, contain cardfiles with detailed information on thousands of songs in Hebrew and Yiddish, on the lyricists and on the tunes, and on the place in which they were printed. In the area of the folktale the leading institute is the Israel Folktale Archives at Haifa University which sets down the tales of stories of the different Jewish ethnic communities; unfortunately a large part of the material was not taken down from East European informants in the Yiddish original but in Hebrew translation instead.

Another musical aspect is under the wing of the Weinstein Archive of YIVO Sound Recordings which assiduously preserves popular Yiddish folksongs that were recorded on 78 rpm records, rerecording them and overseeing their redistribution.³ The last fact yielded results which went beyond the area of pure collecting: the archive became the source for material for those groups which are working with *klezmer* music in the United States, and the artists turn to the archives with requests for texts and tunes in order to build their repertoire. Precisely in the area of popular culture we see the value and power of collecting as a means for growth and influence, even if only modestly, on contemporary Jewish cultural life. "The people of the book," which already for the most part cannot read that which was written in a language spoken by them until two or three generations ago, now maintains its link to it through the sounds of its music. While knowledge of Yiddish is continuously declining among the children and grandchildren of its speakers, the Yiddish song at times becomes its only living memory.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

In the period between the two world wars, when Yiddish cultural activity in all of its manifestations reached its zenith, the Soviet Union was the only country in which Yiddish was granted a recognized status by research institutes and university-level academic institutions. This situation drew scholars from other countries to Russia, such as Max Erik and Meyer Wiener, who hoped to pursue their research uninhibitedly in Russia. But reality upset their dreams and the ideological pressure, the persecution, and arrests severely limited them and did not allow their rich talents to reach full expression. However, many pages of their works in the fields of linguistics, literature, and folklore do in any event constitute even up to the present a touchstone for the younger generations of scholars. Conversely, in Poland and in the United States, in which millions of Jews spoke Yiddish, recognition of this language in any academic forum was only a distant, unrealistic dream. Interest in Yiddish and its literature on the part of many individuals and scholars from the widest possible backgrounds had, to be sure, a long and interesting history, beginning in the late 16th century. With regard to a period much closer to that under discussion one must mention the first comprehensive work on Yiddish literature of the 19th century which was published in 1899 by Leo Wiener who was then an instructor and later a professor of Slavic languages in Harvard University.⁴ Yet this interest of individuals did not lead to the permanent recognition of Yiddish as a field of learning in any Western university.

Thus, the intensive research activity on Yiddish outside the borders of Russia was concentrated, between the two world wars, in an institution which was established at the initiative of Yiddishist circles. The beginning of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research is to be found in meetings which took place in 1925 in Berlin which was then the center for the Jewish intellectuals who had left Russia in the early years of the Revolution. But to those who participated in those discussions it was clear that the institution could not exist in a western cosmopolitan city if it did not have a significant pool of enthusiasts and willing hands to do the work, a pool which might be found — or so they hoped — within the broad spectrum of Yiddish speakers. Thus it was decided to set up the institution in Vilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," the city with a glorious historical tradition in which there were only weak signs of linguistic or cultural assimilation. Branches of YIVO were active in other countries and cities, particularly in New York. After the outbreak of WWII and the destruction of the Vilna center, the New York branch became the new center of this institution. This was to a great extent due to the intensive work of Max Weinreich, a central figure



Uriel Weinreich (Courtesy Columbia University, New York)



YIVO building in Vilna before World War II (Courtesy YIVO, New York)

in YIVO from its establishment, who had managed to escape Europe at the beginning of the war and to reach America.

After the end of the war an infinite amount of patience and deep faith was necessary even to hope for the continuation of research on Yiddish. Of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, there remained but a few glowing embers. The institutes for Yiddish research in Russia had suffered greatly in the purges at the end of the 1930s and from the Nazi occupation; what little remained after the Holocaust was destroyed along with the other familiar manifestations of Jewish culture at the end of 1948. Yet, a number of scholars who had managed to flee in time from the Holocaust and reach safety, such as Max Weinreich and Yudel Mark, dedicated their lives to serving as a real link between the two periods and the two totally differing cultural milieux, prewar Eastern Europe and postwar America. They strove with all their might to continue their scientific activities on a soil which seemed totally unfit for it.

At the end of the 1940s the first significant attempts were made at blazing a trail for the teaching of Yiddish at universities in the United States. A few years later saw the founding of two university frameworks for the teaching and research of Yiddish which were of signal importance, in Israel on the one hand and in the United States on the other. In 1951 the Yiddish Department was established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under Dov Sadan, and in 1953 Uriel Weinreich, the son of Max Weinreich, was appointed assistant professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture on the Atran Chair at Columbia University in New York.

Their students and their students' students are today responsible for the study and instruction of Yiddish which have found their place in several academic institutions: Jewish Theological Seminary (New York), McGill University (Montreal), Ohio State University, Queens College (CUNY), University of Texas at Austin, University of California at Los Angeles, University of Michigan, and a number of other academic institutions in the United States and Canada where scholars make the research of Yiddish their central aim. The emphasis in the United States is on the research and teaching of Modern Yiddish Literature. In Europe one finds, among other places, scholars of Yiddish in Oxford University and a group of Germanic Language scholars carry on intensive work at the University of Trier (West Germany) concentrating on the study of Old Yiddish literature. However, the Yiddish Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem remains, as of now, the only independent framework dealing with all the aspects of Yiddish — old and new literature, language, and folklore. Programs for the teaching of Yiddish and its literature now exist at all other Israeli universities as well.

After the deaths of Max and Uriel Weinreich two projects were undertaken which symbolize the desire to maintain continuity and renewed growth in the research field which had suffered so much from the vicissitudes of Jewish history in recent decades. In 1968 the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research established the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies, which provides a framework for graduate training and post-doctoral specializing in the fields of Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies. The same year Columbia University in cooperation with YIVO, established the Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture, which annually enables students of every level, by means of an intensive, comprehensive program, to make their first acquaintance with Yiddish and its literature and follow more advanced studies. The continued success of this program prompted other institutions to follow in its footsteps, and



The destroyed Vilna YIVO building — a factory stands on the site (Courtesy YIVO, N.Y.)

there are now summer courses in Yiddish in Oxford, Jerusalem, and Bar-Ilan University.

Before the Holocaust, studies on Yiddish and its literature were marked by ideological clashes which were at times quite severe, particularly between those who were working in the Soviet Union on the one hand and the YIVO people in Poland and the United States on the other. But in the final analysis these were internal arguments, since most of the scholars had come from very similar cultural and educational backgrounds. Today the situation is different: the study and teaching of Yiddish is spread over three continents, and is in the hands of people who work in variegated, differing conceptual and cultural contexts. This does ensure mutual inspiration and crossfertilization, but any advantages inherent in the situation are dependent upon the ability of those working in the field to maintain a common framework of reference, while recognizing the achievements of the past and the value of innovation.



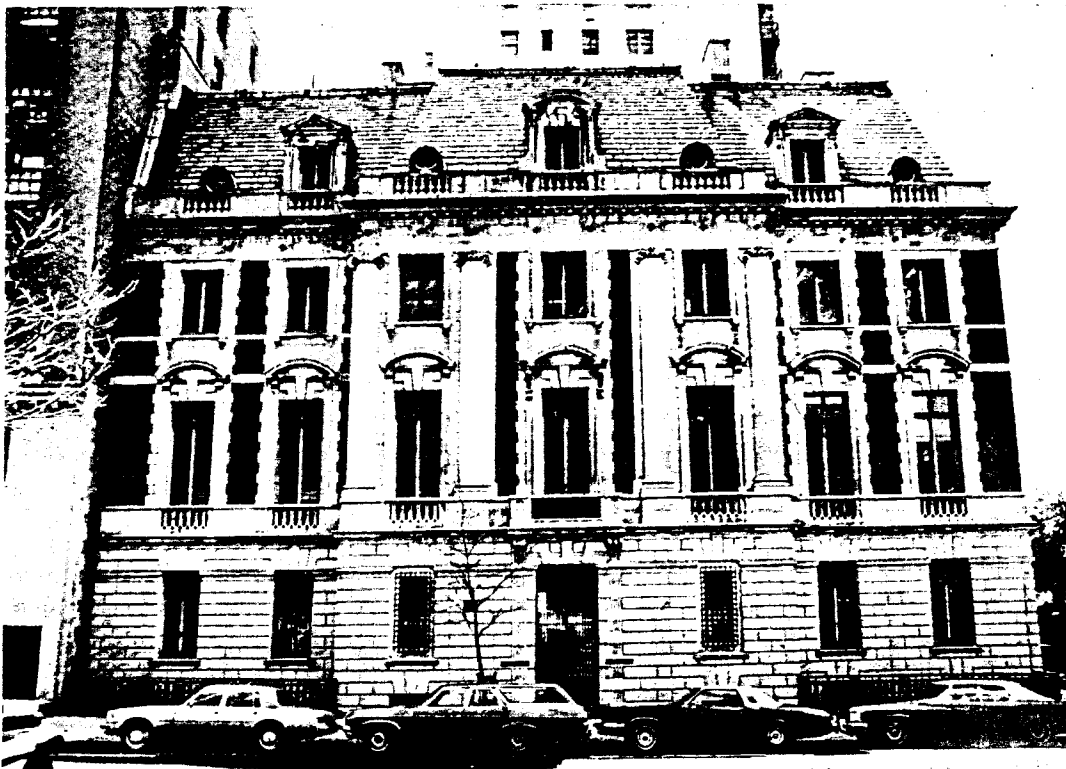
Dov Sadan (Courtesy Hebrew University, Jerusalem; photo Ricarda Schwerin, Jerusalem)

YIDDISH RESEARCH IN THE PREVIOUS GENERATION: CONCEPTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The New Cultural Context. Throughout its history Yiddish was the language of a minority group which maintained within itself a very high degree of internal unity. It is therefore not surprising that the history of both the language and its literature serves as an illustrative example of the complex, tense relations between internal traditions and external influences; parallel phenomena can also be discerned in the development of Yiddish research.

Until the beginning of the 20th century the researchers of Yiddish, with almost no exception, were people who did not use it as a spoken language or as a means for writing. This is true certainly for the non-Jews, such as J. Johann Christoph Wagenseil and J. Schudt as well as for those who turned to Yiddish for pragmatic reasons (including missionaries). Even the outstanding scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Leopold Zunz and Moritz Steinschneider, fell into this category. Only at the start of the 20th century, with the firm development of the awareness of the national value of Yiddish as a cultural artifact did there begin to develop in Eastern Europe the study of Yiddish — in Yiddish; the high point of this work was reached with the work which was carried on between the two world wars, in Russia on the one hand and in YIVO on the other.

The researchers, for whom Yiddish was both their mother tongue and the language in which they wrote their scientific studies, considered themselves as a party to the wideranging cultural creativity, which included schools, newspapers and journals, publishing, and theaters. It is difficult to name many individuals from this period whose only occupation was research: those involved in research were, in addition, active in Jewish parties, newspapers, criticism, or high school or open university teaching in Yiddish. They particularly liked to emphasize the fact that whereas their predecessors had approached Yiddish from the outside, simply as a “dry” object of



YIVO building in New York (Courtesy YIVO, New York)



Graduation day at the Uriel Weinreich Summer Yiddish Program at YIVO, 1983 (Courtesy YIVO, New York)

research, they saw it as a living possession of the people which they were obliged to nurture within the framework of the entire range of cultural artifacts. It is no wonder then that parts of their work seem overly "forced" to contemporary readers, as writing which integrated research with journalism and which attempted to promote a clearly defined ideological position. This is true mainly for work carried out in Russia, particularly in the 1930s, in which references were made to statements by Lenin and Stalin, interpolations which the writers added by force or by choice and were an obligatory companion to almost any scientific article. But even the scholars for whom scientific objectivity was their guiding light did not think that research free of ideological bases was an ideal to strive for, and it was clear to all of them that their work fit into a wider cultural context.

This cultural context was totally destroyed in the Holocaust, the annihilation of Jewish cultural institutions in Russia, and by linguistic assimilation in both east and west. The people who spoke their own language, who were the potential addressees and the frame of reference of values for scientific work on Yiddish and in Yiddish, no longer existed. Also gone was the network of schools which had needed terminology in Yiddish for every subject, from physics to psychology. With the teaching of the language gradually tapering off, the issues of normativeness which in their time had led to great controversies, were no longer pressing, as for example the question whether or not it was necessary to strive for a universally accepted pronunciation. The abandoning of Yiddish as a spoken language necessarily led to a great decline in the fields of study and interest on the part of the researchers. But the new cultural situation, in which other balances were created for the maintenance of Yiddish in a bilingual or multilingual framework, led the scholars to emphasize other aspects and to raise new questions. As in any field of research in the humanities, in this instance too, the present was leaving its mark on the approaches being applied in studying the past.

The Achievement of Max Weinreich. The path of Max Weinreich is an outstanding example of this process. Upon arrival in the U.S. in 1940 he immediately understood how different was the new cultural context in which he had to work; in his lectures and letters he repeatedly compared and contrasted Jewish New York and Vilna, the city which he had left before the war. But such a comparison could only reinforce within him the ever-heightening awareness that even those few elements of similarity between the two communities which he still found when he came to New York were eroding right before his eyes. Thus Weinreich faced a difficult challenge: in light of the drastic painful change in the cultural context, between prewar Vilna and postwar New York, there developed the need to reach a conceptual and even ideological reorganization.

In this regard there is in the research of Yiddish no more fascinating document than Max Weinreich's magnum opus, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh* (4 volumes, New York, 1973; partial English edition, *History of the Yiddish Language*, translated by Shlomo Noble [Chicago, 1980]). This great synthetic work depicts the history of Yiddish in a wide cultural framework. The book itself is noteworthy first and foremost for its advances in research; but some of its more sub-



Max Weinreich (Courtesy YIVO, New York)

tle dimensions are just as valuable: on the one hand, its ideological premises and the conclusions drawn from them, and on the other — a feature which seems “superfluous” — the style and ways of approaching the material.

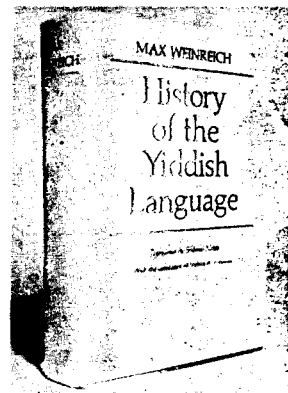
On every page of the book (in the original, of course) the reader can palpably feel that in this case the method of exposition has its own latent significance; Weinreich’s style attempted most earnestly to combine the rich vitality of the spoken language with characteristics which typify scientific language, which demands precision and the ability to express nuances. In his search for a way to build and formulate his statements Weinreich did not use readymade examples from English or German, because he believed that such a scientific work as this in Yiddish must be seen and read differently. Thus his work became a wonderful revelation of the combination of the folk and academy, of scientific style in Yiddish which knows whence it stemmed, and the hidden richness of the spoken language.

The backbone of the book is the discussion which goes into infinite examples of the mutual relations between language and culture; Weinreich expresses and summarizes the ideas of thinkers and scholars who preceded him and he defines Yiddish as the language of “the Way of the Shas [Talmud]” among Ashkenazi Jewry, of the traditional Jewish way of life. In light of this definition readers can only wonder (and become ever more convinced as they go on) whether Weinreich is implicitly questioning the chances of maintaining Yiddish in the Diaspora among secular Jews outside of its natural cultural framework. But it is striking that Weinreich, the scholar who once subscribed to secular Yiddish ideologies, does not raise this problem explicitly. His detailed discussion of the link between Yiddish and Yiddishkayt raises many problematic questions that cannot be avoided by the sensitive reader, but they remain outside of the scope of this comprehensive work. In the section preceding the discussion of more specific aspects of research, Weinreich for the first time set up a broad, conceptual framework of great momentum for dealing with all of the languages of the Jews, and thereby laid the foundations for a new area of research: interlinguistics of Jewish languages, one which in recent years has become of greater interest. Weinreich showed, with a great many examples, how Yiddish had become a fertile field for the melding of the languages of the surrounding environment — Romance languages, German, and Slavic languages — along with the special status given to Hebrew, *lashon ha-kodesh* (holy tongue), in traditional Jewish society. The nature of Yiddish as a fusion language of various linguistic elements is not therefore just a plain linguistic fact, but a multidimensional intersection of language and culture. A large part of Weinreich’s book is devoted to the description and analysis of the phenomena of bilingualism and multilingualism among Ashkenazi Jewry in particular and in other Jewish groups as well — between Hebrew and the spoken language of the Jews or between these and the surrounding language. Thus Max Weinreich’s work is outstanding in its decidedly interdisciplinary nature. His discussions and analysis of pure linguistic facts touches on and illuminates other areas as well, such as the history of the Jews, folklore, literary history, and sociolinguistics.

Bilingual Dictionaries. An illustrative and even paradoxical example of the possibilities and limitations simultaneously at hand in the new cultural situation in Yiddish research is the work which by its very nature was aimed at bridging cultures — the bilingual dictionary. These dictionaries were always the high road for Yiddish lexicography, because they were intended initially to answer practical needs, and in modern times their main aim was to teach European languages to the Yiddish speaker. By contrast Uriel Weinreich’s dictionary, *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* (1968), which no doubt is one of the most important Yiddish lexicographical undertakings in this generation turned the tables; it was aimed first and foremost at the reader who wanted to acquire Yiddish as an active language. Towards this Weinreich gives a detailed grammatical description of each lexical item in Yiddish, a description which has no parallel in any earlier dictionary of the language, either in its attention to grammatical details or in its clear objective of making normative decisions. However, the double two-language format used in the dictionary led to a definite limiting of the entries chosen. That being the case, students in need of a reference tool to help them understand Yiddish literary texts should turn to the older dictionary by Alexander Harkavy, *Yiddish English Hebrew Dictionary* (1928; also in photo offset, 1988), but as a dictionary it is of lower quality than that of Weinreich. One sees even more clearly just how high the price of the current imbalance between English and Yiddish is for the dictionary’s potential audience, precisely because Weinreich intended his dictionary to be used both by active Yiddish speakers and by passive readers of the language. Though each audience is equally well served by this faultless book, the latter audience is in actuality much larger than the former — and its needs cannot be adequately met in a work of limited scope that tries to cater to two objectives.

Research on Old Yiddish Literature. The study of Old Yiddish literature — the corpus of works written up to the end of the 18th century — is one of the branches of Yiddish which has the longest tradition, leading back to the period of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*; in this field contemporary scholars can draw on the achievements of the past and benefit from them; yet with a view to a certain continuity in the research tradition, it can be easily discerned that the difference in the cul-

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History of the Yiddish Language by Max Weinreich

tural context led to new emphases in the research conducted and to a different general perspective.

When the oldest extant Yiddish manuscript — the Cambridge Codex of 1382 — was published, it aroused controversy between one of the German scholars, J. W. Marchand, and Max Weinreich: Is one to relate to the works in the manuscript as German literature written in Hebrew letters, or to consider it as the beginning of Yiddish literature — despite the fact that the language used reveals scarcely any distinctive features compared to the German language of that period?⁵ The dispute did not revolve around the facts themselves but on their interpretation, or rather, on the context in which the researcher tries to explain them. In this regard their disagreement was the forerunner of two trends in the study of Old Yiddish. Today there are indeed discernible two different cultural contexts for this discipline: the current generation of Germanic scholars, located in the University of Trier (Hans Peter Althaus, Walter Roll, Erika Timm) are particularly noteworthy for their careful editing of texts and their analysis of them (despite the significant limitation imposed by their publishing the texts in Latin characters); they naturally contribute to the understanding of phenomena of Old Yiddish literature by virtue of their approach and training as Germanic scholars. By contrast, among the scholars in Jerusalem (Kh. Shmeruk, Ch. Turniansky, S. Zfatman) a different methodological perspective has been developed, which mainly stresses the internal Jewish context of the works in Old Yiddish literature, and the close relations with Hebrew works of the same period, a contact whose most noticeable manifestation is the bilingual writing — a work written simultaneously in Hebrew and in Yiddish.

In the first comprehensive works on the history of Old Yiddish literature, written in the 1920s and 1930s by Max Erik, Max Weinreich, and Israel Zinberg,⁶ the ideological tendency of the writers were clearly discernible in their special appreciation of the “secular” aspects in Old Yiddish works. Kh. Shmeruk basically revised this approach in his book *Sifrut Yiddish: Perakim le-Toldoteha* (Tel Aviv, 1978; Yiddish translation, 1988) which is based on a much wider corpus, including texts discovered in the past few decades (the most significant being the Cambridge manuscript mentioned above). He analyzed Old Yiddish literature with regard to its status and role in the traditional Jewish society in Ashkenaz. Within this context it is clear that the sharp division which his predecessors had made between the “secular” and “religious” aspects of Old Yiddish literature is quite artificial. The new conceptual system stresses the centrality of the Bible as a source and inspiration for Old Yiddish literature, and understanding its importance makes it possible to demonstrate the mutual link between the genres which previously were taken to be distinct — direct translations of the Bible, paraphrases of the Bible, homiletical works (which gave Old Yiddish literature its most popular book, the *Ze'ena u-Re'ena*), biblical epic poetry, and plays based on biblical themes which were presented as *Purim-shpils*.

In his studies of Old Yiddish literature Shmeruk cited phenomena parallel to those which Weinreich noted in the history of the language itself: traditional Jewish society, from which the Yiddish language and literature developed, could not absorb cultural artifacts from the environments that were external to its autonomous way of life. In order for these cultural elements to be accepted by the Jews they had to pass through a process of “Judaification,” or at least neutralization of their Christian components. This multifaceted process is an outstanding example of the productive meeting of internal traditions and external influences which characterize every aspect of the Yiddish language and its literature. In addition to the exposition of hitherto unknown texts and the enrichment of our bibliographical knowledge, the current generation has built up a new conceptual system which aims at properly describing the cultural complexity of Old Yiddish literature.

Modern Yiddish Literature — Reappraising Classical Texts. Dov Sadan, the founder of the Yiddish Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, presented an all-encompassing concept of Jewish literature in his comprehensive essay, “*Al Sifroteinu*” (1950). Sadan saw Jewish literature as one wide, many-branched corpus — who included writings in Hebrew and Yiddish as well as works of Jewish authors who wrote in other languages for Jewish readers.

The striving for totality is discernible with Sadan not only with regard to languages in which modern Jewish literature is written, but also in the mutual relations between its various spiritual trends; while most of his predecessors considered the modern literature in Hebrew and in Yiddish as the product of the Haskalah movement and a clear manifestation of the penetration of modernization into Jewish society, Sadan made the canvas wider and tried to encompass all of Jewish intellectual creativity in modern times with all of its interwoven manifestations and roots, which are hidden in the Haskalah, in Hasidism, and in the rabbinic works of the *mitnaggedim*. Thus Sadan's broad comprehensive conception deliberately raises doubts as to whether the place of honor accorded to secular belles lettres from among all of the cultural heritage of the Jews is justified.

This thesis of the underlying unity of Jewish literature attracted a number of scholars and was one of the bases of the comprehensive work by Israel Zinberg, *Di geshikhte fun der literature bay*

yidn (1929–1937; English translation: *A History of Jewish Literature*, I–XII, translated and edited by Bernard Martin, Philadelphia-Ohio, 1972–1978). Despite the difficult conditions under which Zinberg wrote his work, while living in Leningrad cut off from other scholars and from the literature of the West, he conceived of a most comprehensive plan for his endeavor, which was aimed at describing Jewish literary creativity during the European period for all languages used and in every genre. However, because of his imprisonment and exile he did not manage to complete this wide-ranging work, and its final volume (which was discovered and published in 1965) only reaches the period of the flourishing of the Enlightenment in Russia, the sixties of the 19th century. Dov Sadan and his students are the ones, therefore, who took upon themselves the task of applying the integrative approaches to Modern Yiddish literature.

In this context it is natural to expect that the main author who would benefit from new exposition of his work would be the bilingual writer, Shalom Jacob Abramowitz, who is better known in the persona fabricated in his writings, Mendele Mokher Seforim. To be sure this “split” between the biographical writer and his literary persona was the focal point of the study by Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973), the basis of which was a research work written under the direction of Max and Uriel Weinreich. In the first part of his book Miron summarizes the ambivalent position demonstrated by the Enlightenment towards Yiddish: despite the fact that the majority of the representatives of the Enlightenment had a contemptuous and negative attitude towards the language, some of them did become the ones to lay the foundation of Modern Yiddish literature. This known, accepted fact is used by Miron as a hoist for following the literary and cultural circumstances and conditions in which the young Hebrew Maskil S. J. Abramowitz turned to writing Yiddish, and for that he created his most central, vital character — Mendele Mokher Seforim. This character appears in his works in a wide range of incarnations and roles — as the publisher of works given to him, as a Yiddish translator, as a good listener to the stories told in his presence, and even as the hero in his own right. Miron’s study deals with the point of intersection at which the influence of ideological positions on the act of literary creation becomes discernible, and he proves how the problematic status of Yiddish, the difficulties and problems with which its authors struggled, led directly to refined, complex artistic solutions.

Another aspect of the tension between literature and ideology is that which occupies the central position in the book by Kh. Shmeruk, *Peretses yiesh-vizye* (“Peretz’s Vision of Despair,” New York, 1971) which deals with one of the basic works of Modern Yiddish literature from the beginning of the 20th century — the symbolistic drama of I. L. Peretz, *Baynakht oyfn altn mark* (“At Night in the Old Market Place”). This drama, in which many characters from both the world of the living and the world of the dead express their existential thoughts and doubts when appearing one night against the background of a typical market square familiar in the Jewish milieu of Eastern Europe, was perceived by critical reviews in Yiddish as a pivotal expression of Peretz’s attitude toward the wide range of Jewish ideologies — from the Haskalah to the workers’ movements. They felt that his position was exhausted in the final sentence of the play, “in shul arayn!” (“To the synagogue!”), which was taken as a call to returning to a traditional Jewish way of life. Shmeruk basically accepted the approach expressed by the critics that the play should be read in a contemporary-ideological context, but his tracing of the sources of the various motifs interwoven within it and the allusions in the text to a wide range of sources led to the discerning of many shades of meaning which had gone unnoticed before.

Publishing of Yiddish texts. The researchers devoted great, continuous effort to the publishing of selected Yiddish literary texts. Among the most outstanding achievements in this line, one must mention the anthology *A shpigl oyfa shteyn* (Selected by B. Hrushovski, Kh. Shmeruk and A. Sutzkever; edited by Kh. Shmeruk; Tel Aviv, 1964; second edition: Jerusalem, 1988), which contains poetry and prose by 12 Yiddish authors who perished in Russia. The Yiddish Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem publishes a series of books based on selected texts of modern Yiddish literature to be read and studied. One of its goals is to collect the works in Yiddish by bilingual authors who are known today mainly through their works in Hebrew; in this framework have appeared writings of S. Y. Agnon, M. Y. Berdyczewski, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Jacob Steinberg. Likewise selected works by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Abraham Sutzkever, Itzik Manger, and Israel Rabon have been published.

Yet it is only natural that the interest among the wide audience of Modern Yiddish literature would give rise to an ongoing trend of translations, mainly into English and Hebrew, but also into French, German, Spanish, and other languages. The bibliography by Dina Abramowicz, in 1968 listed 247 titles of books translated from Yiddish into English from 1945 on,⁷ and today that list could be significantly expanded. The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1978 increased interest in his works in particular and in Yiddish literature in general.

One of the main demonstrations of this is the recent appearance of two bilingual anthologies which strove to offer the best of Yiddish poetry for a new generation of readers: *American Yiddish*

Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology, edited by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley, 1986), and *The Penguin Book of Yiddish Verse*, edited by Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse and Khone Shmeruk (New York, 1987).

The bilingual format of the two anthologies makes them the first collections of this type, and it shows us that the editors were aiming for a varied audience: both the student and the reader of Yiddish literature in the original as well as the English reader who does not know Yiddish. A comparison of the two volumes is interesting because of the differing approaches of the editors: The Harshavs emphasize the literary achievements, the multifacetedness, and uneasy path of modernism in Yiddish poetry in its most important center, the United States, and thus their anthology can serve as an excellent introduction to the reader interested in becoming acquainted with this important branch of Modern Yiddish literature; the editors of the *Penguin Book of Yiddish Verse*, which offers a selection of Yiddish poetry of the last one hundred years from everywhere in the world of Yiddish, aimed at a wider audience, and their selections were guided more by thematics. They assumed that today the interest in Yiddish poetry is derived for the most part from its Jewish content, and from its ability to express and describe a world which no longer exists.

The selections offered by these two books, therefore, reflects two different, complementary approaches towards the question of how to understand and appreciate today the great heritage of Yiddish literature, and they both demonstrate the multiplicity of approaches and contexts in which research and teaching in this field is conducted. This pluralism of views and methods holds a promise for interesting new achievements in the various fields of Yiddish research.

Notes

1. H. Leivick, *Eseyen un redes* (1963), 105.
2. Y.L. Cahan, *Shtudies vegn yidisher folksshafung* (1952), 10.
3. *Klezmer Music 1910-1942*, Compiled and Annotated by Henry Sapoznik (Folkways Records FSS 34021).
4. L. Wiener, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1899; reprinted 1972).
5. J.W. Marchand, Review of *The Oldest Known Literary Documents of Yiddish Literature*, L. Fuks (ed.), *Word*, 15 (1959), 383-94; M. Weinreich, "Old Yiddish Poetry in Linguistic-literary Research," in: *Word*, 16 (1960), 100-118.
6. M. Erik, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur: fun di eltste tsaytn biz der haskole-ikufe* (1928; reprinted 1979); M. Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte* (1928); I. Zinberg, *Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn*, 6 (1935). (reprinted: New York, 1943; English trans. *A History of Jewish Literature*, Vol. 7, 1975).
7. *Yiddish Literature in English Translation*, compiled by Dina Abramowicz (1968); idem, *Yiddish Literature in English Translation: List of Books in Print* (1976).

Bibliography: L. Prager, "Yiddish in the University," in: J.A. Fishman (ed.), *Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters* (1981), 529-45; D. Roskies, "The Emancipation of Yiddish," in: *Prooftexts*, 1 (1981), 28-42; Kh. Shmeruk, "Yiddish in universitetn," in: *Di goldene keyt*, 91 (1976), 39-48.