

"Dovid Katz's book on Yiddish reflects the beauty, the variety, and the warmth of a language that refuses to be extinguished. Its miraculous survival brings joy to its readers." —ELIE WIESEL

# WORDS ON FIRE

## THE UNFINISHED STORY OF YIDDISH



Dovid Katz

REVISED AND UPDATED

## Praise for *Words on Fire*

"Dovid Katz argues convincingly that Yiddish is the product of history: not a makeshift jargon, but the complex linguistic outgrowth of a thousand years. . . . 'Words on Fire' abounds in surprising information."

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". . . Nuanced and persuasive."

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"Dovid Katz, with his breadth of knowledge and research of this remarkable language and the culture that sustained it, has written a unique book that is both dynamic and informative."

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". . . in this ambitious, comprehensive and entertaining history he [Katz] makes clear not only its [Yiddish's] past but its future."

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"In *Words on Fire*, Professor Dovid Katz reaffirms his role as one of the world's leading scholars in the field of Yiddish Studies. Katz's command of Yiddish linguistics, Yiddish literature and Eastern European Jewish cultural history is unsurpassed. *Words on Fire* is a bold and timely book that deserves to be read not only by specialists in the field of Jewish Studies but also by anyone concerned about the future of Yiddish and Jewish culture. While one may not agree with all of Katz's conclusions, resulting from three decades of research, no one can question that this brilliantly written work has been a true labor or love."

—CARL J. RHEINS, Ph.D., Executive Director,  
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

"I love this book. It's a treasure trove of nostalgia and a beacon of hope. It warmed my heart to read how the rich emotional Yiddish jargon became an elegant language of literature; then it broke my heart to read about the near-total destruction of Yiddish civilization, one of the great cultures of the world. This book revives hope that Yiddish will still flourish, even in a small way."

—ALAN DERSHOWITZ

אלמעכטיגער גוט בייאדיין טעמפל שירי אלוז שיר אין אונזן טאג  
 טאגן שיריא שיריי ברמהער ציגער גוט גרעכטער גוט  
 דעכטיגער גוט דוכער גוט ווירדער גוט  
 זעכטער גוט העכער גוט טרויסר גוט  
 יודן גוט כרפטיגער גוט לעכדיגער גוט  
 מעכטיגער גוט כאמחאפטיגער גוט עיביגער גוט  
 בארכט צומר גוט זארטר גוט קרינגליגער גוט  
 דיכר גוט שטרקער גוט דובשטער גוט  
 און צימנט מער און בייאדיין טעמפל שיריא אלוז שיר אין אונזן  
 טאגן שיריא שיריי

# Words on Fire

THE UNFINISHED  
STORY OF YIDDISH

Dovid Katz



A Member of the Perseus Books Group  
New York

*Maps and Graphics by*  
**Giedre Beconyte**

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*For Chic Wolk, Richard Maullin, Mendy Caban  
Visionary builders of a new Yiddish island in Vilnius*



## A Yiddish Poet

by Menke Katz

I am a Yiddish poet—a doomed troubadour,  
a dreamsmith jeered by the soft-voiced yokel,  
the smooth snob with the swinging lash shrieking: jargon!  
O are the mocked tears of my people a jargon?

Yiddish,  
formed as Adam of the dust of the four corners of the earth;  
the quenchless blaze of the wandering Jew,  
the thirst of the deserts.

My mother tongue is unpolished as a wound, a laughter, a love-starved kiss,  
yearnful as a martyr's last glance at a passing bird.  
Taste a word, cursed and merciless as an earthquake.  
Hear a word, terse and bruised as a tear.  
See a word, light and lucent, joyrapt as a ray.  
Climb a word—rough and powerful as a crag.  
Ride a word—free and rhymeless as a tempest.

Yiddish,  
The bare curse thrown against the might of pitiless foes.  
A "black year" shrouding dawn after a massacre.  
The mute call of each speechless mouth of Treblinka.  
The prayer of stone to turn into gale.

from *Land of Manna* (Chicago 1965)



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Acknowledgments are among the most pleasant tasks. This book, for all its faults, is finished, and it is time to thank friends and colleagues who have taken time and trouble to help. Here it is also fraught with concern, however, because I know that some of the people who have helped would differ with a number of the controversial views proposed. So let the usual disclaimer come before and not after. Not only are none of the acknowledgees responsible for weaknesses and errors, which goes without saying, but none is in any way responsible for the views proposed.

Various ideas about the history of Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic, and the nature of Jewish history that come together in this book directly or indirectly derive from discussions starting in early childhood with my father, poet and teacher Menke Katz (1906–1991). I have also benefited enormously from the challenging questions posed by my students at Oxford (1978–1996), Yale (1998–1999), and Vilnius (from 1999). My students are all equally dear to me, but those at Yale asked the toughest questions, forcing some serious rethinking.

At Yale, I had the privilege of being among the members of the (very modest) Ashkenazic Hebrew Society, at which various “heavy” Jewish language issues were thrashed out in an atmosphere of collegiality and good humor. Special thanks to Rachel Wizner and Rabbi Jim Ponet for fostering a spirit of friendly, open discussion. Yale’s inspirational Professor Donald J. Cohen (1940–2001) began to persuade me in early 1999 that it was time for a radically alternative view of Yiddish

to be presented in a book in English for a wider readership. American Jews in particular, he assured me, would benefit from a genuine and frank *debate* on these subjects, without any of the sides being “labeled” as anti-anything. “Israel and Hebrew are doing very well for themselves,” he once told me. “I heard you, the other day, passionately defend the need for there to be a strong Jewish state in the world. Now you go and tell *your* truth about Yiddish!”

For many years, and until his death at the age of ninety-seven, I had the benefit and challenge of discussing the history of Yiddish with the remarkable Carl Cowl (Kalmen Kovel, 1900–1997). I suspect (may he forgive me if I’m wrong) that he is the one interlocutor who would agree with all the premises of this book, many of which emerged in a quarter century of long talks during my visits to his Brooklyn Heights residence and his visits to me in Boro Park in Brooklyn; London, Oxford, and North Wales in Britain; and Vilnius, Lithuania.

The impetus to write the book came from Scott Mendel of Mendelmedia in New York, to whom I am profoundly grateful for expert guidance. Professor Arthur Hertzberg (New York University) provided vital support in a variety of ways to enable the project to get underway.

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DOVID KATZ  
Vilnius, Lithuania, 2004

#### FOR THE SECOND EDITION

The paragraph thanking Professor Benjamin Harshav (Yale) was inadvertently deleted from the first edition. Over a quarter century he has steadfastly supported my continued research in the field, in easy and hard times. That we hold profoundly different views about Yiddish and Israeli Hebrew has only served to add depth—and a lot of two-way humor—to our friendly debates. The reader who seeks out contrary views is referred in the first instance to Professor Harshav's *The Meaning of Yiddish* (1990) and his *Language in Time of Revolution* (1993).

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Reviews of the first edition have been posted unabridged at *www.dovidkatz.net*.

The star speaker at the book launch for the first edition, held at the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York in November 2004, was Professor Arthur Hertzberg. He passed away in spring 2006. Arthur was a dear friend and awe-inspiring scholar, who every day championed the rarified spirit of scholars working in harmony in the search for new ideas.

DOVID KATZ

*Vilnius, Lithuania, 2007*

## Notes to the Reader

The dates given for events in antiquity are approximations.

Translations provided are by the author and often intended to be accurate overall rather than narrowly literal. Biblical translations are often based on the classic King James renditions.

Forms of names common to Yiddish civilization are given primacy. The modern Israeli Hebrew variants likely to be found in some reference works occasionally follow in parenthesis. Common English usage is often followed where it exists, where Yiddish specificity is not at issue, especially in the case of biblical names for which there is a durable tradition, and for various “Jewish words” that have become common in English.

Where actual transcriptions of Yiddish, traditional Ashkenazic Hebrew, and modern Israeli Hebrew are used, they all follow the Yivo system for transcription in English, with the accent sign (´) frequently added to show which syllable is accented. In renditions of biblical Hebrew and classical Aramaic, *th* (as in *thought*) is used too.

*a* is “Continental *a*” resembling American lot, hot; British cut, hut  
(phonetic [a])

*ay* as in aye or bite but shorter ([aɪ], [aj])

*e* (accented) as in let or rest ([ɛ])

*e* (unaccented, reduced) as in coming, Irish, spoken, or Moyshe ([ə], [ɪ])

ey as in gate, they, or late ([ei], [ej])

i as in peek, she, but not diphthongized ([i])

o is "Continental o" resembling American cut, hut, British lot, hot  
([ɔ])

oy as in Lloyd, foist, loiter, but shorter ([ɔɪ], [ɔj])

u as in book, root but not diphthongized ([u])

kh as in Chanukah, Loch Ness, Kharkov ([x]); it is used also for clas-  
sical and some Israeli Hebrew [ħ]

tsh as in choose, catch ([č], [ʧ])

zh as in Asia, closure, measure ([ž], [ʒ])



# *Introduction*

## ACCEPTED TRUTH, GLOBALIZATION, AND YIDDISH

It is commonly accepted that Hebrew is the “major” or “real” Jewish language (past, present, or future). In casual usage the name is nowadays taken to be the same as (or close enough to) the majority spoken language in modern Israel. As part of the same set of givens for most of today’s Jews, as well as many interested non-Jews, Israel and its mainstream culture are the prime inspiration and practical focus for world Jewry. It is usually assumed, even by those who may feel something for Yiddish and the East European Jewish heritage, that Yiddish entered the arena of Jewish history relatively recently, it was spoken in a fairly restricted region, interest in it is now more or less academic or sentimental, and, crucially, it is on the way out. This book presents an unabashedly alternative model of Jewish cultural history for the reader’s consideration, with no claim on absolute truth and no malice toward the incumbent “winners” of the public relations battleground. Israel, Israeli Hebrew, and the modern American Jewish establishment are all splendid creations, and they are all, thank heaven, secure and mature enough to withstand efforts to add to the mainstream canon some other parts of the Jewish heritage. Not a word in this book is intended against them. It opposes, rather, the opinions of those who dismiss the idea that Yiddish and the East European cultural heritage are also vital to authentic Jewish identity, continuity, and spiritual survival (rather than some kind of add-on or pop-up). Surely the coexistence of different strands of Jewish culture, with diverging areas of emphasis, is a sign of vitality, diversity, and a considerable wealth of

cultural assets from which users may pick and choose what to concentrate on, with no prejudice to anything or anyone else.

Israeli Hebrew is a language that was artificially and tenaciously constructed by determined Yiddish-speaking East European Zionists around a century ago as part of the movement to return to the ancient homeland. In the few generations that have elapsed, their success has proven to be phenomenal. Ivrit (Israeli Hebrew) has blossomed into a fully natural language of the twenty-first-century Middle East, one which is in many ways more a contemporary Middle Eastern language than it is a linguistic continuation of the millennial language chain of Jewish history (the philological etymology of most of the words notwithstanding).

Yiddish, on the other hand, is the naturally and uninterruptedly surviving modern rung in a (nearly) four-thousand-year chain of language continuity that starts with the oldest Hebrew, runs through the era of Jewish Aramaic, leads into the Yiddish period and nowadays through traditionalist (mostly Hasidic) Jews, takes world Jewry (rather than just Israelis) into the far future.

Over the past century and a half, a permanent treasure store of literary masterpieces was created in Yiddish during the kind of “secular outburst” that recurs periodically in the cycles of Jewish history. We find ourselves today at the twilight of the greatest secular outburst ever, one in which Jewish innovators created a new Yiddish literature, a new Hebrew-based language, and a new Jewish state, as well as making countless contributions to world culture and the arts. It comes to its end before our eyes, while the so-called Ultraorthodox (our unfair term for them, looking from the outside and at great distance) continue, as ever, to adhere to the age-old laws of traditional religious Judaism, treating it as a bona fide civilization with culture-specific language, dress, and totalistic lifestyle (rather than a religion to be practiced on Fridays, Saturdays, holidays, or to be felt as some kind of identity issue in a modern society). Yiddish today is the language of three principal groups: the last (and rapidly dwindling ranks of) survivors of pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe, a minute number of serious secularist enthusiasts, and (by the lowest estimates) hundreds of thousands of traditionalist Orthodox Jews (overwhelmingly Hasidim) who are multiplying into the millions of native Yiddish speakers of the next century.

All languages are of inherently potential equal value. A master Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century, Max Weinreich (1894–1969), quipped that “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” There are no good and bad, beautiful and ugly, complicated and simple languages from a scientific point of view. All natural languages are of equal capacity to grow, develop, and meet the needs of the communities that speak them. They can serve the motives of the best and worst, the beautiful and the ugly, the inspired and the ridiculous.

There are many ways to categorize and divide the world’s languages—by their etymological sources, geographic spread, internal structure, comparative features, ethnic correlations, social status, and more. For the purpose at hand, there is just one major division that matters, the one that distinguishes mass communication (international) languages from culture-specific (ethno-cultural) languages. Of course, the mass communication languages also have their traditional dialects. In the depths of northeastern England, there is a kind of English spoken in villages that goes back many centuries and is rich in the lore, history, and world outlook of the locals and, in some sense, the English people in general. It is full of “real English” that outsiders who grew up with international English can barely understand. It differs radically from North American and even standard British English. But log on to the Internet, and you are in the great sea of mass-communication international English that is today a kind of extraordinarily useful “Esperanto English.”

These two varieties of language are as old as human societies. Only the details have changed. Just over 2,700 years ago, in 701 B.C., in the days of King Hezekiah and Isaiah the prophet, the Assyrian king Sennacherib sent his emissaries to persuade the population of Jerusalem to surrender. The Assyrian government sent specialists to speak to the Jerusalemites in Judean (the language of Judea or Judah, i.e., biblical-era Hebrew). Fearing panic and demoralization, three high-level Judean officials, Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah, implored the Assyrian emissaries, in the timeless spirit of diplomatic discourse, to “Be good enough to speak to your servants in Aramaic for we understand and do not, please, speak in Judean within earshot of the people who stand by this wall” (2 Kings 18:26; Isaiah 36:11). In those days and in that part of the world, a certain kind of Aramaic had become the in-

ternational language of diplomacy, culture, and commerce (the English of the day in the region), while Judean was the specific language of the small nation of Israelites.

Nowadays, English is spreading rapidly throughout the world's populations, though other multiregionals, including Russian, Spanish, and French, continue to play the multiethnic role in a number of countries where they have been strong for various reasons (usually past colonialism). Thanks to the Internet, the ubiquity of American popular culture, and international communications, English is coming to fulfill the role that the grand linguistic dreamer (and Yiddish scholar) Ludwig Lazar Zamenhof (1859–1917) imagined for his own created language, Esperanto. The Bialystok native believed it would be an international means of communication that nobody would feel is particularly tied to any one ethnicity and that could therefore unite humanity. But English has now attained a pan-ethnic status and is becoming the Esperanto that Esperanto itself could never become. Internet lingo and the modern mass media "esperantize," avoiding narrow particularities, whether ethnic, political, or racial. That is good insofar as it brings communication and understanding to more and more people and places, and so long as it does not displace the rich local, culture-specific vernaculars of the diffuse corners of the earth.

And so it turns out that The Yiddish Question, small as it may at first seem in the bigger scheme of things, is part and parcel of a vastly bigger quandary, the contemporary globalization debate. At most, Yiddish can offer a globalized English some "fun words" (especially off-color epithets and satiric tell-offs), some good literature in translation, and a few other bits and pieces that the global trolley car may take on board. But all of that misses the point, which is that small and "culture specific" languages represent a unique way of experiencing life and viewing just about everything, from a speck of dust to a profound set of ideas.

The centrality of language to culture, and its importance for a special heritage and the spiritual freedom of its people, was propounded in Central Europe by various Romantic philosophers for whom language is the singular soul of a nation. One of them, Johann Herder (1744–1803), stressed the overriding importance of insights gained

from immersion in the past. He saw a divine hand in the majesty of the very diversity of the world's peoples and languages, and wrote a lot about the way each culture has to be studied through its own eyes, which means, to a great degree, through the perceptions of its language. Wilhelm Humboldt (1767–1835) followed up with detailed, sophisticated analyses of languages that were (and are still) considered “marginal” by Western observers, such as Basque and the Kawi language of Java. He showed they are every bit as susceptible to the most sophisticated analyses as the “great languages” of the major powers. They and others came up with ideas that fed into the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism with all its good and its evil effects.

In twentieth-century America, well before the term “globalization” was popularized, modern linguistics arose as an “antiglobalization discipline,” largely out of anthropology and ethnology in the hands of modernist thinkers. One of the first was Edward Sapir (1884–1939), a rabbi's son (and Yiddish linguist) who was brought to the United States as a boy and grew up in New York City. He helped establish linguistics as a discipline in America with his book, *Language* (1921). In it he claimed that “language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives.”

His boldest follower was Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), a fire prevention inspector for the Hartford Fire Insurance Company whose family, unlike Sapir's, had come over to the New World back in the days of the Pilgrims. Whorf's studies of the Hopi Native American language emphasized how the tribe views time in a way that differs radically from the Western concept. His theory of linguistic relativity is best known from his (posthumously published) *Language, Thought, and Reality* (1956). In its final chapter he made the sensational claim that “the moment we begin scientific, unbiased research into language we find, in people and cultures with the most unprepossessing exteriors, beautiful, effective, and scientific devices of expressions unknown to western Indo-European tongues or mentalities.” Whorf proclaimed that “no language is ‘primitive.’”

Ashkenazic Jews in America and elsewhere would do well to leave open the possibility that their modest shtetl forebears, their own re-

cent immigrant parents or grandparents, tailors and cobblers included, and today's so-called Ultraorthodox, all speak a language that is not "primitive" in any pejorative sense (though it has elements that are certainly ancient), but one that is rich in "beautiful, effective, and scientific devices of expressions." The "devices" of Yiddish include the unique and irreplaceable living repository of a nearly four-thousand-year-old Jewish civilization, whose final thousand-year incarnation in Europe was almost eradicated in the Holocaust. Every culture has its distinct mode of thinking, and it is entirely natural that at least some members of a group should want to preserve that group's language and culture. That desire is not extreme, fanatic, or even far-fetched, and in the case of Yiddish, it does zero damage to the causes of Hebrew and Israel.

#### JEWISH CONTINUITY

There are three unbroken chains that are sometimes thought to bind the Jewish present and future to its earliest past.

One claim to an unbroken chain is *genetic continuity*. Many (by no means all) modern Jews are *partially* descended from ancient Israelites in the Land of Israel. At first glance, that claimed pedigree may sound miraculous, but it is not. During the long Jewish exile prior to the modern melting pot, interethnic marriage was rare. It was common in biblical times among the various ancient Near Eastern peoples; King David, according to the biblical account, was descended from the Moabite Ruth. All that changed when the Judeans of Judea became the dispersed Jewish minority in other lands and group survival became a conscious aim. Turning to Europe (and other diasporas), there was a pattern of founders of communities taking local wives, resulting in more male-specific genetic material deriving from the ancient Near East and relatively more female-specific material from the societies in which settlers had set up their new communities. In 2003, a team of a dozen scholars from around the world published a major study on Ashkenazic genetics in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*. Traditional Jews have even retained, for thousands of years, knowledge of whether they are a *kohen* (priest), *levvi* (Levite), or *Yis-*

*róel* (plain Israelite). The research team confirmed earlier work demonstrating that the priests (*kohanim*) “predominantly share a recent common ancestry irrespective of the geographically defined post-Diaspora community to which they belong, a finding consistent with common Jewish origins in the Near East.” They followed up with research on the Levites (*leviim*), which led them back to “a founding event, probably involving one or very few European men occurring at a time close to the initial formation and settlement of the Ashkenazic community.”

A second chain is *linguistic continuity*, although not in the superficial sense of continuing to speak the same language. It is a subtle, complex process that has come to be known as the Jewish language chain. Continuity is enhanced by reading, studying, praying, and actually creating new written works in the previous languages in the chain. But the core of the Jewish language chain is much more dramatic and relates to everyday spoken language. It is the pattern by which each new Jewish language is created by combining elements of the previous inherited language with the surrounding non-Jewish language. Each of the past Jewish languages has thereby been fated not to “die” but to morph into a vital component of its successor and live on in a new incarnation. The result was neither a mishmash nor a pidgin, but a unique new Jewish language that carried forward the primeval Jewish spirit in a fresh, revitalized linguistic medium. This process of linguistic regeneration is as old as the Jewish people and even characterized the development of the very first Jewish language, ancient Hebrew. Communities, tribes, and nations sometimes follow a recurring pattern as stubbornly as individuals who appear to have themes to their biography.

#### RELIGIOUS CORE AND SECULAR OUTBURSTS

The third chain of preservation is *religious and cultural continuity*. Again, at first glance, this act of national survival in the face of generations of persecution, expulsions, and massacres may appear to be supernatural (and is often thought of as such, whether as an act of God, a feat of immense human proportions, or both). But not necessar-

ily. The group in question was not until recently invited to assimilate. It did not, by and large, harbor a wish to trade in what it regarded as its divinely privileged lot as the Chosen People of God (with all the obligations and all the suffering entailed) for the perceived primitive darkness of the surrounding nations. In these circumstances, perpetuated distinctiveness was the predictable route. The conscious and constant binding force has been Judaism as a complete way of life based on wholehearted belief in the literal, divine origin of the Torah (the notion that God actually gave the first five books of the Old Testament to Moses and the People of Israel), and on the belief in the infallible authority of collective rabbinic interpretation over the generations. What is known as Torah Judaism entails an absolute need to carry out a multitude of positive (“thou shalt”) and negative (“thou shalt not”) commandments on a daily basis. In rabbinic law, there are 613 commandments. Throughout Jewish history, this believing, traditionalist, ritual-observing central stream has been challenged, and also enriched, by *secular outbursts*. They tend to occur during the first few generations of creative intermingling within tolerant, multicultural, non-Jewish civilizations. After that the secularists’ own not-too-distant descendants tend to assimilate to the surrounding culture. But each secular outburst is founded by individuals who were acculturated to the central (traditionally Orthodox) stream in their childhood or absorbed much of it from their immediate family background.

From Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.—A.D. 50) in the Greek-speaking milieu, through Spinoza, Freud, and Einstein, the secular outburst giants each had the central tree trunk of observant, antiquity-based Judaism in their immediate background. Some secular outburst leaders were dual trajectorists who attained much in both the Jewish and the contemporary secular arena. Maimonides (1135–1204) wrote his Jewish legal code in Hebrew and his philosophical treatise in Arabic.

Modern linguists are understandably wary of too much “biographization” of language. A language is not a person. Nevertheless, language is a dominion of people by definition, the major feature of communication between people, and a major—if not *the* major—feature of group identity in a wide variety of ways, from the dialect with features unique to a village, to the variety that becomes symbolic of peoplehood or nationhood, all the way to the supranational languages



of globalization. Language is the key factor distinguishing humans from all other beings. Still, it is important to remember that biographical terms, such as “born,” “moved,” “be in danger,” or “be revived,” need to be taken partially as metaphors, at least insofar as the precise ramifications are not identical to those of an individual. With that caveat, the “linguography” of Yiddish can be enjoyed as a dramatic life story of an embattled, controversial language and people. A part of that story follows, written from the point of view of the language and its people. It is a story of a language (and a people) subject to attack from within and without.

First, from the outside. Its people have repeatedly been subject to massacres for their religion or ethnicity or both from the early eleventh century through the Holocaust. Second, from the inside. Yiddish has repeatedly been identified with the uneducated masses, with women, with the disenfranchised of traditional Jewish society, and it has been the object of overt rejection from medieval times and onward. These tribulations came to enhance the passion of the language. For all its geographic spread and huge numbers of speakers, it is not the language of even a microcosmic “Jewish globalization.” It is a language whose everyday words, naturally spoken, continue to burn with ancient ideas, humor, and psychic content that have come down the line of generation-to-generation language transmission, from antiquity into the twenty-first century. The opposite of globalization is not necessarily parochialism. It is a uniqueness, a specificity, that makes the world’s natural languages as spiritually melodious to each other as the instruments of a fine orchestra, each of which is to be cherished in ways inconceivable for the global colossuses of the age.

# Genesis

## PREHISTORY

The Yiddish language is only a thousand or so years old. But many of its elements—words, turns of phrase, idioms, embedded historical references—are much older. They fed into Yiddish in a continuous language chain that antedated ancient Hebrew, progressed through Hebrew and then Jewish Aramaic, and ended up in today's Yiddish—without interruption, seam, or discontinuity, despite an ever-shifting geography and changing historic circumstances.

When, for example, a place hasn't been spruced up in a long time, you can say in Yiddish, with a delicate touch of criticism, that it seemingly was last renovated during *shéyshes yeméy bréyshis* (the "six days of creation"). Any state of chaos can be called *tóyhe-vóyhe*, after words in the second verse of the Bible (usually translated "without form and void"), as disordered as the cosmos was prior to creation. You can't get a lot earlier than that for embedded living history in a currently spoken language. But some Yiddish words are even older.

Take *mazl*, which means "luck" and is used in common Yiddish expressions, such as *mázl-tof!* (congratulations!), *góyishker mazl* (good luck, literally gentile luck), *a yídisher mazl* (bad luck, literally Jewish luck), and in certain trades in the handshake proclaimed by *mazl-*

*brókhe!* (a blessing of good luck, on concluding a deal). It goes back to the earlier Hebrew *mazzol* and Aramaic *mazzolo*, which referred to a constellation, star, or planet. The modern sense of *mazl* on its own referring to “good luck” is a Yiddish development deriving from the Talmudic Hebrew and Aramaic sense of luck or fate, good or otherwise. That sense followed from the pejorative biblical sense of idol worship (“those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun, to the moon, and to the *constellations*,” 2 Kings 23:5). The biblical Hebrew term was derived from ancient Akkadian, a language that was widespread in Mesopotamia (largely covering the territory of today’s Iraq) from the third to the first millennium B.C. In Akkadian, it was a neutral term for constellation or planet, but that neutrality implied belief in the godliness and power of these constellations vis-à-vis human affairs. By Old Testament times, the word referred to the cursed idol beliefs that seduced people away from belief in God. In Talmudic times it was softened, abstracted, and shifted to mean fate in general. That’s how it eventually entered Yiddish and came to mean not just any luck but good luck. About five thousand years of history lie behind this one Yiddish word.

These links among Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish form the central *Jewish language chain*, stretching from antiquity to the twenty-first century. This uninterrupted traditional history started, according to the biblical account and Jewish lore, with the era of the patriarchs and matriarchs: Abraham with Sarah, Isaac with Rebecca, Jacob with Rachel and Leah. Sometime during the first quarter of the second millennium B.C., Abraham is reported to have trekked from Ur of the Chaldees in Babylonia (today’s al-Muqayyar in Iraq) to the land of Canaan (now Israel). There Abraham’s monotheism, in the biblical account, established the first of the Abrahamic religions. Whether or not the biblical account is accepted as historical, the linguistic evidence for its geocultural outlines is overwhelming.

## HEBREW

The basis of Hebrew was the ancient Canaanite language of the people living in the land of Canaan that the Israelites came to inhabit. The

historical origin of Hebrew was well-known in biblical times. The prophet Isaiah, who wrote in the second half of the eighth century B.C., uses this common knowledge as a poetic image in a daring prophecy of the rise of Judah over Egypt: "And the land of Judah shall become a terror unto Egypt. . . . In that day there shall be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:17–18). The biblical account provides other clues. Abraham's clan in Ur had spoken Aramaic. When they came to the land of Canaan, they didn't just "drop" their native Aramaic and "start" speaking Canaanite. Instead they created the first major Jewish language—Hebrew—which for hundreds of years was known as a form of Canaanite. Classical Hebrew was an intricate fusion of the Aramaic heritage that the Abrahamic tribe brought with it from Babylonia to Canaan and the local Canaanite dialects, which provided the bulk of the "template" for the machinery of the language. For hundreds of years, "language of Canaan" was applied to the Hebrew language with no pejorative strings attached. During the substantial Egyptian period, an Egyptian component was added to the language, particularly proper names. The best-known word contributed by Egyptian is of course the name "Moshe."

Both Aramaic and Canaanite are members of the group of languages known to scholars as Northwest Semitic. The extraordinary wealth of biblical Hebrew poetry derives in no small part from the luxury its writers had of using "near synonyms," one hailing from the Aramaic component of Hebrew and one from its Canaanite component. *Ish* from the Canaanite component is used for the everyday sense of "specific man," *enósh* from the Aramaic component for the more poetic and abstract "human" or "mere person." The poetic and semantic richness of biblical Hebrew derives precisely from the "hybrid pedigree" resulting from the early history of its speakers and their westward trek. Thus the book of Kings uses the expression, "in the month Bul, which is the eighth month" (1 Kings 6:38), using Aramaic-derived *yérakh* for the first occurrence of "month" in the passage and Canaanite-derived *khódesh* for the second, with a slight but marked difference in usage. Languages such as biblical Hebrew, where the union of diverse elements is obvious, are known as *fusion languages*. (There are of course

no “pure” languages, but in these languages the synthesis of two or more elements is paramount. The term “fusion language” was contributed by Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich.)

In fact, the Jewish people are commanded to never forget those distant Aramean origins. A passage in the Five Books of Moses instructs: “And thou shalt speak and say before the Lord thy God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my father’” (Deuteronomy 26:5). The Bible is not in the least squeamish about ongoing bilingualism. When Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, had a mound of stones made to witness his agreement with his father-in-law, the Aramean Laban, we are told (in Genesis 31:47) that “Laban called it *Yegar-sohadutho*” (Aramaic for “witness mound”), “but Jacob called it *Gal-eyd*” (the Canaanite-Hebrew equivalent).

In the biblical account the twelve tribes of the people of Israel came to be named for the sons of Jacob. The clan migrated to Egypt and grew into a populous minority. According to some datings, they would have been enslaved from around 1700 B.C. to 1300 B.C. and then were liberated under Moses. He led them through the desert, where they received the Ten Commandments, up to the Promised Land, Canaan, to be renamed the Land of Israel. The significance of an idea can be overhauled by the almighty power of the *word*. Canaan is what it was, Israel what it would become, named for Jacob, who was renamed Israel after wrestling with an angel, according to Genesis (32:29). And then Joshua conquered the land. The Judges judged. Samuel anointed Saul to be king over Israel. After Saul fell, David reigned (in the tenth century B.C.), establishing the Davidic dynasty. Traditional Jews believe fervently that the true Messiah will be a direct descendant of David, king of Israel. Traditional Christians believe with equal fervor that Jesus, who will return as the Messiah, was a direct descendant of David.

After David came his son, King Solomon, who reigned, the Bible reports, over a large, wealthy dominion. But early in the reign of Solomon’s hapless son, Rehoboam, ten of the twelve tribes broke away. In 928 B.C., they set up the renegade Northern Kingdom (the kingdom of Israel, also known as Samaria) under Jeroboam. It was conquered and disassembled in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians. Its exiles, the “ten lost tribes,” were never heard from again (recurring rumors to the contrary

about the Welsh, Native Americans, and Tutsis notwithstanding). But Judah, the southern state, survived longer, ruled by David's direct descendants until it was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Unlike the exiled northerners, the exiled Judeans did not disappear but emerged as "Jews" in the modern sense of the word: a dynamic, controversial, dispersed ethnic minority, identified by ethnicity, a stubborn loyalty to customs, religion, and language, and a record of phenomenal and eccentric creativity.

### ARAMAIC

Sometime after the Babylonian exile of 586 B.C., Hebrew ceased to be an everyday spoken language. But instead of adopting the language of their new environment, Babylonian Aramaic, the exiles, who were in a sense "the first Diaspora Jewish community" created a new language: Jewish Aramaic, often referred to simply as "Aramaic" in the Jewish context, when the various non-Jewish forms of Aramaic are not the point of discussion.

Parts of the biblical books of Daniel and Ezra, written after the fall of Judah, are in an Aramaic that is close to the official Babylonian language of the time. The richly specific Jewish Aramaic, however, was being created in everyday life, coming to full literary fruition hundreds of years later. Although Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language, it continued to be a sacred language used for writing, studying, and praying.

And so the Jewish language chain took root. It originated in the remote Jewish past with the consolidation of the first Jewish fusion language, Hebrew, at a primeval point in Jewish history. Over a thousand years later, their descendants, the Judean exiles in Babylonia, created the second major Jewish language, Jewish Aramaic, from the Hebrew (itself a fusion of Canaanite with an older form of Aramaic) they brought with them and the Babylonian Aramaic they found in their new home. The military and political victors that appeared on the stage of Near Eastern history were each vanquished in turn. The Assyrians who conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) in 722 B.C. were themselves overwhelmed by the Persians in 612 B.C. Then

Babylon, which had conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, in turn fell to the mighty Persians in 539 B.C. About a year after that, King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree that the Judean exiles be returned and their sacred Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. That was the first instance of a major success for the “Jewish lobby” in a great power. In the biblical book of Esther, set in the Persian period, the word *yehudí* means (for the first time perhaps) not “person from the land of Judea” but “Jew” in the modern sense: “There was a certain Jewish fellow in Shushan the capital and his name was Mordecai” (Esther 2:5).

The Persians were conquered by the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, in 333 B.C. Hellenic-era Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 63 B.C. Among the new religious sects that arose among the Jews in the ensuing years was the one that was developed into Christianity.

In August of A.D. 70, the Romans crushed a major Judean revolt, captured Jerusalem, and burned the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing Jewish political sovereignty in the territory of ancient Israel to an end (until 1948 when the modern State of Israel was established). Jews worshiped in synagogues dispersed throughout the ancient Near East, using words instead of animals to express their dedication to the Almighty, even as their ancestors had switched to animals from humans.

Just before Jerusalem fell, according to ancient Jewish sources, a rabbinic scholar, Yohanan ben Zakkai, met with the Roman general (and soon to be emperor), Vespasian. The scholar understood very well that the Jews’ revolt against the Romans would fail dismally. And so he persuaded Vespasian to spare one village, Yavneh, not as a sovereign political entity but as a place of learning, where the traditions of Jewish scholarship could be peacefully pursued. Tradition has it that the granting of that request led to the survival of rabbinic Judaism. New generations of scholars collectively produced the legal compendium (a code of laws and record of diverging opinions) known as the Mishna in Hebrew (completed A.D. 200), and the two Talmuds. The Talmuds, in Aramaic, contain the records of elaborate debates and deliberations: the Jerusalem Talmud, completed around A.D. 400, and the Babylonian Talmud a century later. All these works have at their core jurisprudence and textual analysis, and a tradition of studying by in-

tense, lively, and logically penetrating debate. The successful participant is one who comes up with a new angle or insight. The culture is one in which the process of study and analysis is much more important than the certainty of the conclusions. Many legal issues argued out on the pages of the Talmud had little or no bearing on everyday life. One of the Talmud's favorite terms is *téyku*, signifying that after all the arduous debates, the question remains unsolved. Lawmakers who legislate for the here and now in a sovereign state do not have that luxury.

There were many "Jewish language debates" during the Talmudic period. One Talmudic sage asked, "Why Aramaic? Either Hebrew or Greek!" and another said, "Why Aramaic? Either Hebrew or Persian!" (Babylonian Talmud, tractate The First Gate 83a; The Suspected Wife 49b). But another sage warned: "Let not the Aramaic language be light in your eyes for the Good Lord has shown it honor in the Bible" (Midrash Genesis, on 31:47). This debate between advocates of the classical language and those of the spoken language would be replicated many centuries later among the far-flung descendants of those Jews. Eventually, Aramaic too was recognized as "classical" and "sacred" alongside Hebrew. One of the oldest and forever most emotive, spiritual Jewish prayers is Kaddish for the dead, in Aramaic.

By the turn of the second millennium, Jewish life in the Near East, centered in Babylonia, was in decline. The seventh-century rise of Islam had stimulated a unique, enormously creative Jewish tradition that was transplanted (along with triumphant Islam) to Spain and Portugal. Twin Jewish leadership positions in Babylonia symbolically represented most of the Jewish Diaspora internationally. The civil, political leader of the Jews was known as the *reysh gelutha*. The spiritual and rabbinic leader was the *gaon* (medieval Hebrew for "rabbinic genius"). The last internationally acclaimed *gaon* was Hai, who held the office from 998 to 1038 in Pumbeditha (now al-Anbar, Iraq). Lesser figures kept the proverbial shop open a while longer. The time frame for the "splendor days" of Babylonian Jewry in Islamic times matches that of the enlightened Arab caliphate in the period stretching from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the eleventh century. If any one major external political development can be held responsible for the



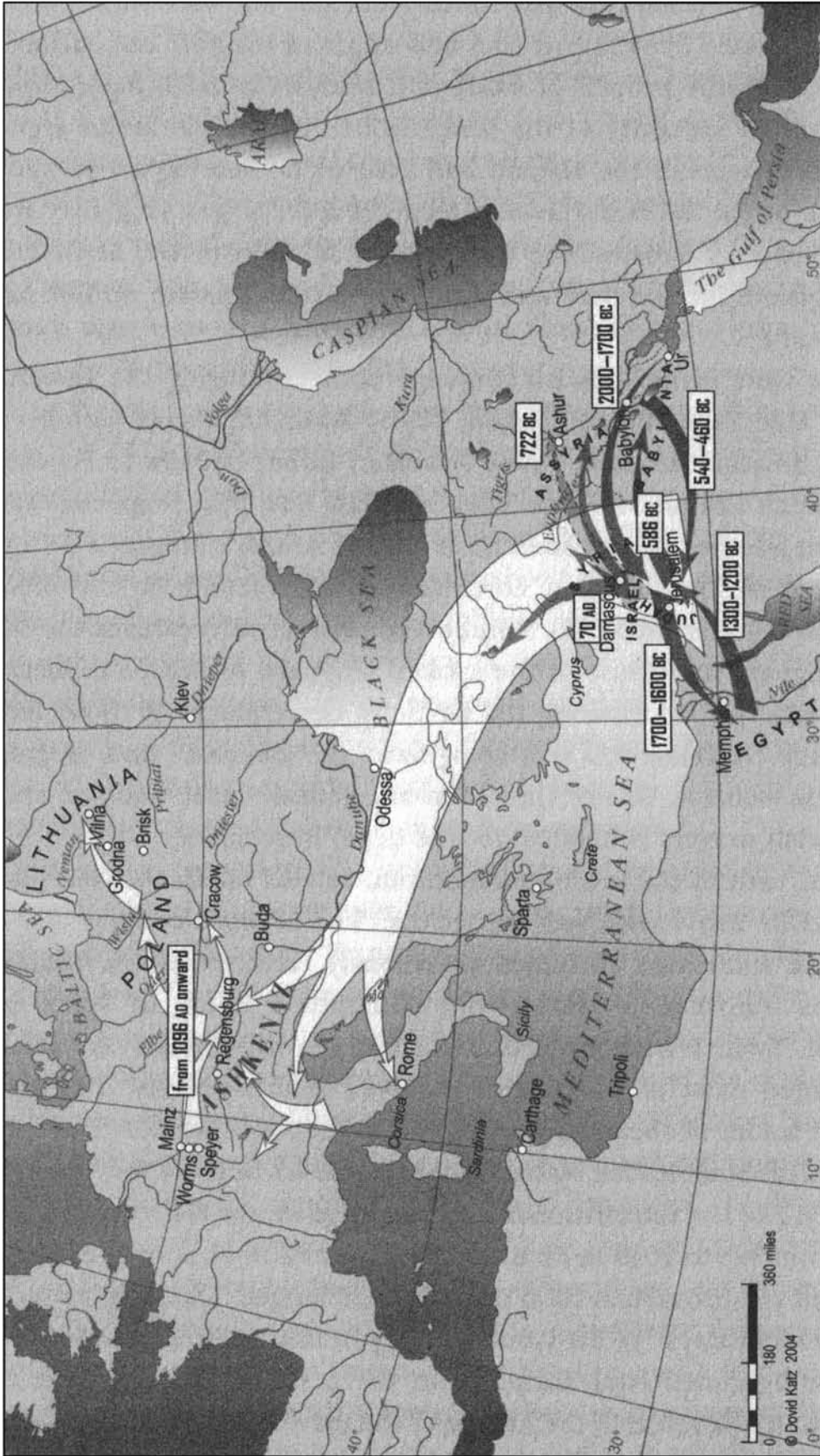


Figure 1.1 From Babylonia to Eastern Europe.



fall of the gaonic center in the Near East, it is probably the conquest of Baghdad by the Buwayhid emirs, who were Persian Shiites. They ruled the land from 945 to 1055, severely persecuting Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Jews. It was the end of the long Oriental period in Jewish history.

### THE EUROPEAN PERIOD IN JEWISH HISTORY

About a thousand years ago, when the Near Eastern epoch of Jewish history was coming to its close, a new era in Jewish history—the European period—was making a dramatic appearance on the stage of history. There are numerous historical bits and pieces, but historians still don't know, by and large, the routes, years, geographical sources, or the reasons behind the substantial migration to many parts of Europe. There is one major exception—the migration of Near Eastern Jews under Islamic rule with, and following on, the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), the area that became the home of Sephardic Jewry.

At the dawn of the second millennium, the distinctive Jewish cultures of Europe were rapidly crystallizing. As the communities acclimated themselves to their new surroundings, they bestowed Jewish names on the territories they now inhabited. The new Jewish culture areas, as they are sometimes called, usually started out more or less congruous with one of the language and culture areas of contemporary Europe. In an evolving pattern, the Jewish communities stuck to those primeval Jewish European names even as wars kept changing the political and cultural borders. The geographic sense of the Jewish names often underwent changes too, but in a quintessentially Jewish way, based on the shift of Jewish populations and cultural centers. Stateless cultures have the luxury of exercising “geography at will.” They can come up with terms based on internal cultural categories and concepts and can use those terms for whatever areas they go on to inhabit, all without regard to the changing political borders of the times.

The rising Jewish culture areas in Europe were named in a spirit of linguistic playfulness that brought meaning as well as fun to the new

Jewish life in Europe. The most frequent device involved digging up and recycling with relish some relatively obscure biblical name. This name would be reassigned to a specific area in the new European abode, giving this stateless minority a sense of “home” without the slightest desire to hold political power. There is a substantial academic literature on the historical and philological motives for why a particular biblical name was assigned to that and no other Jewish area in Europe. But the simple answer in most cases is that a name was found with a phonetic similarity to the European name or with a tradition-linked connection.

The French-speaking area became known as Tsorfas (Tsarefat, Zarephath). The *ts-*, *r*, and *f* echo *Francia* or *France*. The Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking region on the Iberian Peninsula was named Sepharad (Sephorad, Sefard, Sfarad), the *s* and *f* suggesting varieties of *Spania* (*p* and *f* are variants of the same consonant in classical Hebrew and Aramaic).

In the Bible, these two places were obviously in the Near East, even if scholars dispute their exact location. Both are in fact mentioned in the same prophecy of Obadiah (1:20):

*And the captives of this host of the children of Israel  
Shall possess the land of the Canaanites  
As far as Zarephath.  
The captives of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad  
Shall possess the cities of the South.*

An added charm emerges from the European replication of the north-to-south relationship of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) to Jerusalem and Judea (the Southern Kingdom) in the new France-and-Spain sense (Israel to Judah as France to Spain).

Phonetic similarity played its good-humored role in the dubbing of Hungary as Hogor (Hagar), after Abraham’s concubine Hagar (Genesis 16), invoking the *h*, *g*, and *r* sounds. Turkey became known as Tugarmo (Togarma), after the *t*, *r*, and *g* in biblical Togarmah. Traditional biblical history came into play too. Togarmah is one of the fathers of the Europeans in the genealogy of nations (Genesis 10:3). The Slavic

countries were called Knaan (Canaan) because of slave trade associations (parallel to the words “Slav” and “slave”). Canaan was the son of Ham, who was cursed to be a slave for looking at the nakedness of his father Noah (Genesis 9:25). One European Jewish area had an unambiguous sense in the Bible: Yavan (Yovon) for Greece.

The name *Ashkenaz* was bestowed on the Jewish culture area that gave rise to Yiddish and was destined to become an extensive cultural empire in Jewish history. The biblical Ashkenaz was Noah’s great-grandson: Noah, Japheth, Gomer, Ashkenaz (Genesis 10:1–3). The antiquity of the name looks more awesome in the book of Chronicles, which takes the reader from Adam (no less) to Ashkenaz in the visual space of six verses. Noah’s son Japheth, of course, was regarded as the traditional “father” of the European peoples, possibly explaining how a territory in the depths of Europe might come to be called Ashkenaz. But “general terms” are a weak cup of coffee for a civilization that adores fine points and revels in minutiae, especially linguistic details and their capacity for cultural regeneration, nomenclature, and fun. In ancient Jewish sources, the name Gomer is linked to a Near Eastern place called Germanika or Germania, which sounds awfully similar to the later Germania—Germany. The word Ashkenaz was associated as early as the sixth century with Scandia (or Scandza), the old name for Scandinavia (on the basis, it would seem, of phonetic similarity of the *a*, *s*, *k*, and *n* sounds), and it may have simply “relocated south” when Jews migrated in larger numbers to German-speaking lands. Thus there are converging threads in ancient Jewish folklore that lead from the book of Genesis to the heartland of Europe.

The name Ashkenaz, perhaps referring to a location in Turkey, also occurs in Jeremiah’s vision of the fall of Babylon: “Prepare the nations for war against her [Babylon], call up against her the kingdoms: Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz” (Jeremiah 51:27). Ararat is the famed mountain where Noah’s ark came to rest (Genesis 8:4) when the great Flood subsided. There was perhaps a wistful hope that the new European home would become a place of tranquil refuge. Just as those early European Jews applied a biblical name to their new place of residence, they used the Hebrew suffix *-i* (plural *-im*) to designate the Jewish people in that country. Hence, Sephardi means a Sephardic

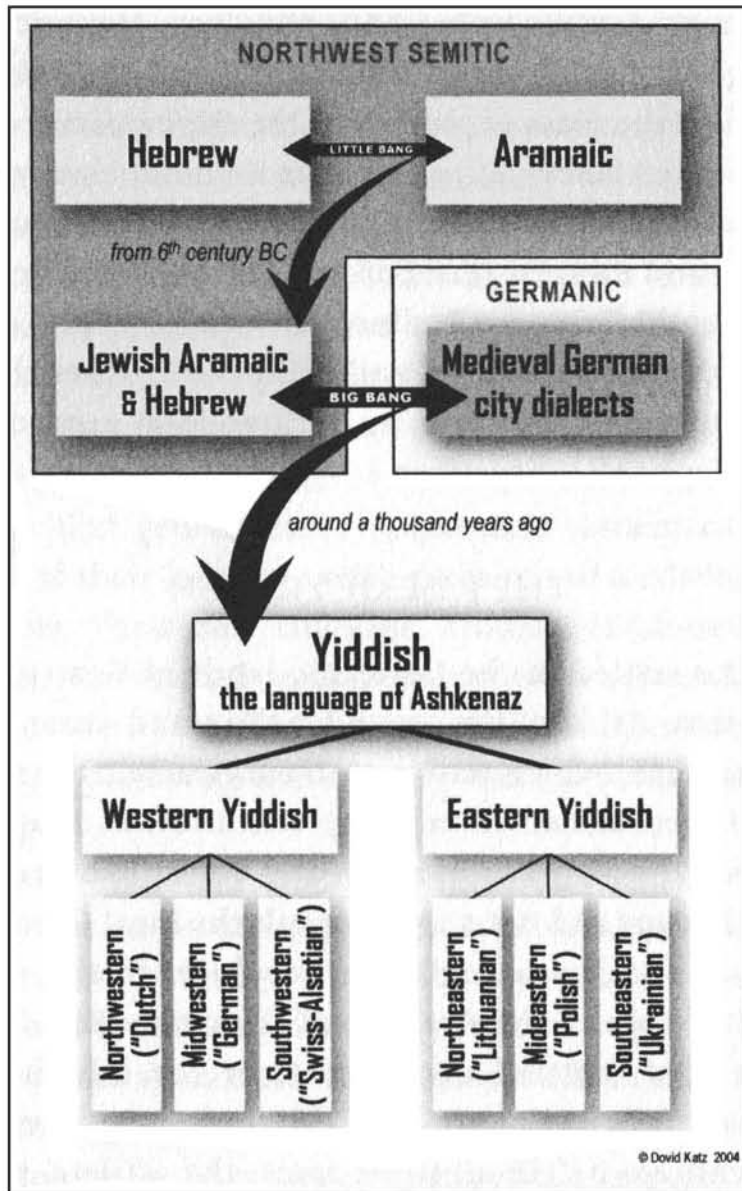


Figure 1.3 The “big bang” that created Yiddish.

Jew, not a Spaniard, and in medieval Jewish usage, *Knaani* could mean a Jew in the Slavic countries. The Jews of Ashkenaz—German-speaking Europe—came to be known as the *Ashkenázim*, and each of them was an *Ashkenázi*, in contradistinction to the gentile neighbors who were Germans. The two European Jewish cultures that survived and for the most part replaced the rest were the Sephardic and the Ashkenazic. In both cases, as historical irony would have it, they expanded because of exile and dispersion brought on by the violent intolerance of medieval Christian societies in Europe. Sephardic culture (in Spain and Portugal) drew its initial inspiration from the Islamic milieu, which

stimulated poetry, philosophy, and philology alongside traditional biblical exegesis. The ascent of Christianity and the Spanish Inquisition resulted in the mass expulsion of the Sephardim, particularly in 1492. Their looted assets helped finance Columbus's voyage to America. They settled in various places, including Greece, Turkey, Holland, North Africa, and even Eastern Europe. The everyday language of the Sephardim was Judezmo (or Ladino), in which Hebrew elements had combined with contemporary Castilian Spanish. After the expulsion, Judezmo was further enriched by various local components in the lands of the Sephardic dispersion.

### THE RISE OF YIDDISH

The Jews who settled in the Germanic lands of Central Europe and became the first Ashkenazim around a thousand years ago were the creators of Yiddish, which took over from Aramaic the mantle of the major Jewish vernacular. Over many centuries, it, like Aramaic before it, became the language of a vast and versatile literature. Settlers in medieval Europe did not start to speak the local German language any more than the Judean exiles in Babylonia in the sixth century B.C. "started to speak" the Aramaic of their new Babylonian neighbors, or for that matter, any more than the Abrahamic settlers "started speaking" the Canaanite of their new neighbors back in the second millennium B.C. In all three cases, the settlers' previous language encountered the new neighbors' vernacular, resulting in a brand-new Jewish language, fused from the (majority) elements of their new neighbors' language with the (minority) elements "brought with them from their previous abode." In the case of the genesis of Yiddish, the minority component was a kind of Jewish Aramaic that itself contained a substantial Hebrew component. Yiddish resulted when it encountered the medieval German urban dialects the Jews now heard every day. The earlier linguistic confrontations in Canaan (when Hebrew arose) and Babylonia (when Jewish Aramaic originated) can be referred to, from the linguistic point of view, as little bangs. In Europe, however, things were different. The confrontation of Semitic with the utterly different Germanic was a big bang. Two wholly different language families,

Semitic and Germanic, were joined in an everlasting union that came to be called Yiddish.

The fusion formula of Yiddish, uniting in one language two diverse linguistic families, has remained remarkably stable over time and space, and has even been an effective template for later add-ons from other linguistic families. But the immediate result a thousand or so years ago was the language referred to in rabbinic literature as *loshn Ashkenaz* (“the language of Ashkenaz” or “language of the Ashkenazim”) and what became known over time as *yidish*—Yiddish—which means simply “Jewish.”

During that first generation of Ashkenazic settlement, the settlers merged parts of their language with parts of the medieval German of their neighbors. Their new language, Yiddish, fashioned most of its words and its grammatical machinery from German stock. The Germanic elements were so radically “Judaized” that Germans who heard their neighbors speak were immediately aware that the Jews have their “own language.”

As is the case with most natural languages, there is no direct evidence of its creation or earliest stages. It always takes time, a lot of time, before a new language is reduced to a relatively standardized written form and used for a preserved written literature. Over the centuries, and especially since the rise of modern historical linguistics in the nineteenth century, linguistics has developed an exacting and rigorous methodology for reconstructing stages of a language that predate the earliest documents that happen to survive, happen to have a date, and happen to be known to us. (That methodology is described in Ferdinand de Saussure’s classic *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916 in French, after his death, from the notes of two of his students.)

The challenge is to compare all the dialects that have been observed and studied and see what is common to all of them. The universality of an element across time and space can be explained by derivation from a single ancestor dialect—the proto-language. If a certain feature is present in the old Yiddish of Amsterdam and Strasbourg and the newer Yiddish of Warsaw, Vilna, and Kiev, it is a safe bet that it was inherited from proto-Yiddish. But one can never be sure. A popular borrowed word, phrase, or construction, for example, could have spread horizontally (across space rather than through time). But when



the parallelism over a wide swath of geography as well as time and over many distinct dialects encompasses thousands of linguistic points (from sounds to nuances of meaning to syntax and more), the evidence demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that much (by no means all) of modern Yiddish goes back to the proto-Yiddish of around a thousand years ago.

For example, all Yiddish dialects have the word *levóne* (from Hebrew) for “moon” and *zun* (from Germanic) for “sun.” The details may differ. For example, in the southern dialects of Eastern European Yiddish, the pronunciations are *levúne* and *zin*; in the now extinct dialect of Holland, it was *levône* and *zon* (no need to worry about the exact phonetics). The point is that this commonality, or *fusion formula*, like so many others, was established during the big bang, and many parts of the language then remained relatively stable. Of course the importance of the moon in the lunar calendar, and its monthly blessing in the prayer canon, may help explain why the word for “moon” was retained from Hebrew while the word for “sun” was not. But the explanation game, enlightening though it may be, addresses a different set of issues. What is most important for fathoming the origin and development of the language is the presence of the fusion formulas with all their specificities, whether “logical” or not. A combination of a Semitic word for “sun” and a Germanic word for “moon” (for example, Hebrew *shémesh* and German *mond*) can never be Yiddish, it is just Hebrew plus German.

A major part of the master fusion formula involves the mechanics of Yiddish, the combinatory machinery that creates Yiddish words. The big bang resulted in a Germanic-type grammar into which Semitic roots may be inserted, as in *gánvenen* (to steal), *kháleshn* (to faint), *khásmenen* (to sign). Linguists can write the rule with some formulaic notation for the idea “insert the three-consonant Semitic root into a Germanic verb pattern using *a* as an unchanging stem-vowel.” During that first generation of settlement, enough of the Jewish population combined the Germanic and Semitic elements in that way rather than another for it to become the norm for the rest of the history of the language.

Similarly, Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic *yom tov* (holiday) became *yóntef*, which joins up with the Germanic-derived suffix *dik*, giving

*yóntevdik*, which means not only “pertaining to a holiday” but by extension (and here mechanics gives way to culture) “happy” or “in high spirits.” The unitary sound patterns of Yiddish also lead back to proto-Yiddish. For example, during the big bang, the Hebrew-derived word for “worries” entered the new language with the same vowel as the Germanic-derived word for “wine.” As a result, whatever the phonetic changes over a thousand years, the two, whose stressed vowel is the same, turn up with one and the same vowel, whatever that may happen to be in any given dialect in any given period. In modern Lithuanian (and standard) Yiddish, they are *dáyges* and *vayn* with the same *ay*, in Polish Yiddish *dâges* and *vân* with the same “long *â*,” in Ukrainian Yiddish *dages* and *van* with the same “short *a*.” The reason the two words have the same vowel in all dialects is that they were “wedded to that vowel” back during the big bang, and remain wedded to it, though the phonetic quality has changed over time and over space. This parallelism is evident in thousands of words. One can predict what sets will be evident in another Yiddish dialect where the actual sounds are different because they all ultimately derive from that one proto-Yiddish created by the big bang in Old Ashkenaz. Proto-Yiddish then split into dialects, first into two large groupings, Western Yiddish (in Central Europe) and Eastern Yiddish (in the Slavic and Baltic lands), and then later into the individual modern dialects within each group (see the illustration on p. 23). Different linguists may come up with different “physical” (phonetic) reconstructions of what the actual sound was in proto-Yiddish, but that is of secondary importance. The persistence of consistent correspondences over thousands of words goes well beyond the possibilities of “coincidence” and demonstrates derivation from a common source.

#### THE NATURE OF YIDDISH MEANINGS

Yiddish is known for its characteristic patterns of meanings, nuances, and allusions. The big bang often produced apparent synonyms, two words for the same thing. But linguists know that there is no such thing as a perfect synonym, at least not for long. Each word develops its own special nuance, whether of meaning or usage (e.g., whether it

is used in a formal or casual situation), or a social difference (e.g., used mainly by certain groups of people). One result of the big bang is that the new Yiddish words were never identical in their associations, sounds, forms, and structural uses to the Hebrew, Aramaic, or German words that originally went into the fusion process.

It is natural that a word inherited from previous Jewish history retains a special Jewish meaning while a Germanic-derived term refers to something in life generally. A *séyfer*, for example, is a traditional Jewish sacred book in Hebrew or Aramaic, and a *bukh* is any book other than one of those. A *yad* is a hand-shaped pointer used by the reader of the Torah in the synagogue, while *hant* refers to a physical hand. A *súde* is a festive traditional meal, say for Sabbath, a holiday, a wedding or circumcision, while *móltsayt* is an everyday meal. In a traditional Jewish educational institution, *zman* is a term or semester, but *tsayt* is the general concept of "time." Yiddish freezes the specifically Jewish sense of many concepts inherited from the ancient Near Eastern period in Jewish history and reserves them for things intimately Jewish.

The predictable interrelationship between Yiddish words from different sources is only one of many. The results of the confrontation interacted, changed, and continued to develop long after the big bang and right up to the present. Eastern European Yiddish absorbed a Slavic component, adding a third major language family to the process. A general term for "important" is Germanic-derived *víkhtik*. When human dignity, respect, recognition are involved, *khóshev*, from Hebrew, fits the bill. When a spur-of-the-moment necessity is present, or when satire is needed, Slavic-derived *vázhne* can be used. German-derived *nar* is any kind of a fool. Hebrew-derived *típesh* is a specifically Jewish kind of fool, and a notch higher is a *shóyte*, a Jewish fool who goes ahead and actually does something stupid. Finally, *péyte*, also from the Hebrew, has a certain humor, implying that the speaker feels sorry for someone who was not endowed with more intelligence.

In another typical case, Yiddish has at least four terms corresponding with the word "question." If it is a quick query meant to elicit simple factual information ("What time does the train leave?") one uses a *frég ton* (literally "do an ask" or "give an ask"), using a Ger-

manic root for “question.” A question for a rabbi or other authority on whether something is permissible or not (and usually requiring a yes or no answer) is a *sháyle*, from the Hebrew word for question. An intellectually challenging question that aims to refute something is a *káshe* (from the Aramaic word for such a question, from a Semitic root for “difficulty,” as in, “There is, I am afraid, a difficulty with your opinion”). In addition, modern Yiddish has borrowed from more modern German *frage* for the general concept of “question.”

Sometimes it is possible to trace the development of nuance over thousands of years. The usual biblical Hebrew term for holiday or Holy Day is *khag*. In the late postexilic book of Esther, *yom tov* (literally “good day”) occurs in the sense of festival or celebration (of some recent event). During the Aramaic period of Jewish language history, *yom tov* stuck, and it became the standard term for a Jewish holiday; the Aramaic-derived *khoggo* became the word for any celebration or anniversary. During the Yiddish period, the Aramaic-period sense of *yom tov* continued (the two words fused into one, *yóntef*), while *khoggo* (evolving to *khóge*) came to signify a Christian holiday. It occurs in the well-known Yiddish expression *Az m’klingt, iz khóge*, literally, When they ring the bells (in church), you know it’s a holiday out there. Over time, it came to mean, Where there’s smoke there’s fire.

Another biblical term for holiday is *moeyd*. After many generations in the Jewish language chain, however, the term became associated with *khol hamoeyd* (the intermediate days of holidays when work is permitted). Yiddish retains the special greeting *A gútn móyed!* (Happy [Minor] Holiday!) for these intermediate days.

The genesis of Yiddish is a key event in Jewish history that gave rise to a new European culture. It produced a living linguistic organism that developed continuously from that initial meeting of language and people from the Near East with language and people in Europe.

## ASHKENAZ

The best way to feel something of the atmosphere of the early generations of the new civilization Ashkenaz of a thousand years ago would be to spend a week in traditional Hasidic households in Brooklyn

(or Jerusalem, London, Antwerp, as well as many other places). Although the beliefs, givens, customs, and language would not be identical to what they were a thousand years ago, there would be similarities between our Hasidic family in Brooklyn and our proto-Ashkenazic family of a thousand years ago.

The similarities to a thousand years ago are telling. These people continue living Judaism as a genuine civilization, with distinctive language, dress, laws, and customs that cover many of the details of everyday life (though the “appearance” of each has changed a lot; the distinctiveness itself is the constant). These people consider their laws and customs, from keeping the Sabbath and obeying the strict dietary regulations, to the laws of sexual union and separation during the monthly cycle and many others, as privileges and obligations that derive directly from divine chosen-ness. They take open pride in separateness (chosen-ness) and often exude a certain inner peace and cheerfulness (“confidence” might be the Western term) that we Westerners might envy or resent. Their interest in politics and the wider society is limited to what is good for their community. In traditional Ashkenazic society, beliefs are not just “believed in” because of group loyalty but are taken to be as real as the sun, the moon, and the stars. For example, they believe that God wrote and gave the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) to Moses and the People of Israel at Sinai; that the rabbinic traditions of Talmudic and later times up to the present are sacrosanct and God’s true interpretation of the Torah; that the Torah needs to be forever interpreted and researched in the traditionalist spirit by the greatest rabbinic sages of the day; that Jews are God’s chosen people and in some sense therefore superior to everyone else; that death is followed by the world to come (also called the other world); that the dead will be resurrected when Messiah comes; that it is an honor to die to sanctify God’s name rather than submit to baptism or any other betrayal of the Jewish faith.

But these givens, exotic as they are for moderns (and modern Jews who find them a quaint embarrassment), do not fully account for the civilization. Surprisingly, a culture with so much normativism (of belief and practice) not only tolerates diversity of opinion and original thinking but values it exceptionally, within certain contexts, as the

highest human endeavor. This seeming contradiction does not exist in the eyes of the culture, since the Torah scholar—the traditional learned Jew—is the hero of this society in the same way a warrior, poet, novelist, political leader, or athlete is a hero in other societies.

The traditional Jewish scholar did not (and does not) feel free to question either God's existence or authorship of the Torah and the overriding authority of normative rabbinic mainstream Judaism. But he (nearly always a he) nevertheless had enormous intellectual scope to challenge opinions within the culture. What developed during those centuries before and after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is variously called rabbinic Judaism, Talmudic Judaism, or normative Judaism. They all refer to the same thing but with different emphasis. Many people, including the vast majority of modern Jews, think that rabbinic Judaism is all about "religion" in some sense or other. Actually, Talmudic literature, in the service of research into what the Torah really means, covers an array of disciplines, including history, philosophy, geography, textual analysis and literary studies, and agriculture, among others. The predominant discipline is jurisprudence and argumentation over law, whether or not it has an application in everyday life. The virtual reality of the belief system is so strong that one scholar might devote his entire intellectual life to open questions in the laws of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem when Messiah comes; this person's life work is every bit as "real" for the people in the society as the focus of another on what local dish may be eaten. The first Ashkenazim brought all this to Europe as a package in which the belief in Messiah and resurrection of the dead was (and for their faithful descendants still is) as sacred as the belief in the six-day creation of the world, and the permanent celebration of the seventh day. It matters not at all that the six-day creation and the Sabbath are explicit in the Torah, while the belief in Messiah and resurrection became part of Judaism long after the Torah was written.

Tradition derives Sephardic Jews principally from Babylonia and Ashkenazim from the Land of Israel. But presuming, for the sake of argument, general overall common origins in the greater Near East, it is important, in fathoming the nature of the primary Yiddish-speaking population in Europe, to come to grips with what made Ashkenaz spe-

cific and different. In large part, the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic culture can be ascribed to the differing environments. In Muslim Spain, relative tolerance and intercultural respect led to a golden age of Sephardic Jewry, with a major secular outburst that produced great Hebrew poets (e.g., Yehuda ha-Levi, c. 1074–1141), Hebrew grammarians (e.g., David Qimhi, c. 1160–1235), and philosophers (e.g., Maimonides, 1135–1204). They molded written Hebrew to new heights of literary and philological sophistication, and enjoyed close contacts with Muslim scholars. With the Christian conquest of Spain, and the Spanish Inquisition in the 1490s, Sephardic civilization was largely destroyed. Many Sephardim saved their lives by converting and then secretly adhering to Judaism. These secret Jews were known as Marranos. Even today, there are many people in Spain and its former colonies who are descended from Marranos.

The continuous history of Ashkenaz, including an immediate pre-history, starts in the medieval period, not in the Jewish communities on Germanic soil in ancient times. Numerous Jews were brought to the continental Roman Empire after the fall of Jerusalem and subsequent revolts. They were granted citizenship by Emperor Caracalla in 212. Historians are fond of citing the references by Emperor Constantine to a Jewish community in Cologne in the early fourth century. But there is no known continuity between those Jewish settlements on Germanic soil and the later Ashkenaz. It is in the environment of medieval Europe that the story of Ashkenaz begins to unfold.

The early cultural and spiritual history of Ashkenaz is essentially different from what was happening in Sepharad. Even before any major persecutions, the Ashkenazic elite—the rabbinic scholars—showed little interest in developing new forms of Jewish culture that were consciously inspired by their non-Jewish surroundings (though the culture of those surroundings impacted the Jewish masses, and was to inspire much of early Yiddish literature). The Jewish scholars of Ashkenaz felt there was little to emulate, in sharp contrast to their counterparts in the flourishing culture (and relative tolerance) of medieval Islam and Moorish Spain. When cruel, unprovoked, widespread persecutions were sanctioned by high civil–religious authorities, Ashkenazic culture became even more inward looking, backward

looking (to the ancient sacred books), and forward looking (to the days of the future Messiah). The traditions that the Ashkenazim kept about their earliest history paint a classic picture of a first settler being invited by a benevolent king and going on to build a great family and community that grew into Ashkenaz. According to the tradition, Charlemagne (Charles I of the Holy Roman Empire, 742–814) brought the great scholars Moses the Elder and his son Kalonymus (or Klonimos) to Mainz. Over the centuries, the family scions became teachers and scholars. Their own name, evolved to Kalmen, would become one of the more popular Jewish names in Ashkenazic Europe. The name Kalmen can be regarded as the oldest known uniquely Yiddish word.

An initial tone of tolerance was set by Charlemagne in both the French and German regions. Among Carolingians and post-Carolingians in the eighth and ninth centuries there were a number of rulers called Lothair (Lothair I, a grandson of Charlemagne who died in 855, Lothair II of Italy who died in 950, and Lothair III, Holy Roman Emperor, who died in 1137). In rabbinic literature, “Lóter” turns up as the name of the German-speaking area, in close connection with “Tsórfas,” the French-speaking area, both of which fed into the new Ashkenaz. For several centuries, the Jews found themselves under the protection of Carolingian and Ottonian rulers. “Kalonymus” turns up repeatedly as a Jewish name in those parts. A famous thousand-year-old gravestone in Mainz reads “Meshulem the son of Rabono Kalonymus” (*rabono* being Aramaic for “the teacher” or “the rabbi”). Among the liturgical compositions ascribed to the family is “Song of Unity” (*Shir ha-yíkhud*), a hymn to God that is divided in seven sections for recitation each day of the week.

The inner life of the Ashkenazim was one of total devotion to their civilization. Spiritual fulfillment was found in complete belief in God and the inherited Jewish religious system. Intellectual fulfillment was found in profound research into the inherited library of texts, starting from the Torah and including contemporary Talmudic commentaries. Seemingly out of nowhere, rabbinic giants emerged in the new Ashkenaz, the territory comprising the German-speaking area and the adjacent French area. As if by the intervention of some higher power, they



picked up where the Jewish Orient, particularly Babylonia, had just left off and moved to fill the vacuum.

A number of Jewish laws derive from the early days of Ashkenaz. One of them is the *khéyrem bés-din* (*herem beth-din*), which gives Jewish courts powers to enforce their decisions by various means, including the feared ban of excommunication. Another is the right of any man or, remarkably for the period, any woman to interrupt the prayers to protest against someone's perceived misdeed. This survived into every East European shtetl synagogue, where, the oldest survivors today remember, a woman would stop even the most sacred prayer, Kol-nidrei on the eve of the Day of Atonement, to expose someone who acted dishonestly and to have her grievance aired before the entire congregation. In the realm of charity, the biblical law of giving a tenth (tithe) to the Levites was reinterpreted for giving charity to the poor, which became a cornerstone of the society. People who achieved wealth, men and women alike, were expected to give substantial amounts to charity, and they would suffer general disrespect if they did not. That first Kalonymus, who was invited to settle in Mainz by Charlemagne in the late eighth or early ninth century, was known to learned Ashkenazim of later generations as a first settler figure who established the nucleus of Jewish scholarship and the Jewish population in the Rhineland. But he is not regarded as the founder of the new Jewish culture centered in the Germanic-speaking lands. The symbolic "founder of Ashkenaz" was Rabeynu Gershom, "our master Gershom" (c. 960–1028). He was often referred to as *reysh glúso*, the old Aramaic title of the head of the Babylonian Diaspora, which was now revived in Ashkenaz in the Ashkenazic pronunciation. Gershom established a yeshiva (Talmudic academy) at Magentza, one of the three early Ashkenazic cities known by their acronym "Shum" (*Shapiro, Vermayzo, and Magentzo* = Speyer, Worms, and Mainz). Around 1000, he convened an international conference (often called *synod* in historical works) that issued a number of legal amendments. The most sensational at the time was the prohibition of polygamy, which was widespread in biblical times. That is not to say that early Ashkenazic Jews in Speyer, Worms, or Mainz were practicing

polygamy. They were not. Gershom was conceptually separating the new Jewish Europe from the old Jewish Orient and on this crucial point was bringing legal Judaism closer to mainstream European Christian civilization. It was a statement on behalf of the new dignity accorded the Jewish woman, which was enhanced by another edict necessitating a wife's agreement to a divorce. No longer was a woman merely a man's chattel to be discarded at his whim. Divorce was an issue for both parties. The status of women, though far from today's concept of equality, was radically revamped from the biblical, Near Eastern model of (more or less) property to an equal within the institution of marriage (though the sexes were by no means thought of as playing the same or similar roles in society).

One of Gershom's edicts became the source of many centuries of Yiddish humor. It forbade (in all seriousness) reading a letter addressed to someone else. With typical Jewish love of acronyms, it is common practice to this day to write on the envelope of a Yiddish or Hebrew letter *b'khdrág*, an acronymic for the Hebrew words "under the ban of Rabeynu Gershom [of reading a letter addressed to another]." Over a thousand years, the weightiness has been lightened, and it is common to ask in Yiddish whether "your letter is *b'khdrág* or not *b'khdrág*."

#### EARLY GENOCIDE

The saddest edict of all is Rabeynu Gershom's prohibition against reminding someone who had forcibly been converted to Christianity and then returned to Judaism that his steadfastness had ever lapsed. It is said that one of Gershom's own sons converted after being tortured and died before returning to Judaism. Gershom mourned him, though the weight of the body of previous jurisprudence decreed that he not be mourned. And that takes us to the early crisis of Ashkenaz, Christian-motivated genocide. The catalog of horrors pales only by comparison with the genocidal Holocaust of the twentieth century. As far as we know, all was more or less well until 1012, when the Jews of Mainz were expelled, with many killed, by Emperor Henry II, after a priest allegedly converted to Judaism. That was the time when Ashkenazic

rabbis began to write their classical Hebrew or Aramaic liturgical, often penitential poetry mourning the murdered people and the destroyed communities. One of the most famous was composed by Rabeynu Gershon and is still recited during the Jewish New Year. In the eleventh century, many rulers of cities took in and protected the Jews of their cities, frequently as an economic asset. One of the most famous pro-Jewish statements of the period is attributed to Speyer's Bishop Ruediger, who in 1084 invited Jews to come and settle there to "enhance one thousand times the respect accorded our city."

In late 1095, the First Crusade was proclaimed by Pope Urban II at Clermont to win the Holy Land away from the Muslim "infidels." The mobs that took up the call started by doing away with the local Jewish infidels. Thousands of Jews were massacred throughout the Rhineland between April and June 1096. One of the early victims in Speyer was a woman who on the eighth day of the Jewish month Iyar (May 3, 1096) proudly accepted death over conversion (an option offered by the Crusaders). This unknown woman established the Ashkenazic pride in dying for God rather than accepting Christianity. A considerable number of the city's Jews were rescued by Bishop John, who had succeeded Ruediger. Later that month, about eight hundred Jews were killed in Worms. More than a thousand Jews of Mainz, led by Kalonymus ben Meshulem of the Kalonymus family, were either massacred or took their own lives rather than accept baptism.

From the Christian side, a long period of Jew hatred was unleashed that ultimately culminated (after the infusion of chauvinistic nationalism) in the Holocaust nearly a thousand years later. In the aftermath of the First Crusade a new and sad form of Jewish literature took shape: the *Memer-bukh* (Book of Commemoration). The names of murdered people were listed, so that they would not be forgotten and could be read out in perpetuity. An ancillary genre was the memoir of what happened, and these survivor accounts are preserved in various writings of the period. More than eight centuries after the First Crusade, in the wake of the Holocaust, the genre evolved into the *Yizker-bukh* (Book of Remembrance) for a destroyed Jewish community. It is also poignant that Yiddish words make their first dated appearance in the old *Memer-bikher*, starting with the First Crusade in 1096.

Eleventh- and twelfth-century personal names include not only classical Hebrew names but typically Yiddish ones. The best-known Yiddish male name in the lists is, not surprisingly, Kalonymus (it apparently derives from Greek *kalos* “good” and *nomos* “name”). We also find *Shneur*, which is usually derived from Latin *senior* (Jews over time endowed it with a playful Hebrew etymology: *shney* for “two” and *or* for “light”: “two lights”). Among women’s names, however, early Yiddish could be most expressive because there was less perceived need to give females Hebrew-etymology names. Among eleventh- and twelfth-century Ashkenazic women we find Yiddish names that have survived into the twenty-first century, including Béyle, Gíte, Gólde, Míne, Yákhne(t), and Yentl. Yes, the famous Yentl is one of the oldest Yiddish names, and it is derived from Romance *gentil*, meaning “well-bred” or “genteel.”

The Second Crusade was declared by Pope Eugene III in 1144. At the time, the Cistercian monk Radulph reinvigorated the charge of deicide, inciting the mob to take revenge on the people who betrayed Jesus before dealing with those faraway Muslims in the Near East. The Church’s Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 banished Jews from the crafts, leaving them few ways of making a living, principally the finance industry (a polite expression for the loathed occupations of money lending and pawn broking). The same council proclaimed the accusation of “desecration of the Host,” the charge that Jews continue to inflict pain on Jesus Christ by stabbing or otherwise profaning the wafer that Christians hold to be the body of Jesus. In 1243, a number of Jewish women and men were burned alive at the stake in Belitz, near Berlin, on that charge.

The blood libel, which claimed that Jews used Christian blood to make their unleavened bread (*matzah*) for the Passover holiday, was deployed with increasing frequency. Given that Jewish law prohibits ingesting blood, it is a perfect example of religious and racial hatred rearing its head with a ridiculous accusation. There was a massacre of Jews in Munich on a blood libel in 1286. The blood libel of Fulda in 1235 claimed that Jews used Christian blood for medicinal purposes. Pope Innocent IV wrote about the falsehood of a blood libel in 1247, but so impassioned was the Christian mob that even the pope’s word

could not deter it. A combination of these charges was invoked by the knight Rindfleisch, who incited massacres in 146 German localities in 1298. In the wake of the bubonic plague, the Black Death that swept through Europe in 1348 and 1349, the Jews were blamed for poisoning the wells, although they also drank from them. Atrocities were committed throughout Central Europe. Some six thousand Jews perished in fires in Mainz, and several thousand were burned at the Jewish cemetery in Strasbourg.

There was something in Christianity that no ruler of a city, king, or pope could mitigate in a Christianity-based state in medieval Central Europe: the passages of the New Testament that were constructed to incite hatred of Jews. The fascination with them is interminable, as demonstrated by the success of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The Gospels duly record that the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate pleaded with the Jews for Jesus' life: "'Why, what evil has he done?' But they cried out all the more, saying 'Crucify him!' When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person. You see to it.' And all the people answered: 'His blood be on us and our children!'" (Matthew 27:23–25).

The anonymous woman who took pride in dying at the Crusader's sword on May 3, 1096, founded a tradition that continues to mystify some Holocaust scholars even today. Why did so many people go to their deaths peacefully instead of resisting? The Ashkenazic civilization is one of the most peaceful in human history. It is inherently stateless and weaponless, dedicated to life according to the ancient cumulative Jewish religious tradition and to dying when necessary to sanctify God's name. From the Crusades to the Holocaust, the Ashkenazic Jew perished with the words *Shma Yisroel, Adoynóy eloyhéynu Adoynóy ekhód* on his or her lips (Hear O Israel, God, our Lord, is One; Deuteronomy 6:4). The line is known in Yiddish as *Shma-Yisroel*. Its use as a martyr's last words dates to A.D. 135, at least, when uttered by the great Rabbi Akiva as he was being tortured to death by Roman authorities in the wake of a failed revolt against Roman rule. In Christian Europe, it was, for many Jews, a last word of defiance against the attempt to force them to believe that God could have a son. In other

words, for *them* it became the affirmation of monotheism as seen through classical Jewish eyes.

The belief in martyrdom, however, should not be taken in isolation from the culture as a whole. For people who believe in the reality of the world to come, for people who believe that this world is but a “hallway” and the “false world” leading to the “true world” (classic Jewish phrases in translation), death is not as scary as it is for so many moderns who believe that death is a finality. Ashkenazic civilization continued to grow

despite persecution. Rabeynu Gershom was followed by Rashi, a popular acronym for Rabbi Shloyme Yitskhoki (Solomon son of Isaac, c. 1040–1105) whose commentary on the Bible and Talmud remains standard to this day. Ashkenaz became the world center for Talmudic scholarship. Among its best-known scholars were the Maharil (Rabbi Jacob Mollin, c. 1360–1427) who established *Minheg Ashkenaz* (the Custom of Ashkenaz as a formal set of practices, traditions, and laws). His loyal pupil Zalmen of St. Goar produced the *Seyfer Maharil* (Book of Maharil), which remains a classic text for traditional Ashkenazim through modern times. Another Talmudic giant was Isserlin (Israel son of Pethahiah, c. 1390–1460), who perfected the literary form of Responsa, works that were organized as questions (on various matters, mostly Jewish law) and answers. Gershom, Rashi, the Maharil, and Isserlin were among the many personalities that over centuries defined the scholarly and moral ideal of Ashkenaz and at the same time made Ashkenaz the undisputed new world center for traditional Torah scholarship.



Figure 1.4 The traditional gravestone in Mainz of Rabeynu Gershom (960–1028), the “Light of the Exile,” who is considered the symbolic founder of Ashkenazic civilization in Europe.

## THE INNER ASHKENAZIC WORLD

The Jewish mystical tradition is the body of literature and thought known collectively as the Kabbalah (the literal meaning of the word is “received tradition”). The Kabbalah has roots in Near Eastern antiquity. But it was in Europe, as far as is known, that Kabbalah became a serious philosophical discipline. The first major “native European” work of Kabbalah was perhaps the *Bahir* (Brightness), composed in twelfth-century Provence, which introduces a sexual (or symbolic sexual) element into its cosmology, one that remained with many speculative kabbalists through the ages. Its nucleus is the concept that God comprises a feminine and a masculine component, and the two forces and their union are perceived as central to both the material world and the nature of God.

From this bridgehead in Europe, the Kabbalah went in different, predictable ways in the new Jewish Europe. In Sepharad—Jewish Spain and Portugal—where Jewish philosophy flourished and leading scholars were often well educated in Arabic culture (which included Arabic versions of Greek and Latin classics), Kabbalah took a philosophical and cosmological direction. The central work of this major branch of Jewish life and thought was apparently compiled in Spain by Moshe de Léon (1250–1305) and his circle, using many older sources. (Traditionalists, however, continue to ascribe the work to the second-century scholar Shimon bar Yochai in Israel.) The book is called the *Zohar* (Splendor) and is largely set out as a commentary on the Torah, its sections following the order of the Torah portions (which are weekly in Jewish life, each portion being read on Sabbath, and the Torah cycle being completed each year).

In Ashkenaz, however, there was much less inclination to consciously incorporate (or even become acquainted with) elements of non-Jewish philosophy. The cultural and spiritual divide between Jews and non-Jews was more conspicuous in medieval Christian Europe than in Muslim Spain. The persecutions played a major role in leading Jewish mysticism into the frame of mind of *kídash hashém*, dying to sanctify God’s name, otherworldliness, a passionate yearn-

ing for Messiah's coming and intensive adherence to customs, rituals, and laws.

The followers of the new mystical movement in Ashkenaz, which flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were called the Pious of Ashkenaz (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*). The leading personality of the medieval group was Yehúde Khósid (Judah the Chosid, "Judah the pious one"). He was apparently born in the western part of Old Ashkenaz, in the Rhineland, in the middle of the twelfth century and moved east to Regensburg by the Danube, where he lived until his death in 1217. He was one of the Kalonymuses, a scion of the oldest known original extended Ashkenazic family. Yehúde Khósid taught extreme humility, even declaring that an author may not sign his name to a book. Little wonder, perhaps, that most of his writings have been lost (most painfully, his major kabbalistic tract). Among the surviving writings are his extraordinary "ethical will" and the *Book for the Pious* (*Séyfer khasidim, Sefer Hasidim*), of which he is thought to be a prime compiler.

Many of the points in both the *Book for the Pious* and Yehúde Khósid's ethical will might strike the contemporary observer as extreme, superstitious, arcane, simplistic, overpietistic, and overnormative in encouraging people to be overly self-critical and worry too much about always doing the right thing, whether or not there is overt logic in the prescribed way of living. People are encouraged to keep a written record of their sins and mistakes. There was also an extraordinary emphasis on praying and the need to be in a state of personal spiritual elevation, genuine happiness, and interconnectedness with higher powers during prayer. There was a belief in the imminent presence of departed souls (dead people). There was also belief that "practical kabbalists" who know secret letter combinations of God's name can work wonders on earth.

It is from this environment that two major motifs in Ashkenazic literature arose at some early point in Ashkenazic history. The first is a golem (Yiddish *góylem* from Hebrew *gólem*), a homunculus, or a kind of human being created by sacred names and crafts. The word goes back to the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 139:16), where it is thought to mean something like "unformed substance." But Yiddish has the



meaning from the Aramaic Talmud, where it refers to a kind of robot. The second is a dybbuk, a word from a Hebrew root (DBQ, meaning “cleave”) created, perhaps much later, by the Yiddish speakers of Ashkenaz to refer to a spirit of a deceased person that invades the body of a living person. With dybbuks and golems, the Ashkenazic Kabbalah became, in part, a homespun kind of mysticism. Both could serve as checks against evil in this world. A great kabbalist could create a golem to defend a civilian Jewish population against armed enemies. And the dybbuk of a wronged soul had recourse after death to return to haunt the living until its/his/her grievance was dealt with in this world. The *Book for the Pious* teaches that it is better to be the loser in a conflict in this world, since the loser, who does not prevail with force or with cunning, will be the winner in the world to come. This is part of a wider pacifism and acceptance of fate that is mandated as something that needs to be not only “agreed to” but even enjoyed in this life. There is more than a curious parallelism with various Christian pietist movements and the Christian theological exaltation of suffering. These parallelisms are all the more intriguing in light of the many exhortations in the book to keep separate from the non-Jewish population. Perhaps there were more contacts, especially between scholars, than is now known.

Among the most revealing passages in the *Book for the Pious* are those mandating the care of books. A book in the twelfth century was what we today call a manuscript, of course, well before the invention of printing, but the notion of one text copied many times is quite close, conceptually speaking, to a book in the modern sense. Some examples include: “It is forbidden to write in a book that so-and-so owes me such a sum” and “If a man kissed his wife or children, he shall not afterwards kiss the book; he should wash his hands first.” Myriad laws of hygiene and scrupulous cleanliness are scattered throughout the work, and some medical historians have even argued that the emphasis on cleanliness contributed to Jews’ proportionately lower death rate in some plagues, resulting in the group being blamed for the disease, as happened in the wake of the Black Death of 1348–1349.

The ethical will of Yehúde Khósid, appended at the beginning of some traditional editions of the *Book for the Pious*, forbids the burial

of enemies next to each other. You shouldn't build a house on land that never had a house on it before. Don't take the mezuzah (traditional doorpost amulet) with you when you move from one house to a new house; it is dangerous. Don't close a window completely, but leave at least a small opening so that ghosts can go out. Don't marry a woman with the same name as your mother or if your name is the same as her father's. Two brothers should not marry two sisters. Don't have two of your children, one a daughter and one a son, marry two of the children of one of your friends. You can write your name in a book but don't write that it belongs to you.

Far from feeling "even more constricted" or "ghettoized" in a modern sense, the medieval Ashkenazi felt extraordinarily proud to be Jewish and to be chosen for differentness and, when necessary, for suffering and the honor of dying for God's name. He or she believed in what we would call supernatural powers, and in living a life in which moral, ritual, religious, and hygienic demands must be met, in which books and traditional learning carry the highest respect. And that traditional learning entails above all the power to come up with original new analyses of age-old questions that arise from Torah study in its wider, Jewish sense. In fact, the *Book for the Pious* commands that a manuscript which contains new ideas must be ransomed from captivity of extortionists before other books.

Yehúde Khósid remained one of the romanticized builders of Ashkenazic civilization about whom folktales were told and written for centuries to come. The Yiddish *Máyse nísim* (Wonder Tales) was first published in the late seventeenth century, but parts of the material had been circulating from the twelfth century onward. One way to catch something of the flavor of early Ashkenazic wonder tales is to cite one about the mother of Yehúde Khósid.

Something that happened when the mother of Reb Yehúde Khósid was pregnant with him. One day she was standing in the narrow alleyway near the *váyber-shul* (women's synagogue) and an evil man rode by with his wagon and harnessed horse and tried to run over the righteous woman. The woman clutched onto the tower of the *váyber-shul* and a great miracle took place. The tower bent over, so that the righteous woman was suddenly standing

under the bent tower, and the evildoer with his wagon was blocked from doing anything to her. There have not been many such miracles since we have been in the Diaspora, and it is possible to see from this how Reb Yehúde Khósid was so righteous that this occurred to enable him to be born by miracle, and to this day the tower stands bent over and all foreign visitors who come to Worms come and look at the tower to see the great wonder.

*(Yiftekh-Yospe Shamesh, Máyse nisim, sec. 8. Amsterdam, 1696.)*

The Leaning Tower of Worms stood, leaningly intact, until Kristallnacht in 1938.

# *The Three Languages of Ashkenaz*

## INTERNAL JEWISH TRILINGUALISM

For all their spiritual separateness from their Christian neighbors, the Ashkenazim were anything but “isolated” from their surroundings on the level of daily interaction in life and commerce. The Yiddish language itself, the daily vernacular of the Ashkenazim, is mostly derived from medieval German city dialects. One of the consistent attributes of Yiddish is the “specifically Yiddish reconfiguration” *within* the Germanic elements, in addition to the specific fusion formula (Germanic with Semitic) that Yiddish generated when it was created in that linguistic big bang. The Germanic elements of Yiddish are most closely related to the German dialects of Regensburg and Bavaria, although there is no Yiddish dialect that corresponds in its major features to any one German dialect. The Jewish quarter of Regensburg dates to the early eleventh century, and there are records of Jewish residents from the tenth. Regensburg and the Danube region is the closest Yiddish has to a hometown. The “Rhineland Jewish language,” an early variant of the new language in the far west of earliest Ashkenaz, was not destined to become Yiddish. It disappeared but left numerous traces

on Yiddish, which soon encompassed all of Ashkenaz, including the Rhineland.

In addition to Yiddish, the average Ashkenazi also spoke the local German dialect well enough to communicate. But the issue here is not bilingualism in everyday speech but the internal trilingualism of Ashkenazic civilization. Ashkenazim had (and in traditionalist communities still have) three Jewish languages: Hebrew (traditionally called *loshn-kóydesh*, the “language of holiness”), Aramaic (called *arámish* or *tárgum-loshn*, “translation language” from the classic translations of the Bible into Aramaic), and Yiddish (traditionally called *loshn Ashkenaz*, the “language of Ashkenaz” or *leshoynéynu* “our language” in rabbinic texts).

The general configuration is one of graceful complementation between the three languages. Yiddish was the only Jewish spoken language in classical Ashkenaz. The ancient sacred texts imported from the Near East were in Hebrew (most of the Bible, the Mishna, and many other works) or Aramaic (the Bible targums, most of the Talmud, and rabbinic literature). The traditional Jewish alphabet was used for all three languages. From the earliest times onward, Ashkenazim read in all three Jewish languages; what is much more exotic from the modern point of view, the scholars in the society could write original works in all three. The same Ashkenazic scholar who wrote a Bible commentary in Hebrew could author a Talmudic or kabbalistic tract in Aramaic and a letter or popular book in Yiddish.

The three complemented one another in their prestige too. In traditional early Ashkenaz, Yiddish as a spoken language was neither “low prestige” nor “high prestige.” It was what people in the community spoke to each other naturally and exclusively, without being a “statement” or “point of contention.” But when it came to reading and writing, knowledge of the classic languages was more prestigious, but they were not of equal prestige. The learned could understand written Hebrew. The more learned could write in Hebrew. The highly learned could understand Aramaic texts. And the most learned could write original works in Aramaic. Aramaic was generally reserved for the two highest endeavors in the eyes of Ashkenazic society: legalistic

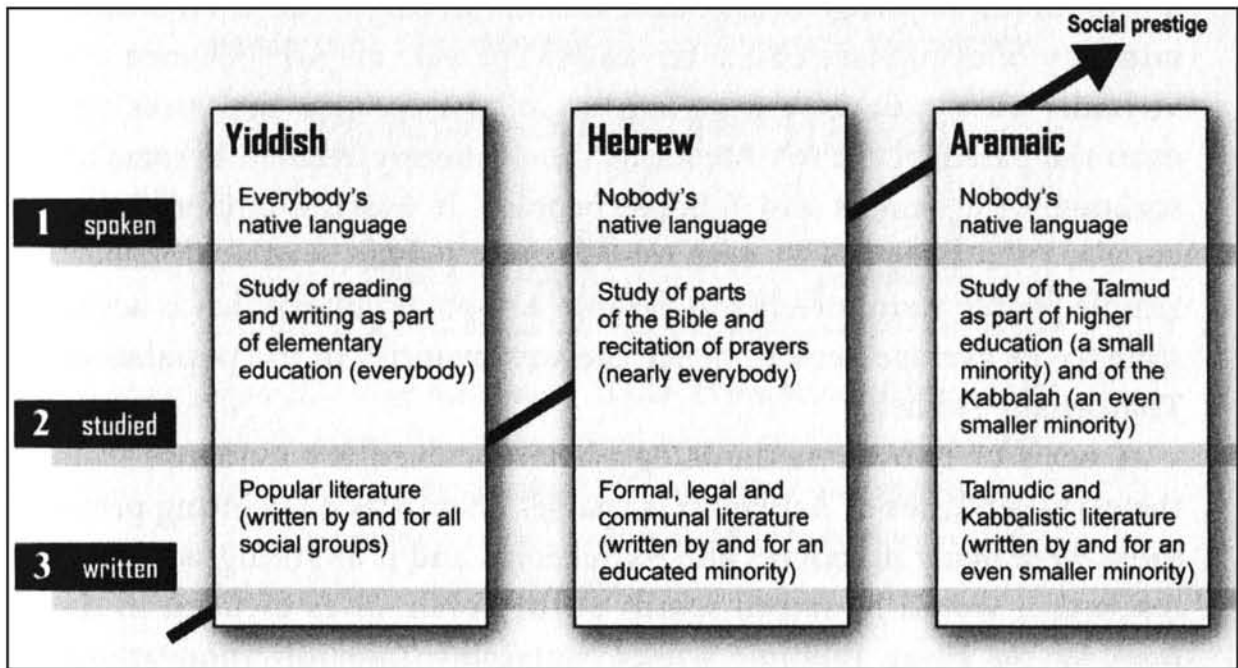


Figure 2.1 Function and status of the three Jewish languages in Ashkenaz.

commentaries and treatises in the field of Talmud and mystical treatises in the field of Kabbalah. Aramaic, which became the Jewish vernacular after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. and eventually acquired sacred status, survived in Ashkenazic culture as part of a well-defined three-language system. It has a special mystique that has survived undiminished. It is the language of the highly emotive Jewish prayer for the dead, the Kaddish (which also has other sacred uses in the liturgy), and it is the language in which marriage contracts and bills of divorce continue to be written by traditional rabbinic authorities. But the creative use of Aramaic was not limited to the serious Talmudic, the esoterically mystical, and the divinely somber. It was the source of a lot of linguistic fun. Schoolchildren would combine Aramaic suffixes with Yiddish words to come up with multilingual jesting.

On the face of it, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish all had their fixed places. The trilingualism was so finely complementary as to ensure that no conflict arose. But "status issues" between the languages did arise because the three languages were necessarily associated in different degrees with different kinds of people. While a profound knowledge of Hebrew was the luxury of a small minority of educated males,

a profound knowledge of Aramaic was the luxury of an even smaller minority of even more educated males. The vast majority of men and virtually all the women were left out of the creative processes and even the passive culture of reading. Consequently Yiddish became associated with women and “simple people.” It was the universal vernacular in a society with near total literacy (in the Jewish alphabet). Simple people want, need, and deserve a popular culture that is accessible to the average person, hence the vast majority of the population. That meant Yiddish.

A word or two on methodology. The documentary evidence from the early centuries of Ashkenaz is sparse. There was no printing press, there were many massacres and expulsions, and if anything was to be rescued, it would be sacred scrolls of the Torah, or as dictated in the *Book for the Pious*, rabbinic works containing Talmudic innovations. Moreover, Ashkenazic culture minimized the need for biographical detail and contemporary observations of society. Consequently we must latch on to whatever hard evidence there is, which often means a preserved document that can be dated, at least roughly. We have to remember that what happens to be preserved probably reflects something that also happened beforehand and elsewhere, of which we happen not to have a dated record. And, finally, there are some documents that tell us something indirectly.

One such document is the oldest known complete Yiddish sentence with a date. It is a rhymed couplet in the holiday prayer book (the *mákhzer*) that was completed in 1272 in Worms (Vermáyzo to traditional Ashkenazim). The one Yiddish sentence is written into the calligraphic hollows of the large-size Hebrew first word of one of the prayers. The Yiddish sentence reads, “May a good day come upon him who will carry this *mákhzer* into the synagogue.” The fun element includes the rhyme in the vernacular and perhaps the great weight of the book, hence the special blessing for whoever will deign to shlep it to shul to actually pray from it. The sentence occurs at the start of the prayer for dew in the supplementary service for the first day of Passover. Some scholars see in this a symbolic half-empty cup. Yiddish had no literary possibilities other than to “fill the odd gap” such as the hollows of letters.



Figure 2.2 The oldest known Yiddish document with a date: a single Yiddish sentence (in small red letters) written into the hollows of a large Hebrew word in the illuminated Worms prayer book manuscript of 1272. (By permission of the Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Jewish National Library, Jerusalem)

There are also documents that contain no Yiddish and do not mention Yiddish but can shed light on the interrelationships of the Jewish languages of Ashkenaz. Yekusiel (Jekuthiel) of Prague, a Hebrew philologist who lived in the thirteenth century, wrote a commentary on the correct reading of the sacred texts. He lists a number of “mistakes” Ashkenazim make on account of using the sound system of their native language (Yiddish) rather than what he believed to be the “correct” ancient (Near Eastern) Hebrew reading. These instances, which modern linguists know as interference of one language in the sound system of another, are inevitable when one language is the spoken one and the other is not. In Yekusiel’s generation, back in the thirteenth century, things were shifting away from Near Eastern pronunciation norms, and this was bothering the learned observer who lived in a time when an older phonetic tradition still survived. The Ashkenazic and Sephardic pronunciations of Hebrew differ radically from ancient Hebrew and Aramaic pronunciation. Ashkenazic maintains many more distinctions among the vowels, and Sephardic is more conservative for consonants. They are the equally valid and equally “correct” traditions of the two principal branches of European Jewry.



## YIDDISH COMES OUT

For most Jewish cultures, including Ashkenaz, the canon of Hebrew and Aramaic prayers in the original has been, and is, sacrosanct, even if the majority of the people did not fully understand the literal meaning of what they were reading or reciting. It may be a universal of human culture that it is “easier” to engage in deep spiritual communion with higher powers in a medium other than the everyday vernacular used for all the nonsense of daily life and its foibles. However, the mystical Pious of Ashkenaz movement of the twelfth century and beyond believed in the power of praying in the spoken language, which in Ashkenaz meant praying in Yiddish. The *Book for the Pious* says (in Hebrew):

It is better for a person to pray and to read the *Shma* and the blessings in a language that he [or she?] understands rather than praying in Hebrew and not understanding it. For it is written [in Isaiah 29:12–13]: “[And when the book is given] to him who does not know of books, saying: “Read this, will you be so good” and he says “But I do not know of books!” And so God said: “Because this nation approaches and honors me with its mouth and its lips, but has distanced its heart from me, their veneration of Me is a commandment that people have learned by rote!” . . . Inasmuch as one would not understand what one is saying, they therefore wrote the Talmud in [both] Babylonia and the Land of Israel in the Aramaic language in order that the Commandments be known, even to simple people.

(*Book for the Pious [Séyfer kbasidim / Sefer Hasidim]*, sec. 785, Bologna 1538 and editions following it. Wistinetzki-Freimann edition, sec. 1590, Frankfurt, 1924.)

This early Ashkenazic encouragement of prayer in the spoken language ultimately led to the creation of a large number of Yiddish prayer books. For centuries, as far as we know, they were translations or paraphrases of the sacred Hebrew prayers. The rabbinate, however, attempted to limit praying in Yiddish, principally because many Ashkenazic rabbis did not accept the “folkist” position of the early Pious of Ashkenaz and insisted on prayer in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. In many cases, it is difficult to determine whether the point of contention is the practice of Yiddish prayer as an auxiliary to the

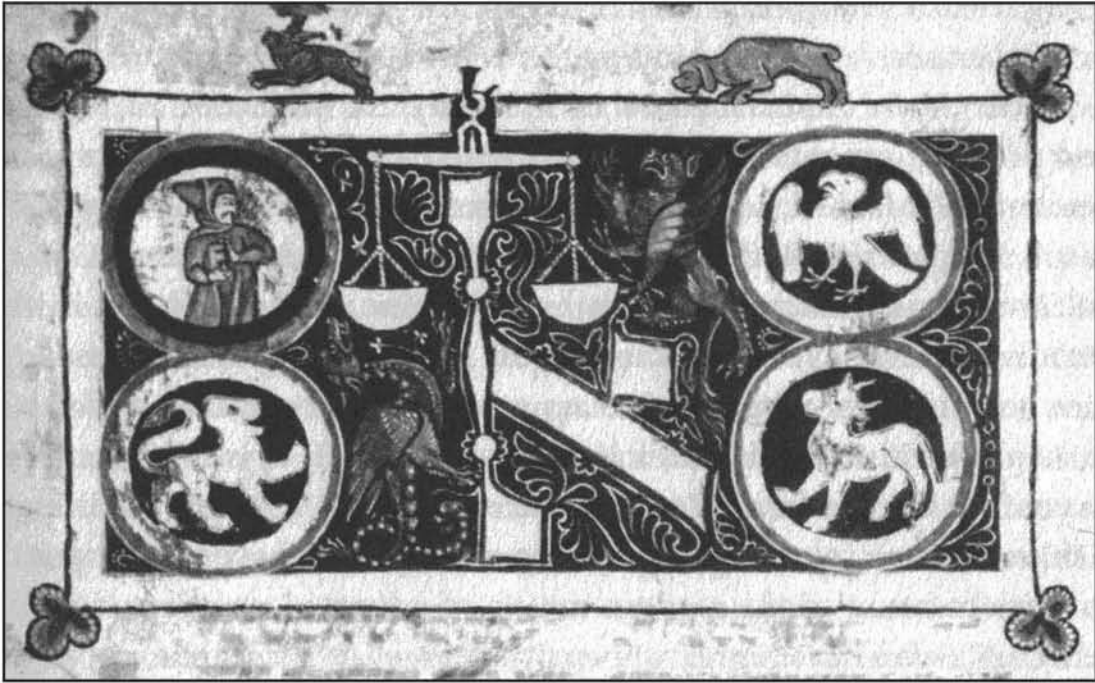


Figure 2.3 This fragment from an early fourteenth-century holiday prayer book, known as the *Machzor Lipsiae*, shows a hare being hunted (at the top). It is a gentle reminder of the ancient Talmudic acronymic *yaknehóz*, which helps people remember the order of various ritual requirements when the end of the Sabbath at sundown on Saturday “collides” with the beginning of a festival. *Yaknehóz* stands for the Hebrew words *yáyin* (wine), *kidush* (reciting the text of the *kiddush*), *ner* (candle lighting), *havdólo* (“separation” ritual, in this case between one holiness and another), *zman* (time, referring here to the blessing called *Shehekhíyónu*). Yiddish comes into the equation via the similarity of *yaknehóz* with old southwestern Yiddish *yak 'n hoz* (modern Yiddish *yog dem hoz*), “*Hunt the hare!*” Some humor derives also from the non-Jewish image of hunting in Ashkenazic civilization: the traditional Yiddish term for hunting is *góyishker nákhesh* (gentile pleasure). (By permission of Bibliotheca Albertina, Leipzig)

classic texts or the danger that the vernacular prayer would come to be uttered and read instead of the original texts. There is extensive literature on the topic.

The “rise” of Yiddish from mere vernacular to an accepted cultural language is mentioned in the sources early enough to infer that the issue must predate the documents that happen by chance to survive, to be dated, and to be known to us. The sensational point is that when it came to alternative, universally participatory means of celebrating the religious truths held in common by virtually all Ashkenazim,

using the universal vernacular, Yiddish, the “word of the rabbis” suddenly became less than binding. One key text that has survived is from the *Séyfer Maharil* (Book of Maharil), the collection of wisdom and pronouncements of the foremost Ashkenazic rabbinic leader of his generation (Maharil, usually pronounced Maharíl, is an acronym for Jacob ben Moses Mollin the Levite). He lived from around 1360 to 1427 and was a native of Mainz by the Rhine. After studying in the Danube region, he returned to found a great yeshiva which trained a new generation of rabbinic scholars who provided spiritual leadership to Ashkenazic Jewry in the following generation. It is important not to confuse the modern, Western concept “rabbi” with the traditional Ashkenazic *rov* (plural *rabónim*). The concept of *rabónim* corresponds in some measure to the modern notion of educated people and/or intellectuals who have higher university degrees. With scant exceptions, the *rabónim* were the class of authors of Hebrew and Aramaic books. The book that contains the first known lines about a “Yiddish question” is a *Minhógim* (Customs) collection compiled from the Maharil’s pronouncements and comments by his faithful pupil, Zalmen of St. Goar. It circulated widely for centuries in manuscript form. Since the first printed editions in the mid-sixteenth century, it has been reprinted frequently and remains in print to this day in traditional Ashkenazic communities.

We are told in the book, in an informal Hebrew style,

He [the Maharil] said:

“Those rhymed songs that they come up with in *loshn Ashkenaz* [“language of Ashkenaz” = Yiddish] on the Unity and on the Thirteen Principles, if only they wouldn’t do it! The reason is that most simple people think that all the commandments depend on that alone, and they give up on a number of the Thou-shalts and the Thou-shalt-nots, such as wearing the fringed vest, putting on phylacteries, studying Torah and such. They think they fulfill their obligations by reciting those rhymes with devout intent [*kavóne*]. But those rhymes are only an allusion to the main tenets of the Jewish religion and not even one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments which Jews are commanded to perform!”

(Zalmen of St. Goar, *Maharil*, 103a. Sabionetta, 1556.)

We may never know whether the two specific Yiddish rhymed songs that the Maharil mentions were, in fact, Yiddish versions of Maimonides' Thirteen Articles and the Kalonymus family's Song of Unity of old Ashkenaz (in the second case, that would mean that the now lost Yiddish text could be as old as the Hebrew or older). Clearly there were Jews in the fourteenth century in the ultra-believing society of Ashkenaz who did not obey all the normative commandments and expressed their religiosity by singing songs on the basic principles of the Jewish faith in their native language, Yiddish, rather than in the society's sacred languages. There is no hint that the Maharil has anything against (or for) Yiddish per se, and it would be anachronistic to deduce a language policy here. But from its very beginning, Yiddish empowered nonscholars, simple people, to express their Jewish faith and enjoy singing in their native language. It is predictable that the natural language of the population should represent the masses, who are not masters of exalted classical languages. What is surprising in the case of Yiddish is that modern scholarship and popular Jewish culture alike have forgotten that a "Yiddish rebellion" of sorts has been underway in Jewish life for many centuries and is not a product of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yiddish movement (Yiddishism). Few realize that the creative forms Yiddish has taken on within Jewish society have been controversial for the better part of a thousand years.

In addition to rhymed couplets inserted into illuminated prayer book manuscripts and songs about God and the Jewish faith, Yiddish came into use for Jewish vocational training, especially for community positions requiring deep Jewish knowledge but not as high as that of an ordained rabbi. One such trade was the ritual slaughterer, who must have mastery of a complicated legal literature about the insides of the animal and many intricacies of Jewish law about various details. Not every community could afford to have a rabbi do its slaughtering. The long and short of it is reported by the Maharil in his collections of responses to legal questions that came his way:

There was a learned man who composed a work on the laws of slaughtering in a charming rhymed poem in *loshn Ashkenaz* with a comprehensive commentary. And he did it with good intention, for he had seen that there were

some simple people in the provinces who cannot grasp or understand on their own even the laws of slaughtering from a work in *loshn kóydesh* [“language of the sacred” = Hebrew]. It is even necessary constantly to explain everything to them. . . . And those in [the language of] Ashkenaz are explained very well. Nevertheless it is not the custom to give license to slaughter on the basis of these, even though everything forbidden in the laws of slaughtering counts as a sin of the actual Torah. . . .

Every householder who can read the commentary of Rashi on the Torah, or the holiday prayer book. . . and there are some who never served a genuine scholar! All these are reckoned unto the Vale of Fools [wordplay on Genesis 14:3]. They look things up in the works of our rabbis the compilers of codes. . . But according to the reasoning in a given case, the application of a law can change! . . . They made those compilations strictly for the use of those who have proficiency in deriving a ruling from the talmudic source.

(Yitzhak Satz, ed., *The Maharil's Additional Responsa* [in Hebrew],  
Section 93. Jerusalem, 1977.)

The basic knowledge required is to be able to understand a page of Talmudic debate in *Aramaic*, not just a page of a *Hebrew* summary of laws of one of the codifiers. Mastery of *Yiddish* summaries would not remotely qualify one to adjudicate legal issues. Without being intimately familiar with the debates and opinions, one could go wrong in any specific case. All three of the languages of Ashkenaz thus come into play in the Maharil's critique. Moreover, we learn of the practice of producing practical works in Yiddish that rhyme. The aspiration to literary or aesthetic creativity is inherently linked with the spoken language.

But it wasn't only ritual slaughtering that bothered the Maharil in connection with Yiddish. He was especially worried about women's issues.

#### WOMEN, CHRISTIANS, AND EARLY YIDDISH LITERATURE

The Maharil's comments about ritual slaughtering manuals in rhymed Yiddish were made in a by-the-way tone, in the course of a legal reply

to a different question. That question came from a certain man called Chaim, who had written to the great rabbi in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, asking approval for a project to produce a work in Yiddish about the laws of family purity. The term “family purity” in its original and in English is a euphemism for the laws of sex between married partners as they relate to the wife’s menstrual cycle. In short, sex is prohibited from the day a woman expects her period until after seven full days following the end of the period (after Leviticus 15:19–33). The legal and practical questions that come up are the subject of an entire tractate of the Talmud and countless rabbinic tomes, and traditionally Orthodox Jews take these laws every bit as seriously today as thousands of years ago. The one great change in post-biblical times concerns the ceremony of purification following the end of the ritually unclean period. The Bible dictates that the woman take two turtledoves or pigeons to the priest on the eighth postperiod day, and “the priest shall offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering” (Leviticus 15:29–30). In later Judaism the ritual bath (*mikve*) replaces the animal sacrifices. For the Bible and traditional communities, these are laws given by God and of paramount importance. But *within* the determination to obey these laws, there has for a long time been a question as to how much the couple themselves, and particularly the wife, can determine without every private detail being brought before the rabbi. This is more pressing in places where there is no qualified rabbi. To return to the mysterious Chaim, who penned the question on these matters concerning his plan to produce a manual in Yiddish for couples to be able to ascertain the law in a given situation. The Maharil went nuclear over the idea (as rabbinic literature goes, at any rate).

It is a matter of urgency for me to reply to my cherished and dear learned friend, Reb Chaim, may you live and be well. I was astounded by you, extremely, to learn that you are thinking about writing in Yiddish that which you know. . . . But our rabbis the codifiers did not intend [for their compilations of laws to serve the ignorant] but rather for pupils to go on to higher learning, and for *them* to inform women of the laws relevant to them. . . .

And on top of everything [the proliferation of “experts” who cannot read the Talmud itself and just look up the law in one of the compilations in Hebrew], you go ahead and try to foist on us even newer products that scatter the Torah among the scatterbrained, the simple people and frivolous women, and to give them “a monument and a memorial” [*yod vo-shéym / yad va-shém*, literally “a hand and a name,” Isaiah 56:5, here in the sense of “enduring authority”], to study and to teach from your Yiddish book the issues relating to menstruation and blood spots, which our earlier and later masters dwelt upon in great detail, even as waters that have no end. God forbid, God forbid that such a thing would have been found among your fathers and forefathers, notwithstanding that we see [in Yiddish] many books on the laws of what is forbidden and what is permitted, and menstruation, and the *challah* bread, and the laws of Passover and holidays and various other topics.

(S. Assaf, “A Rabbinic Reply Against the Composition of Law Books in Yiddish” [in Hebrew], 41–42. In *Kirjath Sepher* 19, 1942–1943.)

These parsimonious rabbinic mentions are treasure troves for the modern cultural historian. We learn, first, of the existence of a popular legal literature in Yiddish during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (and obviously earlier; a literature does not come into being overnight, and the Maharil knows of it as something evolved and widespread). Second, we learn of the social and societal framework that defined the trilingualism of Old Ashkenaz. Aramaic is necessary for a scholar who can adjudicate legal questions (he needs to be able to read all about it in the original Talmud). Hebrew is necessary for studying the Bible as well as the codes and compilations of laws (e.g., Maimonides and Tur) and occupies a middle rung of education and learnedness. Yiddish is the literary domain of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population who could benefit from a book only in the vernacular, since advanced Hebrew and Aramaic education was something many men didn’t have, and it wasn’t open to women at all. The implication is that for a woman to read a Yiddish book is completely natural and expected and not a blow to her ego. But if a man reads such a book, it is because he did not succeed to the higher rungs of learning that entail the need to not only “read” (in the sense of “recite”) but actually understand books in Hebrew and Aramaic. Hence

the identification of Yiddish with femininity is as old as Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism, as old as Ashkenaz itself. But it is critically important to remember that that is a literary, social, and cultural identification. In real life, Yiddish was everybody's language, and it is obvious even from the content of older Yiddish literature that much of it was actually meant for men (or for men as well). Jerold Frakes sums it up aptly.

It is not Hebrew for men, Yiddish for women, but rather Yiddish for everybody, Hebrew for men. The fiction that men did not actually read Yiddish books is just that—fiction. Men translated those books, wrote those books, typeset, published, peddled, and read them too.

*(Jerold Frakes, private communication to author.)*

But symbols, and the way they were once perceived, are important in attempts to grasp the conceptual realia of another age. Yiddish was the symbolic cultural citadel of femininity. And it was a kind of femininity that also covered men who did not have the "masculinity" of Talmudic prowess, which was the Ashkenazic brand of male heroism, fulfilling something parallel to the societal role assumed by knights, warriors, and gladiators among the nation-states of the period. The overwhelming propensity to give baby boys a Hebrew- or Aramaic-derived name while assigning no significance to the etymology of a girl's name is another reflex of the language and gender divide in Ashkenaz. Let us now engage in a thought experiment about the earliest generations of Ashkenaz, language, and the sexes. While literacy in the sense of reading the alphabet and basic prayers was nearly universal among men and women alike, serious knowledge of Hebrew (and even more so for Aramaic) was limited to a small number of males. "Being a man" meant knowing as much as possible of Hebrew sources (the Yiddish phrase for this type of knowledge is very old; in its modern form it is *óyskenen zikh in di kléyninke óysyalakh*, literally "to be really knowledgeable in those little letters," a loving reference to the petit-style lettering of traditional rabbinic writing). For a man, being a hero meant knowing his way around the more difficult Aramaic Talmud and its literature. There would be a certain amount



of embarrassment at being unable to read Hebrew well. It was a question of male prestige. A woman on the other hand, though fully bound by laws of keeping kosher, Sabbath, and holidays, is not obligated to study Torah or pray as frequently. The Jewish woman's role in running the household and bringing up children in the spirit of traditional Torah Judaism is of paramount importance, and she is hailed every Sabbath eve with the exuberant singing of the *Éyshes kháyil* (Woman of valor from Proverbs 31:10–31). The woman was not supposed to be able to “enjoy” a book in Hebrew, she wasn't meant to be able to study a Talmudic argument, and she wasn't even allowed, officially, to delve into the Kabbalah, even if she had somehow gained the linguistic skills that women's education did not provide.

In this environment, the modern notion of rebellion against the status quo was unthinkable. For one thing, the status quo was almost universally regarded by women and men alike as a grand privilege of God's chosen people. The laws, traditions, customs, and mores of the society functioned in unison as a living system, one bequeathed by God to his people, as authoritatively interpreted. The prayer canon has the famous line *Ato bekhartónu mikól ho-ámim* (You have chosen us from among all the peoples). What kind of fool would replace all that with some human solution based on logic or fashionable philosophy?

Since overt rebellion was not a possibility, women (and many men too) could find cultural and spiritual empowerment through the vernacular. That the vernacular was written in the same alphabet as the two sacred languages, from right to left, gave Yiddish its first stimulus to become part of the Ashkenazic Jewish “written way of life.”

In some cases, the vernacular served ritual purposes, for example, the need for books on the laws about irksome issues of family purity or kosher slaughtering. But the women of Ashkenaz needed far more than that. They wanted to enjoy books as much as their menfolk did, and they suffered no stigma about being seen reading a book in Yiddish instead of Hebrew or Aramaic. The actual intellectual freedom that the system gave women came to the fore in another arena. Yiddish, not Hebrew or Aramaic, was the effective link with the non-Jewish culture of the countries in which Ashkenazim lived. Not all of that culture was exclusively Christian in the narrower sense of the term. Medieval epics

about princes and princesses, knights and warriors, and damsels in distress could be enjoyed in Yiddish without violating any of the 365 negative precepts (thou shalt nots) of Jewish law. No Jewish law says, "Don't enjoy a good story in your native language."

Put differently, it was Yiddish that provided enormous freedom for women (and their fellow travelers, the "simple men") to enjoy literature, theater, and singing without grazing the traditional three-language system of Ashkenaz. Wealthy women began to invest in Yiddish. Many early literary manuscripts contain dedications to the *genenin* or the *patronin*—the benefactress. They were commissioned by women for the enjoyment of "women and others." It became standard for the writers of Yiddish books to sign themselves "the writer for all pious women" (various versions of *shráyber far ále frúme váyber*, where the words for "writer" and "women" rhyme). This has a double meaning. The book was written (or copied or recopied) on the commission of the benefactress, and it was brought into existence for the pleasure of women. One of the names of the Yiddish language became *váyber-taytsh*, which means "translation for women," as many of the works produced were translations. The term shifted over centuries to mean the special language of these books translated into the vernacular, and in Ashkenazic "men's talk," it became a mildly dismissive name for the Yiddish language itself—a women's language.

Old Yiddish manuscripts occasionally tell tales about how the writer (at first always a man, at least officially) was paid. Sometimes it was by an advance, sometimes by commission on further sale of the manuscript or a copy of it, and sometimes commitments to send food on Sabbaths and holidays. They also divulge a wealth of information about how Yiddish literature grew. A writer tried hard to satisfy his benefactress by coming up with a product that would be prestigious, entertaining, and beautiful to look at. Without Talmudic studies to occupy their (inherently equal) intellect, Ashkenazic women were more likely to covet the literary pleasure of German, Italian, and other medieval epic knightly romances. And what the women wanted in Yiddish was exactly what the writers sought to give them. Old Yiddish literature (literature, not the language itself) got underway by the efforts of various kinds of Jewish *shráyber* (a cover term for copyists,

popular scribes, translators, writers, paraphrasers, rewriters, editors, and more) to “render” into Yiddish the popular European romances of the day.

The oldest known extensive Yiddish manuscript with a clear Jewish date, corresponding with 1382 in the general calendar, is a handwritten anthology, probably written in Egypt where it was found in the late nineteenth century. In the fourteenth century, part of the Jewish community in Cairo consisted of Ashkenazim whose families had escaped the Christian persecutions and found refuge in the more tolerant Islamic world of that time. The manuscript as a whole symbolizes the interweaving of traditions of the ancient Near East with the cultural landscape of medieval Central Europe. Ancient Jewish and contemporary non-Jewish material are rendered in contemporary genres and, taken together, exemplify the European Jewish tradition, specifically its Ashkenazic core. Part of the manuscript is signed by *Ayzik der shráyber* (Isaac the writer).

Occasionally the name of the “commissioning lady” is found in older Yiddish manuscripts, sometimes embedded in a rhymed preface or colophon. For example, a 1532 manuscript containing Yiddish versions of Psalms and Proverbs was written by Eliezer son of Israel of Prague for “my patroness Peslin” (modern Yiddish *Pesl*). A Yiddish version of *Sayings of the Fathers*, a tractate of the Mishna with many famous dictums for everyday life, was compiled in Italy around 1580 by Anshel Levy. It contains a long rhymed colophon dedicated to his patroness Perlin (modern Yiddish *Perl*). But such instances are few and far between, and the degree to which some norm can be extrapolated from them is a highly controversial question among scholars.

The elements were in place for a dynamic, original Yiddish literature that would transcend the scope of translating, transcribing, and paraphrasing. Early diversification is another prominent feature. A recent anthology by Jerold Frakes, *Early Yiddish Texts, 1100–1750* (2004), demonstrates the enormous range, including medical treatises and various how-to books (from witchcraft to medicine), chronicles of historic events and local catastrophes, reworkings of Germanic epics (including King Arthur and Hildebrand) and Hebraic literature (in-

cluding Bible, Mishna, Aggadah—Jewish legends and homilies, books on laws, customs, ethics, Kabbalah, philosophy), multilingual dictionaries and Bible concordances, legal documents, travel logs, stories and poems of love and passion, holiday celebration books, early drama and plays, polemics, satires, spoofs, and more. In this mammoth output, the modern reader will find a breathtakingly diverse literature that pulses with the rhythms of a confident, wholly natural “Jewish-in-Jewish” civilization that is spiritually at peace with itself and with components of the outside world that do not threaten it.

The printing of Jewish books got underway around 1475, about a quarter century after Johannes Gutenberg’s fabled invention of the printing press at Mainz (or, more accurately, reinvention of a mechanism devised and first used in East Asia). It originated in Italy, which was home to both Sephardic and Ashkenazic “relocated” communities, in addition to the scions of older Italian and Roman Jewry. The first works to appear were Rashi’s commentary on the Five Books of Moses and Jacob ben Asher’s legalistic compendium, the *Tur* (short for “the four Turim”). Rashi (1040–1105) and Jacob ben Asher (c. 1270–1340) were among the giants of early Ashkenaz, and it is no surprise that the era of Jewish printing in Europe started with their works. Jewish printing in Hebrew and Aramaic produced about 150 incunabula (pre-1500 prints) and emanated from around twenty printing presses.

Jewish printing meant that the literature of Torah in Hebrew and Aramaic could be taught much more effectively, economically, and evenly. Suddenly a library spanning millennia could be reproduced in standardized form. In time, however, it became obvious that the printer’s error was sometimes worse than the scribe’s error. Yiddish humor came up with the line *In áltsding iz shúldik der bókher ha-zétser* (The typesetter fellow is always at fault), which is used whenever a messenger or technician is blamed instead of the one who really causes an evil.

The advent of the printing press, which so benefited the classic Hebrew and Aramaic fare of European Jewry, might have been seized on as a commercial opportunity in the much bigger market for Yiddish. There was potential for a major new business in Jewish Europe. Sud-

denly the book buying power of “women and simple people” was a formidable economic force in European Jewish society. It so happened that in the sixteenth century the geographic spread of Yiddish across Europe was at its maximum, stretching from Alsace and Italy in the southwest to Holland in the northwest to the Ukraine in the southeast and Belorussia in the northeast—one of the most extensive contiguous linguistic empires in the history of Europe.

But Jewish printers and publishers were slow to pick up on Yiddish. They were afraid it wouldn't be acceptable to produce books in the language of women and of men who didn't participate in the active culture of Ashkenaz beyond elementary Bible study and prayer, in other words, the vast majority.

Jewish printing by Jews (rather than Christians) in the Ashkenazic lands was founded by Gershom ben Solomon Cohen in Prague. From 1513 onward, he specialized in providing prayer books for Ashkenazim, for both Germany (Western Ashkenaz) and Poland (Eastern Ashkenaz) and their satellite countries. His 1526 Passover feast book (Haggadah) contains the first known page in Yiddish in a Jewish printed book. Its symbolic value is therefore analogous to the rhymed couplet (or sentence) that had made it into the famous 1272 Worms holiday prayer book. But that was a manuscript. Famous as it may be, there was only one. Of a printed book there are many and it is always open to “further procreation.” The Passover song in the 1526 Prague Haggadah is “Almekhtiker got” (Almighty God), a Yiddish version of the Hebrew song “Adir hu” (Mighty is He); like its Hebrew prototype, it is alphabetic (in both cases going through the alphabet from *alef* to *tof* with attributes of God). In the Yiddish version, some letters that don't occur at the beginning of a word are just skipped. The song, which is known from older manuscripts too, is a favorite at the Passover *seyder* table, and it is perhaps not surprising that its inclusion in the Haggadah was the first “debutante Yiddish celebration” in the age of printing.

Another Passover table favorite is the Aramaic “Khad-gadyo” (One Little Goat). It was written in Yiddish and then translated into Aramaic. It is a classic counting-down song about one little goat that is devoured by a cat, the cat by a dog, and so forth. It is often thought to be a kind

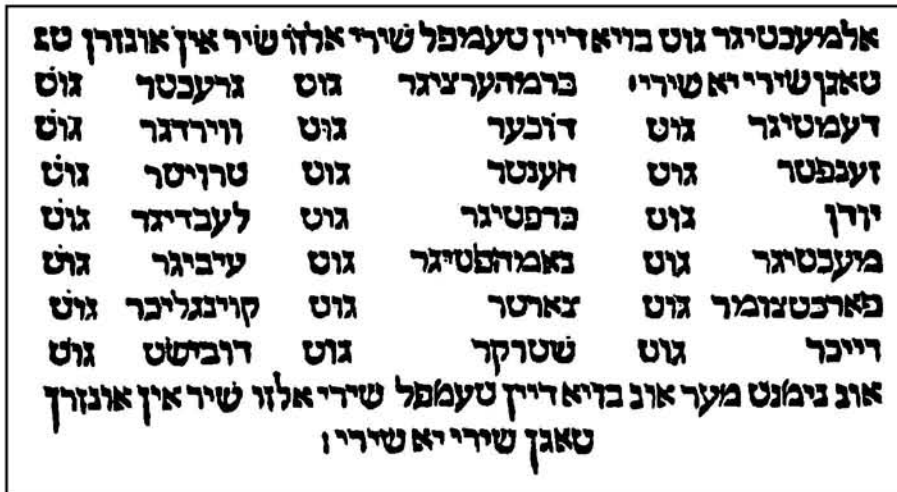


Figure 2.4 One of the oldest known printed Yiddish texts is this 1526 Passover song “Almekhtiker got” (Almighty God), which appeared in a Prague Haggadah. Over the centuries the song (alphabetic in Yiddish as in the Hebrew prototype “Adir hu”) became standard for the Passover séyder. (By permission of Dr. Hermann Suess, Rostock University Library)

of allegory for the survival of the weak Jews in the face of all the great empires—Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome—that conquered them. Its earliest appearance in both Yiddish and Aramaic is in a fifteenth-century manuscript. But aside from Gershom Cohen of Prague and his inclusion of “Almekhtiker got,” nobody in Jewish publishing dared print a Yiddish book for over half a century from the time the first Hebrew books appeared in 1475 (except for citations of witnesses’ testimony in rabbinic works published in 1519 and 1523). It would have been too risqué to use the new tool of the “sacred work” for the “language of women.” The Jews were hesitant but the market prospects were alluring. And so the Christians moved in.

#### CHRISTIANS LAUNCH YIDDISH PUBLISHING

The Christians who established Yiddish publishing in the 1530s and 1540s fell into three categories: (1) Jews about to convert to Christianity, (2) Jews who had previously converted, or (3) born Christians who had commercial or theological interests (ranging from the study of He-



Figure 2.5 This version of “Almekhtiker got” (from 1719) has a woodcut to go with the refrain “Build Thy Temple Soon.”

brew and Aramaic in the spirit of European humanism to missionary activity or various combinations of both).

Yiddish publishing as an enterprise (beyond the single Passover song of 1526) is traced to the three Helitz (or Halicz) brothers of Cracow, Poland. Shmuel (Samuel), Osher (Asher), and Elyokim (Eliakim) put out the first bilingual Hebrew–Yiddish book in the early 1530s (most bibliographers date it to 1534). It is an alphabetical Bible concordance meant to enable “every simple person” to read “all the twenty-four” (the traditional number of books in the Hebrew Bible). From the preface we learn that many early Yiddish printed books have been lost or are yet to be discovered: “Inasmuch as it has become commonplace

to publish in Yiddish all esoteric things and books, so that every simple person can gain knowledge of them, it seems to me good to publish a useful work.”

The Helitz brothers followed up in 1535 with *Azhóres nóshim* (Admonitions for Women), which, they explain on the title page, was adapted from the works of the great Ashkenazic rabbis Judah Mintz (c. 1408–1506) and the twelfth-century Samuel of Worms. In the late 1530s, they released *Múser un hanhóge* (Ethics and Behavior), a Yiddish version of a famous ethical work by the great Ashkenazic scholar, Asher ben Jehiel (c. 1250–1327), known as “the Rosh” from his acronym. In 1537, the Helitz brothers were baptized. The Jews of Cracow (and elsewhere) organized a bitter boycott against their books and refused to pay the debts that had piled up. Although lacking a single Christian or missionary allusion, anything and everything they produced was retroactively tainted by this most painful act of community betrayal in the eyes of Ashkenazic civilization. Launched in this “baptism by fire” in every sense of the term, Yiddish publishing was a highly controversial prospect from the outset. The brothers Helitz and their many new Christian friends petitioned the king of Poland, Sigismund I (“The Old,” 1467–1548). The king was a devout Catholic who protected the rights of Jews, Greek Orthodox Christians, and nascent Lutherans. He issued a decree on March 28, 1537, ordering the Jews to buy up the remaining stock of the Helitz brothers’ books. But the controversy grew and by the end of 1539, the brothers had to obtain another royal decree ordering the Jewish community to buy up their stock of (mostly) Yiddish books—almost 3,500 volumes (a vast collection in those days). The Jewish community of Poland handled things in a classic Jewish Diaspora way. According to tradition, they obeyed the king, paid for all the books, and then set them on fire.

One of the three brothers (historians dispute which) changed his name to Paul and went on to publish the first New Testament in Jewish letters in 1540 (actually a transcription of the Lutheran German translation) as well as a handbook in 1543 to enable Christians to learn Yiddish for business purposes. He became a missionary among Jews. The brother originally named Shmuel eventually renounced his baptism, returned to the Jewish faith, moved to Istanbul (the former Con-



stantinople), and in 1552 printed a Bible with a colophon containing his statement of repentance.

Another pioneer of Yiddish publishing was a Christian Hebraist called Paul Fagius (1504–1549). Like many humanists, he “classicized” his original name, Buechlin, by translating it into Latin (Buechlin = *fagius* = beech tree). He was a German who became professor of Hebrew at Strasbourg and eventually at Cambridge University in England, where he died. Fagius translated Hebrew books into Latin, edited a famous Aramaic translation of the Bible, and wrote several tracts trying to prove the truth of Christianity. Like many Christian Hebraists, he had a Jewish teacher. And here the lines of cross-cultural communication become delightfully elaborate. His Jewish teacher, a great scholar of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, was also the first great Yiddish poet, and the two interfaith friends shared a zest for publishing Judaica.

That Jewish teacher was Elijah Levita (1469–1549), the leading Hebrew and Aramaic philologist among Ashkenazim. Elijah was born in Germany and, as a result of persecutions, relocated to more tolerant Italy, where he spent most of his life (in Padua, Venice, and Rome). He is known to Ashkenazic Jews as Elye Bókher. It is more than a little symbolic that the first really eminent linguistic specialist in Hebrew and Aramaic among Ashkenazim was also the first major poet in Yiddish. In other words, he was a master of all three languages of Ashkenaz. Philology had been among the specialities of preexpulsion Sephardic Jewry, and Elijah picked up where they had left off. He wrote commentaries to the classic Hebrew grammatical works of the earlier Sephardic masters, and he delved into the intricacies of the system of vowel points and accents and cantillation marks that were codified for the Hebrew Bible on the western shores of Lake Tiberias in the late first millennium A.D. (hence known as Tiberian Hebrew). His *Masóyres ha-masóyres* (Tradition of the Tradition or Tradition of the Mesorah), which appeared in Venice in 1538, remains indispensable for specialists in Hebrew. His *Meturgemon* (The Translator) remains vital for students of Aramaic. *Tíshbi* (Isny, 1541) is one of the most “fun dictionaries” ever written, defining interesting Jewish words whatever their origin. It is also the book that established the science

(and pleasure) of Yiddish etymology. Its intrepid Yiddish etymologies remain in vogue today. For example, the Yiddish word *katóves* refers to fooling around, making fun of something or somebody, or saying something in a lighthearted vein. Elijah derives it (accurately) from the Hebrew and Aramaic root כתב, which means “to write,” and explains its origin from “those people who stealthily wrote their stuff on the doors of rich people or on street walls so that nobody would know the writer’s identity. And this is the custom even today in Rome.” It was, in short, early-sixteenth-century graffiti.

Fagius, with the help of Elijah Levita, set up a Hebrew and Yiddish printing press at Isny (in Bavaria). He delighted in Yiddish books and did very well with them. He was not a convert, as far as is known, and Jews, particularly Jewish women, had no problem buying good Jewish books from a Christian publisher. Fagius published Elijah’s *Shmoys dvórim* (Names of Things) in 1542. It is an exquisite quadrilingual dictionary (Yiddish-Hebrew-Latin-German). The same year, Fagius issued *Book of Traits* (*Séyfer mides*), a work on ethics and character building in the tradition of Jewish ethical or *múser* literature. The book has a dedication to a certain “Lady Morada, doctor of the free art of medicine,” who may have put up the financing or otherwise endeared herself to Fagius. The preface makes it clear that it is for everybody (using the contemporary term *ayéderman*, literally everyman), not just the women addressed in Hebrew on the frontispiece. It becomes transparent from such blatant inconsistencies that all “statements of intended audience” have a lot more to do with convention, mores, and promoting book sales than the eventual actual readership for a given title.

The *Book of Traits* includes the first-ever published rules of Yiddish spelling for Jewish readers (a Christian Hebraist had written out a version of Yiddish spelling rules in his Hebrew grammar back in 1514). This is important because Yiddish publishing was seeking a market throughout Europe, and the linguistic and spelling decisions that these early publishers made often involved choosing between various manuscript traditions and dialect areas. The result was a kind of “lowest common denominator literary Yiddish” with a relatively standard

spelling (insofar as variation was itself regulated and could be used to make up spaces in lines and so forth; it was not a rigid spelling). This sixteenth-century lowest common denominator literary Yiddish lasted until the nineteenth century. But to return to the *Book of Traits*, the anonymous compiler (perhaps someone Fagius commissioned), begins his afterword, which includes the Yiddish spelling rules, with the following words:

To God Almighty an exclusive oath! We send our sincere greetings to all women and girls. And in the first place to the honorable and pure lady, Morada, doctor of the free art of healing, resident of Guenzburg, a generous woman. After I understood that you have craving and desire for the *Book of Traits*, so I have taken it on myself with the help of God, blessed be He, the Almighty, and have on this day done it, and although I should not take upon myself such a thing, it is after all written in the Sayings of the Fathers [in the Mishna]: "Where there is no man, try to be a man." I therefore want everybody, and ask women and girls and whosoever will read from this *Book of Traits*, and might find something wrong in it. . .not to think the worst of me.

(*Plóyni Almóyni*, afterword to *Séyfer mídes* [Sefer Middoth].  
Isny: Paulus Fagius, 1542.)

By the 1540s, Fagius had become a missionary. At that point his name, for those Jewish buyers who knew, would not have helped sales, though he did not inject missionary tendencies in commercial ventures that were intended for a Jewish audience. In this case he seems to have felt that his book would fare better among Jewish readers signed with the name *Plóyni Almóyni* (biblical *ploni almoni*, an expression for "such and such a person," after Ruth 4:1), in other words, comic anonymity, rather than Mr. Paul Fagius.

The publisher's ambivalence about his readership is revealing. The frontispiece has a fancy Hebrew paraphrase from Isaiah, making it clear in big letters that this is a book for the ladies. The preface broadens that readership to "whosoever." The afterword uses the term "everyman." All in all, it is clear that "literature for women" is a euphemism for publishing in Yiddish.

This Freudian creative ambiguity enabled Yiddish literature to continue to use the label “for women” while appealing to ever more women *and* men. An unknown number of men enjoyed various writings in Hebrew, whether ancient or more recent, and *also* enjoyed Yiddish. From the point of view of really enjoying something that is read, men had up to three languages to choose from. Women usually had only one.

Paul Fagius did very well from publishing and selling Jewish books. He published the first four chapters of Genesis in Yiddish and Hebrew in 1543, and a selection of favorite books from the Old Testament in 1544. It is telling for interfaith history (and literary commerce) that Fagius issued two prints of this Jewish Bible anthology, one for Jews and another, with a German title page and introduction, for Christians.

Perhaps unknown to Paul Fagius, he was the publisher of the first book of Yiddish verse in European history. In 1541, he published Elye Bókher’s masterpiece of epic Yiddish poetry, *Bovo d’Antono* (Bovo of Antona). This first great work of Yiddish poetry was written in Italy by a Hebrew and Aramaic philologist born in Germany, using Italian rhyme, and published by a devout Christian. Yiddish literature acquired an international, cross-cultural, pan-European flavor that it retains into modern times.

Turning to the author’s own thoughts about his Yiddish work, which he had drafted decades earlier, it is instructive to see that he regarded publication as a good deed for Jewish *women*. In his old age he writes in the preface for the about-to-be published poetic work of his youth (this is a rough translation; the original is in rhyme that comically “leads in” from the lighthearted preface to the serious tale of the escapades and scrapes of the Knight Bovo):

I, Elye the Levite, the writer, serving all pious women, with respect and graciousness, realize full well that many women hold a grudge against me for not printing some of my books for them, in Yiddish, so that they might enjoy them and read them on Sabbaths and holidays. So I want to tell the truth. It seems to me the right thing to do, as I have written some eight or nine books in our sacred languages, and I have begun to put them through the press, as

I reach the end of my days, and today or tomorrow might find myself on my back, and all my books and my poems will be forgotten. So if nobody deflects me from my purpose, I will print them all one after the other.

(*Elye Bokher [Elijah Levita], preface to Bovo d'Antouno. Isny: Paulus Fagius, 1541.*)

It was inevitable that someone should follow Fagius into the game. That “someone” was a convert to Christianity who was intimately familiar with Jewish literature and, unlike Fagius, did not need a teacher. After converting to Christianity, this fellow also became a Paul. Paul or Paulus Aemilius was a native of Roedlsee, Germany, who converted in Rome. He started publishing books taken from Yiddish manuscripts that had long been in circulation. Thanks to him, two of the classic works of Old Yiddish literature were published in quick succession, the *Mlókhim bukh* (Kings Book) in 1543 and the *Shmúel bukh* (Samuel Book) in 1544, both epic poems based on the biblical books of Samuel and Kings. There is no hint that the publisher is a convert to Christianity. It is hard to tell if Paulus Aemilius was interested purely in profit, or if he also took a certain “naughty” pleasure in seeing simple Jews having fun with a knightly romance in Yiddish that retells the stories of Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon and their times with humor and zest, knowing full well it would infuriate the rabbis and scholars, who would prefer that Jews spend their Saturdays and other free time reading books on Jewish law, ethics, and proper behavior. He was working as bookbinder for the Dominican convent, and for many years worked for church institutions as a copyist of Hebrew manuscripts.

But the “two Pauls” at the genesis of Yiddish publishing, the born Christian Paul Fagius and the converted Paul Aemilius, went head to head in commercial competition with their editions of the Pentateuch, Scrolls and weekly Prophets selections. Fagius’s appeared in Konstanz in March 1544. Aemilius’s came out in July of the same year in Augsburg. Sometime that year, he too put out a separate edition for gentiles. So, we have four Yiddish Bible selections (covering the same “Ashkenazic canon” of Pentateuch, Five Scrolls, and Prophets selections) in 1544, published by two Pauls, each of whom issued a Jewish and a gentile edition.

Meanwhile, the rabbis, who had been busy publishing the standard sacred texts and their own legalistic and homiletic innovations, all in Hebrew and Aramaic, were beginning to get frightened. Women, Christians, and “simple folk” were suddenly prominent in the Jewish book market and poised to take over its popular high-selling end. The two Pauls, having succeeded with Yiddish, went their separate academic ways. Fagius moved to England and became professor of Hebrew at Cambridge, where he died after a few months. Aemilius was appointed professor of Hebrew at Ingolstadt in Bavaria. Both Christian professors of Hebrew had fulfilled the historic role of launching Yiddish publishing in Europe. Fagius died rather young in Cambridge in 1549. His rival Aemilius lived to a ripe old age in Ingolstadt. In his last year, he was employed by the Munich Library to organize and catalog its Judaica holdings, and is therefore regarded as the first professional Judaica bibliographer in European history.

Another character who entered the fray was also intimate with both Christians and Jews. Scholars differ as to whether Cornelius Adelkind converted. Those who insist that he remained a Jew who simply worked with Christians contend that he adopted the name of the father of his longtime, loyal employer Daniel Bomberg as a sign of honor and respect. Bomberg, a Christian, was a major European publisher who put out some two hundred Hebrew and Aramaic editions at his printing house in Venice. It was a golden age for classic Jewish texts. Bomberg employed Jewish experts on every aspect of text redactions, versions, and proofreading. He also fought for various privileges for his Jewish employees. The pagination of Bomberg’s massive edition of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds remains standard in every yeshiva in the world today. He was also the first to publish the entire Talmud. The sets appeared in the early 1520s with the express approval of Pope Leo X. His Hebrew Bible remains the classic Hebrew text for Jews and Christians alike.

Adelkind went into Yiddish publishing in the 1540s in competition with the “two Pauls”: Fagius and Aemilius. A German Jew who settled in Italy (whether or not he converted), Adelkind was a learned man who had many Christian contacts and spent a lifetime in the Jewish printing profession.

There is a very old self-satirizing Yiddish saying, *Azoy vi s'kristlt zekh, azóy yídl't zekh* (As among Christians, so among Jews). It wasn't long before the Christian episode and the heated dispute about the Helitz books in Cracow gave way to the publication of Yiddish books by the efforts of Jewish publishers, printers, and businesspeople in collaboration with Jewish authors, translators, and editors.

The start of Yiddish publishing as a Jewish enterprise was highly controversial. In the history of Yiddish, creativity goes hand-in-hand with impassioned, fiery debate. A Jewish printer, Chaim ben Dovid Shokher, turned to Yiddish after moving from Augsburg to Ichenhausen, where in 1544 he printed a Yiddish prayer book. It was compiled from various earlier manuscripts by his son-in-law, Yosef bar Yokor, whom some consider to have been the first "champion" of Yiddish. Some scholars try to trace an old pedigree for the more modern "Yiddish movement." There is enough ambiguity to allow two opinions about this forever, which is just as well. It might be best to let Yosef bar Yokor speak for himself. These are excerpts from his preface.

I have not translated this prayer book out of my own head but have taken what seems to me the best from those I have read through. . . . The prayers were constructed in very difficult language, and for all our sins, you barely find one in a thousand who knows what they mean. I therefore consider the people who pray in Hebrew and don't understand one word to be utter fools. I for one would just like to know what kind of devout intention [*kavóne*] they could possibly have. . . . We therefore came to the conclusion that we would publish this prayer book in Yiddish and many more books later on.

(Yosef bar Yokor, preface to *Tfilo* [Prayerbook]. Ichenhausen: Chaim ben Dovid Shokher, 1544.)

The august prayer book is followed by a lighthearted afterword, in which Yosef bar Yokor says, in fine Yiddish rhyme in the original:

I allowed it to go on sale for one crown, but I swear by my head, it is well worth ten, as you will very well see for yourself. When you take a look at other prayer books, you will verily conclude that the difference is as great as that between an old hag and a young maiden.

(Yosef bar Yokor, afterword to *Tfilo* [Prayerbook].)

Curiously, the word *kavóne*, that special quality of devoutness and intention while praying, crops up again. Earlier, the Maharil had decried religious songs in Yiddish even when they are sung with *kavóne*, and here, almost 120 years after his death, when the magical new invention of printing was finally used for Yiddish, a relatively simple fellow who could not hold a candle to the Maharil in learnedness, has the audacity to turn the argument around using the same word and ask rhetorically how anyone can pray with devout intent without understanding the prayers. It is fair to say that the “prayer debate” (Hebrew and Aramaic versus the vernacular) is as old as European Jewish civilization, and that both sides have strong traditions. The pray in Yiddish camp could always look back to the famous quotation from the twelfth-century *Book for the Pious*, telling people to pray in whatever language they understand. On the other side of the fence were many rabbis and others who insisted on the classical texts in the original language, which was Hebrew or Aramaic. Ironically, the very song the Maharil had complained about over a century earlier, the song of the unity of God, also appeared in Yiddish as a pamphlet in the 1540s.

The intrinsic debate is intriguing. Some make the argument that prayer should be understood to be felt deeply. Some make the opposite argument: praying from sacred, ancient texts and believing that one is praying in the precise way one’s ancestors prayed can bring a more profound spiritual high than using the vernacular. In the history of Yiddish, polemics aside (and there has been a lot of polemicizing), both sides contributed a lot to the traditional genres of Yiddish literature. Those who believed in the vernacular instead of the Hebrew and Aramaic published “sacred book” translations entirely in Yiddish. Those who believed in the primacy of the original “responded” by publishing bilingual texts, classically with the Hebrew and Aramaic original occupying the top half of the page, and the Yiddish translation the bottom half. Yosef bar Yokor’s published prayer book (Ichenhausen 1544) speaks for the first approach. Less than a decade later, the first published prayer book containing the original Hebrew and Aramaic prayers with a Yiddish translation as well appeared in Venice. It was published by our old friend Cornelius Adelkind in 1552. There is some irony. The “kosher” Jewish publisher went for the more dar-



ing project, going so far as to attack prayer in a sacred language one does not understand. The suspected convert, on the other hand, saw a fine market for the bilingual product that would in some sense satisfy everyone (surely the rabbis could not, and did not, hold it against anyone that they would look toward the bottom of a page to see what the sacred words mean). The bilingual model predominated for Yiddish prayer books and *khumóshim* (literally “editions of the Pentateuch” often containing the Five Scrolls and weekly Prophets selections as well). One could pray in Hebrew and Aramaic or study the original but “look down” at the translation at will. It also meant that women, who prayed together in the *váyber-shul* (women’s synagogue or gallery) could pray exclusively in Yiddish while the men, whether they understood or not, prayed in Hebrew and Aramaic and often had the daily and Sabbath prayers more or less memorized.

Neither of these two types of “pro-Yiddish” activity in the first decades of Yiddish printing was “Yiddishist” in the modern sense of the term. Neither saw (nor could have seen) in Yiddish an intrinsic value in the nineteenth-century sense of “language of the people” and modern nationalism. Yiddish was the only universal vernacular of Ashkenaz, virtually the only literary vehicle for women and, in fact, most men. The first type of activity (praying exclusively in Yiddish) was spiritual, on behalf of prayer from the heart and soul. The second was educational and intellectual within the parameters of traditional Ashkenazic culture and entailed dissemination of the Ashkenazic canon (at its core: Pentateuch, weekly readings from the Prophets, and the Five Scrolls) in a form that everyone could study. Still, with or without “language consciousness,” dissemination of a people’s cultural treasures in the vernacular is tantamount to empowerment of an otherwise disenfranchised majority.

#### LANGUAGE, FUNCTION, STATURE, AND TYPEFACE

In a civilization centered on words, texts, and quotations from ancient works, typefaces took on a major symbolic importance after the invention and spread of printing. Both Christian and Jewish printers pro-

duced pre-1500 books (incunabula) in Hebrew and Aramaic, in both Italy and the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). The Spanish Inquisition, which came to a head in 1492 with the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from their homeland, brought to a brutal end the role of Spain and Portugal in the early history of Jewish printing. Italy, which became the great center of Jewish printing in that period, was home to both Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities.

The founders of Jewish typography, Christian and Jewish alike, were irresistibly attracted to the creative process of fashioning a modern Jewish-letter typeface *in addition* to the classic “square” Jewish letters. The square characters are called *meruba*, which means “square.” They are also known as *ksav Ashúri*, literally “Assyrian script” because the Jews adopted it after the 586 B.C. Babylonian exile, and eventually abandoned the ancient Hebrew script, which looks completely different and can be read today only by few specialists. The new fonts were modeled on actual Ashkenazic and Sephardic writing of the period, sometimes called “Hebrew cursive.” The printers, inspired by the aesthetic and functional variation in the new Latin and Gothic fonts (and the different styles being developed for each), used square letters for the text of the Bible and Talmud and other classic works. In the case of the Bible, they usually included the intricate system of vowel points and accents. They used their more creative adaptations of the contemporary popular written forms of the day for the commentaries on these texts. As noted, the Christian Daniel Bomberg’s printing enterprise pioneered editions of the Bible and both Talmuds that remain standard to this day. But it was the Jewish (originally Ashkenazic but Sephardicized) Soncino family that set the mold for the genre of the commentary, which was usually printed *around* the main text.

The differences between the newly created contemporary fonts were considerable. Not only is there a great deal of variation in handwriting, but it is natural that Sephardic-oriented printers, whether Christian or Jewish, would use Sephardic script as a model, while those oriented toward the Ashkenazic lands would look to typical handwriting in those countries. The result was a wide array of styles for rabbinic commentaries. The specific style of Sephardic cursive that

the Soncino family printers used for commentaries became known as Rashi script after the most popular commentator, Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105), on both the Bible and Talmud. (Rashi, an Ashkenazic Jew who lived centuries before, did not use that script. But names have a way of sticking; to this day the font is known as just Rashi or Rashi letters.)

The story gets more involved. In the 1970s, Judaica bibliographer Herbert Zafren of Cincinnati cracked the mystery of how the third major kind of early Jewish type, the unique separate font for Yiddish, came about, starting with the prints of the brothers Helitz in Cracow in the 1530s (if not earlier). What came to be the Yiddish type font in the 1530s had previously been one of the competing (and now forgotten) typefaces for rabbinic commentaries based on the Ashkenazic handwriting of the time. When the Soncino Rashi script won the battle of the commentaries, the font based on Ashkenazic handwriting was left without a function. The Helitz brothers of Cracow and nearly everyone who followed them until the nineteenth century (close to four hundred years of Yiddish printing) used (1) the Ashkenazic handwriting-based font for Yiddish, (2) square Jewish for the classic Hebrew and Aramaic texts, and (3) Soncino's Rashi font for Hebrew and Aramaic commentaries. A typical Ashkenazic page often has all three fonts—a three-script culture to go with a three-language culture, although not in one-to-one correspondence. Instead, the three fonts roughly correspond to three strata in Jewish history. Square Jewish type was for the classical texts from the Near Eastern period in Jewish history, principally the Bible and the Talmud. The so-called Rashi font was principally for works of rabbinic scholars in Hebrew or Aramaic hailing from the European period in Jewish history and equally in use for Ashkenazic- and Sephardic-origin works. The Yiddish font, often called *máshkit* (formerly also *méshit*), came to be used for Yiddish only. The origin of the name *máshkit* is unknown, and the word continues to inspire etymological speculations.

The special Yiddish type font survived in many places well into the nineteenth century. Why?

First, there is probably a subtle Christian influence. The right-to-left Jewish letter typography arose in emulation of the dazzling new invention for left-to-right European gentile typography. There was a desire to replicate the variety of typestyles as a matter of art and professionalism. There was also the European custom of using so-called *bâtarde* (*bastarda*) typefaces for the vernacular to distinguish vernacular text from the classic languages. But even that explanation only goes so far. After the first few years (or, more likely, the first few books), it could have gone out of fashion. What happened was that the letters became popular precisely because they were similar to the Ashkenazic handwriting on which they were based; the font had a certain heartwarming quality. And on that count the symbolism of the typography had another level too. The mind-set of Ashkenazic civilization is not one of universalism or leveling out in the interests of efficiency or standardization. It is a culture of seemingly infinite differentiation, a culture that takes pleasure in the minutest of split hairs. The morning, afternoon, and evening prayers must be said within fixed time spans that depend on the relative locations of the sun and the moon. There are blessings for the onset of the Sabbath and for its end. A person who can study Pentateuch is not at the same level as one who can study Mishna. Mishna is not at the same level as the Gemora (the Aramaic Talmud); Gemora can be studied at many levels of depth; serious, philosophical Kabbalah (mysticism) is for an even smaller set of learned people. Into this ancient culture, Ashkenaz gracefully inserted its trilingualism: Aramaic for Talmud and Kabbalah, Hebrew for Bible and its commentaries and community documents, Yiddish for the vernacular and its literature. Square letters for the basic texts, Rashi letters for the scholars, and Yiddish letters for the language spoken by the people. Nuanced Jewish reproduction of a Christian custom could fit right into the Ashkenazic way of thinking.

## Old Yiddish Literature

### ORIGINS

Yiddish was written in the ancient Jewish alphabet as soon as it was spoken. The first Ashkenazim had their extensive Hebrew and Aramaic library, their literacy rate was very high, and there was a tradition of writing anything and everything in the Jewish alphabet (including numbers in the ancient alphanumeric system). Before modern times, most Jews, who could speak with their gentile neighbors, vendors, and customers, could not read Latin, Gothic, or Cyrillic letters, all of which were called *gálkhes* in Yiddish. The word literally means “that which belongs to the priests” (*galókhim*). Two conclusions suggest themselves. First, that non-Jewish writing remained strange for Ashkenazim (with the rare exception of highly assimilated individuals such as the bard Suesskind von Trimberg, who wrote German lyrics in the early thirteenth century). Second, they noticed that it was usually priests and other officials of the majority religion and government who could read and write in their Christian alphabet (in countries run in part or in full by the Church there were no clear distinctions between church and state). Hence the name they gave to this strange script, although created on an Aramaic collective noun model,

is exquisitely Yiddish—*gálkhes* (from the Hebrew and Aramaic root for “to shave,” derived from the monastic practice of tonsuring).

Having an inherited alphabet and putting it to immediate use for their new language, the Ashkenazim rapidly established a more or less phonetic writing system, aiming toward “one letter for one sound.” The ability to adapt an ancient Semitic alphabet to a medieval European setting came about through a circumstance of linguistic history. A number of ancient Semitic consonants were lost in the European linguistic environment. They are generally the laryngeal (“guttural”) consonants produced deep in the throat that were alien to most European languages. Then there were other letters that had been made to double as vowels in the Aramaic period. The earliest writers of Yiddish took these “freed-up” letters and used them for the basic vowel sounds: of the ancient laryngeals, alef for *a* and *o* sounds and, most famously characteristic of Yiddish, ayin for the vowel *e*. Of the letters “vowelized” in the Aramaic period, yud was used for *i* and *e* sounds, two yuds for *ey* and *ay* diphthongs, and vov for *u* and *o* vowels. The system was rounded off by the use of two vovs for *v* rather in the spirit of European *w*.

One of the earliest types of written Yiddish was the private letter or note, although, not surprisingly, little has been preserved; for example, the Speyer Letter of 1454. There were also legal documents and declarations that authorities wanted Jews to sign with an understanding of what they were signing. Unlike the surviving private letters, whose Yiddish is relatively close to the spoken Yiddish of the time, the legal documents tend toward a Germanizing style. Although the spoken language had to be as stable (with plenty of variation allowed for) as any other spoken language, the written documents of those centuries can be located on a kind of continuum ranging from “real” Yiddish to German or Germanized Yiddish in the Jewish alphabet and using the Yiddish spelling system. Among these is a declaration signed in 1392 by Meir ben Borukh ha-Leyvi, a fourteenth-century rabbinic scholar, upon being released from prison. He subsequently became rabbi of Vienna.

In addition to personal and legal documents, there were medical works, ranging from recipes for proven remedies to superstition-laden

folkloristic cures for all kinds of maladies. One of the oldest Yiddish genres is the *ópshprekhenish*, a kind of magic formula that can drive away the demons and evil spirits that bring sickness and misfortune to people. Some of the survivals are very old, for example, the famous “Instruction on the Powers of Bloodletting and the Veins” from the Jewish year corresponding to 1396–1397.

Then there was the *shprokh*, a formula uttered for protection. One famous *shprokh* manuscript, from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, says: “When I go forth today, may twelve angels be with me, three to accompany me, three to show me the way, three to destine my journey for happiness and health, and three to bring me in the name of Almighty God back home.” Then come four final words in Hebrew, “in the name of God the God of Israel.” The flavor of Ashkenazic multiculturalism is discernible as Hebrew and Yiddish complement each other (Yiddish text with Hebrew sacred formula to cap it off) in the spirit of a prejourney incantation that was widespread throughout Christian Europe. It was used in addition to (instead of?) the traditional Hebrew prayer for the road.

#### EUROPEAN EPIC FOR A YIDDISH AUDIENCE

The people of Ashkenaz enjoyed some of the same epic tales as their Christian neighbors, as long as incompatible religious references were modified or brushed out. Compared to the traditional pious Jewish literature, these Christian-origin epics were chivalrous, violent, and sexual. They provided light relief and entertainment and were the first form of popular European culture that the Yiddish language brought to the Ashkenazic population. It didn't bother the readership (or audience when these epic poems were performed) that these were basically the same stories enjoyed by their Christian neighbors. The modifications often came to provide a humor absent in a solemn original. The Yiddish versions are inherently humorous, being disseminated among a population that was completely unarmed and had heroes who were scholars of the Torah and its literature. The same basic plotline entertained the two audiences in very different ways.

The primary modifications replaced Christian religious references with something neutral or Jewish. A plea to the Virgin Mary might be replaced by one to God Almighty, or even to our mother Sarah, with some humor. In a case where a famous German epic has the German word *Kirche* for "church," the Yiddish might replace it with *tifle*, a humorous and frankly unflattering term, derived from a difficult ancient biblical word that is usually translated "unseemliness" (Job 1:22). This occurs in the tale of Horant preserved in the 1382 Cambridge Codex. It is the story of an exquisite beauty in Greece called Hilda, whose father, the wild King Hagen, arranges for the murder of anyone who asked for her hand. But young King Hetel decides to mount a dangerous expedition to capture Hilda. The royal expedition is led by Horant, one of the king's vassals, who pretends to be a merchant-philanthropist and is welcomed in town. In the end, Horant's magnificent singing attracts Hilda to meet him, and they plan their elopement. Only a fragment of the manuscript is preserved and the ending remains unknown.

There were Yiddish versions of other popular stories, such as the tale of Ditrikh of Bern and Hildebrand, two friends who are exiled from their homeland for over thirty years. This theme of exile struck a poignant chord with Jewish audiences. Hildebrand and Ditrikh confer on Hildebrand's plan to finally return to Bern (the Italian city Verona). Ditrikh urges him to persuade the young guard of Verona to give him safe passage, but Hildebrand is determined, despite his age, to fight his way through. After the young guard wounds him, it emerges in the ensuing conversation that Hildebrand is the guard's long lost father. In the Yiddish version, the wounded knight is offered "chicken and fish" to refresh him when they make it into town, replacing the general reference to refreshment in the Germanic versions. The juxtaposition of the exploits of the gentile knights with the traditional Ashkenazic dish would have made contemporary audiences roar with laughter. It is the humor of the unexpected and incongruous. The delight is enhanced by performance in rhymed verse.

The 1382 Cambridge Yiddish Codex contains a number of Jewish-origin pieces. But the first known Yiddish versions of European



literary favorites that show remarkable literary originality were composed in the early sixteenth century by Elijah Levita (Elye Bókher), the master Ashkenazic philologist (see pp. 66–67). In 1541, Christian Yiddish publisher Paul Fagius published his teacher's Yiddish poetic work, *Bovo of Antona*.

It is a highly original Yiddish version of a Tuscan Italian epic romance, *Buovo d'Antona*, itself ultimately adapted, through a chain of translations and adaptations, from the originally Anglo-Norman romance of Bueve de Hantone (English *Sir Bevis of Hampton*), based on the legends of the semimythical founder of Southampton, England. The Yiddish version contains the first use in any Germanic language of ottava rima, the Italian stanza form comprising eight eleven-syllable lines with an AB-AB-AB-CC rhyme scheme. It was an Italian standard from the time of Boccaccio in the fourteenth century. The narrative starts with Guidon, duke of Antona, who remains a bachelor until late in life. He suffers from a cold in his old age, and his advisers counsel marriage (in a scene hilariously reminiscent of King David's last days, when his advisers brought him the Shunamite; 1 Kings 1). Guidon is brought a luscious young beauty called Brandonia. She marries this old man but can't stand the sight of him. They had a son, Bovo, who is raised in the castle of St. Simon under Count Sinibald. Meanwhile, Brandonia becomes ever more unhappy with her old man and eventually decides on intrigue. She writes to Duke Dodon of Magentza (Mainz), suggesting he invade her hometown and rescue her from her senior citizen husband in the process. She coquettishly sends her husband on a hunting trip; Dodon lies in wait in the forest and murders him. Later the happy couple, Brandonia and Dodon, decide to do away with the unwanted child, Bovo. Bovo manages to escape but is sold into slavery and eventually grows into a handsome young man with golden locks who wins the heart of the princess of the faraway land where he ends up. There is a feast (roasted chicken and fish in the Yiddish version), at which the princess, called Druziana, drops her knife on the floor in order to steal a kiss with Bovo. Bovo, then a poor stable hand in his land of refuge, fights a public duel with a stronger opponent. He gets himself a makeshift shield but cannot find a sword. Instead he finds a

twisted old wooden beam and uses it to devastating effect, this time invoking for the Jewish reader's imagination the young David using his slingshot against Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40). Druziana continues her romantic pursuit of Bovo and eventually tries to seduce him by removing her top. The risqué scene allows the early sixteenth-century Yiddish writer to insert himself comically for the reader's pleasure. Bovo doesn't even look at her magnificent chest, but the author assures his audience, "Not likely that would be the outcome with Elye Bókher."

There are many instances of Yiddish humor. When Druziana fears at one point that Bovo will leave her for good, he reassures her: "May I be baptized if I don't come back to you!" The sultan in a distant land orders Bovo to convert to Islam or be hanged, telling his underlings to first try to bring the Jew into the Muslim *kóel*, using a word for "community" (*kóhol* in Ashkenazic Hebrew) that refers most emphatically, and exclusively, to a traditional Jewish community. Thanks to Jerry C. Smith's fine translation into English, called *Elia Levita Bachur's Bovo-buch* (2003), this classic can now be widely enjoyed.

Another Yiddish reworking from Italian, once (and sometimes still) thought to have been penned by the prolific Elye Bókher, was *Pariz un Vyéne* (Paris and Viena). The story was popular throughout Europe and there are manuscript versions in ten languages. Its intricate plot revolves around the love of a lower-born knight, Paris, for Viena, the magnificent daughter of King Dolfin. Nothing comes of it because the king naturally wants his daughter to marry proper royalty. After considering the family of the king of England, he settles on the son of the duke of Burgundy. The wedding feast is prepared, but Viena shames her father by refusing the match; she is put in prison, where she refuses to eat. The foreign duke arrives. The king is ashamed to tell him the truth at first, but it comes out eventually. The duke accepts that matches can only come from heaven and asks only to see Viena once. Viena agrees on condition that three days elapse. She uses the time to allow the roasted chicken, which was delivered to her, to rot and binds it under her arm. Amid the repulsive odor, she tells her royal suitor that she is

deathly sick with an incurable ailment. Paris dejectedly wanders across Europe for many years and after many ins-and-outs finally returns to Dolfin's court in a Turkish outfit. He ends up having better luck the second time.

There are rhymes between words of Hebrew, German, and Italian origin, which function as an integrated literary language. The work is written in an exact iambic meter devised by the author. It is full of homey Yiddish expressions as well as hearty insults (like *mámzer-ben-haníde*, literally "a bastard born of a woman who was [in addition to not being married to her partner] menstrually unclean during his conception"). The Jewish humor is laid on thick and fast. Viena is described early on as a maiden who doesn't need a guard to behave herself (where the word for "guard" is Talmudic) because she is "kosher," a take on the common Yiddish phrase *a kóshere yídíshe tókhter* (a kosher Jewish daughter). At a crucial point, someone tells Paris: "Boy, will she drive you crazy," using the popular Yiddish word *meshúge*. At points in the narrative where the French, German, or Italian reader would be taking it all rather seriously, the Yiddish reader would be laughing at the application of homespun Yiddish and a thick Jewish atmosphere to these very Christian characters.

These two sixteenth-century works demonstrate the sophistication of the old forms of literary Yiddish for complicated poetic epics. Older works may have been at the same level but were lost. That literature is secular insofar as the themes, plots, and heroes are taken from the gentile world, with ease and pleasure, and without any concerns beyond the replacement of specific Christian religious references.

One of the most adored of European works rendered into Old Yiddish was *King Arthur's Court*. A partial 1279 Hebrew reworking of another work from the cycle, *Lancelot*, is kept in the Vatican library in Rome. Nobody knows when the first renditions in Yiddish arose, but they probably started circulating not long after the work on which they were based, Gravenberg's early-thirteenth-century German version titled *Wigalois*. The two central characters, Gavein and his son Vidvilt (Widwilt), were as cherished for Yiddish readers

as they were for Germans and other Europeans. An old Yiddish saying about someone whose house is too fancy says that “the guy thinks his house is King Arthur’s court.”

BIBLE STUDY AND TRANSLATION;  
BIBLE AS EUROPEAN EPIC

The earliest preserved Yiddish written words go back to the eleventh century and predate personal names known from lists of Crusade victims. An early Ashkenazic tradition added Yiddish translations of particularly irksome words to manuscripts (usually in the margin). These marginal translations, known in Yiddish as *táytshtsh-verter* (translation words), are called glosses in the academic literature. They are sometimes found in Bible manuscripts intended for study (not to be confused with the sacred Torah scroll in the synagogue to which nothing may be added). Sometimes they are found in Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons and dictionaries. Some scholars believe that the tradition of writing the Yiddish equivalents for the “hard words” evolved into partial and then complete text translations.

In the Bible and Talmud commentaries of the great medieval Ashkenazic commentator Rashi (1040–1105), the phrase *b’loshn Ashkenaz* (in the language of Ashkenaz) is frequently used to introduce a Yiddish word to translate an occasional hard-to-explain word or phrase. For example, in his commentary to Genesis 1:27, “And God created man in His own image,” Rashi explains things using the analogy of minting a coin: “made with the seal [of the Maker] like a coin that is made by a mold that is called *koin* [or *konets*] and in *loshn Ashkenaz* it is called *shtémpel*” (which happens to be the modern Yiddish word for “seal” or “stamp”). Translations of parts of the Bible into Yiddish probably date back to the earliest generations of Ashkenaz. By the time we have a manuscript tradition, from which the printing traditions took their material in the 1540s, there is a fixed method of translating. The last thing on the mind of the translator of those days was “developing Yiddish style” or even “good style in the language into which the Bible is translated.” The translator had two purposes, each of which

helped produce a special kind of written Yiddish that lasted many centuries.

First, the translation was to be as literally accurate as possible. The obvious motive for this is the holiness of the text being translated. This often meant inventing Yiddish words to match biblical Hebrew. If Hebrew had a single verb for “to reign” or “to be king” akin to the Hebrew word “king,” then Yiddish would have one too. Some medieval translator took the Yiddish word for king, *kinig*, and made a verb *kinign* meaning “to reign.” If a biblical Hebrew word for catastrophe came from the Hebrew root for “break,” the Yiddish translator shadowed this too, coming up with *brokh* (which has made it into modern Yiddish as in the well-known phrase, *Oy a brokh!* for “Oh darn!”).

Second, the Yiddish Bible translation was meant to have a psychological aura of sanctity, giving rise to a style that is differentiated from both spoken Yiddish and the Germanized style of the popular secular writings. What developed was an archaizing style not dissimilar in principle to the continuing pleasure taken nowadays in the King James translation, replete with its *thous* and *thines*. It was a towering twentieth-century Bible educator, Nechama Leibowitz (1905–1977), whose 1930 study demonstrated the technique of archaization in her study of Old Yiddish translations of the Psalms. Traditional Yiddish Bible translations brim with *náyert* (but or only) and *drum* (therefore), which were borrowed back into modern Yiddish literature for special effect.

The first Yiddish printed book, from Cracow (c. 1534), was a Bible concordance, the kind of book that helped the serious Bible student come to grips with the original text (see above p. 64). Yiddish Bible translations also became popular in the first decades of Yiddish printing. But long before Yiddish printing, the Yiddish language and the Bible had a relationship that was deeper than translation for the sake of understanding the literal meaning of the text or even learning Hebrew in order to read the original. In the case of Ashkenaz, one of the most beloved arts was (and remains) storytelling. The first extensive Yiddish manuscript with a date, the so-called Cambridge Codex of 1382, in addition to the *Dukus Horant* epic, includes poetic

compositions on the death of Aaron, Paradise, Abraham, and Joseph the Righteous. It also has straight biblical material, such as lists of the traditional weekly portions from the Torah and of the precious stones in the high priest's breastplate.

These reworkings of the biblical narrative have a medieval European flavor. They reuse the ancient material in a novel way in Yiddish in one or another of the genres of Christian Europe. The most popular was the epic poem. The books of Samuel and Kings lend themselves to wistful reinterpretation as epic romance, with all the kings, wars, lovers, intrigues, and action. The appearance of characters like King David as a medieval knight had its humorous side too, especially when obvious postbiblical traditions are comically woven into the story. The Yiddish retellings of these two books, the *Shmúel bukh* (Samuel Book) and the *Mlókhim bukh* (Kings Book), go back to the fifteenth century at least and probably earlier. There is evidence that they were performed before an audience of some sort. The author of at least one (the *Shmúel bukh*) is supposed to be (the obviously pseudonymous) Moyshe Eshim-veárbe (Moyshe of the Twenty-Four, in other words, a master of the books of the Hebrew Bible). These two early Yiddish works symbolize the quintessential Ashkenazic spirit of a synthesis of ancient Jewish material with contemporary European form. Finally, the Bible is the ultimate source of Yiddish drama. It was traditional to stage a Purim play based on the book of Esther. It became acceptable over the centuries for the annual Purim play to have more than a touch of the "off-color" that would be condemned the rest of the year. At some unknown point, Yiddish playwrights started writing plays telling the stories of other books of the Bible, including "The Selling of Joseph," "Moses our Teacher," and "David and Goliath." Many of the details in these works are not based on the biblical accounts, but rather the much-embellished later midrashic literature.

## *What Should a Lady Read?*

### THE BIBLE OR EUROPEAN ROMANCES?

Although Yiddish printing was established by Christians (born or converted) in the sixteenth century, the battle of early Yiddish publishing that shaped up by the end of the century was internal to Ashkenazic Jewry. The intellectual fault line within Ashkenaz had been aflame for centuries, between a rabbinate guarding its authority and control over Ashkenazic society and a popular culture movement to spiritually and culturally empower women and the masses of men via the vernacular and what the vernacular could bring to the nonscholarly majority.

By the twelfth or early thirteenth century, that same *Book for the Pious* that was so tolerant of prayer to God in the vernacular, had a rather different message when it came to secular romances:

A person may not cover a sacred book with pieces of parchment upon which romance works are written. . . . There was the case of the person who covered his Pentateuch with leather on which alien things were written, with nonsense about the quarrels of kings and nations. A pious man came and slit it right off.

(Book for the Pious [*Séyfer khasidim* / *Séfer Hasidim*],  
sec. 141, Bologna, 1538 and editions following it.)

Although this segment also refers to non-Jewish languages, there can be little doubt that Yehúde Khósid and the others in his twelfth- and early-thirteenth-century circle in Ashkenaz would have looked askance at any romances (the original has the word *romants* transcribed into Jewish characters).

In the centuries before printing, only well-to-do people could afford to own a manuscript, often a top-end luxury item bequeathed by parents to children. The first items that people wanted to own were a prayer book or Pentateuch. The secular romance manuscripts were often written to be declaimed before others as well as just “read.” Little is known about the details of these “performances” but they were likely declaimed before audiences comprising men and women. In the age of printing, secular works in Yiddish became available to people of average resources. For example, King Arthur’s Court texts changed from manuscripts for performers to printed editions for everybody. In a manuscript there would often be a line (fitting into the rhymed structure) in which the performer teasingly asks the audience to buy him a drink before he will tell them what happens next. In the printed versions it is sometimes deleted or changed, though some editors retained such references in the hope that the work might indeed be performed, much as a playwright includes stage instructions. But the age of these declamations (which may or may not have been widespread) was coming to an end. The printed book did for Jewish women and many non-Talmudic men what its non-Jewish vernacular analog was doing in Christian Europe and in the same Renaissance spirit.

In that literary sense, Yiddish in the age of printing provided a new European component in Ashkenazic civilization. But the debate was not over language in any direct sense. None of the combatants had anything for or against Yiddish per se. But Yiddish, being the vernacular, was of necessity the means by which European tales reached the Jews of Ashkenaz. Nobody complained about there being a Hebrew version of King Arthur’s Court. Hardly anyone knew it existed, very few people could read it even if they had known, and anyone who could would have been immersed in the sacred books in any case, and thus inoculated against the “harm” of cultural invasion by Christian



Europe. The debate would have remained distinctly obscure were it not for the rise of Yiddish printing. The published Yiddish versions of the epic romances became popular, and the reading public would welcome a new (previously unread) secular romance in Yiddish as a respite from endless study of Bible translations, prayer, ethics, and women's laws. This was also true of many men who, in Ashkenazic parlance, "could not learn" (did not know enough to study Hebrew and Aramaic texts in the original). Just as Yiddish distinguished between a traditional sacred book in Hebrew or Aramaic (a *séyfer*) and any other book (*bukh*), the plurals of these words came to have a special significance in that old internal Ashkenazic debate. The highest ideal was to be immersed in *sfórim*, and the popular Yiddish books became known as *bikhlakh*, a grammatical diminutive that can be translated as "booklets" or "pulp literature." The contrastive terminology fit well to the frequent physical size of the two types, the more so in the age of printing. Tomes of the Talmud would be in large folio size, and a popular tale in Yiddish would be printed in small, cheap format to ensure maximal distribution at low cost.

When the debate heated up in the new age of Yiddish printing, with all its newly added commercial ramifications, the publishers, editors, and compilers of Yiddish religious books would routinely attack the secular storybooks. Sometimes the same publisher was publishing both kinds of books, and the criticism rings rather hollow and insincere.

From the mid-sixteenth century there was a surge in the production of tradition-oriented books, such as *Commandments for Women* (*Mitsves nóshim*, published in Venice in 1552 and 1588), publications and republications of individual books of the Bible in Yiddish, and a number of moralistic works and translations. Cracow, which had pioneered Yiddish publishing when the Helitz brothers' publishing enterprise flourished in the 1530s, again became a major center for Yiddish publishing toward the end of the century. But this time around it was a Jewish enterprise. The leading publisher was the Prosznitz (or Prosnitz) family, originally of Moravia. They produced Jewish books in Cracow between 1569 and 1626. From the early 1570s through the late 1590s they are known to have published a good number of pious Yiddish tomes, mostly taken from earlier publications,

and occasionally from manuscripts. The speciality was individual books of the Bible. The war drums against secular romances continued in the introductions to some of the sacred books in Yiddish, underlining that the conflict had shifted to a purely cultural one between two different kinds of literature, both entirely in Yiddish (as distinguished, say, from the Maharil's earlier worry about Yiddish songs potentially detracting from the perceived need to perform religious rituals).

The 1544 Konstanz edition of the Five Books contains a polemical pronouncement about reading choices open to women.

This book is also for the benefit of women and girls. It is common that they can all read Yiddish well but squander their time in books of nonsense like *Ditrikh of Bern, Hildebrand* and the likes of them, which are nothing but lies and concoctions. These same women and girls can now find their entertainment in this edition of the Five Books, which is all pure and clear truth.

(Preface to *Khúmesh, Megiles, Haftóyres*  
[*Pentateuch, Scrolls and Haftaroht*]. Konstanz: Paulus Fagius, 1544.)

The counter-strategy of the antiseccular literature camp was then to empower women *within* the structure of the traditional religious community. Even today, many American Jews remember hearing from their grandmother about the women proudly following along in the Yiddish Bible and prayer book during Sabbath and holiday services. The "threat" of the 1544 Konstanz publishers to bring out the whole Old Testament in Yiddish was not realized. The first complete Yiddish texts of the Hebrew Bible were not to appear for well over a century thereafter. But the thrust of the movement for popular religious knowledge, coming as it did in the wake of the wide spread of printing in Europe and during the time when the Reformation and Luther's Bible were carrying out analogous goals among the Christians, is quite clear. With extraordinary *chutzpah*, the publishers even use the word *séyfer* for the book, classing it as a sacred book, to be cherished alongside Hebrew Bibles and Aramaic Talmuds, not one of "those little *bíkhlahk*." Its title page has a motto from the book of Jeremiah that is explosive in the sixteenth-century Ashkenazic context: "And they shall no longer teach everyman his neighbor and everyman his

brother, saying: ‘Know God’ because they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, so sayeth God” (Jeremiah 31:33). In one fell swoop, knowledge of God is open to everyone, including women and girls, all of whom can read Yiddish well.

Safety warnings against *Ditrikh of Bern* and *Hildebrand* became commonplace in Bible translation prefaces. Elye Bókher’s 1545 edition of Psalms ends with an afterword that might be described as the confessions of the book’s publisher Cornelius Adelkind, somewhat in the spirit of Elye Bókher’s own preface to his *Bovo of Antona* (see pp. 69–70).

In my younger days I published many precious and large sacred books, and put all my energy into it, as one can see from all of [Daniel] Bomberg’s prints where I am inscribed at the beginning or the end. Now that I have grown old, I have thought things over, and see that I have done nothing for the pious women and for those men who had no time to study in their younger years or even later, and who would nevertheless like to spend their time on Sabbath or a holiday with reading Godly tidings and not about “Ditrikh of Bern” or “The Good Luck of the Beautiful Girl.” And so for their sake, those who would gladly read God’s word, one finds very few books that are written in Yiddish and well translated, so I went to Mr. Elye Bókher [Elijah Levita] to translate some books for me, and first of all, the book of Psalms.

(Cornelius Adelkind, afterword to *Tehilim [Psalms]*. Venice, 1545.)

The rabbis worried that the aura of European popular culture—knights with swords, power, murder, intrigue, sexual allure, adultery, challenges, duels, in short, the adulation of physical and political power—would lead Jewish women to spend Sabbath afternoons or other times of leisure dreaming about those convoluted plots instead of being immersed in the values of the Torah and the literature of laws, morals, and customs that had been assembled for women over the generations. But this was a tricky issue. The Jewish intellectual tradition allowed for a few leading women, from the matriarchs of the Torah—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah—through Deborah the prophetess in the days of the Judges (around the twelfth century B.C.), to Beruriah, the learned wife of Rabbi Meir (second century A.D.). These and others became the subject of many legends. Still, they were excep-

tions in a patriarchal tradition. It would be anachronistic to apply twenty-first-century Western mores to old Ashkenaz; the traditional Ashkenazic woman believed with all her heart and soul that following the commandments and bringing up boys to become great scholars and girls to bring up another generation of great scholars was the greatest ideal, rather than the pursuit of personal intellectual fulfillment. But now, with the boom in production of Yiddish printed books with stories of European chivalry, the women “had where to go” without actually violating any commandment. Nowhere, after all, does the Good Book, which is hardly wanting in violence, sex, power, and intrigue, say “Thou shalt not read.” That was the nub of the crisis, psychologically speaking, and it irked some of the men who ran Ashkenazic intellectual life. But there was little they could do to stop it, especially in the face of the care that the authors and publishers of secular works took to ensure that all was culturally kosher. They removed or replaced Christian references and added Jewish ones. They sometimes went out of their way to add religious afterwords and the occasional godly moral to the story. That irked the rabbis even more. Elye Bókher concluded his *Bovo of Antona* with the words (in the original language they are in the rhymed pattern of the entire work): “And may we all merit to live to see Messiah’s time, may he lead us right into Jerusalem, or at least to a village nearby, and build for us the holy temple, may it come to pass, Amen.”

#### A WOMEN’S BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF STORIES

The spirit was “If you can’t beat them, join them.” The traditionalist initiative to provide a pleasurable Yiddish alternative to secular romances led to the rise of new Yiddish genres at the end of the sixteenth century. They include polemic spoofs, plays based on biblical motifs, and prose based on ancient midrashic tales. An arc of generally increasing literary originality can be traced in these religious and pietistic works. All are literarily significant though not adhering to any modern Western model such as novel, short story, or poem. A lot of it was emanating from the eastern part of Ashkenaz, the Polish area.

Poland in the sixteenth century was rapidly becoming the nucleus of a new eastern Ashkenaz that would eclipse the older western branch.

The *Tseneréne* (the Yiddish Women's Bible) became a long-running Yiddish best-seller. Over three hundred editions have appeared, but nobody knows exactly how many. It is a Yiddish elaboration and paraphrase of the "core Ashkenazic canon" parts of the Hebrew Bible, in other words the Five Books of Moses (the *Khúmesh*: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy); the weekly Prophet readings (Haftaroth, Yiddish *di haftóyres*); and the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). It was compiled by one Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanov. No one is sure which of the many East European towns called Yanov (or Yanova) this is, and his location remains a source of mystique. For the book's title, the author followed tradition and found an alluring phrase in the Bible. He took the Hebrew plural feminine imperative for "Come out and see!" from a passage in the Song of Songs ("Come out and see King Solomon upon the crown O ye daughters of Zion," Song of Songs 3:11). In Yiddishized pronunciation, these Hebrew words, *ts'éno u-r'éno* (Israeli Hebrew *tseéna ureéna*) became the *Tseneréne* (Yiddish *di Tseneréne*), a copy of which was the traditional Ashkenazic woman's most precious possession for centuries to come. It continues in print today for Hasidic communities. The first three editions, starting probably in the 1590s, were read to pieces and not a trace remains. The oldest surviving edition, from 1622, indicates that the first three editions, one printed in Lublin and two in Cracow, were by then unavailable.

Instead of "translating" those principal parts of the Bible, the author interwove and interlaced his narrative with material from ancient and medieval commentaries and legends. The result was not a partial Yiddish Bible translation, such as those that had been appearing in print from the 1540s onward, but a new work that told the stories of the Bible in the way they had been interpreted, extrapolated, expanded on, and understood by a millennium and a half of rabbinic scholars. In addition to stories, it gave many commentaries of the type that learned men reveled in developing and exchanging.



Figure 4.1 The Ashkenazic Women's Bible, the *Tseneréne*, a graceful paraphrase of the Five Books, the weekly readings from the Prophets, and the Five Scrolls, was written by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanov in the waning years of the sixteenth century. The oldest surviving edition of this work, often considered the greatest Yiddish best-seller of all time, is from 1622. Over three hundred editions have appeared to date. (By permission of Dr. Hermann Suess, Rostock University Library)

In one fell swoop, this erstwhile male world was opened to the Jewish woman.

The *Tseneréne* seamlessly interweaves several thousand years of texts and ideas in simple everyday Yiddish, without the apparatus of daunting bibliographic cross-references or a stack of esoteric tomes on the table. This was a book Jewish women (and some men) enjoyed reading and studying. It was infinitely more popular than the straight Bible translations. In the eyes of its female readership, it was genuine Yiddish empowerment in a way that a straight Bible translation could never be.

Jacob ben Joseph of Yanov followed the *Tseneréne* with a similar compilation on the Prophets and Hagiographa. Again, its name is rich in historic allusion. He called it *Séyfer ha-mágid*, which literally means “the book that tells” or “the messenger book” according to the biblical sense of the word *magid*; for example, “the messenger (*ha-magid*) came to David, saying” (2 Samuel 15:13). In Ashkenazic society, the *mágid* was a traveling preacher who would deliver a talk interweaving many Jewish sources in a continuous narrative with a charisma that delighted his audiences. Now Jacob ben Joseph turned the genre from an oral discourse by a learned man into a second Bible book for women. Jacob ben Joseph of Yanov has rightly been called the Martin Luther of Yiddish. He used the vernacular of his people and the Bible to raise the level of creativity and stature of the spoken language to bring serious knowledge to anyone who could read. Going beyond Luther, Jacob of Yanov synthesized commentaries and works from many diverse times and places in an easy-to-read book. This offered a form of intellectual liberation to the Ashkenazic woman.

Starting in early Ashkenaz, stories circulated about the hallowed personalities of the new European Jewish civilization, orally and in manuscripts. Among those that survived were tales about Rabeynu Gershom (c. 960–1028), Rashi (1040–1105), and the father and son who were at the center of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement. These “primeval Ashkenazim” thereby joined a pantheon of precious characters, starting with Adam and Eve, about whom stories were assembled in ancient and medieval Jewish literature. Parallels from

European Christendom include a late Latin analog to the early Yiddish *máyse* (“story,” as in Jewish Aramaic; in biblical Hebrew, it meant “work” or “deed” from the root for “to do”). That was the Christian *exemplum*, a short tale used by a preacher to illustrate a point or exemplify model behavior by telling about the life of a saint. *Gesta Romanorum* (Deeds of the Romans) was a popular compilation that preachers used to inspire their congregations. Writers utilized it as material on which to expand.

By the late sixteenth century, the indigenous Ashkenazic tradition of stories had coalesced into a book in the hands of generations of anonymous compilers. In the age of publishing this became part of the traditionalist literary response to the secular books, part of the rise of traditionalist Yiddish literature that is intended to satisfy the reader, not just inform. Like the *Tseneréne*, it was meant to be enjoyable, not just educational. The oldest known edition dates to 1602, published in Basel under the title *Máyse bukh* (Book of Stories), and was put together by Jacob ben Abraham of Mezritsh, also known as Yankev Polak, or Jacob of Poland.

The *Book of Stories* comprises three major threads. The first consists of tales from antiquity, mostly stories from Talmudic and midrashic literature that the compiler adopted from *Eyn-Yánkev* (*Ein Yaakov*), an anthology of legends from the Talmud that was put together by the Sephardic scholar Jacob ibn Habib, who died around 1516. The second part of the Yiddish work is drawn from the legends and stories around the father-and-son team at the center of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement, Shmuel ben Kalonymus the Chosid, of Speyer (twelfth century), and his son, Yehúde Khósid of Regensburg (c. 1150–1217). A third major component “reaches out” to a wide variety of tales drawn from far and wide including many non-Jewish sources. Literary scholars have found that a number of tales from the days of rhymed epics about gentile knights somehow made their way into the *Book of Stories*, Judaicized and shortened, transformed into the genre of the short-short story.

Second only to the *Tseneréne*, the *Book of Stories* became a must for every Jewish woman and many men in Ashkenazic society. Although the stories had to have a moral, which was sometimes a mechanical



tag-on from the literary point of view, the essential criterion was that they be enjoyable and succeed in the new European marketplace of printed Yiddish books.

### LIFESTYLE LITERATURE

It was in another newly reinvigorated genre of Yiddish literature, lifestyle literature, that Yiddish expanded beyond its natural base to eventually include a hefty proportion of men readers who could feel that it was addressed equally to them. This development can be traced through a number of authors and works, starting in the 1590s, the decade of “pious counterattack” against secular Yiddish literature. It started with a desire—literary, commercial, or probably both—to have “official” male readers too.

Earlier Yiddish publications of works on Jewish ethics, such as the *Book of Traits* (*Séyfer mides*), and works on women’s laws, such as *Conduct of Women* (*Hanhóges nóshim*), had been among the Yiddish printed works of the 1540s. The first of these was a version of a Hebrew text (published after the Yiddish version), and the second was a relatively straight rendition of women’s laws. These Yiddish books mirrored their Hebrew counterparts (or the texts on which those “originals” were based) rather closely. They fulfilled the practical purpose of informing what the classic sources say, whether about everyday life or points of Jewish law that women need to know. There was no attempt at creativity.

But that changed at the end of the sixteenth century, as part of the traditionalist response to *Ditrikh of Bern* and other secular romances. As in the retelling of parts of the Bible (the *Tseneréne*) and the compilation of the classic tales of Ashkenazic civilization in the *Book of Stories*, there was a new wave of creative Yiddish writing in a pious, traditionalist, God-fearing mood. Alongside Bible and stories, this third genre of the revived, energetic Yiddish literature of the traditionalists is usually called *múser*. The word is derived from a biblical term (*musár*) that is particularly common in Proverbs, where it is usually translated “instruction,” “correction,” or “reproof” and came over centuries to refer to the need to keep watch over one’s character and

conduct, and to tell off friends when they have gone wrong. The classic European Jewish literature of this genre was written in Hebrew in the Middle Ages, mostly in Spain and partly in Italy. Its major works include *The Obligations of the Hearts* by Bahya ibn Paquda (late eleventh century), *The Book of Fear of God* by Jonah Gerondi (c. 1200–1263), and the *Advantages of Good Attributes* by Jehiel of Rome (late thirteenth century).

Late-sixteenth-century attempts at original Yiddish contributions developed this literary form into an all-encompassing lifestyle literature. Even in its earlier form in Hebrew, it covered far more than what would today fall under ethics. It included everything from the pitfalls of envy to the need to feel upbeat and in good spirits. In its new Yiddish guise, it was adapted to the Ashkenazic Europe of the sixteenth century. Like the traditionalist *múser*, it was inspired by deep feelings of pride and happiness with the traditional Ashkenazic Jewish heritage and all that it implies. The notion that one should feel *lucky* at being born into this minority is a point often brought home in this literature.

This lifestyle literature progressed over a few years, within the 1590s, from booklets of moral warnings to encyclopedias in which the reader could look up the right thing to do in a vast array of situations. One 1590 booklet intended for men was written by Abraham Ashkenazi Apetéker (the pharmacist). Like the author of the *Tseneréne*, Jacob ben Joseph, Abraham was from eastern Ashkenaz, the Slavic area to which the religious and secular center of Ashkenaz was by then rapidly shifting. Apetéker lived in Ludmir, Ukraine (now Vladimir Volynski). It was published in Prague in a bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish edition, with so many forced rhymes that a lot of it is barely comprehensible. Its name, *Sam kháyim*, can translate “Medicine that Heals” or simply “Elixir of Life.” In either case, the author meant to take a pharmaceutical image from his trade and to apply it to the moral sphere of daily life. Like many of the Yiddish authors and publishers of the day, he saw himself as part of a movement of the times that stressed vernacular language and the new liberating force of the printed book. He states the view that whoever doesn’t really understand Hebrew well “should look at books

printed in Yiddish. . . and for that reason the opportunity is given for things to be printed in every language." For the late sixteenth century, this was a daring pro-Yiddish sentiment. The author identifies Yiddish not with women alone but with the vast majority of the population. This pharmacist stays away from such stock formulas as "women and men who cannot learn," which provided others an excuse to publish in the vernacular. For him, knowledge of the right thing to do goes hand in hand with social protest against community leaders who are more interested in their own wealth than the people they represent. Apetéker explains what is required to be a member of the community leadership: "to treat the members of the community as they would treat their own children" and not to "show off power." It is a book for men, itself innovative for a Yiddish publication of the time. It even discusses a number of male-specific issues, including the behavior of rabbis and students in a yeshiva (traditional Talmudic academy). The author warns students not to be in a carnival Purim-like mode for the whole term, and not to "think about girls all the time."

The next rung was the first major "lifestyle encyclopedia." It was called *The Burning Mirror* (*Brántshpigl*). Apparently, it first appeared in 1596, but the oldest complete copies that survive are of the famed 1602 edition. *The Burning Mirror* was written by Moyshe Henoah Yerushalmi Altshuler, a scion of the famous Altshuler family that had spread out from Prague to many parts of Ashkenaz. It is a large-scale work (some 470 pages in 76 chapters). Much of the early parts are meant specifically for women, while most of the later chapters are ostensibly for everybody, though this is not consistent. The title page addresses the book to "men, women, and girls," promising "eternal life in Paradise full of joy" as well as a long and good life "also in this world." Chapter titles include Why This Book Is Written in Yiddish; How Women's Talk Can Bring Eternal Life; How to Treat People Who Work in Your House; Not to Be a Too-Frequent Visitor; Not to Practice Magic.

The following excerpt can help us fathom how the role of Yiddish was grasped around 1600. The mention of the book's prime competitor, the *Book of Attributes*, is also illuminating.

This book is written in Yiddish for women, and for the men who are like women and cannot study [the sacred texts]. Other sacred books are in Hebrew, and feature convoluted Talmudic arguments which they cannot understand. There are many fine Books of Attributes in Yiddish, but they do not tell about the good things in the world to come, or the punishments of hell. Only the great masters of Kabbalah write about that, and it's not very easy to understand. Therefore I have written this book for women and men who cannot read the sacred books. I write in Yiddish so that people will know what a person is and why people were created, and how it is better to be among the people of Israel than other nations. And what the reward is for being in awe of God blessed be He and serving him with love. And if people will read this book seriously and will keep to what it says, then I will later write about the attributes of the world to come.

It says in the Talmud that Rabbi Avohu and Rabbi Chiya bar Abba turned up in a certain city and gave talks. Rabbi Chiya spoke purely about laws. And Rabbi Avohu recounted legends and beautiful stories. And the people who were listening to Rabbi Chiya moved over to Rabbi Avohu and listened attentively to his talk. This made Rabbi Chiya feel badly. Rabbi Avohu told him: "I will tell you a parable. Two people came to a certain town. One of them sold needles. And the other sold precious stones. More people came to the one selling needles than the one selling precious stones. And you come and give a talk purely on law, and not everyone can understand it. But in my talk I bring the legends and beautiful stories which everyone can understand, and so they come to me."

("Why This Book Is Written in Yiddish" [in Yiddish].  
In Brántshpigl [The Burning Mirror], sec. 3. Basel, 1602.)

*The Burning Mirror* became a standard for the Ashkenazic woman who could afford to buy it, but about a generation later it was displaced by a better book that really was for everybody and proudly in Yiddish. That is *The Good Heart (Lev tov)*, which appeared in Prague in 1620. In addition to being more sophisticated (and less patronizing), it was acclaimed by a number of great rabbis and scholars who recommended it for woman and men who "could not learn" the sacred texts in the original. As usual, extracts from the title page containing the rhymed commendation for the book help explain the Ashkenazic mind-set of the time, now into the late first quarter of the seventeenth century:

All you men and women, all who are made by the Creator, who want to build This World and The Other World for themselves, come and look at this beautiful book. Anybody who reads it through will not regret it. The reader will find in it all of *Yidishkayt* [traditional Judaism], in its length and its breadth, easily understood and well explained, spread over twenty chapters.

(Preface to *Lev tov* [*The Good Heart*]. Prague, 1620.)

Among the chapters in *The Good Heart* are Laws of [Honest] Business, Laws of Good Judgment, Anger and Rage, Not Revealing a Friend's Private Matters. The book's charm includes its interweaving of Hebrew and Aramaic bits and pieces to give the flavor of the totality of traditional Ashkenazic civilization. The names of the chapters sometimes start with the word *hilkhes* (Laws of), using a term known to Talmudic students from various tracts and codes of law. The book became so popular that it contributed to the word *hilkhes* entering Yiddish in a wider and humorous sense as "laws of" juxtaposed with a nonlegal issue ("he's really good at the laws of showing off"). Many of the chapters conclude with the Aramaic phrase *sliko pírko*, "end of the chapter." This is a Yiddish book for men and women that introduces to the Yiddish reading public major points of law and wisdom from a wide variety of times and places.

*The Burning Mirror* concentrated on women pleasing their husbands. *The Good Heart*, by contrast, offers a two-way street, demonstrating how the popularization of Yiddish books, thanks to the spread of printing, was affecting attitudes about culture and gender by the early seventeenth century. Husbands and wives could both read about the respect they owe each other, in their own language from the same book. *The Good Heart* even touches on domestic violence. A man who raises his hand as if to hit his wife, even if he doesn't touch her, is considered evil. He may not be called to say a blessing on the Sabbath for the reading of the Torah, and his signature in business documents is null and void until he repents. A husband who forces sexual relations on his wife when she is not in the mood for it is cursed. Although various ancient platitudes about wives and husbands are repeated, the author, Yitskhok ben Elyokum (Isaac ben Eliakum) of Posen, adds that a wife should be as a maidservant to her husband, and a husband as a manservant to his wife. He warns against marriage for beauty or

money. The thematics of male–female relations recur throughout the work and reveal a Yiddish “counter-spirit” to a male-dominated traditional Near Eastern civilization long ago transplanted to the heart of Europe.

#### WOMEN PIONEER OLD YIDDISH POETRY

Sooner or later the chain of events unleashed by the initiation of Yiddish publishing primarily for women would result in women becoming writers. The literacy rate of women, like men, was high. But women did not aspire to write ethical books teaching others how to act or to compile lifestyle encyclopedias. They were inspired to creativity by a more intimate, spiritual genre: the Yiddish prayer. A canon of special Yiddish prayers for women had been developing in any case, in addition to the various translations of the Hebrew and Aramaic standard canon. In its published forms, the special Yiddish canon came to be known as *Order of Personal Prayers* (*Séyder tkhínes*) or more fully as *Order of Personal Prayers and Requests* (*Séyder tkhínes u-bakóshes*). These titles were parallel to many editions of canonical Hebrew and Aramaic prayers called *Order of Prayers* (*Séyder tfiles*). It is noteworthy that women’s prayers became a significant genre notwithstanding that women are exempt from daily canonical prayer according to rabbinic law.

The Yiddish prayers in the *Order of Personal Prayers* are sometimes supplements to various specific Hebrew prayers. Sometimes they are specific to certain holidays or days of the week. And sometimes they are specific to circumstances in life. There is a prayer for successful childbirth, a prayer for the health of the children, a prayer for a widow, and the prayer of a wife whose husband is away on a business trip. It becomes apparent that the *Order of Personal Prayers* is a standardized personal prayer book in Yiddish for the Ashkenazic woman. Many editions contain specific instructions that would be unthinkable for the original canon in the classical languages. One famous instruction tells a woman to “read this prayer slowly and joyfully, even if it means finishing it only the following day.” Another calls (in print!) for her to weep when uttering it. One of the classic editions of

the *Order of Personal Prayers* was the Amsterdam 1648 edition. But it took quite a few years for the fully developed *Order* to emerge. The earlier printed versions contained only a few prayers. For example, a booklet called *Tkhíno zu* (This Personal Prayer) appeared in Prague around 1590. It is a small booklet comprising a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish title page and two pages of a Hebrew prayer text followed by four in Yiddish.

We usually don't know whether it was men or women who actually wrote the special Yiddish prayers for women. In either case, this genre eventually inspired women to start writing individual Yiddish poems and have them published under their own name. Modern scholars who learn that women started publishing the first nontranslated Yiddish poetry during the age of earlier Yiddish printing sometimes get very excited about what they expect to find in the way of the topics, feelings, and purposes of that poetry. Thinking that there might be a subtle revolution, they are often disappointed when they read the poems and find out that they snugly fit the bill of ancient Jewish law and sensibilities as evolved over the millennia by standard rabbinic Judaism. These are deeply pietistic, religious poems, in which the woman talks to God one-on-one, asking, for example, for her male children to be Torah scholars or for her husband to succeed. But we need to avoid applying contemporary ideas to a completely different time, place, and society, and look at the society through its own eyes. For Ashkenaz, it was quite revolutionary that a work written by a woman would appear with her name as the author.

The daring new enterprise started in 1586 in Cracow. A Yiddish edition of the book of Psalms, by one Moyshe Shtendl, was prefaced with a rhymed poem by one Royzl Fishls. In the poem (typeset as continuous prose), she tells of her life history as it relates to this edition of the Psalms, of which she is the publisher. She is the daughter of the late Rabbi Joseph, and granddaughter of Rabbi Judah Levy, who kept a yeshiva going for fifty years in Ludmir, Ukraine. In the course of the poem, she explains that she was forced into a period of wandering, and in Hanover found this rhymed translation of Psalms by Rabbi Moyshe, which is to be sung according to "the melody of the *Shmúel bukh*." She goes on to say that seeing how good it would be for

men, women, and religious girls, she copied out the text with her own hand and brought it to press. The poem becomes a prayer only at its conclusion, where she thanks God and beseeches him to continue having mercy on her, and to stand by her, just as he stood by David son of Jesse (the traditional author of Psalms). Royzl's poem, appearing in the highly prestigious incarnation of a preface to a book of Psalms, helped inaugurate the age of the woman Yiddish poet. It daringly went against the old tradition in which a woman's prayer might ask her to be in the eyes of God as deserving as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah; instead, and importantly for the history of ideas and their published literary expression, she asks to be treated as David was. In a more cosmic sense, Royzl Fishls initiated the tradition of women Yiddish poets that has continued, albeit in different senses, unbroken into the twenty-first century.

Sometime early in the seventeenth century another star emerged—Toybe Pan, wife of Rabbi Jacob Pan and daughter of Rabbi Leyb Pitzker. She published her personal prayer, known to generations of scholars as “Toybe Pan's *tkhine*,” though the title on the book itself is *A Lovely Poem Newly Made*. It has fifty quatrains (with some exceptional five-line stanzas), with the refrain “Father King” and a user's note suggesting it be sung according to the melody for a popular Hebrew prayer. The occasion for the poem is a plague that the author begs God to call back. Writing in Yiddish verse, this learned woman dares to construct an argument that determines the structure of the poem. Its opening stanzas characteristically praise God's mercy and ask him to look at people's prayers rather than their sins. It goes on to explain the loneliness and sense of helplessness caused by the plague, and the specific request that no further victims succumb to it. She then talks about what the community is doing for itself. “Five men” are devoting themselves, at great risk, to helping those in need, and God is asked to reward them appropriately. Toybe quickly moves to what women *always* do for sick people (in the original, stanza 9, all five lines rhyme).

*But goodhearted women all the time,  
Do fine things for sick people,*



*Bringing them company all the time,  
At the ready to carry out many good deeds,  
May God protect them from all suffering.*

The poet dares God to do his work whether or not the acts of repentance suffice:

*We are doing penance, young and old,  
But halt the plague!  
And if we God forbid were too sinful  
Then do it for us as a gift for naught.*

By stanza 26, Toybe respectfully points out to God that there is no longer a high priest in the temple to properly intervene for the people, and therefore God is beseeched to accept *this* prayer.

*We have no temple, no high priest  
Who will stand for us  
And pray on our behalf  
So dear God, accept our prayer.*

By stanzas 29–30, God is challenged to “remember well” his own oath to the patriarchs, and he is reminded of Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac for God.

*O dear God, remember well Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of old,  
And keep your oath,  
That when the people of Israel in great need be  
You will help them out of all their misery.  
You promised Abraham  
When Isaac lay bound on the altar  
That you would keep your hand over us  
For the sake of old Jacob.*

God’s image is obviously in some trouble after the death of the pious rabbi of the community in the plague.

Toybe then throws up to God the death of tiny children, “jewels of two, three years, and those who can read and pray too.”

With an obvious knowledge of rabbinic terminology, Toybe takes up two of the classic measures of justice, the (harsh) *mides ha-din* (measure of the law) and the (compassionate) *mides ho-rákhmim* (measure of mercy).

*O dear God who sits in the seventh heaven,  
Pay attention to your poor flock.  
Get up from the measure of law,  
And sit yourself down upon mercy's measure.*

While the poetry and tone would strike some modern critics as simplistic and naive, Toybe was making bold statements. This is a woman talking sternly to God in a time of community crisis, not afraid to take on God and argue with him, within the faith and tradition concerned, and to tell all about it in a carefully rhymed poem published as a separate pamphlet in her own name in the early seventeenth century.

Another female poetic phenomenon came a century later. Not yet twelve years old, Gella was the daughter of a printer-publisher who had, very unusually, converted to Judaism. Her father, who went on to become a rabbi, published a Yiddish prayer book in Halle in 1714. The rhymed preface is by his daughter Gella, who also typeset the book:

*Typeset with my own hands, every one of the letters.  
My mother Freyde, daughter of Reb Yisróel Katz of blessed memory,  
Gave birth to me among her ten children.  
I am a virgin a little under twelve,  
But don't be surprised that I must toil,  
The gentle abandoned Daughter of Israel sits long days in the Diaspora.  
One year goes by and another comes yet around,  
And we have not yet beholden our redemption,  
That we cry out and beg God for every year.  
Would he see that our prayers to God, blessed be he, shall come to pass,  
But for now I must stay mum and still.*

*I and my father's house must not talk much.  
 Soon all Israel will come to see it,  
 So may it happen to us,  
 As the passage says, all people will rejoice,  
 Who had bewailed Jerusalem's sack,  
 The great who were banished to exile,  
 Will come rejoice at Redemption,  
 Amen may it come to pass.  
 Now, my dear people, buy this prayer book for a pittance,  
 For we have no other living in this world,  
 Because that is how God, blessed be he, wanted things to be.*

The most famous woman writer of devotional Yiddish poetry lived most probably in the early eighteenth century. Her name came to assume mythical proportions. She was Sora bas Tóyvim (Sarah, daughter of the good people of the city). Her two most famous surviving works both have Hebrew names. One is called *Shéker ha-khéyn* (The Deception of Charm, from Proverbs 31:30: "Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears God shall be praised"). The second has a rabbinic-sounding title, *Shlóysho sheórim* (Three Gates, the image of the gate being common in Talmudic and later rabbinic literature). Sora bas Tóyvim became the symbol of female pietistic prayer in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ashkenazic society.

#### GLIKL HAMEL

Older Yiddish literature is rich in works on local history, often epic ballads about a disaster that struck a community or what appeared to be a miraculous deliverance from disaster (otherwise known as near-disaster works). One of the best known was written to commemorate the salvation of the Jews of Frankfurt from the bloodthirsty Vincenz Fettmilch. The resulting bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish poem, *Megíles Vintz*, or Megillah (Purim-like story) of Vincenz Fettmilch, appeared in 1616. It was cherished by the Frankfurt Jewish community right up to the Holocaust. In 1612, Fettmilch, a guild leader, protested to the emperor, accusing the Frankfurt municipality of favoring Jewish in-

terests. When his protest got nowhere, Fettmilch incited violence. His mob broke through the gates of the Jewish quarter in August 1614. There was some armed resistance on the part of the Jews, but eventually most of the men fled to the cemetery where the women and children had earlier taken refuge. Some scattered to surrounding towns and villages. Fettmilch's dispute with the emperor took its own course. The emperor eventually issued an order for his arrest and on March 10, 1616, he and his associates were hanged and quartered. A Purim-like scenario indeed. The city's Jewish population returned home in a joyous parade.

But much of the "professional" historical literature pales in comparison to a work that has much to say about European Jewish cultural history, while also standing out as a substantial literary work. It is the memoir of Glikl Hamel (whose name is spelled in many ways: Glikel, Glueckel, etc.; Hamil, Hameln, Hamelin, etc.). Although her husband was "of Hamel," the epithet stuck to her too (Glikl of Hamel). In Yiddish she is known simply as Glikl Haml. Born in Hamburg in 1645 or 1646, she was married at the age of fourteen to Chaim of Hamel (near Hanover). In addition to bringing up their dozen children, she ran most of his business affairs, rather more successfully after his death. She started her journal or diary at the age of forty-six to combat her loneliness after being widowed. She eventually remarried and for a time stopped writing. After her second husband, Cerf Levy of Metz, died, she went back to the manuscript, completing it in 1719. The original was lost but her family and descendants kept copies. In 1896, a German Jewish scholar, David Kaufmann (1852–1899), published the work with his own introduction on the basis of the copy made by Glikl's son, Moyshe Hamel, rabbi at Beiersdorf. It became a classic and has been translated into English, German, Hebrew, Russian, modern Yiddish, and other languages. There may well be other invaluable memoirs "out there" waiting to be discovered.

Glikl Hamel was a woman of the world who ran, in terms of the day, a business empire. It involved non-Jewish and Jewish people in Amsterdam, Berlin, Hamburg, Hanover, Hildesheim, and Metz. She was learned in sacred books, exhibiting a degree of knowledge of Talmudic literature that is usually thought to have been acquired only by

men (though scholars point out that most of this knowledge could have been gleaned indirectly from the Yiddish pious books of the day). In spite of all her worldliness and Jewish learning, she is comfortable with the Yiddish writing style of those personal women's prayers, the *Tkhines*, which gave Yiddish its first original, pietistic poetry.

Besides quoting freely from biblical and rabbinic sources, Glikl's text reveals more than a passing knowledge of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. She is well acquainted with the Act of Genesis and Act of the Chariot notions, two prime events in kabbalistic thinking. Glikl also extols the powers of an ancient scholar by referring to his knowledge of mysticism. In fact, Yiddish has been linked to Jewish mysticism in various ways throughout the history of Ashkenaz.

## *Yiddish and Kabbalah*

The relationship between Yiddish and the Kabbalah—Jewish mysticism—is mysterious. First, it was never intrinsic or primary but evolved during the thousand years of Ashkenaz, partly in consequence of what both came to stand for in the society. Second, much of the Kabbalah is in Aramaic, the language at the elite end of the spectrum in Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism. But the paths of Yiddish and Kabbalah have crossed too often for the links to be “ships passing in the night.”

Mysticism entails study of or belief in that which is mysterious, intangible, or unknown, especially involving the most basic questions of deity, higher powers, unseen powers, creation, life, soul, divinity, purpose of humanity, and the world. Mysticism often involves elevated states of consciousness or concentration (or both) in an endeavor to go beyond reason to reach either a transcendental experience or a transcendent understanding. In popular forms, it can also be related to magic, wonder-working, and extraordinary powers such as prophecy or communication with higher powers. One of the basic tenets of most forms of mysticism across cultures is the notion that the human soul has an existence apart and distinct from the body with which it is associated; it does not necessarily come into being and disappear with the birth and death of one body. From this primary belief

come axioms about the afterlife, eternal life, resurrection of the dead, invasions of bodies by wayward souls, and a lot more.

Most of the Old Testament is narrative, legalistic or poetic, rather than mystical. Later mystics latched on to the few Old Testament sections with mystical elements, such as the beginning of the books of Genesis (the Act of Creation) and Ezekiel (the Act of the Chariot, Ezekiel's vision of being transported to heavenly palaces), Isaiah's vision of seeing God on his throne (Isaiah 6), visions of the "end of days" (Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1), and the esoteric allusions in Daniel. There are also short references to individuals who apparently ended their life on earth by means other than death. Enoch "walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). The prophet Elijah was with his pupil Elisha, when, "as they were walking and talking, behold a chariot of fire and horses of fire parted them asunder, and Elijah went up to Heaven in a whirlwind" (2 Kings 2:11). But these exceptions can be attributed to poetic license and the kind of vision and imagery characteristic of much of the world's poetry (and religion). Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is there anything explicit about life after death. Later mystics, around two thousand years ago, both among the Jews of Judea and those who became the first Christians, began to read life after death *into* the Old Testament and developed the messianic theologies well-known to us from later Judaism and Christianity. Long after the texts were written, both traditions came to insist that the Messiah idea was contained in the Old Testament. (The difference between the two religions on this point, one believing in a Messiah to come and the other in a Messiah who came, left, and will return seems minor from a distance, but it is a major difference to both these historically antagonistic religions.)

One result of the later Jewish exegesis, as biblical interpretation is often called, is that it is a lot harder to separate out what is rabbinic from what is mystical, given that much of the minority-mystical made it over time into the majority-rabbinic, that is, classical normative Judaism. What was once a clear case of two distinct tendencies has become a matter of degree within the same tradition. And that is the crux of the matter. A Jewish mystic, or kabbalist, over the last

thousand years in Europe was generally a traditionally religious scholar who concentrated on studying the explicit kabbalistic literature and spent a lot of time pondering such questions as God, Genesis, the soul, and other branches of Kabbalah. Such a scholar had to read Aramaic as well as Hebrew, and inevitably this scholar concentrated less on the minutiae of Talmudic law. That is why it is in part a question of degree. Some scholars became masters of both rabbinic and kabbalistic literature and wrote major works on both. One such figure was Elijah the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797).

The major twentieth-century scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), divided the history of Kabbalah into six periods in one of his midcentury chronologies: (1) Oriental (first millennium A.D.); (2) the Pious of Ashkenaz (around 1150 to 1300, with influences through the sixteenth century); (3) the great Sephardic center in Spain and Portugal, from 1200 to the expulsion of 1492; (4) the center in Safad, Israel, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; (5) the Sabbatean movement in Europe from the mid-1600s to around 1800; and (6) the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe, from the mid-eighteenth century to the present (and future). The Yiddish connection is directly present in three of Scholem's six periods of Kabbalah, the three that transpired in Ashkenazic society (the second, fifth, and sixth). But no major original kabbalistic work was written in Yiddish (unless twentieth-century Yiddish literary works are included, and that would be a controversial stretch of the notion of Kabbalah).

Everyday men and women are naturally more attracted to the great questions of being, eternal life, and God's interest in humans than to mastering detailed legal arguments about such classic Talmudic questions as the liability of the owner of an ox that has gored someone's cow. Kabbalistic questions are often more interesting to the "average person" than to top specialists in law, which is what most traditionalist rabbinic authorities were in older Ashkenaz. Many incarnations of Kabbalah involved not only speculations about creation, Messiah, life, death, the soul, and so forth, but also included astrology, magic, wonder-working, amulets, incantations, numerology, alphabetology,



alpha-numerology, angels, demons and devils, and more that was popular among most people of Europe in one form or another. The popular end of the Kabbalah spectrum was particularly relevant in Ashkenaz because of the extensive persecution of Ashkenazic Jews by the authorities of medieval and postmedieval Europe. The catalog of expulsions, burnings, massacres, and socially and economically debilitating laws and restrictions may have made a mysticism that dealt with the end of days, eternal life, life after death, and the survivability of the soul very appealing. As already noted, martyrdom or “sanctification of the Name [of God],” as it is euphemistically called, became a classic Ashkenazic attribute from the Crusades to the Holocaust. The otherworldly focus of Jewish mysticism, sharpened by the brutal persecutions of this world, put mystical concepts into the consciousness of much of the entire Ashkenazic population in premodern times.

#### PIOUS OF ASHKENAZ

In the debate about prayer in the vernacular, the classic text of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *Book for the Pious*, made it very clear that people should pray in a language they understand. That one line gave heart—and ammunition—to generations of translators, prayer writers, and, in the age of printing, publishers to promote prayer in Yiddish. But it is important not to atomize Yiddish out of its context in different periods of history for the sake of seeing Yiddish continuums (though there are no doubt Yiddish continuums that wait to be discovered). The Pious of Ashkenaz believed firmly in the potent mystical power of prayer to raise the person praying to a hypnotic state of union with God. Contrary to many earlier and later interpretations of Jewish law on the subject, the mystic sages of Regensburg and Worms declared, daringly, that it is better not to pray at all in the absence of devout intent, whether because of failure to understand the language or even because of being in the wrong mood for prayer. Notwithstanding the Talmudic reference used to support this notion, Orthodox Jews of many periods would be shocked, in view of the rigid laws about praying within strict time

frames three times daily, that the mystics of old Ashkenaz would tell people *not* to pray if their Hebrew wasn't up to scratch, or if they could not sustain the right mood. This is a good example of how kabbalistic influences occasionally seem to contradict rabbinic law when a higher principle is involved.

The difference in emphasis is stark and clear. The mystic is most interested in the heart and mind and soul. Far from belittling or discounting the importance of the simple, uneducated person, the mystic warns that person not to pray without devout intent, a situation that may result from not understanding the original language of these prayers.

A second, less direct Yiddish connection of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement had to do with practical Kabbalah, a euphemism for wonder-working, magic, and the power of mystical masters to make miracles and cure the sick. The most frequent tool of the practical kabbalist was knowledge of secret combinations of the Jewish alphabet and particularly of names of God. The word "Kabbalah" (Yiddish *kabóle*, Ashkenazic Hebrew *kabólo*, Israeli *kabalá*), which means "that which has been received" (or handed down), may come from ancient oral traditions about sacred letters and names that could be made to work wonders in the hands of the initiated. The Pious of Ashkenaz pursued this kind of Kabbalah too. For example, Eliezer of Worms (c. 1165–1230), a central figure in the movement, wrote a commentary that contains instructions for creating a golem (homunculus), a tradition that remained popular in Ashkenazic culture. The most famous example is the story of the golem created by the Maharál of Prague (c. 1525–1609) to protect the Jews of the city. In the twentieth century, it became a beloved theme in modern Yiddish literature.

Finally, the stories about mystical wonders said to have been worked by leading figures of the Pious of Ashkenaz, such as Samuel ben Kalonymus of Speyer and his son Judah of Regensburg, formed the backbone of Yiddish folklore and storytelling for hundreds of years and were codified in a text best known in the age of printing from the 1602 *Book of Stories* (*Máyse bukh*). This branch of Kabbalah played a major role in the development of one of the important genres of older Yiddish literature—stories about the founding fathers of Ashkenazic civilization.

## KABBALAH OF SAFAD

In the sixteenth century, the ancient town of Safad, in the upper Galilee (Yiddish *Tsfas*, now *Tzefat* or *Tzfat*, northern Israel) became a world center of Kabbalah. Its masters, numbering both Sephardim and Ashkenazim, settled there and created a copious literature in Aramaic and Hebrew that carried Kabbalah forward. Its most famous personality was “the Ari,” the acronym of Isaac ben Solomon Luria, known also as Isaac Ashkenazi of Safad (1534–1572). In effect, he and his disciples continued where the Zohar had left off centuries earlier in Spain. The Safad kabbalists developed elaborate systems of mystical speculation, cosmology, and theology. Writing mostly in Aramaic, they occasionally addressed *gilgul*—metempsychosis, or transmigration of the soul after death into another person, animal, or thing; the spiritual qualities needed for genuine prayer; repentance; achieving a mystical interpretation of many passages throughout the Old Testament; and, perhaps above all, cosmology and the origins of the universe and humanity, as well as details of the emanations between God and humanity. As in the Zohar, sexuality and the idea of feminine and masculine components of the Godhead are explored in much greater depth, as is the sanctity and divinity of sex. There is a lot about *tikkun*, the “repair” of the cosmos necessary to bring about the Messianic age.

The Lurianic Kabbalah introduced many new customs, prayers, and ethical precepts into Jewish life. These spread rapidly into various corners of Europe, as did renewed belief in both speculative and practical Kabbalah. One of the results of the concentration on *gilgul* was an increase in stories about dybbuks. The Yiddish word “dybbuk” (*dibek*) refers to the earlier mystical concept (present in the Gospels too) about a soul that invades a living body and must be expelled via a ritual of exorcism. The word is of Semitic origin (the root DBQ means “to cleave” or “to stick”) but it was a new formation in Yiddish, like many other “Hebrew” words that are really Yiddish creations that were then “borrowed back” into later Hebrew. In this case, Yiddish borrowed a kabbalistic phrase meaning “stuck on from an evil spirit” and turned

the word for “stuck” into a noun meaning the evil spirit itself, which sticks itself onto someone’s body.

The new kabbalistic literature of the Arí and his circle in sixteenth-century Safad diffused speedily through Jewish Europe, and the Ashkenazim picked it up with the most enthusiasm. One dybbuk story adapted from the writings of the Safad circle turns up in the Yiddish *Book of Stories* of 1602. It is about the soul of a sinner who invades a young man’s body. During the exorcism attempt, the dybbuk strikes back by recounting the sins of the supposedly righteous people in the room, especially in the realm of their private sex lives. Some of the elements of the story turn up in a 1651 tract on the nature of the soul by the famous Dutch Jewish scholar, Menashe ben Israel. And, some turn up in a modern short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. The channels by which a story transmigrates across time and space are often intriguing in themselves.

The kabbalistic center in Safad, as well as the Lurianic Kabbalah it produced, continued to impact the wider Jewish populations of the Ashkenazic lands. Kabbalah seemed to merge effortlessly into works of ethics and morals, the *múser* literature that had a long tradition in both Hebrew and Yiddish by the time this influence was felt in force in the early seventeenth century. There was a revolving effect whereby these works led to the spread of a number of Lurianic practices, which came as exhilarating additions to the already fulsome set of laws and traditions. In some cases these were simply revivals of older practices the kabbalists had reinstated. They included the fasting of firstborn males on Passover eve, the all-night study vigils on the first nights of various holidays, and atonement on the last day of each month. There were also additions to the prayer book. One mystical Sabbath song, couched in powerful romantic language taken from the Hebrew Bible, made it into the Friday night liturgy. It is *L’kho doydi* (Let us go, my beloved!) by Solomon Alkabez (c. 1505–1584), one of those who settled in the kabbalist colony in Safad. It was as if some holy spirit from the Holy Land had suddenly come to infuse the masses of European Jews with a mystical inspiration to immerse

themselves in higher pursuits and questions, further than ever from the ins-and-outs of mundane life.

The impact of the Safad Kabbalah on Ashkenaz fed quickly into the movement to relate more and more of the esoteric doctrines of Judaism to the Jewish masses, both by interweaving mystical explanations for many laws and by making way for the publication of books on mysticism in the universal Ashkenazic vernacular, Yiddish.

Two major Yiddish works of the early eighteenth century were a new kind of lifestyle encyclopedia that stressed Kabbalah. The two authors were, as it happens, a father-in-law and son-in-law. But the two could not have been more different. The father-in-law constantly threatens with hell and wandering of the soul. His son-in-law stresses the need to be joyous and cheerful here and now.

The father-in-law was Tsvi-Hirsh Keydonover (or Koydonover), a native of Vilna, Lithuania. He moved with his family first to Poland, then to Austria, and then on to Frankfurt. He returned for some years to Vilna, where he wrote his famous treatise, the *Kav ha-yóshor*. The book's name is a classic Hebraic double entendre. One is the literal meaning of the words. The other is a playful numeric allusion. It means *Measure of the Upright* (or *Righteous*), which suits the work's contents. But *kav* (a word for measure) is 102 in the Jewish alphanumeric system, an allusion to the book's 102 chapters. And the particular word for "the upright," *ha-yóshor*, is composed of the same four letters (with the order of the last two reversed) as the author's Yiddish name, Hirsh. There is a lot of internal evidence that the *Measure of the Upright* is a compilation of rousing talks that Tsvi-Hirsh gave over many years. He compiled them in Hebrew and Yiddish versions, and published a bilingual edition in Frankfurt in 1705. The Yiddish became an overnight hit and was reprinted many times up to the twenty-first century. It is a kind of Yiddish answer to Dante's *Purgatorio*.

His son-in-law, Elkhónen Kirchan, was equally immersed in Kabbalah, and equally passionate about bringing its teachings to the wider Jewish public. But he went in the opposite direction, talking not about purgatory for the evil in the world to come, but about the need to pursue elation here in this world, and first and foremost, the

dictum *Don't worry!* As ever, the Hebrew names of these works are very telling. Instead of going for austere allusions to punishment, he called his work *Simkhas ha-néfesh* (Happiness of the Soul). It appeared in 1707, in Yiddish only. It might just as well have been called "Antidote to my father-in-law's recently published book." His work was a milestone in the story of Yiddish and Kabbalah. A further sensation was roused by the second component of the book, a Yiddish summary of a massive number of laws in the final part of the volume. If ever there was a "simple people's liberation book" in Yiddish, this was it. Kabbalah *plus* rabbinic law, all in the vernacular in simple, concise popular format in a single volume. The book was very successful in its time. Kirchhan followed up with "volume 2" of *Happiness of the Soul* in 1727. It is a book of songs to elevate the spirits. It includes the musical notes to the songs, one of which is called "Sing Without Worry!" and is meant for Sabbath mornings. "Yiddish in print" came to be the vehicle of empowerment of the majority in both elite realms of Ashkenaz: mysticism and knowledge of Talmudic law.

#### A YIDDISH-KABBALAH PARTNERSHIP

The Yiddish works that brought kabbalistic ideas to the wide readership of men and women played an essential role not only in the dissemination of those kabbalistic ideas, but also in a newly uninhibited transmission of classical Jewish knowledge in the universal vernacular. Kabbalah became a motivating factor in the enfranchisement of women and unlearned men. There were two driving forces at work, both enhanced by the meteoric rise of Kabbalah in sixteenth-century Safad and its swift European circulation. First, there was the force of kabbalistic ideas themselves, in which the soul of a person is a core entity in the bigger scheme of things and includes everyone, not just rabbis and scholars and legal minds. Many kabbalistic ideas, for all their esoteric or nonmaterial flavor, can be easily grasped by the average person who is interested. There are intrinsic factors that favor inclusiveness, and inclusiveness in traditional Ashkenaz means Yiddish. Second, there was the force of internal Jewish politics. Deep knowledge of Kabbalah and deep knowledge of rabbinic law were often pres-

ent in one and the same individual rabbi, but there was frequently a creative tension between the two streams that was based on a scholar's primary interest. If that interest was overwhelmingly kabbalistic, the scholar concerned was often less of a specialist on matters rabbinic. Conventional rabbis sometimes looked askance at Kabbalah, fearing its abuse in the wrong hands and fearing that its study might eclipse the study of Torah in the conventional rabbinic sense of text and commentaries that are either legalistic (halachic) or homiletic (midrashic). Perhaps it was as a kind of "insurance policy" against rabbinic doubts that many kabbalistic works, including much of the thirteenth-century Zohar, are constructed as commentaries on the weekly Torah portions. Additionally, there was the deeply held kabbalistic conviction that each line, word, letter, and dot of the Torah contains esoteric secrets, whose discovery is no less important than the legal dictums that many centuries of rabbinic commentary derived from the same minutiae. By spreading kabbalistic interpretations far and wide, the kabbalists were in effect strengthening the legitimacy of mysticism within Judaism. A widening franchise translates to widening influence and, in the world of ideas, to a kind of power.

The stage was set for Yiddish to move up in status well beyond the pray-and-understand-what-you-pray arguments of the twelfth and thirteenth century onward, and the commercially based arguments that came with the age of widespread Yiddish printing, from the 1540s onward. One of the major figures was Yechiel Michel Epstein (died c. 1706), a rabbi-kabbalist known for his "abridged and then enlarged by myself" version of an older famous work written by an earlier kabbalist. In addition, Epstein produced his own trilingual prayer book in 1697, comprising the original text as well as his Yiddish translation, commentary, and guidelines. Significantly, the statement on the title page, that usually addresses Yiddish books only to "women and unlearned men," states that this is "a prayer book that is composed along with the laws and customs according to which a human being should conduct himself, be it a scholar, a simple householder, or a woman." As ever, everything in relative. For a Yiddish book by a rabbinic scholar to be addressed to the *lámdn* (scholar) as well as everyone else, and for all three categories of people to be described as being equally capable of benefiting from a new book in print, is truly revolutionary.



Figure 5.1 Yechiel-Michel Epstein, a kabbalist in Germany who died in 1706, was perhaps the first to explicitly contend that mystical heights could be reached by praying in Yiddish. His prayer book first appeared in 1697. This later edition, from 1768, says “printed as in Amsterdam,” the most prestigious city in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jewish publishing. That aura was assumed by Vilna in the nineteenth century. (Menke Katz Collection, Djanogly section)

The commentaries and guidelines provided in Yechiel-Michel Epstein’s prayer book were an important step in evolving the Yiddish-Kabbalah nexus. He contributed further to the evolving Yiddish consciousness in Ashkenaz with his own treatise on life and Judaism, written in Yiddish and published with a Hebrew title, as customary. It



is called *Dérekh hayóshor l'óylom hábo* (The Upright Path for [or: The Straight Road to] the World to Come). The book first appeared in Frankfurt in 1703. In it, he went deeper into the question of language. He analyzed the gradations of knowing Hebrew, noting that even among those who could read Hebrew well, very few actually understood. He insisted that such people pray in Yiddish and believed that Yiddish had acquired a kind of sanctity of its own. Like many kabbalists, he believed that prayer should be passionate.

#### THE ZOHAR IN YIDDISH

The rise of Kabbalah among the Yiddish-speaking masses of Europe in the seventeenth century can be derived from two sources. First was the spread of Lurianic Kabbalah from the sixteenth-century mystical center in Safad, in the hills of northern Galilee, and the new widespread spiritual mood it inspired in scholars and laypeople, men and women alike. Second was the major pre-twentieth-century Jewish catastrophe in Eastern Europe, the Chmielnitski massacres in Ukraine in 1648 and 1649. Under Bogdan Chmielnitski, Ukrainian Cossack hordes rising in revolt against the Polish domination of Ukraine murdered tens of thousands of Jews. According to some chronicles, the number of Jewish people murdered approached 100,000. The vast suffering and impoverishment of surviving East European Jewry (especially the southern regions, Ukraine and Poland), further enhanced a widespread mood of mysticism. There is an old kabbalistic belief in a major catastrophe constituting the "birth pangs of the Messiah." An increased attraction to Kabbalah in such times was natural.

The time was ripe for an actual Yiddish translation of the central work of Kabbalah, the Zohar. That happened in 1711. But the publication of the Yiddish Zohar, in Frankfurt that year by Tsvi-Hirsh Khotsh, came, he claimed, after more than a century of delays in the processing of a manuscript first drafted by his great-grandfather Zelig, well before the Chmielnitski calamity. What could not well be published before the calamity, could readily make its way into print in a new age of mystical moods.



Figure 5.2 After a hundred years of discussion on whether it was appropriate to make the secrets of the Kabbalah widely available in Yiddish, Tsvi-Hirsh Khotsh's edition of the Zohar (translated from the original Aramaic) finally appeared in Frankfurt in 1711. (By permission of Dr. Moshe N. Rosenfeld, Rose Chemicals, London)

Tsvi-Hirsh Khotsh, of Cracow, Poland, was a kabbalist who came from a long line of mystics and rabbis. In the introduction to his 1711 Yiddish Zohar, he explains that the published work is based on a manuscript left by his great-grandfather Zelig, rabbi of Korb (near Lublin), about a hundred years earlier. His own complicated introduction in all three Ashkenazic languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish, provides a chronology of the many troubles that befell the manuscript, not least during and after the Chmelnitzki massacres. But the gist of it all is that the Yiddish Kabbalah is not just some postponed publishing project but a major mystical event in and of itself. His great-grandfather, the original translator, had a vision in which Elijah the prophet appeared. God himself stirred up his great-grandfather's spirit back in 1600. Reading these documents, Khotsh was, he recounts, still not certain, and he demanded of God a sign. The sign was provided by way of his great-grandfather coming to him in a vision. Khotsh provides an impassioned defense of the status of Yiddish in the teaching of the highest and most esoteric components of Judaism.

#### MESSIAH SYNDROME: KABBALAH OUT OF HAND

Perhaps it was just one of those unfortunate coincidences that the fellow who brought out that Zohar in Yiddish in Frankfurt in 1711 was called Tsvi, and that he called the book not by the word "Zohar" or some other neutral name, but by the name *Nákhles Tsvi* (Tsvi's Inheritance or Bequeathed to Tsvi), the manuscript that he, Tsvi, inherited from his great-grandfather Zelig of Korb. Of course it fits well with the story told in the introduction. The problem is that much of the Jewish world was reeling from the effects and aftereffects of the false Messiah Shábse Tsvi (Sabbethai Zevi). Born in Smyrna (now Izmir) in Turkey in 1626, *that* "Mr. Tsvi" had much of the Jewish world (and some non-Jews too) convinced that he was the final redeemer. Many kabbalists had worked out 1666 as the year of final redemption. Shábse Tsvi's own life ended in ignominious failure. Faced with torture or decapitation, he chose conversion to Islam and became Mehmed Efendi, dutifully donning his turban on September 16, 1666, in the sultan's court at Adrianople.

His conversion, and then his death in 1676, dampened the certainty of only part of his following. Tracts with names like *Legacy of Tsvi* that had double meanings continued to appear, and the Sabbatean movement, as it is called, continued to evoke bitter controversy and condemnations from anti-Sabbatean rabbinic figures. The Yiddish Zohar was widely suspected of being part of a secret Sabbatean conspiracy. After all, Sabbateanism thrived on the popularization of Kabbalah among the masses, and much of the Kabbalah is concerned with messianism and the signs of its imminence, so a Zohar in Yiddish with a Sabbatean allusion would seem more than a little suspect, even if the details about *this* Tsvi finding his great-grandfather's manuscript were all true. It is almost as if the alibi were too perfect to be credible. Moreover, the title *Nákhles Tsvi*, is inherently ambiguous in the Hebrew usage of the day. It can mean that which was bequeathed *to* Tsvi, or just as well, that which was bequeathed *by* Tsvi.

Anything combining Yiddish and Kabbalah was suspect during that period. First, Yiddish was the medium by which Kabbalah was transmitted from a tiny elite of Aramaic readers and writers to the masses. Those late-sixteenth-century and early to mid-seventeenth-century Yiddish Kabbalah books, and morality and ethics works with a heavy kabbalistic injection, helped set the Eastern European part of the stage for the mass hysteria that erupted when Sabbethai Tsvi's imminent revelation was announced. Had Yiddish literature not "moved in that direction," the biggest part of the movement's following would just not have been molded into the frame of mind in which the imminent coming of the Messiah becomes a plausible reality rather than a far-fetched claim that should in the *first* instance arouse overwhelming suspicion of fraud. In many versions of Lurianic Kabbalah, the coming of Messiah can be hastened by specific kabbalistic means. The dissemination of such ideas in Yiddish, during a period when East European Jewry was heaving with shock from its first encounter with mass genocide, made for a potent mix into which a false messiah could most plausibly stake his claim.

There is another and deeper interrelationship that is often passed over in silence by modern Yiddish scholars who are, for a variety of reasons to do with the history of Yiddish, loath to discuss things that

are, for modern people, embarrassing. The entire Sabbethai Zevi episode goes down in history as one of the great internally generated disgraces of Jewish history. Those who continued to believe that Sabbethai Tsvi would come back as Messiah, even after his conversion and death, came up with new theoretical constructs about a posited conflict between the external world and a redemption in spirit as a necessary phase of the Redemption. Some believed in other “incarnations.” The leading post-Sabbatean Sabbatean was Jacob Frank of Galicia (1726–1791), who attracted many Jewish and Christian followers; his messianism was transferred to his daughter Eva after his death. She had a court of followers until she died in 1816.

The upshot is that Sabbateanism, in its wider sense, survived the ignominious end of its major star. It is interesting how the Yiddish term *shabse-tsvinik* (follower of Shábse Tsvi) came to have three distinct meanings. The first is the literal meaning, someone who believes in this particular false messiah, Shábse Tsvi. The second, somewhat wider, refers to the follower of any false gods or false movement. And the third and most biting (entailing a second level of Yiddish satire) refers to someone who believed in something sincerely, lives to see it unmasked as chicanery, and nevertheless continues to believe in whatever it is.

Jacob Emden (1697–1776), a gifted eighteenth-century rabbinic scholar in northern Germany, whom some credit as the first modern Jewish historian, demonstrated that various forms of Sabbateanism had crept into the souls of even major rabbis and authors, who would use coded references or secret Sabbatean alphanumeric formulas for sneaking their messianism into their works so that the uninitiated would not be suspicious. Emden mastered the entire secret language of the Sabbateans in order to expose every one of them. The trouble is that for all his brilliance and pioneering work in the comparison of texts and the search for clues to unstated aspects of a text, he wasn't always right. Like many zealots out to expose all hidden followers of something or other, he sometimes accused authors who were innocent of Sabbatean leanings. But once accused of being a closet false-messianic follower by the great Emden, one's reputation was forever tarnished.

Emden (or in some cases his followers in Jewish historiography) suspected many of those who developed the kabbalistic stream of Yiddish literature as being among these secret Sabbateans. Emden leveled the accusation against Yechiel-Michel Epstein, the mystical champion of Yiddish of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, on the flimsiest of evidence (the use of a word in Epstein's prayer book that actually occurred in many pre-Sabbatean prayer books too). But the messianic fervor of kabbalists could in such times be mistaken for Sabbateanism, and the line between the two is not always clear. The belief that the Messiah is "just around the corner" in one way or another has been held by many eminent rabbis and kabbalists and is not necessarily symptomatic of the evils of Sabbateanism or other brands of false messianism. In the late twentieth century, Gershom Scholem, among the most meticulous of scholars, took an unusually generalized potshot, accusing "kabbalists who also wrote moral tracts in Yiddish" as belonging to "this camp," calling them the "moderate wing" of the movement. But how could there be a moderate wing in believing Sabbethai Tsvi to be the Messiah? Yiddish has a ready-made answer to such cases. It is like saying that someone is *a kap meubéres* (just a little bit pregnant). Perhaps the problem was not Sabbateanism but Yiddish. Writing kabbalistic works in Yiddish was for centuries bogus grounds for accusing the authors of "Sabbateanism" in the absence of evidence. Some Jewish historians continue today to tar with the Sabbatean brush the "pro-Yiddish" leaders of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movements to elevate the spiritual status of the masses (women and simple men). This issue must not be confused with a very different kind of literature: actual Sabbatean writings that were in fact penned in Yiddish, just as there were such writings in Hebrew (most were in Hebrew, in fact).

But another mystical movement was soon to replace Sabbateanism as the bearer of popular mysticism and an elevated status for Yiddish. It is a movement that also started with extreme radicalism but, as happens not seldom in history, became over centuries the bulwark of a future ultraconservatism. That movement is, of course, Hasidism, whose

rise and early conflicts need to be considered in the new and specific context of *East European Jewry*, the “younger branch” of Ashkenaz. And before considering the movement, and its crucial importance for the story of Yiddish, it is first necessary to backtrack somewhat to the origins and history of the Ashkenazim and their culture in the Slavic and Baltic lands of Eastern Europe.

## *In the East*

### EASTERN ASHKENAZ

The origins of East European Jewry have long been an object of sometimes sensational theorizing. Naturally, East European Jews and their descendants are curious to hear a tempting explanation of their origins. Who isn't? In some scenarios they all hail from the Khazars (a confederation of Turkic-speaking tribes in the Caucasus, some of whose ruling class adopted a kind of Judaism around A.D. 740). On other occasions the linguistic origins are sought in the land of the Sorbians (a medieval language group straddling the modern German–Czech border). It usually doesn't take long for the discussion to turn to the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70 and subsequent dispersions of Jews in Europe.

Naturally there is evidence of individual Jews or even communities being sighted in many places around Europe during such a long dispersion. Some of these sightings by historians are in the broader region of Eastern Europe. There are first-century inscriptions in the Bosphorus that indicate the presence of Jews. On December 6, 300, Jews joined with pagans in Tauris, on the northern shore of the Black Sea, to revolt against the ruling Christian bishops. But these and other isolated early sightings are not related to the origins or history of



Ashkenazic Jewry in the East European lands. Of course individuals who joined with Ashkenazic Jewry could have derived from the Bosphorus, Tauris, or the Khazars, and many certainly derived from local non-Jewish populations. But the overwhelming majority of Ashkenazic Jewish stock hails from the Ashkenazic Jews of Central Europe, the original Ashkenaz on the German-speaking lands where the Ashkenazic civilization and its Yiddish language emerged around the turn of the millennium.

There are cases in history where the linguistic evidence and the historical records seem not to harmonize; such cases exist in the history of Yiddish too, but this question is not one of them. The universality of Yiddish and of its majority Germanic component among virtually all of East European Jewry prior to the Holocaust, and the consistent correspondences between the dialects of older Western Yiddish and the modern eastern dialects, combine to make it obvious that Eastern and Western Yiddish derive from a common source. As for the Sorbians to the west or the Khazars to the east, not one word, construction, or sound credibly harkens back to any of these sources. The original elements of Yiddish—Semitic and Germanic—were joined in Eastern Europe by a third element, Slavic, that came from Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and other people among whom East European Jewry lived for centuries. The unambiguous philological evidence goes hand-in-hand with the consistent genetic evidence, which often comes from such tragic diseases as Tay-Sachs, common to Ashkenazim (whether hailing from western Ashkenaz, centered in the Germanic-speaking area, or eastern Ashkenaz, in the Slavic and Baltic areas). Language, history, and genetics support the same straightforward conclusion, which is in concord with the collective memory and traditions of the people themselves.

The history in the west was one of massacres, expulsions, and suicide to avoid forced baptism in the early centuries of Ashkenaz. That heritage deeply affected the internal spiritual life of the surviving Jews in German-speaking territories. Its impact could be felt in some aspects of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement, and in various details of the desire for maximal separateness from the neighboring population. It also led to the mass migration of surviving Ashkenazim to

other parts of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe. Many books have been written about the catalog of horrors that Christianity in medieval Central Europe inflicted on its hated Jewish minority, who would not accept Christ's divinity, were accused of killing him, of continuing to torment him by desecrating the host, and of using blood to bake Passover matzahs. That litany, cited earlier in connection with understanding the forces that molded earliest Ashkenaz, includes the expulsion of the Jews of Mainz in 1012; the First Crusade in 1096 (annihilating most of the Jews of Speyer, Worms, Mainz, Bachrach, and other communities); the Second Crusade in 1147 (Wurtzburg, Cologne, and more); the Third Crusade in 1196 (Vienna); massacres in 1206 (Halle); 1221 (Erfurt); 1230 (Wiener-Neustadt); 1235 (Bischofsheim); 1241 (Frankfurt am Main); 1243 (desecration of the host libel at Belitz; blood libel at Kitzingen); 1264 (Armstadt); 1265 (Koblenz); 1266 (Cologne); 1281–1285 (blood libels at Mainz, Bachrach, Munich, Oberwesel); 1285 (at Munich); 1298 (start of the massacres led by the knight Rindfleisch). This skeletal list of atrocities, involving torture or murder (or more humane options such as expulsion) of innocent unarmed civilians adhering to an Old Testament faith, does not do justice to the minority of Christian rulers who protected, or attempted to protect, the Jewish people under their jurisdiction. They include Emperor Henry IV, who issued charters of rights to the Jews of Speyer and Worms in 1090 and the archbishop of Cologne, Hermann III, who did his best to protect the Jews of the city from the ravaging mob that attacked on May 30, 1096, by dispersing them in as many places as possible in the region, when he saw that hiding them in his palace was to no avail.

This outline list takes us to around 1300. While West Europe was butchering the "Christ killers," much of Eastern Europe was shaping up as a multicultural pluralist haven in which a Jew had a good chance of living out his or her life in peace and quiet, and adhering to Jewish traditions without being abused, killed, or expelled because of them. Eastern Europe, which moderns often associate with lagging progress, was far ahead of the West in not slaughtering, torturing, or expelling people of a different faith or race (see above p. 36).

The reason for the greater tolerance in medieval Eastern Europe is, in a word, paganism. Christianity came late to the parts of Eastern Eu-



rope that became the heartland of eastern Ashkenaz. It took many centuries for western-style Christianity to become fully entrenched and natural to the vast majority of the population. In Poland in 966, the great Piast prince Mieszko I accepted Christianity directly from Rome in order to avoid forced conversion by the neighboring Germans (the threat of forced conversion came into play in this and other cases). In the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, negotiations between Grand Duke Gedymin (Gediminas), founder of Vilna (now Vilnius), and the pope started in 1322, closely tied up with the political priorities of Lithuania (and Poland) of the time: to be rid of the frequently invading Teutonic Knights. When the pope's legates arrived in Vilna on November 3, 1324, they discovered to their chagrin that Gedymin had changed his mind. The grand duke famously commented that the European Christian nations of his time loved each other and their neighbors to the point of annihilation. Even after the leadership of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania officially accepted Christianity in 1387, pagan beliefs and customs continued. Paganism may be inherently more tolerant on religious questions than any of the monotheistic religions when in power. While the history of paganism has its own bloodstained chapters, those who worship the sun, moon, *and* stars are not likely to butcher someone for worshiping one or more other things.

The absence of single-religion zeal in medieval Eastern Europe, related to the late entrenchment and empowerment of Christianity, went hand-in-hand with enlightened rulers viewing Jewish migrants from the Ashkenazic lands as vital economic assets whose skills, trades, languages, and experience could help develop the commerce of their countries, especially in the towns and cities, and particularly in the realm of international trade. Among the many Jewish specializations were coin minting. Coins with Jewish letters have been excavated from the reigns of the Polish rulers Mieczyslaw III (1173–1209), Casimir II the Just (1177–1194), Boleslav the Curly (1201), and Leszek the White (1205). For a variety of reasons, including vivid Jewish memories of religiously motivated genocide, as well as the desire of the rulers of Poland and Lithuania to encourage more Jewish immigration, formal documents were issued specifying the status,

rights, and obligations of Jewish residents. These charters, or privileges, had been issued by some rulers and bishops in cities in the west too, but they had been useless in times of mass violence. In the east, they were proclaimed by the great national rulers, rather than the leaders of feudal-type city-states or individual towns. There is a progression in time and in west-to-east geography that corresponds with the expansion of human rights in the various Central and then Eastern European charters. There was the charter granted by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen to the Jews of Vienna in 1238/1244. Along with those issued in Hungary in 1251 and Bohemia in 1254, the tradition fed into the more generous document issued in Poland by Prince Boleslav V (the Pious) in Kalish (Kalisz) in 1264. This famous Statute of Kalish was broadened further by the Polish King Casimir III who expanded its legal scope and applied it throughout his kingdom (in 1334, 1364, and 1367). That, in turn, formed the basis of the charters issued to the Jews by the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Witold (Vytautas), for the Jews of Troki and Brest (now Trakai, Lithuania, and Brest, Belarus), in 1388, and with more rights added in 1389 for the Jews of Grodna (now Hrodna, Belarus). Witold became known to East European Jewry as the “Cyrus of Lithuania” after the biblical king of Persia who “undid” the Babylonian Exile by allowing the return to Jerusalem. Grand Duke Witold’s 1389 charter gave Jews the right to live in the center of the city, do what work they please, own land, have the same legal rights and obligations as other citizens, and have synagogues and cemeteries that are tax-free. Recognizing that a wholly nonmilitaristic minority might need extra protection, a punishment is levied against a Christian who does not answer a call for help from a Jew who is being attacked. The charter stipulates that these rights are to be everlasting.

The promises of physical safety and economic freedom stimulated a massive eastward exodus; the exact numbers will never be known, but the trends are clear. For both Jewish history and general cultural anthropology, it is remarkable how easily the term “Ashkenaz” came to encompass Eastern Europe. Stateless cultures are free to do what they like with geographic names and don’t depend on military conquest or treaties but on their own collective perceptions. Such names acquire wide usage and stability over centuries among a culturally

close-knit population, in the total absence of border guards and the trappings of statehood. Ashkenaz “conquered” Eastern Europe without disturbing the region’s contemporary inhabitants. After the “conquest” there could be further internal divisions into regions and territories. For some time it remained the practice in prayerbooks to keep the name “Ashkenaz” for the more westerly rite.

For a long time, however, the centers of rabbinic intellectual authority remained in the west, by virtue of the prestige and “old glory” of the original Ashkenazic cultural centers, such as Worms, Mainz and Rothenburg, and such intermediate cities as Prague and Vienna. A west-to-east shift in authority over the centuries is discernible. As a rounded time marker for conceptualizing the eastward shift of authority, some cultural historians take the year 1500 and the biography of Reb Yankev Polak (c. 1460–1541). He was born in Germany and studied in Regensburg. He married a woman from Cracow and moved east, first to Prague and then to Cracow, where he founded the first important yeshiva in eastern Ashkenaz. He was a character who suffered various run-ins with the authorities, but in the end he was appointed chief rabbi of a large part of Poland by King Alexander in 1503. The beginning of the sixteenth century saw the beginning of the rabbinic traditions of eastern Ashkenaz, with Poland as the nucleus. Reb Yankev developed a now controversial Talmudic method of analysis that became associated with Poland. It involves a kind of logical gymnastics that critics contend is more apt to be “charming” than “historically accurate” in text analysis. Nevertheless, the method stimulated the growth of Talmudic study in Poland. Reb Yankev’s life symbolizes the shift of Ashkenaz from a Germanic to a Slavic epicenter, just as Rabeynu Gershom, a half millennium earlier, symbolized the shift of Jewish legal authority from Babylonia to the Germanic-speaking lands of Central Europe.

There is another significant analogy between the two. Like Gershom, who formally banned polygamy, Yankev Polak caused a major European Jewish stir on an issue of women’s laws, with one tremendous difference. Gershom faced little opposition to formalizing monogamy around the year 1000. But Yankev’s ruling, on an issue affecting many young women of his time, caused a major controversy.

Making it even more controversial, he ruled on a case concerning a member of his own family. His wife's sister, while still a minor, had been contracted to marry an older man, a prominent Hungarian Talmudist who lived in Buda. But before she reached the Talmudic age of majority (twelve for a girl, thirteen for a boy), she exercised her Talmudic right of refusal. The case was complicated by the fact that she was "given to the Talmudist" by her widowed mother (Yankev Polak's mother-in-law), who later supported her refusal to proceed. Yankev Polak accepted the girl's refusal on the basis of ancient Talmudic law, and thus defied what had a half century earlier become Ashkenazic law in Germany, when Menachem of Merseburg abolished the right of a minor to back out of a prior agreement. In other words, Yankev, the upstart who married an East European, was defying the consensus of the western Ashkenazic German rabbinate. Yankev considered the girl's erstwhile contract to marry null and void following her refusal, and he allowed her to marry someone else. The rabbis of Germany placed him under a ban (*khéyrem*), the harshest legal punishment open to rabbinic authority. The lines of the conflict largely followed the division between old (western) and new (eastern) Ashkenaz. The endeavor to end forced child marriage (or marital commitment), consolidated a growing east–west differentiation in the realms of culture, tradition, dialect, and lifestyle.

The creative and relatively tranquil centuries of East European Jewry constitute a high point in Jewish history, in which Jewish life became remarkably vital and complete in the absence of Jewish sovereignty. It was a long period of deep spiritualism and immersion in Jewish sources. Much of the Jewish population lived in shtetls, the East European towns that provided a microcosm of semiurban life (often with just a few streets), surrounded by forests, rivers, lakes. In most areas, the typical wooden house had a large garden that usually contained fruit trees, potatoes, and various vegetables, in addition to chickens, a cow, and various other livestock. If there is any "physical" feature common to much of East European Jewry for many centuries it is the juxtaposition of a highly literate society immersed in writings in three Jewish languages, with matter-of-fact adherence to the myriad Jewish laws and customs, all in a setting in view of magnificently

beautiful nature. The shtetl Jew, who is in the immediate family background of the majority of Jews in the world today, was so immersed in Jewish life that a retrospective stereotype has developed of unworldliness, otherworldliness, and general distance from whatever the “modern world” was concerned with at any given point in time. Like many stereotypes, it is neither exact nor fair, yet it is rooted in a degree of truth.

One of the historic high points of East European Jewry was the establishment of the system of autonomous Jewish councils in Poland and Lithuania. In exchange for these councils collecting taxes on behalf of the government and maintaining internal order, the government granted them a degree of self-government and control over Jewish life that amounts to the most significant Jewish self-government between the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the rise of the State of Israel in 1948. The Eastern European councils were active from the early sixteenth century until 1764 (shortly before the fall of Poland-Lithuania to the Russian empire). They are known by various names, the most famous of which is the *Váad* or council, variously the council of three, four, or five lands. By a decision of three major constituents, Poland, Lithuania, and “Russian Poland” (the regions of Podolia, Volhynia, and Galicia, mostly in modern-day Ukraine and southeastern Poland), a complete edition of the Talmud was printed in Lublin between 1559 and 1580. The *Váad* made it a condition that the new edition be made available to all yeshivas.

Among today’s scholars, Gershon David Hundert well sums up the long-standing mood of East European Jewry and explains why it is so difficult nowadays to come to grips with that mood:

If one had to choose a single word to reflect the experience of Jews in Polish lands, that word would be *vitality*. Vitality and an indomitable, and indomitably positive, sense of self. The community was vibrant, creative, proud and self-confident; “for they thought they had found dry land and forgot they were in exile.” Their neighbors knew this about Jews as well. They referred to Poland as *Paradisus Judaeorum*—*rajem dla Żydów*. The full expression was: Poland is heaven for the nobility, hell for the peasants, and paradise for Jews. This is hyperbole of course, but it serves as a corrective to the pre-



dominant popular image of the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe, one that is altogether too dismal and profoundly colored by events in the twentieth century.

(G. D. Hundert, "Jewish Life in Eastern Europe." In *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*. New York: Rizzoli, 2000.)

## EAST EUROPEAN YIDDISH

The dialects of genuine Yiddish spoken in the twenty-first century are varieties of East European Yiddish. That is not to say that the minuscule remnants of Western Yiddish, the older Yiddish of western Ashkenaz, are not genuine, but they are scattered remnants and not a language. For example, some Jews of Dutch origin know the word *mókem* (meaning "Amsterdam," originally "place" in Hebrew and then "city" in Western Yiddish). Some of German origin recall *tfile* in the sense of "prayer book" (rather than "prayer"). Some Hungarian Jews recall *bérkhes* or *bárkhes* instead of *challah* (Yiddish *khále*) for the traditional Sabbath bread, and a form of the word is well-known in Hungarian bakeries today. But the Yiddish of older western Ashkenaz did not survive. By contrast, the major varieties of East European Yiddish can be heard as complete, vibrant languages.

Older Western Yiddish was divided into three major branches: Northwestern Yiddish (Holland, northern Germany), Midwestern Yiddish (central Germany), and Southwestern Yiddish (Switzerland, Alsace, southern Germany). They shared common features. For example, older *ey* sounds (in such words as standard Yiddish *freyd* "happiness," *shteyn* "stone") and *ou* sounds (as in standard Yiddish *boym* "tree," *koyfn* "to buy") merged as a single long *a*, often spelled *aa*: *fraad*, *shtaan*; *baam*, *kaafn*). The long *aa* is well documented from the fifteenth century and may be older. Eastern Yiddish "broke away" from the west before that and continued to maintain the two different sounds. This is one of many examples that linguists use to demonstrate that a younger dialect, B, broke away from its older sibling, A, sometime before A underwent certain changes.



Figure 6.2 The dialects of Yiddish.

But such linguistic methodology is not the only means of coming to terms with older East European Yiddish. There are many mentions of differences, especially in regard to vocabulary, in contemporary sources. When Yiddish printing began to flourish in the 1540s, the language was pretty much Western Yiddish because many early printed books were either printings of older western manuscripts (such as the *Shmúel bukh* and *Mlókhim bukh*) or an attempt to use a watered-down “minimum common denominator” Yiddish that could be sold in Amsterdam or Frankfurt, Lublin, Cracow, or Grodna. One revealing “laboratory” is a popular Hebrew-Yiddish dictionary, organized in sections on different categories of life. It was first published in Cracow in 1640 primarily for East European Jews. When it was reprinted in Amsterdam in 1658, the editor added Western Yiddish equivalents in many cases so that the book could be useful in both parts of Ashkenaz. For example, the Eastern Yiddish words *bóbe* “grandmother,” *zéyde* “grandfather,” *múme* “aunt,” and *rózhinkes* “raisins” have their Western Yiddish equivalents added in the 1658 edition, hence *bóbe*—*frále*, *zéyde*—*hárle*, *múme*—*mémele*, *rózhinkes*—*váymperelekh*. This delightful bow to variation is far from universal. When the same dictionary came out in 1761, a more “standardizing” editor decided in many such cases to expunge both the Eastern and the Western “hearty Yiddish words” and replace them with “minimum common denominator” Germanic equivalents, giving *éltér*—*muter* for “grandmother,” *éltér*—*foter* for “grandfather,” and so forth.

As much as modern researchers would like to have a corpus of older literary Yiddish that reflects the wealth and diversity of real usage, it was not to be. Publishers’ desire to sell a maximum number of books over as much of Europe as possible in a short period of time led them to hire “experts” who would work long hours to purge a text of such wealth to ensure that the minimum common denominator language became the norm of publications in Yiddish. One famous case involves two competing translations of the entire Old Testament that appeared roughly at the same time and led to a massive international conflict over copyright. By the seventeenth century, liberal and generally tolerant Amsterdam had become the center of European Yiddish publish-

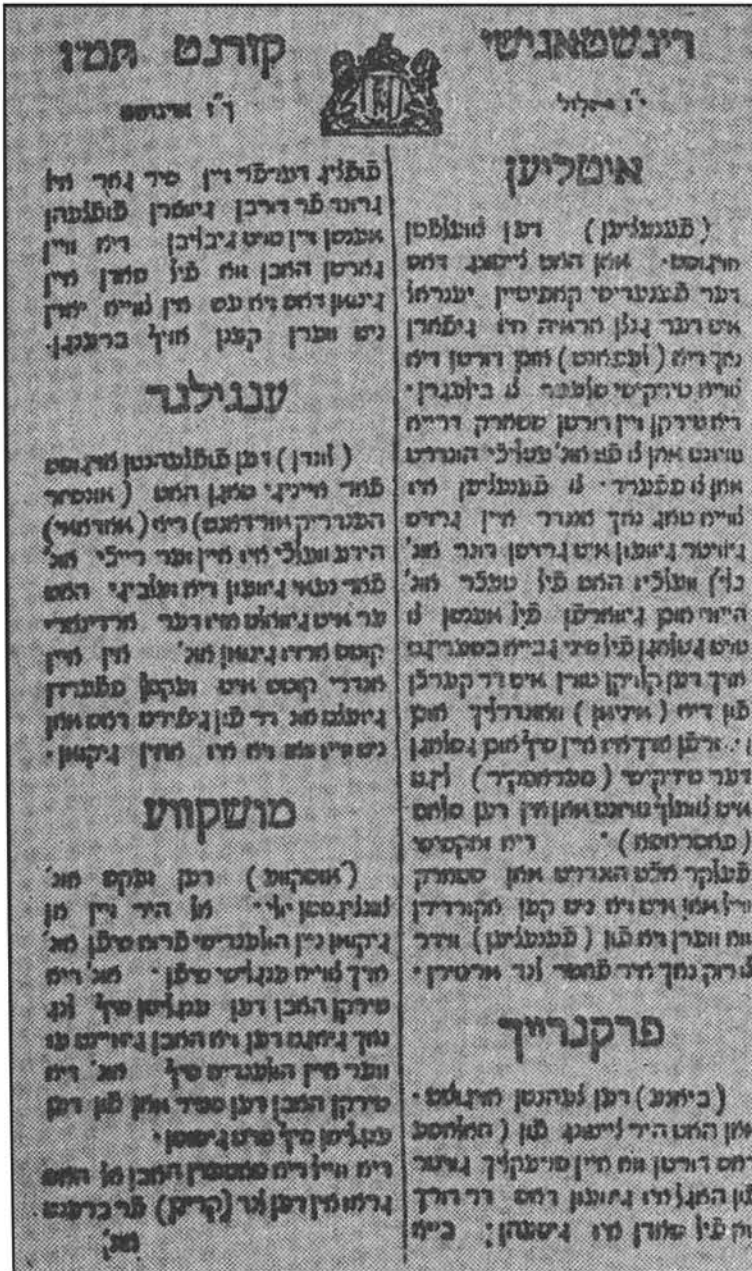


Figure 6.3 The world's first Yiddish newspaper in Amsterdam. It was called Kurantn (from the Dutch word for "news-papers") and appeared on Tuesdays and Fridays between August 9, 1686, and December 5, 1687. In the liberal atmosphere of Amsterdam, Jews had no problem using the Jewish and Christian dates side by side. (By permission of the University of Amsterdam; courtesy of Hilde Pach)

ing, producing books read in the “four corners of Ashkenaz.” They were often beautifully produced editions that Ashkenazim, wherever they lived, hoped to own. And, as happens now and again in cultural history, two people had the similar bright idea more or less at the same time. Two major Amsterdam Jewish publishers, Joseph Atias the Sephardi and Uri Faivush the Ashkenazi, set out to produce the complete Bible in Yiddish in a luxury folio. They were sure it would commercially eclipse the *Tseneréne* and other Bible paraphrases. Atias commissioned a translation from Yoyzl Vitsnhoyzn (Witzenhausen). Faivush commissioned one from Yekusiel Blitz. They appeared in Amsterdam around 1679, each claiming to be the first and only legitimate translation. The ensuing legal conflicts engulfed Jewish communities throughout western and eastern Ashkenaz. Both big, expensive Bibles became a big fat Yiddish joke of the late seventeenth century, not least because of the funny-sounding names of the translators (Vitsnhoyzn sounds like “jokes in his pants” and Blitz is *blits*, the Yiddish word for “lightning”). Both, ironically, were failures while new editions of the *Tseneréne* continued to sell far and wide. And both exemplify the extreme to which antidialect, lowest-common-denominator Yiddish could be taken. Atias went so far as to hire the famed Shabsai Bass (1641–1718), now known as the founder of Jewish bibliography (also a renowned cantor, earning him the name “Bass”), to fix the manuscript. He beamed to his readers: “I was thrilled to find such a man who is expert in all the dialects.”

A number of Christian scholars had remarked on the noticeable divide between the Yiddish of West and East. A prominent scholar of Hebrew and Aramaic, Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629), added a chapter on Yiddish to one of his books that appeared in Basel in 1609. He wrote that “the Polish Jews speak with a singing tone.” The talented Christian grammarian of Yiddish, Wilhelm Christian Just Chrysander (1718–1788), went further in his 1750 grammar, noting words and sounds that were systematically different in different Yiddish dialects. The same year he published another book about the Yiddish language. Its most memorable line was that Jews brag, “With Yiddish you can travel the world.”

LITVAKS AND POLISH JEWS:  
A NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

In the history of a people, it is not unusual for an internal division into dialect groupings based on language, folklore, and other cultural factors to become a matter of fame, humor, or even notoriety. In Jewish lore, the story starts back in the days when the judges judged over the tribes of Israel.

And the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And it came to pass, when any of those escaping from Ephraim said: "Let me cross over" that the men of Gilead would ask him: "Are you an Ephraimite" and he would say "No!" they would then say: "Well then say *shibboleth*!" and he would say *sibboleth*, for he could not pronounce it properly and they would grab him and slaughter him at the ford of the Jordan. And there fell of Ephraim at that time forty-two thousand people."

(Judges 12:5-6)

The word *shibboleth* made it into English in the sense of "test word." Hebrew scholars continue to debate whether the original *shibboleth* in ancient Hebrew meant "ear of corn" (as in Genesis 41:5) or "flow of a stream" (as in Psalms 49:3), but that is another story. In Eastern Europe, by coincidence, a similar linguistic feature has long distinguished northerners or Litvaks (Yiddish *lítvakes*, literally "Lithuanian Jews") from the rest of their Yiddish-speaking brethren. The northerners' Yiddish came to be known as *reydn sábesdik*, speaking in the language of those who say *sábes* instead of *shábes* for "Sabbath" or "Saturday." Modern linguists have proven that the Litvaks often merged the *s* and *sh* sounds (the hissing and hushing sibilants) into a single intermediate sound, but, as it might be put in Yiddish, "linguistics-shminguistics." The impression given to all the rest of East European Jewry is that the Litvaks say *s* instead of *sh*, or that they switch the two (which can well be the case at times, when traditional Litvaks make a bold effort to adhere to the standard).

In the case of most other differences, especially in the systems of stressed vowels, the Litvak version has been considered the standard for centuries, both in the pronunciation of traditional Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic and in spoken Yiddish. The quality of most vowels differs between the north (Litvish or Lithuanian) and the south (Poylish or Polish) vary consistently. When people from one of these two major dialect areas hear the other for the first time, mutual comprehension is rapid because of the consistency of correspondences over many thousands of words. The southerners derive principally from an area roughly corresponding to the kingdom of Poland before the Polish–Lithuanian Union of 1569. In addition to “Poland proper” the southerners’ huge territory includes Ukraine (Podolia, Volhynia, and Bessarabia), Romania, Moldova, Galicia, and parts of Hungary. Although East European Yiddish is larger than Lithuania plus Poland, even in their earlier and much larger geographic incarnations, these “backbone countries” in each region were used to name an entire dialect, and the names stuck in Yiddish in the same free spirit in which stateless languages often name their internal geographic concepts. But in one major case the southern vowel, rather than the northern, is standard—southern *oy* corresponding to Lithuanian *ey* (as in *tóyre*—*téyre* for “Torah”).

If you are of East European Jewish heritage and there are people in your family who speak some Yiddish, you can quickly find out, even in the twenty-first century, whether your family’s heritage from many hundreds of years ago is northern (Litvak) or southern (non-Litvak; Polish, Ukrainian, etc.).

The southern dialect is split into two primary components, a “Polish” part in the west (called Mideastern Yiddish in Yiddish dialectology) that differs somewhat from the “Ukrainian” (Southeastern Yiddish) variety to the east. The main difference is heard where Ukrainian goes with the Lithuanian *ey* but Polish has *ay*.

By and large, however, the two southern dialects are much closer to each other and taken together, much more set apart from the Lithuanian north, known as Northeastern Yiddish.

Of course the complexities of a vast population spread over a vast territory are much more intricate than any table could hope to illus-

Northern (Litvak)	Southern (Non-Litvak)	Meaning of Sample Word
ay	a (usually long a — aa)	
gayve	gaave	“arrogance”
dayges	daages	“worries”
haynt	haant	“today”
vayn	vaan	“wine”
e	ey	
betn	beytn	“ask”
kretshme	kreytshme	“inn, pub”
makhateneste	makhateyneste	“in-law” (female)
zelik	zeylik	“Selig” (male name)
ey	oy	
teyb	toyb	“deaf”
teyre	toyre	“Torah”
veynen	voynen	“live, reside”
geylem	goylem	“golem; dope”
o	u (long or short)	
kroke	kruke	“Cracow”
matone	matune	“gift”
nosn	nusn	“Nathan”
zogn	zugn	“say”
oy	oh	
froy	froh	“woman”
kloyz	klohz	“little synagogue”
shoyb	shohb	“window pane”
toyb	tohb	“pigeon, dove”
u	i (long or short)	
hunt	hint	“dog”
mutshen	mitshen	“nag, torture”
purim	pirem	“Purim”
shvues	shvies	“Shavuoth” (Pentecost)



“Ukrainian” (Southeastern)	“Polish” (Mideastern)	Meaning of Sample Word
ey	ay	
leynen	laynen	“read”
meydl	maydl	“girl”
peysekh	paysekh	“Passover”
zeyde	zayde	“grandfather”

trate. In individual cases in real life, things can get much more involved, and to the student of linguistics, much more fascinating. In parts of the Ukraine (Podolia and Bessarabia), short *a* became *o*, and the old southern long *a* became short, so *man mon* means “my husband” (in contrast to *maan man* in classic Polish Yiddish, *mayn man* in Lithuanian). This subdialect became known as *tóte-móme lushn* (literally “father-mother language”) because the words for father (*táte*) and mother (*máme*) are pronounced with an *o*—*tóte* and *móme* (standard Yiddish would have *táte-máme loshn*).

Some individual words go their own way. The usual north–south *o*–*u* correspondence generally holds true in the Eastern Yiddish word for “grandmother,” which turns up expectedly as *bóbe* in Lithuania and *búbe* in deep Poland. But in an area including some of the Polish and some of the Ukrainian subdialect areas, it turns up as *bábe* with a short *a* vowel. The distribution becomes more complex in areas where short *a* became *o*. In some parts of deep Podolia, such as Kamenitz-Podolsk, the very southern *bábe* becomes *bóbe*, which is coincidentally identical with the northern, Lithuanian, form, though it is not the result of any influence of the north. But if there is any one tool that can help a descendant of a Yiddish-speaking family figure out where his or her people came from, it is finding out from the oldest relatives how to say “grandmother.” Within Lithuanian Yiddish, the cases of *oy* that “joined up with” *ey* among the Litvaks produced such embarrassing homonyms as *véynen* which means both “to cry” and “to live” (in the sense of reside). It is awkward to ask someone “Vu veynt ir”? when that can mean “Where do you weep?” as well as “Where do you

live?" The Jews of Vilna solved the matter by using an opposite of crying, and ask "Vu freyt ir zakh?" (literally, Where do you rejoice? meaning, Where do you live?). The Jews of Pinsk (Lithuanian from the Jewish point of view, even if it was Poland between the wars and is now in Belarus) devised another ruse. They ask "Vu lakht ir?" (literally, Where do you laugh?) when they want to ask someone's address.

There are further subdialects within each dialect area. Within the Lithuanian area, which is known in Yiddish as *Líte* (often spelled *Lita* in English), the Yiddish of the far west, called *Zámet* (the name derives from the old kingdom of Samogitia) by the Baltic coast, is clearly differentiated from the Yiddish of the Vilna area in central Lithuania, which differs from the Yiddish of Vitebsk, Mohilov, and Gomel, an area once known to Jews as *Raysn* (Reissen). Among the more populous regions of southern East European Jewry, the specific "Jewish geography" is equally pronounced. The regions Yiddish calls Poyln, Volín, Podólye, Besarábye, Galítsye, Úngarn (Íngern), Ruménye are related to various local forms of the words for Poland, Volhynia, Podolia, Bessarabia, Galicia, Hungary and Romania, respectively. But the actual geographic area covered, and the cultural specificities implied, differ markedly from the general conceptions of these spaces. Frequently the actual borders correspond more closely to an older state of affairs in European history. The Yiddish concept of Hungary, for example, includes Transylvania, which is now in Romania, and a number of cities now in western Ukraine (e.g., Minkatsh or Munkatch, now Mukachevo). From the Yiddish cultural point of view, they are in Hungary, irrespective of all the wars and border changes. Similarly, Dvinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia), Grodna (now Hrodna, Belarus), and Chernigov (now in Ukraine) are all part of the Jewish concept of Lithuania. During the post-World War I negotiations between the new Lithuanian Republic and the new Soviet Union, the negotiator for Lithuania, who happened to be Jewish, jokingly asked for all the territory that Jews call Lita.

It cannot be pure coincidence that the border between the Jewish north and the Jewish south of Eastern Europe, as determined by modern research of Yiddish dialects, is so remarkably close to a certain medieval state border—the southern border of the Grand Duchy of

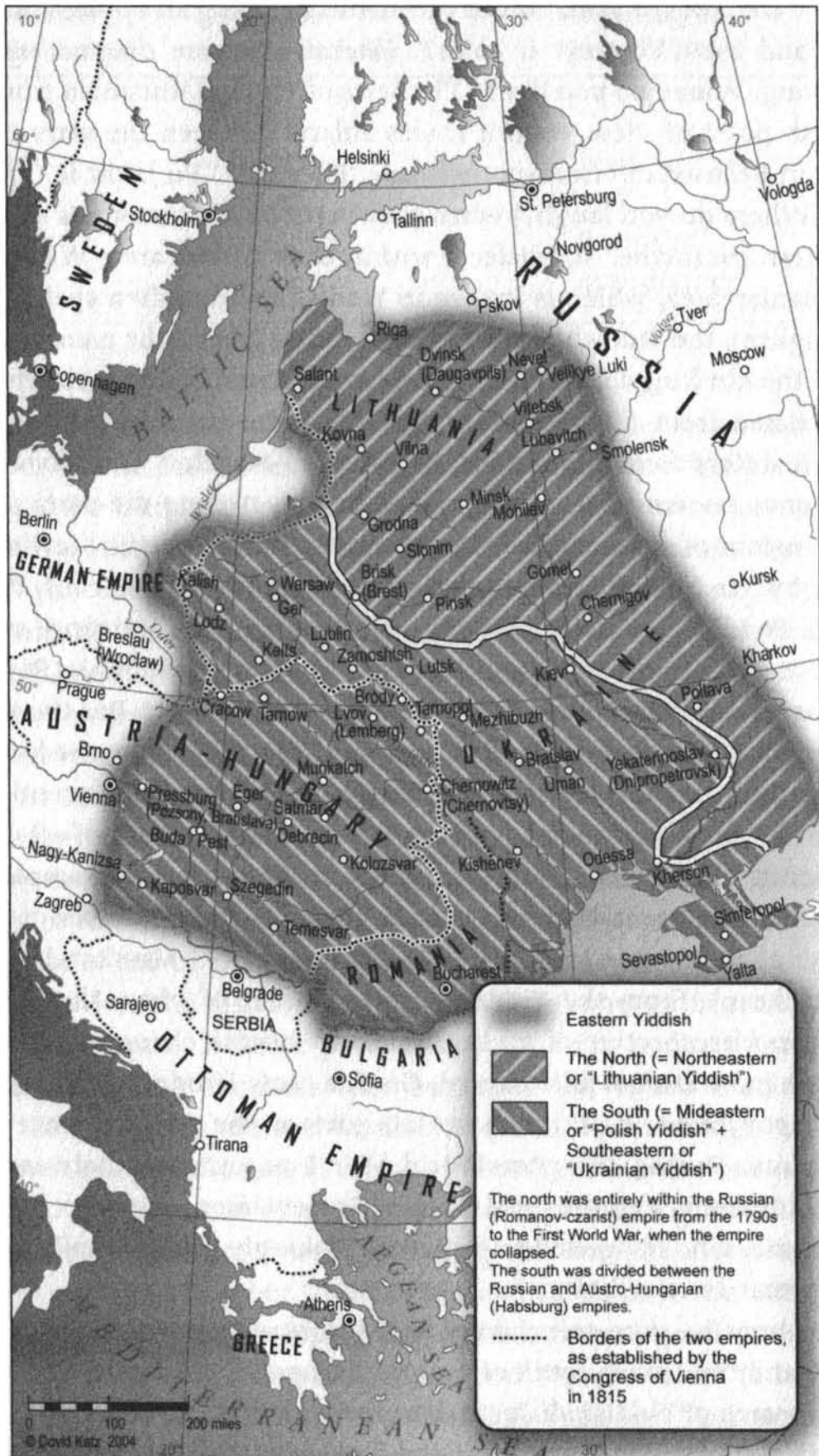


Figure 6.4 The north–south divide within Eastern Yiddish.

Lithuania in the time of Grand Duke Gedymin (Gediminas), who ruled Lithuania from 1316 to his death in 1341 and made Vilna his capital in 1323. A more precise match is evident with some of the outward expansion into regions conquered by Gedymin's son Olgierd (Algirdas), who was grand duke of Lithuania from 1345 to 1377. The separation between the territories of Poland and Lithuania is roughly congruent with the main dividing line between the northern and southern Jews of Eastern Europe as known from Yiddish dialectological research carried out in modern times.

Southerners have always outnumbered Litvaks. The census of 1766 counted 454,625 Jews in Poland and 157,520 in Lithuania. These figures come from contemporary borders within the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth of the time, which do not match the Yiddish borders exactly but are close enough to give the general picture. On the eve of World War II, there were 7–8 million Yiddish speakers in Eastern Europe, of whom about 1.5 million were Litvaks from the Yiddish and Jewish ethnographic points of view.

Some of the friendly (and not so friendly) names that each group used to refer to the other come right from the widespread knowledge of Yiddish dialectology. Many southerners call Lithuanian Jews not *litvakes* but *lútvakes*, because of all the cases where the Litvak has *u* for their familiar *i*. The Litvak hits back by calling the southerners *páylishes* instead of the Lithuanian-dialect *péylishe* that would be expected (for southern and standard *póylishe*), a barb at the “incorrect” Polish *ay* for Lithuanian and standard *ey* in another set of words (e.g., Polish *shayn* for Lithuanian and standard *sheyn* for “beautiful”). Of course all natural dialects are from the linguistic standpoint equally “correct” and those that are not standard are non-standard but by no means “substandard.”

It is natural for groups of people to regard themselves as the norm and refer to others by various terms. The most common inclusive word for all southerners is *Galitsyáner*. As ever, there is more to folklore than meets the eye. The lands traditionally part of Galicia (Yiddish *Galítsye*) are actually split between the two southern dialects: Polish (or Mideastern) Yiddish and Ukrainian (or Southeastern) Yiddish. While not by any means objectively accounting for all of the south of



Figure 6.5 The major north–south divide within East European Jewry (in dialect and culture) sets apart the Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews) of the north from all the rest (Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Hungarian, etc.) in the south (see the map on p. 150). In popular parlance, the southerners are often called Galitsyáner. Poking fun, vibrant in the Old Country, became a focus of musical comedy in the United States. (By permission of Richard F. Shepard)

Jewish Eastern Europe, the Yiddish of Galicia represents both southern dialects and turned out to be a convenient description for all southerners. This native nomenclature stuck for centuries. In the United States, the Litvak—Galitsyáner dichotomy became the subject of much humor, especially the folkloristic stereotypes of vaudeville.

As usual in cultural history, linguistic differences go hand-in-hand with other kinds of differentiation. In older rabbinic culture, the difference between the south(west) and north(east) of Eastern Europe is related to the bigger west-to-east march that is the hallmark of the first thousand years of traditional rabbinic Ashkenazic culture. It can be traced by cities, towns, and especially rivers. The names of the rivers Rhine, Danube, Vltava, Vistula, Viliya, Neman, Dnieper, and Dniester symbolize an eastward historical march. The portion of this history that is congruent with the formative centuries of East European Jewry also established the cultural differentiation between Polish Jewry in the wider sense (the south) and Lithuanian Jewry (the north). Reb Yankev Polak established Poland as a new center of rabbinic authority around the year 1500. From that point onward, the rabbinic scholarship of Poland surged even as the authority of those older centers in the west declined. That surge continued eastward and northward to Lithuania. By the seventeenth century, Lithuanian Jewry was growing in Talmudic and rabbinic stature, and Brisk, Grodna, and Vilna were rivaling Cracow and Lublin as major centers of academic excellence in the world of Torah. Reb Moyshe Rivkes, for example, a Vilna Jew who lived until the early 1670s, wrote a commentary on a classic Jewish code of law in which he introduced the method of textual criticism—accepting that errors might have crept into the text in manuscripts and in print and proposing emendations to solve difficult issues logically, rather than by the more fanciful Polish method of *pilpul*. One of his direct descendants was the celebrated Gaon of Vilna (Elijah of Vilna, 1720–1797) who carried logical, straightforward analysis to new heights. A more graceful, fanciful, exuberant approach in the south was challenged by a more logical, intellectual, and text-centered method in the north.

This went hand in hand with a number of folkloristic characterizations that survive into our time. Southerners are supposed to be warmer, more deeply religious, more spontaneous, emotional, possessing a richer sense of humor and being a little richer in the economic sense too. The Litvaks, by contrast, are supposed to be dry, overly intellectual, mercilessly skeptical and always demanding evidence for every last detail, emotionally distant, possessing a sharp, acidic, satiric humor, quick to anger (and quick to forget the anger), and very

poor, living from potatoes and whatever the poor earth of Lithuania can bring forth.

### THE RISE OF HASIDISM

The differences between the northerners and southerners of East European Jewry were not limited to dialects and folklore. In the early eighteenth century a major new movement arose, in which the Yiddish–Kabbalah partnership, again somewhat obliquely, was rekindled and institutionalized as never before, markedly changing the character and culture of nearly all the south, while encountering bitter resistance in the north. The preexisting linguistic and cultural “Yiddish divide” between the Litvaks up north and the southerners in Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary was recast by a split that led to a more intensive differentiation in religion and culture, and to consequences that have stark implications for the future of world Jewry in the twenty-first century and beyond.

The first mass calamity of Eastern European Jewry, the Chmielnitski Cossack massacres in the Ukraine in 1648–1649, was all the more numbing for Jews throughout Eastern Europe in view of the confidence in the general tranquillity of the region that had been growing unchecked for centuries in both the north and south of the area (individual incidents and the universal suffering caused by wars notwithstanding). The society-wide shock and pain were compounded by the hysteria and shame associated with the widespread movement that believed in the messianism of Sabbethai Zevi. The false messiah’s “revelation” had been projected for 1666 (a date predicted by many practical kabbalists too, on the basis of gematria—alpha-numerological calculations—leading them into the Sabbethai Zevi cauldron). The false messiah’s forced conversion to Islam in 1666, failure to “die to sanctify the Name,” and subsequent death in 1676 further devastated the morale of southern East European Jewry, particularly in the Ukraine, where most of the massacres had taken place.

The south suffered the genocide of the massacres, and the south was deeply impacted by thwarted hopes of an imminent redemption. Conditions were ripe for a new spiritual movement that would bring com-

fort, confidence, hope, and tranquillity, particularly to the devastated Jewry of the Ukraine. That movement grew out of the Kabbalah that was so popular. It came to be called Hasidism (Yiddish *khsídes*, Ashkenazic Hebrew *khasíduš*, Israeli Hebrew *khasidút*; often spelled Chasidism in English).

Its founder was Yisróel Baal Shem Tov, who was born in Okop, a village in Podolia around 1700. The name can mean Israel “master of the good name” (*bal shém-tov*) or “good master of the name” (*bal-shém tóv*). Either way, *bal-shém* refers to a master of the holy name and its variants—a practitioner of practical, magical Kabbalah who can use esoteric combinations of letters of names of God to heal the sick and perform other miracles. There were many of these in the south of Eastern Europe, and they were often called on to produce amulets to protect a mother in childbirth, protect a traveler on a rough road, or produce some magical solution for a daily problem. There was no “yeshiva of practical Kabbalah,” of course, and many of these “name renderers” were self-taught in varying degrees, and there was a wide spectrum of education and sophistication among them. Israel the Baal Shem Tov, widely known for centuries by his Yiddish acronym *der Besht* (the Besht), traveled around extensively and became known as a wonder-worker who could exorcise dybbuks, overcome demons, heal the sick, and perhaps most importantly, help people achieve an ecstatic state of union with God through prayer. He eventually established his court in the village Mezhibuzh in Podolia (now in Ukraine). Historians will never be sure exactly where his personal contributions stop and those of his disciples and followers start, but that is not crucial to understanding the dawn of this great movement. He is said to have stressed the need for Jews to be full of devotional joy, ebullience, optimism, and high spirits. Smoking and using alcohol, neither forbidden by Jewish law, could help put one in the right mood. Traditional Jewish scholarship (whether biblical, Talmudic, or kabbalistic) was relegated to secondary or tertiary importance in the traditional Jewish ladder of prestige, in itself a revolutionary societal change. According to his followers’ traditions, he was “revealed” as a leader of Israel at the age of thirty-six (around 1736) and became widely known. He stressed that his own soul, and those of select individuals, was in-



herently “higher.” The Jew possessing such a soul is, in Hasidic thought, a *tsádik* (literally “righteous person” but in the more precise new Hasidic sense referring to one of these spiritual leaders of his believing followers in a given town or region). The *tsádik* has a special inborn capacity to communicate with God, and it is his sacred responsibility to “lower himself” to mingle with simple everyday people in order to elevate them and help them achieve the joyous union with God called *dvéykes* in Yiddish (*dvéykus* in Ashkenazic Hebrew, *devekút* in Israeli; from an old root for “to cleave”).

The movement quickly spread and attracted other charismatic leaders after the Baal Shem Tov died around 1760. The primary educational tool was the Yiddish story. Suddenly the Yiddish word for “story,” *máyse*, acquired a kind of sanctity. In fact, Yiddish itself acquired a kind of sanctity. It was no longer conceptually conceived as the language of those who couldn’t do this or that, but a language suitable for communing with God, and the language for disseminating the stories of the *tsadikim* (plural of *tsádik*) to the people. A brilliant rabbinic scholar who could write tomes of novel interpretations on details of Jewish law, in Hebrew or Aramaic, was no longer the only Ashkenazic equivalent of the European national hero. This too was revolutionary, though it came to be mitigated in many Hasidic communities by renewed status of Torah learning over the generations. Still, Yiddish developed the difference between a *rov* (rabbi in the conventional sense) and a rebbe (Hasidic *tsádik* or grand rabbi, though rebbe also retains the additional meaning of a traditional schoolteacher in the *khéyder*); all to be distinguished from Reb, the traditional respectful Yiddish form of male address that precedes a forename as in *Reb Yankev*; the female equivalent is *Móras*.

Because the supposedly higher kind of soul was deemed to be genetic rather than a result of excellence at studies, it was only natural that Hasidism would become dynastic. A number of charismatic leaders emerged in the eighteenth century to pick up where the Baal Shem Tov had left off and to build their dynasties. Each new *tsádik* became known by the place-name with which he was associated, with the Yiddish ending *er* suffixed. Among the major new heroes of nascent Hasidism were der Mézritsher *mágid* Dov-Ber (Dov-Ber, the *mágid* or

preacher of Mezritsh), known for short as *der Mézritsher* (the Mezritsher, *the rebbe* or *tsádik* of Mezritsh), who lived until 1772. He was a fine scholar of both Talmud and Kabbalah. He became a disciple of Hasidism after one of his kabbalistic self-mortification escapades caused him to be ill, and he went to the Baal Shem Tov for a cure (and apparently got it). In addition to stressing the capacity of every person to communicate with God and developing the notion of a *tsádik* or rebbe further, he introduced into Hasidism a certain philosophic pantheism, the notion that the universe taken as a whole is God, and God is present in everything; everything is therefore potentially sacred. Another early Hasidic master was Yankev-Yoysef Polonoyer, or Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, who led a court at Sharigrod (now Shargorod, Ukraine). He died in the early 1780s. *Der Pólnoyer* or the *Tóldoys*, as he is known, wrote down what he claimed to have learned from the Baal Shem Tov and carried Hasidic theory forward. His own contributions include the daring notion that even evil thoughts and impulses that “invade” a person’s mind during prayer have their sacred role to play; he extended Hasidic pantheism by implying that evils are part of the “everything” in which God is present. Even more daringly, he claimed that sometimes the *tsádik* has to sin for higher purposes (a position that at the time rang warning bells of a renewed kind of Sabbateanism because Sabbethai Zevi had committed many serious sins, claiming it was his prerevelation mission to do so). *Der Pólnoyer* also developed the theology of joy, condemning sadness as the root of much evil, attacking the fasting practiced by some kabbalists and further documenting the need to be happy in daily life. All the higher, godly pursuits could be achieved by belief in the infallibility of the *tsádik* who is God’s messenger on earth and needs to be supported financially by people of means in the community.

#### YIDDISH IN HASIDISM

Dov-Ber—*der Mézritsher mágid*—became mentor to Léyve-Yítskhok of Berdichev. *Der Berdítshever*, who lived from around 1740 to 1810, is credited with doing a lot to establish Hasidism in Poland during the dozen or so years (1772–1784) he led the community of Zhelekhov

(Zelechov). When opponents of the new movement drove him out of town, he settled in Berdichev, Ukraine, establishing that town as one of the permanent sacred sites of Judaism. In addition to being a classic movement organizer who sends disciples far and wide to capture territory, so to speak, Léyve-Yítskhok developed the notion that observing the commandments should involve euphoria rather than dry obligation. And, he went a long way in codifying the implicit new role of Yiddish in the Hasidic consciousness of southern East European Jewry. He addressed God in Yiddish despite his ability to do so in one or both of the ancient sacred languages that the first Ashkenazim had brought to Europe so many centuries earlier. While those previous “pro-Yiddish” kabbalists, like Yechiel-Michel Epstein and Tsvi-Hirsh Khotsh, were basically traditional rabbis with influence over a small circle (“eccentrics on the margin of European Jewish thought”), the new Hasidic movement of Israel Baal Shem Tov, Dov-Ber of Mezrich, and Léyve-Yítskhok of Berdichev was rapidly growing into the form of Judaism practiced by a majority of East European Jewry—eventually, millions of people.

The Hasidic masters put great stress on the sanctity of melody performed by the *tsádik*. They branched out into music, beyond the traditional incantation of the Torah and other biblical texts, and beyond the cantorial canons of the official Hebrew and Aramaic prayer book. The Yiddish words that went with the melody became every bit as sacred. One of the most famous is the Berdichever’s “A Dúdale.” The name evokes the older Yiddish verb *dúdlen* (to play a simple folk instrument, like a shepherd with a flute or bagpipe). In a sophisticated multilayered use of Yiddish (for which twentieth-century Yiddish poets were to become famous), he came up with *dúdale* as a loving, childlike diminutive of the word *du*, the familiar form for “you,” used with intimates, children, and God, to whom it is, in effect, a love poem.

Each of the Hasidic masters developed his own court. The Yiddish word *hoyf*, which means yard or courtyard in everyday life, was revived in an older second sense of royal or majestic court, just as in those Yiddish storybooks of old (like *Kinig Artus hoyf*—King Arthur’s Court). It became customary for the far-flung followers of a certain

rebbe to visit him at his *hoyf* at least twice a year, usually for the High Holidays in the autumn and *Shvúes* (Shavuoth) in late spring. One of the treats of the *khósid's* stay would be to hear the new melodies and songs produced by the rebbe or his court. Hasidic folklore derived the affection for inspirational music from the Baal Shem Tov himself, who was able to feel the presence of God in birdsong as well as in popular gentile tunes. Some followers considered this "rescuing of something sacred" to be essential, and Hasidim began to take known gentile ditties and replace everyday items with exalted religious ones. This is reminiscent of what older secular Yiddish had done with non-Jewish epic poems for entertainment; in eighteenth-century Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary, it was being done by the most exalted religious authorities. The founder of Hasidism in Hungary, Yitskhok-Isaac Kálever, or Taub (1751–1821), the *tsádik* of Kálev (now Nagykálló, Hungary), heard a shepherd's love song and recast it as a call to God, replacing the rose of the original with *shkhíne* (Shechinah, Godly Presence or the immanence of the Divine on earth in kabbalistic thought) and the forest with *góles* (the Jewish Diaspora).

After hundreds of years, and in its new East European homeland, Yiddish was ready to join Hebrew and Aramaic as the third great language of Jewish spiritual life, in the context of Hasidism. Expressing creativity in Yiddish had been hindered for centuries by the conviction that it was for those who couldn't cope with a text in Hebrew or Aramaic—the vast majority of the population. Hasidism was, for all its mystical and ecstatic components, a grassroots movement for the empowerment of the masses of "simple people," women and men, in opposition to what the movement perceived as the hegemony of the educated—the rabbinate. Naturally, this had its economic and social components; the *rabónim* (traditional rabbis, the plural of *rov*), who had previously been in control, were accused by the first generation of rebellious Hasidim of all sorts of abuses in their capacity as community leaders and officials.

European history was playing its own role here. The Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth was collapsing just as Hasidism was gaining its hold on the population of the southern regions of Eastern Europe. The three partitions of Poland, which wiped Poland off the map

for well over a century, divided the kingdom between the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian (Habsburg) empires, in three stages in 1772, 1793, and 1795. The official, rabbinite-dominated community structures that derived much of their power from government recognition were in the process of losing it, leaving a power gap that the exuberant new movement was poised to fill. The Hasidic masters were remolding “standard Judaism” on the model of the *tsádik* or rebbe instead of the rabbi, and it was only a matter of time until the new populist movement progressed from Yiddish song to published Yiddish literature proper.

That happened around 1815 when two major publishing events occurred in the history of Hasidism and Yiddish. Two works appeared—both of them in Yiddish as well as Hebrew—that became classic texts of a Hasidism that was successfully recasting itself by the early nineteenth century as the standard majority Jewish culture rather than a revolutionary counterculture. In both instances, the Yiddish text was in every sense primary, and the Hebrew a kind of necessary formal add-on needed to make the books look like classic works even though they had just come off the press. The first was *Shívkhey ha-Bésht* (Praises of the Baal Shem Tov). A number of editions appeared between 1814 and 1817, including several in Hebrew, two different Yiddish translations from the Hebrew, and an apparent third Yiddish version that may be the original text. The book derives from the stories that the Baal Shem Tov told his disciples, often about other saints, and from those the disciples (and their disciples) told about him. Many are in the spirit of the old *Book of Stories* of 1602, but with more immediacy and a sense of common purpose—the establishment of the transcendental greatness of one personage, the Baal Shem Tov. It is a greatness determined not only by good deeds in the classic sense, but by a man who quite literally knows everything, and has immense power as an intermediary between humans and God.

*Praises of the Baal Shem Tov*, a sacred book for Hasidism, raised the status of Yiddish markedly. Although it is not a work of literary originality, it contributed to a tradition of storytelling in Yiddish that was in itself an important stepping stone on the road of a language to modern literature. This passage from *Praises of the Baal Shem Tov* illustrates the shift in the way a story may be considered.

During a circumcision celebration at the home of the head of the court of the sacred community of Horodnia, I heard from the rabbi of the holy community of Polonnoye and then from the rabbi of our own community that the Besht had said: "When you tell stories in praise of the *tsadikim*, it is as if you are engaged in the Act of the Chariot."

(Shivkhey ha-Bésht [*Praises of the Besht*]; Hebrew, *Kopust*, 1814; Yiddish, *Korets* 1815; sec. 158 in A. Rubinstein's Hebrew edition, Jerusalem, 1991; sec. 194 in D. Ben-Amos and J. Mintz's English text, Bloomington, 1970.)

The Act of the Chariot is the vision in the first chapter of Ezekiel in the Bible. It is the source of a school of Jewish mysticism (Merkavah or Merkabah mysticism, visions of the heavenly hosts). Here, the art of Yiddish storytelling in the praise of *tsadikim*, previously the stuff of literature designed to compete with secular knightly romances, is elevated to the highest mystical, spiritual status in its own right, in competition with nothing. This dramatic conceptual change in the history of religion and language, and society and language involved a social shift in intellectual power from the intelligentsia to the new populist leaders of the masses.

But it was the second Hasidic Yiddish book that appeared around 1815 that remains the first actual *literary* masterpiece of East European Yiddish, perhaps of East European Jewry altogether. It is the book of original stories by the Hasidic master Nachman Bratslaver (in Yiddish: Nákhmen Bréslever or *der Bréslever*; local Yiddish distinguishes the name of this town in Podolia, *Bróslev*, from *Bréslev*, its brand of Hasidism; today, the town, called Bratslav, is in southern Ukraine). Bratslaver, a great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, was born in Mezhibuzh in 1772 and eventually settled in the village Bratslav, until his final year, 1811, when he moved to Uman, where he wanted to be buried.

Unlike other Hasidic courts, Nachman's was centered entirely on his own being, rather than on himself as founder of a dynasty. He was not (and in principle could not be) succeeded by any other rebbe after his death, and his followers to this day are known as *di tóyte khsidim* (the dead Hasidim) because they could by definition never again have a living rebbe. He flirted with spiritual conceptions of himself as the greatest of the great and a messianic figure, but never crossed the line between messianic-oriented Hasidism and false-messiah Sabbateanism.

The apparent visions of self-aggrandizement in his theological writings and stories have, in retrospect, a straightforward explanation. He was a great writer with the typical ego of a great writer. He was also a serious thinker who regarded a healthy ego as necessary to having the determination to improve the world. One of his sayings sums it all up. A person should say, "The world was created on account of me alone and therefore I must make the world better and raise it up with my prayer." Nachman was a highly controversial personality in the world of Hasidism. He claimed to be the modern link in a rather exclusive mystical chain:

From the time of Shimon bar Yochai [the second century scholar traditionally considered the author of the Zohar], the world was uneventful until the time of the Arí [sixteenth-century Safad kabbalist Isaac Luria], in other words nothing new was revealed. And again nothing was revealed from the Arí to the Baal Shem Tov, and the world continued on its way after he came, until I came, and now I begin to reveal wonderful new things.

(*Nosn Shternharts [Nathan Sternharz] Kháyey Moharán, sec. 2.8, 1875.*)

A contemporary Hasidic rebbe, Leyb-Arye of Shpola, known as *der Shpóler zéyde* (the grandfather of Shpola) had this to say in response: "If Nachman were not the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, I would know what to do with him." Nachman was among the first to state explicitly, in one of his theological works that the mother tongue is suited to the highest realms of the spirit.

The highest state in which a human being can achieve divine inspiration is in seclusion, where he can pour out his heart and soul to God freely and with intimacy, and in the familiar language, the native tongue, the Yiddish of our lands. Hebrew is barely known to the average person and it therefore impossible to express oneself fluently in it. The result is that whenever Hebrew is used as a medium of prayer, the ears are not listening to what it is that the mouth is saying.

(*Likútey Moharán, sec. 2.23a, Ostrog, 1806.*)

While the literal meaning of his words might echo opinions of earlier theologians and publishers, the new and revolutionary Hasidic

context made these words ring very differently. Bratslaver went well beyond praying in his native language (though a master of Hebrew and Aramaic) to actually create a great work of literature in simple East European Yiddish. His stories, often titled *The Tales of Nachman of Bratslav*, appeared in a bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish edition around 1815, probably in Ostra (Ostrog or Ostraha, Ukraine). They were transmitted orally by Reb Nachman to his Hasidim (and the Yiddish word *khsidim* has come also to mean somebody's loyal followers or disciples in general). They were written down by his faithful deputy, Nathan Hertz Sternhartz, and possibly others, who wrote them down in Yiddish as well as in a stilted Hebrew that is a translation from the spoken Yiddish. While the Hebrew version is a kind of lip service to the sacred language of old, the Yiddish version is the pulsating text in a newly sacred modern language. The book's name is *Sipúrey máyses* (The Telling of Stories). Unlike *Praises of the Baal Shem Tov*, where the key theme is greatness of the *tsádik*, and the genre of the laudatory *tsádik* story is explicitly commended, the tales of Reb Nachman are complicated mystical allegories subject to multiple and ambiguous interpretation. They have many sources in Jewish writings and non-Jewish folklore, and they often revolve around a king, a princess, or a prince rather than a *tsádik*; but that is what made Nachman the first modern Yiddish writer. Nachman had this to say about stories: "People say that storytelling is a good way to get to sleep and I say that through the telling of stories people are awakened from their sleep."

In the end, it was not Hasidic theology or these classic works in Yiddish alone that made the language a permanent component of genuine Hasidism. It was the Hasidic success in creating and codifying Judaism as a civilization that is an indivisible whole, a whole in which language, dress, customs, and all the rest of what moderns call culture are as much an indispensable part as the ancient laws and customs. That is the notion, made real for actual communities who are raised into the civilization naturally, that has made Hasidism the most potent force in world Jewry, able to survive everything the modern world, Jewish or non-Jewish, has hurled at it during the two centuries since a man called Nachman told his stories in a town called Bratslav.



## LITVAKS OPPOSING HASIDISM

In the cyclical patterns of Jewish history, it has frequently been the case that a “secular outburst” sharply affects Jewish and even non-Jewish life for a couple of generations. But for a radical new movement to modify the permanent Jewish religious “tree trunk” (the core from which all the secular outbursts spring) in a few short generations is rare. But perhaps not unique. We may never know the ins and outs of the monumental shifts that occurred two millennia ago. An Old Testament-style Judaism rooted in one God alone shifted to the inclusion of a Messiah to come; elaborate beliefs in the world to come (afterlife) and resurrection of the dead were added; animal sacrifices were replaced by prayer canons to fill largely the same daily time slots; commands to do away with nonbelievers (at least in the Promised Land) melted into tolerance and the weaker-minority stance of just wanting to be left in peace by others; and the status of prophets (or high priests or kings or all of them) was replaced by the new position of rabbis who were ordained after mastering the necessary Talmudic literature in academies called yeshivas, analogous to the giving of specific degrees for academic achievements in other cultures.

It would be foolhardy to claim that the Hasidic upheaval of the eighteenth century was anywhere near as revolutionary as that ancient shift from biblical religion to the later Judaism. But it certainly was the most revolutionary set of changes within the mainline tradition since that ancient shift. In the eyes of much of the contemporary established rabbinate, Hasidism was every bit as threatening to Judaism as Jews believing in Christ as Messiah in the early centuries of the Common Era, and every bit as threatening as Jews believing that Sabbethai Zevi was Messiah in the second half of the seventeenth century. First, there were the theological and philosophical issues. Instead of the clear traditional distinction between Creator and created came a kind of pantheism that blurred the distinction and then went even further by seeing good (and God) even in evil. Then there were Jewish legal issues. The Hasidism adopted different rules about what constitutes a kosher slaughtering knife (a major question to the food supply of a population striving to obey an ancient code), and they

adopted the prayer rites of the sixteenth-century kabbalist Arí (Isaac Luria of Safad), which became known as *Núsekh Sfard* (Sephardic rite), and discarded the *Núsekh Ashkenaz* (Ashkenazic rite) traditional among Ashkenazim. Instead of prayer being a strictly regulated canonized activity, Hasidim introduced ecstatic extralong prayer sessions accompanied by wild gesticulations, somersaults, and Yiddish interjections. But most threatening and rebellious of all was rejection of the primacy of the rabbi (the *rov*, who completed the necessary studies to earn rabbinic ordination) in favor of the Hasidic *tsádik* or rebbe, who is supposed to have divine powers deriving from his inherently superior soul that can be passed on through his seed, and who needs to maintain a court at the expense of his Hasidim. All of these differences amounted, in the eyes of major rabbis of the time, to a precipitous diminution in the value of dedication, perseverance and talent in Torah study and education; the respect commanded in those early Hasidic communities by a *rov* was little compared to the mystic belief in the infallibility of the rebbe and his divine connection and special soul. Then there was the whole Messiah question. While all forms of standard modern Judaism believe in Messiah, the Hasidic emphasis on messianism, the belief in the imminent coming of Messiah, and flirtations with the idea that the rebbe is somehow part of the messianic soul or solution all set off alarm bells that this was a new false-messiah movement in the spirit of Sabbethai Zevi. That fear was bolstered by the many successes in Poland and Ukraine of the East European false messiah Jacob Frank (1726–1791), who was, as it happened, born in the same Podolia that was the heartland of the new Hasidism.

Yiddish southerners, comprising those who speak the southern dialects of East European Yiddish (principally Ukrainian and Polish) formed the natural constituency for Hasidism. Within those lands (“the Polish lands”) the Jewish communities suffered the Chmielnitski massacres and the ensuing impoverishment of Jewish centers of learning. In those lands Sabbateanism in the late seventeenth century and its eighteenth-century successor Frankism made the greatest inroads in Eastern Europe. In those lands popular Kabbalah so inspired the population, and the *bal-shém* was admired and revered as a God-inspired worker of miracles and healer of the sick.

It is not always possible to figure out whether an ethnographic stereotype precedes or results from a period in history that it seems to especially fit. One thing that's certain, though, is that the Litvak (Lithuanian Jewish) reputation for skepticism, conservatism, emotional restraint, and respect for education and academic achievement, tallies naturally with the staunch opposition that Lithuanian Jewry exhibited to the Hasidic movement. Just as soon as Hasidism began to make inroads into the "Lithuanian lands" (Lithuania, Belorussia, and adjacent territories), it ran into a "Litvak's brick wall," as a saying goes.

As it happened, the rise and spread of Hasidism transpired during the lifetime of the arguably greatest Ashkenazic Talmudic scholar ever, the Gaon of Vilna, who was also one of the most prolific commentators on classic kabbalistic texts. The Gaon's real name was Eylióhu ben Shloyme-Zalmen (Elijah son of Shlomo Zalman), who lived from 1720 to 1797 and whose life firmed up the reputation of Vilna (Yiddish *Vílne*, Polish Wilno, now the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius) as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," or, among Jews, *Yerusholáyim d'Lite*. Although local rabbis opposed the Hasidim in some southern towns too (e.g., Brod, or Brody, in Galicia), Lithuania was different. The Jewish scholars and communities of Lithuania acted with speed, determination, and remarkable unity in their attempt to stamp out what they thought was a potent threat to the survival of Judaism.

Instead of being content to remain entrenched in the south, the Hasidic movement considered it a matter of principle to conquer Lithuania and they set out to do so with a kind of missionary fervor. Dov-Ber the Mágid of Mezritsh sent emissaries throughout Eastern Europe. One of his top disciples up north was Menachem-Mendel of Vitebsk (1730–1788), who worked tirelessly in the Minsk area and then further east in the Vitebsk region to spread Hasidism. Other courts arose in Amdur (now Indura, Belarus) and Karlín (now part of Pinsk, Belarus). For the Lithuanian Jews of the time, *Karlíner* became the name of the new sect, otherwise known simply as *di kat* (the sect).

By the winter of 1771–1772, the Karlín branch of Hasidism had set up its own little prayer house (*kloyz*) in Vilna. Two of its leaders were accused of transgressions by the Vilna community (which still had

vast powers in the waning years of the Polish–Lithuanian commonwealth). One of them, Chaim, was convicted and driven out of town for heresy against God and slander against the Gaon of Vilna. He was brought to trial before the Gaon, who forgave him for the personal insults but convicted him for “defaming God.” This Chaim was excommunicated and then left town in disgrace. The trial of his partner, a man called Isser, turned into an inquiry into the whole Hasidic movement. The Vilna rabbinic inquiry accused and convicted the movement of interjecting coarse Yiddish words and expressions into their Hebrew prayers, doing somersaults and the like during prayer, and homosexual acts. A recurring plot line in the story of Yiddish, the identification of the language with nonstandard culture, was reemerging. All Hasidic writings that could be found were publicly burned on a Friday afternoon before Sabbath prayers. The first of the famous Vilna bans of excommunication against the Hasidim was issued on the first of Iyar 5532 (May 4, 1772).

The Vilna ban of excommunication (*khéyrem*) was a defining event in the relationship between the northerners and southerners among East European Jewry, or the Litvaks versus the Galitsyáner (or Póy-lishe), in popular parlance. It was followed up a week later by an even stronger ban. It did not take long for the Litvaks to acquire a new name, which is a Yiddish coinage from a Hebraic root. They came to be called (and called themselves) the Misnágdim, which means opponents, protesters, or, quite literally, protestants. So great were the overwhelming majorities of Hasidic Jews among the speakers of the southern dialects of Yiddish, and of anti-Hasidic Jews among the speakers of Lithuanian Yiddish, that Hasidim versus Misnágdim has come often to be a kind of metaphor for Galitsyáner versus Litvak.

But the plot thickens. The Hasidic takeover of the “hearts and minds” of the vast majority of the Galitsyáner, as the Litvaks refer to all southerners, would not have concerned the Gaon of Vilna and his circle of eminent scholars for an extended period. What upset them were the encroachments onto *their* turf, the rise of small groups of Hasidim in eastern Lithuania (today’s Belarus). It is impossible to say what Hasidism would have turned out to be if not for the campaign against it led by the Vilna scholars and their supporters.

Most likely, the campaign tempered Hasidism and steered it toward reincorporating sophisticated Torah study within a Hasidic framework that accepts the holiness of the *tsádik* or rebbe figure. What turned out to be most infuriating to the Litvaks was that Hasidism was tempered and brought back into the Torah mainstream by a Litvak.

That Litvak was Shneur-Zalmen (1745–1813), a native of Lyozna near Vitebsk who moved his court in his later years to nearby Lyadi, becoming for Jewish history Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi. For many years, he battled the other Lithuanian Hasidim, those few adherents of the new movement up north who acquired a reputation for wild behavior, drunken parties, and public somersaulting. Some were even accused of orgies and substance abuse. Shneur-Zalmen was the quintessential Litvak, a master at Talmudic scholarship and author of a sophisticated code of Jewish law. This was not a man who could be accused of replacing scholarship with somersaults. He came up with the Third Way, a Lithuanian Hasidic movement combining southern zeal, joy, and fervent adherence to a rebbe with the Lithuanian ideal of sophisticated Torah scholarship, moderation, and strict adherence to Jewish law (albeit siding with Hasidim on matters of the slaughtering knife and prayer rites). That insistence influenced *all* of Hasidism to adjust to becoming the standard form of traditional Judaism for the south of Eastern Europe. It was neither the first nor the last time in history that yesterday's radicals are today's conservatives.

Shneur-Zalmen called his new Third Way Chabád, an acronym for *khókhme* (Wisdom), *bíne* (Understanding), and *dáas* (Knowledge). These attributes (Ashkenazic Hebrew *khókhmo*, *bíno*, *dáas*) are among the ten sefirahs or emanations between God and humans, as enumerated in classic kabbalistic works (more exactly, *dáas* is a subcategory of *bíne*). The acronym became a proper name for the major group of Lithuanian Hasidism. The rise of Shneur-Zalmen and his successful construction of a Lithuanian-style Hasidism caused even greater bitterness and mistrust on the part of the Vilna-based Misnágdim. The period of greatest hostility started when the Gaon of Vilna died in the fall of 1797, and a number of Hasidim were caught dancing in celebration. The cumulative anger led to a denunciation of Shneur-Zalmen to the Russian authorities (Russia had by then annexed all of

historic Lithuania). He was twice imprisoned, in 1798 and 1801, on trumped-up charges. His enemies made use of his famous book, known as the *Tanya* (1797), which contains philosophical remarks about Jewish and non-Jewish souls that did not go down well in translation. He was released on both occasions and became a particularly loyal subject of the Russian empire. When Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, Shneur-Zalmen used his considerable influence to encourage his Hasidim to help the Russian military resist the French. He wrote to a friend: "If Bonaparte wins, the wealth of the Jews will be increased and their status raised, but they will be distanced in their hearts from their father in heaven; and if our lord Alexander wins, poverty will increase among the Jews, their status will be lower, but they will be bound and tied in their hearts to their father in heaven. . . . And for God's sake, throw this letter right into the fire!" When Napoleon's forces were closing in, in August 1812, Shneur-Zalmen and his family fled eastward in desperate flight from the French. For five months, the ailing master and his closest relatives fled from town to town. One of the most powerful biographical documents in Hasidic literature is the memoir, preserved in both Yiddish and Hebrew, by his son and successor Dov-Ber about his last days on the road. Shneur-Zalmen's health gave way to the freezing Russian winter. He died in January 1813 in a village near Kursk and was taken to be buried in the Jewish cemetery in Haditsh in the district of Poltava (now Hadyatch or Gadyatch, Ukraine).

The Misnágdim, who did not mount a populist movement of their own, instead turned to building a network of *litvishe yeshivas*, high-level Lithuanian academies that rapidly became international centers for Torah studies. They naturally used Yiddish as the universal oral medium for the study and debate of Hebrew and Aramaic texts. The first and most famous, known as the mother of Lithuanian yeshivas, was the Valózhiner Yeshíve founded in 1802 at Valózhin (now in Belarus) by the Gaon of Vilna's pupil, Chaim Valózhiner (1749–1821). Others that followed include the Mírer Yeshíve (in Mir, now in Belarus) in 1815; Slónimer Yeshíve (in Slonim, in Belarus) in 1815; Kélmer Yeshíve (in Kelem, now Kelme, Lithuania) in 1872; Télzer Yeshíve (Telz, now Telshiai, Lithuania) in 1882; Pónevezher Yeshíve (Pónevitsh, now Panevezhys,

Lithuania) in 1911. Those established in the great cities include Reb Mayle's (Ramáyles) Yeshíve in Vilna in 1831, and the Slabódker Yeshíve in Kovna (Slabódke or Slobodka, now the Viliampole district of Kaunas, Lithuania), in 1863, with major refoundings in 1881 and 1897.

It is an entrancing irony of Jewish cultural history that the best-known "Yiddish-sanctified" East European town name belongs neither to the classic Hasidim who speak Polish or Ukrainian Yiddish in the south, nor to the classic Misnagdic Litvaks in the north. It is in fact Lubavitch that became the base of the Third Way Lithuanian Chabad (*Khabád*) Hasidim of Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi. After his death in 1813, his son Dov-Ber moved the Chabad court from Lyadi to Lubavitch, and became, retrospectively speaking, the second Lubávitcher Rebbe, for in Yiddish lore it does not matter that the first rebbe had been born at Lyozna and moved to Lyadi. What matters is what town *came* to be associated with this particular dynasty, philosophy, and "tribe of Hasidim," and so it remains. The actual town Lubavitch is now Lyubavichy in Russia (not far from the border with Belarus near Vitebsk). But Lubavitch in modern Judaism, just like all those other names, has transmigrated, as it were, from geography and history to language and culture.

The Hasidic–Misnagdic debate calmed in the early nineteenth century and moved in many cases to the realm of the intellectual. However, the northern Misnágdim, the classic Litvaks, never elevated Yiddish to the sacred or mystical status that it achieved among the Hasidim. Not that they were in any sense "against" Yiddish. They were instead the cultural conservatives who strove to maintain the old Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism. The major Lithuanian Jewish rabbinic authorities, who would never dream of writing an innovative rabbinic or kabbalistic works in Yiddish, nonetheless favored the production of books on Jewish law in Yiddish translation. The Gaon of Vilna himself, in the "ethical will" he left to his family, tells his wife and children,

And here I have a number of works on ethics with Yiddish translation. Read them all the time and especially on the Sabbath, the holy of holies, read only these works of ethics. . . .

And among my books there is an edition of the book of Proverbs in Yiddish. For the sake of God, read from it every day; it is even better than all the books on ethics.

(Elijah of Vilna, *Ólim li-trúfo* [*Leaves for Healing; after Ezekiel 47:12*], Minsk 1836; other editions known as *Igères ha-Gró* [*Epistle of the Gaon of Vilna*], secs. 2, 4.)

In the early nineteenth century, Avrom Danzig (1748–1820), who served as a rabbinic judge in Vilna from 1794 to 1812, wrote his famous *Cháyei ódom* (The Life of Man), a summary of Jewish laws of everyday life. Without rancor or apologetics, he prepared Yiddish as well as Hebrew versions of the text for the practical benefit of readers. In the nineteenth century, a new Jewish movement arose in Lithuania. It was called the Mussar movement from that same biblical word for rebuke or reproach that later came to mean ethics or morals. Founded by Israel of Salánt (1810–1883), affectionately known as Reb Yisróel Salánter, it stressed the need to work on one's character and everyday ethics and frame of mind in addition to studying Torah. In a famous quip aimed at both Hasidim and Misnágdim, the Salánter said, "The Hasidim think they have a rebbe, and the Misnágdim think they don't need one." Or, in another version, "The *Khósid* asks, 'Why do I need the book when I have the rebbe?' and the *Misnáged* asks, 'Why do I need the rebbe when I have the book?'" He became a kind of cult figure to his disciples and was known for his sessions of meditations in Yiddish at twilight to dwell on *Mussar* (Yiddish *múser*). He developed to a fine art the Ashkenazic tradition of a Hebrew or Aramaic passage that is read having a parallel and highly emotive Yiddish "related statement" that is uttered. For example, he would cite the original of the Hebrew verse "Return us then unto you, O God, and we shall be returned, renew us our days of old" (Lamentations 5:21) followed by hypnotic repetition of the Yiddish: "Mir viln zekh tsuríkkern fun undzer vandl" (We want to return from our *vandl*), which can refer to "wandering," either spiritual or in the sense of Diaspora, and also to business or worldly affairs, as in the frequent phrase *handl-vandl* (trading and maneuvering).

Salánter's major Yiddish connection, aside from being a Litvak who spoke Yiddish all his life, was his plan to translate the entire Talmud



into Yiddish. It was a bold proposal coming from a major rabbinic figure, and it was conceived in the spirit of radically redistributing the social differentiations that were a function of the internal Jewish trilingualism of Ashkenaz. Nothing came of it in his lifetime, although Yiddish translations of individual Talmudic tractates appeared later on.

Yiddish played very different roles among the Hasidim in the south and the Litvaks in the north, though it continued to be everyone's daily language. Lithuanian Yiddish has come to be identified with the Misnagdic way of life, and Polish and Ukrainian Yiddish with classic Hasidism. The one great surviving exception, Lithuanian Yiddish in the context of a very Lithuanian-like modified Hasidism, is the unique sect of Chabad Lubavitch.

Hostilities between Hasidim and Misnágdim, like other rivalries in history, faded in the face of a new common enemy: the movements to westernize, modernize, and secularize.

## *Westernization and Language*

### HOW DID THE MODERN JEW ARISE?

Many Jews in the United States and other Western countries might be shocked to consider the idea that their immediate ancestors, in many cases a grandparent or great-grandparent, were very far from a “modern person” in the Western sense. He or she, “back in the Old Country” at least, held an array of literal beliefs that entailed suspension of logic and the critical faculty in favor of a series of “fundamentalist” givens that defined the spiritual core of their Jewishness. One of these is that God gave the whole Torah as we now have it, the Five Books of Moses, to Moses on Mount Sinai, even though the Bible reports only that the Ten Commandments were given. Another is the literal belief in the biblical (and nonevolutionary) account of creation in six days. Others include the absolute reality of the world to come, the ever present prospect of an imminent, actual Messiah, belief in the rising of the dead and the notion that Jews are a chosen people and in various ways superior to gentiles. For modern, secular Jews, these and numerous other beliefs are sometimes embarrassing. But if we are to understand the real Jewish heritage, then we need to suspend embarrassment and perhaps even take pride in the stubbornness, loyalty, and remarkable success with which these ancestors maintained an ancient Near East-

ern culture and continued to develop it, adding a third major language in Europe and boasting a thousand-year record of concentration on study and teaching in the face of oppression, humiliation, expulsions, and massacres. At the same time, it is important to understand how the classical Ashkenazic Judaism of those ancestors gave way to the modern Jew. In many individual cases, it happened sometime close to the moment that that ancestor got off the boat at Ellis Island, had a look around the Lower East Side of New York, and was never the same again. But that phenomenon accounts for only one part of this historic transformation, and much of that one part was made possible by changes that were going on in Europe.

It started in Germany. The western Ashkenazic culture, with Western Yiddish as its language, had been in sharp decline on its own. By the eighteenth century, important new works in Yiddish were very rare in Germany, and rabbinic Judaism was weakening. There was a gradual process of assimilative attrition to the majority culture. One early shot that was fired in this cultural war, in Yiddish, came from a simple fellow with grandiose ideas: Aaron ben Shmuel of Hergershausen, a small town in southern Germany. In 1709, he published an edition of prayers in Yiddish, which differed from the standard Western Yiddish literary language. The departures are sometimes in the direction of local Western Yiddish dialect, sometimes in the direction of German. Moreover, the book was published in fully pointed square Hebrew characters that had been restricted to sacred Hebrew and Aramaic texts (see pp, 74–77). These were all reforms moving from a sacred old Yiddish style that had been accepted for centuries, to something that was here and now. Many of the prayers were composed by the author, who was neither a scholar nor a particularly good writer.

The prayer book, called *Liblekhe tfile* (A Lovely Prayer Book), begins with an introduction in which Aaron challenges the Ashkenazic practice of teaching children to pray from the original and teaching them Hebrew by the method of *taytshn*, literally translating phrase for phrase from the written Hebrew into the spoken Yiddish. This method of language teaching differs markedly from teaching a language by systematically presenting its grammar. In his introduction, Aaron invokes the traditions of the Sephardic and Italian Jews, whose educational



Figure 7.1 The daring new Yiddish prayer book of Aaron ben Shmuel of Hergershausen (in southern Germany) appeared in 1709. Its fate portended the fiery conflicts that would surround Yiddish in following generations. The local German rabbis put the book under a ban (khéyrem). Apparently because of the occurrence of God's name it was, however, neither burned nor thrown out. Instead, many copies were torn. The press run was found over a century later in an attic in Hergershausen. (Juedisches Kulturmuseum und Synagoge Veitshoechheim, courtesy of Dr. Hermann Suess)

practices were often more in line with European practice. He was not arguing for any of the Ashkenazic languages to be discarded, but rather for them to be rearranged in a modern European way: for children to study their mother tongue systematically and then study the classic languages using grammar. This was at odds with the Ashkenazic tradition of teaching *no* language by grammar but by having children translate Hebrew (and then Aramaic) into their native Yiddish, phrase by phrase, from the classic texts. At one point in his lengthy introduction, Aaron ben Shmuel writes that his “work will bring great peace.” He was badly mistaken. The local rabbis placed his book under a ban.

Hardly anybody dared touch it, and that was the end of that. (In 1830, 120 or so years later, most of the press run, with many copies purposely torn, turned up in the attic of the old synagogue in Hergershausen.) But rapid change was imminent, and it came along in a very different way.

#### EFFORTS TO STAMP OUT YIDDISH IN GERMANY

During the eighteenth century, a growing popular German anti-Semitism focused on Yiddish. Many anti-Semitic books appeared accusing the Jews of having a secret language that they used to fool Christians in commerce and commit blasphemy against Jesus Christ and Christendom. These books usually attacked the language of the Jews with an aesthetic judgment that Yiddish was an ugly, barbaric “jargon” emblematic of Jews’ lack of civilization. Some are actually dictionaries and grammars, out to “crack the code” of the Jews. Many remain of interest to Yiddish linguists keen to learn about the daily colloquial Yiddish of western Ashkenazim of the period. One from the early eighteenth century, the *Jüdischer Sprach-Meister* (authored by “J.W.”) is a long dialogue between a corrupt rabbi (Rebbe Itzick) and a simple Jew, Youne (Jonah), who is gradually corrupted by his mentor. The left-hand column is in Yiddish in Latin (or Gothic) letters and the right side offers a German translation, enabling the reader to follow the yarn (which includes visits to prostitutes) while mastering the “secret language of the Jews.” A dictionary by “Bibliophilus” (1742) calls Yiddish “Hebraeo-barbarisch” (Hebraico-Barbarian). For the first time Yiddish is seen as a symbolic embodiment of all Ashkenazic Jews, not merely as a representative of any one section of Jewish society. “Their language is ugly, just like them” was the not very subtle message. One German-Yiddish dictionary published in Oettingen in 1790 features a drawing on the title page of a fat Jew with a hooked nose and pointed beard, and a subtitle explaining the usefulness of the dictionary: “to be able to be careful when doing business with the Jews.”

As if the charges of being the language of Christ degradation, cheating Christians, and being ugly were not enough, another old accusation against Yiddish, which went back to Martin Luther, was resurfacing with venom. When his efforts to convert masses of Jews to

his new denomination foundered, Luther made various anti-Semitic claims. One of the most famous appears in his preface to the 1528 edition of the *Liber vagatorum*, or *Book of Vagabonds and Beggars*. Luther wrote that the criminal gangs of Germany were spearheaded by Jews. As evidence he cited the derivation of Rotwelsch, the secret German underworld language, from the Jews. In fact, Rotwelsch has many borrowings from Hebrew as well as many non-Jewish sources that would be “safe” from law enforcement. But the point—made by Luther and revived in the eighteenth century—was that the language of the Jews was the source of criminality in Germany and allowed criminals to thrive. The anti-Semitic propagandists were not interested in distinguishing Hebrew from Yiddish. As it happens, most Rotwelsch words from Jewish sources were taken from Hebrew rather than Yiddish to make them wholly incomprehensible to outsiders.

These widespread charges coincide with an underlying shift during this period. Anti-Semitism was expanding from its religious origins to a new phase of fashionable and sometimes intellectualized racial, cultural, and linguistic derision. As Sander L. Gilman puts it in *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (1986), there was a “shift from a rhetoric of religion to a rhetoric of race” and this “introduced the question of the Jews’ language into the very center of scientific discourse.” Popular anti-Semitism fed into the thinking and writing of intellectuals who employed the pejorative verb *mauscheln*, meaning something like speak in a coarse, ridiculous, Jewish-like way. The word appears to derive from the German spelling (*Mausche*) of the Western Yiddish *Moushe* (Moses, modern Yiddish *Moyshe* or *Meyshe*).

Western Ashkenazic civilization was so weak by the mid-eighteenth century that instead of rejecting these aspersions on their culture, the western Ashkenazim who had by then become German Jews, by and large internalized the critique of the anti-Semites, often thinking that if they became like everybody else (by mastering standard German and doing away with *mauscheln*), prejudice would end and they would be welcomed into German society with open arms. The simplest route to acceptance was baptism (often accompanied by a change of name). The difficult way was to mold a new sort of Judaism.

That task was undertaken by the eminent philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), whose *Phaedon* (1767), written in masterly German and following Plato's dialogue of the same name, was highly regarded in Germany. Mendelssohn was diverted from his pure philosophy by disputes he faced that were based on his Jewishness, and he could not pretend, even among the elite intellectual circles to which he was admitted, that being Jewish was not a major obstacle. One apostle of German tolerance in the spirit of European Enlightenment was Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), who did a lot to make his modern Jewish friend at home in top intellectual circles in Berlin. Lessing even made a thinly disguised Mendelssohn one of the heroes of his last play, *Nathan der Weise*. The play presents Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as three offspring of one father, each claiming to be the authentic heir. Mendelssohn is paid the greatest compliment he could have hoped for. His character, Nathan, rather than being cast as the protagonist for Judaism among the three sons, is the advocate of Enlightenment, tolerance, and a sense of caring for all peoples.

Being a committed German Jew who experienced and witnessed so much of that special kind of German eighteenth-century anti-Semitism, and being a philosopher, it was natural for Mendelssohn, as a rationalist child of the European Enlightenment, to mold a new rational Judaism. In dramatic contrast to the "I believe because I believe" essence of the classic Ashkenazic Jew, Mendelssohn spent innumerable hours, as had many Christian philosophers before him, demonstrating a rational basis for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

Mendelssohn had so internalized the German view of Jewish appearance, clothing, mentality, and language that he came to the conclusion that eradicating Yiddish and replacing it with German was a priority of modern Jewish life. While Hebrew could, in the shining Jewish future he foresaw, fulfill the role of Latin among Christians, German would transform the situation of the masses of Jewish people (nobody in the eighteenth century thought seriously about *speaking* Hebrew as an everyday language). As part of his transformation from philosopher to "servant of the German-Jewish masses," Mendelssohn translated books of the Bible into German and encouraged his disci-

ples to do the same. These books were published in the Jewish alphabet, often in the classic Yiddish typefont (*máshkit*) and with the typical Yiddish spelling conventions, to make them look familiar. These publications were part of the project to wean as many German Jews as possible off the old Ashkenazic fare and into the contemporary gentile German culture. Jews, according to the Mendelssohnian model, would retain their religion, which could be reformed to be as formal and “dignified” as Christianity. Jews would become, in the famous phrase, “Germans of the Mosaic faith.” Mendelssohn inspired the first modern Jewish school in this vein, the Jüdische Freischule in Berlin in 1781.

As for East European Jews who were not “fortunate” enough to live in a German-speaking environment, Mendelssohn and his circle looked down on them as Asiatic primitives. However, they welcomed with open arms individuals who were prepared to defect from the traditional Judaism of Eastern Europe and become heralds of modern culture. For example, when Boruch Shick of Shklov (1744–1808), from the east of Lithuania (now Belarus), turned up in Berlin with a Hebrew reworking of a book on astronomy (elaborate cosmos charts and all), Mendelssohn got it published rapidly (Berlin 1777). The production of new books in Hebrew (on any topic) had plummeted in Germany during the eighteenth century. The Berlin circle of Enlighteners had not reckoned with the possibility that the decline of Yiddish and Ashkenazic multilingualism, and of traditional Jewish culture, would drag down Hebrew productivity too. For Mendelssohn, Yiddish was an archenemy of the Jewish people, period. He had to debunk and humiliate the language and those who spoke it to motivate them to “overcome their handicap” and speak only German (the possibility of mastering both was not considered). He never let an opportunity slip by. In 1782, he insisted that the Yiddish text of the traditional Jewish oath in court cases be replaced by his “pure” German text. Most famously, he wrote that “this jargon has contributed much to the immorality of common Jews.”

The Berlin Jewish Enlightenment came to be known among Jews as the Haskalah (Yiddish *haskóle*). This word, from the ancient Hebrew root for common sense or use of reason, is closely related to a verb that



describes the power of understanding and capability to figure something out. In good old Jewish fashion, the source of the word *Haskalah*, in effect the Jewish version of the European Enlightenment (*Aufklärung* in German), was traced back to an occurrence in the Bible. "God looked forth from Heaven upon the children of people, to see if there were any man of reasoned thinking [*maskil*] who did seek after God" (Psalm 14:2). *Máskil* (Yiddish *máskl*, plural *maskílim*; Israeli Hebrew *maskíl*, *maskilím*) became, effectively, the term for a would-be neo-European enlightened Israelite man. There is no feminine form, and in the usage of the time, the word *máskil* referred to a man as exclusively as did "rabbi," "cantor," and "ritual slaughterer."

The German Jewish *maskílim* (Enlightenment proponents) who led the movement under Mendelssohn's guidance made eradication of Yiddish a primary platform of their program. This was something entirely new in the history of Ashkenaz and Yiddish. This was not a campaign against singing, writing, or reading in Yiddish but against what the Berliners considered a subhuman, degrading jargon (usually pronounced *zhargón*, in attempted emulation of the French pronunciation). A language that had been around for many centuries, in which hundreds of books were published, was suddenly being recast as a nonlanguage.

Few kinds of hate are as potent as self-hate. In 1778, the official rabbinate of Berlin declared itself opposed to the "Jews' dialect" (*Juden-dialekt*). A Haskalah-inspired Austro-Hungarian government edict of 1781 recognized the Jewish language but insisted on German in juridical and extrajudicial transactions. The Berlin Haskalah intellectuals and liberals in government saw eye-to-eye on the Yiddish question. In 1812, Prussia granted Jews civil rights on condition that they used the German language and script.

One of Mendelssohn's disciples, David Friedlaender (1750–1834), issued his famous *Epistle to the German Jews* in 1788. Written in that classic Berlin transitional form of (attempted) German in Jewish letters, it includes the famous comment on Yiddish:

This is the first and necessary condition. . . . The Judeo-German that is common among us has no rules, it is vulgar, and it is an incomprehensible lan-

guage outside of our own circles. It must be eradicated completely, and the Holy Language, and the German mother tongue, must be taught systematically from early youth onward. Only then will it be possible to lay the foundations for a useful and rational education for our youth. Once the child is stuck into the so-called Judeo-German language he cannot have any correct conception of a single thing in this world. How can he be expected to act later on in accordance with any proper principles of behavior?

(David Friedlaender, *Epistle to the German Jews [German in Jewish letters]*. Berlin, 1788.)

Just as German Judaism is the ultimate precursor of much of world Jewry today (Westerners of the Jewish faith or heritage), one of the major intellectual achievements of German Jewry, the so-called science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) is the direct parent of Judaic (or Jewish) studies. The vast Jewish heritage, from ancient times onward, provides a large corpus of material for academic research and teaching in a number of disciplines, including philology, history, literature, and theology (later also sociology, anthropology, modern linguistics, and more). The founder of the field was Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), an outstanding scholar who wrote many seminal works on Judaic studies and cofounded the first modern society for academic Jewish studies (*Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*) and an academic journal to go with it in 1823. His disdain for Yiddish notwithstanding, Zunz could not ignore the massive Yiddish output in the history of his “own” (German) Jews. In the end, he became an unwitting founder of Yiddish studies, subjecting Yiddish vocabulary to a philological analysis, researching Yiddish names, and tracing Ashkenazic history and culture from the earliest settlements on Germanic speaking soil. In the nineteenth century, German Jewry developed major new varieties of modern Judaism, all founded on the premise of linguistic assimilation and a German-speaking Jewry. Among the most famous movements to arise are Reform Judaism and two movements that arose largely in response to it, Neoorthodoxy and Conservative Judaism. All are children of the German-Jewish Enlightenment and the age of Jewish emancipation unleashed in large part by Moses Mendelssohn and his circle of adherents in Berlin. The notion of Ashkenazic Jewish lawyers, professors, secular philosophers, and scientists would have made for a good joke earlier, but German Jewry made it all happen. Nevertheless, the

price was high: large numbers of German Jews tried to give up all traces of their heritage. Among those baptized by their parents in childhood was Moses Mendelssohn's grandson, composer Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), who nevertheless defied his father's wish that he go professionally by the name Felix M. Bartholdy. While a number of impressive individuals found acceptance in German high society, German anti-Semitism was evolving into a pernicious force, and German Jewry's confidence about its acceptance was tragically self-deceptive. The Jew "behaving like a German" infuriated racist German ultranationalists. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more and more German Jews integrated into German society. But a century and a half of increasing visibility of these modern westernized Jews did not do away with the image of the Yiddish accent and other stereotyped features in anti-Semitic descriptions.

The charge of traces of Yiddish in the speech of German Jews remained potent right through to the Holocaust; Adolf Hitler commented on it in *Mein Kampf*. The accomplishments—in the German language—of the likes of Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, and Arthur Schnitzler did not deter hate, and in fact those accomplishments were among the most irksome to the racial purity beliefs of National Socialism.

#### WESTERNIZATION EFFORTS IN EASTERN EUROPE

The ideas of the German Jewish Enlightenment were beginning to arrive in Eastern Europe through contacts among Jews (individual emissaries and missives, published works of the Berliners, cross-migration), just when the political statehood under which East European Jewry lived was undergoing dramatic changes. The three partitions of Poland between the 1770s and 1790s did away with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (including its northern Grand Duchy of Lithuania component). The 1815 Congress of Vienna in the wake of Napoleon's downfall split nearly all of East European Jewry—the well-established territory of eastern Ashkenaz—between the Russian (Romanov) and Austro-Hungarian (Habsburg) empires.

The western sector of East European Jewry, particularly Galicia, under the Habsburgs of Austria-Hungary found itself face-to-face

with the emancipation and assimilation policies of Joseph II, emperor of Austria from 1765 to 1790, who had been in direct contact with Mendelssohn's circle. Joseph II issued his famous Tolerance Edict in 1782, which opened up various mainstream educational and career opportunities for the Jews, shortly after his edict forbidding Yiddish (and Hebrew) in Jewish communal record-keeping. This was in sharp contrast to the Judeophobia of his mother, Maria Theresa, who was his coregent until she died in 1780. She was said to have granted audiences to Jews on condition they stayed behind a partition. The policies of Joseph II, hailed by the Berliners but anathema to most East European Jews who wanted to be left alone to pursue their separate culture, became relevant to East European Jews living in Galicia, when they suddenly found themselves under Austrian rule as a result of the First Partition of Poland in 1772. More were joined to Austria in the Third Partition of 1795. In a scenario that could have been dreamed up by Mendelssohn himself, a quarter of a million Eastern European Jews suddenly found themselves under a German-speaking government with a quasi-Mendelssohnian agenda.

During the same period, most East European Jews, including those of "Great Poland," Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belorussia, suddenly found themselves under Russian empire rule. From the 1790s, the czarist empire introduced one debilitating, humiliating edict after another. The most famous, creating the pale of settlement as a legal entity from which Jews were not allowed to relocate, did not at the time seem so terrible. The overwhelming majority of Jews in the Russian empire lived there anyway, and it was simply an affirmation of their longtime homeland (a far cry from the massacres and expulsions that had resulted in the migrations to Eastern Europe in the first place). The edicts that hurt included double taxation for Jews (1794), expulsion from countryside hamlets to towns and cities (1825), and forced military conscription for twenty-five years, starting in childhood, that was imposed by Nicholas I from 1827 onward. The Jewish Haskalah proponents coming out of Germany as well as the Austro-Hungarian empire began working on two fronts. First, they initiated a campaign to persuade Jews of the benefits of acculturation, which would do for them the same "wonders" that had been achieved in Austria and Germany, in terms of emancipation from crippling laws and access to real

new opportunities. Second, they began to work with the Russian empire directly, trying to persuade successive czars and their advisers how good it would be to rid the Jews of their strange ways and assimilate them into Russian culture, and how this could be accomplished if anti-Jewish legislation were repealed and the Jews were emancipated and given equal rights, all on the presumptively idyllic German-area model.

But east is east and west is west. The Jews of Germany in the time of Mendelssohn numbered less than half a million, and most had been undergoing various degrees of assimilation, acculturation, and language shift without pressure from the Berlin Enlighteners. In contrast, Eastern Europe around 1800 had millions of Jews constituting a compact Yiddish-speaking civilization that carried forward the society of old western Ashkenaz with its internal Jewish trilingualism and profound religious beliefs, all developed further over the centuries in the Slavic and Baltic environments. These Eastern European developments included the rise of the Hasidim and their opponents, the Misnágdim. If anything could get the Hasidim and Misnágdim to bury the bitterness between them, it was the Berlin-inspired *maskílim* knocking at the proverbial door. Almost overnight, the old enemies became allies who recognized their differences as legitimate and compatible traditions within the superstructure of traditional Judaism. In May 1843, the leaders of the Misnagdic and Chabad-Hasidic communities of Lithuania traveled as friends in one coach to St. Petersburg to defend old-fashioned religious schools in the face of the challenges being posed by the Jewish modernizers aligned with czarist wishes to assimilate the Jews.

In that compact Eastern European Jewish civilization of millions of Yiddish speakers, nothing in the world seemed more absurd than fancy folk in dandyish clothing coming to town telling people to stop speaking Yiddish. In addition to the vibrancy of Yiddish and the traditional Ashkenazic lifestyle in the east, there was a big difference in what is now called the sociology of language. German Jews looked up to German language and culture and were persuaded in many cases to hate their own language. Eastern European Jews did not by and large look up to the language of their non-Jewish neighbors and friends,

who were usually illiterate and in many cases belonged to a peasant agricultural society. Standard Russian language and culture were not things the Jews of Eastern Europe were conscious of or interested in acquiring. For them, the utter ridiculousness of dropping their language was readily apparent. “Vos zol ikh reydn, Têrkish?” (What should I speak, Turkish?) became a common satiric reply to such suggestions.

In the spirited, satire-rich Yiddish of Eastern Europe, any new usage quickly received a more nuanced meaning. As soon as Berlin-inspired *maskîlim* started to become active in the east, the word, and its Yiddish singular, *máskl*, *máskil*, acquired the meaning of a “follower of the Haskalah” just as *khósid* had come a few decades earlier to mean a “follower of Hasidism.” A *máskl* could also be a “follower of rationalism,” but that could be overturned by its frequent comic use in the Yiddish sense of “someone who thinks he is being rational all the time by following the dictates of this movement that calls itself rationalistic.” That became a common understanding of the term in everyday Yiddish.

For reasons of geographic, political, and cultural proximity, the *maskîlim*, who had ambitions for modernizing, westernizing, emancipating, and secularizing East European Jewry, found that the sector which fell into the Austro-Hungarian empire was the most obvious place to start. German language and literature were already being peddled by the government and its educational institutions, and edicts of tolerance and emancipation for Jews were being issued along with anti-Yiddish laws. It seemed perfect. One slight hitch was that by 1800, much of southern East European Jewry, and Galicia very ardently, had been captured by the mystical, deeply religious Hasidic movement, not only an ideology but a way of life that is at the polar opposite end of the traditional–modern spectrum. Viewed through Western, modernist eyes, the Hasidim had just succeeded in moving an entire Jewish population backward in time, fixing such matters as dress, language, and prayer habits as far away as possible from those of the local gentile population. The *maskîlim* began to attack Hasidism in its own heartland and with even more gusto (if that is possible) than the campaign waged by the Gaon of Vilna and the

Lithuanian Misnágdim just a few years earlier. The Hasidim of Galicia, after benefiting for some years from Joseph II's Edicts of Tolerance (the first of which was issued in 1782), were harassed by various elements in the government. In July 1814, the president of the Supreme Imperial Police and Censorship Office, Baron Franz von Haager, advised the governor of Galicia to be particularly suspicious of the secret Jewish "freemasonry society" known as Hasidism. Fellow Jews, the *maskilim*, were doing everything possible to convince the authorities of the evils of Hasidism. The dispute became so bitter that in fall 1815, the main synagogue in Lemberg, Galicia (Lvov, now Lviv, Ukraine), issued a ban of excommunication against the leading *maskilim*, including Solomon Judah Rapoport (1790–1867), a Judaic scholar in the spirit of Zunz. The modernizing west of Ashkenazic Jewry, for whom the German language was the key to European acceptance, equality, and high culture, and its traditionalist east, for whom Yiddish and traditional Ashkenazic trilingualism were a bulwark against spiritual and cultural watering down, were now facing off in the "both-man's-land" of Galicia.

What happened is of overriding importance to the story of Yiddish. The Hasidim had, as it were, canonized the sacred use of Yiddish with the appearance of the *Praises of the Baal Shem Tov* and *The Tales of Nachman of Bratslav*. The *maskilim* were using German to spread European culture and in Galicia they were also developing rabbinic Hebrew into a more academic style, using a flowery style of overstatement that became their hallmark. Those among the *maskilim* who were interested in "helping their people" achieve Western-style sophistication, knowledge of the world at large, and competence in secular subjects (as opposed to those primarily interested in their own research and writing) quickly came to see that the only way to reach the zJewish population was through Yiddish. Being learned in various languages, and living in the thick of a Yiddish-speaking society, they began to use Yiddish to make their views known. And here is the rub. The *maskilim* of Eastern Europe, whose Western-inspired program called for the eradication of the "ugly jargon" were the first to use it as a modern literary language and to develop its stylistic, journalistic, and literary potential. But in his definitive *Origins of*

*Modern Literary Yiddish* (Oxford 1999), Dov-Ber Kerler demonstrates that many of the linguistic features associated with the new East European Yiddish literary standard had in fact been crystallizing in pre-maskilic Yiddish books of the late eighteenth century.

Joseph Perl (1773–1839) was among the early Yiddish stylists who came to a sophisticated use of the language through his dedication to maskilic ideals. He had been a *khósid* in his youth and later turned to secular education. His accomplishments for Jewish education were impressive and included the establishment of the first modern Jewish school in Galicia, at Tarnopol, in 1813. But the Hasidim could not have had a more astute enemy. When, for example, the Hasidim purchased and burned copies of a Misnagdic anti-Hasidic tract written in Slutsk, Lithuania, Perl made it his business to find a single copy in order to republish it and spread it far and wide. When the manuscript, with a new introduction by Perl, was submitted to the censor's office in 1825, a witch-hunt was launched against fifteen alleged Hasidic leaders described as "rebels against his majesty." A long and complicated dispute arose, which inspired various government reports on the Hasidim (mostly negative but not viewing them as nearly as dangerous as Perl and other *maskilim* were trying to make out). In 1829, Perl wrote a German brochure on how Jewish education in Galicia needed to be reformed. In 1838, he appealed to the government to closely regulate study houses, religious societies, and ritual baths. The extended debate, which backfired on the *maskilim* and only strengthened the authority of Hasidism and its *tsadikim* or rebbes, was ended by the Revolution of 1848. Perl found catharsis for his most virulent anti-Hasidic moods in Yiddish. His major anti-Hasidic work in Hebrew appeared in Vienna in 1819. It is a satire on *Praises of the Baal Shem Tov* and other Hasidic works of hagiography about the rebbe. It takes the form of epistles from "Reb Zelig Letitshiber in Zolin to Reb Zanvl Verhievkir in Kripen" and so forth, and fooled many people into believing that these were real letters between Hasidic courts obsessed with power, money, lust, and so forth. The 151 letters, purportedly written by twenty-six authors, were modeled on actual Hasidic tales (which often took the form of letters or reports) and also, in terms of satiric method, on the 1515 *Epistolae obscurorum virorum*, the satire of the



humanists under Johann Reuchlin against the Dominicans. To avoid “publishing” in Yiddish, Perl had the Yiddish version distributed in handwritten copies far and wide, fostering the rise of Yiddish satire. (It was first published by modern Yiddish scholars in 1937.) Going beyond anti-Hasidic satire, Perl translated Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* into Yiddish. Perl’s rich, idiomatic Yiddish demonstrated, against its creator’s wishes, how remarkably fit the Yiddish of Eastern Europe was for precisely the modern forms of culture (including satire and fiction) of which the *maskilim* were so enamored. Perl’s followers were less hesitant about publishing their anti-Hasidic works in Yiddish. Among the best known is Isaac Joel Linetzky (1839–1915), whose biting satire, *Dos póylishe yíngl* (*The Jewish Boy in Poland*, 1869), has gone through several dozen editions.

#### THE FIRST YIDDISH DEBATE IN THE EAST

Another turning point is marked by a second fiery Yiddish story of early-nineteenth-century Galicia. It was a major scandal in the Haskalah community, triggered neither by Hasidic beliefs nor government restrictions on Jews, but a new edition of the book of Proverbs. And it was simultaneously an act of creation of the modern Yiddish literary language by a master of style. At the center of the fracas was Mendl Lefin (1749–1826), who was also known as *der Sá-tanover* after his apparent town of origin, Satanov in Podolia. During the early 1780s, he had lived in Berlin, where he became a disciple of Mendelssohn and his circle. Among his Haskalah-friendly works was a translation from French into Hebrew of a popular work on hygiene and health, an ethical treatise in Hebrew based on the works of Benjamin Franklin, and an original philosophical treatise in German. This popular polymath abruptly became a focus of bitter conflict, however, when his translation of Proverbs appeared, not in German, Germanized Yiddish, Mishnaic Hebrew, or even the Yiddish literary language of the time, based on that older Western Yiddish minimum common denominator language of Yiddish publishers from the 1540s onward. Instead, he translated Proverbs into a rich, idiomatic, local Galician-Ukrainian Yiddish, bringing into play the Hebrew and Ara-

maic (Semitic) elements of the language, as well as the Slavic elements that had been part of spoken Eastern European Yiddish for centuries but had not been freely represented in written language. Only a few decades earlier, Mendelssohn and his followers invested time, work, and money trying to replace the Western Yiddish-based literary language by producing Bible translations in modern German but printed in the Yiddish *máshkit* font of the Jewish alphabet. To add fuel to the flames, Lefin's Proverbs dispensed with the *máshkit* font, using square characters and full vowel-pointing, the format usually reserved for biblical (and) prayer books in Hebrew. This experiment, looking back, was inspired by Europeanization: the idea that a mass vernacular could be elevated to the status of a potent literary language, and the use of Bible translation, in the spirit of a Luther, to make the point. The story line became more confounded insofar as a classic European model was replicated, in the spirit of Haskalah, but in and for the Jewish language the *maskilim* had come to be seen as a target for eradication rather than development.

There was bedlam. The 1814 edition of Proverbs, the first book ever to appear in a completely genuine, vibrant East European Yiddish, was published anonymously. The *maskilim* launched investigations to determine who the culprit could be, paying off printers, booksellers, and censors to get to the bottom of things. They felt deeply betrayed when they learned that it was the surreptitious work of their own esteemed colleague Mendl Lefin. This Yiddish Proverbs inspired the first ever work in Hebrew explicitly opposing the Yiddish language. It was written by the *máskil* and Hebrew writer Tuvia (or Tobiah) Feder (1760–1817), who was said to be so heartbroken by this betrayal of the Haskalah that he got sick and died soon after completing his book on the subject in Berdichev in 1816. The book, in Hebrew, is called *Kol mekhátsetsim* after a biblical phrase usually translated along the lines of “the shout of dart-throwers” (Judges 5:11). Its title page is rather explicit, and it is a curiosity of the time that a polemicist could get away with a lot in Hebrew, precisely because the language had no colloquial ring and would not offend as much as the equivalent words in a vernacular language.

Shame, shame on the new translation of Proverbs, which is disgusting and stinks. It should be torn into pieces and burnt, and its name not mentioned again. This *megilah* [here the word means, as in satiric Yiddish, a long yarn] by Reb Mendl Sátanover is senseless and tasteless, and its purpose is to find favor in the eyes of concubines and girls.

(Tobiah Feder, preface [in Hebrew] to his *Kol mekhátsetsim*  
[The shout of dart-throwers]. Lemberg, 1853.)

The feminine image of Yiddish, as old as Ashkenaz, rises to the fore again. Lefin must be trying to impress the ladies! Why else would he do such a thing? A longer introduction accuses Lefin of “hurling King Solomon’s exalted Proverbs into the mud.” Most hilarious, from the literary point of view, is the pamphlet’s core genre and content. It is a drama set in heaven. Moses Mendelssohn, surrounded by his apostle-like disciples, refuses to believe that his one-time pupil could do such a thing, until he is shown the evidence of the crime—a copy of the book.

As Feder’s pamphlet, with its attack on Lefin and the Mendelssohn-in-paradise scene, was still at the press in Brody, another Galician *máskil*, Jacob Samuel Bik (1772–1831), intervened to halt the polemic conflagration. Bik, a Hebrew writer and satirist (with a softer touch than Perl or Feder), wrote an urgent letter to Feder about his anti-Yiddish, anti-Lefin pamphlet.

To Reb Tuvia Feder: Concerning his [Mendl Lefin Sátanover] having translated the book of Proverbs, it bothers you, you compare it to the twitter of birds and the moos of cows, and screeches of other animals. But remind yourself, won’t you, my dear friend! How did our fathers and grandfathers speak for four hundred years? Yiddish was spoken, thought and expounded by the brilliant masters. . . .

Peasants and simple people work very hard so that scholars may have something to eat and something from which to live, so it is only common sense that they should nourish the spirit and the faculties of the people in a language which they can understand. . . .

Moreover, French and English are likewise mixtures of German, Gallic, Latin and Greek, but through the efforts of scholars in each generation for over three hundred years to make something out of them, they were made

beautiful, and now, although they are mixed as ever, they are nevertheless used for exalted poetry and the most formal uses. It was only a century ago that German was very poorly thought of. Eighty years ago Russian was a language for peasants. Even those very ancient languages, Greek and Latin, when they were born they were also “common” until their scholars came and developed and purified their words, divided them into rules of grammar until they came to their full development which we so admire. . . .

But philosophers and artists make from raw material a precious utensil and a wonderful picture. In a word, you did not do the right thing, my friend! It won't be to your honor if you publish your insults. Instead write a letter to Mendl Sátanover and apologize for insulting him! This is the advice that is given to you by your friend who always wishes you the best,

(Jacob Shmuel Bik, *Brody, 19 Teyveys* [5]575 [January 1, 1815],  
cited from the letter's publication in *Kérem khémed 1*, sec. 28, Vienna, 1833.)

Galician *maskilim* of the day were busy petitioning the government for Jewish civil rights and the provision of modern education, and they were busy battling the Hasidim. They did not want an internecine battle to muddy their agenda, and they collected money to “reimburse” Tuvia Feder for his expenses and trouble in return for his taking his attack on Lefin's book off the press. It was not published until 1853, when both were dead, but the debate had been circulating for decades in the favored maskilic tradition of “round robin” circulars and replies that are copied, distributed, and redistributed.

Other *maskilim* produced books in Yiddish on various modern subjects, and they too, for all their derision of Yiddish and promotion of literary Hebrew, German, Russian (“anything but Yiddish”), were developing the modern European uses of Yiddish. One of them, Chaikel Hurwitz (1750–1822), published a book in Yiddish in 1817 on Columbus's discovery of America (an adaptation of a book by the German children's writer Joachim Heinrich Campe). An earlier Yiddish work on hygiene and medicine was published by Dr. Moyshe Markuze (Marcuse) in 1790. But many of the nineteenth-century *maskilim* in Galicia were profoundly conflicted about Yiddish, and some, like Perl, resolved their inner doubts about their native language by publishing in Hebrew and other languages while continuing to write and circulate Yiddish works in manuscript form.

A so-called Mendelssohn of Russia campaigned long and hard to spread the maskilic version of westernization among Eastern European Jewry. Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788–1860), a native of Kremenits, Volhynia, in the Ukraine, had spent years on the Galician (Austro-Hungarian) side of the new border, admiring the work of Perl and others. He was talented at learning languages and earned the loyalty of Russian authorities for his work on behalf of the Russian army during Napoleon's invasion of 1812. He was hated by traditional Jews, not least because of his active support of government schemes to force Jews into agriculture, plans to limit the number of Jewish printing presses to three in the Russian empire, and laws to censor imported Hebrew and Yiddish books. His major work, *Attestation Among the Jews* (or *Attestation in Israel, Teudo be-Yisroeyl*, after Ruth 4:7) was published in Hebrew in 1828. The Hasidim in the south put the book under a ban, but the Russian government awarded him a prize of a thousand rubles for the book's excellence. It dealt with subjects such as the grammatical study of Hebrew and the Jewish attitude toward foreign languages, sciences, and other secular subjects. As for Yiddish, his conclusion became a slogan for decades to come: "In this country, why speak Judeo-German? Either German or Russian!" It was a paraphrase of the anti-Aramaic side of the Talmudic-era debate on the legitimacy of Aramaic (see p. 17). In some ways it was more than a paraphrase. The conflict was evolving into a latter-day replay.

#### NEW JEWISH LITERARY LANGUAGES

Something odd happened on the way to an East European version of Mendelssohn's paradise. Isaac Baer Levinsohn and a few other convinced *maskilim* could yell "German or Russian!" all they wanted to in the East, but they were just fooling themselves in a multicultural eastern Ashkenazic environment where millions of people spoke and breathed Yiddish, which was every bit as much a part of the human environment as Belarusian, Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian, and all the other languages in the region. And the learned among the Jews had more than a lifetime's worth to master in the Hebrew and Aramaic literatures without ever studying the surrounding languages. Although

the *maskilim* failed in terms of many of their own stated goals, they contributed prolifically to the rise of arguably the most creative secular outburst in Jewish history. East European Jewry gave rise to a major new European literature—in Yiddish, its universal spoken language—and, in the hands of native Yiddish speakers, a notable modern Hebrew literature that contributed to the rise of modern spoken Hebrew in the Land of Israel in less than a century.

The modernizers in Eastern Europe, in the course of their work from the early nineteenth century onward, developed a literary tradition of experiments in both Yiddish and Hebrew with such modern European genres as the poem, short story, novel, drama, periodical, newspaper, and more. The stylistic questions and possibilities that arose for each language were equally challenging but by no means identical. In the case of Hebrew, a basic decision had to be made whether to imitate biblical Hebrew or one of the later styles (Mishnaic, rabbinic, medieval, Aramaicized, and various combinations). Many *maskilim* preferred a Bible-like style because it suited their notions of purity and reversion to a primeval, “pure” state of affairs; in sociological terms, it made their output as different as possible from that of the many sacred traditional books that continued to be produced both in the Hasidic south and the largely Misnagdic north. In other words, a Hebrew work by a *máskil* was noticeably different from a nineteenth-century rabbinic work in Hebrew. It is no coincidence that Hebrew literature emerged from Lithuania, where study of the Hebraic textual heritage was as intensive and widespread as any time or place in Jewish history. The first full-length novel in Hebrew, which also helped join the renewed Hebrew language to the ideal of the ancient homeland in Palestine, was called *Love of Zion*, by Abraham Mapu (1808–1867) of Kovna. It appeared in Vilna in 1853. Modern Hebrew poetry was largely established by Abraham Dov-Ber Lebensohn (“Odom ha-Kóyhen,” 1794–1878). Three private addresses in nineteenth-century Vilna, the households of the Katzenelenbogens, the Klatshkos, and the Rosenthals, formed the nucleus of a critical mass for the nascent Hebrew literature. Naturally all the new Hebrew writers in the maskilic spirit were native speakers of Yiddish, and this is conspicuous from their Hebrew, irrespective of whichever style

they emulated. None of these writers could hold an extended, complex conversation in Hebrew and none tried to. The notion of Hebrew as a language of literature (albeit other kinds of literature) was in any case deeply embedded in the culture. All who tried their hand at Hebrew grew up in the traditional environment of Ashkenazic trilingualism, deep religiosity, and a text-centered education.

In the case of Yiddish, there was less of a standard written language model to emulate. Paradoxically, the writer of Hebrew, who did not even think about speaking the language he (and it was always a he) was writing, could imitate the style of the same sacred books he grew up studying and was in many cases rebelling against. The Yiddish writer had the enormous wealth of a vivid, rich, spoken language, but no usable literary tradition. This meant that he (and increasingly she) could create modern genres in the universal folk language. Invariably this led to a lot of internal variation. The model of Old Yiddish, with its western base, minimum common denominator vocabulary, and *máshkit* font, was abandoned.

A number of distinct Yiddish styles developed. One popular style borrowed heavily from contemporary German periodicals and books, leading to a watered-down Yiddish called *dáytshmerish* (Germanish). In addition to substituting German for Yiddish words (e.g., *mund* for *moyl* "mouth"; *mond* for *levóne* "moon"), they tried to imitate German grammar and style. This kind of *dáytshmerish* influence was usually rejected by the mature Yiddish literary style of the later nineteenth century and beyond, but remained characteristic of newspaper Yiddish for much longer. A second type of nineteenth-century importation from contemporary literary German left a much more permanent imprint on the language. That is the genre of Western cultural concepts that the *maskílim* were working so hard to introduce. Such modern Yiddish words as *bavéung* (movement in the political or social sense), *partéy* (political party), *tsáytung* (newspaper), *unterdrikung* (suppression), and *zítzung* (meeting) come from the German press of this period. In some cases, a traditional Yiddish word has a traditional, homey air that differs markedly from the closest Western analog. A gathering of rabbinic scholars, for example, is an *asífe* (deriving from Hebrew); the rabbinic air would not do for a modern meeting of West-

ern intellectuals, so *farzámlung* was introduced based on the German *Versammlung*. *Din*, the Yiddish word for “law” deriving from Hebrew, came to refer to ancient Jewish law, while *gezéts* was imported to refer to a modern government law. Often the nuances are finer and less culture specific. Older *faynt hobn* (to hate) contrasts in modern Yiddish with the more scornful *hasn* (to loathe). Older *tsáytk* (ripe) refers to the ripeness of fruits and other edibles, while newer *rayf* has the added connotations of literary or sexual maturity. There are numerous cases where Yiddish inherited the same Germanic word twice, once in old times when the language was arising and then again in the nineteenth century during the maskilic modernizing, westernizing period. Examples include the old *vókhedik* (having a weekday, everyday, non-holiday, non-Sabbath spirit) versus newer *vékhntlakh* (weekly); *kunts* (trick) versus *kunst* (art). Moreover, nineteenth-century Yiddish was enriched by internationalisms, incorporating such modern Western concepts as *internatsyonál*, *literatúr*, *kultúr*, *politik*, *problém*, *relígye*, *protést*, *teáter*, *zhurnál*. These often have multiple parents (German, Russian, Polish, and more).

A second emerging Yiddish style relied heavily on Hebrew. The traditionalists (the anti-*maskilim*, so to speak) used this style in their tracts on Jewish ethics and law, translations of sacred works, and, in the south especially, in the evolving Hasidic storybook. One very productive paradigm, for example, is formation of a Yiddish verb from any traditional Hebrew present participle, conjugating with the Yiddish verb *zayn* “to be.” In addition to the everyday *máskem zayn* (agree) and *móyde zayn* (concede a point), many religious books were swimming in dozens or even hundreds of such Hebraic verbs, of the type *mediye zayn* (inform), *mefárnes zayn* (provide livelihood), *mesháne-mókem zayn* (change one’s place of residence). This style of Yiddish became as identified with sacred books and Hasidic storytelling as the Germanizing style was “naturally suited” for news reports, political tracts, and translations of Western educational works.

A third style of Yiddish, long prominent in Bible and prayer book translations, “rescued” many of the archaisms from this genre and kept them going within a modern, eastern linguistic framework. They included emotionally evocative words like *har* (master), *lugn* (look),





*náyert* (but or only), and constructions of verbs using *ton* (to do), as in *er tut zogn* (he says) instead of the everyday one-word conjugation (*er zogt*). Although square Jewish characters had by and large replaced the older *máshkit* font from the days of Lefin's Proverbs translation in 1814, certain sacred books, especially the *Tseneréne*, still the women's Bible, continued to appear in *máshkit* or in parallel editions, offering the buyer the old and new styles to choose from, to well past the midpoint of the nineteenth century.

A fourth style made use of local dialects rich in Slavisms that had replaced older words of Germanic origin, especially for everyday terms. The older Yiddish *érdepl* "potato" (literally, earth apple) continued to be used, but Litvaks were using *búlbe* (from Belarusian) or *búlve* (from Lithuanian), and southerners were using *kartóshke* from Slavic or *kartófl* (from modern German). Older *dil* (floor) was being supplanted by Slavic *padlóge* (in the north) or *pódlege* (in the south) or, in Belorussia, by the Germanic *brik* (literally, bridge), which came to be used for "floor" on the analogy of dialects of the Belarusian language, where the word for "bridge" came to double for "floor."

Hindsight is always a luxury. The proliferation of literary styles in the vernacular language, completely natural in the absence of a native literary tradition or any government (or even nongovernmental) authority, was a centrifugal force that could have generated a hundred local Yiddishes, especially as each written style came to be associated with a different Jewish tendency.

What happened is sometimes considered one of the notable wonders in the history of languages. In the absence of legal or educational authority, spread over a number of countries belonging to two separate empires, and with a good percentage of the native Jewish intelligentsia advocating Hebrew or Russian or German as the language of literary culture, written Yiddish nevertheless developed a standard form capable of rapid growth to the level of the great languages of Europe. It happened in a remarkably short time. The wider outline mirrors that of the early East European Haskalah generally. Native Yiddish speakers who started out promoting Hebrew (or Russian or German or Polish) ended up not only using Yiddish to popularize whatever they

considered vital for modernization, westernization, and enlightenment, but developed it using genre models they became intimate with while studying one or more European languages. It is not a statistically far-fetched projection to say that in this time and place of intensive Jewish civilization in Eastern Europe, it was only a matter of time before one of these Haskalah writers who took to Yiddish happened to be an exceptionally talented individual who was in the right place at the right time.

#### THE FIRST MODERN YIDDISH MASTER

The stage for the sudden emergence of Yiddish as a sophisticated modern language of a weighty European literature was set by a small number of individuals. Alexander Zederbaum (1816–1893), an ambitious Polish Jew with a talent for languages and a dedication to the ideals of the Haskalah, relocated to Odessa, which was rising to become one of Russia's most important cities in the middle of the nineteenth century. The atmosphere was more liberal than elsewhere in two ways. First, czarist controls were often less stringent in matters of culture. Second, the Jewish atmosphere was relatively modern with pluralistic acceptance of secular endeavors by Jews of various degrees of personal religious observance. It was technically within the pale of settlement, so Jews could freely move there, but it had no Jewish community until *after* Russia took over the entire region in the late eighteenth century (the story goes that they found six Jews when they took the local stronghold in 1789, and the oldest gravestone was from a few years after that). In other words, Odessa was a city whose sizable Jewish population (close to 20,000 by the middle of the nineteenth century) was “new,” composed entirely of “internal migrants” from Hasidic and Misnagdic, urban and rural, traditional and less traditional environments. Liberalism and modernity came naturally in a place lacking an established local leadership from earlier periods. It was a suitable place for Zederbaum to obtain legal permits from the government and financial support from advertisers and modernist philanthropists for his pet project: the first modern Hebrew weekly. It was called *Ha-méylits* from a biblical term that could mean either in-

terpreter or advocate (see Genesis 42:23; Job 33:23), and Zederbaum managed to keep it extraordinarily lively, with free debates and responses on national, international, literary, and Jewish communal affairs. He shunned the purist style of Hebrew that was keeping the language in stilts elsewhere and turned it into a lively medium that would overlap with today's understanding of something between a newspaper and a magazine. The one major problem was circulation. For all the Talmudists and traditionally learned Jews in the pale of settlement who were used to reading the traditional genres, there were precious few who could enjoy a newspaper in Hebrew.

Zederbaum was friendly with many *maskilim*. In terms of the language they thought most appropriate for developing modern European culture among East European Jews, there were three preferences, or streams, of Haskalah work going on: German (principally in the Austro-Hungarian empire), Russian or Polish (in the Russian empire), and Hebrew (across the board). The idea of a fourth, Yiddish, stream in a region where 100 percent of the Jewish population spoke Yiddish and close to that figure read the language never went anywhere after the pioneering but dead-end translation of Proverbs by Mendel Lefin was published at Tarnopol in 1814. As a result, further high culture development of Yiddish was stymied for a time. During the intervening decades and through the midpoint of the nineteenth century, more and more popular culture works were appearing in Yiddish. In addition to Chaikel Hurwitz's (1750–1822) adaptation of a book about Columbus and America in 1817, there were some writers who attempted to put Yiddish to literary use. Dr. Shloyme Ettinger (1803–1866) wrote a comedy called *Sérkale* (Sarah) about a powerful woman and her environment. But the anti-Yiddish *maskilim*, working in cahoots with Russian censors, prevented his Yiddish work from appearing in his lifetime, so its influence was minimal. His competitor, the classically maskilic, anti-Hasidic Israel Aksenfeld (1787–1866), saw one novel and one play published in 1861. Around 1850, a successful Hebrew writer in Vilna, Isaac-Meir Dik (1814–1893), turned to writing popular short novels in Yiddish that actually combined maskilic principles with traditional Judaism in a way that was simply not possible in the Hasidic south of Eastern Europe. Dik appreciated the

need to embed his morals in a fun story line. After turning to Yiddish, he became so popular that in 1864 the Romm publishing house in Vilna gave him a contract to write weekly novels. He was the first Yiddish writer to be a financial success (for his publishers at least).

But down in Odessa, in the circles of Alexander Zederbaum and his Hebrew weekly, there was one thinker who favored the creation of a modern European culture in Yiddish, though he was proficient in all the languages approved by the *maskilim*—Hebrew, German, and Russian. He was Yehoyshúe-Mórdechai (Shiye-Mórdkhe) Lifschitz (1829–1878), who dreamt of a grand new Jewish culture in Yiddish, just as Belarussians, Czechs, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, and many other nations were creating modern culture in the language of their peoples, in the spirit of romanticism and cultural nationalism. Shortly after Zederbaum launched his Hebrew weekly, Lifschitz persuaded him to launch a weekly Yiddish supplement that would fetch many more readers. That Yiddish supplement, called by the Hebrew name *Kol meváser* (or *Koyl meváser*; The Voice That Bringeth News, cf. Isaiah 40:9, 52:7–8), began to appear in 1862. Its detractors, who found a serious Yiddish supplement to a serious Hebrew paper rather incongruous, to put it politely, lampooned the name with the similar sounding Yiddish words *koyl mit váser* (coal with water).

Instead of imitating German or Russian, Zederbaum took his Yiddish style from traditional works of Jewish ethics which convey a story or idea along with its usable moral or didactic message. He took his linguistic usage from the Ukrainian dialect, peppered here and there with Germanisms, Russianisms, and elements of what would become the interdialect standard Yiddish of the future. The first issue appeared in October 1862. It led off with a story about the American Civil War.

AMERICA. Everyone should take an example of what strife can lead to from America. This was a happy land. People from all over the world made their way there and found their happiness, as long as they were willing to work. Over there, nobody asked anybody *who* he is, a Jew or a Christian, but rather *what* he is, a merchant, an artisan, or a laborer. The people themselves ruled in the country, without a king. In other words it was a republic. Every



was shipped to England, France, and Russia and other countries, and many other products as well. But there was one thing there that the whole world considered unjust. Everybody was shocked that in such a free country slaves were kept by the owners of plantations with fields for growing cotton and tobacco. These slaves were Negroes (these are the black people who lived in that country originally [!] and understand this work in a way that people from Europe could not). And they were kept in harsh conditions and tortured without mercy. In America itself, many protested about keeping slaves, but of course those who had their own interests and benefited from the slaves who worked for them almost for free, like horses, do not want to liberate them.

(Kol meváser, October 23, 1862.)

Zederbaum's weeklies in Hebrew (*Ha-méylits*) and Yiddish (*Kol meváser*) appeared side by side. In many little towns all over the pale of settlement and beyond, Jews waited for someone to get the weekly *blat* in the post. *Blat* literally means a "leaf" or "leaf of paper" and is traditionally used for a two-sided page of the Talmud. Now it acquired the second meaning of "newspaper," which it retains in folk usage, though *tsáytung* (from modern German *Zeitung*) eventually became the more formal Yiddish word. In the 1860s, in many *shtétlakh* (little towns) throughout Eastern Europe, Jewish readers waited for both *bléter* (plural of *blat*). The arrival of one in Hebrew and one in Yiddish, both with elegant biblical names, gave everyone something to anticipate and enjoy.

The appearance and commercial success of the first modern Yiddish newspaper in the Russian empire gave Lifschitz an opening to build his movement for modern Yiddish culture. As a first step, he started publishing pro-Yiddish pieces in *Kol meváser*. The very idea was outlandish, revolutionary thinking in the context of the time, place, and environment. Lifschitz would not have initiated his movement for Yiddish had the *maskilim* not attacked the language all those years. Some of their attacks were part of their anti-Hasidic, anti-religious ideology, coming at a time in history when Hasidism had elevated the status of Yiddish. Other attacks were in the interests of modernization and acculturation to modern Europe. The *maskilim* of Eastern Europe in-

tended to do Jews a favor by weaning them off their *Zhargón* and teaching them to be competent in German, Hebrew, Russian, or some combination. The constant barrage of anti-Yiddish attacks inspired this one *máskil* to come up with the alternative idea that the most appropriate language for a modern culture for the Jews of Eastern Europe was in fact their own spoken language. Lifschitz's one-man crusade, as it was at first, started with his poem in the ninth issue of *Kol meváser* at the end of 1862. The poem is called "Yudl un Yehudis" (popular Yiddish forms of Judah and Judith). For an audience unaccustomed to subtlety, it is provided with the subtitle "The Jews and Their Jewish Language" and takes the form of a rhymed dialogue between Yudl (the Jewish people) and Yehudis (Yiddish). Instead of trying to deny or escape the feminine associations of Yiddish, Lifschitz amplifies them and gives them new and daring romantic associations. Yiddish is the faithful everyday wife; she is no less pretty than other women but has not had their good fortune to be "polished day and night." She challenges her husband: "You just want to have pleasure from others" but then gives him the chance to make it all up. "If you pamper me and caress me, you will work yourself up into a sweat, but afterwards you'll have the ultimate pleasure." In the poem, Yiddish warns "her" husband that he cannot win back her competitor, Hebrew. "Trying to get her back is a waste of your time." The romantic and sexual images then broaden out to issues of equality with other nations.

If you want to be equal to other people, then don't keep that distance from me. Polish me, clean me up and I will be quite beautiful. You will see, how in a short time a great person will emerge. I will sing my song for you as the finest nightingale. I will be able to read and write in every branch of wisdom, all kinds of work, whatever you will want; let me just learn, I absorb things lightly, just try and you'll be full of joy, trust me, you will lose nothing, that I can solemnly swear to you. Believe me, I'm not thinking of myself, but of you.

(paraphrase in prose of Lifschitz's poem in *Kol meváser*, December 25, 1862.)

Lifschitz followed up his daring poem in Zederbaum's Odessa Yiddish weekly with a series of articles. What strikes the twenty-first-



century reader is that Yiddish could have been such a touchy subject in the first modern Yiddish weekly in the Russian empire in the early 1860s.

In a subsequent installment, Lifschitz dared to compare Yiddish with great European languages:

Some people accuse the Yiddish language of not sounding nice for them. So I will have the audacity to say that she sounds very beautiful! I will not even say *more* beautiful, but as beautiful as the nasalized French or lisping English, especially for the Yiddish ear. But the joy you can get out of every single thing depends on which cradle you were cradled in.

(Kol meváser, July 1, 1863.)

Lifschitz devoted the rest of his life to writing Yiddish dictionaries, including bilingual dictionaries confronting Yiddish with Russian in a way that highlights the wealth, specificity, and untranslatable nature of authentic Yiddish. The language in these works is the rich, hearty usage of his native dialect (Southeastern Yiddish, Volhynian branch). His Russian–Yiddish dictionary was first published in 1869 and went through several editions. The Yiddish–Russian counterpart appeared in 1876, two years before his death. But his pioneering pro-Yiddish articles and dictionaries, even taken together, are far from his most lasting achievement for the language he loved.

Lifschitz understood that making Yiddish a serious contender in the contemporary marketplace of East European Jewish ideas would take more than theorizing, dictionaries, or a weekly newspaper. He knew instinctively that Yiddish had to start producing major authors to become a prestigious medium of modern European culture. And, he “went and found” the person who would become the first great Yiddish writer, someone rather more talented than he could ever aspire to be, and he “pestered and plagued” that person until he switched from Hebrew to Yiddish, simply refusing to take no for an answer. That person was Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh (Sholom Jacob Abramowitz), who not only had enormous literary and stylistic talent, but had an early biography that took him to three different scenes of Jewish life in the pale of settlement, causing him to spend years and become in-

timately familiar with both northern (Litvak) and southern (Ukrainian) Yiddish—an ideal person to set the code, as it were, for modern standard literary Yiddish.

Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh (originally Broyde) was born in Lithuania in a village called Kapulla (Yiddish Kapúle, now Kapył, Belarus), south of Minsk, around 1836. His youth became unsettled after his father died when he was fourteen, and he spent time in various other towns and at a famous yeshiva in Vilna. At the age of seventeen, he started his long trek down south to Ukraine (a land of milk and honey to poor Lithuanian Jews) as an apprentice to a lame beggar, and eventually settled in Podolia, in Kamenitz-Podolsk (now in southwestern Ukraine). His earliest teenage writings combined a serious attraction to nature with a sharply satirical tone about people and their complexities. After becoming a teacher in Kamenitz-Podolsk in 1856, he began to publish pieces in Hebrew in various magazines, some satiric, some polemic, and some translations. He became known as a Hebrew writer in maskilic circles and settled in Odessa. After continued prodding by Lifschitz, Abramovitsh finally tried his hand at Yiddish prose. He rapidly came to adore his native language, which he molded into a nuanced, intricate, and powerful literary language. In addition to his native northern (Lithuanian) and his later southern (Ukrainian) dialect, Mendele made a number of grammatical decisions for literary use that were based on the actual patterns of convergence of Yiddish dialects in the Odessa region.

Still embarrassed to publish in Yiddish, he submitted his first novel to Alexander Zederbaum for *Kol meváser* under the pseudonym Senderl Moykher Sforim (Senderl the Bookseller). Zederbaum, fearing that people would think *he* was dabbling in Yiddish fiction (because Senderl is a Yiddish diminutive for Alexander), changed the author's pen name to *Méndeke Móykher Sfórim*. The persona of Mendele is a traveling salesman of books and religious articles who gets to ride all around the Pale with his horse and wagon and observe Jewish life up close. The first installment of Abramovitsh-Mendele's first novel, *Dos kléyne méntshale* (The Little Guy) appeared in the Odessa *Kol meváser* on November 24, 1864, which became the symbolic birthdate of modern Yiddish literature. In his 1889 autobiography (in Hebrew)

Mendele, by then well-known and greatly admired, reminisced about his turn to Yiddish in the early 1860s, not failing to highlight the age-old gender symbolism in the use of written Yiddish:

And our writers and stylists, who would only consider the Holy Language and didn't take an interest in the people, looked at Yiddish with condescension and with a lot of ridicule. And if one out of ten reminded himself about "that cursed woman" and wrote something in Yiddish, he would hide it behind seven locks or under his holy prayer shawl, so that the shame would not become public and it should not do damage to his reputation. So my discomfiture became very great, whenever it occurred to me that if I will get involved with that "unworthy" language my reputation would be put to shame. I also listened to the rebukes of my admirers among the "Lovers of the Hebrew Language" who assured me I would spoil my name and standing in Jewish society if I put any effort into this funny language. But my love for the constructive vanquished my stupid pride and I decided: Come what may, I will take pity on Yiddish, the cast-out daughter, and will work for the people. Moreover, one of my good friends [Y. M. Lifschitz] didn't stop insisting. . . .

From then on, I fell in love with Yiddish and became betrothed to the language forever, and gave her all the spices and herbs that she deserves, and she became a beautiful and graceful princess, who gave me many sons.

(From Mendele's autobiographical essay [in Hebrew], in *Nokhbum Sokolov, Seyfer zikoroyen lesoyfrey Yisroeyl* [Book of Memory of the Writers of Israel]. Warsaw, 1889.)

There continues to be sexual nuancing in the conceptualization of Hebrew and Yiddish, even for one and the same author (and especially when that author is a literary master in both). They can be seen as the "male" and "female" of Jewish culture, respectively, a little bit like the masculine and feminine parts of God in the Kabbalah, the Aramaic masculine *kudsho brikh hu* (the Holy One Blessed Be He) and the Hebrew feminine *shekhino* (Shechinah, usually translated as the "Divine Presence"). Alternatively, and sometimes concurrently, they are seen as two competing females, an image that expanded at the expense of the male-female image as the nineteenth century rolled on. The nature of the two females, whether, say, a wife and a lover, an old loyal everyday wife and a daring young lover, and many other images, came to define many of the Jewish movements of the late nineteenth century.



*Figure 7.5 Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem-Yankev Abramovitch, c. 1836–1917), founder of a major new European literature. There had been significant Yiddish talents for centuries, but Mendele was the first to create virtuoso works in a modern European genre (fiction). He implicitly codified a revised standard Yiddish literary language and inspired numerous young talents who invariably referred to him affectionately as the zéyde (grandfather) of modern Yiddish literature. (Menke Katz Collection)*

For all its prominence in advanced Talmudic and kabbalistic study, Aramaic as a third language was omitted from the nineteenth-century discussions among the modernists. The overt debates became a Hebrew–Yiddish affair. On the whole, it seems, those with the most

knowledge of that “most educated” of the three Jewish languages remained in that silent majority of religious Jews who stayed with their yeshivas and tomes of Talmud, commentaries, Kabbalah, and the associated literature.

In her outstanding and provocative study, Naomi Seidman traced the sexual symbolism not only in the Hebrew–Yiddish complex of discussions but *within* the story lines and characters and tales in the works themselves, especially those by Hebrew Abramovitsh turned Yiddish Mendele. She compared his “statements on the subject” with the actual content of his literary creations in both languages and through all the periods of his life. It is possible to see within Mendele himself a certain trend to transition from male–female to female–female characterization of the Hebrew–Yiddish interrelationship. As Seidman puts it:

In an introduction to his early Hebrew work on natural history, Abramovitsh sang the praises of Hebrew in conventional terms, personifying the language as his beloved mistress whom he adorned with his prose. In the case of his turn to Yiddish, the overdetermined “femininity” of the language produces a more ambivalent discourse. Drawing from a more ramified and physical vocabulary of sexual choice, courtship, and procreation, Abramovitsh describes his encounter with Yiddish as a tortured love affair.

Seidman carries it further in analyzing Mendele’s reported remark to his secretary, that when he looks for a proper Yiddish expression he calls on his “simple little fellow” (*yidale*, literally little Jewish fellow). But for Seidman, the choice of *yidale* (which is also, in Ukrainian or Polish Yiddish pronunciation, diminutive of the Yiddish letter *yud* for a *y* or *i* sound) has another meaning too.

This conflation of text and body moves in two directions: the Hebrew letter is shown to represent the Jewish body, especially in its male form (the yod sometimes signifies the penis as well as the hand); and the Jew becomes the earthly embodiment of what is simultaneously the smallest letter and the most sacred one, the yod.

(Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.)

Even if Seidman's modernist interpretation is one layer of allusion too far, she dramatically paves the way for a postmodernist phase of investigation seeking, ironically, to turn the clock backward to enable us to understand what Yiddish (and Hebrew) meant for the Jewish intelligentsia of the Haskalah period in Eastern Europe. Discourse shifted from discussions of what type of literature in what language would be appropriate for which gender (the discourse of older, traditional Ashkenaz) to a discourse about which Jewish language is itself masculine or feminine.

One of Seidman's permanent contributions is to demonstrate and document how biased (in favor of Hebrew, the purported great winner of everything) twentieth-century scholarship was, and how important it is to get past that to come to grips with the origins and subsequent development of the Jewish language politics that led away from traditional Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism to the various modern incarnations.

#### THE SECOND MASTER

For over two decades, the serious literary success of the Mendele phenomenon (Abramovitsh's books in Yiddish) seemed to many in the intelligentsia, whatever their views, as a fluke of some kind, a great writer having himself some fun in Odessa with a self-indulgent literary and linguistic experiment. Truth to tell, Mendele's books are not for everyone. He had no contemporary equal in literary sophistication, though other authors earned more by using Yiddish for another kind of Western culture: popular romances or pulp fiction. The border between "popular" and "literary" changes with time, place, and critical orientation, and the most popular (and highest-earning) author may be resented by others in the literary community not only for the loftiest of motives. The man at the center of the eventual storm called himself Shomer, a pen name made from an unusual acronymic of the final letters of his three names, Nokhem-Meir Shaykevitsh. In his youth in the shtetl Niezvizh (now Niazvizh, Belarus), Shaykevitsh (1849–1905) started writing Hebrew novels with names like *Ahavas kédem* (Love of the East or Love of the Ancient) and a collection of poems called *Hórey besómim* (The Mountains of

Spices). Eventually he became a correspondent for Zederbaum's Odessa Hebrew weekly, *Ha-méylits*.

When Shomer moved to Vilna, a leading Hebraist *máskil* publisher, S. J. Finn (Fuenn, 1818–1890), saw that his material would be a commercial hit in Yiddish. Finn considered it natural that popular works appear in the vernacular while Hebrew be reserved as the literary language of the intelligentsia, thereby preserving “two-thirds” of traditional Ashkenazic trilingualism in the modern Jewish book market. When he approved the result of Shomer's first attempt in 1876, the young man went on to produce nine new Yiddish novelettes in the coming nine days. Sometime later, the major Jewish publishing house in Lithuania, Romm, took him on as an in-house author, asking if he could match the output of another very popular Yiddish novelist of the time, Jacob Dineson (1856–1919), who had sold almost a quarter million copies of his novel *Ha-neeóvim v'ha-neímim oder der shvártser jungermántshik* ([in elegant Ashkenazic Hebrew:] The Beloved and the Pleasant [switching to earthy Yiddish:] or The Dark Whippersnapper). “No problem,” replied Shomer, who produced three long novels in 1879 and six more in 1880. They had titles like *The Religious Murderer* and *The Blind Orphaness*. By 1882, Shomer was directing his own theater company, which specialized in dramatizations of his own books. By 1888, he had fifty full-length novels under his belt and had become a hit with a broad spectrum of the population.

What happened after that is eerily reminiscent of what transpired in late-sixteenth-century Ashkenaz, when “the rabbis” ganged up on *King Arthur*, *Bovo of Antona*, *Ditrikh of Bern*, and the other secular romances whose popularity they feared. This time around, in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, it was not rabbis but the literati, a new class of intellectual leaders among the Jews of Eastern Europe. For all the various maskilic and post-maskilic tendencies, be they Hebraist, Yiddishist, or in some rare cases, assimilationist (Polonist, Russianist, and so forth), there was a new worship of “serious, good literature” that amounted to a kind of psychological transference of the adulation of the Talmudic scholar who produced *khidúshim* (innovations, new ideas, novel solutions to old problems). In that sense, the East European Haskalah, in all the guises and versions it morphed into

in the later nineteenth century, managed to create a new set of Jewish heroes, including *der shráyber* (the writer), *der redáktor* (the editor), and sooner or later *der inteligént*, which quickly gave birth to Yiddish feminine counterparts—*di shráyberin*, *di redaktórshe*, *di inteligéntke*. For many Jews, these new heroic titles coexisted with continuing adulation of rabbinic prowess.

Against this emergence of a modern Yiddish and Hebrew intelligentsia, the late 1880s gang-up on Shomer became a joint effort of Hebrew, Yiddish, and even Russian-language Jewish writers, academics, and intellectuals. First came concerted attacks on Shomer and the “damage” that his best-selling novels were allegedly inflicting on popular morals. Among the attackers were Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860–1941), Hebrew writer David Frishman (1859–1922), and the Hebrew (and Yiddish) journalist Y. Kh. Ravnitsky (1859–1944). What is most important for the story of Yiddish is perhaps the impetus to competition that Shomer’s commercial success unleashed. But Shomer himself felt driven out of his natural literary milieu. He moved to America in 1889, where popular Yiddish tastes were still on the raw side and he largely sank (from a literary point of view at least), though retaining his mass appeal. Shomer got a raw deal from life and history. For the future of Yiddish as a serious literary language, however, his popular success was a godsend. So much of the Haskalah had involved tiny circles of intellectuals writing, it often seemed, almost for themselves. Where was the audience for all this enlightened stuff? A famous old Talmudic dictum seemed relevant: “The mutual envy of writers leads to the production of ever more wisdom” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate The Last Gate 21a, 22a). Nearly half a century after Shomer’s death, his daughters, Roza Shomer-Batshelles and Miriam Shomer-Tsunzer, put out a worthy tome in New York, *Úndzer fóter Shómer* (Our Father Shomer, 1950) to restore their father’s reputation.

It so happened that the major “Shomer basher” was the writer destined to become the second great literary master after Mendele. He was Sholem Rabinovitsh (1859–1916), much better remembered by his pen name Sholem Aleichem (taken from his first name and the traditional Jewish “hello” upon shaking hands, *sholem-aléykhem*). Sholem Aleichem penned what for a humorist seems to be an uncharacteristically



vilifying pamphlet. Called *Shómers mishpet* (Shomer's Trial), it appeared in 1888, accusing Shomer of everything from lifting his plots from foreign-language literature, to being cynical and vulgar instead of edifying and ethical. Most ominously, it included the health warning that nobody should let school boys or girls read this stuff. The lengthy pamphlet is written in the form of a transcript of a trial. While sophisticated readers would have enjoyed the humor of a mock trial, more naive people who had only recently come to modern literature might well have thought that their beloved Shomer had really been put on trial on various serious charges.

But despite this one bitter polemic, Sholem Aleichem was a giant of a writer who buried Haskalah didactics not with polemic pamphlets but by showing that deep and subtle humor that was also serious literature could be brought to bear on the various sectors of contemporary Jewish society, from the most religious to the most secular. His rich literary Yiddish is an outgrowth of Mendele's, and represents a stylistic maturity and semantic wealth that can only result from many centuries of intensive Jewish living in a compactly settled Jewish civilization. It is for that reason that Sholem Aleichem translates so poorly; so much of the material is embedded in the language which is itself embedded in the civilization. In one section of a "memoir," the narrator returns to his shtetl after it has been "modernized" somewhat, following an absence of some years, only to find that where there were no "newspapers" before (and the word for "newspapers" itself still sounded funny in Yiddish) there were now *two*. The old simple life where everybody knew where everything stood, was now replaced by two "competitors" for the Jewish hearts and minds of the shtetl:

Now, there were two Yiddish newspapers in town: The *Yármulke* [traditional religious skullcap] and the *Kápelish* [a modern hat]. It was self-evident that the *Yármulke* is a religious, old-fashioned paper for the Orthodox, while the *Kápelish* is a modern, radical newspaper for the progressive elements. You could figure out the tendencies of these two competing publications by the mottos on the masthead. The *Yármulke* printed right on top with very large letters: "To God and to Man" while the *Kápelish* had printed, also on

top and also with very large letters the rather modest motto “I am here and it’s all here!”

It’s difficult to say when these two papers were established and which of them is older—because each says that it is the *first* and the *only* Jewish publication in Kasrilevke, and ignores, excludes the other, not mentioning the other’s name, forbidden as for a Jew to eat pork, unless of course there is a grave necessity, for example, to expose and put the other to shame. Then the *Yármulke* would call its neighbor the *Crushed Hat* and the *Kápelish* would respond with *The Moldy Yámperke*. But most of the time, it’s done more discreetly and each dutifully avoids mention of its competitor. For example, when the *Kápelish* wants to talk about its neighbor without mentioning its name, it will instead of “*Yármulke*” prefer to provide a list of names according to the Jewish alphabet: “the *évyen, bátlen, grober-yúng, dálfn, hunt, véytsid-koskhe, zoylel-vesóyvenik, khótsef, tintler, yidlák, keylev-shebiklóvim, léydikgeyer, móser, núdnik, svólitsh, amórets, provokátor, foylyák, tseráes, káptsn, rétaKh, shóyte, téraKh*, whose name we frankly prefer not to mention.”

This was a big hit in Kasrilevke, and the *Kápelish* was sold out. Everybody went around with the alphabet, reciting it by heart. This, naturally, caused the *Yármulke* considerable concern, and in its turn it came out the next day with its reply, also according to the alphabet: “We have read this particular alphabet of a certain *óysvorf, bód-yung, gánef, dover-ákher, hultáy, vovkeláke, zhúlik, kházer, treyfnyák, yungátsh, kol-bóynik, lígner, mámzer, nakhál, skandalíst, azes-pónem, parkh, tsoyrer-hayhúdim, krikher, róshe, téraKh’s éynikl*, but we have decided not to sully our pen with a reply.”

The reader over in Kasrilevke happens to like this type of literature rather more than other genres. There is a name for it. It is called “criticism” and he loves it when the editors of both papers “criticize” each other. On a day when there is no “criticism” in the paper, it doesn’t seem to sell very well at all.

*(Shólem-Aléykhem, Kasrilevker progrés [Progress in Kasrilevke], 1914–1915.  
Usually in the volume Fun Kasrilevke [From Kasrilevke] of the various multivolume editions.)*

The layers of language in this excerpt could be the point of departure for a dissertation. There is everything from a word for “old fool” deriving from Terah, Abraham’s father in the book of Genesis (chapter 11), to Yiddishized forms of such hearty contemporary Russian words as *nakhál* and *svolotsh*. Layers of Jewish history represented

include the Diaspora in ancient Persia (a popular epithet for “Jew baiter” from Esther 3:10; 9:10, plus one of Haman’s sons from 9:7). Some words reek of the relatively new vocabulary of writers and intellectuals hurling insults at one another (like *tíntler*, “an ink-thrower who thinks he’s a writer” or *skandalíst* for “scandal monger”). The word for “hypocrite” comes from the prayer book (*véytsidkoskhe*, literally “and Your righteousness” refashioned in Yiddish to mean “holier than thou”). Vocabulary is freely drawn from all three major components of the language as recombined in Yiddish over the centuries. Many individual Yiddish words, wholly indivisible within the structure of Yiddish, come from diverse sources. These include *zoylel-vesóyvenik* (the biblical bad boy son who is a glutton and drunkard, after Deuteronomy 21:20, with a hilarious veneer provided by the Slavic-derived suffix *nik*); *treyfnyák* (where Hebrew-derived *treyf* “un-kosher” combines with the Yiddish pejorative Slavic-derived suffix *nyák* to mean “someone who goes out of the way to eat what is forbidden”); *kolbóynik*, which wittily juxtaposes the name of a popular inclusive edition of the prayer book, *kol-boy*, from Hebrew for “everything in it,” with Slavic-derived suffix *nik*; the resulting word means “a rogue who combines in himself just about every conceivable vice.” One of the worst insults in Yiddish, derived entirely from Slavic roots but psychically Yiddishized, also occurs in a list of one of Sholem Aleichem’s Kasrilevke editors: *núdnik* meaning a bore or pest, someone who has nothing of interest to say. The various people defined by the suffix *nik* by the way all have feminine equivalents with *nitse*, hence *zoylel-vesóyvenitse*, *kolbóynitse*, and *núdnitse*.

Many of Sholem Aleichem’s best-known characters were created in weekly Yiddish newspaper serials and later expanded into book-length works; some became everyday words in Yiddish. One of them, Menákhem-Méndl (Menachem Mendel), is the classic *lúftmentsh* (a person of the air), living all his life from half-baked schemes to get rich. Then there is Tevye the milkman, now internationally famous from the adaptations known as *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye is packed full of Hebrew quotes from the prayer book, and he has all the joy and sadness of a simple Jew of those times who is blessed with many daughters. Then there is *Motl Peyse-dem-khazns* (Mottel, son of the

cantor Peyse), who sees the whole world, traveling from the shtetl in Ukraine through western Europe, to America, through the naive yet not-so-naive eyes of a little boy.

Sholem Aleichem was the first to demonstrate that Yiddish literature could attain a higher level and still be popular, especially if disseminated first through the periodic press and subsequently in book form. This was a new kind of Haskalah, in the sense of being out to modernize and Europeanize the masses through popular education, although it was centered on the development of the very language *maskilim* loved to disparage. That is one of the great ironies of his success. Another is the degree to which Sholem Aleichem could make fun of moderns as well as traditionals, something the founders of Haskalah were incapable of considering.

Growing into a first-class writer, and a highly successful one, by using the rich everyday language of simple East European Jews to gently satirize the world, Sholem Aleichem did more for Yiddish than any pro-Yiddish movement ever could. With his impact in Eastern Europe, maskilic leaders, Hebraists, assimilationists, and others who had scorned the “trash novels” of his immediate predecessors, began to sound foolish when they said that Yiddish was not a serious language of literature. The debates about language continued, sometimes even more bitterly, because the Hebraist-Zionists resented the successes of Yiddish; but they could not resist Sholem Aleichem, himself a committed supporter of Zionism.

But the stunning growth of high-level Yiddish literature, poetry and prose alike (especially prose) owes a lot more to Sholem Aleichem and to the vicissitudes of his biography than just the recognition due a fine writer. In 1883, Sholem Rabinovitsh got married to a woman whose father was not overly thrilled at her choice. When his father-in-law died in 1885, Sholem Aleichem found himself suddenly in control of a fortune. He moved to Kiev and settled into a prestigious apartment house in the center of the city and quickly set out to “create a new Yiddish literature” by publishing at his own expense a series of anthologies of new Yiddish writing that would boost, popularize, and inspire serious writers to come forward. He called it the *Yidishe fólksbiblyoték* and published two volumes, in 1888 and 1889. There would



Figure 7.6 Humorist Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) was the first Yiddish writer to achieve great fame and inspire love among East European Jews of all persuasions. Sholem Rabinowitz of Ukraine took this pen name from *shólem-aléykhem*, the traditional Yiddish “hello” (upon shaking hands), to which the reply is *aléykhem-shólem*. (Image from *Shólem-Aléykhem bukh*; Morris Weinberg, New York, 1926)

have been more but he was not much of a businessman and lost his father-in-law’s fortune on the Kiev stock exchange. But in those two years, he did far more than just publish fine work in Yiddish. He created the public perception of a sophisticated new Yiddish literature that stood above the politics of the day. Sholem Aleichem understood that this perception required more than anthologies of good material. It required a kind of national myth, and it would have been too egocentric even for a great writer to declare himself the founder of “real” Yiddish literature, especially while he was out bashing Shomer, and by implication, Shomer’s contemporaries Dik and Dineson who also delighted in the more popular vein of fiction. Instead, Sholem Aleichem wisely began to proclaim in the early 1880s, even before his short-lived wealth, that Mendele was *der zéyde*, “the grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature, and that he, Sholem Aleichem, was *der éynikl*, “the grandson.” Sholem Aleichem, the gregarious populist who enjoyed public readings and the adoration of the crowds who would greet him anywhere in the Jewish world, managed to find, by the early 1880s an ideal “guru” in the austere intellectual Mendele, who rarely left his famous study in Odessa.

After establishing a personal friendship with Mendele, Sholem Aleichem publicized the new “myth of Yiddish literature” in the two volumes of his *Yidishe fólks-biblyoték* in 1888 and 1889. In addition to

announcing to the public that this new literature had a grandfather, these volumes included the best work of several of his “grandchildren.” One of the talents Sholem Aleichem discovered (before relations between them predictably soured) was destined to become the third modern master of Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem’s bankruptcy ended his ability to play master of the field who had the power to choose, edit, and publish. At that point, the major talent he had discovered in the course of gathering material for the *Yidishe fółks-biblyoték* again moved the “main address” of Yiddish, which Sholem Aleichem had in a sense moved from Mendele’s Odessa to his own base in Kiev, this time to Warsaw, Poland. The new and lasting romantic popular conception of modern Yiddish literature would be not of a grandfather and grandchild, but of a triumvirate of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Y. L. Peretz.

#### THE THIRD MASTER

Peretz, born in 1852 in Zamoshtsh (Zamosc), in the district of Lublin, Poland, acquired religious knowledge from his mother and broad secular knowledge from his father. The family, while observant, was among the small minority of non-Hasidim in deep Poland. After working in various family businesses and mastering Hebrew, Polish, and Russian in addition to his native Yiddish, he began to publish poetry in Hebrew in the middle of the 1870s. His poems were often maskilic in tone, with a didactic quality, but also with a rare sharp satire that was often aimed at Hebrew literature of the day, which he thought to be obsessed with word games and weak on content. He qualified as a lawyer and did well. Yiddish poems that he wrote were often put to tunes by local *klezmórim* (traditional musicians) in Zamoshtsh and sung around town. By the mid-1880s his Hebrew poetry was changing tone from satire to a loving, longing romanticism, at the heart of which stood the East European shtetl, the small town with its heavily Jewish population and its many inimitable features. Almost uniquely in Hebrew literature of the time, his *Ho-ír haktáno* (The Small City, *Ha-ír haketaná* in Israeli) is a prototype of poetry that sees the pleasing, romantic side of shtetl life. Another Hebrew poem of the 1880s,



Figure 7.7 *Yehuda Pen's Reading a Newspaper*. Around 1914, artist Yehuda Pen (1854–1937) painted this image of a modern character reading the paper. Looking like he could be a secularist or even a revolutionary, he is immersed in his St. Petersburg-based *Fraynd* (Friend). (By permission of the Belarusian Museum of Arts, Minsk)

“Manginoys ha-zmán,” represents a first in modern Hebrew poetry. Its title translates “Melodies of the Time,” but with a concomitant playful allusion to the occurrence of the biblical *manginoth* (at Lamentations 8:63, “I am their song,” in the sense of “the object of their songs of contempt and triumph”). It is a Hebrew poem in praise of Yiddish, demonstrating how a bilingual poet can feel free with both languages. For this one poem, the young Hebrew poet fell out of favor with the leaders of the Hebrew literature establishment. Unknowingly, they did Yiddish a huge favor. The young Peretz had not even heard of Sholem Aleichem. After being put down so harshly for one pro-Yiddish poem, Peretz made it his business to find out more about “this Yiddish literature” that Sholem Aleichem was popularizing. Pushing forty, he suddenly had the impetus to turn from competent Hebrew poetry to virtuoso Yiddish prose, just when Sholem Aleichem and his scouts were scouring Eastern Europe for new Yiddish talent. The rest, as they say, is history. Peretz’s ballad “Monish” appeared in Sholem Aleichem’s



Figure 7.8 In contrast, in *The Watchmaker*, Pen portrays a traditional watchmaker reading the conservative Warsaw daily *Haynt* (Today). Taken as a pair, the two paintings explore the tradition-oriented and modernist Yiddish cultures that were rising simultaneously. Yehuda (or Yuri) Pen established the first Jewish art school in the Russian empire in Vitebsk in November 1897. Its best-known pupil was Marc Chagall. (By permission of the Belarusian Museum of Arts, Minsk)

*Fólks-biblyoték*. Peretz became famous overnight, but he was furious at Sholem Aleichem for extensively editing the poem. Two years later in Warsaw, in 1890, Peretz published his *Bakánte bílder* (Familiar Images), with an introduction by the famous Dineson. Peretz quickly established a new kind of Yiddish literature with this book, one that was radically different from both Mendele's and Sholem Aleichem's work, and even more different from the mass-market popularizers. Peretz, though by then a committed socialist and a secularist in his personal life, took the traditional Hasidic tale and recast it as the modern Yiddish short story, with romantic and expressionist overtones. Completely gone was the need to "debate" with Hasidism or any religion. This was literature for



the sake of art. Shunning Mendele's and Sholem Aleichem's styles of conjuring up living Yiddish speech in their prose, Peretz devised a crisp, terse, Europeanizing style.

Sholem Aleichem's loss of his father-in-law's fortune meant the end of the Kiev-based *Yidishe fólks-biblyoték*, a big blow for this brand of sophisticated Yiddish literature. The vacuum was quickly filled by Peretz, who became a hero not only to Polish Jews interested in modern literature but to much of the Yiddish reading public everywhere. Peretz had his license to practice law revoked by the authorities in 1889 on suspicion of revolutionary activities. After participating in an economic expedition around Poland (which he used to gather materials for his stories), his friends in Warsaw got him a job with the Warsaw Jewish Community that kept him for the remaining quarter century of his life. In 1891, Peretz launched his own *Yidishe biblyoték* in Warsaw and followed up with other collections, which quickly replaced the lapsed Kiev-based *Yidishe fólks-biblyoték*. In the mid-1890s, Peretz began to issue one-time-only publications in honor of one of the Jewish holidays. They quickly became known as *Peretz's blétlakh* (Peretz's magazines) or *Yóntef blétlakh* (Holiday magazines). Growing as a writer and a leader of Polish Jewry (particularly its moderate socialist wing), Peretz proved to be the "right one" among the three Yiddish masters of the day to build a new sophisticated secular Yiddish culture that would have Yiddish literary creativity and education at its center. His private address in Warsaw, Tsigliana no. 1 (the street is now Peretza in Warsaw), became the symbolic world address of high-culture Yiddish, and aspiring young writers from all over Eastern Europe began to make the pilgrimage to Tsigliana 1 to show Peretz their work and ask whether they had a future as Yiddish writers. Among the future twentieth-century masters who made the trek were the momentous short story writer Lamed Shapiro (1878–1948), leading Yiddish novelists Dovid Bergelson (1884–1952) and I. J. Singer (1893–1944), and the mystical symbolist Der Nister (Pinye Kahanovitsh, 1884–1950). This is how Shapiro remembered his visit in a later memoir in Yiddish.

At the end of 1896, almost a boy still, I made it to Warsaw with the explicit intention of taking the city by storm. What were my qualifications for this march of victory? Zero. Except maybe for good intentions which had expressed themselves by my starting to write—and tear it all up—at the age of eight.

Having turned up in Warsaw, I got dressed up in my hotel in a cap with a glossy visor, like those students of certain secondary schools. And that is how I rang the bell on the door of Tsigliana no. 1. Near the door there was a brass plaque on which were engraved the words [in Hebrew] “Y. L. Peretz receives guests at 4 o’clock in the afternoon.” Peretz himself opened the door. His normally big eyes got even bigger when he saw what I looked like. . . as if a kind of Genghis Khan were standing right there in front of him.

(Lamed Shapiro, *Der shráyber geyt in khéyder*  
[*The Writer Goes to School*]. New York: Aley, 1945.)

However Lamed Shapiro remembered his boyhood trek to Tsigliana no. 1, he was one of the many right choices Peretz made as he encouraged those with real talent to dream of a career as a writer in a language that had no state and many detractors. As someone who had *succeeded* in Hebrew and then switched to Yiddish, Peretz also set the example of Yiddish as a choice, not just a necessity, and something to feel proud of. It was the modest beginning of something that would soon come to be called Yiddishism in the sense of a vision of modern Judaism that stressed creativity in Yiddish with universal education and a “humanistic reinterpretation” of the ancient treasures of Judaism as a culture, which meant that the stories in the Bible and the beliefs of the Hasidim could be components of a culture, without anybody having to believe in them literally. In the political atmosphere of the day, these ideas arose alongside the spread of socialism in its many varieties. Peretz, the first major Jewish thinker and leader for whom Yiddish culture was a prize treasure of the modern Jewish people of Eastern Europe, developed Yiddishism in the context of humanism and the notion that all people—and peoples—are inherently of equal value, a notion at odds with the chosen people belief of the traditionalist religious majority and at least part of the Zionist-Hebraist move-



*Figure 7.9* By the 1890s, this picture postcard image of Y. L. Peretz sitting at his famous desk at Tsigliana Street no. 1 in Warsaw became a symbol of literary sophistication and authority. Young writers from all over Eastern Europe made the pilgrimage to Warsaw to show Peretz their work and hear his opinion. Among them were future masters I. J. Singer, Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister, and Lamed Shapiro. (Menke Katz Collection)

ment. Zionism made significant strides during the 1890s in Europe, where Theodor Herzl was turning it into a real political force, and crucially in Palestine, where East European migrants were building the nucleus of the future State of Israel. It is symbolic of the contemporaneous rise of the two major Jewish political movements, that the Jew



Figure 7.10 By the end of the nineteenth century, Yiddish was ripe for the trappings of modern national languages. One was the first daily Yiddish newspaper in the Russian empire, the Fraynd (Friend), founded in St. Petersburg on January 5, 1903, by Saul Ginsburg and Shabsai Rapoport. It was moved to Warsaw in 1910.

ish Labor Bund was founded and the First Zionist Congress in Basel convened in the same year, 1897. Around the same time, the fiery nature of Yiddish debates continued unabated. But now the debate was fueled by a new development: the launch of the first Yiddish daily, the *Fraynd* (Friend) in St. Petersburg in 1903.

## *New Visions of Judaism*

### REFORM AND COUNTERREFORM IN GERMANY

The assimilationist tendencies in Central and Western Europe enabled a growing number of individual Jews to feel accepted in wider society, and personalities emerged who made serious contributions to the wider society. But in terms of Jewish culture, much of it simply resulted in monolingual German-speaking Germans of the Jewish (or Hebrew or Mosaic) faith (or of the "Semitic race") and, analogously, English-speaking English, Dutch-speaking Dutch, French-speaking French, and others who never spoke Hebrew or any other Jewish language in everyday life. Language is at the heart of a distinct living civilization, and with its loss, the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi of the west became the gentile-speaking Jewish-faith citizen of Ashkenazic origin. Gaining a degree of acceptance in Germany, some Jews found it easier to be baptized and to secure their children's future by baptizing them when they were young and untraumatized by being *Juden*, rather than follow the second part of Mendelssohn's program and remain staunchly of the "Mosaic faith." Mendelssohn's family became the most poignant example, at least for historians. In 1822, for example, his son Abraham decided to formally become a Christian

“because it is the form of religion acceptable to the majority of civilized human beings.”

Feeling threatened by encroaching assimilation, German Jews remaining loyal to the “religious Mosaic heritage” came on a new idea: make synagogue worship and other aspects of Judaism as similar as possible to German Christianity. An early symbol became the use of an organ at Sabbath services (defying the traditional laws of Sabbath), perhaps pioneered by Israel Jacobson in his school in Seesen in 1810 and then by other laymen. The founders of Reform Judaism often replaced Hebrew or Aramaic prayers with newly minted German ones, did away with “inconvenient” beliefs such as hopes for a return to Zion (which would be disloyal to Germany), and “lightened” the difficulties of many laws of marriage, divorce, and so forth. One of the major figures was Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), a German Jew who came up with the idea of Judaism as an evolving, living organism, in which many ceremonial traditions could be retained without too much violence to modern sensibilities. A second major leader, Samuel Holdheim (1806–1860), came from Kempno in Posen on the borderlands of Polish Jewry and actually studied Talmud in the traditional Yiddish-speaking milieu in his youth. He developed a convert’s zeal and became more radical than Geiger, demanding that reform be revolutionary rather than evolutionary and insisting that Jewish legal emancipation in Germany was the onset of the messianic age, meaning that ceremonial laws are therefore canceled! He derived all this from an opinion in the Talmud he came across during his traditional youth.

German Jewry provided two “counter-reformations” that were equally destined to be long-lived. Both supplied archetypes that became popular in America and other countries. There had been tensions for decades between the Reform movement and those who thought it went too far, in both Germany and America. The more conservative elements finally broke away in 1885 at a conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, when the Reform movement decided to abrogate many details of the laws of kosher and unkosher food. Alexander Kohut (1842–1894), a Hungarian Jewish scholar, bolted and formed the group that became known as Conservative Judaism.

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City became a major intellectual and educational center of the new middle-of-the-road modernizing movement. The Reform and Conservative movements had no use for Yiddish—the hated *Jargon* of East European Jews—but the Conservative movement, especially in America, provided a home for many immigrants from Eastern Europe who had forsaken the natural, traditionalist stance (Ultraorthodoxy, as it came to be known in America) of the Old Country.

An even more conservative counter-reformation came in the guise of Neoorthodoxy, also a creation of German Jewry. Neoorthodoxy entails a synthesis with modernity and is, perhaps surprisingly, closer to contemporary language debates precisely because the Neoorthodox of Germany decided to retain the full baggage of Jewish law and religion while dumping distinctive Jewish language, dress, and everyday culture. The modern Neoorthodox Jew, his knitted skullcap and hair clip and her comfortable trousers and sneakers, is a direct outgrowth of the third German Jewish movement of the nineteenth century. Given that ideologies closest to each other tend toward the most mutual acrimony, distrust, and repulsion, it is hardly surprising that Neoorthodox and traditional Orthodox (Ultraorthodox or Haredi) have little use for each other in spite of a shared belief in all 613 commandments that rabbinic Judaism derives from the Torah. German Jewish Enlightenment, the ensuing Reform movement, and the various counter-reformations (Neoorthodoxy and Conservatism) all remained antagonistic toward the allegedly backward and embarrassing *Ostjuden* (East European Jews) and their Yiddish language. Nevertheless, Conservatism was more tolerant toward Yiddish, and a few sectors of Neoorthodoxy, especially in its American twentieth-century incarnations, even embraced it. In particular, the Lithuanian tradition of the *Misnágdim*, in its émigré manifestations in the west, often meshed into Neoorthodoxy and remained sympathetic toward Yiddish. One of the greatest modern Orthodox figures in the United States, the Lithuanian born Yoshe-Ber (Joseph Dov) Soloveitchik (1903–1993), even found classical legal grounds for declaring a certain cosanctity of Yiddish. In a 1961 article, he based his view on a doctrine of “associative linkages” with primary Jewish religious

features. But that was an exception as far as Neoorthodoxy in general was concerned, and Soloveitchik's thoughts on the subject had scarcely any effect, even on his most ardent admirers.

One major accomplishment of all the new German-Jewish persuasions and their transplantation to other western countries, was the rise of a Jewish metaculture in German and English and other languages that enabled immersion in various aspects of the Jewish heritage using the tools and institutional possibilities of the West. In addition to Judaic studies, in the spirit of Zunz and his followers, the trend also made way for the emergence of the Western-style rabbi who is expected to have a university degree in addition to rabbinical ordination. A second major metaculture involved the arts. Whether in literature, painting, or other fields, modernists could focus on selected aspects from ancient, recent, or contemporary Jewish culture as material. Crucially, the Western Jewish metaculture enabled material derived from things Jewish to be used in contributions to general culture, knowledge, or theory.

#### THE SITUATION IN THE EAST

In nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, the two indigenous languages for new kinds of Jewish creativity, Yiddish and Hebrew, came to be associated with differing worldviews, even if the initial literary masters of each were usually masters in both. In other words, each language was acquiring modern symbolic associations not entirely unrelated to their earlier associations in traditional Ashkenaz. With both, East European Jewry, by synthesizing undiminished Jewish culture with Western models, succeeded in creating much that was simultaneously Jewish and European. This synthesis was breathtaking in its progress and achievements.

At each juncture, however, traditional religion and culture continued as usual for the silent majority. For them, the third Jewish language of Ashkenaz, Aramaic, ignored by the modern movements (often lumped together with Hebrew), remained the medium for significant rabbinic, Talmudic, and kabbalistic creativity. Aramaic managed to "escape" modernism, although it left a profound stamp on



some of the most exquisite literary styles of both modern Yiddish and Hebrew. Any Aramaic works written in recent centuries, and those being written now, are almost invariably the work of traditionalist scholars in the fields of Talmud and Kabbalah. The overwhelming majority of individual books published (many of them editions of one text) in all three Jewish languages in Eastern Europe emanated from traditional Jewry, not the new movements. A new Hasidic storybook in Yiddish about a wonder-working *tsádik* in Ukraine or Poland, a new tome on Kabbalah in Aramaic in Vilna, a new work on Jewish law in Hebrew in Poland, and all sorts of other works that continued the unilinear and uninterrupted traditions of Ashkenaz, were the primary staples of nineteenth-century Eastern Ashkenazic Jewry's book production. Study of the modernist (and most original) incarnations of Jewish culture in East Europe must not obscure the reality that they were *minority* movements, and most of their adherents also retained many old Ashkenazic practices and traditions. The masters of each "secular outburst" had themselves been brought up in the traditionalist environment (or in an environment that had traditionalism in the immediate living background). Although they may have rebelled against it, that tradition remained part of them and to a lesser degree their children and to an even lesser degree their grandchildren. Finally, in many cases, nothing was left of the old religious tradition, at which point the secular outburst also wanes (though it does not necessarily disappear in one stroke). The limited lifespan of the secular outbursts does not detract from the extraordinary creativity of the permanent contributions they make.

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the Haskalah movement, only a few decades old in Eastern Europe, was splitting up even as it was maturing. Each of the tendencies can be defined in terms of two interlocking factors: first, the preferred language of Jewish culture and, second, ideology. There were to be sure conditioning factors. There was the legal and political situation in the Russian empire and the feelings of its citizens (not only Jews) in the western regions that were forcibly annexed in the late eighteenth century. And, there was a more specific racially biased anti-Jewish attitude of the czarist

government. Handicaps, as noted earlier, included at various times double taxation; forced relocation from hamlets to towns; confinement in the original area of Jewish settlement (the pale of settlement); forced conscription that at its worst, during the reign of Nicholas I (from 1825 to 1855), entailed twenty-five years of military service starting in childhood and often leading to baptism or premature death; and, in conjunction with radical (sometimes imported) *maskilim*, constant government interference with traditional Jewish education, with an eye to Russianizing various institutions where Jews educated their young. The backdrop of Russian oppression made a small minority of Jews more interested in utopian solutions, as well as in the plight of non-Jews who were voicing dissatisfaction with things. For many of the Jews' immediate non-Jewish friends and neighbors, there was an analogous national issue. Belarusians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians, and others resented Russian suppression of their individual cultures as well as Russian control over their once proud independent nations (Belarusians and Lithuanians, incidentally, both looked back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as their golden past).

The ideas of romantic nationalism and the flourishing of the "folk" were taking root and adding a powerful cultural and psychological dimension to the various national movements in Eastern Europe. One factor common to nearly all of them is language. Each people had its language and demanded that it be recognized as their official language, rather than a subservient local dialect under the aegis of the Russian empire and language. This had a big impact on Jewish intellectuals who were often learned people with a Talmudic, yeshiva background in their youth, who had been inspired by the Haskalah to take an interest in various modern questions. Some looked to Hebrew to fit the bill, others to Yiddish. More and more, Hebrew was being identified with a new movement to emigrate to the ancient Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel (then Palestine in the Turkish empire), thereby providing for Jews the same amalgam of territory and language that other European nationalist movements sought (and in many cases, once had). Just as in neighboring territory-based nations, a new kind of nationalism was arising among Jews that could range from de-

mands for equal status for one's culture and language all the way to theories of superiority, exclusivity, and a kind of presumed "blood purity" that was thought by many to define a nation.

Others were being conditioned by another, related complex of ideas spreading through Europe at the time that amounted to an "aggregate echo" in Eastern Europe of the Enlightenment, Rights of Man, liberalism, and secularism: the ideas that people are basically equal, no church or religious power has an absolute knowledge of truth, and humans have basic rights that the state may not deprive them of. In the east there were many blends of nationalism and, as a cover word for the rest, liberalism. It is an overstatement and an unfair generalization to say that among East European Jews, the new movement for Hebrew was nationalist and the new movement for Yiddish liberalist. Still, this statement is built on a large degree of historic accuracy, and the various exceptions only help demonstrate the usual state of affairs.

All of the new movements and their transitional nuances in Jewish Eastern Europe were in some sense a rebellion against the deepest literal beliefs of the Ashkenazic Jew. A modern Jew was being fashioned in Eastern Europe who acquired from the Haskalah and its successor movements the power of skepticism and the courage (or *chutzpah*) to substitute human reason for an absolute truth in which children had been brought up. This modern Jew might (or might not) remain very resolute in keeping customs, traditions, and laws, and might consider the "new Jew" somehow more loyal to an ancient image in the Prophets. But the modern Jew would never again be a literal believer after being captured by the *maskilim* for modernism. This was the beginning of the Jewish secular revolution in Eastern Europe. The word "secular" acquired a number of Yiddish correlates in the nineteenth century. The two most famous are *véltish* and *vétlakh*, both from *velt* (world). Being *véltish* had the positive implication of being a person "of the world" who has been around and knows about the wider world. To be *vétlakh*, however, implies rejection of the literal religious worldview. In contemporary parlance, Jews who are *vétlakh* would not be Ultraorthodox, since they take a lot of their life from their non-Jewish surroundings. Jews who are not *vétlakh* by choice are the Ultraorthodox or, as they are called today, the Haredim. Many Jews

today are descendants of East European Jews who became to some degree or another *véltlakh*.

#### TO ZION, WITH NATIONALISM, IN HEBREW

The history as usually presented by the perceived victors created (and continues to perpetuate) many misimpressions about the revival of spoken Hebrew. Some twentieth-century books claimed that Hebrew had “always been spoken” while others tried to maximize the “miracle” of its revival by pointing out that it had been dead. In fact, in the nineteenth century, nobody spoke Hebrew or had spoken it for around two thousand years at the very minimum. But among Ashkenazim (and not only Ashkenazim) it was far from dead. It was prayed in every day, studied every day, recited every day, and quoted every day; it was the language of the most sacred text of the civilization, the Torah or Five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch). The Western concept of text does not do historical justice to the intimacy, immediacy, and quality of being alive that the Torah and other classic works of Judaism held (and hold) for traditional Jewish culture. Moreover, many genres of new Hebrew texts were created over many generations without interruption, including letters, community records, contracts, gravestone inscriptions, in addition to the learned commentaries, responsa (legal question-and-answer compendiums), and more.

The examples of “living Hebrew” in Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic civilization are virtually incalculable. In addition to the many texts, there is the intricately interwoven Hebrew and Aramaic component in everyday spoken Yiddish. Take an everyday concept like “big.” The common, neutral Yiddish word is *groys* (pronounced *greys* among the Litvaks in the north). It is part of an extensive family of words in Yiddish, ranging from the loving diminutive noun *a gróysinke* (masculine *gróysinker*), referring to “a large lovable bear of a person” (or animal) to *greysn zikh*, a verb for “to brag.” There is *gróys-artik*, meaning “magnificent,” and *gróys-hartsik*, which is closer to English “magnanimous.” There is the diminutive of the adjective, *gréyslakh* (kind of big, biggish), the noun *gróyskayt* (greatness) and its nuanced variant *gróysikayt* (elevatedness). There are fixed combinations like *groyser*

*mentsh* (influential person), *groyser rov* (brilliant rabbinic scholar), down to the satiric *groyser makher* (big shot) and *groyser knaker* (hot shot). People from big cities are *groys-shtótishe* (in contrast to the small-town folk who are *kleyen-shtéldike*). *Groys-shtótish* came to mean “cosmopolitan” or “urban” or “broad-minded.” A *gróyse máyse* is an old skeptic’s phrase, literally a “big story” but used to mean “Well, big deal!” There is much more, all with *groys* from the same Old Yiddish word for “big” or “large” that comes from a similar Middle High German word and has developed in all kinds of specifically Yiddish ways over the ages. Where does Hebrew come into it? The ancient Hebrew and Aramaic root GDL and its most common derivative, Ashkenazic Hebrew *godoyl* (Lithuanian *godeyl*), and Yiddish *godl* (Polish and Ukrainian *gudl*), although not the “simple” word for “big” would be well-known to the entire traditional population of an Ashkenazic community (in traditionalist communities—everyone). There is *godl be-tóyre* (great scholar in Torah), *godl be-Yisróel* (great Jewish leader), and *godl-bedór* (gratest of the generation), as well as the less lofty *gádlen* (braggart), *gádles* (case of bluster), *gadlónes* (the more general trait of showing off), adjectives *gádlesdik* (haughty) and *gadlónesdik* (being a haughty, arrogant character). Then there is the lethal *A gdúle!* It refers to something that somebody else thinks is something to brag about but is really nothing much. The Jewish calendar includes *shábes hagódl* (the Great Sabbath prior to Passover), and every traditional Jewish child learns about the ancient *kóyhen gódl* (high priest). The Aramaic for big, *rabo*, is universally known from the name of the seventh day of the holiday *Súkes* (Succoth, Pentecost)—*Hoysháne rábe* (literally, the great Hosanna), and from a line of the Kaddish prayer for the dead that is said by all those who respond to the mourner with *yehéy shméy rabo* (may the great name). It would be rendered *rábo* (Polish–Ukrainian *rábu*) in a more intimate family or “study house” style; *rabó* (Polish–Ukrainian *rabú*) in a more formal “big synagogue” style. Someone in the middle of the traditional educational ladder would know about the *Médresh rábe*, the ancient collection of legends and homiletics that was widely studied, and its individual books (*Bréyshes rábe*—Genesis Rabbah, and so forth). These examples do not come close to exhausting the intricacies of words, thoughts, history, culture,

and nuances inherent in the various *Ashkenazic* words for “big” or “large,” be they dervied from Yiddish, Hebrew, or Aramaic. Each is part of a vast interlocking complex that evolved over the generations in a totally Jewish society, though etymologically they come from diverse sources (Canaanite, Aramaic, Germanic).

For the Yiddish speaker to acquire the “Hebrew word for big” was a straightforward conscious adaptation, not a case of reviving the dead. The same is true of a large number of other roots. The shift from a complex system to the adoption of one of its parts as a translative equivalent of an everyday concept is incomparably easier than the other way around.

Hebraism and Zionism were natural Jewish versions of the language- and territory-based nationalisms in Eastern Europe. The ultimate results were roughly analogous, notwithstanding all the differences (Jews had neither spoken Hebrew nor exercised Jewish sovereignty for a long period of time). But the idea of the Land of Israel was not “revived” either. It had been part of the Jewish mainstream heritage since the Babylonian Exile of 586 B.C., and more so after the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. The return to Jerusalem was prayed for in the thrice-daily prayers. The most hallowed of the daily prayers, the Eighteen Blessings, says it very plainly.

And return in Your mercy to Jerusalem Your city, and dwell within it as You have promised, and build her soon, in our days, to be built forever. And speedily establish therein the throne of David. Blessed are You, O God, re-builder of Jerusalem.

*(From Shmóyne-ésre [Shemoneh-Esrei],  
the Eighteen Blessings of the daily prayer book.)*

The transformation from prayer to a readiness to leave behind house and kin and migrate to a dangerous desert-like setting required great courage. In the later years of the nineteenth century, idealists willing to “go to fight the Turk,” as the Yiddish saying went, seemed incurable dreamers. The nineteenth-century East European Zionist movement was the theoretical and ideological adjunct

of much of the modern Hebrew literature that was developing. Zionism became a serious political movement with an impetus from assimilated and more worldly western Ashkenazic Jews, the most famous of whom was the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), a native of Budapest who relocated in his teens to Vienna. Herzl inherited the “Berlin Haskalah” type of antipathy toward Yiddish. But a Western Jew could never imagine speaking Hebrew as a daily language, either. In his classic work on the Zionist dream, written in German in the middle of the 1890s, he included a section on the language of the new state.

It could perhaps occur to someone that it will be an obstacle that we no longer have a common language. After all, we are not going to start speaking Hebrew to each other! Who among us knows enough Hebrew to ask for a train ticket in that language? This can't happen. Nevertheless, the whole question is straightforward. Everybody preserves the language which is the cherished homeland of his mind. Switzerland is the ultimate example of the feasibility of a federation of languages. Over there [in our state] we will remain exactly what we are now, and we will not stop loving, with a sense of longing, our home countries from which we have been driven out.

Well, it didn't take a genius to figure out that Herzl was saying that civilized German Jews would continue to speak German in their new state. Knowing full well that many millions of East European Jews spoke Yiddish, and that they were the community who provided close to 100 percent of the modest circles of new Zionist settlers in Palestine, Herzl could not leave Yiddish out of the discussion, nor could he bring himself to mention Yiddish by name, even a condescending name. The language he wants to allude to is lost in the plural “jargons.” Herzl continues:

We will rid ourselves of the ugly and stunted Jargons, those ghetto languages that we now make use of. They were the sly languages of prisoners. Our schoolteachers will turn their attention to this matter. Daily life will see to it that one language becomes established as the primary language, without any coercion. Our peoplehood is after all a special and unique one.

We acknowledge our belonging together only in the sense of sharing an inherited religion.

(Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat: Versuch einer modernen Loesung der juedischen Frage* [*The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*]. Vienna, 1896.)

Had Zionism been left to Herzl, in other words, there would be no Hebrew-speaking state in the historic Land of Israel. Although pointing it out is not politically correct nowadays, the State of Israel was built almost entirely by Yiddish-speaking East European Jews who were able in their deepest soul to “translate” the erstwhile Jewish readiness to die for God and his Torah into a modern kind of nationalism that entailed rejecting their mother tongue and the culture of their parents, families, towns, and civilization. In the twenty-first century, this observation should not draw the charge of anti-Zionism (or worse). Such a radical idea as ditching one’s native language in favor of one that just about nobody speaks, and leaving a built-up country with a population that includes millions of one’s own people to take one’s chances with deserts, malaria, and hostile armies could not be realized in the absence of an obstinate, uncompromising fervor. The actual “first revival” of Hebrew as a spoken daily, exclusive language, could only be accomplished by a Yiddish-speaking East European Jew born into and steeped in traditional Ashkenazic Jewish trilingual culture, a person who would be fierce in his determination to succeed. He was born in Luzhik (or Luzhke) in Lithuania (now Luzhki, Belarus). He was a Litvak known in his youth as Lézyzerke Perlman (1858–1922); Lézyzer and Lézyzerke are Yiddish forms of the classical Eliezer. He came from a Chabad family and was later influenced by maskilic ideas at a yeshiva in the nearby city Polotsk, and by Russian nationalist thought during a visit to Paris. He adopted the pseudonym Ben-Yehuda (son of Judah) and joined the Hebraist wing of the Haskalah in the 1870s as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. In 1879, he published his essay “A Burning Question” in the Hebrew journal *Ha-shákhār*. That essay was pivotal in promoting the idea of actually moving to the Land of Israel and building a new Hebrew-based culture there, thereby creating the conditions on the ground for a future state. Ben-Yehuda laid it out plain and simple in the well-rehearsed terms of East European nationalism. The Jews must



have their own country and language like everyone else, and the only acceptable language is Hebrew.

When Ben-Yehuda and his wife, Deborah, arrived in Jaffa in the fall of 1881, he informed her that they and their future children would speak only Hebrew. He thus set up the first Hebrew-speaking household in a couple of thousand years, which came to full fruition when his son, Ithamar, born in 1882, became the first child to grow up speaking a kind of neo-Hebrew. It is thought that the mental anguish Deborah endured played a considerable role in her breakdown and premature death in 1891. Several months later, Ben-Yehuda married her younger sister and the household language project continued without interruption. He established a miniature Hebrew-speaking community in Jerusalem by pretending to be pious, donning the clothes of an Ultraorthodox Jew and growing his earlocks to encourage Hebrew speech among East European origin traditionalists who were the only ones who really had enough Hebrew to “play” with him. When he had enough new immigrants in his circle to drop the religious front, he did. He also succeeded in spreading an intense revulsion at Yiddish, ever fearful that the survival of Yiddish would hamper the possibility of Hebrew becoming the one Jewish language. The loathing of Yiddish among East European native-Yiddish speaking Zionists in Palestine, who were actually speaking Hebrew, was incalculably more bitter than anything seen in the Mendelssohnian circle in late-eighteenth-century Germany or their East European followers in the nineteenth. The leaders of the Jewish settlement in Palestine and then Israel who succeeded in building the renewed Jewish state were almost unanimously driven to eradicate what they considered the greatest cultural threat to their plans: the third major language of Jewish history, Yiddish—their mother tongue. That by the early twentieth century Yiddish was gaining recognition as the language of a major new literature only made the Zionist-Hebraist leaders more determined to obliterate it. Yiddish names were made out to be ugly and had to be changed by anyone seeking respect in the new Hebrew society. Using “translative” equivalents, a Blumke Goldberg could become Shoshana Har-Hazaháv and Berl Gottesman could become Dov Bar-El. The various thousand-year-old Ashkenazic pronunciations of

Hebrew in all their intricacy and nuance were demonized as “ugly,” “wrong,” “ignorant.” The Arabic-engendered pronunciation of Hebrew prayers and names by Middle Eastern Jews was accepted as the only correct standard. The resulting Middle Eastern (now Israeli) pronunciation is often called Sephardic, though it is a misnomer; most non-Ashkenazic Jews in the Middle East, many hailing from ancient and proud communities, were not in any sense Sephardim, who by definition are descendants of preexpulsion Sephardic—Spanish and Portuguese—Jewry.

In a deep sense, the Zionists had that historically singular and enormous strength of character, determination, and commitment to succeed at authentic nation building in the most unlikely circumstances. They left familiar environments, family, and friends to move to a dangerous land where malaria, swamplands, desert, and armed foes lurked. They created a kind of golem: a proud, new Jewish-derived people who became *Israelis*, leaving their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic Jewishness far behind. They would prove to themselves and the world that the “old Jew,” whom they considered passive, hapless, effeminate, who jabbered that ugly jargon, would be replaced in the ancient homeland. The Israeli would till the soil and defend the land, speaking a Middle Eastern-sounding revived form of the ancient language. Back in Eastern Europe, though, and in other migration centers such as America, where there were powerful Zionist movements, the number of people who spoke Hebrew in daily life remained at zero, although the development of Hebrew school systems, periodicals, and literature continued to flourish.

STAY WHERE YOU ARE,  
WITH HUMANISM, IN YIDDISH

The new Yiddish movement received its first major impetus from writers who were producing brand-new masterpieces in the language. By the 1880s, they were using Yiddish with a defiant pride, not in the formerly apologetic spirit of having to use it to communicate with the masses. The gratification that was evolving in the accomplishments of Yiddish went hand-in-hand with developments

among the various peoples of Eastern Europe, whose languages had been long suppressed. But just as Hebraism–Zionism arose as a modified Jewish version of the surrounding non-Jewish nationalist movements, so the Yiddishists, not inclined to migration or single-culture nation-state building, drifted to another set of movements that were evolving rapidly in the late nineteenth century. European humanism holds that all people are equal and valuable and should have equal rights, including full rights for minority cultures. Humanism and nationalism drank from many of the same sources, including romanticism and the notion of “the people,” “the folk,” and even “the language.” But where a nationalist might say, “Our sacred duty is to care first for our own and concentrate our people in its own secure, powerful nation-state and develop our historic language as its official state language,” a humanist might say, “Our sacred duty is to stay where we are to help build a multicultural democratic state where we can develop the language of our people, just as others will do alongside us, in friendship, harmony, and mutual respect.” In both competing visions of Jewish modernity, anti-Semitism spurred a sense of special urgency for a need to take some sort of action. Some scholars see a Jewish response to anti-Semitism at the core of both solutions.

But what could Yiddishists, as the pro-Yiddish elements came to be known after the rise of Peretz in the 1890s, hope to do without an army, navy, or police force? The answer for most was that Jews needed to fight for freedom of *all* peoples, and in the Russian empire that meant at a minimum sympathizing with revolutionaries who hoped to overthrow the czar and establish a new democratic order, and, at a maximum, joining with those revolutionaries in a partnership that would ideally result in the Jewish population having rightfully earned a part in the new society that would emerge. Many of the first Jewish revolutionaries came from the ranks of *maskilim*, especially the tiny handful who managed to get to a university environment, and whose language became Russian. Invariably they turned to Yiddish, not at first for any aesthetic or literary or ideological reason, but because it was every Jew’s native language and the only language a majority of Jews could read and easily understand.

Two matches were made in heaven. Those who preferred to work in Hebrew had a territorial and nationalist model. Those who took to Yiddish had a humanistic and internationalist model, one that was increasingly becoming known as *sotsyalizm*, socialism, in the sense of a vision of equitable societies in which all people are equal and wealth is spread more equally, and there is no brutal, unchecked exploitation of workers by ultrarich capitalists.

Party politics initially played an insignificant role for East European Jews and involved only a tiny number of Jews, until the events unleashed by the assassination of Czar Alexander II in March 1881. Alexander had liberated millions of serfs in 1861 and was more liberal toward Jews and others than most of his predecessors. He was mortally wounded by a bomb the same day he signed a heralded new constitution. Among the six conspirators sentenced to death was one Jew, Hesia Helfman, a young woman from Belorussia who had taken care of a clandestine residence for the revolutionary group Narodnaya Volya (Will of the People) behind the assassination. The czar's excruciating wounds (he initially survived the attack that blew away parts of his body) and the involvement of one Jew was enough for anti-Semitic elements in high society, church, and government to spread the rumor that the Jews were responsible. The age of pogroms—anti-Jewish riots with the tacit (or not so tacit) acquiescence of local police—was unleashed. The first pogrom broke out in Elizavetgrad, Ukraine, at the end of April 1881, and others followed, mostly in Ukraine. Cynically punishing the victims rather than the perpetrators of violence, the government commission investigating the pogroms pinpointed the cause as “Jewish exploitation.” One major result was passage of the 1882 May Laws, which imposed further humiliating restrictions on Jews and triggered mass migration. Between 1881 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, over 2 million Jews left Russia. But with a high birthrate, the population maintained itself and even grew while Jews from the Russian empire were creating the overwhelming stock of future American Jewry (as well as communities in other places, including South Africa and of course Palestine).

The growth of Yiddish literature, press, theater, and other forms of modern culture, crowned by the revelation of Mendele, Sholem Ale-



Figure 8.1 By the early twentieth century, a frequent advertisement in Yiddish periodicals was for getting to America, *di göldene medine* (the golden land). This ad for the Russian-American Line appeared in Vilna just before World War I. The line made direct voyages between Libau (now Liepaja), Latvia, and New York and Halifax. (Menke Katz Collection)

ichem, and Peretz as a triumvirate of great writers, reached critical mass in the popular perception during the 1890s. Circles of Yiddish literary figures and circles of Jewish revolutionaries were often coming together. A major symbolic role was played by Peretz, who became a highly successful socialist leader in Warsaw, a major center of Jewish population (219,141 Jews counted in the 1897 census), in the same years as his home was becoming the international address of high-brow Yiddish literature. Peretz made it natural for a Yiddish writer to be committed to the Yiddish language and to principles of humanism and socialism, seeking equality of all peoples and a vision of new multicultural societies where smaller peoples could enjoy cultural autonomy. Yiddish writers—an emerging new class of Jewish intelligentsia—tended to support underdogs, the downtrodden, and various lost causes. A notable percentage became ethical vegetarians.

The relationship of the new humanistic, socialistic Yiddishism to the ancient Jewish sources is more complex than for the new nationalistic, Zionist Hebraism. For Zionism, the Hebrew Bible legitimized any Hebrew-based project and contained a mass of material about

God having promised the Land of Canaan to the seed of Abraham. Thus language and territory were codified thousands of years ago. Few movements in history have been so lucky to have it all laid out on a plate. The Bible is replete with tales of the military successes and failures of the ancient Israelites, nearly all concerned with the same kind of territorial sovereignty as that preached by the modern nationalisms of Europe. For Yiddishism, however, the Bible had much to offer as well. After all, the later Prophets had preached social justice many centuries before Christ. “Therefore, because you trample upon the poor, and take from them taxes of their wheat; you have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them!” warned the eighth-century B.C. prophet Amos (at 5:11), inspiring words for young Jewish radicals steeped in the ancient books. And what better source for minority rights than the law in the Torah commanding “one law shall there be for the native and for the stranger who lives among you” (Exodus 12:49).



Figure 8.2 *Love in Yiddish.* One of the many effects of the secular revolution among some Jews in Eastern Europe was the emergence of European-style courtship traditions. This Yiddish postcard for lovers became popular in Eastern Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century. The young people's clothing and demeanor is distinctly Western. (Menke Katz Collection)

In broader terms, a secular revolution was making itself felt among liberal intelligentsia in the east, attractive to Christians and Jews alike. Whether or not these newly minted secularists felt a profound attachment to their religion as a cultural heritage, they no longer took it literally. This small point of taking things literally (“fundamentalism”) is not small to traditionalist religious people of whatever faith. Secular humanist Yiddishism seemed to mesh seamlessly with the various humanist, secularist, and socialist movements sweeping Eastern Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century. For these movements, acceptance of new members, regardless of race or creed, was a big part of what distinguished them from the czarist society they bitterly opposed. And for their Jewish members, gaining acceptance into a non-Jewish organization was a major step forward, not a betrayal of the faith. The number of Jews in any one socialist movement was invariably much smaller than the number of non-Jews, but in each movement, the proportion of Jews was usually much higher than the percentage of Jews in the general population, noticeably so among leading figures, writers, theoreticians, and organizers. The first revolutionary political party in the Russian empire (as opposed to odd groups of conspirators) was *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Freedom). Among its founders in 1876 was Marc Natanson, son of a Grodna Jewish merchant. It soon split into two groups, the radical wing involved in the assassination of Alexander II and a more moderate wing. It had emerged from the wider *Narodniki* (populist or people’s) movement that had also included a number of Jewish leaders.

By the 1890s, when Yiddish had achieved its literary status, increasing numbers of socialists became enamored of the ideas of humanism-socialism and a distinct Yiddish people’s culture based on the universal vernacular of Jews (which was also understood by many non-Jews in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe). Peretz was the first great Yiddish writer for whom the new secular Yiddish culture and humanism-socialism were full partners, although his best stories came from traditional religious (usually Hasidic) life, and he continued to write in Hebrew all his life. This was not contradictory for him. The Yiddish culture movement that Peretz became guru to in the 1890s placed Yiddish literature and social justice and human rights at the center of

things, without disparaging or losing the ancient sources or ethos. It was all about creative synthesis and, above all, tolerance and acknowledgment that modern Jewish life would have, and *should* have, a healthy variety of cultural treasures. Sholem Aleichem ultimately produced many more literary canvases than Peretz, but his typical writer's aloofness to party politics could not build Yiddish into the centerpiece of a conceptualization of modern Jewish life. That historical role was left to Peretz, who picked up the thread when he launched the new ethos of Yiddishism with his *Yidishe biblyoték* in Warsaw in 1891. The founding editorial includes the following.

Our enemies say that Jews in general are parasites. . . . Our chauvinists say that the Israelite is God's only chosen. . . . We say simply that we Jews are people like all people, with virtues and faults.

We have a lot to thank the Diaspora for. Many good things, but many painful ones too. In the millennial struggle for existence, in ancient times, when all nations built up power and used it for murder, burning and forcing one's will on others, we built up strength and used it for being patient, enduring, tolerating, to live through the bad times. That other force, military power, grows only until the time when it meets a greater force and bursts like a soap bubble. Our strength cannot be outmatched. . . .

For the time that we have been living in the Diaspora, we don't have on our conscience, on the conscience of our Judaism, a single drop of foreign blood.

(Y. L. Peretz, "Bildung" [Education], founding editorial of Y. L. Peretz, ed., *Yidishe biblyoték*. Vol. 1. Warsaw, 1891.)

By the beginning of the 1890s, Peretz was lambasting "fanatic Hebraists" (who were lambasting him as a traitor for turning to Yiddish). At first he cited the practical point that millions of people speak Yiddish, while assuring his readers that the language did not pretend to sit in the place of honor in the Jewish house. That is a view he came to later, as the Yiddish–Hebrew debate heated up around the turn of the century and the new idea of Yiddish as a national Jewish language came to the fore. But for that moment in Jewish history, Peretz was setting the stage for Yiddishism by propounding a theory that daringly



sees good in the Diaspora period in Jewish history. Far from feeling ashamed about not having a state, sovereignty, or armies, Jews should feel proud that from day one of the Diaspora (i.e., thousands of years) Jews as such did not spill a drop of blood, a magnificent achievement in a world beset by murder and survival of the strongest. This was the nucleus of what is sometimes called Diaspora nationalism—pride in heritage, culture, and languages that is based on staying where your forebears have lived for ages and regarding the Judaism that evolved there as worthy of respect, love, pride, and future development. Diaspora nationalism might be renamed stateless nationalism, the desire to keep alive and develop a culture in the absence of any territorial claim. By definition its people are a stateless culture, a dispersed minority that wants peace, tolerance, and multiculturalism. A Yiddish coinage sometimes cited to cover this set of ideas is *dó-ikayt*, “hereness” or “here-ism.”

The greatest of all Jewish historians, Simon Dubnov (1860–1941), traced the rise of Diaspora nationalism through the language question in one of his least-remembered works, a slim Yiddish volume that appeared at the end of the 1920s. In it he traces the evolution and institutionalization of the modern idea of Yiddish in the late nineteenth century. Leaving aside the most famous—Mendele’s dramatic switch to Yiddish, Sholem Aleichem’s *Folks-biblyoték*, and the rise of Y. L. Peretz—Dubnov concentrates on those lesser known to later generations but of equal importance. They include the return of Alexander Zederbaum to Yiddish nearly two decades after the 1862 launch of his Yiddish weekly *Kol meváser* in Odessa. In 1881 in St. Petersburg, once again in a large city away from the classic pale of settlement population, an older, frailer Zederbaum set up a new Yiddish weekly. His old Odessa experiment discovered Mendele Moykher Sforim. And now the new weekly in St. Petersburg, called *Yidisher fólksblat*, discovered Mordechai Spektor and Sholem Aleichem. Spektor added to the institutionalization of Yiddish by the launch in 1888 of his annual literary collection in Warsaw, the *Hóyz-fraynd* (Friend in the House). Looking back at the waning years of the nineteenth century some three decades later, Dubnov sought to keep in perspective the accomplishments of both Jewish language movements.

Our generation has witnessed two miracles: the old national language, that was no more than a prayer and book language for two thousand years is becoming a living language in the Land of Israel at home, in school and on the street. And, the living folk language of millions of Jews, which was treated as a stepchild in the realm of literature, is becoming a rich literary language and is branching out from belles lettres to education and academic research. Already now it is possible on the basis of the available information and clear evidence, to predict that in the coming period Hebrew will become the dominant language in the Land of Israel, which will provide Hebrew literature for the entire Diaspora, while in Eastern Europe and in America the Yiddish language will rule supreme in the press, literature and in a large segment of Jewish elementary education.

The new generation needs to know that forty or fifty years ago [c. 1880–1890], not even Mendele, Sholem Aleichem or other “Zhargonik” writers would have been able to dream that there would come a time when Yiddish would be competing, in education and in literature, in press and in scholarly work, with Hebrew, much less with the “exalted” European languages, that in so little time the “language of the masses” would grow into a language of the nation. . . . It is all being created before our eyes, and this is only a modest beginning!

*(Shimen Dubnov, Fun zhargón tsu yidish [From Zhargon to Yiddish].  
Vilna: Boris Kletskin, 1929.)*

Dubnov was certainly right about the astounding feats pulled off both by the Yiddishists and the Hebraists. His predictions were also well founded (except for not reckoning with a Holocaust). But like most secular intellectuals, he did not follow the progress of Yiddish among the traditional, religious majority.

#### TRADITIONAL RELIGION (WITH YIDDISH) AS A NEW MOVEMENT

Virtually all of the nineteenth-century founders and followers of the new Jewish movements in Eastern Europe hailed from traditional homes. Their childhood (and often part of their adulthood) was spent in that pious, deeply messianic trilingual civilization that arose on the

banks of the Rhine and Danube rivers a millennium or so ago, and was relocated to Eastern Europe over a number of centuries. These were people who were attracted to the new and exciting causes, and to Yiddish or Hebrew, or in many cases both, as natural and intimate media for modernist European creativity. Many continued to participate in religious rituals while participating in the new movements. Among the German Jews, that kind of thoroughgoing culture was part of family history, for cultural assimilation and linguistic attrition had been setting in by the eighteenth century, even before the Berlin Enlightenment of Moses Mendelssohn and his followers.

In the east, however, the vast majority of Jews remained what Yiddish calls *póshete yidn* (simple Jews, or just plain people), not *tsiyenístn* (Zionists), *sotsyalístn* (socialists), *yidishístn* (Yiddishists) or *hebreýístn* (Hebraists). In the Russian empire and much of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian empire, the traditional religious life of the past was quietly continuing into the future. The rise of modern yeshivas in Lithuania in the north and the continuing growth of classical Hasidism in the south, as well as the overall peace between the two groups in the wake of their new common opponent (secularization in all its forms), made Jewish religion in Eastern Europe more secure than ever. By the later nineteenth century, the brightest Talmudic scholars among Polish and Ukrainian Hasidic youth were often sent up north to study in Valózhin, Mir, Slabódke, or one of the other *lítvishe yeshíves* (Lithuanian yeshivas).

It was elsewhere, in an old no-man's-land between western and eastern Ashkenaz that today's Ultraorthodoxy was born. Its founder, as fate would have it, was a German Jew who moved east, whose major source of worry and aggravation came from the modernist Jewish movements in Germany and the German-language influenced regions in the east, principally in the Austro-Hungarian empire. He was not nearly as concerned about Jews who became secular or were lost to the Jewish people as he was about those who thought that they could factor out religion in order to become "modern people" in the society they lived in while observing the Jewish religion. Being a German Jew, he remained above the Hasidic–Misnagdic religious divide. Paradoxically, by renouncing German and the heritage of western–Ashkenazim–

turned-German-Jews, he could become the founder of an unreconstructed religious East European religious movement that stressed language and clothing and custom and distance from gentile life and culture, one that would fearlessly stand up to the modernizing Jews and their leaders. An everyday Yiddish saying often invoked was *ikh bin oykh a tatns a kind* (literally, I am also the child of a father), which means in context, I can play the same game of making a modern movement or, more fundamentally, I can give as good as I get. Given the maskilic and postmaskilic attacks on religion, it is surprising that there was no well-organized response to the modernizers. As ever, a great leader came from an unexpected background. His life story represents an unusual west-to-east-trek in Ashkenazic history.

The founder of Ultraorthodoxy (nowadays also known as Haredism) was Moyshe Shreiber (Moshe Schreiber or Sofer). Born in Frankfurt in 1762, Shreiber was a child prodigy student of the controversial Frankfurt rabbi Nathan Adler (1741–1800); Adler had been infused with various elements of the East European Jewish spirit and, it seems, early Hasidism from one of his teachers, Dovid-Tevele of Lissa, originally of Brody, Galicia. Adler's belief in practical Kabbalah, his emphasis on the Zohar and the Lurianic prayer book, just like the new Hasidim in Eastern Europe, got him into trouble with his modern German congregation. When one of his supporters excommunicated someone in a bitter local dispute, Adler had to leave town in the early 1780s. His young pupil, Moyshe Shreiber, decided to follow his teacher into exile. Adler moved east, but eventually returned to Frankfurt. But his pupil moved on to various Moravian and Hungarian towns, settling in 1806 in Pressburg (Pozsony), Hungary (now Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia), where he lived until his death in 1839. Shreiber founded a yeshiva that some think was the largest since the days of the Jewish academies in Babylonia.

Shreiber believed that traditional East European Jewry had attained harmony and a perfection of spirit, and that its Judaism needed to be taken as one indivisible whole. The smallest custom (and even more so major features of Jewish lifestyle, dress, and language) needed to be guarded with the same vigor as the "logically" most important laws given in the Torah at Sinai. Jews need to be prepared to fight vigor-

ously to maintain all of it, not just what a congregation happened to like. He declared war on Reform when the movement took over many of the ecclesiastical assets in Hamburg. The traditionalists, he argued, needed to master the techniques of diplomacy and negotiation with the powers at large; far from disparaging gentiles, he believed that good relations with gentiles could and would be maintained if the Jews convinced the authorities that as a traditionalist religious minority they are commanded by their law to be loyal to the government of the countries they live in (a far cry from the demands for legal emancipation and equal rights being made by the modernizers). And he proved that he, like the modernizers, could come up with pithy slogans. His best known adage is *Khódesht óser min ha-tóyre* (Something new is banned by the Torah). He understood that the modernists relied on their reason or on a contemporary sense of aesthetics in daring to judge a custom's importance. Shreiber gave a Torah-based justification for his stance. He wrote that someone "who starts mixing books about logic with Torah violates the prohibition against plowing with an ox and donkey together" (Deuteronomy 22:10). To the "modern Orthodox" Jew, the Deuteronomic injunction might be observed for religion's sake, but deriving a prohibition on "books about logic" might seem extremist. To the emergent Ultraorthodox, this was an authoritative ruling from the bench, derived from the Sinaitic Torah. Battle lines were drawn that continue to this day.

Like many major European rabbinic scholars, Moyshe Shreiber was a prolific writer but was not keen to publish his own books, because publication during one's lifetime was considered immodest among some of the most pious. Shreiber left about a hundred books, all unpublished. The most famous posthumously published collections were seven massive folio volumes of responsa (questions and answers on matters of Jewish law) called *Khasam-Sóyfer*. *Khasam* (*khsam*) means a "seal" or "signature." The family name Shreiber (*Shráyber*) means "writer" and *Sóyfer* (*Sofer*), which was also used as the family name, can mean "scribe" or "writer," so the work's famous title can mean "stamp of the scribe" or just as easily "stamp of Rabbi Sofer." In addition to meaning "seal," *Khasam* here is taken to be a traditional-style acronymic for the words *Khidúshey tóyras Móyshe* (Innovations in the

Torah of Moses), itself playfully ambiguous. It could refer to the Torah of Moses, or the Torah teaching of the author Moses Sofer (Moyshe Sóyfer). After his death, Shreiber became known simply as the Khasam-Sóyfer (Yiddish *Khsam-Sóyfer*; Chasam, Hatam, or Chatam Sofer in English).

There is something remarkable in all this for the story of Yiddish. The Frankfurt-born German-speaking rabbi, who mastered East European Yiddish after settling in Pressburg and hearing the language constantly from his local students and those from Poland, was issuing militant statements about the importance of Yiddish many decades before the modernist Yiddishists began to do the same, in their own secular spirit, in the age of Peretz at the end of the nineteenth century. He did so even decades before such lone voices as Lifschitz in the 1860s.

What did the Khasam-Sóyfer say about Yiddish in his Hebrew and Aramaic legalistic writings and rulings? First, he provided a rabbinic-legalistic conception of the origin of the language and its standing vis-à-vis German, an important point in the context of the anti-Yiddish positions taken by the various modernizers in east and west alike (“Yiddish is a corruption of German”). As a rabbinic scholar concerned with jurisprudence, his opportunities for expression of views arose when a legal question that came his way presented an opening. In a reply to a question concerning the qualifications for the post of congregational rabbi, the Khasam-Sóyfer turns away from the candidate’s place of origin to the type of rabbi under consideration.

May he be from the sages of your own congregation or from elsewhere, but he has to be someone who can be called with the name *rov*, a guide in the ways of God for the people of God, and he should not, God forbid, be one of those who write polemics, who read outside books and speak in a non-Jewish language. From the mouth of such a person it is forbidden to learn Torah, and it would be as if the Asherah-goddess were placed in the middle of the holy Temple.

(Sóyfer Khasam-Sóyfer, *khéylek Khóyshen mishpot*  
[*Book of Responsa of the Khasam-Sóyfer*], on [laws pertaining to the]  
*Choshen Mishpot*, sec. 197. Vienna, 1872.)



Figure 8.3 A popular postcard showing the Khasam-Sóyfer (Reb Moyshe Shreiber, 1762–1839). A leader in the battle against modernization of any kind, his yeshiva at Pressburg, Hungary (now Bratislava, Slovakia), became the European bastion of traditionalism, including adherence to Yiddish as a major principle. (Ildi Kovács Collection)

The Khasam-Sóyfer exerted a major influence on the traditionally religious Jews of Eastern Europe, whether Hasidic or non-Hasidic, to maintain their names, language, dress, and other characteristics in the face of modernity, irrespective of whether a community lives in a tolerant or an intolerant society. He thereby founded Ultraorthodoxy, or Haredism as it is alternatively termed today, though both words leave

something to be desired. The term “Haredim” (Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew *kharéydim*, modern Israeli *kharedím*) has a biblical heritage, referring to a kind of trembling before God (as in “Hear the word of God, ye that tremble at his word,” Isaiah 66:5), backed up by a European kabbalistic heritage that fed into Hasidism. The book *Seyfer ha-Kharéydim*, a tract on spiritualism and asceticism, appeared in Venice in 1601. It was written by the Safad kabbalist Elozor Azkari (1533–1600). “Haredim” currently refers to the Ultraorthodox in America, Israel, and other countries, groups deeply influenced by the Khasam-Sóyfer.

There is a direct lineage between the Khasam-Sóyfer and the Haredim in Israel. One of his top pupils was Akiva Joseph Shlezinger (1837–1922). Though only a toddler in Pressburg when his master died, his childhood and world outlook were molded by the Khasam-Sóyfer’s successors in the Pressburg yeshiva and by his writings, which were published by the Shreiber (Sofer) family beginning in 1839. Because Shlezinger moved to Palestine and believed in working the land and was one of the first to help build Petah Tikva, he is even regarded as a founding Zionist. Political history writing makes for strange bedfellows.

Shlezinger published the Khasam-Sóyfer’s ethical will in Yiddish with his own commentary in Ungvar, Hungary (now Uzhgorod, Ukraine), in 1864. In the classic tradition of a commentary often being many times the length of the text it is written for, the Khasam-Sóyfer’s will is expounded in a much longer commentary by Shlezinger. It is this little book that “codified” the question of Yiddish for Haredim for all time to come, warning everyone, “Be careful not to change your name, language, or clothing to those of the gentile, God forbid.”

In his commentary, Shlezinger offers pages of elaboration, brimming with rabbinic references and proofs. He says in the commentary,

And thus our master [the Khasam-Sóyfer] warns us not to do as is done, when someone is given the name Aaron and then calls himself Adolph, or Moyshe and calls himself Moritz. . . . Our sacred forefathers altered the national language to become their own language, the language of Judaism as our master has explained. . . .

Our Yiddish language has the same law as Hebrew, and thus have I heard it in the name of the sacred Ari, who would not speak any unsacred word on



the Sabbath, but would speak in our language, he would speak on Musar and Torah, and he said: "The language which the Jews have settled on and is unique to them, has sanctity and its law is the law of the sacred language Hebrew." And therefore, our master of blessed memory commanded us not to change our language. . . and that is our Yiddish language.

(Akiva Yehosef Shlezinger, *Seyfer lev ho-ivri*  
[Book of the Hebrew Heart]. Ungvar, 1864.)

Shlezinger continues to draw parallels between Aramaic in ancient times and Yiddish in modern times, demonstrating that they were so modified as to become the unique expressions of the contemporary Jewish spirit.

And so it happened, unknown to today's secular Yiddishist enthusiasts—or most of today's Haredim, for that matter—that in 1864, the same year that Mendele Moykher Sforim began to publish the first modern masterpiece of Yiddish prose in that Odessa weekly, Rabbi Akiva Joseph Shlezinger published the Khasam-Sóyfer's will with his own commentary proclaiming the religious sanctity of that same modern, spoken Yiddish. The rise of the sophisticated new literature in the east of Eastern Europe (Ukraine), and the rise of an elaborated pro-Yiddish religious philosophy at its west (Hungary) go back to one and the same year. After publishing three learned tomes in Hebrew and Aramaic, Shlezinger turned to Yiddish.

In 1869, Shlezinger published his *Second Call to Jewish People* in Lemberg (Lvov). For any modern who might want to understand the historical psychology of Haredism (Ultraorthodoxy), there can be no better introduction than this 1869 handbook. Unlike his master's, the Khasam-Sóyfer's massive legalistic tomes and his own prior works in Hebrew and Aramaic, this book, in simple Yiddish, is a call to arms to traditional Jews to resist all the temptations of the world at large and especially those of modern Jews, known collectively to Haredim as *di apikórsim* (the unbelievers or deniers of the faith; the word entered Jewish Aramaic from the name of the Greek philosopher Epicurus and has remained popular through the ages). Shlezinger exhorts traditionalist Jews to be steadfast.

Every nation has its own way of life, and doesn't take it to heart if others, or even thousands of others, go in different ways. . . . Therefore, dear Jewish brothers, we have to strengthen ourselves against the evil inclination with the help of God. And to keep ourselves strong in our Judaism, with our Yiddish language, with Jewish names, and with all the Jewish customs. And blessed is he who remains in his Jewish clothing even in German regions. . . .

I had to walk through the streets of the city four times each Sabbath, and I did so in my Jewish clothes and in my *shtrayml* [traditional fur-edged hat] and found that the gentiles had no problem with me. The nations of the earth do not remotely demand that the Jew should be a bad Jew. All the trouble comes from the "mixed multitude" [after Exodus 12:38], those Amalekites! And with my fortitude I accomplished more in that place than I would have done with forty-odd sermons!

Proceeding to tackle the moderns on their own turf, Shlezinger embraces the concept of freedom but argues that being oneself and not assimilating is what constitutes genuine freedom.

To practice Judaism with a full feeling of freedom, and our unity, these are the roots of our tree of life. When we strengthen ourselves with these roots then no evil spirits will dare make us weak. The free Jew, who lives in harmony with his creator, will not curl up in fear, never mind what the *apikórsim* and the present-day Sadducees come up with. Let them do what they want, it doesn't bother him. And the more they make fun of him and mock him, the more happily he goes on his own way!

The cold [modern] Jew cannot last for very long. And he will be unable to resist all the temptations that come to bear on people nowadays.

Significantly, Shlezinger went out of his way to stress that traditional Judaism with its lifestyle components of language, names, and dress must not be confused with the Hasidic movement, which was being identified with elevation of the status of Yiddish by the middle of the nineteenth century. Haredism, Ultraorthodoxy, traditional *Yidishkayt*, whatever one may want to call it, is for Shlezinger a simple matter of the traditionalist interpretation of Jewish law, which is not limited to the Hasidic movement.

Do not think that everything that we have written in this book is Hasidism. In all the books we have written, we have not included one word that is not in the *Shúlkhon óruk*h [Code of Jewish Law]. That we have thundered about the issue of gentile lifestyle and replacing the Yiddish language, that is just a case of following what the *Shúlkhon óruk*h says (*Yóyre-déyo*, sec. 178), that Jews must be separated, different from the other nations, in clothing and in all their ways. "All their ways" encompasses everything, as it is written. . . . God sees everything, the way Jewish children are being tricked into breaking the covenant with God, into replacing the Yiddish language with the gentile language. But none of this will be forgiven.

(*Akiva Yehosef Shlezinger, Der tsveyter ufruf on yidishe kinder*  
[*Second Call to Jewish People*]. Lvov, 1869.)

Shlezinger was only one of a circle of leaders of the traditionalist movement within Hungarian Jewry that established the preservation of Yiddish as a formally enunciated principle of modern Jewish life. This took the matter much further than the scattered mentions in the legalistic responsa of the departed master, the Khasam-Sóyfer. More than a decade after his death, this aspect of his legacy was being formalized, particularly in the 1860s. One major figure was Shlezinger's father-in-law (and later brother-in-law), Hillel Lichtenstein (1814–1891). Another was Chaim Sofer (1821–1886). The Yiddish issue was morphing from scattered legal rulings (from the Chatam-Sóyfer onward) and sections of polemic tracts (from Shlezinger onward) to becoming a formal component of the newly systematized Jewish Traditionalism ("Ultraorthodoxy" to others). The nine-point *Psak Din* ("Ruling of Law" in rabbinic tribunals), includes the Yiddish issue prominently, demanding for example that one depart the synagogue immediately if a sermon is given in a gentile language. The document was issued by a conference of some twenty-five rabbis held on 28 November 1865 at Nagymihály (Michalovitch, now Michalovce in eastern Slovakia). Signed by seventy-one rabbis, the same number as in the classic Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, it appeared under the title *Psak Bés-din* (Ruling of the Court of Law) in 1866, in Ungvar, Hungary (now Uzhgorod, Ukraine). The "Hungarian component" of a religious traditionalism for which the maintenance of

Yiddish is an explicit principle would prove to be of vital importance in following generations (see pp. 292–293).

The Hasidic–Misnagdic conflict of the late eighteenth century was replaced by the split into a segmented modernist Jewry pitted against a traditionalist East European Jewry for whom language retention was a firm principle. And so it came to pass that Yiddish found itself in the midst of fiery debates, hated by the Western Enlighteners and their followers in the east, as well as many modern Orthodox Jews, and just as passionately treasured by modernists who decided in favor of Yiddish for modern culture and by the newly militant Ultraorthodox Jewry. By the late nineteenth century, Yiddish as a matter of principle (rather than the natural language of a time and place) was becoming characteristic of two different Jewries, one at the extreme cultural right (Ultraorthodoxy with Hasidism included), the other on the far cultural and political left (the secularist and revolutionary movements). Much of what is now regarded as the center (Zionism, moderate assimilation, modern Orthodoxy, and more) developed a distaste for things Yiddish. Yiddish as an idea was the subject of scorching debates as never before.

## *The Twentieth Century*

### CRITICAL CULTURAL MASS AND JEWISH SOCIALISM

There are in history partial truths that are made to masquerade as whole truths. One popular semimyth about Jewish languages in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe is that the political impetus of socialism drove the development of Yiddish, and that Zionism correspondingly drove the development of Hebrew. That is partially true when formulated (as it often is), so as to suggest that the “drive” that socialism gave Yiddish and Zionism gave Hebrew were the decisive factors. They *became* decisive factors for further growth and development by the end of the nineteenth century as both Jewish socialism and Zionism built the infrastructure that enabled the construction of school systems and other forms of essential cultural institutionalization. But both movements found a Yiddish and Hebrew literary tradition that was a direct result of the early-nineteenth-century Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement. When nineteenth-century East European Jewish culture developed serious political components—after the czar’s assassination and the outbreak of pogroms in 1881—both major modern solutions to the “Jewish problem” had a language-based culture ready for mass use. Hebrew by 1900, in the hands of Yiddish speakers who grew up in Ashkenazic trilingualism, had produced enough impres-

sive journals, stories, poems, and essays to enable a newly minted everyday spoken variety in Palestine to thrive as a written language. In the case of Yiddish, the critical mass that was achieved by the turn of the century was in no small measure the result of natural market forces, which turned Dineson, Shomer, and Dik into best-sellers in the time leading up to Sholem Aleichem's proclamation of the new Yiddish literature in his 1888 yearbook. After losing his father-in-law's inheritance on the Kiev stock market, he became a best-selling author himself.

It is often illustrative to see how a literature is viewed by those outside it. In the case of Yiddish, that means looking at the first major works *on* Yiddish culture to appear in other languages, whether or not by native Yiddish speakers. The growth that occurred during the 1880s and 1890s brought an international recognition around the turn of the century when the Yiddish language, literature, and folklore of East European Jewry (the Ostjuden) became the subject of research and publications in various major languages. A Jew from Bialystok, Leo Wiener (1862–1939), broke the ice in the English-speaking world. Wiener emigrated at the age of twenty to the United States, where he eventually became an instructor (and later full professor) of Slavic studies at Harvard University. He married a well-to-do German Jew, Bertha Kahn, daughter of a department store owner in St. Joseph, Missouri. The household was so assimilated that his son Norbert remembered years later that growing up he did not know that he was Jewish. Leo Wiener's four-hundred-page treatise, *The History of Yiddish in the Nineteenth Century*, appeared in 1899. In 1901, in St. Petersburg, Russia, S. M. Ginsburg and P. S. Marek published their *Yevreyskiye narodniye pesni* (Jewish Folk Songs), a massive collection of Yiddish folk songs, in the original and Latin transcription with a Russian introduction and notes. In 1906, in Germany, the young philosopher Martin Buber, by then a convinced Zionist, published *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (The Tales of Reb Nachman [of Bratslav]). It was not a literal translation but a graceful paraphrase of the original Yiddish text, intended to convey to a German-language readership the remarkable spirit of the traditional East European Jew, whom German Jews had disparaged from the days of Mendelssohn onward.

Around the turn of the century, while these and other scholars were discovering Yiddish and its literature or folklore for learned Western audiences, the language itself was being used more and more by various political movements, both those positively disposed toward the language (primarily socialists) and those not (primarily Zionists who were compelled to use the language of the masses in order to persuade them of the ideas of the movement, much as the East European *maskilim* of the early nineteenth century). But it was the Yiddishists, quite naturally, who were at the forefront of sophisticated literary development, as opposed to practical use for winning political adherents. But not literary development alone. In the rapidly growing Yiddish movement, the two ideals of first, development of modern Yiddish culture, and second, the fervor to bring about social justice and a better world were coming together, particularly in the work of poets who wrote poems of protest against the heartless exploitation of the masses of working people.

The dramatic increase in the number of Jewish followers of socialism in the later nineteenth century resulted from a number of factors. The pogroms with tacit police approval, and the anti-Jewish legislation that followed, drove the modest numbers of Russian-educated Jewish intellectuals right into the ranks of the revolutionaries. During the same period, rapid industrialization resulted in the rise of an urban class of Jewish workers, genuine proletarians who were working side by side with non-Jewish colleagues, and who were increasingly squeezed and maltreated by the barons of laissez-faire capitalism (as well as many small shop owners). These factors were enormously magnified by the nineteenth century Jewish population growth in the czarist empire. In the half century between 1847 and 1897, the Jewish population tripled, with many moving to the larger cities to seek a livelihood. Just as post-Chmielnitski, post-Sabbatean Ukrainian Jewry was ripe for the Hasidic movement during the eighteenth century, the new urban masses of Jews in the pale of settlement in the late nineteenth century, having grown to appreciate modern literature in their own language, were ripe for an inspiring movement that promised a better life. The popularization of socialism in Russia was another prime factor. In razor-sharp distinction to the czarist police and their

disdain for *zhids*, Marxism was preaching the inherent equality of all races and the unity of all workers, whatever their language and ethnicity. It was all very timely, attractive, and promising.

The major Jewish socialist organization, the Bund (from a newly imported German word meaning “pact” or “covenant”), was founded secretly in an attic in Vilna in 1897. This was in sharp contrast to the very public convening of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, the same year. That difference in itself is emblematic of the much tougher situation the Yiddishists faced. From liberals to reactionaries, many government leaders and institutions were quite content with a movement for Jewish emigration. The Yiddishist position entailed a desire to be involved in the here-and-now and the future of that here-and-now and in bringing about serious change in local society.

The earliest leaders of the Bund generally came from Russian-language circles of Jewish intelligentsia or the maskilic Hebrew-writing environment. Initially the Bund was close to Russian revolutionary movements that were involved in anticzarist violence. Its first major sensation was a young shoemaker called Hirsh Lekert (1880–1902), a native of Hanúsishok (now Onushkis, Lithuania). When the czarist governor of Vilna, Von Wahl, ordered the arrest, humiliation, and brutalization of a group of Polish and Jewish demonstrators on May Day 1902, the Bund decided on revenge. Young Lekert volunteered to shoot him. But he had the hands of a shoemaker, not a marksman, and his shots lightly grazed the governor’s hand and foot. Lekert was hanged on June 10 and refused the pleas of the official rabbi to ask forgiveness in his last moments. He surprised the witnesses to the hanging with an eloquent speech about defending the honor of the Jewish worker. Lekert became the stuff of the evolving Jewish socialist legend and of the Bund in particular. At least three Yiddish dramas and dozens of poems were written about Lekert. But the Bund permanently turned away from violence as a means of achieving social change, and it became a mass socialist movement in the twentieth century, in fierce and open opposition to three other alternatives of the time and place: violent revolutionary activities (communism), Zionism (which advocated emigration and Hebrew), and religion.



By the early years of the twentieth century, the Bund steered away from the assimilationist attitude of its founders, and even further away from the Hebrew movement that had become identified with Zionism and emigration. The Bund turned to modern Yiddish literature, culture, and education as the cultural and national backbone of Jewish socialism. Its leadership came to see in Yiddish the great national language of East European Jewry that had a magnificent future in multicultural democratic societies that would emerge one day in place of the autocratic Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Bundists allied themselves with Belarusians, Lithuanians, Poles, and others who believed in socialism or social democracy and the development of their people's national language. It attracted hundreds of thousands of activist supporters and many more sympathizers. Unlike the Jewish communism that was to emerge in the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution, the Bund engendered an environment of tolerant discussion and preached humanism and democracy. Those sympathetic would call a follower, in Yiddish, a *bundist* (feminine *bundistke*); those antagonistic usually affixed a Slavic-derived ending, giving *bundovets* and *bundovke*.

In part, the Bund was recast from being just another Jewish ethnic department of this or that Russian revolutionary party to becoming a major factor in modern Jewish culture by Y. L. Peretz and the many younger Yiddish writers who became his followers. In the 1890s, they began to see a natural synthesis emerging between a socialism that would preserve the languages and cultures of each group and the new Yiddish literary movement (although Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, more sympathetic to Zionism and wary of rabble-rousers, took care to steer clear). For the Bund to make Yiddish culture a central part of its platform, some impetus had to come from the ranks of its political leaders too, those who were doing the organizing, taking the risks, and often landing in prison for antigovernment activity. Among the founders was a woman known simply as Esther (1880–1943). She captured the imagination of the mass of Jewish workers under the Bund's influence by building Yiddish culture with school systems at all levels and other trappings of national languages. Single-handedly, she took on the elitist anti-Yiddish bias of the Russianist and Hebraist trained

leaders and turned Yiddish from a practical necessity to a primary cultural goal of modern Jewish life in Eastern Europe generally.

“Esther” was a *nom de plume* (or *nom de guerre* in the context of the revolutionary movement) that symbolized her attachment to ancient Jewish traditions and her belief in their appropriateness for modernity. She was born Malke Lifschitz; the Yiddish word *málke* (queen, from Hebrew *malko*) is frequently associated with the biblical Queen Esther and the Purim holiday, as well as the frequent Yiddish female “double forename” *Ester-Málke* (or, just as frequently, *Malke-Éster*). In Russian circles she was known as Maria Yakovlevna (russified *Málke* plus patronymic Jacob). In later life, she became known as Esther Frumkin, the surname of her first husband, and sometimes Esther Vikhman, after the second. During the first decade of the Bund, Esther became a firebrand Yiddishist. Her influence went far beyond the Bund. She adopted a radical position, arguing that Yiddish was the only national Jewish language and Hebrew just a chimera, a plaything of Zionists and a tiny minority of intellectuals and rabbis useful for showing off their literary, linguistic, or stylistic prowess, and a means of keeping the masses of Jewish people at a lower cultural level. This opinion was sensational, coming only a decade or so after Sholem Aleichem and other major Yiddish writers were still calling themselves *zhargónishe shráyber* (writers in *Zhargón*). Looking back, it is evident that her “extreme” position served to shift the center position of the debate to a policy of respect for both languages. It is a shame that so many historians continue to write Esther out of Jewish history books. It is one example of how latent twentieth-century exclusivist Hebraism, as well as the biases it gave rise to, continue to infect the field of Jewish history. In her fiery speeches up and down the pale, in her articles and in her outspoken participation in conferences and meetings, Esther insisted that a positive program of Yiddish education, from kindergarten to the highest levels, be incorporated into the Bund’s philosophy. A native of Minsk, she was descended on her mother’s side from two families of Vilna’s “Jewish royalty,” the Romms (of the famous publishing house) and the Katzenelenbogens (illustrious rabbinic scholars). Her father, a professional Torah reader, wrote

Yiddish poems on the side. Her family background put her in step with the majority of Eastern European Ashkenazim, in a way that the handful of russified males who were running the Bund were not. Esther had mastered Hebrew, Russian, and German, and her pro-Yiddish position could not be attributed to an “ignorant woman,” as her enemies sometimes tried to paint her. She wrote prolifically for the new Yiddish Bundist periodicals and coedited *Di náye tsáyt* (The New Era) and *Tsáyt-fragn* (Questions of the Times). In her articles she demonstrated that traditionalist culture was not antithetical to the Bund’s progressive agenda.

In 1910 Esther published *Tsu der fráge vegn der yídisher fólks-shul* (On the Question of the Elementary Yiddish School), setting out the blueprint for a network of sophisticated secular Yiddish schools. She was a major architect of the Yiddish school systems that were established thanks to the infrastructure and support of the Bund and other parties. She was also a major influence on a young Bundist, Boris Kletskin (1875–1937), who went on to establish the first high culture Yiddish publishing house, the Klétskin-farlág (Kletskin Press), in Vilna around 1910. Her writings also influenced Max Weinreich (1894–1969), a young Bundist who became the major Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century. Esther’s broadening of the Bund’s mission made it possible for some talents who felt more attracted to literature and research than party politics to fulfill the cultural elements of the Bund’s program. As far as the history of Yiddish is concerned, Esther widened the scope of Yiddishism, allowing it to retain the kind of party support it needed to set up the infrastructure of modern culture (particularly education) while remaining above the political fray. The writing of her biography is long overdue. One reason some histories of the Bund ignore her is that she, like many others who “landed” in what became the Soviet Union after the revolution, later (around 1920) joined up with Soviet communism, against which international Bundism fought relentlessly (not least in its world center right across the border in interwar Poland). She was arrested by Stalin’s regime in early 1938. After refusing to confess to the false charges, she was sent to a slave labor camp where she perished.



*Figure 9.1 Esther (1880–1943), firebrand revolutionary who made Yiddish language and culture a central component of the Bund platform. (Giedre Beconyte Collection)*



*Figure 9.2 Some Bundists in 1913. The gentleman in the white shirt is the young Max Weinreich (1894–1969). Abandoning party activism, he became a master Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century, and was the key founder of the Yivo in 1925. (Zhitlovsky Foundation)*

## THE SPIRIT OF CHERNOWITZ

The story of how a word, in this case a relatively obscure place-name, can trigger an explosion of emotions was best told (as usual) by Sholem Aleichem. The town Chernowitz (Yiddish Tshérnovits) is today Chernivtsi, Ukraine. Sholem Aleichem's piece is characteristic of the Hebrew–Yiddish debate, which reached new levels of bitterness

(and, looking back, ridiculousness) in the years following the 1908 Yiddish language conference at Chernowitz. The scene is a Jewish meeting in his prototypical shtetl, Kasrilevke.

The [Yiddish] poet sat on the dais [of the town meeting], and in his capacity as chairman politely gave a knock on the table and opened the proceedings.

“Khavéyrim un khávertes!” [Gentlemen and Ladies!]

But he couldn't get out more than these two-three words. They didn't let him. Who didn't let him? Those who are against Yiddish. They hate Yiddish, because Yiddish is “Zhargón” and Zhargón is—feh! They started shouting in protest.

“Ivrít! Hebréyish!” [Ivrít! Hebrew!]

Now this poet with the thick black hair is not some timid little schoolboy who gets scared of a protest. Still he got a little confused. He gave himself a pat on the belly, straightened out his vest and once again, as if the shouts had nothing to do with him, said, in a slightly louder voice:

“Khavéyrim un khávertes!”

An even bigger commotion broke out in the hall, with banging, whistling and all kinds of screams and shouts:

“Ivrít! Ivrít! Ivrít!”

It would appear that this was organized from before. This was the work of the Hebraists in Kasrilevke who prepared their demonstration against Yiddish. And even the holy prayer *Shma-Yisroel* wouldn't have helped. The poet had to leave the podium in shame, and his place was taken by the young writer with the acne face in his old jacket, and he too acting on his own, not waiting for anyone to appoint him, gave a knock on the table and started out in Hebrew.

“Rabotáy!” [Gentlemen!]

Not “Rabóysay” as we say it, but actually “Rabotáy” the way they say it over there in the Land of Israel. As it happens, the young writer with the old jacket has a resounding voice, and his “Rabotáy!” rang out like a bell. But what, he didn't get any further than this one word. They didn't let him continue.

Now this was already the work of Kasrilevke's Yiddishists who started a demonstration against Hebrew. It would appear that this too was organized from before and with the same means, in other words, people started to twist and shout, pound with their feet and yell at the top of their lungs. It verily

turned into a disturbance. The shouts reached up to heaven. The walls began to tremble and the windows were echoing:

“Mikhnatáyim! [Trousers!] Lokshn-kóyletsh! [Challah with noodles, play on *loshn-kóydesh* = the sacred language = Hebrew, the point being that this new dialect from the Middle East is *not* real Hebrew.]

“Yiddish! Yiddish! Yiddish!”

At that moment, God put it into the head of one of the Hebraists to throw a bomb. He yelled out among all the other shouts:

“Chernowitz!”

Now when you think about it, what’s the big deal? What is so explosive about the word “Chernowitz?” Chernowitz is no more and no less than some town in Bukovina, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, that two countries claim as their own and keep chasing the other out of town. One day it belongs to one of them and the next day to the other. . . .

Funny people, this new generation in Kasrilevke. Such very touchy people, full of caprices and so quick to get so furious.

*(Sholem-Aléykhem, Kasrilevker progrés [Progress in Kasrilevke], 1914–1915, which usually appears in the volume Fun Karilevke of the various multivolume editions.)*

Sholem Aleichem vividly captures the full-fledged politicization of the words for “Yiddish” and “Hebrew” and the division of would-be modernists along the lines of language. The curious insults from both sides are revealing. The word *zhargón* in this sense had been picked up from French by the German anti-Semites of the eighteenth century, and it went from their parlance into that of the German Jewish Enlightenment proponents. From there it spread in the early nineteenth century to East European *maskílim* as a term of derision for the vernacular. By the later nineteenth century, it had become a neutral or positive term in Yiddish itself, very much in the sense of “vernacular” or “folk language.” And then the earlier “curse word” feel of *Zhargón* was picked up anew by the Yiddish-speaking Hebraists.

Zionists in the Land of Israel revived spoken Hebrew with the Near Eastern pronunciation (mislabeled “Sephardic”), which differs markedly from East European Ashkenazic Hebrew. While *ívrís* was one of the traditional terms for “Hebrew,” *ivrit* was a word from the new language of the Zionists in Palestine. While Ashkenazic Hebrew

(and Yiddish) distinguish between the ancient Hebrew-Aramaic sounds *t* and *th* (as *t* and *s*), the two collapsed into a single *t* sound in most Middle Eastern pronunciations of Hebrew (compare *shabbos* to *shabbat*). Here the Palestinian (proto-Israeli) pronunciation demanded by the Zionists is made fun of by use of another word that has the letter *samekh*, pronounced *s* by everybody, but here purposely mispronounced with *t*, in a hypercorrection that causes hilarity, not least because of the word chosen, *mikhnasáyim* (trousers), which is purposely misrendered as *mikhnatáyim* by the Kasrilevke Yiddishists. But the most explosive word of all was the name of a certain town in Eastern Europe.

The Chernowitz language conference was held in Chernowitz from Sunday morning, August 30, to Thursday evening, September 3, 1908, and it continues to be celebrated by Yiddishists as a symbolic turning point in the history of the language. The two people who made it happen were Yiddishist philosopher Chaim Zhitlovsky and (in one of the great ironies in the story of Yiddish) the Vienna-born German-speaking Jewish philosopher Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1937), one of the founders of Zionism, who balked at its negative attitude toward Diaspora Jewry. Birnbaum famously said “Israel comes before Zion.” After (it is said) coining the word “Zionism,” he went on to coin “Yiddishism” and became a leading thinker of Diaspora nationalism. Birnbaum was the prime moving force behind the conference and delivered its opening speech in a limping, Germanized Yiddish that was lampooned in the press.

Birnbaum delighted in the development of Yiddishism from the feelings of scattered individuals to a movement.

We have the joy to see in this hall those great Yiddish writers who are respected even by the opponents and detractors of our language, who nevertheless show them great respect. . . .

I hereby open the first conference for the Yiddish language!

And with his gavel, the respected Nathan Birnbaum took Yiddishism out of the realm of mere opponents of Zionism to build a coalition of forces that included writers, socialists, religious people, many

who were also sympathetic to Zionism, and the various nonaligned who could see his vision of an East European Jewish nation developing its culture in its own language.

More cachet was provided by Peretz's opening address. As if to throw all his socialist activism out the window, Peretz explicitly built the notion that as a modern literary language of East European Jewry, Yiddish was in fact established by the Baal Shem Tov and Nachman of Bratslav.

Yiddish didn't start with Isaac-Meir Dik. The genesis is to be found in the Hasidic tale. . . . The first writer of the people was Reb Nachman of Bratslav with his "Story of Seven Beggars." It also comes from the awakening and demands of the Jewish woman, the Jewish wife, the Jewish girl. That gave rise to the "women's books." The "translation language" became our "mother tongue." . . . Then the Jewish worker came on the scene. . . and the modern Yiddish book came into being.

But all of that would not have brought us together here. If we have gathered from far-flung lands and states to proclaim our Yiddish as a language with rights to equality with all other languages, it is because of another factor. The state, to which small peoples are brought on the altar, as children to Moloch in ancient times, that state, which in view of the interests of the ruling classes and peoples had to negate and level everything out—one army, one language, one school, one police force, one set of rights for the police—that state is losing its gloss. . . .

The modern word is the nation, not the fatherland! Our own culture, not borders and hunter-guards. . . .

And we say to the world: We are the Jewish people and Yiddish is our language. . . . And in this language we will gather together our treasures, create our culture, stimulate our soul, and unite ourselves over time and space.

The conference concluded with various declarations about education, translations, and other projects, but the debate centered on the question of whether Yiddish is *a* national language of the Jewish people. The resolution that was passed reads:

The first conference for the Yiddish language recognizes Yiddish as a national language of the Jewish people, and calls for its political, social and cultural



equal rights. Moreover, the conference finds it necessary to state that each participant in the conference, and of its resulting organization, has the freedom to regard the Hebrew language according to his personal convictions.

(From the conference proceedings compiled by  
Max Weinreich and Zalmen Reyzen, and published by the Yivo in Vilna as  
Di érshte yidishe shprákh-konferénts [*The First Yiddish Language Conference*]. Vilna, 1931.)

This “big tent” resolution enabled the new Yiddish cultural movement to include the many who quietly believed in Hebrew for Palestine but Yiddish for Eastern Europe and its “Jewish colonies” in America and elsewhere. But, as frequently happens, the media (principally the newspaper reporters at the conference) latched on to an interesting headline not in the conference’s actual concluding statement but in the rejected minority resolution that had been proposed by Esther: “We recognize Yiddish as *the* national language of the Jewish people.”

Esther, however, accepted the majority wording, which proclaimed Yiddish *a* national Jewish language. But the press reports sensationalized the “firebrand lady socialist from Minsk” as a sort of Lady Macbeth of Yiddish, and the Hebraists, in particular, began to publish attacks far and wide on “that woman and the Yiddishists” who all “hate Hebrew.” The “primeval sin of Esther Frumkin” would be thrown up for almost a century as a pretext for suppression of Yiddish, particularly in Israel, but also by major international Jewish organizations that were constructing a purist “Hebrew and Hebrew only” curriculum for Diaspora Jewish schools, a curriculum that survives largely unreformed in Hebrew day schools around the world in the twenty-first century (though nowadays more from inertia than anything else).

After the conference, Nathan Birnbaum, cofounder of Zionism and resident of Vienna and New York, remained in Chernowitz for several years, briefly making it the symbolic world address of Yiddish. In 1910, he organized thousands of Bundists, Zionists, and Labor Zionists to march on city hall demanding the right of Jews to list Yiddish as their daily language in the nationwide (Austro-Hungarian) census. That particular effort failed, but the march elevated the rights of Yiddish in Eu-

rope to a major Jewish rights issue of interest far beyond the growing Yiddishist sector. Birnbaum's enormous prestige, and the considerable credit he still had with Zionists, was behind this. He had been active in German-speaking proto-Zionist circles from the 1880s and was one of the heroes of the First Zionist Congress in Basel (1897). But this was one of the rare examples of "cross-breeding." In general, Chernowitz as a concept led to bitter new attacks on Yiddish by Hebrew writers. It was arguably the beginning of the end of the bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew writer in the spirit of a Mendele or a Peretz who wrote in both languages throughout their careers. There were important exceptions, but generally writers who were starting out in those years had to forget about becoming famous in both languages. If they wrote "serious stuff" in Yiddish, their bona-fides as Zionists would be questioned (even if they settled in Palestine). And if they became major writers in the new kind of Hebrew, the left wing of the Yiddish establishment would be just as suspicious. In short, two of the three languages of Ashkenaz had come to symbolize conflicting worldviews, and among the intelligentsia at least they were going through a messy divorce.

The Chernowitz Conference provided an extraordinary impetus for the meteoric rise of twentieth century Yiddish literature. The gathering of famous writers (including Sholem Ash, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, H. D. Nomberg, Y. L. Peretz, Avrom Reyzen, and Chaim Zhitlovsky) from different countries to proclaim Yiddish a national language gave aspiring Yiddish writers, teachers, and scholars around the world confidence that they too were part of an international cultural movement. The Hebrew-Yiddish debates ignited by Chernowitz gave both camps impetus to develop their school systems. But the debates in the popular press and circulated correspondence tended to be acrimonious, and the polemics became known as the language dispute, called *riv leshóynes* in Yiddish and *riv leshonót* in Israeli Hebrew. In the Diaspora it remained in the realm of ink and involved no Jewish-on-Jewish violence, unlike the situation in Palestine. In Eastern Europe, two kinds of modern Jewish day schools arose. One featured Zionist education in Hebrew (recognizing that the everyday language of the children was Yiddish). The second was Yiddishist education in Yiddish (with Hebrew often taught too). In their zeal to show that each language could



Figure 9.3 This image of five Yiddish writers at the Chernowitz Language Conference of 1908 became a classic and was used on a Yiddishist postcard for many years. They are (from left to right): Avrom Reyzen, Y. L. Peretz, Sholem Ash, standing, Yiddishist philosopher Chaim Zhitlovsky, and H. D. Nomberg. (Menke Katz Collection)

be used to teach all subjects, educators in both camps compiled textbooks in each language to cover modern secular subjects.

A wholly unanticipated, monumental result for Jewish culture emerged at Chernowitz: a new and far-reaching field of academic research now known as Yiddish studies. Chernowitz set in motion a chain of intellectual and scholarly work *on* Yiddish that led directly to the university-level field of Yiddish studies, which was destined to play a part in the perpetuation of the language, literature, and culture.

#### POLEMICS TO SCHOLARSHIP

From the Yiddish writer Peretz of Poland, to the Zionist Birnbaum of Austria (and latterly, New York), to the radical Esther of Belorussia, the major players at Chernowitz were figures known to the Yiddish press. The surprise of Chernowitz, intellectually speaking, was the

one original academic paper, delivered by an unknown twenty-three-year-old. Matisyóhu Mieses (Mates Mizesh) from Pshemishl, Galicia (now Przemyśl, Poland), had made a name for himself in the Hebrew periodicals of the day. He started to publish poems at fifteen and went on to essays. In spring 1907, just over a year before Chernetz, he caused a commotion with his essay "In Defense of the Yiddish Language." Writing in a rich Hebrew, in a major Hebrew periodical, he began by pointing out that two major camps in modern Jewish life, the Zionists and the assimilationists, both gleefully wish death to a language "spoken by millions, felt by millions, who express in it their joys and sorrows." The obsession to "rip out a large part of the people's heritage" in the Diaspora is "pathological" and the result predictable.

In whatever place the Yiddish language is silenced, there Hebrew will not be heard, there the official language will resonate. And where Yiddish remains strong, that does not pose the slightest threat to our ancient language. . . . If the wish of these Seekers of Zion is brought to fruition in Diaspora Jewish neighborhoods, the national language of the majority, the powerful competitor to Yiddish, will be the only winner, and that will be the day our traitors have yearned for, the day we lose our nationhood. With the loss of the principal criterion of a nation, the natural language specific to each community, a people vanishes. . . . Along with its language, our people will also lose its unique content, its soul, it will lose its living spiritual world of satire and emotion, the flashes of wit, the hues of texture of spirit. . . that are one of a kind, homey, that the Diaspora has given it for all time and with cosmic vigor.

Mieses goes on to dare to trace the origin of the Zionist war on Yiddish:

The invisible, but actual, motivating force for the Holy War against the "Zhargón" is the anti-Semitism that does not rise to the level of consciousness. The feelings of revulsion at Judaism that led in earlier times to betrayals, to consciously lose one's national identity, continue to be at work here, as

a work of Satan, even in the camp of the most devout Zionists, furtive as this force may be.

(*Matisyóhu Mieses, "Bizkbús hasófo ha-yehúdis"*  
[In Defense of the Jewish Language] in *Ho-óyloom* [Ha-olám], June 5, 1907.)

With this controversial essay under his belt, Mieses turned up at Chernowitz with a long, learned paper written in a rich Galician Yiddish. Reports on its delivery to the conference have become part of the lore of Chernowitz, for example, the stories in the press of a number of Zionist observers beginning to weep, and a couple of fistfights breaking out in the rear of the hall. Mieses began his talk with the substance of his earlier article, picking the Irish as an example of an ingenious people who largely lost their unique identity when they lost their language.

Mieses's paper read at Chernowitz quickly moved from his outspoken Ashkenazic-centric view of modern world Jewry to a chutzpah-laden assault on the Germano-centric views of transcendental idealist Johann Fichte and the preexistentialist Arthur Schopenhauer concerning their adored "pure" German language. He contrasts what he considers their purist nonsense with the work of the Irish-born scholar Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who introduced Japanese language and culture to the West and saw richness in the admixtures that purists call "mixed language." From this Mieses proceeded to formulate the theory that there are no pure languages; in the richest, most nuanced, culturally advanced languages the mixing is massive, obvious, and ongoing, leading to constant enrichment and refinement.

Mieses proceeded to launch into the most sophisticated linguistic analysis of Yiddish that had ever been made. With numerous examples of sounds, meanings, grammar, and subtle gradations, he demonstrated that the brilliance of Yiddish in completely remaking its Semitic, Germanic, and Slavic sources into an exciting, joyous, powerful, and inimitably *Jewish* structure was the culmination of not only a thousand years of Ashkenaz, but the entire time span of Jewish existence. On the subject of Hebrew, he invoked case after case to demonstrate how the true spirit of ancient Hebrew is preserved as a living

thing in Yiddish, not in the “physical” Hebrew of Hebrew, whose revival, he argued, can only produce a second-rate language and literature. To thunderous ovation, Miseses concluded with the following proclamation:

The nineteenth century gave us the rights of people, and the twentieth has the high mission of creating the rights of language. Whoever believes in the progress of humanity is welcome to join our ranks and with courage and hope strive for our sacred national aim, to acquire the rights and freedom to develop our Yiddish language.

(“Mizeses referát” [Miseses’s Paper], in M. Weinreich and Z. Reyzen, *Di érshte yidishe shprákh-konferénts* [The First Yiddish Language Conference]. Vilna, 1931.)

Miseses dedicated the rest of his life to studying Yiddish and Jewish languages, mostly writing in German. In 1915, he wrote a book that established the comparative study of all Jewish languages, and in 1924, he published his profound (if controversial) linguistic study of the history of Yiddish, *Die jiddische Sprache*. This prolific scholar, who never held an academic post and worked out of the family’s dry goods store, published a massive tract on the theory of writing systems (1919) and a number of works intended to counter the rising tide of German racism and theories of racial superiority. Among them are *Zur Rassenfrage* (On the Issue of Race, 1919) and *Der Ursprung des Judenhasses* (The Origin of Jew Hatred, 1923). His work on individual versus group psychology appeared in 1928. The manuscript of his multivolume encyclopedia of religion was lost during World War II. He perished in 1945 on the death march from Auschwitz to Cracow, just as the Russian army was closing in.

For all Miseses’s writings in Hebrew and German (as well as Yiddish and Polish), his life’s work would have remained the voice of a singular but lonely and eclectic scholar of interest to a few specialists. The fate of the paper he delivered at Chernowitz, however, was to create a new field of Yiddish within Jewish studies. Its ideas were salvaged, developed, and recast in a mainstream spirit by the most brilliant Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century, who single-handedly fashioned Yiddish studies as a new field of academic research. That scholar was

Ber Borokhov (1881–1917), who is best known to modern Jewish historians for something entirely different. Borokhov was a founder and the major theoretician of Labor Zionism, a movement that incorporated principles of socialism into the Zionist movement. It played a crucial role in setting up the new Jewish society in Palestine, and then the State of Israel, and then Israel's leadership for decades. That a founder of a branch of Zionism could simultaneously be a staunch Yiddishist, whose love of the language led him to the most profound research on its origins, structure, and future, demonstrates powerfully that the usual "Zionism-Hebrew" and "Diasporism-Yiddish" alignments are far from organic or obligatory.

Borokhov, the leading Zionist and founder of one of the movement's principal branches, stood up to the standard anti-Yiddish views. In a polemic piece in 1913, he replied to an educational proposal of the revisionist Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940).

Come and hear the new warning by Mr. Jabotinsky: "If *Zhargón* becomes the language of study in Jewish elementary schools, it will be a death blow to Hebrew." He takes no comfort from the fact, that for seven or eight hundred years, Yiddish was always the language of instruction in the traditional *khéy-der*, in the yeshiva, and look, it did no "damage" to Hebrew. . . .

Since the new settling of the Land of Israel got underway, there have been excellent conditions for the revival of Hebrew, because everything there, that is done in Palestine, has the character of experimentation, is mechanically constructed and mechanically maintained, including the Hebrew experiment. I happen to be among those who believe in these experiments!

(Ber Borokhov, "Hebreyismus militans," 1913; in *Nakhmen Mayzl*, Ber Borokhov: Shprákh-forshung un literatúr-geshikhte. Tel Aviv, 1966.)

That a primary Zionist thinker, organizer, and leader took up the cause of Yiddish was surprising enough. But the Borokhov story goes further than that. He had grown up in an assimilated Russian-speaking family in Poltava and did not learn to speak Yiddish until the age of twenty-six. In the course of his Zionist party work in various parts of the pale, Borokhov first saw in Yiddish a practical means

to reach the Jewish masses with the ideals of Labor Zionism. He then came to see in Yiddish a magnetic intellectual challenge for himself, future generations, and modern Jewish culture in general.

Jewish intellectuals were flabbergasted when a folio volume dedicated to Yiddish studies seemed to appear out of the blue in Vilna in 1913. Called the *Pinkes* (Record Book) and edited by literary historian Sh. Niger (1883–1955), it is a scholarly anthology not only *on* Yiddish but *in* Yiddish. The two-column format, symbolically evocative of rabbinic tomes, opens with Borokhov's "Aims of Yiddish Philology," an essay that sets out with the premise that a modern culture has to have its academic component. That academic component comprises formal study at all levels as well as programs of research and development to secure the future of the culture. This was all the more vital for a language without a state. He proceeded to demonstrate that the kinds of prejudices about Yiddish that existed among Jewish intelligentsia, "for whom the very idea of a Yiddish philology would be funny," were parallel to those encountered among the Catalans, Serbs, Ukrainians, and other European peoples.

Whoever has the vaguest notion about the language sciences knows very well that every vernacular that is spoken and understood by millions of people has to have its internal order and stable structure, or else nobody would understand anybody else. What various kinds of students like to call "grammar" may or may not be written down. The language nevertheless has its rules and its philological law. The cultural value of a language has nothing to do with whether that grammar was already written up by someone or not.

Borokhov demonstrated that Yiddish could not be younger than of thirteenth century origin, and was probably older. He analyzed the role of the various historic components, and provided a survey of older Yiddish literature, which had been forgotten. Borokhov's "Aims" provided a blueprint for what had to be done to build "the modern national language of Jewish culture, Yiddish." Like Mises, he had made the transition from polemics with the detractors of Yiddish to becoming a Yiddish specialist. Borokhov set out his *Yidishe filológye* as an exciting, young, inspiring enterprise that could never be ex-



hausted. Farsightedly for his time, and notwithstanding his own accomplishments, he stressed that this was no work for individuals.

Individuals can take initiatives, but the overall organization of the philological work of our nation can only be carried out by a broad-based institution. As long as we have not gathered together our people's strengths, and as long as there is no authoritative national organization for philological purposes, Yiddish philology will not be able to fulfill its aims.

(Ber Borokhov, *Ufgabn fun der yidisher filológye*  
[The aims of Yiddish Philology]. In Sh. Niger, ed., *Pinkes, Vilna, 1913.*)

Borokhov's "Aims" in the Vilna *Pinkes* were published (unlike most of the volume) in a modern Yiddish spelling that by and large fixed the spelling of the entire modern Yiddish culture movement. To give Yiddish everything that national languages have, Borokhov put the final touch on his masterpiece by proclaiming the "pronunciation of the Vilna region" to be the basis of the spelling system. In fact, Lithuanian Yiddish pronunciation always had the most consistent one-letter-to-one-sound correspondence of any Yiddish dialect, and was therefore conceptually closest to the inherited spelling system. By invoking a single city, one that had for generations had the aura of the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" Borokhov was adding a romantic touch to the new stateless languagehood of Yiddish.

The collection in which Borokhov's essay appeared concluded with his massive bibliography of five hundred works written in whole or in part *about* the Yiddish language between 1514 and 1913. Called *Library of the Yiddish Philologist: Four Hundred Years of Research on the Yiddish Language*, Borokhov's *Biblyoték*, as it remains known, contained a large respository of material in an array of languages (Latin, German, Hebrew, and many more) that would be more than enough for any aspiring Yiddish scholar to start off with. Unknown to East European Jewry, Yiddish had been an object of fascination and obsession with numerous scholars from the sixteenth century onward. Many of the early works were by Christian scholars, including humanists (who started out with Hebrew and Aramaic in the spirit of European humanism and then looked at Yiddish as an adjunct), missionaries (who

wanted to reach Jews directly or teach other missionaries the language of the Jews), criminologists (who wanted to master the German underworld language with its large Hebrew and Yiddish component), business manual writers (who saw that Christian merchants needed this language), anti-Semites (out to expose the secrets of the Jews), and linguists and literary specialists (who were interested academically). Then Borokhov uncovered the writings of Jewish authors, from medieval rabbis who commented on Yiddish sounds and spellings in connection with divorce law to the masterly works of Elijah Levita in the early sixteenth century. He also gathered a lot that had been written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and carried the work right up to 1913. It remains an indispensable tool.

When World War I broke out, he moved from Vienna to New York. Then, after the 1917 revolution, the restless Borokhov returned to Russia on an intensive speaking tour that included presenting his paper for a new commonwealth of nations to replace the czarist empire at the Congress of Nations in Kiev. He was brokenhearted at the loss of some fifteen years of unpublished materials on the history of Yiddish that went missing on the train journey from Stockholm to St. Petersburg. Soon afterward, he came down with pneumonia and died on December 4, 1917, at the age of thirty-six. His unpublished writings were later retrieved and secured, and some continue to await publication.

In a secular Yiddish version of the old Hasidic rebbe magic, Borokhov's zeal for building Yiddish philology was somehow transferred immediately to a diverse group of young scholars in various countries. They became enchanted by Borokhov's *yidishe filológye*, at a time when the very idea of getting a proper academic job in the field of Yiddish would have been a joke (it wasn't an acknowledged field anywhere). Each took one or more of the aims that Borokhov had enumerated in his 1913 essay to fulfill, as it were, Borokhov's academic will. By the early 1920s, these young scholars started building the field of Yiddish. But there was no more Russian empire, and there was no more Austro-Hungarian empire. Their work became part of the Yiddish culture movement in the new post-World War I European order.

## IN THE NEW REPUBLICS

The status of Yiddish rose noticeably during the German occupation of Eastern Europe in World War I. Part of the reason was practical. The German occupiers found Yiddish, a partly Germanic language, to be more supraregional than many others. Also, they were making serious attempts to win the loyalties of various minorities whose cultures had no official status in the old Russian empire. One device was printing passports, and other official documents in German plus the minority member's own language. This led to the issuance of a great many passports, which included Yiddish, perhaps for the first time in history. Another policy allowed minority schools to be established with much greater ease than under the old czarist regime. Various interwar Yiddish schools were actually set up during the German occupation and then modified to suit the post-World War I realities in the new republics of Eastern Europe.

The rights of non-territorial peoples (the stateless cultures) were an issue at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–1920. The conference tried to shift the old notion of winners and losers to that of the “multinational state,” that would recognize its minorities so there would be no “total losers.” Point no. 4 of document no. 822 called for the right of all people to use their own language in public meetings, in the press, and in schools, and prohibited the legal status of a document from being diminished because of the language in which it is written. The question of education came up on June 23, 1919. Lloyd George (suitably “primed” by British Zionists), argued that Hebrew was a recognized language, but Yiddish was not. But the American president, Woodrow Wilson, countered that Yiddish was widely used around the world, including the United States, and there was little sense in Poland of all places becoming some kind of exception.

Wilson pointedly told Lloyd George that minority citizens in Britain and the United States had confidence in the equal justice principle but that this would be rather more delicate in Poland. Finally there was agreement on state-sponsored education in native languages at elementary level, but with nothing stopping minority groups from set-

ting up their own school systems, where the Jewish studies component would be privately financed. The status of Yiddish at the conference was meticulously researched by Joseph L. Tenenbaum (1887–1961), a Polish-Jewish delegate to the conference, who later migrated to America where he became a surgeon as well as a Jewish writer.

For many of the Jews of Eastern Europe, the worst suffering of World War I came after the major powers stopped fighting, and the new local nationalist forces began to battle fiercely with each other or with the new Soviet Union that emerged from the October 1917 revolution. There were pogroms, massacres, bouts of hunger and deprivation, and the seemingly endless saga of one place changing hands frequently. Most famously, Vilna changed hands *seven* times during this period. In the name of undoing various historic injustices committed by great powers and empires against smaller nations, the areas of the two former great empires, Russia and Austria-Hungary, were being carved into nation-states. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in early 1918 paved the way for independence of the three Baltic States—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—formerly part of the Russian empire and, very briefly, of Ukraine (which came back into Russia during the civil war in 1919). The Treaty of Saint-Germain in 1919 carved up what had been the Austro-Hungarian or Habsburg empire, creating Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. The 1920 treaty at the Trianon Palace at Versailles, France, resulted in the further allocation of substantial parts of Hungary to surrounding nations. The Versailles Treaty, signed in 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, to take effect in January 1920, set up “theoretical” borders of the new state of Poland, partly attempting to restore what had been the kingdom of Poland before the late-eighteenth-century partitions. In the continuing military battles, the forces of Poland’s Grand Marshall Pilsudski proved surprisingly powerful (especially since there had been no fully independent Poland since the 1790s), capturing both Kiev and Minsk. The new Poland, after various withdrawals demanded by the Western powers, included not only the Polish heartland of Warsaw, Lublin, and Cracow but also Vilna (now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania); Brest, Grodna, Nowogrudek, and Pinsk (now in Belarus); Lem-

berg (Lvov, Lviv), Lutsk, Rovna, and Tarnopol (all now Ukraine). These borders, finally confirmed in March 1923, left the Polish Republic with over 3 million Jewish citizens, more than any other country in Europe. Poland, with 27 million people, became the sixth largest nation in Europe. Hefty chunks of the heartland of all three modern East European Yiddish dialect and culture areas—Northeastern (Litvak), Southeastern (Ukrainian), and Mideastern (Polish)—were now in the Polish Republic. Even Kiev and Minsk, the capitals of the Ukrainian and Belorussian republics of the post-World War I Soviet Union, were not far from the Polish border.

Notwithstanding the various forms of anti-Semitism, there was religious, cultural, and political freedom for all groups except pro-Soviet revolutionary communists and others who threatened the regime. That meant that Yiddish-speaking movements like the Bund, which was wholeheartedly anti-Soviet while being pro-secular, pro-Yiddish, and anti-Zionist, could flourish in Poland, and indeed they did. It was a new golden era for Yiddish culture, not only in Poland but in all the new free republics carved out of the old empires by the victorious Western allies.

Warsaw quickly became the international center of sophisticated Yiddish literature, and a new era was afoot. The three *klásiker* (classics) of Yiddish literature, Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, had all died during World War I (Mendele in 1917 in Odessa, Sholem Aleichem in 1916 in New York, and Peretz in 1915 in Warsaw). A new generation of masters, many of them from the Polish area of Yiddish culture (Mideastern Yiddish), were becoming the leaders of an ever more modern and sophisticated literature. Among them was the novelist Sholem Ash (Asch, 1880–1957), who received the Polish Republic's Polonium Restitute decoration in 1932 and was deemed the "fourth classicist" for a time. Around 1920, just when introspectivist poets in New York were starting their own movement, a group of Warsaw-based writers, derided as a *khalyástre* (gang) by older writers and journalists, did what groups of writers have long done in such circumstances: adopt the derisive name as a badge of pride. They were expressionists and antirealists, by and large, and began to publish a journal called *Khalyástre*, which started to appear in 1922. It was ed-



Figure 9.4 Isaac Bashevis Singer in Warsaw. (Yivo)

Figure 9.5 The modern Yiddishist movement cultivated a readership of millions that was hungry for modern literature from diverse cultures. Translations sometimes became best-sellers. One favorite was Flaubert's *Trois Contes*. This page is from the Warsaw 1929 edition of the third and final story, *Hérodias*. (Menke Katz Collection)



I

די מאקערדער סעסטונג האָט זיך געהייבן צו מורח סזגם  
 ים-המלח, אויף אַ באַזאָלטישן פעלז, וואָס האָט געהאַט די  
 פאַרם פון אַ קאַנוס. פיר טיפּע טאַלן האָבן זי אַרומגערינגלט:  
 צוויי פון די זייטן, איינע פון סאַרנט, די סערטע פון הינטן.  
 הייזער האָבן זיך געפרעסט ביי איר צומיסנס, אַרומגערינגלט  
 מיט אַ וואַל, וועלכער האָט זיך געצויגן אַרויף און אַראָפּ, לוי  
 ערך מיט דער אומגלייכקייט פון דער ערד; און אַ געשלענגל-  
 טעג וועג, דורכגעהאַקט דורך אַ פעלז האָט סאַרייניקט די  
 שטאַט מיט דער סעסטונג, וווּ די ווענט האָבן געהאַט האַנדערט  
 צוואַנציק איילן די הויך מיט אַ סך ווינקלען, און שייסלעכער  
 ביי די זוימען; דאָ און דאָרט האָבן די טורעמס געמאַכט  
 דעם איינדרוק פון גלוימען. אין דערדאָזיקער שטייגערנער קרוין,  
 וואָס איז אַ געזעצטען איבערן אָפּגרונט.  
 אין דער סעסטונג איז געשטאַנען אַ פאַלץ באַפּונט מיט  
 איילן-גענג און איבערגעדעקט מיט אַ ראַד אין דער סאַרם

ited by leading Yiddish writers Peretz Markish (1895–1952), later a major Soviet Yiddish poet, and I. J. Singer (1893–1944), who later moved to America, where he brought his brother Isaac Bashevis (1904–1991) in 1935. Warsaw became the European center of a European movement in Yiddish literature with “satellites” in Paris and Berlin. The second issue of *Khalyástre*, adorned with illustrations by Marc Chagall, appeared in Paris in 1924. It was edited by Markish and another talented Polish Yiddish novelist, Oyzer Varshavski (Ozer Warshavsky, 1898–1944), whose novel about the Jewish underworld (which many respectable Jews liked to deny existed) made a considerable splash. The movement, which grew increasingly avant-garde and futuristic, climaxed with the two classic volumes of *Albatros*

(Warsaw 1922; Berlin 1923) edited by poet Uri-Tsvi Greenberg (1894–1981). The group eventually fell apart because of the international (and ideological) migrations of many of its players.

A proliferation of newspapers, magazines, and writers in the huge Polish Republic established Yiddish literature as something absolutely normal in the life of the country. The address of the Warsaw Yiddish Writers Union, Tlomatzka 13, became a new symbolic world address for Yiddish literature, and what went on over there entered the mythology of modern Yiddish literature.

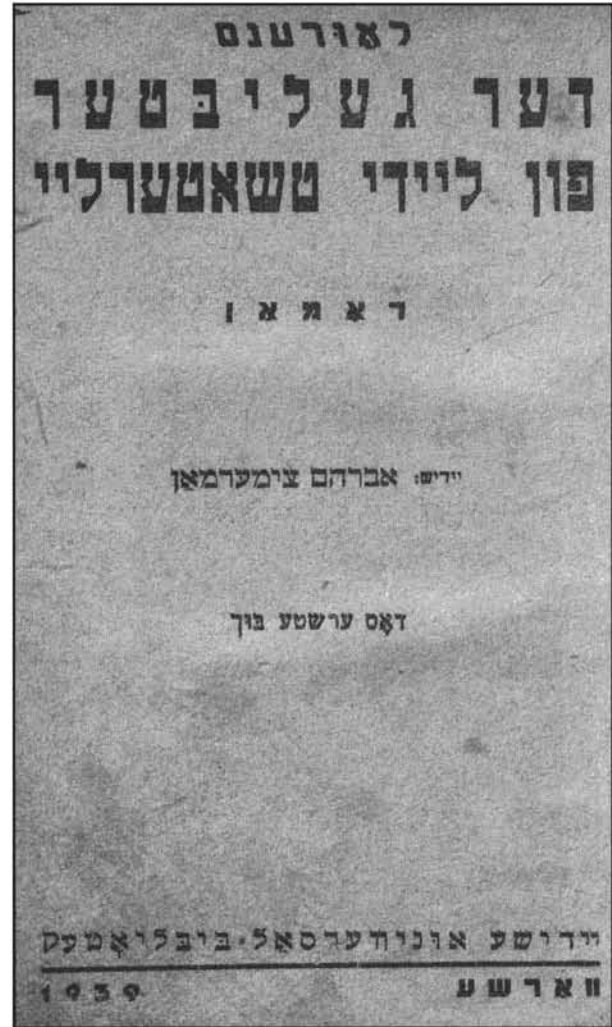


Figure 9.6 *Lady Chatterly's Lover in Yiddish*, a best-seller in Warsaw in 1939. (Menke Katz Collection)



Figure 9.7 In the early twentieth century, Yiddish newspapers began to appear alongside those in the state languages at many newsstands. The Jewish rate of literacy was particularly high throughout Eastern Europe, and sales of Yiddish papers were out of proportion to percentage of the population. This image is from Vilna during World War I. (Leyzer Ran Collection, courtesy of Faye Ran)

During this period of prolific Yiddish culture, which covered the spectrum from very religious to outspokenly atheist, there were over two hundred Yiddish periodicals in Poland, among them twenty daily newspapers. Six of them were in the Litvak area of the Polish Republic (three in Vilna, two in Bialystok, and one in Grodna). In the Polish heartland there were dailies in all the major cities with the biggest concentration in Warsaw, where the leading competitors were the Zionist *Haynt* (Today) and the Yiddishist *Moment* (Moment). These two giant enterprises made roughly equal contributions to serious Yiddish literature, notwithstanding their differences in theoretical language loyalty and political ideology. This is an important point for understanding the 3 million Jews of interwar Poland. Yiddish had become the accepted major language of expression for popular and serious genres of all the Jewish factions and factions of factions. Poland





Figure 9.8 Alongside the various national and cultural movements in early-twentieth-century Eastern Europe, there was a tendency, especially in larger cities, for events where people from the different nationalities could celebrate life together. One favorite was the masquerade ball. The poster for this one, held in Vilna on November 16, 1918, is in Yiddish and (clockwise) Polish, Belarusian (Belorussian), Lithuanian, and German. The absence of Russian, the former imperial language, is no doubt a political statement in favor of the development of the local languages and against Russian claims on the city, whose sovereignty changed hands frequently during this period. (Leyzer Ran Collection, courtesy of Faye Ran)

breathed as naturally with Yiddish as with its other native, long-standing languages, and a considerable number of translations from world literature into Yiddish, often by major Yiddish writers, gave Yiddish the feel of a new European national language.

In 1920, the Bundists, Labor Zionists, and a third group known as Zionist-Socialists together set up the Central Yiddish School Organization, known in Yiddish from its acronym *Tsisho*. It set up modern schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction throughout the vast Polish Republic. Developments in Poland, containing the largest segment of Yiddish speakers, were only one part of the interwar naturalization of modern Yiddish high culture in Jewish Eastern Europe. The new Yiddish school system in Latvia, for example, registered six thousand children in 1934. On the educational front, the weakest record of Yiddish schools in Eastern Europe was in Romania, where a government decree stipulated that only Romanian or Hebrew could be the language of instruction. The small Yiddishist community in Estonia provided for the primary education of about a hundred children in the 1930s.

A special set of circumstances arose in the independent Lithuanian Republic (often called *Kóvner Lite* in Yiddish because its de facto capital was Kovna, or Kaunas, the Vilna region having been taken by Poland in 1920). Partly because of a pogrom perpetrated by the Polish legionnaires in Vilna in April 1919 (often considered to be the first major pogrom after six centuries of peaceful coexistence in the Lithuanian region), and largely in view of the good relations Jews and Lithuanians enjoyed for centuries, the Jews of Lithuania tended to side with Lithuania in the Polish–Lithuanian dispute over the Vilna area. Leaders of the fragile new Lithuanian state based in Kaunas seemed to think that Jewish influence in Western capitals could help win the transfer of Vilna to Lithuania and help build the country's economy. In August 1919, Lithuania proclaimed its intentions about minority and Jewish rights at the Paris peace conference in a statement incomparably more generous than the one extracted from the Poles by Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George, and the Western powers. It offered national Jewish autonomy, exactly as Bundists and others had been demanding, a minister for Jewish affairs, equality before the law,

free use of Jewish languages in courts, government schools, and unlimited freedom to enjoy the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays in peace. For some years all of these promises were honored. There was a minister without portfolio for Jewish affairs who was a member of the government, and an elected National Jewish Council, but both were abolished in 1924. Further setbacks came with the coup of 1926, which resulted in a kind of benign dictatorship. The local councils of elected Jewish representatives were abolished. Despite these setbacks, the Jews were arguably the best-off in Eastern Europe. Yiddish and Hebrew schools flourished and received generous support from the state. There was cultural autonomy and almost no anti-Jewish violence (in sharp contrast to the outbreak of the East European Holocaust in late June 1941, when the bloodbath in Lithuania was proportionately the worst in Europe). Unlike the configuration of internal Jewish politics in Poland, where Diaspora nationalists and Yiddishists were the most dynamic and powerful, it was the Zionists and Hebraists who captured the imagination of the majority of modern-oriented Jews in Lithuania, and the Hebrew *Tárbus* (*Tarbút*) schools were said to be of the highest quality of any in Europe. Like anywhere else in Eastern Europe, the language of all the factions in daily life was Yiddish and a lively Yiddish press served the entire Jewish population, which was the least assimilated in Europe. Because of the much greater strength of traditional religious schools and the Hebrew schools, the Yiddish school system had proportionately fewer pupils. It is possible to argue that in the Lithuanian Republic, Ashkenazic trilingualism reinvented itself among an unassimilated but modern Jewish population. Aramaic continued to be used for Talmud and Kabbalah. Yiddish, in addition to being the language of 100 percent of the Jewish population, was the language of a lively press and school system. But Hebrew, far from being only a sacred language or object of Hebraist worship, became a lively written and read language for modern life as a nonspoken complement to a Yiddish-speaking society. Hebrew was also spoken in varying degrees in the classroom in many of the Hebrew schools.

Still, the republic did not become the spiritual or cultural center of even the Litvaks of Eastern Europe (about 1.5 million, of whom only

150,000 lived in the Lithuanian Republic). One reason for this was the relative isolation from other European centers, which was partly due to the hostile relations with Poland. Another reason was that most of the major Lithuanian Jewish centers—Vilna, Grodna, Brest, Pinsk—were now part of the northeastern districts of the Polish Republic. It is perhaps symbolic that Boris Kletskin of Vilna was able to expand his publishing activities to Warsaw in the mid-1920s and set up in Warsaw, the most logical place, the prestigious new weekly *Literárishe bléter*. Marc Chagall was one of the first to hail the appearance of this high-flying weekly for literature and the arts, which soon became a favorite of the new Yiddishist intelligentsia throughout Eastern Europe.

#### THE RELIGIOUS (SILENT) MAJORITY

Many readers of works on East European Jewish history in the interwar period come away with the incorrect notion that the population was split down the middle between right and left, Zionists and Bundists, Hebraists and Yiddishists, and various combinations (such as Poalei-Zion socialist-Yiddishist-Zionists). There would be much more truth to a generalization that made clear that these divisions, all accurate for the period, were prevalent among the *minority* of Jews, those who were modernist, politically active, and party-oriented. The vast majority remained, for want of a better term, *póshete yidn* (“simple Jews” or “plain people”) who believed in God and prayed and observed the commandments. They picked and chose what to enjoy from the modern world of press, radio, Jewish theater, and so forth. It comes as no surprise that the greatest school enrollment was achieved by traditional religious Jewish schools. The most famous systems in Poland were Horev (*Khóyrev*) for boys and Beth Jacob (*Beys-Yánkev*) for girls.

A remarkable new movement for old-fashioned Jewish religion also thrived in the new interwar republics. The movement was old-fashioned in maintaining the traditional East European status quo, at the very heart of which lay Ashkenazic trilingualism, with Yiddish as the language of everyday speaking and popular literature. Like its

12  
 בעסער יאָרנאַנג, פֿרײַן 60 נר, 21 סעפּט 1930

# דיביעטאָרישע פּקעטליע

אָקוסטראָדעס וואַנשדעפּט פּאַר דיבעראָמאָד מעאָפּער און קאָנסע

פּאַרקאַג פּ.קלעקק.וואַרשע

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זכּה קאָואַלסקאַ-וײַנאַנבּוראָ / פּאַרײַן

## מאַרק שאַגאַלס הונדערט נייע אילוסטראציעס

ערוויסן די יונגע מאַלער אויף מאַנפּאַרינאַם, אַט דער אוואַני-אָרד, וואָס זיבט אין דער פּעלעריי נאַר רײַן-פּלאַסטישע ווערטן און וויל זיך אינבאַנגן אַפּ-מריילען פּון יעדן טרעמפּן באַלאַסט, האָט מען טעגות צו שאַ-נאַל און מען וואַרמט אים פּאַר זײַן, לײַטשאַ-רײַטסייט, ווײַן, לײַטשאַ-די האַרציקע טעגות, וועלכע זענען אַפּטיר, פּאַר זיך טעגות, אין אַ קערטער פּאַס באַרעכ-טיקט, זענען אַפּטיר לנבי שאַגאַלן דרױכױם אומ-געקעמט און אומבאַ-גרענעצט, ווײַל בײַ שׂא-נאַל האָט די טעג, די רײַטסייט, גױס נאַר גױס פּאַפּערוואַכט די רײַן-פּאַלערישע קראַפּט ווײַנע, נאַר נאַר פּאַר-קערט, די לײַטשאַר-סייט, אױב פּון די מיט-וואַרן אױב פּון די מיט-און שטרייבן נאַר מער אונטער זײַנע פּילױטיקע, רײַכע רײַן-פּאַלערישע עפּאַציעס שאַגאַלס, לײ-טעראַרישקייט, אױב מױב איבערצײגער און אַרנאַ-גױס - צוואַטענענענענענע מױס ווײַנע פּלאַסטישע ווײַזיקע און זענענען, און דאַס וואָס וואַלט אַפּטיר געקענט די ווערט פּון באַלעסטיק און אַפּטיר ברענגען, אױב בײַ שׂא-נאַל נאַר אַ טעג, וואָס העלפט אונטערשטרייבן דעם איינאַרטיקן חן פּון זײַן גױסן פּאַלענט.

דער בעסטער באַווײַז דערצו זענען זײַנע פּרעכטיקע הונדערט אילוסטראציעס צו די פּאַקעל פּונם באַרימטן פּאַנעליסט לאַפּאַנטען, וואָס זענען אױס-געשטעלט אין דער פּאַ-רױער געלעדייט טעג-חױדשען דעם אױ פּאַ-רפּאַן אױ טעג, אױ לײ-טעראַטור, אױ פּאַרפּאַ-גױס פּאַרפּאַן, אױ דאַס אַלץ אַפּטיר שטעטער לנבדי גױס, אױ שאַגאַל זאַל זיך אין דעם אַלעם אױס-לעבן אַלס פּינסלער און ברייט זיך פּונאַרדערצױן אין אַ שטע פּון אַפּטיר, קערטירוקער און פּאַרפּאַ-רױטער פּאַלעריי.

ווען מען קומט אױין אױב גרױסן זאַל פּון דער אויסשטעלונג און מען וואַרמט אַז אַלע-מױנעם בלױס אויף די פּיר וועגן, וואָס זענען באַהאַנגען מיט שאַגאַלס בילדער, האָט מען דאַס געפּיל פּון אַ טעגטען, וועלכער אױ אַ לאַנגע צײַט פּאַרשפּאַרט געווען אין אַ פּינסטער קעלער און פּלוצעם פּאַלעס ער אַרױן אין אַ וואַנאַ-טענעם, שטעטערדיק און טױזנט - פּאַרפּאַן נאַר, טן מען ווערט באַרױשט און פּאַרפּאַרעט פּון דער פּרױכטיקער און לײַט-שאַפּעלכער שאַגאַל - פּינסטער, מען זעט, אױ אַלעס-פּאַרפּאַן די פּאַקעל פּון לאַפּאַנטען, האָט שׂא-נאַל געטעגן דאַס ברייטסטע פּעלר אין די גרעסטע פּעלעכטיקע צו אַנטפּלעקן און פּונאַ-



מאַרק שאַגאַל (אױסשטעלונג)

Figure 9.9 Mark Chagall (1887–1985), born Meyshke Segal in Lyozna, not far from Vitebsk. The foremost Jewish artist of the twentieth century, his work is the zenith of the Yiddish school of painters who create a visual counterpart to modern Yiddish literature, delighting without inhibition in the real and imaginary cosmos of the East European Jewish milieu. His photo appears on the front page of a 1930 issue of the Warsaw Yiddish weekly, Literárishe bléter. (Menke Katz Collection)

Hungarian antecedent, the nineteenth-century movement of the Khasam-Sóyfer and Ultraorthodoxy, it was modern in taking advantage of such devices as mass organizing, periodical publications, and an educational system that would also produce proper citizens of the new countries where Jews lived. The major organization-cum-party was Agúdas Yisróel (Agudath Israel, or the Agudah for short). It had been set up in 1912 in Kattowitz, Silesia, by rabbis who were not satisfied with the modernist and Zionist approach adopted by a number of religious leaders. It became a major force in the interwar republics, particularly Poland, where Hasidic *tsadikim* and great Misnagdic rabbis alike saw the need for a relatively united traditionalist alternative in education, press, and literature. In general, the Agudah was anti-Zionist and anti-assimilationist, and believed in maintaining the Ashkenazic religious lifestyle, particularly as it had crystallized in Eastern Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. Because the movement believed in maintaining the status quo and needed Yiddish for press and classroom alike, it quietly absorbed much of the new literary language that the secular Yiddish culture and press were producing (while virulently rejecting much of its content), and effortlessly adopted those traditions to its own traditionalist publications. One of the major early leaders of the Agudah who helped mold it into a powerful political force was Nathan Birnbaum, the pioneering Zionist who coined the word "Zionism" and later "Yiddishism." After trying all the new gods of the great secular outburst of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe, he decided to return to the God whence he came. He became a famous *bal-tshúve* (baal-teshuvah, someone who repents and returns to traditional religion). During World War I, he developed a moderated "Polish version" of the Khasam-Sóyfer's Ultraorthodoxy. His summary, in some ways rooted in the Khasam-Sóyfer's principles, is nevertheless conceived in a distinctly twentieth-century format that was obviously impacted by both Zionism and Yiddishism, from which he is not afraid to have learned something. The principles of Yiddish and of shunning secular culture are much weaker than in the Khasam-Sóyfer's philosophy. Nathan Birnbaum's program is:

To live or settle only in such places where there are separate Jewish neighborhoods.

Not to settle in very large cities unless it is for the good of Jewry. To bring up people who work the soil and to settle on private or communally owned land.

To make societal workshops and factories for our workers. To establish our own colonies in our holy land.

Not to turn away from our distinctive clothing, wherever Jews have distinctive clothing, but to maintain this style and show it respect.

Not to turn away from our language in those places where Jews have their own language, but to cherish it and show it respect.

To make study of the Torah, Bible, Mishna, Gemora the basis of studies of our sons and our daughters, and also to teach them Hebrew and everything that Jews need to know, and to give them the possibility to study the various disciplines and sciences of the secular world in a Jewish and God-fearing environment.

To strengthen and make healthy our bodies and the bodies of our boys and girls (and to do so without arrogance or lack of modesty).

(*Nosn Birnboym, Eys laasoys [Nathan Birnbaum, A Time for Action]. Brin [Brno], 1917.*)

In addition to two books on his new “religious program” in Yiddish and Hebrew in 1917, he published his more philosophic tract *God’s People* that same year, in German, and shortly thereafter, in a Yiddish version that was reprinted a number of times.

Birnbaum became a leading figure of the Agudah, traveling widely on its behalf. His spiritual odyssey, from assimilated German Jew to Zionist to Yiddishist to East European traditional Ashkenazic Jew, is a metaphor for the cyclical nature of Jewish history. This is one of those rare occasions when many points of the cycle were completed by one individual who managed to be a shaper and thinker for them all and had the courage to start anew when his thinking changed.

When Yiddishist chroniclers of the Chernowitz language conference turned to Birnbaum in the late 1920s to provide details for a history of the conference, he agreed, on condition that his own statement of his later spiritual evolution would be included:

The conference gave energy to everybody for whom the Yiddish language was and remains dear. It turned them into conscious workers on behalf of Yiddish. But the truth is that I am afraid of one thing, that these activists have taken to an incorrect path. The radical parties have apparently monopolized the Yiddish language, and thereby not only put it under a certain suspicion among the masses of religious Jews who are the first and true creators of Yiddish. They have moreover brought a grave danger upon Yiddish. Torn away from its roots, it might lose its individuality, its genuine Jewishness and its powerful hues and become a mere shadow of itself. A kind of dry creation, any-old-European or just any-old language. God willing, this danger will pass, and Yiddish will remain the Jewish treasure store, for which it was worth convening the Chernowitz Language Conference in the first place.

(In M. Weinreich and Z. Reyzen, *Di érshte yidishe shprákh-konferénts* [*The First Yiddish Language Conference*], "Amól un haynt" [*Then and now*]. Vilna, 1931.)

To insiders, Birnbaum's remarks had a painful cutting edge. Spiritually, a Yiddish that was "cleansed" of its traditional spirit was a watered-down shadow of itself. And linguistically, or "physically," the various radical parties, especially the leftists, had taken the Germanizing tendency of the earlier *maskílim* a step further and were cultivating a new kind of Yiddish, especially in the press, that was poorer for having been "cleansed" of innumerable allusions, idioms, sayings, and proverbs all ultimately rooted in traditional religion-based Jewish civilization. For "believing secularists," it sounded quaint at best to refer to Friday afternoon as *érev shábés* (Eve of Sabbath) or to say that something is "lost in the crowd" or "wholly assimilated" by using a phrase like *botl-b'shishim* (originally, not to render something nonkosher if less than one-sixtieth of the total).

But the unforeseeable ironies of cultural history are scarcely fathomable. Agudath Israel, for all its religious pro-Yiddish sentiment, all its success in bringing Hasidic and non-Hasidic traditionalists into one united movement, and its ultra-conservative reputation among modernists, was just too spineless for the *real* heirs of the Chasam-Sóyfer's traditionalism. Here the internal Jewish ethnographic fault line was *within* the majority southern component of



East European Jewry. The *Póylish* (Polish-Jewish) ethos of the Agudah was far too compromising with modernity for the *Íngerish* (*Úngarish*, Hungarian Jewish) spirit of the Hasidic dynasties hailing from the historically Hungarian lands. Secular Yiddishists rightly continue to celebrate Chernowitz, but future social and cultural historians of the Yiddish language will no doubt consider another conference to have played an important role in the ultimate survival of spoken Yiddish. That conference was the 1922 gathering of Hasidic rebbes and rabbis at Chop (Cop, Tshop; formerly Csap, Slovakia; now in Ukraine on the Hungarian border). At Chop, the Mínkatsher rebbe (rebbe of Minkatsh or Munkatch), Chaim-Elúzer Shapira ("the Mínkhes-Elúzer," 1872–1937) broke with the Agudah and in effect created an anti-Zionist, antimodernist, anticompromise bloc that would distinguish itself in the generations to follow by steadfastly maintaining Yiddish as the sole spoken language. The language question was nowhere near the top of the list of charges against the Agudah and various Polish Hasidic dynasties (including Ger), but it was the most potent everyday life factor separating the "Hungarian ultra-ultratrationalists" from the "Polish ultra-traditionalists."

The difference in allegiance to Yiddish would only become a major factor in countries far from Eastern Europe, where an absence of a natural linguistic habitat can prove to be a mortal blow for the living language within many Orthodox groups for whom it was not a core existential issue, all the more so after the (then unforeseeable) Holocaust. The Chop conference ended with a ban on Agudath Israel that remains symbolic of the rift to this day. The first signature on the ban was that of Yoyel (or Joel) Teitelbaum (the "Vayóyel-Móyshe," 1888–1979), the future Sátymarer rebbe and spiritual leader of the Sátymar Hasidism, destined to become the largest of all Hasidic groups and ultimately the most potent bastion of twenty-first century spoken Yiddish. From the Yiddish point of view, both towns of origin, Minkatsh (or Munkatch) and Sátymar, are deep in Hungary (Hungarian Yiddish *Íngarin*, standard Yiddish *Úngarn*). Today Minkatsh is Mukachevo, Ukraine. Sátymar is Satu-Mare, Romania.

## INTERWAR YIDDISH SCHOLARSHIP

One of Nathan Birnbaum's sons, Shloyme-Osher Birnboym, known in English as Solomon A. Birnbaum (1891–1989), was raised to share his father's spiritual Judaic odyssey. He became one of the young scholars inspired to devote a lifetime to Yiddish philology. During World War I, while in the hospital recovering from his battle wounds, he wrote his *Practical Grammar of the Yiddish Language* (in German), which appeared in 1918, and went on to do his doctorate on the Hebrew and Aramaic component in Yiddish (it appeared in Leipzig in 1922). In 1922, the younger Birnbaum became lecturer in Yiddish at the University of Hamburg, the first person to teach Yiddish at a university in modern times. For all the renewed interest in Yiddish in Germany, and for all his superb academic publications in German philological publications, this was largely a one-man show.

It was further east that Yiddish studies emerged as an organized field of study in the way that Ber Borokhov had envisaged, as a component of the new Yiddish culture that would rise to the level of the rising nation-states and their languages. That it had been founded by the Labor Zionist Borokhov, and that its first subsequent star was the traditionalist Orthodox son of Nathan Birnbaum, augured well for Yiddish studies not becoming the exclusive preserve of the Bund alone or of any conglomerate of anti-Zionist or antireligious tendencies. Yiddish philology in the Borokhovian sense was destined to rise in the new republics that had replaced the pale of settlement, principally Poland among the free states, and the Ukrainian and Belorussian republics within the new Soviet Union. The time was ripe and it was a question of who would take the initiative and organize the start-up capital, location, staff, projects, and publications.

By the middle of the 1920s, there were several young high achievers in the new field of Yiddish in the Borokhovian sense. In Berlin there was Ukrainian-born Nokhem Shtif (1879–1933), who had been known among Yiddish readers for some time under the pseudonym Bal-Dímyen (Master of Imagination). That was a pen name he eventually dropped as his politics veered leftward and his interests shifted to the academic. (The name then became too Hebraic as well as too free-

spirited, and critics were quick to pounce on this or that theory as “one of his many *dimyóynes*,” or imaginings.) He settled in Berlin in 1922, having earned a doctorate at Yaroslavl University with a thesis on criminal law in the Torah and Talmud. Berlin in those years was home to a significant number of Yiddish writers, scholars, and intellectuals who enjoyed a number of productive years in a circle of expatriates that was earning the respect of the German Jewish and some liberal elements of the German intelligentsia.

The legendary “Henry Higgins of Yiddish,” Noyakh Prilutski (1882–1941), lived in Warsaw. Though a full-time associate editor of a daily paper, a leader of the Folkist movement (which stressed social democracy and Yiddish culture), and a full-time lawyer, this man somehow managed to churn out massive (if inscrutable) volumes on the minutiae of Yiddish dialectology. Written in Yiddish and laden with Latinate terminology, they had titles like *Yiddish Consonantism: The Liquids* (1917) and *On Yiddish Vowels* (1920). In his later memoirs, Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer recounted the Warsaw legend of Noyakh Prilutski, lawyer and dialectologist. Singer’s father, a rabbi, was once swindled and went to the famous Advokát Prilutski for legal advice.

My father in the meantime walked around in sadness, and pale. He could not concentrate on his studying in peace. He could not even pray with concentration. The lawyer-guy on the corner was not up to such a complicated case. My father picked himself up and went to see Noyakh Prilutski, the famous philologist, son of Tsvi Prilutski, editor of the *Momént*. My father had barely said two words when Prilutski interrupted.

“You are originally from the province of Lublin!”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“From your speech. Are you perhaps not a native of Tomashov?”

“Yes, I am from Tomashov.”

(*Yitskhok Bashevis*, *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub* [Isaac Bashevis Singer, *My Father's Court*].  
New York: Israel London/Der kval, 1956.)

But the interwar academic center was destined to rise in Vilna, the traditional “Jerusalem of Lithuania” that Borokhov had in 1913

proclaimed to be the symbolic capital of modern Yiddish culture when he created the new field of Yiddish academic studies. In those years the city, called Wilno, was part of Poland (now Vilnius, capital of Lithuania).

The city that the Gaon of Vilna had made the undisputed Ashkenazic jewel in Talmudic scholarship was attaining critical mass as a center of Yiddish literary, linguistic, and folklore studies, as well as Yiddish higher education. One of the first of the young Yiddish scholars to settle in Vilna, in 1915, was Zalmen Reyzen (1887–c. 1940), one of a new Yiddish royalty family. His siblings were the poets Avrom Reyzen (Reisin, 1876–1953) and Sarah Reyzen (1885–1974). The family all came from Koydenov, not far from Minsk (now Dziarzhynsk, Belarus). From 1919 onward he edited the *Vilna Tog* (Day). In 1920, he published his Yiddish grammar and in the years 1926–1929, the four massive volumes of his biographical encyclopedia of Yiddish literature appeared in Vilna. It contains the biographies and bibliographies of around two thousand Yiddish writers. Not even the staunchest Yiddishists dreamed that modern Yiddish literature had come so far by the 1920s. The work remains a necessity for serious Yiddish scholars to this day, and is affectionately called “Reyzen.”

Zelig Kalmanovitsh (1885–1944), a native of Goldingen, Kurland (now Kuldiga, Latvia), had his doctorate in philology from St. Petersburg. He settled in independent Lithuania in 1922, where he worked intensively as a teacher and editor (first in Kovna, then in Pónevezh), and became a specialist in Yiddish philology. In 1928, he too moved to Vilna. Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1940), who was born in Smargón (now in Belarus), was a teacher of inspirational talent in addition to being a fine poet. He settled in Vilna in 1923. The major figure in interwar Yiddish studies, whose star, talent, and luck outshone all the rest, was Max Weinreich (1894–1969). Like Kalmanovitsh, he was a native of Goldingen, Kurland. Weinreich, who grew up in an assimilated German-Jewish household and did not learn to speak Yiddish until he became an activist in the Bund, permanently gave up party politics to build the high-culture edifice for Yiddish scholarship and culture. Holding a doctorate in the history of Yiddish

studies from the University of Marburg, he settled in Vilna, where he married Regina Shabád, daughter of the Vilna doctor Tsémakh Shabád (1864–1935). Shabád's reputation was legendary. He would make rounds of the towns and villages in Vilna province, treating poor children of all faiths for free. "Dr. Shabád is on his way" became one of the happiest cries in a half dozen regional languages. By World War I, Shabád emerged as a leader of Vilna Jewry and prime organizer of the new Yiddish language school systems in Vilna and its region. When Regina Shabád was married to Max Weinreich and Dr. Shabád set up the couple in a prestigious top floor apartment on Great Pohulanka Street, there was an air of emerging secular Yiddish royalty.

The actual proposals for a Yiddish institute—the "authoritative national institution" that Ber Borokhov had written of in 1913—came in 1925. The second conference of Yiddish schools in Poland, decided on April 21, 1925, to support a new Yiddish academic institute. Two study groups were established, one centered in Berlin under the leadership of philologist Nokhem Shtif and the historian Eylióhu Tshérikover (Tscherikower, 1881–1943), the other in Vilna under Weinreich and Reyzen. Within a few months a rivalry broke out over where the institute should be set up, a question not unrelated to the matter of who would run it. The debates and pamphlets favoring or opposing the Berlin plan and the Vilna plan could have undermined the project. But Max Weinreich, a rapid doer in every sense of the word, went ahead and actually set it up. He selected the name *Yidisher vísnschaftlekher institút* (Yiddish Scientific Institute) and its Yiddish acronym Yivo, and set it up in his apartment at 14 Pohulanka Street. With a little help from his well-heeled and devoutly Yiddishist father-in-law, it moved a few houses uptown to occupy its own suite of offices in a nearby building at 18 Pohulanka and initiated a prolific and high-quality production of learned Yiddish publications. Weinreich and Shabád had little trouble convincing the Bundist Yiddishist publisher Boris Kletskin to back the project. In 1926, a series of folio-format collective volumes began to appear entitled *Filológishe shríftn* (Philological Writings). Three weighty volumes were published in 1926, 1928, and 1929. Scholars from around the world sent in papers, and some dared to write academic papers in Yiddish for the first



Figure 9.10 Max Weinreich, founder of Yivo (an acronym from the Yiddish for Yiddish Scientific Institute) in Vilna (then Wilno, Poland; now Vilnius, Lithuania). The city that had for generations been known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania” for its traditional rabbinic learning had seemingly overnight become the symbolic capital of modern Yiddish learning. (Yivo)

time. Yiddish was suddenly the language of a new international academic discipline, and the Vilna scholars running it all—Reyzen, Kalmanovitsh, and above all Weinreich—made Vilna the symbolic international address for Yiddish scholarship. An academic journal in Yiddish, *Yivo bléter*, was established in January 1931 (and has continued with interruptions ever since). A bibliography of Yivo publications from 1925 to 1941 (published in the United States in 1943) counted 2,529 items.

At the conclusion of Yivo’s first international conference in late October 1929, Albert Einstein in Berlin and Sigmund Freud in Vienna, both products of modernized German Jewry, agreed to be members of Yivo’s honorary presidium, thereby cementing the shift in perception of Yiddish as exclusively a common person’s language to a modern Jewish treasure that had won the respect of some of the most prestigious Western Jews in Europe. The same year, the cornerstone for a new, purpose-designed building was laid on nearby Vivulski Street (then Wiwulskiego, now Vivulskio). By the time it was completed, Vivulski 18 was the primary address of modern Yiddish scholarship,

complementing the symbolic literary center at Warsaw's Tlomatzka 13. Such physical symbols played a role in effecting a shift in attitude toward Yiddish.

By making Yiddish one of the rightful heirs to the millennial Jewish dedication to learning, Weinreich had ipso facto brought it a new and unprecedented international status in academia. He was invited to spend an academic year at Yale University in 1934–1935, where he studied psychoanalysis. Branches of the Yivo were set up in London, New York, and other major cities.

The Yivo in Vilna was much more than a research institute with a library. It was closely linked to several Vilna Yiddishist institutions that were educating youth to become proficient in sophisticated use of Yiddish, as well as literature and folklore. Among these were the Tseh-beh-ka, as the Central Education Committee was known from the Polish initials of its Yiddish name (such spontaneous intercultural combinations were frequent). It ran the system of Yiddish schools in the region in coordination with *Tsisho* headquarters in Warsaw. Until it was closed by the Polish government on suspicion of subversive activity, the *Vilner yidisher lérer séminar* (Vilna Yiddish Teachers' Seminar) was training teachers in every aspect of Yiddish and pedagogical studies. One of the school's survivors is Blumke Katz, who celebrated her ninetieth birthday on New Year's Eve 2004. Here is how she recalls those heady days.

It was September 1930. I can never forget my nervous expectation when we were waiting for Max Weinreich to enter our classroom the first time. In came a handsome, dark man with a head held high, straight as a guitar string, with rapid, light steps. He looked around the classroom with his piercing eyes and called on each of us by family name according to the class journal. We soon felt we were old acquaintances. He wasted no time getting to what would be the main points of his course. What is philology in general and Yiddish philology in particular? He never used to digress from the day's allotted topic. There was just one exception to that. If the word "Yivo" came up, he would speak about it as his dearest child and reminded us of our responsibility as Jews to collect materials for our national Yiddish institution for research and preservation. He turned our class into an ethnographic army,

sending one student to gather holiday customs in the villages, and another to collect materials on traditional foods.

*(Blumke Katz, "Mayn lérer Maks Váynraykh"  
[My Teacher Max Weinreich]. In Óksforder yidish. Vol. 2. Oxford, 1991.)*

The lists of financial contributors enumerated in the publications of the Yivo in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate how it rose to be a real institution by virtue of thousands of small contributions from people all over the world who were captivated by the notion of a national Yiddish institute dedicated to their language and culture. Weinreich's Yiddishism, completely devoid of party politics by the time the Yivo was founded, enabled the Yiddish movement to attract a high culture following beyond the public of any one great author, and beyond the followers of any one political persuasion.

#### THE SOVIET CHAPTER

A major center of modern Yiddish culture developed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. When the borders of the USSR were more or less stabilized around 1920, it included around 2.5 million Jews, second in Jewish population only to the Polish Republic. The new regime at first fought anti-Semitism as a form of racism and suppressed the pogroms by Polish, Ukrainian, and other nationalists. The Polish legionnaires who carried out pogroms in Vilna and Grodna, among other places, and the Ukrainian nationalist leader Petlyura, whose mobs attacked Jews in many locations, were branded enemies of the new Soviet state. Jews found themselves on the same side as the state, seemingly for the first time. Many Jews in the new country, which included such former pale of settlement heartlands as eastern Belorussia and eastern Ukraine (the west of both countries was taken by Poland), felt that the days of Jew hatred were finally over. Many joined the Soviet armed services. The Red Army was the creation of Leon Trotsky (originally Leyb Bronshteyn). But very early on, two major groups of Jews were badly hit by the new Soviet regime. First, the crackdown and victimization of the "bourgeoisie" included many Jewish owners of small shops and stalls. Second, the campaign against religion and Hebrew struck at the heart of traditional Jewish religious civilization.



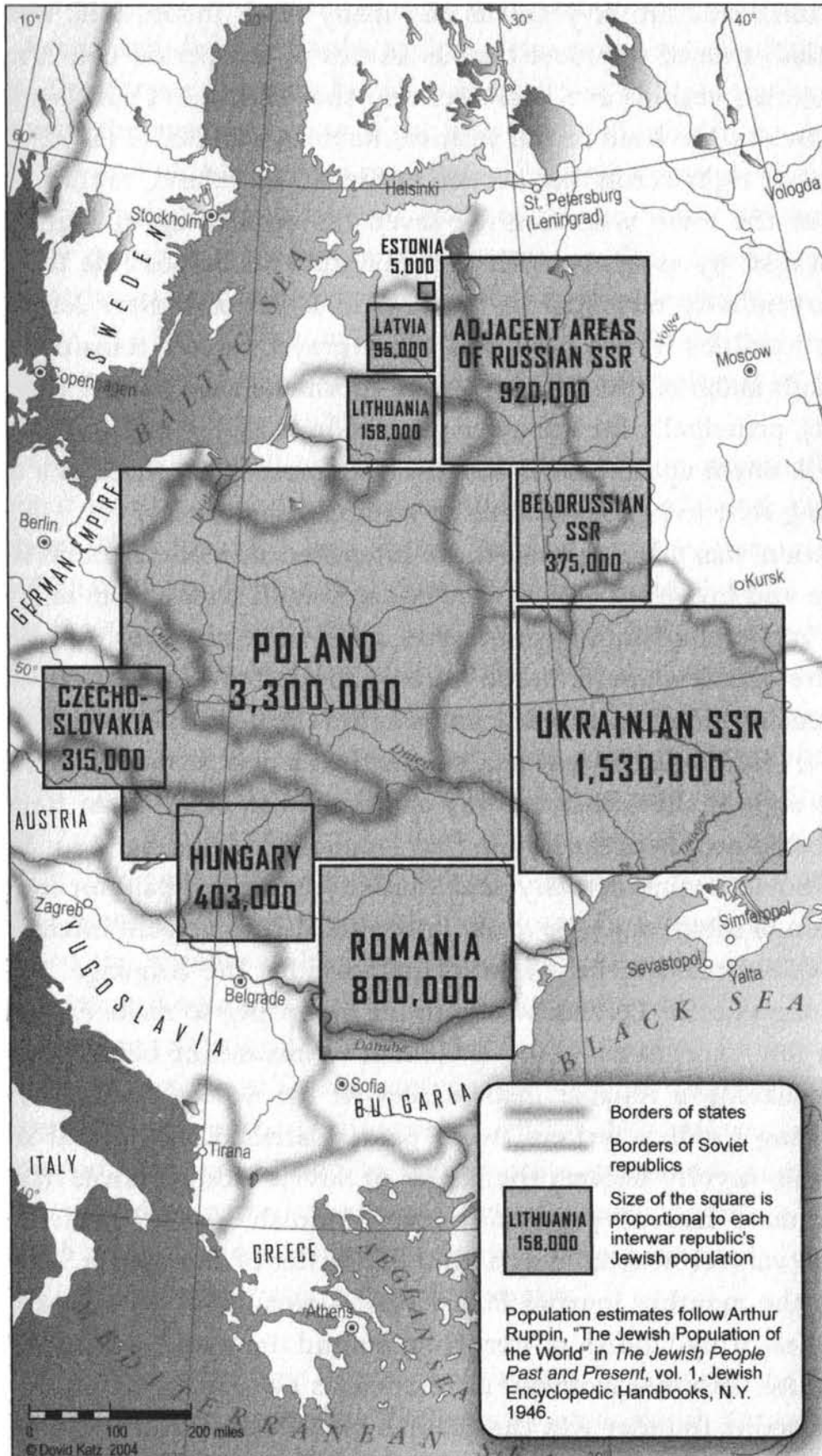


Figure 9.11 Jewish population figures in the Yiddish-speaking heartland of Eastern Europe (using interwar borders) on the eve of the Holocaust in the late 1930s.

The infrastructure of yeshivas and many other institutions was dismantled. One of the most famous stories of the period concerns the Lithuanian yeshiva at Slutsk. Sensing that it couldn't survive under the Soviets, the head of the yeshiva, Rabbi Aaron Kotler (1892–1962), moved it right across the border to Kletsk, in Poland, taking a good part of the town with him (he saved his yeshiva again, during the Holocaust, by escaping with as many students as possible to Japan, and eventually recreated his yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey). In some localities, synagogues and other prayer houses remained open through much of the 1930s (there is enormous local variation on this point), principally for the older generation, while youth was required to look down upon these holdovers from presocialist times as a disappearing relic to be tolerated in its waning years.

Action was taken against those interested in modern Hebrew language and literature which were equated with nationalism and Zionism. While condemning and persecuting both religious and Zionist culture, the new Soviet Union initially supported a Sovietized variety of secular Yiddish culture as part of Lenin's nationalities policy. Soviet support for Yiddish meant much more than a policy statement. The famous sign at the Minsk railway station in the Belorussian Republic welcomed people to the city in four languages, including Yiddish. The early Soviet regime actually *paid* Yiddish writers and paid for the publication of their books. To many in the Yiddish movement internationally, this seemed to be a kind of paradise for the language. In New York the poet H. Leivick was hanging wallpaper to make ends meet. With few exceptions, being a Yiddish writer meant being poor and never having a reliable income. But in the Soviet Union, writers, including Yiddish writers, were paid salaries! Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, rapidly became the center of Soviet Yiddish creativity. The city's most famous prerevolutionary Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichem, was reconstituted as a kind of "writer of the people." In June 1919, the monthly journal *Baginen* (At Dawn) made its first appearance, featuring Yiddish writers from around the world. Soviet Yiddish literature, like many others, developed its own romantic mythology. Its symbolic founder was the Yiddish poet Osher Shvartsman (Asher Schwartzman, 1890–1918), who was decorated for bravery fighting

with the Russians in World War I. He then volunteered with the new Red Army and fell in battle against remaining antirevolutionary forces. The corpus of poems he left was small but of high quality, and he became the martyred saint of the new Soviet Yiddish literature.

The Soviet Yiddish literary world soon became a universe unto itself acknowledging only writers resident in the Soviet Union and avowedly communist writers in other countries. Still, the concentration of serious talent and government support encouraged impressive creativity. The first collection of the emerging new Soviet face of Yiddish literature in the USSR was apparent in the two volumes of *Eygnis* (One's Own) in 1918 and 1920.

A number of talented writers—all of whom would eventually be murdered by Stalin's regime—became the backbone of Soviet Yiddish literature. They included Der Níster (The Hidden One, pen name of Pinye Kahanovitsh, 1884–1950), Dovid Hofsheteyn (1889–1952), Leyb Kvitko (1890–1952), and Peretz Markish (1895–1952), among many others. A separate circle emerged in Minsk, capital of the Belorussian republic, led by the poet Izzy Kharik (1898–1937). In addition to government-supported literature, there was government-supported Yiddish education, starting with kindergarten and extending to university-level departments and institutes. In 1931, there were 94,872 pupils enrolled in 831 Yiddish schools in the Ukraine, 36,501 in 339 schools in Belorussia, and 11,000 in 110 schools in Russia. Added to the number in kindergartens, the total number receiving state-sponsored education, all in Yiddish, was over 160,000. The milieu seemed so inspiring and stable, that highly talented writers were migrating to *dem sotsyalístishn ganéydn* (the socialist paradise). To the intelligentsia, and particularly writers, editors, teachers, and actors, it appeared that in addition to having state-sponsored guaranteed jobs, this incredible new country was actually ensuring future generations of readers and consumers of this stateless, minority culture that had never before “enjoyed such luxuries.”

In what seemed at the time a sensational answer to Zionism, the Soviet Union even decided in the late 1920s to set up a Jewish autonomous region within its borders. But instead of choosing something nearer to

the European heartland, the generous offer consisted of a swampy, freezing, far eastern wasteland called Birobidjan, on the border with Chinese Manchuria. Nevertheless, Jewish emigration to the region started in spring of 1928. During the first five years, around twenty thousand Jews settled there. Many left, but ongoing migration kept the number at around twenty thousand through the 1930s. It was declared to be the Jewish Autonomous Region in 1934, very conveniently so, as the Japanese had occupied neighboring Manchuria in 1931–1932. Birobidjan had Jewish collective farms, Yiddish schools, a growing central library, and a Yiddish theater. But government support was cut off during the purges of the late 1930s and again in the late 1940s. Postwar Soviet Jews would look back with Yiddish black irony: “At least they talked us into moving to a swamp that Hitler never got to.”

Even before Birobidjan, Jewish regions had been set up in Ukraine, Belorussia and Crimea. And, between the early 1920s and the mid 1930s, there were Yiddish-language law courts in Belorussia and Ukraine (a total of 46 in 1931). Moreover, a number of higher Yiddish research institutions also flourished for some years before the crack-down. The most famous were in Kiev, Kharkov, Minsk, and Moscow. For a time in the late 1920s, some of the publications, particularly the Minsk *Tsáytskrift*, were rivaling the Vilna Yivo’s work. Mordechai Veynger (1890–1929), prepared the first-ever Yiddish language atlas before his death in 1929, and it was duly published, in folio format, by his pupil Leyzer Vilenkin in 1931. After government-enforced spelling reforms of the 1920s “phoneticized” the way words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin were written, respelling them according to the Yiddish phonetic system (instead of etymologically), Soviet Yiddish acquired its own feel, which tended to be loved or hated in the west, depending on one’s politics.

But by the early 1930s, a decline in Soviet Yiddish culture was clearly discernible to sober outside observers. There was more and more party control on what writers could write, more masters were churning out propaganda, and the new line common among Yiddish writers around the world was, “Sure, they pay you, but you have to write what they want!”

Operatives of the so-called Yevseksiya (Jewish section of the Communist party) who were responsible for directing Soviet Yiddish culture, and had so ruthlessly suppressed religious and Hebrew culture during the 1920s, were themselves disbanded, having been accused of “nationalistic deviationism.” The Soviets were establishing a pattern of using Jews to promote the Soviet Union and its goals, internally and abroad, and of using them against other Jews before proceeding to destroy them, as well as the various institutions established for the Soviet brand of Yiddish culture. Still, many fellow travelers in the West did not want to believe that this bold Yiddish experiment could have been a kind of chimera to start with.

By the late 1930s, the Yiddish school systems and institutes were being closed down. In 1937, the regime launched its first massive purge, arresting the leading Yiddish writers of Minsk, including Kharik and Kulbak. They were tortured and executed.

There was a thaw in the clampdown during and immediately after World War II, but the final government campaign to destroy Yiddish culture got underway a few years after the war. It included the staged accident that killed the master Soviet Yiddish actor, Shloyme Mikhóels, in 1948. It culminated on August 12, 1952, when thirteen members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were executed in the basement of Moscow’s Lubyanka prison, including five eminent Yiddish writers—Dovid Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, Dovid Hofshateyn, Leyb Kvitko, and Peretz Markish—and the well-known actor Benyomin Zuskin. Stalin’s regime brought the Soviet period in Yiddish literature to its brutal end.

A number of Soviet Yiddish works will be included in the lasting canon of twentieth century Yiddish literature. It may well continue to be the common wisdom that the greatest works of Soviet Yiddish literature were the ones written *before* the greatest writers settled in the Soviet Union. These include Kulbak’s mystical *Meshíekh ben Efráyem* (Messiah the son of Ephraim), published in Berlin in 1924, Bergelson’s *Nokh álemen* (After It All), published in 1913, and Der Nister’s *Gedákht* (Meditation), which he published in Berlin in the early 1920s. Still, major works were created in the Soviet Union too. They include Bergelson’s drama *Prints Reuvéyni* (Prince Reuveni),

the Nister's *Mishpókhe Máshber* (The Family Mashber), Markish's *Fértsik-yérikér man* (The Forty-Year-Old Man), much of Itsik Kipnis's prose, Shmuel Halkin's poems and ballads, and numerous other works.

As noted earlier (see p. 128), the Yiddish derogatory term *shabsetsvínik*, originally "a follower of Sabbethai Zevi," had come to mean "someone who believes in a charlatan like Sabbethai Zevi even after he is exposed." By the late 1930s, after the purges, arrests, and shattering of the newly established Yiddish culture, Yiddish modified the meaning again to mean "someone who still believes in communism even after all that." The metaphor most often applied is that of a meteoric rise and fall. It was an intensive secular outburst whose hand was forced, and which was choked out brutally.

## THE HOLOCAUST

Even the wisest men and women can and should be forgiven for not foreseeing the mass butchery of an entire minority population—men and women, healthy and sick, from new-born babies to the most aged—in a range of countries, based on their ethnicity. Interviews with survivors who fled in the first days of the Nazi invasion yield the same answer to questions about why their more experienced relatives and friends did not choose to flee with them: "What!? they said, run to the Communists? Don't be ridiculous, we remember the first [world] war! The Germans were the most civilized of all the armies that trampled through here. They're not going to go and start shooting innocent civilians."

The simple and unalterable truth is that the Yiddish-speaking heartland of Eastern Europe, where Yiddish would have survived safely for the long-term future without any government support, was annihilated. Yiddish was as natural to Lublin, Kiev, and Kovna as Polish to Lublin, Ukrainian or Russian to Kiev, and Lithuanian to Kovna. The people of Ashkenaz were murdered in the Nazi slaughtering fields, camps, and crematoria. That is why Yiddish, the natural language of so many millions, fell into a state of severe crisis in the wake of the Holocaust. In addition to the massive territory of the (western) Soviet

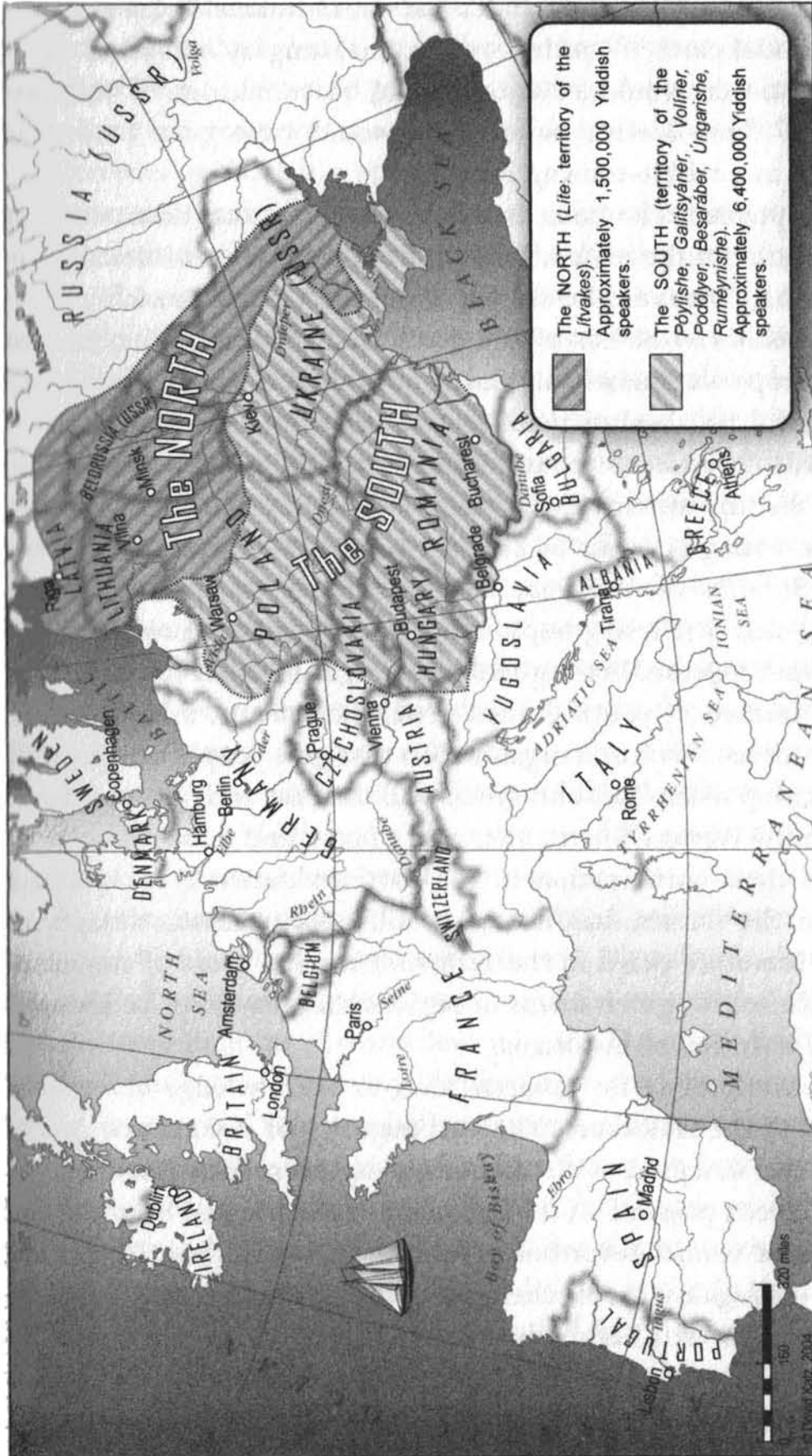


Figure 9.12 The Yiddish-speaking homeland in pre-Holocaust Europe.

Union, the land of Yiddish included Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, substantial parts of Czechoslovakia and Hungary and other countries. Whosoever would have dreamt of mass murder of the vast majority of these Jewish populations would have been (and was) denounced as a rabble-rousing lunatic.

But it happened. The immediate effect was the total destruction of Yiddish culture in the region, ranging from the most traditionalist religious to the most radically secular. From the Yiddish speaking *khéy-der* to the editorial offices of the great Yiddish dailies, the Jews of Eastern Europe were nearly all murdered and their assets plundered.

The painful but absolutely necessary study of the Holocaust is often understandably reticent about certain trends of resistance and survival. Of the tiny minority who survived the East European ghettos, most were young activists of Yiddishist-socialist organizations (most often the Bund) or Zionist organizations (whether Labor Zionist or the right-wing Betar). These groups, which put aside their prewar differences to work together in the ghettos, and fight together in the forests, had been trained in youth groups, scout movements, athletic clubs, and other forms of cultural organization that give people the physical stamina, group discipline, and group will to resist and survive. Their bravery in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Vilna Ghetto, and numerous others, as well as their participation in the partisan network of anti-Nazi fighters in the forests, has not been fully documented, though an extensive literature exists in the *Yizker bikher*, the genre of commemorative volumes for given towns or regions that remain to be brought to the full attention of historians.

It is uncomfortable for modern Jews to acknowledge one of the basic facts of the Holocaust: The vast majority of Ashkenazic Jewry *did* go to the slaughter without putting up even such resistance as might have been possible. If the maximum resistance had been put up, the Holocaust would nevertheless have been carried out. People are only people as against the mechanized horror of the twentieth century, and against a powerful army determined to murder an entire civilian population. Still, the numbers of survivors and escapees would have been somewhat higher. And of course, there was remarkably brave resistance in a number of ghettos where there were uprisings, and



among the partisans in the forests. But in the wake of the Holocaust, Yiddish acquired a new charge added to the old ones on its rap sheet: a fatal pacifism, a failure to go down fighting. A popular Israeli saying of the postwar years was the wordplay *Idish—adishút* (Yiddish brings indifference, or Yiddish = apathy).

The truth is that this pacifism of the traditionalist majority was one of the cardinal features of the entire thousand years of Ashkenazic Jewry. The readiness to die, *af kidush hashém*, to sanctify the name of God, implied not only a readiness to die rather than submit to baptism. The Nazis, in their racial and ethnic hatred, offered no alternative to death. But the same principle of the sanctification of God's name was spontaneously applied by thousands of rabbinic and traditional community leaders throughout Eastern Europe to the situation of mass murder of the Jews by the regime. The eyewitness accounts from escapees from killing sites are powerful. Time after time one comes across survivor testimony about the vast majority going peacefully to a killing site, and being most concerned to recite the final *Shma Yisróel* before entering paradise. Such was the firm belief of millions of Ashkenazim, whose culture was one of the most nonviolent and pacifist in human history. That traditional culture is the traditional culture of Yiddish too, though not of its modernist branches, which were quick to lose belief in a real paradise in the ancient religious sense, and to adopt Western notions of self-defense, group action, and viable, physical resistance to evil. That divide, between the majority of traditionalist Ashkenazim and the minority of modernists, was inverted in terms of world Jewry by the Holocaust itself. The carnage of traditional believing Ashkenazim was the most complete, while the survival rate was highest among activists of various movements. Thus, among post-Holocaust East-European-born Jewry, traditionalists became a small minority, and the modern secular Jews became the archetype in Western countries where survivors settled.

Three sectors of Ashkenazic Jewry did not perish in the Holocaust: (1) those who had emigrated to the Land of Israel, most of whom went to rebuild the ancient Jewish homeland; (2) those who emigrated everywhere else, most of whom went to seek a better life and more opportunity for their families; (3) those who fled, mostly eastward to

Russia at the onset, who became postwar Soviet (or Soviet-sphere) Jewry or resettled elsewhere. In addition, there were the minute percentages of survivors of the actual killing places.

#### IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

As the old Yiddish expression goes, *di malókhim géyen nit arúmet af der érd* (You don't see perfect angels walking around here on earth), and we in the age of postmodernism can appreciate that having a less-than-perfect past makes one no worse than anyone else, whether, to take shameful episodes from American history, we consider Africans shipped across the ocean to be slaves in the United States or the fate of Native Americans whose land was taken from them. The modern state of Israel needs no "recommendations" here. The return of Jews to their ancient homeland and their construction of a viable state is one of the impressive accomplishments of the twentieth century. One of the facets of its gradual maturity is the ability of Jews everywhere, particularly in Israel, to begin to fathom the multifaceted outcome of the bold Zionist experiment. In Israel, the historians who try to see all sides are sometimes called the New Historians.

Zionism set out to create a new Jew who would resemble the ancient Israelites far more than modern European Jews. The fire in the bellies of those who left their families and towns and headed for a life of physical and economic hardship, facing bitter enemies and a much increased chance of unnatural death, was kindled by a complex of feelings. One of those feelings was the kind of group pride and strength instilled by nineteenth-century European nationalism that called on Jews to re-create their ancient national status in the Land of Israel. Another, frankly, was a feeling of shame in the Diaspora Jew. That shame was an integral part of the viewpoint of generations of East European Jews who created the renewed Jewish settlement in Palestine from the late nineteenth century onward. It had various components, including the image of the Diaspora Jew as weak, physically unfit, effeminate, unwilling to fight, useless with serious agriculture, and speaking that dreadful *Zhargón*. That linguistic, cultural shame was bound up with a profound fear that the universality of

Yiddish would prevent the artificially revived Hebrew dialect of Palestine from ever becoming the natural native language of the Jewish people.

Many commentators never tire of repeating that it wouldn't have been "fair" to the Middle Eastern ("Sephardic") Jews who came en masse after the founding of the state of Israel to ask them to learn an Ashkenazic language. Contrary to myth, they were speakers of Arabic and other languages, not of Hebrew, and to say that they and Yiddish are "genetically unsuited" is as nonsensical as saying pure Slavs who migrate to twenty-first-century America cannot be expected to adopt an Anglo-Saxon tongue. Many Sephardic yeshiva students have mastered Yiddish in Israel and around the world. The cultural historian's task is to unravel what happened and ask unpopular questions. The main one in this story is usually ignored. What if Yiddish had remained a folk language for "women's tales and translations" rather than rising, in the absence of a state, to produce a European class literature by the early twentieth century? One possible answer is that there would not have been such a rejection of things Yiddish in the Holy Land. But the emergence of the likes of Mendele and Peretz flew in the face of all of Zionism's cultural predictions, and the fact that they, and many other great Yiddish writers, also wrote in traditional Hebrew added insult to injury for the activists who revived modern Hebrew.

Had the traditional religious Jews and Yiddishist-socialist-Bundist Diaspora dwellers all remained in Europe, on the one hand, and Zionist Hebraists moved to Palestine on the other, there would have been a neat geographic split. But it wasn't that simple. For one thing, *Érets Yisroel*, the Land of Israel, was every bit as sacred to traditionalist Jews as to Zionists, though in a different way. There had been traditionalist religious migrations of both Hasidim and Misnágdim from the eighteenth century onward and, as soon as the Zionists began to settle, some anti-Zionist traditionalist religious Jews (Ultraorthodox or Haredim) migrated as well. This was a further provocation to the Zionists. Not only was Yiddish the language of those ugly Diaspora weaklings, it was simultaneously the language of the "fanatic" Jews who came to settle and oppose everything the secular Zionists were building. One of the many negative images of Yiddish became that of the traditionalist

Ultraorthodox Jew who had the chutzpah to settle in the Land of Israel without being keen to take up arms to fight for it or, for that matter, to tackle swamps and deserts.

Yiddish (non-Zionist) philosopher Chaim Zhitlovsky's 1914 lecture tour in Palestine was marred when the speaker and members of his intended audience were beaten repeatedly by gangs of Hebraist thugs. Zhitlovsky was advised to leave quickly for his own safety. Things got worse in the 1920s, and there are some interesting twists to the tale.

The most provocative disconnect, as often happens in history, did not involve a great number of people, yet it proved the most irksome to the establishment. That was the settlement in Israel of left-wing Labor Zionists who were followers of Ber Borokhov, the virtuoso maverick thinker who founded both Labor Zionism and modern Yiddish studies. These were Yiddish writers, readers, and personalities who believed that Yiddish and modern Hebrew could coexist, whose Zionism led them to settle in the Land, and whose Yiddishism led them to continue to pursue their interest in Yiddish literature and culture after settling. That was the dynamite that set off the Zionist war on Yiddish in Palestine.

The main gang that was organized to beat up Yiddish writers, fire-bomb kiosks, and disrupt literary and cultural events was called *Gedúd meginéi ha-safá* (Battalion of the Defenders of the Language). Research on it is still scant. The first academic book on the subject was published in 2000. It gingerly refers to "nonconsensual means." Shimon Shor traces the origins of the first battalion to spring 1923, though gangs "without that name" had been doing similar work for years. Although the group's dedication to hooligan tactics was widely known, it was enthusiastically embraced by the Zionist establishment in Palestine. Its founding proclamation was featured in the journal *Bedorénu* (In Our Generation). It included some famous phrases that were used for decades, most famously "Hebrew person! Speak Hebrew!"

It has come to the point where newspapers in *Zhargón* have begun to appear in Jerusalem our capital! Various announcements are pasted on our streets in the *Zhargón* language. . . . We, founders of the Battalion for the Defense of the Language. . . cannot remain eye and ear witnesses to this scene and to

just look on with indifference to this vulgar derision. This is a disgrace for our language. . . .

Hebrew person! Speak Hebrew! Get rid of the hold of that *galút* [Diaspora] that accumulated upon your soul in the long years of your exile. Purify yourself! For you are in the land of the Hebrews!

This founding text of the battalion is particularly instructive: Yiddish speech and press are by their existence a “vulgar derision” of Hebrew. What was only partly expressed in such strident language was a deep fear of the age-old Jewish spirit that resides in Yiddish, which needed to be replaced. In other words, the (ugly) *Jew* had to become the (beautiful) *Hebrew*. Little wonder that the anti-Yiddish brigade won the accolades of the top intellectuals in the land. Chaim Weitzmann (1874–1952) called them “heroes of Israel.” In a frank statement of the reincarnation of the old attachment to God as a new attachment to language and modern nationalism, the great Hebraic scholar Joseph Klausner (1874–1958), applauded the battalion:

The new sanctity of language has to be as solemn in our eyes as the old sanctity of religion. . . . And whoever knows Hebrew but speaks a foreign language shall be in our eyes as an “apostate for spite,” as a worshiper of idols, as a public desecrator of the Sabbath.

(Quotes from Shimon A. Shur, *Gedúđ meginéy hasafá be-Érets Yisraél, 1923–1936* [*The Battalion of the Defenders of the Language in the Land of Israel, 1923–1936*]. Haifa: University of Haifa, 2000.)

The tarnished history of Yiddish at Hebrew University also began in the 1920s. When the new university was founded in Jerusalem, the editors and publishers of the Yiddish *Tog* in New York, a pro-Zionist middle of the road daily newspaper at 183 East Broadway on New York’s Lower East Side, had the idea of making a gesture to this historic new institution in Jerusalem by creating a chair in Yiddish literature. Far from being a center for a “campaign for Yiddish” in Palestine, this would be an academic chair for the study of Yiddish literature and culture. Its establishment would ease Hebraist-Yiddishist tensions in the Diaspora, and it would be a contri-

bution of Yiddish-speaking Jewry to the Jewish state-in-making in Palestine. Reform rabbi Judah L. Magnes (1877–1948), the university's first chancellor, was on a fund-raising visit to the United States in 1927 when he and the publishers of the *Tog* enthusiastically agreed on an endowment to establish a Yiddish studies chair at the university. Magnes had, incidentally, been one of the founders of the *Tog*. At a banquet in New York, *Tog* publisher David Shapiro announced his gift of \$100,000 for the new chair, a massive sum for the struggling university. Magnes graciously accepted the chair and elatedly wired the good news to Jerusalem. But something untoward happened "on the way to the committee," something that neither Shapiro nor Magnes had remotely anticipated. The Battalion for the Defense of the Language incited rioting in Jerusalem, roughed up professors and members of the relevant committees, and pasted the city with posters condemning the plan to put an abomination in the sanctuary of Hebrew purity. Magnes wired back that all the teaching would be carried out in Hebrew. The university's governors wired Magnes. The text, discovered by Professor Aryeh-Leyb Pilovsky in the 1970s, reads as follows:

As friend University and yourself beg you relinquish Yiddish chair whatever the conditions. Huge outburst being organised severer than Hilfsverein [an earlier dispute about German language instruction]. Whoever triumphs University ruin certain. Withdraw prior kindling battle.

*(Aryeh Pilovsky, "Lashón, tarbút ve-leumiút ba-yishuv be-khadásh: Ha-diún hatsiburi ba-tokhnit lehakim katédra le-yidish be-Yerushaláyim be-shilhéy 1927" [Language, culture, and nationalism in the New Settlement [in Palestine]: The public discussion on establishing a chair in Yiddish in Jerusalem in late 1927]. Katédra, October 1981.)*

The plan came to nothing, but the history of the debate, published by Professor Pilovsky, is illuminating. Master Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) wrote a memo that "research on Yiddish carried out in Hebrew would in fact strengthen Hebrew in its struggle." He also deplored the violence. "It is completely wrong to give in to or fear the threat of terror and fascistic methods," he continued. "Every concession of the administration in the face of threats like

those we see now will bring the result that each time educational and social questions will come before the university, these methods will be used." The letter, also signed by H. Bergman, D. Banet, and L. A. Meir, warned against "hysterical chauvinism" and "the censorship of the street." It was only after the Holocaust, in 1951, that a Yiddish-taught-in-Hebrew chair was established at Hebrew University.

Meantime, the Yiddishist, or Borokhovist wing of Labor Zionism that had become known as *di linke Páley-Tsíyen* (the left-wing Labor Zionists or Poalei-Zion) became a minor force in 1920s Tel Aviv. A number of young Yiddish writers of one or another branches of Labor Zionism were arriving in the 1920s, full of adrenalin to build Yiddish and Israel against the reigning opinion makers. They quickly went to work on building at least an island of Yiddish culture. Their efforts at setting up a day school met with violence. The attempts to stifle their publications, in a society otherwise extraordinarily free to every point of view were extraordinary. Printers in Tel Aviv and its environs were warned of being firebombed if they "touched" a new Yiddish magazine that was currently in the works. The editors quietly found a religious printer in Jerusalem and went ahead. They put out a first issue of the magazine *Ónheyb* (Beginning) in August 1928. The literary evening to celebrate it, held at the end of the Jewish holiday season that autumn, was stormed by Hebraists who demolished the writers' modest Tel Aviv clubhouse.

Working in tandem with British Mandate authorities on the laws governing periodicals, Hebraists saw that it was made illegal in fact if not in name to produce a Yiddish periodical in the late 1920s (it was illegal to produce a periodical without a license, and submissions for Yiddish were rejected). A periodical meant "two or more issues of a publication with the same name." Thinking they were clever, the Yiddishists produced a fine issue of a new literary journal called *Eyns* (One) in April 1929 in Tel Aviv, following up with a second issue in July called *Tsvey* (Two). They were soon found to be in breach of the law. Trying to outwit the censors (Yiddish writers trying to outwit the Hebrew censors), they called the third issue *Tsvishn tsvey un dray* (Between Two and Three). In 1934 the Battalion for the Defense of the Language broke up a meeting in Tel Aviv in honor of the visiting poet

Leivick from America and attacked the participants. The same year, on Allenby Street, Tredler's bookshop, which sold Yiddish periodicals and books from Poland and America, was set on fire. It was becoming clear during the 1930s that the pro-Yiddish group could not change the views of the Hebraist intelligentsia about Yiddish, and they shifted to fighting for the survival of their own tiny circle and its ability to publish serious Yiddish literature, mostly for a readership abroad. Their ranks were strengthened in 1935 by the arrival of Yankev Zrubovl (Jacob Zerubavel, originally Vitkin), a major founding Labor Zionist and pupil of Borokhov. He tried to use his international Zionist connections to keep the group safe from more serious violence. But the beatings continued, as did the firebombings of printers who accepted Yiddish language printing jobs.

In his open appeals to his fellow Zionists, Zrubovl turned again to the responsibility of the intellectual leadership of the Jewish state-to-be. He cited the reaction of the Hebrew newspaper *Davár* to the violence against Yiddish. It had blamed Yiddishists for holding open meetings in the Yiddish language in provocation of the Land of Israel. Documented acts of revenge included the disbarment of Dr. Nokhem Rafalkes (1884–1968) from the union of attorneys as punishment for editing a Yiddish periodical. Decades later, after a long period of "good behavior" and Hebraizing his name to Nahum Nir, he became a politician.

By the middle of the 1930s, when Zrubovl arrived, the very idea of Yiddish being a national language in the embryonic state of Israel was already too far from the thinking of all factions of Zionism for him or any other Yiddishist to even mention. Zrubovl was hoping for Yiddish and those who spoke and wrote it to have the same minority rights in Israel that existed in European and other countries. He was also appealing for a change in attitude.

Save the new generation, which is arising in the Land of Israel, from snobism, estrangement from Jewish life, save them for the collective of Jewish national life around the world, save the Land of Israel from hate of its own origin and of the widely diverse Jewish people everywhere. . . .



Help us establish cultural positions, values that will be taken seriously, help us to fight for the rights of Yiddish in the Land of Israel.

This is not a campaign against Hebrew, but against aggressive people-hating chauvinistic Hebraism. It is a campaign for the rights of those who can and wish to live their lives in Israel in the Yiddish language.

(Zrubovl [Yankev Vitkin], "Mir bashúldikn un mónen akhráyes"  
[We Accuse and Demand that Responsibility be Taken].  
In *Yidish in Érets Yisróel [Yiddish in the Land of Israel]*. New York, 1936.)

The Gedúd meginéi ha-safá was not the only anti-Yiddish gang. There were other organizations at work, and some reached the top echelons of the establishment. There was, for example, the not-so-subtly named Igúd le-hashlatát ha-ivrit (Union for the Enforcement of Hebrew). A letter was sent to the Tel Aviv printing company Azriel, warning it not to accept Yiddish-printing clients:

We have just been informed that you are preparing to publish or to print a newspaper in Yiddish. . . . We warn you, not to do this thing, and not to assist those who dishonor the Hebrew language, which would lead to conflict and unrest and bring about the involvement of the police. The responsibility for the consequences will be yours. Stop the typesetting of the newspaper immediately.

In 1935, the Union for the Imposition of Hebrew issued an analogous warning to the Horev printing house in Jerusalem, after the banned Yiddish literary magazine *Náyvelt* (New World) mischievously reappeared as *Anshtót náyvelt* (*Instead of Náyvelt*).

A copy of *Anshtót náyvelt*, printed at your press, has reached us. It was hard for us to believe what our eyes saw, that in the holy city Jerusalem a newspaper appears in Yiddish. . . .

We feel certain that you did not properly evaluate the seriousness of your actions, and that you have acted in error. We therefore ask you to rapidly make good that which you have committed, and to stop publishing the above-named paper, which brings grave damage to the interests of our life. We await your rapid reply. With greetings of the Hebrew language,

Dr. Shmetterling, Chairman  
 Hillel Har-Shoshaním, Secretary

(*Redáksye Náyvelt* [editors of *Náyvelt*], *Tsi vert yidish in Èrets Yisróel geróydeft?*  
 [Is Yiddish in the Land of Israel Persecuted?]. Tel Aviv, 1935.)

The long and short of it is that the various battalions and campaigns against Yiddish succeeded. They reduced the standing of Yiddish to the point of shame among all but the tiny number of *linke Páley-Tsíyen* followers on the left and the traditionally Orthodox Haredim on the right (who had no interest in modern Yiddish literature in any case). The first generation of native-born Israelis (Sabras) grew up with little or no knowledge of the achievements of Yiddish language, literature, and culture, but learned that it was the dreadful jargon of those hapless, helpless, and funny *galút* Jews. That generation often learned to understand and speak Yiddish while not respecting it simply because of its widespread use (all the more so after the arrival of Holocaust-era refugees). Their children, the second and later generations of Israeli natives, don't know the language but don't particularly "hate" it; it simply doesn't exist for them except as the off-color lingo of dirty jokes and many colorful words and expressions used in casual modern Hebrew. The idea that there were thousands of talented Yiddish writers who created an impressive modern European literature usually draws at most collegial laughter.

By the time the State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, just three years after the end of the Holocaust, the language debate was for all intents and purposes over and done with in Israel. But the campaign against Yiddish picked up steam in the wake of the arrival of Yiddish-speaking refugees from Europe. One metaphor for the period was founding Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's walking out of the reception for the first anti-Nazi resistance fighter to reach Palestine after the war. She was Rozka Korczak (1921–1988), who escaped from the Vilna Ghetto and organized partisan units in the forests. Ben-Gurion listened to her tale (told in Yiddish) for a while, then stormed out with the memorable phrase, *Ha-safá tsorémet li ba-ózen* (the language grates on my ear).

That many thousands of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Israel were able to enjoy a lively press and other cultural manifestations of Yiddish was thanks in large measure to the energy, talent, and courage of one man, Yiddish journalist, writer, and thinker Mordechai Tsanin (born 1906). He arrived in Palestine in 1941, after escaping Poland and then Vilna by way of Japan. After the war, he returned to Poland, brazenly posing as a non-Jewish journalist, to research a book on one hundred destroyed Jewish communities. Tsanin decided to resettle in Israel and launch a daily Yiddish newspaper there.

That is when his troubles started. Ben-Gurion's government used numerous licensing laws to obstruct Tsanin's daily paper. Dogged and determined, he published two newspapers in different locations, printed in two different places, from 1949 onward. One appeared three days a week, innocuously called *Létste náyes* (Latest News), and this became the popular name for the "other" one too, which had various official names (including *Háyntike náyes* or Today's News). Tsanin recalls the era in a memoir recently written for this volume. An excerpt follows.

I began a campaign to get a permit for *Létste náyes* to be allowed to appear daily. But all my efforts were in vain. The verbal answer, offered in response to my many approaches, was for many years that there would *never* be a daily newspaper in Yiddish in the State of Israel.

But I found an old printed press regulation issued in the British Mandate days where it says, black on white, that the publisher of a thrice-weekly paper has rights to publish daily, but in the event of such a change he must inform the secretary of the High Commissioner. I took my discovery to a prominent lawyer of the day, Rotenstreich, who later became chairman of the press commission. I asked him to please inform the interior ministry of this "revolution," which relies upon British Mandate law. As soon as Rotenstreich informed the interior minister in writing about the change, I began to publish *Létste náyes* every day.

On the third or fourth day of *Létste náyes* appearing as a daily paper, the police informed me that an order was given by judicial counsel to the government, then Chaim Cohen, who later become a judge on the highest court in

Jerusalem, to shut the paper down forcibly unless I revert to publication three times a week at most.

To fight a frontal war with a state, that has its own judicial counsel, police, and the prestige of a government, was beyond my means. So I thought up a plan. As I had already “accustomed” the Interior Ministry to the situation of tolerating a Yiddish newspaper three times a week, I would ask for a permit to publish a second newspaper with a different name three times a week too. The legal precedent worked so I founded a second newspaper called *Háyntike náyes*. Between *Létste náyes* and *Háyntike náyes* I had a daily newspaper. I connected the two papers with my novel *Professor Shapiro*, which I published in installments. Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday it appeared in *Háyntike náyes*; Monday Wednesday and Friday in *Létste náyes*.

(Typescript memoir in Yiddish; Menke Katz Collection.)

After World War II, the circle of Yiddish writers in Israel was strengthened by the arrival of survivors from all over Eastern Europe. This group, eventually led by the poet Abraham Sutzkever, a veteran of the Yung Vílne poetry group who arrived in Tel Aviv in 1947, established a literary center in the late twentieth century by convincing the establishment that they would *not* fight for Yiddish in Israeli society. From 1949, he edited the *Góldene keyt* (Golden Chain) until his retirement in the middle of the 1990s. His ninetieth birthday was celebrated widely in 2003. By the 1980s and 1990s, when the serious Yiddish world was largely collapsing in the West, the cumulative strength of the writers in Israel made it an international center for the aging generation of the last Yiddish writers to come to maturity in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.

Another component of the campaign against Yiddish was the campaign against Yiddish-sounding names, and the drive to persuade people to replace them with Israeli-sounding names. In the same memoir M. Tsanin recalls:

As far as changing names is concerned, from *góles* names to “names of the redemption,” it was a question of economic survival. The most fanatic name changers were David Ben Gurion and [Israel’s first foreign minister] Moshe

Sharett [1894–1965]. They did not fail to badger anyone in their environment with the question, “When are you going to Hebraize that *galút* name of yours?” Sharett, himself originally Shertok, used the law. When ministries and diplomatic posts and establishment jobs were being created in the new days of the state, a candidate for a job could not even dream about being accepted without changing to a Hebraicized name.

One of the funniest things I ever heard was the formal proposal by the second president of the State of Israel, Yitzhak Ben-Tsvi, made from the dais of the Knesset, to pass a law retroactively Hebraicizing the names of the great founders of Zionism. Of course it fell through. I wrote a satire at the time about what the history of Zionism would look like if the school books would say that its vision was formulated by Binyamin-Ze'ev Lev-Hakatán [= “little heart,” i.e., Herzl], that the state’s first president was Chaim Hahiti [= “wheat man,” i.e., Weitzmann], and that Nachum Petah-Tikva [Nachum Sokolov; the name comes from a town in Poland] was head of the Zionist Organization.

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi sums up the ideological background to the campaign of name changes, and the implications.

If we look at typical Israeli names one hundred years after this process started, we find such combinations as Ayelet Sella (Gazelle Rock), Orly Oren, Aviv Orani, Yoram Eshet, Yael Segev, Idan Agmon, Shahar Ram, Amnon Meydan, Netta Moran, Yael Sagi, Ran Ziv and Anat Admati. When first heard, these names sound Turkish, Indian or Arabic. If we look at them as text to be read and interpreted, one clear message in all of these names is “We are not Jewish”. And indeed, no-one will suspect at first sight that these names have anything to do with Jewishness. They represent the new Israeli identity, developed over the past one hundred years through a series of rejections and choices. . . .

One declared aim of the Zionist revolution was to create a new human being, the opposite of the old Jew in the Diaspora. . . . The new Jew, the Israeli, had to be the exact opposite of the old Jew. Zionism was at one with European anti-Semitism in rejecting the traditional Jewish image.

(Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel*. Pluto, 1991; Interlink, 1998).

Linguistically, Israeli Hebrew could hardly escape the impact of the native language of its creators. One of the great ironies in the whole story is that Yiddish was, against the wishes of the revivers of Hebrew, becoming a major but unseen component in the revived Near Eastern medium. Whatever the attitude toward a person's native language, it always leaves traces in languages learned later. Inevitably a population of Yiddish-hating native speakers of Yiddish, who would revive the *words* of ancient Hebrew in daily speech, would unconsciously be transferring native sound, metaphor, turn of phrase, and thought patterns. Much of Israeli Hebrew is in fact "straight translated Yiddish" rather than the language of Moses, Isaiah, and Job. Ghil'ad Zuckermann finds, not surprisingly,

Although internationalisms are frequent in Israeli Hebrew, in many cases it is possible to detect the influence of a single language. As we have seen, Yiddish was a primary contributor to Israeli, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century and during the early years of the twentieth, when the Land of Israel experienced the greatest migration from Eastern Europe.

(Ghil'ad Zuckermann, *Language Contact and Lexical Enrichment in Israeli Hebrew*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2003.)

The creators of modern Israeli Hebrew were virtually all native speakers of Yiddish. They might not have wanted to admit it, but their own innermost thought patterns were in Yiddish. Almost alone among Hebrew scholars, Zuckermann concludes,

It is time to acknowledge that the language spoken by Israelis. . . is very different from the Hebrew of the past. One could call it *Israeli, Ivrit*. . . *Tsabarish* (from *tsabar*, "prickly pear," a nickname for native Israelis, allegedly thorny on the outside and sweet inside).

(Ghil'ad Zuckermann, *book review*.  
International Journal of Lexicography 12, no. 4, 1999.)

One group of Jews in Israel has never given up speaking Yiddish in the context of traditional Ashkenazic trilingualism. That group comprises a majority of the Ashkenazic "Ultraorthodox" or Haredim, who



Figure 9.13 That special blend of life in (or surrounded by) countryside and a highly literate text-based society was a prominent feature of the East European shtetl. There were some attempts to recreate it during the years of mass emigration. The *Yidisher farmer*, a magazine for Yiddish-speaking farmers, began to appear in 1892. (Menke Katz Collection)

have had a presence in Israel since the pre-Zionist *álder yishev* (the Old Yishuv or Settlement) of many centuries, centered in Safad, Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Hebron. The European Agudah fed into this stream, and part of it crystallized as the more anti-Zionist (and often anti-Agudah) Neturei karto (Aramaic for Guardians of the City, a phrase derived from the Talmud). The Yiddish-speaking Haredim in Israel include not only the Neturei karto but various groups of Hasidim, many loyal to the Khasam-Sóyfer's insistence on Yiddish, and also some circles affiliated with Lithuanian yeshivas. The Haredim are estimated to constitute up to 10 percent of the population of Israel. With a very high birth rate, their numbers are expected to grow dramatically.

#### IN AMERICA

A primary myth for many American Jews posits descent from generations of learned Talmudic scholars and/or ultrapious Hasidim and/or maskilic enlightened savants. In *The Jews in America*, Arthur Hertzberg demonstrates a very different truth. The vast majority of early Jewish migrants to America from Eastern Europe were from the lowest echelons of Jewish society, "lowest" from the Jewish

point of view: in their degree of learning and education, their commitment to the beliefs of the community, and their socioeconomic status. For the more respected and better-off, America was usually not a serious option, even after the pogroms of 1881 and 1882 in Ukraine. The vast majority of East European Jewry was not touched by the pogroms. Nearly all lived in stable communities. The fact is that many who emigrated to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were condemned by the majority as being worshipers of money, considered the one important thing in America. Using the results of decades of meticulous research, Hertzberg bluntly sums up his findings:

The European literature has not been read in any connected fashion, until now, by students of American Jewish history. There has, perhaps, been a certain unwillingness to confront this tradition of contempt for America. The reading of such literature suggests that the “better people” were kept from coming to the United States. The truth is that few of the “better people” wanted to come to America. Contemporary essays and later memoirs support this thesis; it is proved beyond doubt by the immigration statistics of those years.

(*Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History.*  
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.)

The overwhelming majority of American Jewry is descended from late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century migration from Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewry. Between 1881 and 1898, about half a million came; there are some disputes about the numbers. Only from 1899 onward did the United States keep record of vital data of immigrants, including “race or people” with the polite term “Hebrew” being used to designate the Jews. Peak years of immigration included 1904 (106,236 Jewish immigrants); 1905 (129,910); 1906 (153,748); 1907 (149, 182); 1908 (103,387); 1913 (101,330); 1914 (138,051); and 1921 (119,036). In all, 2,082,136 Jewish immigrants were recorded between 1899 and 1944. Demographer Leibman Hersch (1882–1955), studying the sixteen-year period between 1899 and 1914, found that 1,066,000 Jewish immigrants came from the Russian empire, 240,000



from the Austro-Hungarian empire, and 63,000 from Romania. Different demographic historians stress differing aspects, but the overall picture is constant. There is no mystery about where the vast majority of American Jews came from. Of course, there was a pre-East European Jewish migration, much of it earlier, and much of it from Germany. In addition to the preexisting sizable cultural gulf between them (the *yahúdim*, as they were called), and the East Europeans (the “Russians”), the German Jews were often well on the way to Americanization by the time the easterners were arriving en masse.

What did “lowest educational class” mean in East European Ashkenazic society? It usually referred to people who knew the alphabet and could read, imperfectly and understanding little, from the prayer book. In social terms, that was the nearest equivalent to the Western concept of illiterate. This basic literacy in pointed Hebrew included the ability to utter basic texts written in the Jewish alphabet with the full Hebrew vowel system (the *píntalakh* or “dots” that indicate vowels).

Arriving in America to become pushcart peddlers and to work in the sweatshops of the garment industry, the literature that the immigrants wanted was provided by the simple formula of “the language they know” plus “the alphabet they read.” The simple end of that formula should, perhaps, in the world of ideas, be “Yiddish” but there was a significant twist. Those who were interested in producing Yiddish newspapers, magazines, and books in New York were not in the early years the American counterparts of writers of the ilk of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, or Peretz; or publishers like Alexander Zederbaum in Odessa or Boris Kletskin in Vilna. They were entrepreneurs who were out to do well commercially by providing news, often supporters of specific parties or politicians whose goals a publication was meant to further, or, in many cases, idealists dedicated not to Jewish culture of any stripe but to the movement to ameliorate the awful conditions of workers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. That meant joining forces with one of the socialist movements of the day. American Yiddish literature was not born of a literary maskilic or postmaskilic elite of the East European brand. It was born as an unpretentious workers literature out to inform and sustain tired, underpaid, poor, and exploited workers, many of them in one or another branches of

the garment industry. There were links with the German-speaking emigrants' socialist organs, and there was a reliance on socialist pamphlets in German. The American newspapers started to publish not in any of the styles of real Yiddish that the immigrants spoke, but in a new, ultragermanized "newspaper dialect" that combined Yiddish and German and increasingly English. One of the ironies is that the language of the American Yiddish press was on the way to becoming a kind of jargon. Its creation was part of the not very secret motivation for the entire enterprise of a Yiddish press: to Americanize the immigrants and help them integrate.

The first period of the American Yiddish press dates to around 1870, the year Y. K. Buchner (biography unknown) started to put out his *Yidishe tsáytung* (Jewish Newspaper) in New York. It seems from surviving issues that the paper, which went from weekly to monthly, was financed by New York City's political power establishment, Tammany Hall, as part of the machine's efforts, historically, to win more and more votes from the electorally significant immigrant groups. It also abounded in ads for employment by cantors, ritual slaughterers, and teachers. In 1872 a serious publisher, Kasriel Sarahsohn (1835–1905), founded his *Nyu-Yórker yidishe tsáytung*, which evolved into the *Yidishe gazétn* in 1874. It eventually grew into America's first Yiddish daily, the *Tágeblat* (Daily Paper), in 1885. One of its shorter-lived competitors was Getzl Zelikovitz's radical *Fólks-advokát* (People's Advocate) in 1887, which used a more genuine, folksy Yiddish and linked up with radical local labor movements. There were other attempts, in New York, London, Montreal, and other cities, all attuned to the practical life of immigrants.

The second phase involved American Yiddish socialism. It grew dramatically in the 1890s, when the Yiddish press was gaining popularity with the increasing number of immigrants. Publications were designed to be a voice of the organized workers that would give confidence in their movement's ability to improve their lives in addition to informing them about general news. The majority of immigrants were exploited sweatshop workers working and living in squalid conditions. Now they were joined by a number of folksy poets who came to be

known as the sweatshop poets. Most of them migrated first to London and then on to New York.

In Whitechapel, the Jewish immigrant neighborhood in London's East End, these poets found a kind of microcosm of New York's Lower East Side. In the "England phase" of Yiddish proletarian poetry, one of the major editors was the German, non-Jewish Rudolph Rocker, who edited *Dos fráye vort* (The Free Word) in Liverpool in 1898 before moving to London that year and assuming editorship of the Anarchist *Árbeter-fraynd*, a journal that was home to the worker-poets. Among the first to achieve fame was Dovid Eydlshat (David Edelstadt, 1866–1892) who emigrated to America in 1882. At the age of twenty-six he died of tuberculosis, a disease that afflicted many American Yiddish writers. Morris Rosenfeld (1862–1923) migrated to New York in 1886 after a stint in London. His *Mayn yíngale* (My Little Boy), about a sweatshop worker father who only ever sees his little boy asleep, became famous. Morris Winchevsky (1856–1932) settled in London around 1879 and then relocated to New York in 1894. His most famous poem is *Dray shvéster* (Three Sisters) about three poverty-stricken girls in London's Leicester Square, one who sells flowers, one shoe laces, and the third—herself. It was quickly put to music and became popular in a number of cities as a sad ballad of inner-city life.

By the later 1890s, immigrant editors who were serious about Yiddish publishing and socialism were able to accommodate the needs of the rapidly growing population of the new "American Yiddish-speaking masses." The most famous Yiddish editor of all time is probably Abraham (Abe) Cahan (1860–1951), a native of a shtetl near Vilna, Podborédze (now Paberzhe, Lithuania). After succeeding as a journalist and novelist in English, several years after landing in New York in 1882, he turned to Yiddish in the 1890s, and cofounded the *Fórverts* (Jewish Daily Forward) in 1897. He made it the most successful Yiddish newspaper of all time, with over a quarter million circulation by the 1920s, and wielded his power at the paper's famous home at 175 East Broadway for over half a century. In its early years, the paper published the sweatshop poets. But after winning a mass readership, Cahan, with an eye for talent, came to include the work of various types of writers. He was fundamental to the success of such

major twentieth-century Yiddish literary talents as Sholem Ash (1880–1957), Jonah Rosenfeld (1880–1944), and the brothers Singer—Israel Joshua (1893–1944) and Isaac Bashevis (1904–1991). Bashevis Singer continued to publish his fiction in the paper until the end of his writing days, and many saw it as a vindication of Cahan’s literary sense that his successor editors accompanied him to Stockholm when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. Cahan also took mainstream Jewish socialism closer to the American center when he supported Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s. But in the world of Yiddish literature, Cahan was known mostly as a carefree Americanizer who watered down the old East Broadway Germanized Yiddish of the late nineteenth century by wholesale importation of Englishisms (like *strit* and *bilding*) and Yinglishisms like *bóytshik* (boy plus diminutive suffix *-tshik*), *néksdórike* (the lady next door or lady neighbor), and *neksdóriker* (the fellow next door). By the early 1920s, there were four Yiddish dailies in New York. In addition to the (eventually) pro-Zionist *Tágeblat* (founded 1885) and the socialist *Fórverts*, (1887), there was the Orthodox-flavored *Mórgn zhurnál* (1901) and the liberal *Tog* (1914). The *Jewish Daily Forward* became famous for its “Dear Abby” prototype advice column called “A bintl briv” (Batch of letters), and for humorist B. Kovner (Jacob Adler, 1872–1974), who delighted readers through his late nineties with satiric portraits of American Jews, particularly the *Yénte-Telebénde* character of the Catskill vacation retreats and, in later years, his satires about his own ongoing negotiations with the Angel of Death. The folksy, populist spirit and language of the paper in its heyday, disdained by many Yiddish intellectuals, was summed up by an oft quoted anecdote about editor Cahan. If one of the staff writers used a word that sounded too fancy, he would ask the elevator operator at 175 East Broadway if he knew it. If he didn’t, out it went.

If the daily Yiddish press in America was not usually at a high intellectual level, it wasn’t because of unskilled editors or publishers. It was to do with the very point of the whole enterprise. This was summed up by the title of Mordecai Soltes’s book, *The Yiddish Press: An Americanizing Agency* (1925). This was by and large a project to help immigrants adjust to a new life in a new land. That underlying

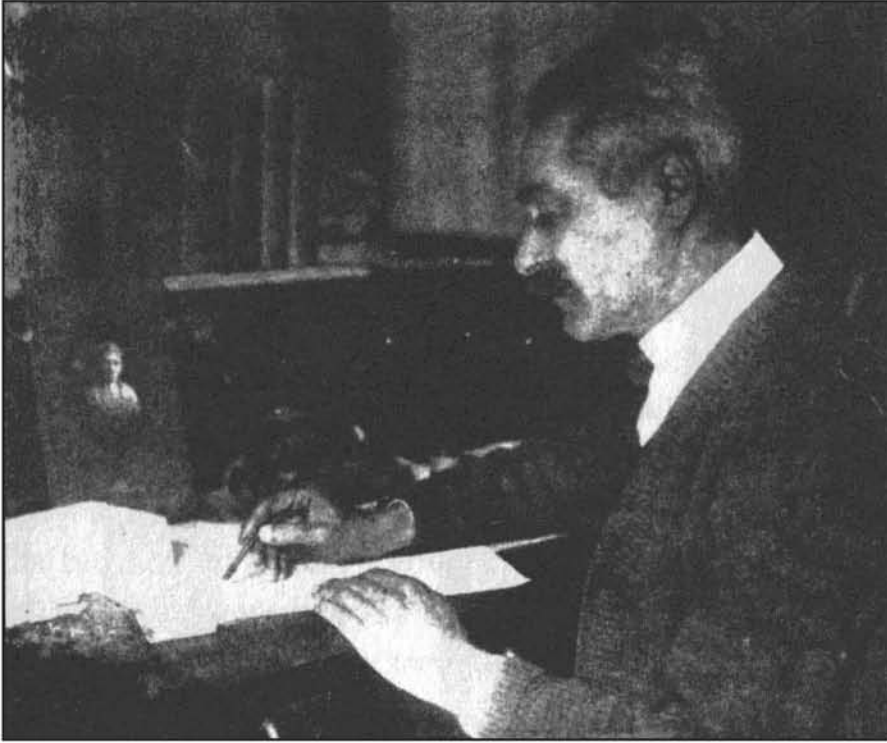


Figure 9.14 Alexander Harkavy (1863–1939), master of Yiddish–English dictionaries. A native of Naváredok (now Navahradak, Belarus), Harkavy settled in New York in 1882. This postcard, picturing Harkavy at work on one of his dictionaries, was a favorite for residents of New York’s Lower East Side for many years. (Menke Katz Collection, Gershon Harkavy section)

goal is inherently different from the goal of any daily Yiddish paper in Eastern Europe. Natives don’t need daily papers to help them adjust because they and theirs have always lived there.

One of the pivotal personalities in the formative years of Yiddish in America was the great Yiddish lexicographer, Alexander Harkavy (1863–1939). Like Mendele and Miseses, he had been an early defender of Yiddish, using Hebrew to defend it to the maskilic elite. A native of Naváredok, Lithuania (interwar Polish Nowogrodek, now Navahradak, Belarus), he moved to Vilna and then settled in America in 1882, right at the start of the great new tide of migration from the Russian empire. In 1885, he wrote his Hebrew pamphlet *Sfas yehúdis* (The Jewish Language), one of the pioneering documents in the history of Yiddishism. He became the master of Yiddish–English diction-

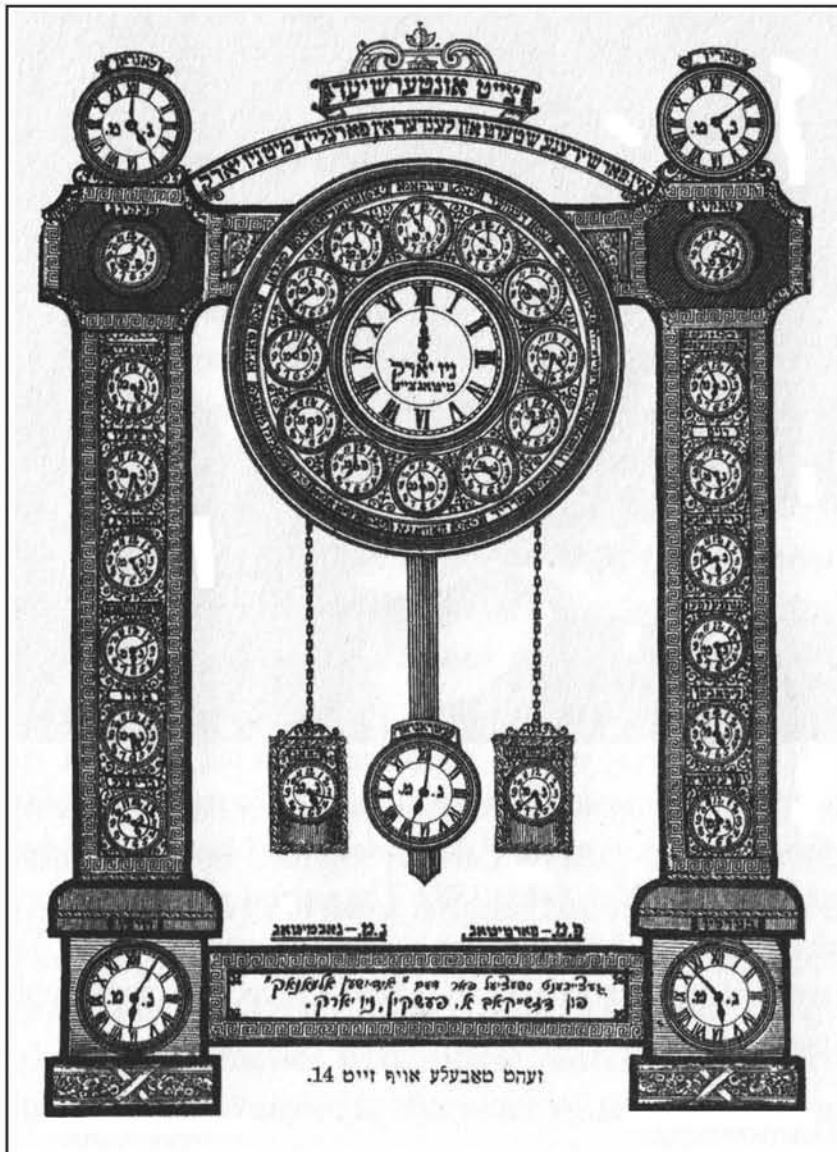


Figure 9.15 Yiddish almanacs became popular on both sides of the Atlantic. This international clock ("specially drawn by Jacob A. Peshkin, New York"), appeared in Victor Mirsky's *New York Yidisher álmanakh un yórbukh* for 1922. Tellingly, relative times are given for New York and many American cities, and as well as London, Paris, Rome, and even Peking (Beijing) and Tokyo, but no mention of such cities as Kiev, Lodz, Minsk, Vilna, Warsaw, or East European regions where the almanac's readers hailed from. (Menke Katz Collection)

aries, starting with his 1891 *English–Yiddish Dictionary*. In 1925, his classic *Yiddish–English–Hebrew Dictionary* first appeared. It is still in print and remains a must for any serious student of Yiddish literature. Harkavy showed he could teach the immigrants English while raising

the status of Yiddish and maintaining the teaching of Hebrew. In American Yiddish folklore he is best known for the story of his marriage. Walking across the new Brooklyn Bridge, he saw a young lady jump off and then watched the badly injured woman as she was rescued by a passing tugboat. Being a Litvak who “has to get to the bottom of it,” he caught up with the horse-drawn ambulance and followed it to the hospital. When she regained consciousness, he asked why she had tried to kill herself. As it turned out, the young woman, Bella Segalowsky, had a fiancé back in Europe who had written to say that he was marrying someone else and not coming to America after all. Harkavy answered: “Nu, vos iz? *I’khl* mit dir *khásene* hobn!” (“So what’s the big deal? *I’ll* marry you!”). She was left badly crippled by the jump, but they were happily married.

During the early years of the twentieth century, a number of serious young writers, mostly poets, started arriving among the masses of immigrants. Some were promising young talents who had been reading international classics in various languages for years. For them, the “sweatshop poetry” of America, and the Yiddish press with its linguistic Germanizing and cultural Americanizing, were substandard features of a kind of American Jewish primitivism. From around 1907, a group called the *Yunge* (Youngsters—a name taken from their detractors) set out to write poetry that would not serve as the “rhyme department of the Jewish labor movement,” as they derisively called the standard verse of the day. They would pursue art for the sake of art. They attracted budding writers who would come to be reckoned among the twentieth century giants of Yiddish verse, including Avrom-Moyshe Dillon (1883–1934), Mani Leyb (1883–1953), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886–1932), Moyshe Nadir (1885–1943), Y. Y. Shvarts (1885–1971), and after his arrival in New York in 1913, H. Leivick (1886–1962).

In 1919, the innovative poets Yankev Glatshiteyn (Jacob Gladstone, 1896–1971), A. Glanz-Leyeles (1889–1966), and N. B. Minkoff (1893–1958) founded the Introspectivist movement in Yiddish poetry. Its followers became known as *di inzikhistn*—those of *in zikh* (in oneself). Their journal, *In zikh*, started to appear in 1920.

After World War I, there were many new immigrants of all ages who had already experienced a more sophisticated Yiddish daily press in the Old Country. Their needs led a number of papers to follow



Figure 9.16 Yiddish playwright and novelist Dovid Ignatoff (1885–1954) published his anthology *Velt ayn velt oys* (In and Around the World) in 1916. (Menke Katz Collection)

Cahan's formula of adding serious literary supplements to the usual fare. Many of these newer immigrants had lived through the failed Russian revolution of 1905 and the events of World War I. They were more passionate, theoretical, and devout in their socialism than earlier immigrants, who had mostly wanted the better life that unions, editors, and local politicians were promising. Around the time of the October revolution in 1917, there was a growing split among the Yiddish readers (and writers) of America on the question of the new Soviet Union and the international communist movement. The extant Yiddish dailies all opposed the Soviets. So the communists set up their own paper, *Fráyhayt* (Freedom), in the spring of 1922, as a specific enterprise of the pro-Soviet Yiddish movement. It was affiliated with the American Communist Party (though most writers and the vast majority of readers were not members). Its editor, Moyshe Olgin (1878–1939), was an imposing intellectual. The pro-communist Olgin and the anti-communist Cahan became leaders of the opposing factions.



Both Cahan and Olgin sought to attract to their newspapers (and to the “satellite” literary journals of each) serious literary talent in addition to popular writers. Olgin and the leftists particularly valued talented writers. Many of the fine writers they discovered, encouraged, and published had little or nothing to do with politics. The leftists believed in bringing better literature to the workers as part of their ideology and this provided a major boost for serious Yiddish literature in America.

In the *Fórverts-Fráyhayt* literary competition, Cahan was the clear winner in prose, having on his staff such giants of Yiddish fiction as Sholem Ash, Israel Joshua Singer, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Olgin was the victor in attracting great poets, including Menachem Boraisho (1888–1949), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886–1932), H. Leivick (1886–1962), and Avrom Reisin (1876–1953); also, the classic prose humorist Moyshe Nadir (1885–1943) and the “poetic novelist” Isaac Raboy (1882–1944).

The quality of the Yiddish and the sophistication of literary criticism were palpably higher in the *Fráyhayt*. Unlike the *Fórverts* and all the other Yiddish newspapers of New York, which stuck to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Germanized spelling, the *Fráyhayt* adopted the middle-of-the-road mainstream modern spelling preferred by nearly all leading American Yiddish writers of the twentieth century, and the standard in education since around 1920. The *Fráyhayt* taught tens of thousands of immigrant workers to appreciate the creativity of the most serious modern Yiddish culture.

The *Fórverts* camp became known in Yiddish as *di Rékhte* (Rightists), the *Fráyhayt* camp as *di Linke* (Leftists). That may sound strange today, given that both were proudly socialist and far to the left of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party (though the *Fórverts* inched closer to that mainstream stance in the mid-twentieth century). Let it suffice to mention that the twin mottos on the front page of every day’s *Fórverts* until the very late years of the century, printed proudly to either side of the name of the paper, were “Workers of the world, unite!” and “Liberation of the workers depends on the workers themselves!” (and that was the “right-wing” paper). The larger truth is that American Yiddishism remained stuck in early-twentieth-century,



Figure 9.17 *The Jewish Daily Forward* (Fórverts), ardently secularist in its heyday under Abe Cahan's editorship, delighted in converts (to any religion) returning to the secular fold. This comment and photo on a dancer comes from the November 30, 1933, edition. Using (for humorous effect) the traditional verb for converting from Judaism to Christianity, the caption reads: "She rejects religious life as a disciple of Gandhi, saying she wants to be happy and merry. Nila Cram Cook who 'converted' and became Hindu has now announced that she can no longer bear this difficult life and will again start to dance and have a good time. She has fallen in love with a handsome young man." (Menke Katz Collection)

European-style socialism even when American Jewry was abandoning all links to embarrassing and antiquated political movements. The *Linke* set up many American-style cultural edifices that helped make their life a full one. These included the 1933 *Revolutionary Disclaimer*,



Figure 9.18 During the 1920s and 1930s, the leftist environment in New York City created a vibrant secular Yiddish scene. Creativity in Yiddish went hand in hand with revolutionary fervor and lifestyle, aided by this *Revolutsyonérer deklamátor* (*The Revolutionary Declaimer*) of 1933. It became a kind of fireside songbook, featuring work by Yiddish writers of the era. (Menke Katz Collection)

a kind of fireside book of popular songs and poems set to music, and the annual *Fráyhayt* ball.

As if to symbolize the “New-Yorkness” of the scene, Lower Manhattan geographic concepts came to be signifiers of the camps: East



Figure 9.19 For most of the twentieth century, the secular Yiddish scene in New York was split along a left-right divide, and there were lively polemics in the press. This 1933 caricature is from the left-wing daily *Fráyhayt* (*Freedom*). It mocks the approval of the *Fórverts* for the labor board by showing the board as a rider wielding a knife called “Pay Cuts” on a donkey made up of a recent *Fórverts* article. The imagery comes from the ancient Jewish tradition that Messiah will ride in on a donkey and is typical for the generation of secularists well versed in the symbolism of ancient Jewish lore. (Menke Katz Collection)

Broadway was the symbol of the *Rékhte*, Union Square of the *Línke*. The addresses of the two giants of the Yiddish daily press came to be the “temple of Jerusalem” for each camp: 175 East Broadway was the famed *Fórverts* building and 35 East 12th Street (off Union Square), the premises of the *Fráyhayt*.

The interwar period may be referred to as the “left-right rift” period of American Yiddish literature. The strife between the camps was



Figure 9.20 American advertising techniques quickly became popular with Yiddish papers and their readers. This cartoon ad for Chase and Sanborn's coffee shows how a nervous person is cured after switching from "expired" to fresh coffee. From the Jewish Daily Forward (Fórverts), New York, November 2, 1933. (Menke Katz Collection)

Its constant feature, and not infrequently its genuine inspiration. A sense of after-the-fact regret frequently accrues to that sharp divisiveness within Yiddish literature in America. But a counter-argument is just as potent: The contentious spirit of the times, and the intense literary competitiveness engendered between the two camps, were a stimulant that spurred these circles in New York to make the city a center of magnitude (in both quality and quantity) of Yiddish literary output in the interbellum period.

The left-wing poets left a legacy of fine poetry. The founder of the group was Alexander (Ishíye) Pomerantz (1901–1965), a gifted young poet, inspirer, and editor. He came from a well-to-do big city family in Grodna. His father was a faucet maker who had won a gold medal from the czar for inventing a faucet that sprouts the water upward like a fountain, obviating the need for cups. As a very young boy,

Pomerantz excelled in Talmud and was sent to the famous yeshiva at Mir; as a teenager, he came under the spell of modern Yiddish poetry and became close to the young master of Yiddish poetry in his native Grodna, Leyb Náydus (1890–1918). Brokenhearted after Náydus's death, Pomerantz migrated to New York in 1920. He rapidly became not only a stirring young poet but also a magnet for talent. He succeeded as editor too, although his journals tended to be short-lived. Still, each of them was an inspiring "event" that discovered talented new writers, particularly the younger poets who were to become the core of the left-wing literary group Proletpén. In the summer of 1924, Pomerantz founded the literary magazine *Yung-kúznye* (*kúznye* is Yiddish for smithy or a blacksmith's shop; "Young Forge" was the official English-language title).

Much of that leftist output remains unknown today, even to the most serious students of Yiddish literature. And the reason for that is to be found in the politics of American Yiddish. Here we must turn to some history and the fate of the two camps against the backdrop of European and Middle Eastern history, both of which exerted powerful pressures on the Yiddish community of New York. During the Hebron riots of 1929, Arab rioters murdered sixty and injured sixty-seven Jewish civilians, men, women, and children, many associated with the non-Zionist yeshiva community there (much of which had come from Lithuania to establish traditional Torah study in this ancient Jewish town). After this attack, it was no longer palatable to oppose Zionism, and the *Fráyhayt* increasingly found itself out on a limb. There were more and more defections of writers from the *Linke* to the *Rékhte* (from Union Square to East Broadway). This pattern repeated itself a decade later, after the Hitler-Stalin (Molotov-Ribbentrop) pact engendered analogous reactions in Yiddish New York. Still, many saw the pact as a clever way to stop Hitler's eastward advance that would open an opportunity for escape for as many as possible. After the rapid dismemberment of Poland in September 1939, the humiliation and ghettoization of the Jews on the German-held side of the newly established border contrasted starkly with the Soviet-conquered territories to the east. Notwithstanding the dismantling of cultural and educational institutions in the religious, Hebrew,

and mainstream Yiddish spheres, the Soviet side provided physical safety, the development of Soviet Yiddish culture, and for the first time, antiracist laws that imposed a fine for the use of racial slurs like the Russian word *zhyd*. For all the faults of the Soviet system, the situation was a day-and-night contrast with areas Hitler controlled. After the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, there was a new wave of sympathy in America for the Russians and “Uncle Joe” Stalin, especially after the forging of the Anglo-American-Soviet anti-Nazi alliance. This also gave the *Linke* a new lease on political life, but one that was smothered during the McCarthy years of the Cold War in 1950s America.

In addition to dozens of sophisticated literary magazines, which contrasted sharply with the more lowbrow daily press, the Yiddishists of the various movements set up a number of school systems. Partly because of their interpretation of the tenets of socialism and the universal brotherhood it proclaimed, most Yiddishists opposed separate day schools; the Yiddish schools were afternoon and Sunday schools. Three distinct secular Yiddish afternoon and Sunday school systems had established themselves by the end of World War I, all centered in New York, and with branches in other major cities. They were the *Yidishe Farbánd-shuln* (Jewish National Workers Alliance schools) of the Borokhovist Labor Zionists; the nonpartisan middle-of-the-road Sholem Aleichem schools; the socialist, anticommunist *Arbeter-ríng* (Workmen’s Circle) schools. By the later 1920s, a number of schools, particularly of the Workmen’s Circle, broke away to join a new leftist school system affiliated with the *Fráyhayt* circles. In time these became affiliated to the International Workers Order and became known in Yiddish as *di Órdn-shuln*. In the mid-1940s, the Labor Zionist Farbánd movement had about 5,000 pupils in 71 schools; the Sholem Aleichem schools, 1,100 pupils in 19 schools; the Workmen’s Circle, 8,000 pupils in 127 schools; the IWO *Órdn* schools had 6,000 pupils in 94 schools. These are the figures of Zalmen Yefroikin (1895–1966), head of the Workmen’s Circle schools from 1953 to his death, in a 1955 study. He was able to report a combined total of 18,600 pupils in the various secular Yiddish schools for 1935, a number that fell to around 13,000, where it held steady during much of the 1950s.



Figure 9.21 While Yiddish prose remained a predominantly male enterprise, women were the leaders in taking Yiddish poetry to international standards (and forms). Fradl Shtok (1890–1930) came from a rough family background in Skala, Galicia (now Skalat, Ukraine). She emigrated to New York in 1907 and soon became famous as a major young poet. She was the first to introduce the sonnet into Yiddish poetry.

Though they seemed internally diversified during their heyday, these school systems shared many features, especially when taken in contrast to the mainstream of American Jewry. The teachers believed in secular humanism, the equality of all peoples, and the preservation of Judaism, from the Bible onward, as an eternal and inspiring culture. They believed in the modern Yiddish culture that had crystallized in Eastern Europe, and in the universal humanistic value of studying the works of the modern Yiddish writers who were the heroes of that culture. Nearly all the teachers had grown up in traditionally religious East European households, and turned to secular Yiddishist culture before or after emigrating to the United States.

Many Yiddish literary classics were written in America. They include such masterpieces of Yiddish fiction as Joseph Opatoshu's (1886–1954) *In póylishe vélder* (In Polish Woods, 1921); Lamed Shapiro's (1878–1948) collection of short stories, *Nuyórkish* (New Yorkish, 1931); I. J. Singer's (1893–1944) *Di brider Ashkenázi* (The Brothers Ashkenazi, 1936); Zalmen Shneur's (1886–1959) *Meshumédeste* (The Woman Who Converted, 1948); Chaim Grade's (1910–1982) *Tsémakh Atlas* (Tzemach Atlas, also known as the The Yeshiva, 1967–1968); and Isaac Bashevis Singer's many works.

The United States also boasted major accomplishments in Yiddish theater. Professional Yiddish theater had been founded in Romania by



Figure 9.22 Kadia Molodovsky (1894–1975), a native of Kartuz-Bereze, Poland (now Kartuskaya Bereza, Belarus), became the first truly international Yiddish poet. During the last decade and a half of her life, she edited the prestigious Yiddish literary magazine *Svive* (Milieu) in New York.



writer and composer Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908). Its birth as a professional, rather than just a homespun, art is traced to his productions in Yas (Jassy), Romania, in the fall of 1876. Many of his plays became so popular that their heroes entered the Yiddish vocabulary. For example, his 1877 hit *Shméndrik* brought the word into wide Yiddish (and Jewish English) usage as a kind of cross between an amiable dope and a loser. Goldfaden spent his last years in New York. The talented and boldly outrageous Boris Tomashefsky, one of the most versatile Yiddish actors, settled in New York around 1881 and was a favorite up to his death in 1939. Jacob Gordin (1853–1909), a native of Mirgorod, Ukraine, who arrived in New York in 1891, wrote a number of plays that became American Yiddish classics. Among the best known are *Der yidisher kéynig Lir* (The Jewish King Lear, 1892) and *Mírele Éfros* (1892), a powerful characterization of the “undocumented” but actual family role of the Jewish woman of the house.

The addition of high art theater came in 1918, when Maurice Schwartz (1890–1960), originally of Sidilkov, Ukraine, set up his Jewish Art Theater in 1918, which thrived on New York’s Second Avenue for decades, offering both original Yiddish masterpieces and adaptations from world classics and better plays of the day. The one major

survivor of this once thriving theatrical culture is the *Fólks-bíne* theater, which continues to offer fine drama in Yiddish. Affiliated with the Workmen's Circle and the Forward Association, and based at their East 33rd Street premises in midtown Manhattan, the theater celebrated its ninetieth season in 2005.

But for all the achievements of the secular Yiddish movement in America, secular Yiddish literature, Yiddish education, and Yiddish culture amounted to a small, closed-off, and, after World War II, declining subsection of American Jewry. As long as there were immigrants coming from Eastern Europe, the cultural infrastructure had a future. When the last of the Holocaust refugee writers and cultural leaders came, that was that. Almost no serious secular Yiddish authors were born in America. The tiny handful of exceptions includes the American actor David Opatoshu (1918–1996), who produced a fine volume of short stories, *Tsvishn yam un midber* (Between Sea and Desert) in 1947. He was the son of the great Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu. Another was the talented Yiddish poet Rokhl (Rachael) Fishman (1935–1984).

The general attitude of the American Jewish establishment and the majority of American Jews was often negative toward Yiddish for more than half of the twentieth century. As the children of the immigrants were pushed to enter the American mainstream, as a doctor, a lawyer, or at least an accountant, the last thing you needed was the slightest Yiddish accent. Yiddish was the language of the funny, poor immigrants who worked so hard to enable their children to have a good American life and speak English like people born in the United States. After making the switch to (some kind of) English, many would use Yiddish now and again, when they didn't want their children to understand.

One of the best (and sometimes, cruelest) benchmarks for judging pride in heritage is the eagerness of people to give their children culture-specific names. The vast majority of American Jews in the twentieth century may have been content giving their daughters and sons Jewish names, often according to the Ashkenazic tradition of naming for deceased relatives, but they were not at peace with the idea of their children using those names in everyday life. They were well-kept secrets strictly for internal use, for example, at birth, Hebrew

school, bar-mitzvah, marriage (and divorce where applicable), death, and of course, to make grandma and grandpa happy with their “little Lézyer” or little “Máلكale.” That is not to say that American Jews joined the precise naming traditions of the Christian majority. They did not. They steered clear of overtly Christian forenames like Christopher and Christina, and some were uncomfortable with more mildly Christian names like Matthew and Peter, though Paul sometimes escaped the association. A large number of popular American English names, such as Alan, Debbie, Edward, Mark, Sharon, Stacey, Steven, became the norm for parents, who usually chose a name on the basis of it sharing the same first sound with the Jewish name of the dead relative being “remembered in perpetuity.” The great American Yiddish lexicographer, Alexander Harkavy, appended a list of “name conversions” to his famous trilingual Yiddish–Hebrew–English dictionary in 1925. In it, Harkavy also provided user-friendly American English spellings of traditional Yiddish names, for example, the female Charna, Malla, and Pesha; the male Alter, Kalman, and Zelig. But these Yiddish names in Englishlike spelling never became popular (except for humor, as in Woody Allen’s 1983 film *Zelig*).

On the November 19, 2003, seventieth birthday television special for Larry King, one of America’s premier television journalism personalities, singer Madonna told him: “Listen, your mother, Jenny, would be so proud of you tonight. Her little Leibel!” Like all of their generation, Mr. King’s parents gave their child an American name (Lawrence) for general use and a Jewish/Yiddish name (Leibel) for intimate use. It was part of the American Jewish cultural scene that for success in the world at large, the Yiddish name was never known in that wider arena, but can in older age serve as a source of light, benign humor and sentimentality. It is only among Hasidic and other traditionalist religious groups that families are comfortable with their child “walking through life” with a Yiddish name, whether it is written in Jewish or Latin characters. But for the secular mainstream, there has been a certain squeamishness about Yiddish names, contrasting with the kind of ethnic pride evident in the naming of children in Hispanic and other communities in America. Yiddish names are so rare in the public domain that the CNN transcript of the King birthday special went with the spelling “label.”

Abstractly speaking, it might have been predicted that in light of the annihilation of 6 million Jews, the vast majority of whom were Yiddish speakers, there would have been a swift reappraisal of Yiddish in America. But it did not happen. The Holocaust itself became a major issue only many years later, starting perhaps with the 1960 English translation called *Night*, of Elie Wiesel's Yiddish book *Un di velt hot geshvign* (And the World Kept Silent; the original Yiddish version appeared in 1956; the French version, called *La Nuit* came out in 1958). If anything, the cliché "they went to the slaughter like sheep" was heard at every turn. Whatever anger there was at Germany, Nazism, and all the collaborators, and whatever respect for the victims, that respect did not extend to the living Yiddish civilization that had been annihilated, which was the civilization of the parents or grandparents of millions of American Jews.

The effect of the Holocaust was to galvanize support for the new State of Israel, which became a demonstrable necessity for the physical survival of Jews in the wake of the catastrophe in Europe. That obvious urgency did become clear, but the American Jewish establishment, working closely with the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization, rushed ahead with a program to "Israelicize" American Jewish culture too. Synagogue after synagogue and school after school, whose members and pupils were often almost all of East European heritage, switched to Israeli ("Sephardic") Hebrew, labeling the Ashkenazic rendition of Hebrew and Aramaic "wrong," "ghetto drone," or "bastardized." The successful Hebrew day school systems that rose in America not only excluded Yiddish as a subject but developed a curriculum that deprived the American Jewish child of any knowledge of the literary and cultural achievements of Yiddish and its literature. To this day, textbooks in these schools often include Yiddish stories by Sholem Aleichem and other Yiddish writers translated into Hebrew, with no mention of the fact that they are translations. Most Hebrew day school pupils have no idea about the existence of American (or any other) serious Yiddish literature. They may have to study the minutiae of the geography of the Negev, but have no incentive to be curious about where their own immediate ancestors came from. "I don't know, somewhere in Russia or Poland" becomes a eu-

phemism for "Who cares." It is a total negation of the European period in Jewish history, and of Yiddish language and culture especially.

When the Hebraicizing, anti-Yiddish, anti-European Jewish mentality took hold of the American Jewish establishment, it meant that Yiddish names sometimes had to be dropped altogether. Most often, the "work" is carried out by American Hebrew teachers. A girl called Gitl after her late grandmother is told in New York that her new name is "really" Tova, and a Zisl named for her great-grandmother might be told that she will henceforth be known in Jewish studies classes as Metuka (both "translative equivalents" in the Israeli style). The issue arises less with boys because most Yiddish boys' names have biblical, hence Hebrew, equivalents, and the difference is often one of pronunciation (as in Nónson becoming Natán, or Shólem turning to Shalóm).

But not all boys' names are "Hebraically pure." One of the more common Yiddish male first names is Hirsh (Hirshke, Hirshl, Hersh, Hersh, and more variants). Numerous American Jewish Harrys, Harolds, and Howards (in earlier times Hymans and Harveys too) were often named after a late relative called Hirsh. In the Old Country, the Hebrew-Hebrew *Tsvi* (which, like Hirsh, means "deer") would have been used in synagogue. But in America, and especially in the Hebrew educational infrastructure, Hirsh was often banished for its too Yiddish, too ethnically Jewish feel, leaving *Tsvi* for bar-mitzvah and Howard, or whatever, for the rest of life.

Taken historically, socially, and symbolically, these are clear indications of the continuing feeling of being "less than comfortable" with the Jewish names of people in the Yiddish language, and more generally, with the language and culture in the immediate background of millions of American Jews. And as long as Yiddish as a serious subject continues to be (effectively) boycotted by the vast majority in the Hebrew day school movement in America, there will be no change in the lack of knowledge and respect for the East European Jewish heritage among those privileged to have an intensive private Jewish education.

Even the naturally evolved American Jewish Sabbath greeting, *Good Shabbos*, not to mention the more authentic Yiddish *A gut Shábés*, is frowned upon in many communities by "spiritual leaders." It is replaced not by the genuine Israeli *shabát shalóm* (not easy for an

American of European family background to decently reproduce) but by the flat “absolute minimum American variant,” *shih-BAT shih-LOME* (rhymes with “the bats in Rome”). But can there not be respect for one’s own heritage alongside support for Israel? Does wishing someone *A gut Shábés!* make them any less a supporter of Israel? Surely the time has come for the strongest support of Israel not to be confused with anachronistic attempts to get rid of the East European Jewish culture that is natural to the family heritage of the overwhelming majority of American Jews.

That anti-Yiddish bias, and the phenomenon of a Jewish education cleansed of the Yiddish heritage, continues apace today. But the attitude to Yiddish among large segments of the American Jewish public has been drifting toward a much more sympathetic stance. Starting in the late 1960s, there was a revival of interest in things Jewish, either in parallel to the “black is beautiful” movement among African Americans, or in the wake of the Six Day War, or both. There was more of a sentimental attachment to the language and culture of grandparents and parents who had come of age before the war in Eastern Europe and were now dying in ever greater numbers. The death of a parent was probably the single most potent factor in igniting curiosity about Yiddish from the last third of the twentieth century and onward. Additionally, there was a noticeably increased confidence and collective power among American Jewry during the Kennedy years and beyond, meaning that there was progressively less embarrassment about things that are deeply Jewish (like Yiddish).

In addition to Wiesel’s 1960 *Night*, there was the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and the reopening that year of Simon Wiesenthal’s Nazi-hunting operation in Vienna. These events seized the interest of many American Jews. The time was ripe for a new look at Yiddish, and two models were on offer: an academic Yiddish for small numbers of university students and, at the other end of the spectrum, a popular interest in the humor and wit of the language that was largely fostered by Leo Calvin Rosten’s *The Joys of Yiddish*, first published in 1968. While academics looked askance at its focus on “Yinglish,” the patois of mixed Yiddish-English parlance and its charming concoctions, it enabled many readers, entering from a homey, comic perspective, to

come to look at real Yiddish too in the process. Rosten's book, for all its popularization, conveys the author's profound knowledge of many fine, delightful, and genuine Yiddish nuances that are deeply embedded in the language and its psyche. Yiddish was becoming more and more popular in the later decades of the century. The Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, especially with Zero Mostel's masterful performance, and Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature were among the factors that encouraged some Americans to take another tentative step or two toward acquainting themselves with their immediate family heritage. Maurice Samuel's provocatively titled book *In Praise of Yiddish* (1971) made another dent. And there was Barbra Streisand's film *Yentl* (1983), based on a Bashevis Singer story.

In fact, in later twentieth century America, many projects, institutions, centers, committees, circles, clubs, and academic positions were set up to preserve, enhance, promote, and disseminate Yiddish. Yiddish was becoming trendy and could even be a ticket to American success stories. The results of these endeavors are, however, now a matter for consideration in the context of the state of the language in the twenty-first century.

## *In the Twenty-First Century*

### MOHICANS

For anyone to whom modern Yiddish, and its literature and culture are dear, the most bitterly painful time is the present. The secondary Holocaust blow is hitting hard and is coming to its devastating climax. The last secular Yiddish *masters*—writers, teachers, cultural organizers, scholars, journalists, performers, artists, and so on, who came to intellectual or cultural maturity in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe are disappearing daily. In mid-2003, Montreal, for example, was still on the conceptual map of high-end secular Yiddish culture because of the presence of the great prose writer Yehuda Elberg (born in Poland in 1912); the untiring, inspirational organizer of Yiddish cultural institutions and events, Sara Rosenfeld (born in Poland in 1920); and the fabled founder of Canada's Yiddish theater, Dora Wasserman (born in Ukraine in 1919). By mid-2004, they were all gone. It is rather unfair to complain to God (or to doctors) when people in their eighties and nineties who have lived through a lot come to the end of life in peace surrounded by loved ones. By late 2004 Montreal, with no disrespect to its many and enduring Yiddish resources (far outstripping many cities with much larger Jewish populations), had fallen off the map as a center boasting major living



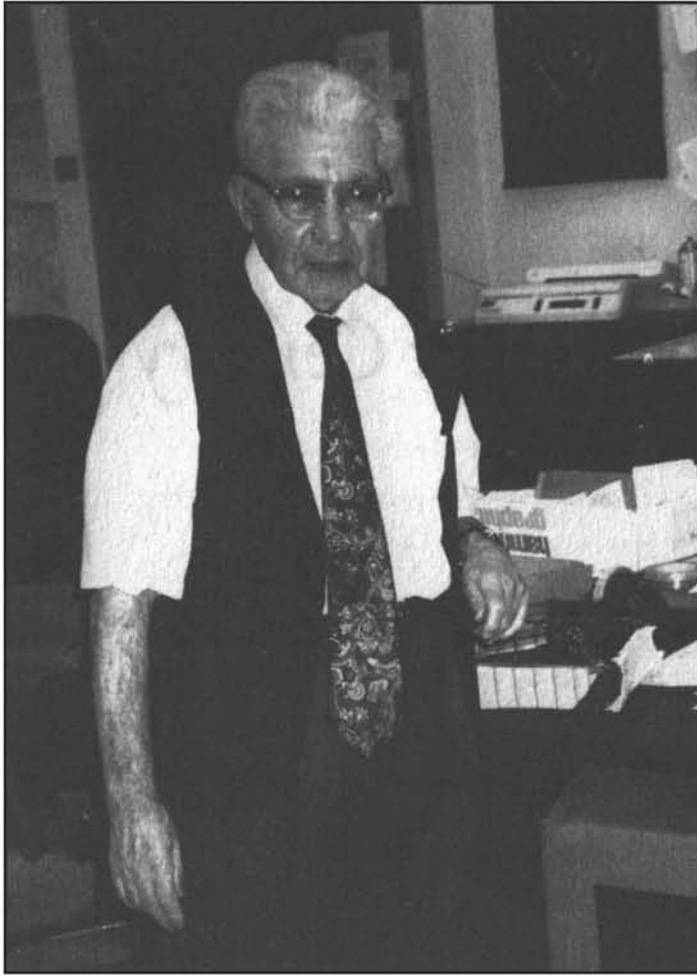
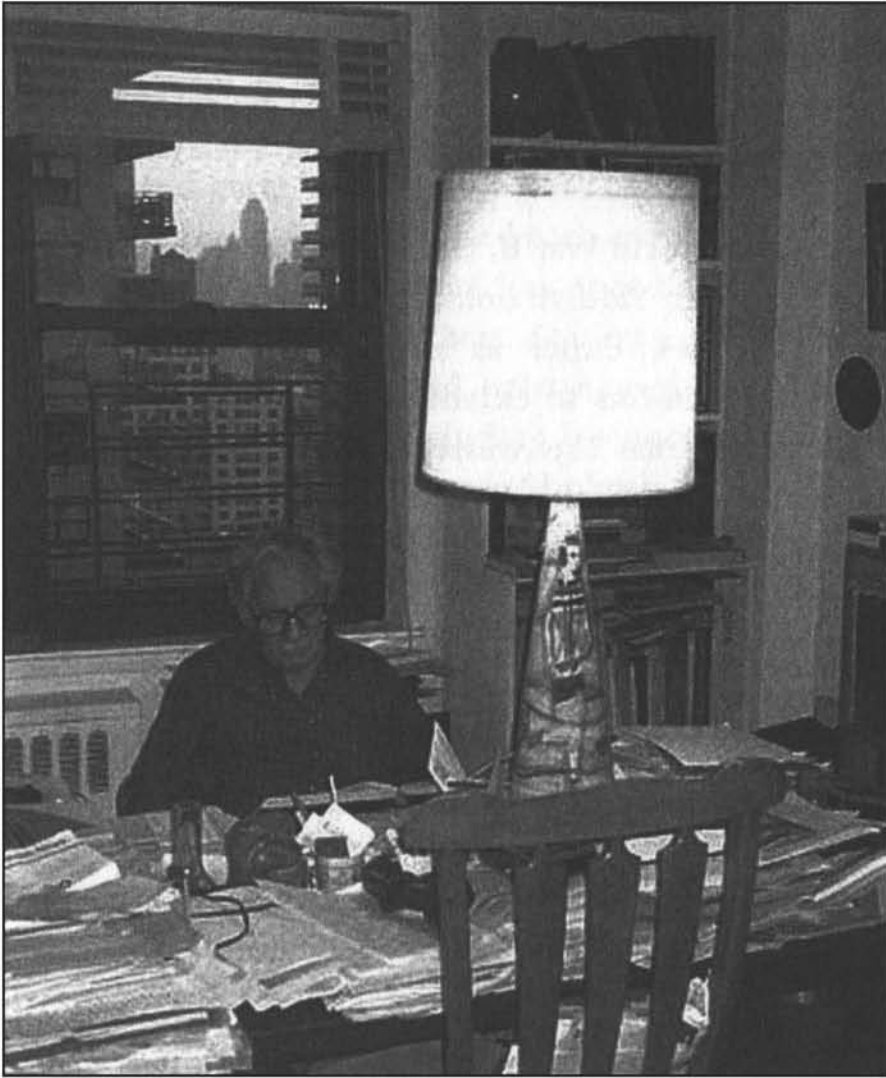


Figure 10.1 Mordechai Shtrigler, the last prewar era editor of New York's secular Yiddish weekly, the *Förverts*, running the office several weeks before his death in spring 1998. Shtrigler, a native of Poland, was a prolific essayist, short story writer, and poet. He survived a number of concentration camps before settling in Paris in 1945 and New York in 1953. (Menke Katz Collection)

masters. The same scenario plays itself out in cities in the old heartland, even though they were able to do little during the Soviet half century after the war. In the early 1990s, Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania) had its grand Yiddish scholar, Chatzkel Lemchen (born in Lithuania in 1905) and a Yiddish writer, Yankl Yosade (born in 1910). By the start of the new century, both were gone. In 2003, the world of Yiddish celebrated the ninetieth birthday of Minsk Yiddish writer Hirsh Reles. He died on September 17, 2004. And in 2003, the ninetieth birthday of leading Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever, in Tel Aviv, was celebrated by Yiddish circles internationally. In New York, the world of Yiddish celebrated in April 2004 the 100th birthday of Itche Goldberg, who had not missed a beat as editor of *Yidishe kultúr*, the world's leading Yiddish literary magazine. He turned up every day at the magazine's offices at Broadway and 26th Street until shortly before his death in December 2006, a few months shy of his 103rd birthday.



*Figure 10.2 The last prince of classic secular Yiddish culture in New York, Itche Goldberg, who turned 100 in spring 2004, working on the new issue of Yidishe kultúr, the journal he had edited since 1964. A native of Poland, he kept the high-brow literary traditions of secular Yiddish culture going in New York through the early years of the twenty-first century. He passed away December 27, 2006. (Menke Katz Collection)*

Expeditions over the past decade and a half in Eastern Europe have discovered and recorded for posterity some of the last Jews in smaller towns in Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and other East European countries. As long as one prewar Jew lives in the shtetl, it is possible to walk around town with him or her and hear about every inch in a rich, local Yiddish and to learn a lot about the local Yiddish dialect,

folklore, folksongs, and worldview. And when he or she is no longer there, the living Yiddish of that time and place, in its fullest sense, will have disappeared along with the person. For now, the intensive expeditions to find the last Yiddish natives in their own land must continue apace before it is too late.

During or after World War II, the Soviet empire swallowed up parts of the East European Yiddish homeland that had previously been independent countries, either as new Soviet republics (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), add-ons to extant Soviet republics (prewar eastern Poland, which became the western parts of the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet republics), or satellite states (the rest of Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and others). As a result, surviving East European Jews in their native homeland were in the Soviet sphere. A few years after the war, Stalin's anti-Jewish and anti-Yiddish policies came brutally into force, and Jewish culture was viciously shut down. In addition to the famous writers and artists being murdered, many ordinary Jews were exiled to Siberia for the "nationalist" crimes of pursuing Jewish culture. It was to be expected that many of their children, born after the war, were of the ethnographic type sometimes called "homo Sovieticus." The majority of families wanted nothing but peace and security for their children.

But in the West? In America? In the other free and prosperous countries where Yiddish culture took root in the twentieth century before and after the destruction of the Old Country? There is a limit to what can be blamed on "assimilationists," "self-hating Jewish snobs," "fanatic Hebraists," "unthinking Zionists," "conscious and unconscious followers of Mendelssohn's eighteenth-century Berlin Enlightenment," and other bogeymen. The record shows that a vast majority of the children of the great secular Yiddish masters did not become leaders of the culture in Yiddish, and most never became competent in the sophisticated literary Yiddish that was the hallmark of their parents' life and culture. A hefty percentage could not speak any kind of Yiddish. Among the millions of American Yiddish-speaking East European Jews in the twentieth century, what excuse can be drummed up for the failure to construct even one day school based on the deep culture of modern secular Yiddish? Several have thrived in Canada, suc-

successfully teaching Yiddish and Hebrew culture side by side with English and French.

The sharpest prophets of rebuke are, as ever, the ones from inside. The merciless master satirist of Yiddish New York, Abraham Shulman (1913–1999), would greet visitors with simultaneous warmth and sardonic wit to his home in Seagate, the beach-front community on the western border of Coney Island, Brooklyn, once home to many Yiddish writers, including the Singer brothers. Shulman, in his later years a slight gentleman whose hands and head moved like a mischievous youngster's, liked to begin by reminding his guest that he is the last Yiddish writer of Seagate. Being Avrom Shulman, he would add in the same breath that he is but one of *all* the old Yiddishists who think of themselves as the last of the last of the last Mohicans. But it wouldn't take long for him to come to his main point:

Neither Hitler nor Stalin ever came to America. Here there are no excuses. Yiddish can't survive without a shtetl. If you want to save Yiddish, you have to build a shtetl, with a town square with its pump and stalls, and with the drunken *góyishe* peasants we would never want to be like, and then you'll have your Yiddish. Come, my wife will make you a cup of chicory just like in Warsaw. And if you'll want I'll give a capsule of Ritalin. It's all that can keep a Yiddish writer going these days.

(From a taped interview.)

Shulman so delighted in being outrageous that he got himself fired from the staff of the Yiddish *Fóverts* in New York, after a half century with the paper, because of a series of controversial pieces about the Holocaust museum in Washington and Holocaust education in general. Getting fired from America's one surviving, heavily subsidized secular Yiddish weekly is not an easy thing to do. For decades he had written uproarious satires of the facsimile Yiddish spoken by various American "Yiddish rescuers," showing with humor how far this concocted pseudo-language was from the treasure of authentic Yiddish. Shulman was also the author of a few English books, including *The Old Country* (1974) and *The New Country* (1976), but most of his English manuscripts remain unpublished. They were too outrageous even

for American publishers in the last decade of the twentieth century, but he was sure to his last day that their day will come.

Turning from Shulman to his words, they have, as has been known to happen with writers, a second meaning that the creator of the words would never accept. The *shtetl* he mentions, without which a real, dynamic Yiddish cannot survive down the generational line, is not, as he put it, a question of the town square, the public pump, or even the supposedly drunken coinhabitants of the neighborhood. Far from it. It is a question of the traditionally religious Ashkenazic Jewish society with its internal Jewish trilingualism, maintained by early life education in a certain canon of texts and an intricately evolved tradition of functions linked with the three Jewish languages. The evidence for this thesis is so overwhelming, and simple, that it can be summed up in one statement of fact that many secular Yiddishists didn't (and don't) like to hear: Virtually 100 percent of the major secular Yiddish authors of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries grew up in an environment steeped in traditionally religious Ashkenazic Jewish society and its trilingualism. This is typical for the recurring cycles of Jewish history. The secular outburst that gave way to modern Yiddish literature and culture is one of the largest, most prolific, and most creative in Jewish history. But like all the others, it is fizzling out, while the future of the Jewish people gradually but surely returns to the old conservative tree trunk, the most traditionalist branches that moderns like to call Ultraorthodoxy.

The reason behind the rather sudden collapse of secular Yiddish civilization and its various humanistic movements is the stuff of ongoing debate. But it is starkly simple. In the worst instance of mass genocide in human history, its millions of people in their native homeland, the native territory of the language, the oldest and youngest alike, were all butchered by the Nazis (and their local collaborators) in the mass campaign of murder-by-ethnicity known as the Holocaust. For as long as bona fide masters of the culture who came to maturity in that civilization are alive, the culture survives far and wide in the lands of migration. Until the Holocaust, the ranks of Yiddish culture were continually replenished with new talent from the Old Country. With a

sharp reduction looming even in the numbers of those born in the 1930s or afterward—the “babies” as they are called with rueful irony in the world of Yiddish—among whom there are few major masters, the horrific final blow of the German war against the Jews is, alas, now upon us.

#### AS AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT

There are at least several hundred secular young people in the world today who are able to truly read and appreciate the great works of modern Yiddish literature in the original, who revere the language and its modern East European origin secular humanistic culture, and who occasionally communicate in the language in classrooms, courses, clubs, conferences, on the Internet, in e-mails. They, and a much greater number with rather less command of the language, are staunch supporters of the survival of Yiddish and its culture, and some are highly talented and productive scholars. A tiny number have written in the language for publication. Very few grew up speaking Yiddish and many (especially in Europe) are not Jewish. This phenomenon, often hailed as a “Yiddish revival” is not directly due to the literary or educational work of the older Yiddishists in America or Western Europe. It is primarily due to the Yiddish academic tradition initiated by Ber Borokhov in his essays published in Vilna in 1913 (see pp. 274–278). That tradition made the preparation of teaching materials at all levels, for the language and its literature, as well as higher research into their history, a major objective of the East European Yiddishist renaissance. But in interwar Vilna, where Yivo rapidly grew into the world center of the new academic movement for Yiddish, nobody thought about giving elementary courses in the language. Yivo was situated in a city of over sixty thousand Yiddish speakers. When its scholars wrote elementary textbooks, they were for children. The Holocaust, however, changed everything.

Most Yiddish scholars in Eastern Europe were murdered in the Holocaust. Warsaw Yiddish dialectologist Noyakh Prilutski, who fled to Vilna when the Germans were closing in on Warsaw in September 1939, was appointed lecturer in Yiddish and head of Yivo by the Soviet

authorities in 1940–1941. After the Germans invaded in June 1941, he was forced to make lists of the most valuable Jewish books in the city; he was tortured to death in August of that year. During the first brief Soviet occupation of Vilna in autumn 1939, scholar and editor Zalmen Reyzen was arrested by the Red Army for reasons unknown. He is thought to have been taken to Russia and murdered in jail there in 1940. Philologist Zelig Kalmanovitsh (1885–1944) lived through the horrors of the Vilna Ghetto. When it was liquidated in September 1943, he was deported to Estonia and murdered the following winter. The list goes on and on. Yiddish scholarship was decimated and its institutions in the homeland destroyed.

But the academic field of Yiddish created by Ber Borokhov, which came to its fullest interwar fruition in the circles of the Vilna Yivo, survived after the Holocaust and became responsible for the survival of islands of serious Yiddish culture.

That the Borokhovian branch of Yiddishism, based on academia and research, was not lost with all the rest owes a lot to a rare piece of good Yiddish fortune during the war years. Yivo's primary founder and leader, Max Weinreich, left Vilna in August 1939 with his wife and elder son Uriel for an academic visit to Copenhagen. He had prepared a paper in English called "A Tentative Scheme for the History of Yiddish" for the fifth International Congress of Linguists in Brussels, scheduled for August 28 to September 2, 1939. Weinreich never returned to his beloved Vilna, where he had accomplished so much in less than two decades. His wife, Regina Shabád Weinreich, returned to Vilna in late August. Max and Uriel Weinreich went on to New York in March 1940 and friends later managed to arrange for Regina and younger son Gabriel (Gabi) to join them during the period when Vilna was in independent Lithuania (late 1939 to spring 1940). The first family of Yiddish scholarship was restored intact in New York, where Weinreich, barely taking a proverbial breath after the war to write his *Hitler's Professors*, devoted himself to the American Yivo, which became the organization's new headquarters, and continued his life's work. His first and supreme success was his son Uriel. Though he lived less than forty-one years, Uriel Weinreich (1926–1967) managed to facilitate the teaching of Yiddish language at American universities, become a leading American theoretical linguist, build a new Yiddish

language atlas, and demonstrate the importance of Yiddish for the science of linguistics. Uriel was still in his early twenties when, in 1949, the American Yivo published his *College Yiddish*, a textbook that enabled Yiddish 101 to be introduced into American universities. By launching *The Field of Yiddish* series in English (1954), he set the stage for Yiddish studies to become a player in Western academia. The career that was launched by *College Yiddish* in 1949 was capped in 1968 by the sadly posthumous publication of his *English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*.

While Yiddishist afternoon schools were sinking steadily in the 1960s, Uriel Weinreich was inspiring a few top scholars to devote their professional energies to Yiddish. One major non-Jewish icon of this chapter in the story of Yiddish is Robert D. King of the University of Texas at Austin, whose incorporation of Yiddish material in his *Historical Linguistics and Generative Grammar* (1969) and other works made it “cool” to take Yiddish courses, something that seemed at best amusing to the parents of most of the Jewish students who were beginning to enroll. In a memoir supplied for this book, King writes:

Yes, the work of Uriel Weinreich—and personality, above all that: the personality—inspired me to work in Yiddish linguistics. I came back from a year (1957–1958) as an exchange student in Stuttgart with an interest in Jewish history, what we now call the Holocaust, and Yiddish. I found out about Yivo, wrote them saying I wanted to teach myself Yiddish, and they said they had just the thing for me: *College Yiddish*, by a Uriel Weinreich. So I sent in my \$9.95, got it.

I was publishing mainly in general linguistics and Germanic, thinking it would be nice to try my hand at something in Yiddish, when we put on a conference in 1966 at Texas at which I met Uriel. . . . I spent most of the three days of the conference talking to him about Yiddish. He had a beautiful soul to which I was instantly responsive.

A major social door was opened, thanks to the Weinreichs (Uriel at Columbia University; Max at City College, in addition to his work at Yivo). Upon the younger Weinreich’s untimely death, from cancer, in 1967, his colleagues at Yivo and Columbia wisely decided to commemorate him with an intensive credit-bearing summer course in Yiddish,



the famous Uriel Weinreich Summer Program in Yiddish Language and Literature. The Oxford summer program in Yiddish, founded in 1982, was relocated in 1998 to Vilnius University in Lithuania, where it continues to thrive.

The academic success story of Yiddish, by which a few thousand people, maybe more, have learned to read, speak, and write Yiddish around the world, derives from Yiddish courses that have been incorporated into university curricula. From the 1970s onward, otherwise inconsolable Yiddishists started to trumpet *Yidish in di universitétn* in the Yiddish press and at conferences and meetings, with a small touch of messianic zeal. Sad as it may sound, it was a great day for an octogenarian editor or writer who had put his or her life into Yiddish, when a couple of mainstream American college students would turn up in blue jeans interested in their work for the first time in the many decades they had been in America. In addition to the impact of the black is beautiful movement among African Americans (an ethnic pride movement that inspired other ethnic groups), and a renewed Jewish pride after the Six Day War in 1967, there was also a subtle political factor at work. The civil rights movement, opposition to the Vietnam War, and emergence of the New Left on American campuses, all attracted support from baby boomer Jewish students. The new Yiddish courses introduced students to such Yiddish figures as Peretz, for whom Yiddish and socialism and humanism and social justice went hand in hand. They made students aware, say, that there were still three daily Yiddish newspapers in New York, the liberal, pro-Zionist *Tog*, the socialist (by then very pro-Israel) *Fórverts*, and the communist (unenthusiastically pro-Soviet and no longer anti-Israel) *Fráyhayt*. This decisive group of "Yiddish students" became a nucleus that gave rise to growing involvement with things Yiddish. A number of veterans went on to tangible accomplishments in the wider world of American culture. In 1980, Aaron Lansky founded the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, after studying Yiddish at the Yivo-Columbia summer program in New York and completing a master's degree in the subject at McGill University in Montreal. The center collected millions of Yiddish books, many of which would otherwise have been thrown out (such was the low esteem in which Yiddish books were held by American Jews who inherited them from sen-

iors who passed away). It has also helped enhance Yiddish in image-conscious America. Moreover, the very availability of “the books” was, from the early years, a godsend for Yiddish teachers. “Amherst,” as the center is colloquially known, has done much to make the Yiddish heritage a matter of pride for American Jewry. In recent years, its outstanding Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library has made many out-of-print texts readily available.

The university-based Yiddish movement has inspired interest in and an elementary knowledge of Yiddish, but it has not been uniformly successful in academic terms. A disturbing proportion of instructors appointed to teach Yiddish studies are not fully competent. The lack of a solid Western academic tradition has sometimes made it possible for those talented at self-promotion to obtain positions in Yiddish without the same qualifications that a university would demand for other language programs. Often the teachers are fully or semiqualfied scholars in related fields (e.g., Hebrew, German, or Slavic studies). The notion of Yiddish as a career booster in academia has given the older generation of Yiddishists the rare pleasure of positive irony (“We have lived to see the day when faking that you know Yiddish can help you get a job”). But the downside is a proliferation of mishaps that often result from the excessive academic politics and envy that plague small fields in particular. The answer to the problems that have arisen is simple: Apply the same standards in Yiddish studies, be it for teachers, students, donors, and accreditation of programs, as those in force for other modern languages.

The one prewar institution that managed to recast itself for successful academic survival in the West in the twenty-first century is the Yivo. Now part of the Center for Jewish History near Union Square, in Lower Manhattan, the Yivo’s magnificent library, expert staff, archival treasures, and ongoing programs make it the international resource center for serious Yiddish studies today. The success of Yiddish studies leads, and will always lead, to a number of scholars going beyond “pure research” to master the modern Yiddish language. For the world at large, it is no surprise that some of these scholars have no Jewish background. For Jews, it often remains sensational, reflecting the emotional way that Yiddish is conceived by Jews today (once satirized as the attitude of “I as a Jew have

a right to have nothing to do with Yiddish, but why should gentiles be able to just come and pick it up?”). The situation that has developed is complicated by the view, held by a number of leading Jewish professors of Yiddish, that there is no living language to master. Those who have come from outside the culture to master the living language and introduce programs to teach it to others, are therefore a very important factor in the field, from the older grandmasters such as Robert D. King, down to those who are today inspiring Jewish and non-Jewish students alike to come to Yiddish studies.

But these small circles do not a language make, and what seemed like the glorious, victorious, phenomenon of *Yidish in di universitétn* in the 1970s and 1980s, especially as some kind of “historic vindication,” rings ever more hollow with the daily disappearance of the last surviving literary, cultural, and educational masters. What the future holds for Yiddish is nowadays a hotly debated topic. The debates themselves have morphed dramatically since the issues that concerned the Maharil in Old Ashkenaz five hundred years ago. But new fires descend from old fires; they are reinterpreted into the modern arena and carried out with the arsenals of today’s terminology and technology. These debates have always been an important part of the story of Yiddish, and some of them need to be covered before this book turns to its final chapter and its own predictions about Yiddish. But before that, we will consider some of the various attempts to save Yiddish.

### “SAVING YIDDISH”

Efforts to rescue the Yiddish language in recent decades have been summed up with Yiddish humor by New York’s leading Yiddish writer, Miriam Hoffman, who is an instructor in Yiddish at Columbia University and a regular contributor to the Yiddish *Fóverts*. In her satire on the subject, “A Congress of Yiddish-Savers,” she writes,

It is a curious time for the fortunes of Yiddish. The number of Yiddish-lovers, who declare their passionate love for the language is increasing markedly. And if you think this is some kind of backwater hick town enterprise, banish the thought. It is a major goal of key conferences and top con-

gresses. . . . I have just returned from the conference to save Yiddish held outside Little Rock, Arkansas. . . .

There was a long table on the stage. Esteemed and renowned Yiddish-savers, men and women alike, were seated around the table. The chairperson, Dr. Rabbi, politely asks everyone to stop shoveling food from the smorgasbord at the back, and to please take a seat. People in a mad rush wipe their lips and faces with the fancy blue and white napkins while rushing to get a good seat. Dr. Rabbi opens the proceedings.

"A gutn-tog!" ["Good-bye" in Yiddish, but misused as "Good day" by English speakers who speak poor Yiddish].

My neighbor at the next seat turns to me: "You mean that's it? Time to go?" I assured him that that is not the case, it's just that the man doesn't *quite* speak the language.

After working its way through the sessions, the piece concludes with the final session.

The congress was concluded with extraordinary success. Resolutions were drafted and voted upon. There was somber work on a constitution, and of course, a certain emphasis was placed on the urgent need for contributions. After hours of spirited debate, arguments and uncertainties, a decision was reached to organize a new congress, this time in China, near the Great Wall. After all, Saviors have always liked walls and donkeys, and we are so very blessed with both.

(*Miriam Hoffman, "A kongrés fun Yidish réter" [A Congress of Yiddish Savers], Yerusholáymer álmanakh 24 (1994); translated and used with permission from Miriam Hoffman and Yerusholáymer álmanakh.*)

The various endeavors to save Yiddish seem to exhibit a certain streak of eccentricity that borders on the charming at one end of the observer's spectrum, and on the downright meshuga at the other. How any individual stream is regarded depends on the observer's viewpoint, which is to say, as the Yiddish expression goes, that water is wet.

The vast majority of American "Yiddish" products contain no Yiddish at all. American marketing, which can sell virtually anything, has been brought into play to redefine Yiddish, not as a language in the

old sense of a set of words, sounds, rules, that needs to be learned by hard work, say like Norwegian or Turkish, but as an overall glorification of some abstract beauty of the Yiddish language. After going through the wily American PR mill, the goal posts are all changed so that “mastering the language,” even in the minimal sense of passive ability to read the masterpieces written in the language, falls off the spectrum, leaving the products of popular culture only. These worthy endeavors include music, theater, pantomime, comedy, and joke telling, with a smattering of the language that many American Jews “remember from home.” Beyond the summer courses offered by universities in Europe and America, the few genuine success stories of small secular Yiddish revivals have been due to charismatic individuals, all born after the war, who are devoting their lives to building enduring circles. The proportions of the academic and cultural components of these centers differs markedly, but all have proven that academic and cultural projects can and should be synergistic. The Paris center built by Yitskhok Niborski, a native of Buenos Aires, has grown into the new address of Yiddish in Western Europe. The success of the Yung Yiddish Center in a poor cellar in Jerusalem is evident from the number of young Israeli intellectuals taking an interest for the first time in the serious culture of Yiddish. It was founded by Mendy Cahan, a native of Antwerp who is one of the few to integrate traditional scholarship, modern popular culture forms, and a wholly authentic Yiddish. The new Yiddish program at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, led by Professor Dov-Ber Kerler, features advanced courses taught in Yiddish.

### THE THREE STIGMAS

The maxim “history is written by the victors” is, according to Sir Martin Gilbert, Churchill’s biographer, wrongly attributed to the British wartime leader. “It smacks of classical antiquity,” he notes, wryly adding that Churchill on one occasion did quip that “History will be unkind to Neville Chamberlain. I know because I shall write it.” Considering today’s establishment views of the Yiddish language, it might be wise to narrow down the dictum, at least for views on

language and culture, where today's status of "victory" and "defeat" might look very different to a future observer.

One of the main stereotypes that floats around concerns the topic itself. According to Jewish historian Ezra Mendelsohn, in his *On Modern Jewish Politics* (1993): "The old political fault line in the Diaspora between Zionists and anti-Zionism is gone, as is the old language war between partisans of Hebrew and Yiddish." The debate in its precise earlier form is gone, but its successor rages on. Questions about the future of Yiddish continue to draw sharp pronouncements from Jewish scholars, thinkers, journalists, and pundits. And, the battlefield mentality of the old Hebrew-Yiddish debate, and all that it implies, is never very far in the background.

The surprise is that Yiddish in our new century continues to attract three mutually incompatible stigmas. Two of them are associative, relating to the stereotyped association between support of Yiddish and certain kinds of people and Jewish groups. The third is that Yiddish is dead, thoroughly (as Woody Allen once put it, "My uncle Sol, he's dead now, completely"). The "pro-Yiddish" responses against all three can in turn border on the comic. Protestations against the standard views sometimes take on the tone of "Yiddish is alive, well, and thriving, and representative of all the Jewish people, and don't you dare say otherwise, or I will call you an enemy of Yiddish and an enemy of the Jewish people!"

But it is hardly an even debate. "PC" Judaism today has erected its own mightily financed hallways of power and glory: rich and influential lobbies and organizations, great universities, and prestigious publications. The "vanquished" view is largely relegated to Internet chat rooms, old folks clubs, community centers, and dedicated individualists who are regarded as eccentric at best.

The first of the three stigmas is that advocacy of Yiddish nowadays is symptomatic of extreme leftism. The apparent root of this impression is the liberalist bent of classic (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) Yiddishism, and its attractiveness for those today who advocate humanism, rights of women, tolerance for diversity, the delights of cultural Judaism, as well as wariness of excessive nationalism or any overdominant, intimidating monoculturalism. Such an ominous

hidden agenda is sometimes detected in current work on behalf of Yiddish.

These days, Jewish (and non-Jewish) spokesmen for gays and lesbians, feminists and neo-Trotskyites freely identify their sense of personal injury with the cause of Yiddish. They thereby commit a double fault, occluding the moral assurance and tenacity of Yiddish culture in its own terms and, by attributing value to weakness, retroactively defaming the Jewish will to live and to prosper.

(Ruth R. Wisse, "Yiddish: Past, Present, Imperfect." Commentary, November 1997.)

But it takes only the proverbial scratch to elicit the "other half of the equation," that the gallant Jewish knight in shining armor is—"Hebrew." The discourse of triumph is expounded with comic-book triumphalism by the popular newspaper philologist "Philologos" (in the English *Forward*), pen name of translator Hillel Halkin. In a 2002 essay, he lucidly articulated the establishment view that is so often just beneath the surface.

The two languages could indeed be compared to a master and a servant, the vernacular performing life's daily chores under the supervision of the superior tongue that assigned them. Or they could be likened to two social castes, one upper, priestly, and brahmin, the other lower, laic, and plebeian. Or they could be imagined as a husband and wife, the former following higher pursuits while the latter ran the household. . . .

The great language war between Hebrew and Yiddish has left behind it a map with a partition line. On one side we have the Jewish Commonwealth of Hebrew Letters; on the other, the Jewish People's Republic of Yiddish Literature. . . .

. . . The Jewish language war had to be fought. It had a right side and a wrong side. It was a conflict between two political and cultural conceptions of the Jewish future, of which one represented a catastrophic misjudgment. At bottom, Yiddishism was a radical amputation of Jewish peoplehood and Jewish history.

(Hillel Halkin, "The Great Jewish Language War." Commentary, December 2002.)

But leftism takes up but half the proverbial rap sheet. The other half features the charge of rightism. Even as Yiddish is accused of being the embodiment of the Far Left People's Republic of Gays, Lesbians, and Others, it is seen by many in the Jewish establishment as the Far Right Republic of the Hasidim, Haredim, and Ultraorthodox. Tommy Lapid, head of Israel's secularist Shinui party, compared himself in a *New York Times* interview to Hasidim in Brooklyn with reference to comparative Jewishness, dropping the tell-tale language reference into the pot.

Merely by living in Israel as a Jew, speaking Hebrew, defending the state and accepting the Bible as my basic book of history and literature, I am the most Jewish Jew who has lived in the world in the past two thousand years, certainly more Jewish than the Israel-hating Yiddish-speaking Satmars in Williamsburg.

(*New York Times*, January 17, 2003.)

The establishment view of the so-called Ultraorthodox came out uninhibitedly during the so-called Dine Affair at the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Thomas Dine, executive director of AIPAC, resigned in June 1993, after he was quoted on record as saying:

I don't think mainstream Jews feel very comfortable with the Ultraorthodox. It's a class thing, I suppose. Their image is "smelly." That's what I'd say now that you've got me thinking about it. Hasids and New York diamond dealers. United Jewish Appeal people have told me several times they don't want to fly El-Al because of "those people." Actually, I prefer Swissair or Lufthansa myself. . . . Yes, that's still the image. Still the poor immigrant image. That's the perception of a lot of people I mix with.

(*David Landau*, *Piety and Power: The World of Jewish Fundamentalism*.  
New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.)

That was in America. In Israel, of course, there are many political and economic issues dividing the Haredim from everybody else. Still, scholar Noah Efron discovered something more extreme in Israeli establishment attitudes.



This political tale is important. But it fails to explain the passion behind the hatred itself. That is a different tale, and it is more complicated. For most Israelis, Haredim are our collective obsession, the monster under our beds, the thought that we cannot banish.

(Noah Efron, *Real Jews*. New York: Basic, 2003.)

In addition to being the symbolic language of choice of the crazy left and the crazy right, Yiddish attracts a third stigma. Unforeseen as it might be in light of the first two associations, it is the view that Yiddish is “so dead” that interest in Yiddish culture constitutes a kind of perverse cultural necrophilia.

Those who continue to speak the language and those who love it are mourning its death throes. As mourners, we are behaving in ways well recognized by practitioners and well delineated by theorists.

(Janet Hadda, “Yiddish in Today’s America.” *Jewish Quarterly* (London), Summer 1998.)

These are then the three stigmas that continue to attach themselves to Yiddish, sometimes in the eyes of major academic experts in the field. Too left, too right, too dead. The perpetuation of all three notions, and the various combinations in which they appear, is well worth a serious study, which could be useful for an analysis of the contemporary Jewish establishment psyche, especially its deeper recesses and the degree to which Yiddish signifies the very Jewishness that parts of the establishment still fear to be associated with.

But for those who work hard in the field of Yiddish language, literature, and culture, it is particularly painful that educators who by virtue of knowledge, talent, and position, all in the field of Yiddish per se, who would be capable of perpetuating the living language and culture among their circles of students and readers, have instead opted to reject the very philosophic validity of such efforts and to continue, in the twenty-first century, to see efforts on behalf of Yiddish as the exclusive turf of unacceptable political ideologies, left or right, or as efforts to raise the dead in our time.

Is it nevertheless possible to work through the thickets, in the wake of all the charged opinions, to judge the situation and prospects of the Yiddish language? It is certainly worth a try.

## *The Future of Yiddish*

### PERILS OF PROPHECY

When the age of prophecy was, in the Jewish view, long over, Mishnaic-era sages came up with the view that a wise person nevertheless “sees what will happen in the future” (Sayings of the Fathers, 2:9). But prophecy has always been a risky business, even in the days of the Prophets. Prognostications should always be prefaced by Amos’s disclaimer: “I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14). What we can do is try to see a bigger picture from our own limited vantage point, explaining at the outset that the goal is to provide a second model, an alternative to oft-repeated sensationalist claims about the “death of Yiddish.” Plain and simple, it is high time that a new set of predictions join the market of Jewish ideas on the charged subject of language. The only way to fathom the future is to understand the recent past and the present. Much that is relevant to the late twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first can be evaluated for what they bring to bear for the future.

LANGUAGE AFTERMATH OF THE  
GREAT SECULAR OUTBURST

What was arguably the most creative secular outburst of Jewish history, the majestic rise of East European modern Jewish culture, is rapidly disappearing before our eyes, leaving a lot of confusion—conceptual and terminological—in its wake. What is left in terms of language? Among the majority of traditionalist Hasidim, who will be the majority of world Jewry in less than one hundred years, there will be the same traditional Ashkenazic Jewish internal trilingualism of Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic, though all three languages will have developed and been impacted by influences very different from those in Eastern Europe. Still, this traditionalist configuration, remarkably after the Holocaust, is being recreated with a population density, a cultural intensity, and a birthrate that were not conceivable in the middle of the twentieth century. What then happens to the languages produced by the secular outburst?

The Israeli language, Ivrit—which the fresh-thinking Israeli scholar Ghil'ad Zuckermann reasonably insists on calling Israeli—is a vibrant new Middle Eastern language that was created by Yiddish speakers inspired by the Zionist dream. As a language, however, it is not the natural heir to ancient or more recent Hebrew, or even to the masters who created the great literature of modern Hebrew. It is a highly successful creation, with Semitic and European elements intertwined, that has fed into the new and natural language of Israel. Therein lies its success: It became the natural language of millions in less than a century. Something like that has never been accomplished by anyone else in history: Ashkenazic trilingualism kept traditional Hebrew just alive enough for this to be pulled off. Considering the prominence that Zionist-Hebraist theory gives to getting rid of the old Diaspora Jew and creating a new Hebrew (person *and* language), Israeli cannot be considered a failure when studied in its own terms (as everything must be) for having little of deep Jewish content, humor, worldview, or embedded culture and history, the kind of psychosocial Jewishness that resounds in every syllable of a genuine Yiddish. That is not because of any inherent superiority of Yiddish. It is

because Yiddish has come down the natural line of close to four thousand years of Jewish languagehood, and it resonates with the collective nuances of all those years. A vernacular created by the settlers in the Land of Israel who disdained their own language had to go another way. And it did.

Israeli could not replace Yiddish in a million years because Yiddish is the unique, irreplaceable linguistic heir to the grand Jewish language chain that started when Hebrew arose from Canaanite, was continued when Jewish Aramaic became the main Jewish language, and replicated again when Yiddish appeared, giving rise to the very special internal Jewish trilingualism of Ashkenaz. It was the Hebrew (and Yiddish) poet Bialik who quipped that he has mercy on a *yósem* (orphan in Yiddish), but found it hard to feel sorry for a *yatóm* (the same word from ancient Hebrew, as recast in Israeli Hebrew). The thousands of Hebrew and Aramaic words in Yiddish have retained their special Jewishness. That is why *bitókhn* in Yiddish can only mean “confidence in God’s providence or fate” and, by extension, “optimism.” Who can blame successful state builders for having to conscript the word for the new concept of “state and military security,” which is, quite naturally, the primary meaning of *bitakhón* in Israeli. That was the natural result of picking up the physical matter of old Semitic roots and giving them the meanings necessary for a twentieth-century state. The examples of the authentic came-down-the-line Jewishness of Yiddish could easily fill a massive tome. One place to start from is “God.” For Yiddish, the God of all humanity, *got*, contrasts with Hebrew-derived *rebóyne-shel-óylem*, which is intimate, someone whose name you call out when something goes wrong. That contrasts with Aramaic-derived *rebóyne d’álme*, which is more pensive and philosophical and appropriate for when you are having a more theoretical discussion with the higher powers. And then, loving diminutive suffixes derived from Slavic or Germanic give the intimate *gótenyu* (dear little God), *táyerinker* (dear one), *zísinker* (sweet one), *tátenyu* (dear, dear father), and many more. Naturally, dipping into the Hebrew Bible, the creators of Israeli chose *elohím* for “God” in the general sense. They wanted something ancient, biblical—something not used by the modern Yiddish-speaking Jew, who was being

replaced. Religious speakers in Israel needed something specifically Jewish, and they have *ha-shém* (the Name), derived from a traditional substitute for the holy four-letter ineffable name in the Bible. Nobody “made” Yiddish. It is the present state of what has evolved in the language of a people over time, and it is for that simple reason irreplaceable as the spoken realm of traditional Jewish spirit, culture, and mentality.

For historical reasons, much of what pertains to Jewish law, lore, and sensibility is contained in the parts of Yiddish that come from the older Hebrew and Aramaic language chain. But it is not necessarily so. In many cases, the physical matter has been replaced more than once, and sacredness is in no way dependent on etymology. Some of the most emotive Yiddish phrases (as deeply Jewish as it gets) happen not to be from Semitic roots. They include *érlakhkayt* (honesty in everyday life and in rendering unto God what is required of a Jew); *fraytik-tsu-nákht* (Friday evening at the onset of the Sabbath); *léyenen mit trop* (read the Torah portion according to the ancient cantillation accents); *méntshlakhkayt* (humanity in the sense of “doing what is right”); *nébakh* (alas); *yármulke*; *yórtsayt* (anniversary of the death of a loved one); *yórtsayt-likht* (the candle lit on such an anniversary). It is neither “pure blood” nor “pure dictionary roots” that make a people or language special. It is what is evoked in the mind of the language user. What the secular outburst has left in its wake is a Yiddish that is molded to the highest pursuits of modern literature and culture, *alongside* the naturally rich spoken Yiddish language. It has also left a brand-new language, Israeli (Ivrít), which is a natural and national language of millions in the State of Israel; its great future as the state language of Israel is only beginning in our time.

To whatever extent Yiddish continues naturally to be spoken, it will continue the millennial Jewish language chain. In traditionalist communities it will certainly continue to be part of Ashkenazic trilingualism. Israeli has failed to replace Yiddish anywhere outside of Israel. There is still not a single family (which did not live in Israel) anywhere in the Diaspora where Israeli is the everyday language. Nor is there ever likely to be. But Ivrít has blossomed into the proud and secure national language of the State of Israel and is the hallmark of the

ethnographic new type on the stage of world history, the born Israeli, informally known as the Sabra, whose continuing contributions on the world stage, and to Jewish history, are anticipated eagerly.

#### LITERARY HERITAGE OF THE GREAT SECULAR OUTBURST

The greatest of the secular outbursts in Jewish history resulted in modern Yiddish *and* modern Hebrew literature and all the individual works in both that may be thought of as potentially permanent contributions to world literature. There are vastly more in Yiddish, for the obvious reason that Yiddish was the universal vernacular of all the writers and the readers who were part of it. All the major authors in both languages grew up in the depths of the thousand-year-old trilingual Ashkenazic civilization in which Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish played their roles. That is equally true of the Nobel laureate for each language—the Hebrew Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) and the Yiddish Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991). This superb secular outburst, which gave so much, is rapidly “becoming history” with the demise of the last masters in either or both languages who grew up in that wide-ranging civilization.

Specialists in Israeli literature can begin to see the contours of this major new Middle Eastern literature that is now taking shape in the hands of native-born Sabras who did not grow up in a Yiddish environment. Many of the finest young writers are of Middle Eastern background. The major migrations of Middle Eastern (often misnamed “Sephardic”) Jews to Israel came after the rise of the state in the middle of the twentieth century. After decades of being second-class citizens, they are now rising to the forefront of Israeli creativity in a wide range of fields. The omnipresent Arabic milieu, with an injection of Russian from the latest waves of immigration, are going to be very important parts of this new Israeli literature of the future. Though physically saved from the Holocaust, Israeli literature was not saved from the cutting off of the roots that would have continued the old traditions of Hebrew. Just as in the case of Yiddish, the disappearance of the last generation of vibrant prewar East European born Hebrew

writers means the end of modern Hebrew literature as we know it and the start, in the hands of Sabras, of a really new literature in the genuine Israeli language.

What about attempts at modern literature *in* Yiddish (not *about* Yiddish) by writers born after the war? In the spirit of full disclosure, this author is among those who have published collections of Yiddish fiction, and therefore disqualified from evaluative judgments. But some general thoughts are nevertheless in order. Does publishing make somebody a real Yiddish writer? Not necessarily. Those born after World War II, who have produced books in Yiddish, as opposed to the odd article, poem, or Yiddishist hymn sheet (yet another ode to the beauty and eternity of Yiddish), do not get much in the way of balanced criticism. The surviving Yiddish papers (and various pro-Yiddish forums) declare such writers to be Shakespeares or at least Bashevis Singers. The professors, pundits, and English-language journalists who enjoy "Yiddish bashing" call them garbage. Today's Yiddish writer has to take these things with two pinches of salt, one from each side, but is then left with little bona fide criticism, not to mention the sore point of readership. The bigger picture about these new attempts at Yiddish literature is that the professors critical of the movement on behalf of Yiddish are right to be skeptical, right to insist on real quality, and right to condemn frivolity that pretends to be serious literature. The numbers are bleak: At most a dozen secular writers born after the war have published books of fiction or poetry in Yiddish. One was born in Montreal and one in Buenos Aires; several come from New York. Western countries owe a debt of gratitude to Montrealer Leybl Botvinik, whose *Gehéyme shlikhes* (The Secret Mission), published in Montreal in 1980 when he was twenty-one, broke the ice that somehow kept authors born in the West after the war from even attempting Yiddish writing. The rest come from the former Soviet Union. Of those, only one, Boris Karloff, born in 1958, hails from a dissident background. The rest are veterans of Aaron Vergelis's *Sovétish héymland*, the communist magazine launched in Moscow in 1961, which was published through to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Vergelis was hated in the West for his betrayals of other writers to the authorities. It was a bitter irony for many that he did succeed

in creating jobs for younger Yiddish writers where all such efforts in the west had failed. Although much of the current writing by his former disciples retains a certain late-Soviet flavor, the group has its literary stars who have grown dramatically since their emigration to Israel or the United States. Alexander Belousov, an ethnic Russian, was born in Samara, Russia, in 1948. He was enthralled by Jewish culture and invested years in mastering Yiddish and Hebrew. His Yiddish verse was widely acclaimed and translated, and he moved to Israel in 1990. As this volume was going to press, sad news came of his premature death in Maale Adumim in 2004. The talented poet Michael Felzenbaum, who was born in Vasilkov, Ukraine, in 1951, is often considered a key poet of the group.

But even if some of the works by “the dozen” have considerable merit, it is still a tiny blip. As for “youth,” all are in deep middle age. The current Yiddishist definition of young (born after World War II) rings more and more empty with each passing year. There will soon be a generation of senior citizens born after the Holocaust. As King Pyrrhus remarked, “One more victory like that, and we’re sunk.” One tragic mistake is the policy of some Yiddish professors and institutions, especially in America. Not investing in the kind of intensive Yiddish education that *could* produce new masters means that the minimal necessary infrastructure does not get built. And with each passing year, the opportunities for young writers to breathe in from the last living prewar masters recedes further.

#### JEWISH SOLUTIONS ON THE TABLE

Nearly all of those who built the nucleus of Israeli society were Yiddish-speaking East European Ashkenazim, as were all of the state’s founding leaders (name changes notwithstanding). The rise, growth, and solidification of a revived Jewish state in its ancient homeland is one of the major accomplishments in all of Jewish history, whatever one’s view of Jewish language and culture, whatever one’s Middle East politics of the hour. A big part of the magnificence of the State of Israel comes not from the narrow focus of its most direct planners or leaders, but from the very fact that it is an ingathering from all cor-



ners of an ancient Diaspora; many unanticipated forms of cultural innovation stemming from Jewish sources can as a matter of course come to fruition in Israel. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that taking issue with the chauvinistic Hebraism of much of standard Zionism and the anti-Yiddish policies of the authorities in Israel does not make one even a tiny bit anti-Israel; it does not even indicate where one happens to stand on the Israeli political spectrum. It would be a failed state indeed whose residents, supporters, and admirers had to support every policy in order to be deemed loyal. In the case of Yiddish and Israel, the best example is the emergence of Israel as a major center of world Yiddish literature between the 1970s and 1990s, simply by virtue of being the country to which Yiddish writers migrated with so many others, escaping the grim realities of life in the Soviet bloc. By way of example, the eminent Yiddish poet Josef Kerler (1918–2000), the leader of the dissident Jewish writers' movement in 1960s Moscow, arrived in Jerusalem in 1971 where he rapidly founded the *Yerusholáymer álmanakh*, which evolved into a prime stimulus to ongoing Yiddish creativity in Israel for three decades. There is a lot to be said for a permanent international home, where victims of anti-Semitism anywhere are by definition welcome. It is only natural that the idea of the state continues to be the center of world Jewry's attempts at retaining Jewishness. But it is unnatural that Jews would have no interest in their own heritage and would dump it while vacuously claiming Israeli language and culture as theirs, without mastering the culture or moving to the country. For many in the west, it is a convenient fig leaf on the road to wholesale loss of identity.

There is a never-ending stream of works on Zionism (quite naturally) but next to nothing on the dozens of works that set out the competing vision of modernism in Jewish Eastern Europe. That vision, involving Diaspora nationalism, Jewish cultural autonomy, and the institutionalization of Yiddish language infrastructure, was successful for millions of Jews, spanning a broad spectrum of beliefs and opinions, in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe. The achievements of the literature of the period took place in a modern culture of newspapers, magazines, parties, libraries, and educational systems at all levels from kindergarten through postgraduate research, which the Yiddishists set up throughout Eastern Europe.

The success of the modern Jewish life developed by Yiddishism in Eastern Europe was ended, together with the lives of nearly all the Jews of Eastern Europe, by the Holocaust. That this is still viewed with triumphalism by some in the “I told you so” Hebraist camp is very sad. It is unclear how successful new projects in the Diaspora (or in Israel) to preserve the values of Yiddishist, secular humanistic culture will be. There are, nevertheless, some intriguing points of overlap with a variety of more recent Western Jewish movements, including the humanistic Judaism of the provocative thinker Sherwin T. Wine, as well as Reconstructionist Judaism and, earlier antipathies notwithstanding, aspects of the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements. Some of their members and affiliates feel the need for a richer cultural component than just the life and times of the synagogue and a culture centered on support of the State of Israel (although that support becomes vital as Israel bashing becomes a popular camouflage for anti-Semitism in some quarters).

What is clearly needed is a new, open-minded study of how Yiddishism and Diaspora nationalism really worked in pre-Holocaust European Jewry. Much of its success likely resulted from its situation in the thick of a dense Jewish civilization that included, as its majority, the traditional Ashkenazic Jews whose language, folklore, and daily lives provided an unending stream of resources for the secular outburst to tap. However future studies go, it is vital for each culture to be fathomed in its own terms and not in terms of a Holocaust that murdered it.

#### THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN JEWRY

Quite amazing, the fuss that one little chart can kick up. In the mid 1990s, statisticians Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz completed a study entitled “Will Your Grandchildren Be Jews?” Using data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, their own fieldwork, and numerous other sources, they published a chart in 1996 following the demographic predictions for two hundred each of the following five categories of Jews: (1) Hasidic Orthodox and yeshiva Orthodox (Haredi), (2) centrist Orthodox (Neoorthodox), (3) Conservative, (4) Reform, and (5) secular. According to their projections, by the fourth

generation, the 200 Hasidim and other Haredim will have produced 5,157 Jews; the 200 Neoorthodox—692; the 200 conservatives—48; the 200 reform—27; the 200 secular—10. The figures were generated by taking into account rates of birth, intermarriage, assimilation, and other trends within each group. By the fourth generation, the box for Hasidim and other Haredim is so full that it is nearly all pitch black. The secularists at the other end of the spectrum have half of one human figure, equaling their paltry ten people.

“The chart” has become a sensation. For those who warn of assimilation and those who want to shock parents into providing intensive Jewish education for their children, it has become invaluable promotional material and has appeared in a number of periodicals. In Ultraorthodox publications it is “quietly juxtaposed” into discussions of various past movements that digressed from tradition. The chart is controversial. Pini Herman and the late Egon Mayer are among the demographers who have challenged various of its details, assumptions, and conclusions. The debates among demographers will continue. A misleading sense of imminent doom among all but the Ultraorthodox was enhanced by the chart’s “level starting line” (two hundred current persons for each category). But in real life that starting line has many more non-Orthodox than Ultraorthodox Jews. The non-Orthodox majority derives from the massive waves of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century migration, as well as the majority of Holocaust survivors and their progeny. Most of the deeply religious in Europe fell victim to the Holocaust. The Ultraorthodox arrived in America as a small minority of survivors, direct or indirect Holocaust refugees. One component arrived from Hungary after the 1956 uprising. Still, the long-term picture is accurate, and it should simply be recast with the actual starting lines of today rather than the “leveled-out” two hundred person starting line.

Some were surprised to see the Gordon and Horowitz chart prominently featured in Alan M. Dershowitz’s *The Vanishing American Jew* (1997), which reaches the same conclusion and offers constructive proposals on reversing the trend toward disappearance of the secular American Jew. This conclusion is also arrived at, in measured tones, by Arthur Hertzberg.

Ethnicity will no doubt last for several more generations, but it is well on the way to becoming memory. But a community cannot survive on what it remembers. . . . The need for and the possibility of a spiritual revival are clear. If it does not happen, American Jewish history will soon end, and become a part of American memory as a whole.

(Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.)

For multiple reasons, traditionalist Judaism will never be accepted by modern Jews. The traditionalist kind of Judaism (Ultraorthodoxy), which is winning the contest to become the future of American (and Diaspora) Jewry, believes in much more than the 613 commandments in rabbinic tradition. Hasidim in Brooklyn believe in things that are more unacceptable to moderns than the rabbinic view on, say, the age of the world, and this has more than a little to do with the subconscious aspects of modern Jews' view of the Ultraorthodox. Every modern Jew's life includes the ideal of respecting other people as equals and the wish to be so respected. Such respect in itself leads to prospects for closer friendships with non-Jews. In addition to believing in the literal afterlife and actual resurrection of the dead, the literal Divine authorship of the entire Torah (not just the Ten Commandments that the Torah says were brought down from the mountain), it is part of Ultraorthodoxy to believe that Jews are superior. This is politely and euphemistically called "chosen-ness." What it really means in the hearts and souls of many was set out in the controversial 2003 Hebrew book by Rabbi Saadya Gama in which the Jewish soul and genes are claimed to be superior to those of gentiles. The book was withdrawn from many outlets after a scandal broke out at the end of 2003 when somebody "snitched" its contents to the outside world in English (only increasing, à la Rushdie, its appeal and popularity). There is in fact nothing surprising here beyond the author's failure to find more diplomatic (or spiritual) formulations.

Such overt claims of superiority make moderns cringe at the thought of their Ultraorthodox brethren, even though we are talking about an exquisitely nonviolent heritage of a historically persecuted minority, whose ideas of grandeur and superiority were an obvious survival

mechanism through a very long period of brutal intolerance. This is an elaborately evolved belief system that provides to its believers certainties well worth dying for and clinging to at any cost. It certainly doesn't (and shouldn't) bother American politicians of both parties who feel comfortable negotiating the Ultraorthodox bloc vote, without worrying that the minority might have beliefs of their own "chosen-ness." For many in the Ultraorthodox communities, the perceived betrayal perpetrated by "modern Jews" is worse, much worse, than the inherited inferiority of the gentiles who are not at fault for having been born, *nébach*, without the "chosen-ness."

The point is that the divide between Ultraorthodoxy and the rest of today's Jews goes to the very quick of the modern, westernized Jew's essence. Of course it is, for an outsider, no less than astounding that the moderns are on the way to demographic extinction, while the Ultraorthodox are on the way to becoming the vast majority of Diaspora Jews in a century's time. In the late 1940s, Abe Cahan, the secularist editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* in New York City, sent photographers to Brooklyn to capture scenes of the "last religious Jews" before it was too late. It did not occur to old Cahan to bring them to the Yiddish editorial offices on East Broadway (including his own) to take pictures of the last socialist Yiddishist daily newspaper offices. It didn't occur to him that those were the scenes of disappearing American Jewish life.

The majority of modern Jews find it frightening that the Jew of the future in the Diaspora is Ultraorthodox, Haredi, and in most cases Hasidic. There is a deep-seated psychological fear of traditional Hasidim among modern Jews. American comedian Woody Allen, who has transposed Yiddish humor into New York English, summed it up in his famous scene in *Annie Hall* (1977), where the non-Jewish girlfriend takes her American Jewish love interest home to meet the family. Although the fellow she brings home (played by Allen) looks more or less like any other American, the family matriarch looks at him and sees (or he thinks she sees) a mental image of a Hasidic Jew with long earlocks and beard, black frock, white tights, and full regalia—the image that the modern American Jew fears the non-Jew sees behind the Western facade. Modern secular Jews have a deep fear of "real Jews": a close-knit people whose dress,

language, separateness, myriad laws, and theological belief in Jewish chosen-ness are a major embarrassment.

### THE HASIDIC FUTURE OF YIDDISH

For some secular Yiddishists, the pain is occasionally greater still. Yiddishism in all its incarnations believes in humanism and the equality of all people, the full rights of women in the modern sense, and the possibility of maintaining one's own language and culture while mastering the majority language and participating in wider society. It is the model of the remarkably successful interwar Yiddish cultural life built up in Eastern Europe on the basis of cultural autonomy, pluralism, and a genuinely multilingual, multicultural society. The annihilation of Yiddish-speaking civilization during the Holocaust put an end to that. It was never successfully reconstructed after the war.

For modern Yiddish culture in all its varieties, preserving and developing the wealth of the Yiddish language while leaving behind religious or racial warfare, was a major achievement. Yiddish as a spoken language is defying all predictions, but not as a consequence of anything the Yiddish movement has ever done. Yiddish will be the future language of the bulk of Diaspora Jewry because speaking it is part of the Jewish civilization of the Hasidic movement, and of the Khasam-Sóyfer's brand of traditionalist Orthodoxy, not because of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, or any other Yiddishist icon. Secular Yiddishism could only work as a real civilization in its native homeland of Eastern Europe; it was doomed in America as a large-scale living society. Naturally, enthusiasts of modern Yiddish culture and literature don't like to be told, as they were at the end of the twentieth century (on their favorite Internet forum), by a member of a Yiddish-speaking traditionalist community:

My dear Mr. B. . . Indeed we have no need for Peretz, Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Ansky, *di Vílner trúpe*, etc. For our Yiddish is the Yiddish of yesterday and tomorrow. Our Yiddish is the Yiddish of the *shuln* and *shtíblakh* [synagogues and little prayer houses], of the *khéyder* [traditional elementary school] and the *tish* [Hasidic festive table], the Yiddish of the essence of the

Jewish people, the Yiddish that has a future. Our culture is the laws revealed to us at Mt. Sinai.

(A. J. Heschel, Mendele, October 22, 1999.)

Mentioning the word “Hasidim” (or Haredim, or Ultraorthodox) in a circle of modern American Yiddishists evokes the whole gamut of complaints: their publications do not follow the radical (and Soviet-inspired) 1937 version of the Yivo spelling rules, their grammar differs from standard literary Yiddish, they don’t read or respect modern Yiddish literature, their Yiddish is not purist and incorporates English words, and more. For younger and middle-aged secular Yiddish enthusiasts and teachers, who often speak a horrifically wooden artificial Yiddish, to be attacking the natural, rich Yiddish of the most traditionalist Hasidic communities makes a rather strange impression on the observer. For Hasidim who happen to encounter a younger secular Yiddishist, who did not grow up in a traditional Ashkenazic community, and did not take the trouble to master much of the Judaic heritage that goes with Yiddish, the emaciated, artificial, and sterile Yiddish elicits some hilarity.

The nearly total lack of contact, as well as the mutual lack of respect, contributes to the reluctance of modern Yiddish scholars to study living Hasidic Yiddish. There are of course important exceptions. Professor Miriam Isaacs of the University of Maryland has produced a number of major studies, among them “Haredi, *Haymish* and *Frim*: Yiddish Vitality and Language Choice in a Transnational, Multilingual Community” (1999). One of the more important studies in recent years is Bruce Mitchell’s project to gather data from Hasidic communities in Britain. His *Language Politics and Language Survival: Yiddish among the “Haredim” in Postwar Britain* appeared in 2006.

The time has come for modern Yiddish studies to make the study of Hasidic Yiddish language and literature a primary focus of researchers specializing in the contemporary period. That professors of Yiddish would fail to take an interest in looking at what is happening to Yiddish in their own time will one day be looked at with some surprise. Those involved with secular Yiddish circles who have

made spelling details or purist vocabulary their prime concerns might refocus their interest to the diverse current incarnations of the actual civilization that produced not only Yiddish, but just about all the great Yiddish secular writers who grew up in that traditionalist culture. Perhaps the survival of “exotic” cultures such as traditional Ashkenaz in peaceful Hasidic communities could be considered a national treasure (coming after the Holocaust as it did) in modern Western democracies that respect multiculturalism, pluralism, and tolerance.

Yes, the great secular outburst of nineteenth and earlier twentieth century Eastern Europe now comes to its end. The end was brought prematurely by the Holocaust; in Eastern Europe it would have lasted many centuries. But it happened. As the secular revolution fades away by sheer demography, the Yiddish language is strengthened daily as the natural spoken language of the Hasidim, the prime component of the eternal religious Jewish “tree trunk” from which secular outbursts branch out from time to time (often centuries apart). It is the Hasidim, more than any other Ultraorthodox branch, who maintain their pre-Holocaust Jewish civilization intact through clothing, traditions, and Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism.

The tree trunk itself is enriched “against its wishes” by the tidal waves of secular outbursts and by the progress of humanity. The Jewish shift from Old Testament theology to belief in the afterlife and messianism was profoundly impacted by Hellenism. In fifteenth-century Europe, the German invention of the printing press led to the publication of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, and other sacred books. In the sixteenth century, its Jewish applications expanded to the vernacular, leading to the rise of a printed Yiddish literature. There was a time in the twentieth century when many Hasidic communities shunned such Western genres as the poem, short story, novel, and modern essay because the genres reeked of the *yidishístishe apikórsim* (those Yiddishist faith deniers). From the Hasidic viewpoint, there was a danger of a young person becoming spoiled (*kálye vern* is the ironic Yiddish term for this kind of “spoilage”). As the secular outburst receded and secular Yiddish culture disappeared as a serious



self-perpetuating force in Western countries, the fear of these genres also receded. One result is a dramatic growth over the past several decades of Hasidic books, magazines, and newspapers entirely in Yiddish, which itself was impacted by various secular Yiddish newspapers and traditions. The “silent ayin” that was a symbol of revolutionary and radical writings in the late nineteenth century had become the symbol of the Orthodox Yiddish press by the late twentieth century. With the fading of secular Yiddishist publications, the more phonetic spelling of Borokhov and Reyzen, which was based on pre-nineteenth century traditions in many cases, is (with modifications) now becoming the new Hasidic spelling. As opportune irony would have it, the middle-of-the-road twentieth-century spelling of the great literary masters is becoming the middle-of-the-road Hasidic Yiddish writing system of the twenty-first century. Before the postwar polarization of “Haredim versus everybody else,” many Hasidim had indeed been reading various Yiddish newspapers and periodicals emanating from other circles. Editors and publishers in their communities were obviously impacted by these publications, and over decades came to adopt a number of features which have come to characterize nearly all forms of written Yiddish. Still, the two are far from identical, and twenty-first century Hasidic Yiddish in print is finding its way to a new configuration. Specificities are frequently in the direction of the southern dialects that predominate in Hasidic Yiddish.

The segment of the Jewish people destined by the cold facts of demography to constitute the overwhelming majority of future Diaspora Jews is the one where Yiddish is, without any movements, campaigns, or arguments, the major international Jewish language of the future. History has had the last laugh on all the parties. The Hebraists think that Israeli is true Hebrew and will one day be spoken internationally by all Jews. The Yiddishists think their clubs, articles, conferences, and proclamations of love and devotion will “save Yiddish.” Meanwhile, the Hasidim, who have no interest in either position are demographically making Yiddish a major Jewish language even in Israel, and the major Jewish language internationally. The spread of Yiddish-speaking communities in New York, Antwerp, London, Jerusalem, and various other cities makes the long-term international survival of Yiddish a simple and foregone conclusion.



similar to those in the early moshavim and kibbutzim. No one had been around then with a magnetophone or even a notebook to record what happened. But now, in London, New York, and B'nei Brak, one could seize the chance to ask, what is happening? And why?

(Louis Glinert, foreword to "Pious Voices: Languages Among Ultraorthodox Jews,"  
International Journal of the Sociology of Language, no. 138, 1999.)

Not all Ashkenazic Ultraorthodox speak Yiddish in everyday life. In the environments of the *Litvishe yeshivas*, the Lithuanian-style (Misnagdic) yeshivas, there is still considerable (but declining) use of Yiddish in education, and progressively less use in the home (though a core of traditionalist families maintain it). A new dialect of English sometimes called Yeshivish is taking over as the vernacular in everyday life in some of these circles in America and elsewhere (documented by Chaim M. Weiser in *FrumSpeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish*, 1995). Among a few Lithuanian Misnagdic communities (e.g., the Brisk community in Israel), Yiddish is stronger. The world's most famous Hasidic movement is Lubavitch (Chabad), where the situation is more complicated. Among the Lubavitcher, there is considerable knowledge of Yiddish in educational settings in traditional strongholds, but less and less in everyday speech in the home, and sometimes none in outreach communities established around the world to persuade secular Jews to become observant. Some young Lubavitcher do not speak it in everyday life but learn it to understand the tape recordings of their late (and apparently final) rebbe, Menachem-Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994). The strongest preservation of Yiddish among Lubavitch Hasidim is in their Crown Heights, Brooklyn base. These "Lithuanian Hasidim," founded by Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi in the late eighteenth century (see above, pp. 168–169), preserve a Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish that is closest to standard literary Yiddish of any Hasidic Yiddish. But it is not clear that the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, or the circles of the Misnagdic yeshivas, can be relied on to preserve Yiddish into the distant future as a primary spoken language of everyday life. Their use of Yiddish is only impressive, in linguistic and demographic terms, compared to the dismal combined performance of the secular Yiddishists and the academicians.

Yiddish, as fate would have it, is 100 percent safe for centuries to come as a virile spoken and written language among the southern Hasidim—those who hail from Poland, Ukraine, and particularly Hungary. The average number of children per family is between six and seven. Most marriages are arranged in the later teenage years, often between brides and grooms of different towns or countries. Nearly all live in compact communities in easy walking distance to synagogues, schools, and other traditional institutions. Among the dynasties centered in the United States the best known are Satmar (Williamsburg and Boro Park in Brooklyn, and Kiryas Yoel at Monroe, upstate New York); Bobov (Boro Park, Brooklyn); Vizhnitz (Monsey, N.Y.); Klausenburg (Union City, N.J.), and Skver (New Square, New York). The Tosh Hasidim are based near Montreal, in Kiryas Tosh at Boisbrand, Quebec. Dynasties based in Israel include the famous courts of Belz and Ger and a number of others, among them Alexander, Amshinov, Bohush, Boyan, Chernobyl (yes, that one), and Kalev. Among some groups in Israel, especially the Gerer, maintenance of Yiddish lags behind their compatriots in the West (and that goes back to the split at Chop in 1922; see p. 293). Satmar, the most populous Hasidic dynasty in the world, has a substantial Yiddish-speaking community in London, which is also home to Belzer and others. Antwerp is the center of Pshevorsk and home to various other Hasidic communities. There are many other Hasidic courts.

The vast majority speak Mideastern (Polish–Hungarian) and Southeastern (Ukrainian) Yiddish, both of which make up Southern Eastern Yiddish—the non-Litvak dialects of modern Yiddish. In popular usage, these dialects are often grouped together as *Póylish* (Polish), and this is the majority Yiddish of the future. The future standard language will be based on these dialects, not on the Lithuanian variety that gave modern secular Yiddish culture much (not all!) of its standard. Still, Lithuanian (Northeastern) Yiddish will survive in future centuries as a minority dialect. In addition to any Chabad Hasidim and Lithuanian yeshiva groups who may speak the language into the more distant future, a Lithuanian-based dialect remains solid among Ashkenazic Haredim who belong to the communities that settled in Jerusalem before the rise of modern Zionism. Among them are various



Figure 11.2 The first decade of the twenty-first century is witness to a veritable explosion of Hasidic children's literature in Yiddish. These two scenes are from *Mir shikn a briv* (*We Send a Letter*), part of the *Malki and Yósele* series, published by Yofi in Antwerp, Belgium, and Brooklyn, New York. At right, Hasidic children mail a letter. At left, the mailman empties the box, taking care not to lose a single letter. (By Y. Stauber; illustrations by Trui. By permission of the publisher.)

groups of Hasidim among the older Jerusalemite families, and one small but important group of *Misnágdim*: the *Prúshim* (literally, those who separate themselves from worldly pursuits to study), who are descended from the pupils of the Gaon of Vilna who migrated from Vilna to the Holy Land in the early nineteenth century. Some lived in the holy city of Safad in the Galilee and relocated to Jerusalem, where they set up their synagogue in 1837, after an earthquake struck in Safad. But that is all for the future dialectology of later twenty-first-century Yiddish.

The question most often asked is, How many “real” Yiddish-speaking Hasidim are there in the world today? Every Jewish demographer and population survey institution contacted in preparing this book provided disclaimers and reasons for not offering a figure or even a rough estimate. Many censuses do not ask the question that would lead to a figure. For their part, many Hasidim in various countries do

not want to be counted. First there is the ancient Jewish tradition against census taking and counting of people, based on the old Jewish view that every such count in the Bible was followed by major catastrophe (“Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel. . . . And God was displeased with this thing and he therefore smote Israel” [1 Chronicles 21:1, 7].) The traditional Yiddish way of counting the number of people for some everyday purpose (How many would like tea?) is to start with the negating *nit* (or *nisht*), hence *nit eyns* (not one), *nit tsvey* (not two), *nit dray* (not three), and so forth. For Holocaust survivors and their immediate descendants there is added anguish about there being “official lists of Jews.” There are many mundane reasons to do with taxes, school registration, military draft, and other questions that can vary a great deal from country to country. Nevertheless, the question cannot be shirked forever by the well-financed Jewish population studies that assemble data on all sorts of lesser issues.

There are divergent figures about the number of Yiddish-speaking Hasidim. Timothy Gill’s *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Culture and Daily Life* estimated 650,000 Hasidim in 1998. Robert Eisenberg, addressing the situation in the United States alone, concluded,

Today there are about a quarter million Hasidim in North America. They are growing at a rate of 5% a year, a trajectory which, if anything, is on the upswing, as new generations have ever more children per family. . . . A 5% annual increase translates into a doubling of population every fifteen years. This means that the 250,000 Hasidim of today [in the United States] will number between eight and ten million in the year 2075.

(Robert Eisenberg, *Boychiks in the Hood: Travels in the Hasidic Underground*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.)

Others have worked on estimates for all Haredim, rather than just Hasidim. Professor Menachem Friedman of Bar-Ilan University, often considered the world’s leading expert on the sociology of contemporary Ultraorthodoxy, confirms that exact figures are in dispute but is prepared to offer estimates as guidelines. For 2005, he reckons on approximately 1.5 million Haredim in the world, of whom about 700,000

are in Israel. Of Diaspora Haredim, the vast majority are Hasidim (and the overwhelming majority of them speak Yiddish as their main language). British demographer Professor Barry Kosmin, executive director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, estimates the number of Hasidim (specifically Hasidim) at 300,000 in the United States and 800,000 worldwide. Whichever estimate is adopted, it is important to remember that not all those counted as Haredim (or even Hasidim) are necessarily Yiddish speakers. This is particularly true in Israel, where Ger, Chabad-Lubavitch and some other Hasidic groups have shifted to Hebrew as the major vernacular, and where many non-Ashkenazic (particularly Mideast-origin) Jews have come to be culturally associated with the larger Haredi camp. But Satmar, the largest Hasidic group internationally, and many others, are solidly Yiddish-speaking.

A working figure of half a million Hasidic Yiddish speakers internationally in 2005 is conservative and overcautious. It is wiser to err here on the side of understatement, given the hyperbolics that have become commonplace on all sides of this debate. And it is important for the various Jewish population surveys to come to grips with the issue and stop shirking one of the major Jewish demographic questions of our times, whether or not their sponsors or chief academicians will “like” the results.

Also around 2005, the international number of full Yiddish speakers in the secular world who actually make significant use of the language in daily life *drops* to about half a million for the first time, and the figure will soon collapse altogether. In other words, the naturally rising figure of Hasidic Yiddish speakers is “crossing” the demographically plummeting figure of aging secular speakers coming to the end of their days. It is a major historic moment in the unfolding story of Yiddish, a moment of profound sadness and, at the same time, a moment of exceptionally promising vistas for the coming centuries.

The forward-looking aspect of the current situation needs to become a matter of interest for serious secular Yiddish enthusiasts, and particularly for academics in Yiddish studies whose obligation it is to know what is happening to Yiddish language and literature. Even more puzzling than the complaint about Hasidic Yiddish spelling and grammar

is the frequently repeated charge that for all their Yiddish, Hasidim have not produced a Mendele, a Bashevis Singer, a Chaim Grade. What are the Hasidim writing? The quickest way to gauge the scope of Hasidic Yiddish literature of the twenty-first century is to peruse the books in a bookstore, either traditional or online. For example, a direct web sale site in 2004 advertised 458 books in print in Yiddish: stories of Hasidic *tsadikim* (rebbe)s—51; stories of *tsadikim* for children—36; classroom textbooks for children—96; prose for children—152; the Menachem-Mendel series—63; and, perhaps the most variegated for the outsider looking in, “general prose”—60 books. This last group, which comprises fiction, nonfiction, historical fiction, adaptations from world literature, current events, and more, includes titles such as *On the Washington Bridge*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *The Second World War* (3 vols.), *The Spanish Inquisition*, *The Master Spy*, *Missed the Boat*, *Lost and Won*. These are all books in print that are published and sold to people who want to buy them, a far cry from a secular Yiddish writer today who has to go look for a grant or defray printing costs himself or herself, print five hundred copies, and work very hard to give them away to people who will appreciate the gift, rather than accept it to be polite.

The Hasidic books are not wholly consistent in spelling and grammar. Their Yiddish is in transition from one standard (the prewar middle-of-the-road standard that encompassed many religious as well as secular publications) to another, the literary Yiddish of mid-twenty-first century Hasidism worldwide. Variation in usage is the most classic (and for linguists expected) feature of literary languages in transition. If predictions had to be made, they might include the following: the three genders of classic literary Yiddish (two in the Lithuanian dialect), are merging into two or one; the classic case system, already reduced (and not with full consistency) in classic twentieth-century literary Yiddish, is being further simplified in line with the centuries-old tendency discovered by Borokhov toward a streamlined grammar with a minimum of genders and cases. The grammatical predictions that Borokhov made for the future of Yiddish in a little-known letter dated December 17, 1912, are uncannily accurate when measured against today’s Hasidic Yiddish. The middle-of-the-



road twentieth century spelling, summarized in the *Oxford Code of Yiddish Spelling* (1992), a project that took secular and Hasidic Yiddish equally into account, is being realized by more and more Hasidic publications. There is a remarkable centripetal force at work leading to further standardization, sometimes in the same direction that the modern literary language took in the late nineteenth century, sometimes in a very different direction. It is a language in a state of beautiful linguistic flux that signifies stylistic youth and energy and the first sproutings of the future new Yiddish literature.

From the literary and linguistic points of view, the resemblance to East European Yiddish literature of the early and middle nineteenth century is eerie. There is an explosion of publishing activity, an expansion of genre, experimentation with Western genres, and didactic thematics slowly morphing into artistic literature. There are diverse experiments in language, grammar, and spelling, as well as tension between dialect and standard language and the evolving *new* standard Yiddish of Hasidic children and young people, based on the southern dialects. The rapidly increasing Hasidic use of the Internet, itself a matter of serious conflict within Hasidic circles, is also having a number of visible effects on the language.

*Máyles*, published in Monsey, New York, is one of the best family and children's magazines ever to appear in Yiddish. It can hold its own with some of the famous children's magazines of pre-Holocaust Warsaw and Vilna. A typical issue, far from being about religion as dogma, comprises articles, essays, a short story, a novel published in installments, poems, cartoons, lessons, letters, and many exciting graphics. Even the journal's name says a lot about its multilayered sophistication. In everyday Yiddish, *máyles* (*máles* with a long "a" in most southern, Hasidic dialects), spelled *Mallos* in the magazine's own transcription of the title, means "good traits" or "advantages" from the ancient Hebraic root for "going up" (it is the opposite in Yiddish of *khisróynes*, faults). In a more formal register of rabbinic Yiddish, the word means "ladder" or "steps" and the masthead depicts a picture of a ladder reaching ever higher.

In the arena of Yiddish press, one of the remarkable achievements is New York's weekly *Álgemeyner zhurnál* (Algemeiner Journal). For

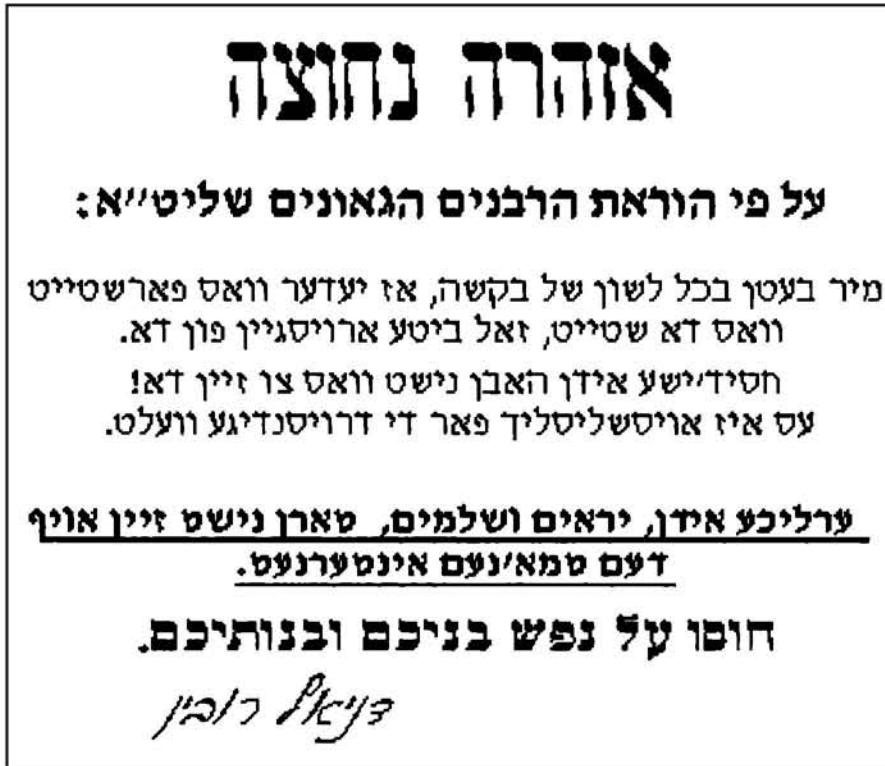


Figure 11.3 The twenty-first-century clash of global culture and Yiddish-speaking Hasidism is particularly evident on the Internet. A number of less-than-kosher sites are accompanied by this and similar pop-ups in a classic-style Hebrew and Yiddish text. It reads: “Urgent Warning! By order of the greatest rabbis, may they live” and the text then goes into Yiddish: “We ask and beg that whoever understands what is written here should please go out from here. Hasidic Jews have nothing to do here! It is exclusively for the external world. Pious Jews, God-fearing and wholehearted, must not be on the impure Internet.”

many decades, the daily *Tog* (itself long combined with the old *Mórgn-zhurnál*), had competed with the *Fórverts*. They divided between them a large “middle of the road” readership, while the leftist camp centered around the *Fráyhayt* (which published until 1988). When the *Tog* abruptly went under in late 1971, one of its long-standing correspondents, Gershon Jacobson (1934–2005), started up the *Álgemeyner zhurnál* in early 1972, taking on board many of the *Tog*’s secular writers while adding a number of religious and rabbinic writers. He was uniquely qualified—and inspired—for the synthesis,

hailing from a family that was part of the clandestine (and un-daunted) Chabad-Lubavitch movement in the heart of Stalin's Moscow in the 1930s. After the war, Jacobson earned degrees from the University of Toronto and Columbia in New York, and worked on major papers in Hebrew, English and Russian.

In early 1983, the *Fórverts* had itself become a weekly, and the old *Tog* vs. *Fórverts* daily-paper competition was reincarnated as an *Álgemeyner Zhurnál*–*Fórverts* weekly duo (though there continued to be—and continue to be—Hasidic weeklies to the “religious right” of the *Zhúrnal*).

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, both papers lost their stalwart editors. Mordechai Shtrigler and Joseph Mlotek of the *Fórverts* passed away, in 1998 and 2000, respectively. With huge annual subsidies, the Forward Association has kept the paper going on a kind of “life support” by importing former staff of Vergelis's *Sovétish héymland* (see pp. 372–373), buttressed by some former American academics, in effect “to make a statement” about the survival of a secular Yiddish weekly, a laudable goal.

But when Gershon Jacobson passed away in May 2005, the youngest of his five sons, New York born Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Jacobson, not quite thirty-three at the time, took over the editorship, becoming the world's youngest Yiddish editor (a generation younger than the “young Russians” imported by the *Fórverts*). He has built it rapidly into the major Yiddish weekly internationally. It continues to feature religious as well as secular topics and issues. In late 2006, the paper started reprinting secular Yiddish classics (including Peretz and Sholem Aleichem) for a largely haredi readership, a first in contemporary Yiddish culture.

Poetry in Hasidic literature is still elementary, but fiction has long crossed the boundary from didactic material to embryonic art. The next chapter in the unfinished story of Yiddish, whoever will write it, will entail a critical review of the Hasidic Yiddish literature of the first quarter of the twenty-first century and its reception by readers around the world. There are many historical mysteries here that we cannot begin to fathom. What will the relentless passage of time bring to future generations of Hasidim, and what new manifestations of wider Jewish culture will one day burst out?

## CODA

The irreplaceable words, and spirit, of Yiddish are inherently incandescent with history, civilization, satire, irony, compassion, and the inner strength to be cheerful amid troubles. There is nothing about the language that is better or worse, more or less truthful or beautiful, than any other language. But its uniqueness and inimitability as the special living embodiment of a psyche is absolutely indispensable for a genuine grasp of East European Jewish culture, and, more generally, the current living stage of the uninterrupted ancient natural line of Jewish languagehood. That line stretches over thousands of years. In traditional Jewish historical geography, the path led from Babylonia to the Land of Israel, to Egypt and back, to Babylonia and Persia and back, to wide swaths of the Middle East, to Central and then Eastern Europe. Coming down the Hebrew-Aramaic-Yiddish language chain, these words have their own special fire, a kind that cannot be purposefully injected or logically translated, or, for that matter, mechanically revived. It is a fire that comes from the natural transmission of language over vast stretches of time in a closely knit and highly, yes, separate society.

The first thousand years of the history of Yiddish started and ended with catastrophic conflagrations. The flames of Speyer, Worms, Mainz, and Regensburg led to the gradual weakening of Ashkenaz in Central Europe. But instead of disappearing from the face of Jewish or European history, the surviving remnants that escaped eastward built a new and even more elaborate Yiddish-speaking Ashkenaz in the Slavic and Baltic lands of Eastern Europe, one that continued the unique Yiddish-Hebrew-Aramaic trilingualism that is the stamp of the culture. Nearly a thousand years later, when millions of European Ashkenazim were annihilated on their native European territory in the Holocaust, the worst instance of genocide in world history, it seemed the end of the Ashkenazic road. Ashkenazim had earlier played the central role in setting the stage for the return to the ancient homeland and construction of the State of Israel as a potential homeland for Jews around the world. The creation and development of Israel is a central achievement in Jewish history. But Diaspora communities, without realizing it, throw their own heritage overboard when they make Israel and the Israeli language into the *entirety* of their own

Judaism (without necessarily moving there or mastering modern Hebrew). The result is accelerated assimilation and the precipitous shrinkage of all but traditionally religious communities.

The recurring cycle, over thousands of years, of a mainstream tree trunk of traditional religious Judaism and spiritual separateness (not separation) from the neighboring non-Jewish population is punctuated by magnificently creative secular outbursts. These volcanic eruptions of creativity are achieved in close and trusting contact with non-Jewish partners (intellectually and personally). The greatest in all Jewish history came to Ashkenaz in the nineteenth century and reached maturity in the twentieth. It was in its prime before the Holocaust, coexisting with the traditionalist religious majority Jewish culture and interacting with it in ways that stimulated creativity and excellence in both sectors. The masterpieces of modern Yiddish *and* modern Hebrew literature are among the permanent contributions of the secular outburst of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern European Ashkenazic Jewry. Sparks of the creative fire are still evident in the last masters of both languages who grew up in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. But it is receding with their disappearance and will soon be history and memory, with its literary and artistic products the enduring legacy.

The so-called Ultraorthodox were a small minority of Diaspora Jews after the Holocaust. They constituted the majority of victims, who went to their deaths with the same spirit of Ashkenazic martyrdom as their ancestors on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube in Old Ashkenaz. Very few were to be found in the various movements to resist or escape. The most numerous among them internationally are the traditionalist (“real”) Hasidim, whose Hasidic passion to retain European Judaism as a civilization, not just a religion, has enabled them, against all expectations, to grow into what demographers see as the future majority of Diaspora Jews internationally, and especially in America. Hasidic Yiddish books and magazines appear by the dozen each year, many thousands of children speak Yiddish to each other naturally, and Hasidic culture is rapidly setting the stage for the second millennium of Ashkenazic Jewry.

The small secular Yiddish movement has its own share of fired-up souls too, in love with a deep and authentic Jewish culture rooted in

the ancient sources but modernized to be humanistic, pluralistic, and tolerant, and adoring its masterpieces of literature, as well as theater, art, and music. Some of that fire comes from a determination not to let the Holocaust succeed in having obliterated modern Yiddish culture. After the catastrophe, the surviving cultural masters continued to create until their last breaths. But with precious few exceptions, they did not fully pass on the language and its culture to their own children, let alone new generations of pupils and followers. The reasons are many and range from the anti-Yiddish attitudes of much of the Jewish establishment in the postwar decades to its connections with political movements that were on their way out, to the simplest of all reasons: the fire went out of it after the Holocaust. Writers and teachers wanted their children to succeed in their new homelands, and somewhere down deep they didn't have confidence that Yiddish culture had a real future in America and other western countries. A mentality of "I am the last of the Mohicans" took over in a kind of twilight zone. In current Yiddish usage, this is frequently satirized by the phrase *Nokh mir, der mábl!* (After me comes the Great Flood of Noah, sheer emptiness; *Après moi, le deluge*).

Where there has been dedication to the secular Yiddish heritage, it has seldom concentrated on the one endeavor that can save something of the genuine article: the training of bona fide masters who can appreciate the literature in all its mesmerizing intricacies, speak and teach and write the language fluently, and themselves start training new generations of students. Instead, enormous energy and funding has been squandered on well-intentioned "sociolinguistic experiments" (efforts to "purify" Yiddish vocabulary from words of newer vintage and "fight to the finish" over the untenable 1937 anti-traditionalist spelling rules—fiddling while the language burns away), internecine strife, academic projects with low standards, and occasionally Yiddish as a springboard for fund-raising, new buildings, self-aggrandizement, and power, on the back of the newfound sympathies and passing on of elderly family and friends ("We are saving Yiddish! Make out your check today and we will save *your* culture!"). The simplest definition of Yiddish tends to get lost on the way. It is a language. The language needs to be mastered, and that involves years of hard work. If it's not your

cup of coffee, that's fine too, but please don't trade on "saving Yiddish" for other purposes.

Popular activities in the field are nevertheless legitimate and laudable. Reading circles, concerts, plays, translations, comedy, even the pleasures of Yiddish words in English and other languages, are all part of contemporary Jewish culture. It is good that they are being propagated instead of looked down on by the very near descendants of East European Jewry. It is inspiring that more and more American Jews want to know about the grand Yiddish culture of Eastern Europe and America.

But if literary Yiddish—refined, subtle, and plastic—is to be saved, how can it be done? And what is realistic, given where we are rather than where we should have been? Secular, literary Yiddish *can* be saved, not as a physical society with streets and squares but as a virtual network of small, serious islands of culture and creativity in the Internet age. It is alive when a Yiddish literature seminar or summer course is conducted in Yiddish with the original texts, with students who write their papers in Yiddish and discuss their work in Yiddish. It can even be alive in a city apartment or a forest hut, when an individual writes and thinks in the language. It is alive when a worthy piece of writing is created, in whatever genre. As it says on the first page of the Zohar, the primary work of the Kabbalah, when something original is created, that word goes up to heaven to be kissed by God. It is alive when students seek out native speakers who can impart the nuances and intricacies of the real language. It is alive when Yiddish letters and texts are exchanged by e-mail, irrespective of where the correspondents happen to be living.

But the task is, as an old Yiddish saying goes, as difficult as parting the Red Sea. It is no mere coincidence that 100 percent of the great secular writers grew up in traditionally religious Ashkenazic society. The Yiddish that is worth saving is rich in cultural, historic, and traditionally Jewish nuance; it cannot be fathomed in a cultural vacuum, with the words and grammar being abstracted out of the entire culture as a kind of fetish. Whoever has the fire in his or her spirit to become a Yiddish master has to learn a lot of classical Hebrew in its Ashkenazic incarnation and some Aramaic; he or she must be well acquainted with various ancient texts that are as alive as today's date to the

Yiddish ear, as well as a religious life that he or she may not be a part of. Is it worth it? Of course, but only if the fire is there. It cannot be demanded or proclaimed. The beneficiary is not Yiddish but the people fortunate enough to master a profound yet fun language that brings so many treasures and delights, of language and literature both, to the user. But if the currency is to be respected, it cannot be devalued. If some go beyond the study of classics to actually create in Yiddish, the result must stand up to the same harsh criticism as a new work in English or French. Nothing harms the dignity of ongoing secular Yiddish culture more than mediocre work that is declared to be serious new literature, just because it is written in Yiddish.

The future millions of Yiddish speakers, and the Yiddish literature of a hundred and two hundred years hence, will come from the rapidly expanding Hasidic communities around the world. Our task, in the meantime, is to have enough fire in us to keep alive little islands of serious Yiddish-in-Yiddish education, cultural programs, literature, and, let us hope, some worthy creativity too. We are fortunate to be able to send our students to survivors. We are fortunate, with the end of the Cold War, to be able to bring the language and culture of the last survivors in the homeland directly to committed students from the West (and not only the West). And we are fortunate that the technology of our time enables the "islands" themselves to be scattered. The seminar rooms of universities, where all kinds of small and threatened cultures can thrive, are ideal places for the creation and development of such islands. Professors of Yiddish, if they wish, can produce major academic advances while fostering little islands for living Yiddish culture too.

The islands we shall build are time bridges linking the days of the last pre-Holocaust East European born masters to the day when the Hasidic world, the new Ashkenaz, moves from Yiddish popular literature to an era of new masterpieces. That the islands have many non-Jews alongside Jews is splendid. That befits a modern culture whose treasures are compelling and whose message of humanism, pluralism, and equality, all with sharp humor, is taken in tandem with deep knowledge of the ancient Jewish sources and traditions. Those were the sparks that fired the muses of thousands of writers during the



secular outburst period. While the next major chapter in the unfinished history of Yiddish is created by the Hasidim, we “islanders” can muster the collective energy needed for efforts to write our own much smaller chapter. As a Hasidic grand master of old once put it: *Kol-zmán dos kléyntshike líkhtale brént, kén men nokh farríkhtn*. As long as that tiny candle burns, it can still all be put right.

Moreover, small is beautiful.

## Notes

(Note: Some references are listed chronologically where that order is relevant to the history of the ideas discussed.)

### Introduction

- p. 3 Max Weinreich (1945: 13) actually credited “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy” to an unnamed foreign-born high school teacher from the Bronx who had attended his course of lectures at Yivo in 1944.
- pp. 4–9 On globalization and language see Fairclough (2006), Lee (2005), Maurais & Morris (2003); on English see Crystal (2003), Pennycook (1994).
- pp. 5–6 More recent editions include Herder (2005), Humboldt (1999), Sapir (1986), Whorf (1964).
- pp. 6–7 On the genetics of Ashkenazic Jewry, see Behar et al (2003, 2006), Hammer et al (2000), Livshits et al (1991), Thomas et al (2002); cf. p. 132.
- pp. 7–9 The model proposed implicitly posits the nineteenth- and (prewar) twentieth-century secular outburst in Jewish Eastern Europe as potentially paradigmatic for Jewish history, without any claim for strict congruence with earlier periods.
- p. 12 In classic Tiberian Hebrew and Aramaic, respectively, these forms were mazzōl and mazzōlš. Ur of the Chaldees: While al-Muqayyar in Iraq remains the “majority opinion location” of biblical Ur, some have posited other candidate sites.

### One: Genesis

- p. 14 Max Weinreich (1937) elaborated on the potential contribution of Yiddish to general linguistics in the area of *fusion languages* before fine tuning the name (and its associated terminology) regarding Yiddish per se (1954, 1959, 1973/1980/2007).
- pp. 14–15 For recent scholarly views of the biblical account, see esp. the works of Finkelstein & Silberman (2001, 2006).
- pp. 15–24 Rise of the European Jewish culture areas: M. Weinreich (1973/1980/2007: chapter 2).

- p. 22 The name *Ashkenaz*: Eidelberg (1988), D. Katz (1998).
- p. 23 On the classification of Yiddish dialects in this chart, see below notes to pp. 140–154.
- pp. 23–24 (European) Jewish languages: See the debates of Loewe (1911) vs. Mieses (1915) and S. A. Birnbaum (1942); Wexler (1981) vs. Katz (1985, 1991d: 142–145); cf. Myhill (2004).
- pp. 24–27 Debate over Yiddish “on touchdown” in *Ashkenaz* (earliest posited origins) vs. (Jewish) German followed by Yiddish (later origin theories) see Mieses (1915: 30), Shipper (1924, 1933), S. A. Birnbaum (1929: 270, 1939, 1979a: 44–57), M. Weinreich (1939: 49, 1954: 78–79, 1954–55: 13, 1967), D. Katz (1980, 1987c, 1991b, 1991c, 1993a) vs. Zunz (1832: 438), Fischer (1936/Bin-Nun 1973: 24–46, 61, 73–77), Ziskind (1953: 104–106), Marchand (1959: 386; 1965). Summary of debates: Beider (2004: 203–209), D. Katz (1991b: 22–30).
- p. 25 Names of Yiddish: M. Weinreich (1973/1980/2007: chapter 5).
- pp. 26–27 On degrees of derivability of Yiddish dialects from Proto Yiddish: Greater derivability posited by S. A. Birnbaum (1923), Fischer (1936/Bin-Nun 1973: 61–72), D. Katz (1983, 1987c: 48–50), M. Weinreich (1960, 1973: II, 321–382; IV, 364–384), U. Weinreich (1958); lesser derivability posited by Marchand (1965: 250–251), Ziskind (1953: 106); intermediate views are developed by Manaster Ramer (1997) and Sadock (2002).
- pp. 27–29 Nature of Yiddish meanings: Borokhov (1913a: 10–11), Samuel (1971), M. Weinreich (1936, 1953, 1973: I, 184–250; III, 157–252).
- p. 29 On the pattern of the *latest* Hebrew and Aramaic (Jewish Aramaic comprising also the Hebrew-component-in-[Jewish] Aramaic) usages appearing in Yiddish (rather than the best known biblical or other textual citations), and the implications for linguistic continuity: see D. Katz (1985: 99, 1991b: 36–37).
- pp. 29–35 Cultural history of early *Ashkenaz*: I. Abrahams (1896), Agus (1969), L. Finkelstein (1924), Gay (1992: 2–31), Gidal (1998: 28–49), I. G. Marcus (2002), Margolis and Marx (1927: 346–359), M. Weinreich (1973: I, 3–47, 334–353; III, 3–32, 344–381, and corresponding sections in 1980 and 2007).
- p. 33 Whether the Kalonymus family (“the Qalonimides”) were brought by Charlemagne himself, or one of his Carolingian successors is open to question within the tradition; see I. G. Marcus (1998: 98, 104). *Rabono* from classical: rabbōnš.
- 34–35 On polygamy in early *Ashkenaz*: Shmuel Hiley (London) points out that visiting and/or migrating Jewish scholars from the Near East might well have come with multiple wives, and that such incidents could have provoked the new legal ban (personal communication).
- pp. 35–39 Early genocide: Baron (1957: IV, 89–149), Chazan (1987), Eidelberg (1977), Gay (1992: 9–12, 23–28), Gidal (1998: 50–52, 74–75), I. G.

- Marcus (2002), J. R. Marcus (1999: 128–141, 153–158), Margolis and Marx (1927: 360–383).
- pp. 33, 37 *Kálmen* is arguably the oldest Yiddish word: D. Katz (2005b); re *Zálmen*: D. Katz (2006a); *Shneur*: D. Katz (2006b).
- pp. 41–42 Golems and dybbuks: The cultural environment depicted in the *Book for the Pious* facilitates our understanding of the “swift acceptability” of golems and dybbuks in Ashkenazic culture though neither is mentioned in this work explicitly. See notes to p. 117.
- pp. 40–44 Inner Ashkenazic world: I. Abrahams (1896), Agus (1969), Dan (1968), Eidelberg (1962), L. Finkelstein (1924), Erik (1928: 49–65), Gay (1992: 17–21, 32–61), A. Grossman (1981), Gudemann (1888), Hirschler (1988), I. G. Marcus (1996, 1998, 2002), Margalio (1957), Metzger and Metzger (1982), *Séyfer khasidim* (1538), see edition by Wistinetzki and Freimann (1924), Shtif (1922a), Steiman (1963), Yuval (1988).
- pp. 45–46 Westerly (Rhineland) origins of Yiddish posited by M. Weinreich (1958b, 1973: I, 3, 334–353; III, 3–4, 344–381; II, 94–111; IV, 135–139); more easterly (Danube) origins proposed by Gerzon (1902: 130–131), Mises (1924: 269–318), Fischer (1936/Bin-Nun 1973: 77–85), King (1979: 7–8), D. Katz (1987c, 1991c, 1993b), Eggers (1998); debate summaries: D. Katz (1987b, 1993b: 9–15), Manaster Ramer & Wolf (1996), Beider (2004).

## Two: The Three Languages of Ashkenaz

- pp. 45–49 Internal Jewish trilingualism (Yiddish/Hebrew/Aramaic), after D. Katz (1975: 2–7, 1982, 1985: 98, 1993a: 47), contrasting with the view of an amalgamated “Hebrew-hyphen-Aramaic” giving internal Jewish bilingualism, after M. Weinreich (1940: 30–31, 1953: 488, 1973/1980/2007: chap. 4), Zinberg (1935: 20 [1975: 12]), and others.
- pp. 48–49 The oldest Yiddish sentence: Frakes (2004: no. 2), Sadan (1963), Shmeruk (1988: 11–15), M. Weinreich (1963).
- p. 49 Yekusiel of Prague and the reconstruction of Yiddish impact on thirteenth-century Hebrew and Aramaic sacred pronunciation: D. Katz (1993a: 61, 69–70, 74, 76; 1995b: 405–406).
- p. 50 Early thinking on prayer in Yiddish: D. E. Fishman (1991). Cf. notes to pp. 104–109.
- pp. 51–56 The Maharil and Yiddish: Zalmen of St. Goar (1556: 103a); modern appraisals: Assaf (1942–3: 41–42), D. Katz (1997b), Shmeruk (1988: 17–18), Steiman (1963: 105–106).
- pp. 56–60 Women and early Yiddish literature: Erik (1928: 10–12, 29–47), Frakes (2004: xlv, lviii), Niger (1913b), Shmeruk (1988: chapter 1), M. Weinreich (1928a: 33–34), Zinberg (1935: 33).
- pp. 62–64 *Almekhtiker got*: Frakes (2004: no. 25), Shmeruk (1988: 50–54, 87–90); *Khad-gadyo*: Frakes (2004: no. 26), Shmeruk (1954, 1988: 51–52, 79–84).
- pp. 63–72 Christian founders of Yiddish publishing: C. Adelkind (1545), D. Adelkind (1552), Aemilius (1543, 1544a, 1544b), Fagius (1541, 1542a,

- 1542b, 1543, 1544), Helitz brothers ( $\pm 1534$ ,  $\pm 1535$ ,  $\pm 1538$ , 1540, 1543). See Baumgarten (2005: 38–71) and Rosenfeld (1987).
- pp. 72–74 Prayer in Yiddish: Baumgarten (2005: 260–295), D. E. Fishman (1991), Zinberg (1928/1946: 285–287); Texts: Frakes (2004: nos. 2, 4, 25–28, 41, 48, 51–52, 88, 116, 124, 127). An early pro-Yiddish tendency was discerned by Noble (1951, 1952), M. Weinreich (1973: I, 256–284; III, 259–292, 1980: 252–279), and Zinberg (1928 [1946]); and disputed by Lieberman (1952) and Pyekazh (1964); cf. Shmeruk (1988: 16).
- pp. 74–77 Cultural history of early Yiddish typography: Zafren (1982, 1986–7).
- p. 75 Yiddish printing in Italy: cf. notes to. pp. 79–88, 84–85 above; and see Wolfthal (2004).

### Three: Old Yiddish Literature

- pp. 79–88 Overviews: Baumgarten (2005), Erik (1928), Frakes (1989, 2004), Gaster (1927), Minkoff (1952a), Shmeruk (1988), M. Weinreich (1928a), Zinberg (1935 [1975]).
- p. 80 The double Yiddish letters: While their classic Yiddish use was “shored up” by European usage, the use of double yud for one or more diphthongs, and double vov for consonantal *v* is well attested in the preceding Aramaic period (see S. A. Birnbaum 1979a: Appendix 2, 112–126).
- pp. 80–81 1454 Speyer letter: Zinberg (1935: 27 [1975: 18–19]); 1392 text of Meir ben Borukh: Frakes (2004: no. 11); twelve-angel blessing for the road: M. Weinreich (1928a: 48).
- p. 81 There were, of course, many other genres in Old Yiddish literature. Frakes’s (2004: xvii–xxviii) classificatory categories are based on a maximal corpus of known sources and should become standard. For an unusually competent bilingual edition of one of the less known genres—fables, see E. Katz (1994).
- pp. 81–82 “Yiddishization” of Christian epics: Shmeruk (1988: 36–38), Zinberg (1935: 62–65 [1975: 50–53]).
- pp. 81–86 European epics in Yiddish translation or adaptations: Baumgarten (2005: 128–162), Erik (1926, 1928: 69–112), M. Weinreich (1928a: 50–67), Zinberg (1935/1975: chap. 3]).
- p. 82 *Ditrikh fun Bern*: Frakes (2004: no. 78).
- p. 83 1382 Cambridge Codex: Frakes (2004: nos. 5–9), Fuks (1957), Shmeruk (1979a).
- pp. 83–84 *Buovo d’Antona*: The Yiddish title, *Bovo d’Antono* “transposes” Romance *d’de* to the Aramaic article *də* which likewise means “of,” giving the synonymous “Bovo of Antona” with alef-final endings, making way for a wholly Aramaic visual (Aramaic *d’* plus two alef-final nouns). Editions: Elye Bókher (1541b)[facsimile]; Joffe (1949); in modern Yiddish: Minkoff (1950), Knapheis (1969); in modern English: Smith (2003). Excerpts and bibliography of studies: Frakes (2004: no. 33). Studies: Baumgarten (2005: 163–206), M. Weinreich (1928a: 149–171).

- pp. 84–85 *Pariz un Viene*: (possible author) Elye Bókher (1594) [facsimile: Baumgarten (1988)]; editions: Shmeruk and Timm (1996); Timm & Beckmann (1996); studies: Baumgarten (2005: 163–206), Fuks (1977); M. Weinreich (1928a: 172–191). See now Frakes (2004: no. 74).
- pp. 85–86 The Yiddish *King Arthur's Court* cycle: Frakes (2004: nos. 80, 111–112).
- p. 86 Early Yiddish “translation words”: Frakes (2004: nos. 1, 3). Rashi's *loshn Ashkenaz* glosses: The example cited could well be of later origin; the manuscript traditions differ, and scholars disagree about which glosses are original to Rashi “personally” and which were interpolated (and if so, in what period). But all these Yiddish glosses, whatever their individual provenance, are part of this tradition, and those in Rashi versions are part of “the Rashi tradition.” See the bibliography in Frakes (2004: no. 1), where a selection of “the agreed-as-original” items also appears.
- pp. 86–88 Bible versions in Yiddish: Baumgarten (2005: 82–127), Frakes (2004: nos. 5, 6, 22, 45, 46, 47, 49, 55, 57, 58, 60, 79, 98, 113, 114, 117), Shmeruk (1988: 157–210), Staerk & Leitzmann (1923). Translation technique: Leibowitz (1931); on liturgical languages see Madsen (2005).
- p. 88 *Shmúel bukh*: Frakes (2004: no. 47), M. Weinreich (1928a: 68–111), Falk & Fuks (1961). *Mlókhim bukh*: Frakes (2004: no. 45), Fuks (1965). Biblical plays: Frakes (2004: nos. 85, 120), Shmeruk (1979b).

#### Four: What Should a Lady Read?

- pp. 89–94 Opposition to secular reading materials: C. Adelkind (1545: afterword), *Séyfer khasidim* (1538: §141). Interwar secular Yiddishist analyses: N. Shtif (1924), M. Weinreich (1928a: 52–55), Zinberg (1935: 103–105, 14–141 [1975: 87–89, 121–22]).
- pp. 94–97 The *Tseneréne*: Erik (1928: 223–230), Frakes (2004: no. 98), Shmeruk (1964a, 1988: 177–179), Zinberg (1935/1975: chap. 5). *Ha-mágid*: Erik (1928: 230), Zinberg (1935: 151–152 [1975: 130–131]).
- pp. 97–99 The lore of old Ashkenaz and the *Máyse bukh*: Erik (1928: 353–365), Frakes (2004: no. 89), Meitlis (1933, 1958), Zinberg (1935/1975: chap. 7).
- pp. 99–104 Lifestyle literature: See Baumgarten (2005: 207–259), Erik (1928: 203–319). *Séyfer mides*: Erik (1928: 270–284), Frakes (2004: no. 43), Zinberg (1935: 169–176 [1975: 148–153]). *Sam kháyim*: Erik (1928: 286–287), Zinberg (1935: 176–179 [1975: 154–157]). *Brántshpigl*: Erik (1928: 287–294), Frakes (2004: no. 76), Zinberg (1935: 179–182 [1975: 157–159]). *Lev tov*: Erik (1928: 294–301), Frakes (2004: no. 97), Zinberg (1935: 182–187 [1975: 159–164]).
- pp. 104–109 *Tkhínes*: Frakes (2004: nos. 124, 127), Freehof (1923), Kay (2004), Korman (1928: xxvii–xlvi, lxvii–38), Niger (1913b: 131–135), Rosman (2002: 552–556), Weissler (1998), Zinberg (1935: 274–293 [1975: 248–259]).
- pp. 109–111 Glikl Hamel: B.Z. Abrahams (1962), Erik (1928: 395–407), Kaufmann (1896), Lowenthal (1977), Minkoff (1952b), Turniansky (2006).

**Five: Yiddish and Kabbalah**

- p. 115 Periodization of Kabbalah after Scholem (1955), see also Scholem (1960, 1971a).
- pp. 116–117 Pious of Ashkenaz: Dan (1968), Meitlis (1961: 15–22), *Séyfer khasidim* (1538).
- p. 117 On golems, cf. pp. 41–42. The Maharal's golem as theme of modern Yiddish literature: treatments range from the popular folkloristic renditions (elaborated from earlier versions) by Yehude-Yudl Rosenberg (1904, 1907) to the poetic dramas by H. Leivick (1921, 1934). Incidentally, Rosenberg is best known for his translation of the Zohar from Aramaic into Hebrew. See now Neugroschel's (2006) collection in translation, and Neugroschel (2000) on dybbuks in Yiddish literature. On the *Máyse bukh*, see Frakes (2004: no. 89), Meitlis (1933, 1958, 1961).
- pp. 118–119: Kabbalah of Safad: Erik (1928: 301–313), Fine (1984, 2003), Rossoff (1991). Shmuel Hiley, a hasidic scholar in London, in his forthcoming book (tentatively titled *Kabbalah and Hasidim*) challenges a number of the standard-history ideas; inter alia, he argues forcefully for pre-Lurianic origins of many of these ideas and customs, and indeed, of the Safad center itself.
- p. 120: *Kav ha-yóshor*: Erik (1928: 226, 309–313), Frakes (2004: no. 129), Zinberg (1935: 235–238 [1975: 207–210]).
- pp. 120–121: *Símkhas ha-néfish*: Erik (1928: 260–261, 301–309), Shatzky (1926), Zinberg (1935: 235–243, 323–329 [1975: 207–217, 288–296]).
- pp. 122–124 Debate on “older Yiddishism” and Yechiel-Michel Epstein (1693, 1697, 1703): Noble (1951, 1952), Zinberg (1928: 95–96 [1946: 289–293], 1935/1975: chap. 8) positing a kind of Yiddishism vs. their opponents Lieberman (1952), Pyekazh (1964), Shmeruk (1988: 16).
- pp. 124–127 The Zohar in Yiddish: Khotsh (1711); see Erik (1928: 239–242), Frakes (2004: no. 130), Zinberg (1935: 387–394 [1975: 347–352]).
- pp. 126–127 Sabbateanism: Goldish (2004), Margolis and Marx (1927: 558–577), Scholem (1973).
- pp. 128–129 The sabbatean accusation against Yechiel-Michel Epstein: Scholem [after Jacob Emden] (1971b: 1248) vs. Noble (1951: 136–138); cf. Lieberman (1952: 310–311).
- p. 129 Sabbatean works in Yiddish: Shazar (1978), M. Weinreich (1926, 1928a: 219–252).

**Six: In the East**

- p. 131 Origins of East European Jewry: see references in Brook (2003).
- pp. 131–140 History of East European Jewry: Baron (1976), Dubnov (1916–20), Haumann (2002).
- p. 132 Genetic origins of East European Jewry: see notes to pp. 6–7.
- p. 133–135 East European state paganism (multitheism): Jones and Pennick (1995: 165–183).

- pp. 136–138 Ashkenaz moves eastward: M. Weinreich (1951: 8–9, 1973/1980/2007: chap. 1).
- pp. 138–140 East European Jewish culture: S. A. Birnbaum (1979a: 16–30), Chagall (1946), Heschel (1950), Rosman (2002). Introductions to the shtetl: Kugelmass, Boyarin and Baker (1998); Roskies & Roskies (1975), Sachs (1928), Shapiro (1996), and esp. Zborowski & Herzog (1952). In literature: Neugroschel (1979); works on single *shtétlekh*: Eliach (1998), Lown (1991), Richmond (1995).
- pp. 140–142 Western vs. Eastern Yiddish: S. A. Birnbaum (1979a: 94–105), D. Katz (1983), M. Weinreich (1958a).
- pp. 142–144 Interdialectal standardization of older printed Yiddish: Katz (1990b: 198–201), M. Weinreich (1973/1980/2007: chap. 10).
- pp. 142, 144 The competing Amsterdam Bible translations of Vitsnhoyzn and Blitz: Aptroot (1990), Erik (1928: 230–239), Frakes (2004: nos. 113–114), Zinberg (1935: 158–161 [1975: 136–139]).
- p. 143 *Kurántn*: Pach (2006), M. Weinreich (1928a: 265–266, 1928b).
- pp. 145–154 The North-South divide: S. A. Birnbaum (1918: 16, 1979a: 97), Mieses (1924: 1), Fischer (1936/Bin-Nun 1973: 93–97), Herzog (1965: 17–48, 246–252), D. Katz (1983: 1021–1022, 2004: 48–64). Preference for the West-East isogloss: Prilutski (1920: 79), M. Weinreich (1958a: 164). Debate summaries: M. Weinreich (1940: 69–70), D. Katz (1983: 1020–1023).
- p. 150 The border on this map (and on p. 141) delineating southern (or southeastern) Northeastern (“Lithuanian”) vs. Southeastern (“Ukrainian”) Yiddish was drawn on the basis of expeditions to eastern Ukraine in April and July 2004, a part of the project *Litvish: An Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish*. Both expeditions were part of projects sponsored by the Shoah Foundation in Paris.
- pp. 154–157 Hasidism: Hundert (1991), Idel (1995), Mendes-Flohr & Reinhartz (1995: 387–393), Rapoport-Albert (1997).
- p. 160–161 *Praises of the Baal Shem Tov: Shívkhey ha-Bésht* (1814, 1815); academic editions include Ben-Amos & Mintz (1970), Grozinger (1997), Rubinstein (1991). On the historical figure of the Baal Shem Tov, see Rosman (1996).
- pp. 157–163 Yiddish in Hasidism: Dawidowicz (1967: 91–110), Niger (1959: 207–279), Shmeruk (1988: 211–291).
- p. 158 Yiddish song of the *tsádik*: Idelsohn (1929: 411–434).
- pp. 161–163 Nachman of Bratslav: Sternharz (1806, 1875); *Sipúrey máyses* [The Telling of Stories]: Nachman ( $\pm$ 1815); modern editions include: Band (1978), Buber (1999), Mantel (1977); see Liptzin (1972: 17–20), Niger (1959: 109–177).
- pp. 164–172 Misnagdism (and the Misnagdic conflict with Chabad): Dubnov (1967–1973: IV, 401–409), Etkes (2002), D. Katz (2004: 121–142), Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (1995: 390–391, 394–400), Nadler (1997), Schochet (1994).



**Seven: Westernization and Language**

- pp. 173–182 Westernization in western Ashkenaz: Biale (2002b), Low (1979), Sorkin (1987).
- pp. 174–176 Aaron ben Shmuel's prayerbook: Zinberg (1928: 100–103, 1935: 255–258 [1975: 224–227]).
- pp. 176–177 Anti-semitic origins of the anti-Yiddish campaign: Althaus (2002), Bering (1992), Gilman (1986), J. A. Grossman (2000), D. Katz (1986).
- p. 177–182 The Jewish anti-Yiddish campaign in German-speaking regions: M. Weinreich (1973/2007: §70, notes); cf. D. Katz (1994b). Quotation in text from Friedlaender (1788).
- pp. 178–179 Moses Mendelssohn: Altmann (1973).
- pp. 179–188 Westernization in eastern Ashkenaz: Dawidowicz (1967: 111–168), D. E. Fishman (1995), S. T. Goodman (2001), Mahler (1985), Parush (2004), Zipperstein (1985).
- pp. 186–187 Origins of modern literary Yiddish: Kerler (1990, 1999).
- pp. 187–188 Joseph Perl: Dauber (2004: 209–310).
- pp. 187–192 Maskilic founders of East European modern Yiddish literature: Liptzin (1972: 24–38), Roback (1940: 72–92), Wiener (1899). On East European Haskalah see Mahler (1985), Raisin (1913).
- pp. 188–191 The Lefin-Feder-Bik affair: Lefin ( $\pm$ 1814), Feder ( $\pm$ 1814, 1815), Bik (1815); see Erik (1934: 135–162), Mashbitz (1970), Viner (1945–1946: I, 38–44), Zinberg (1936: 253–266 [1976: 213–224]).
- pp. 192–198 New Jewish literary languages and literature in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe: Dauber (2004), Dawidowicz (1967: 271–317), Erik (1934), Kerler (1990, 1999), Liptzin (1972: 24–38), Niger (1952: 165–199), Reyzen (1923), Roskies (1974), Seidman (1997: 1–39), Shmeruk and Turniansky (1993), Shtif (1920), Viner (1945–1946), Waxman (1936: 170–347), M. Weinreich (1928a: 267–351), Wiener (1899: 1–147), Zinberg (1937a & b).
- p. 193 Abraham Mapu: Patterson (1964).
- pp. 194–198 New styles of literary Yiddish: Kerler (1990, 1999), Reyzen (1923: 81–418), Roskies (1974).
- pp. 198–209 Mendele: Liptzin (1972: 39–55, 505), Madison (1968: 33–60), Mark (1967–68), Roback (1940: 95–106), Seidman (1997: 40–66), Viner (1945–46: II, 5–234), M. Weinreich (1928: 330–351), Wiener (1899: 148–260), Zuckerman et al (1991–96: I). *Kol meváser*: Zinberg (1978b: 173–194).
- p. 207 The non-participation of Aramaic in modern, politicized Jewish language debate should not be misinterpreted as implying an evaporation of the language from the scene or a simple implosion of internal tri- into bilingualism. Aside from its undiminished creative role as the medium for new works on Talmud and Kabbalah, Aramaic has continued to play a remarkable literary role in modern literary Yiddish *and* Hebrew, and the internal configurations need to be studied from a non-Hebraist, non-Yiddishist perspective. One example: Hebrew poet Saul Tcherni-

- chowsky (1875–1943), in his ballad *Khasunóso shel Élko* (Elka's Wedding), written in Odessa in 1921, prefaces the work with a letter in local Yiddish dialect, features Yiddish headings for individual sections, and goes into Aramaic for a section on the local building contractor's legal issues in the building trade (in Tchernichowsky 1943: 333–377).
- pp. 209–217 Sholem Aleichem: Berkovitch (1926), Erik (1924), Howe & Wisse (1979), Liptzin (1972: 56–66, 505), Madison (1968: 61–98), Mayzil (1931), Roback (1940: 107–124), U. Weinreich (1954b: 278–291), Wiener (1899: 194–202), Zuckerman et al (1991–96: vol. 2).
- pp. 215–217 Contemporary with the two volumes of Sholem Aleichem's *Yidishe folks-biblyoték* in Kiev (in 1888 and 1889), Mordechai Spektor (1858–1925) published in Warsaw the first two volumes of his generally analogous series, the *Hoyz-fraynd*, of which three more appeared in the mid 1890s, some with the participation of Peretz and his circle in Warsaw.
- pp. 217–223 Peretz: E. Katz (1991), Liptzin (1972: 66–72, 506), Madison (1968: 99–133), Roback (1940: 125–152), Viner (1945–46: II, 235–378); U. Weinreich (1954b: 292–299), Wiener (1899: 202–215), Wisse (1990, 1991), Zuckerman et al (1991–96: vol. 3).

#### **Eight: New Visions of Judaism**

- pp. 225–228 Reform and Counterreform: Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz (1995: 155–206).
- pp. 227–228 Yiddish in “modern Orthodoxy”: Soloveitchik (1961); cf. J. A. Fishman (2002).
- pp. 228–231 In the East: Dawidowicz (1967), Mahler (1985), Raisin (1913), Reyzen (1923), Stanislawski (1988), Weeks (1996).
- pp. 232–238 Nationalist Hebraism: Dawidowicz (1967: 365–401), Drucker (1987), Harshav (1993), D. Katz (2004: 225–227), Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz (1995: 529–633), Patterson (1964), Seidman (1997: 102–137), Vital (1975), Zinberg (1937a, 1937b, 1966 [1977, 1078a, 1978b]).
- pp. 238–246 Rise of secular Yiddishism: Dubnov (1929), Harkavy (1886, 1896), Peretz (1891), Zhitlovsky (1917); historical overviews: D. E. Fishman (2005: 3–79), Goldsmith (1976: 45–97).
- p. 241 Popularity of ethical vegetarianism in Yiddishist circles included publication of magazines dedicated to the idea: *Vegetárishe velt* (Vegetarian World) published in Brooklyn, 1921; *Der vegetárischer gedánk* (The Vegetarian Idea) in Los Angeles, 1930.
- pp. 246–256 Traditionalist religious Yiddishism: Khasam-Sóyfer (1859: 11. §6b, 1864, 1872: 74b. §197), Shlezinger (1863, 1864, 1869a, 1869b). Studies: Dawidowicz (1967: 169–222), Efron (2003: 16–56), Guttmann (1977: 10–12, 75, 125–126, 143, 158–160, 242, 243, 252–257), D. Katz (1997a), Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz (1995: 169–173, 202–205), Silber (1992, 1994, 2003), M. Weinreich (1973: I, 287–288; III, 306–310, 1980: 283–284).

**Nine: The Twentieth Century**

- pp. 257–264 Jewish socialism and the Bund: Dawidowicz (1967: 403–492), Gassenschmidt (1995), Gitelman (1988: 1–87, 2002), Jacobs (2001), Kazdan (1956), Lederhendler (1994), N. Levin (1977), Mendelsohn (1970, 1993, 1997), Nathans (2002), Niger (1952: 194–205), Patkin (1947), Shepherd (1993), Tobias (1972).
- pp. 260–264 Some histories of the Bund continue to be informed by various present-day political correctnesses, e.g. a perceived “centrist kosher Yiddishism” need to minimize the Bundist component of Yiddishism (cf. D. E. Fishman 2005, a very fine book), or a presumed Zionist need to disavow that the Bund’s cultural program was ever realistic “even” in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe (cf. Gorni 2006). The historic discussions continue to be loaded on all sides of the debate, including of course, the stance taken by the present volume (see p. 363 and its note).
- pp. 264–271 Chernowitz: Mises (1907a, 1907b, 1910), N. Birnbaum (1913), Reyzen, Weinreich & Broyde (1931), D. E. Fishman (2005: 15, 32, 49, 58–60, 98–101), J. A. Fishman (1980, 1981a: 369–394 1987, 1991: 231–290), Kressel (1957), Lerner (1957), Passow (1971).
- pp. 271–278 Polemics to research: Borokhov (1913a, 1913b, 1966), Harkavy (1886, 1896, 1898, 2005, 2005), Mises (1931); M. Weinreich (1923: 5–58). See D. Katz (1986: 31–36, 1996a: 245–257).
- pp. 279–281 In the interwar republics: Gutman et al (1989), Heller (1977), Mendelsohn (1983); Rothschild (1974). See also Milosz’s (1968) charming memoir of interwar Vilna (Wilno) from a Polish perspective.
- pp. 281–288 Yiddish culture in the interwar Polish Republic: N. Cohen (2003), Flinker et al (1975), Kazdan (1947, 1948: 134–139, 1956), Liptzin (1972: 237–284, 410–425), Niger (1952: 210–219), Rabinowicz (1965), Szeintuch & Solomon (1986).
- pp. 286–288 In the interwar Lithuanian Republic: Kazdan (1948: 139–140), D. Levin (2000: 114–186), Liekis (2003).
- p. 289 Chagall and Yiddish culture: Harshav (2003, 2004, 2006); Yiddish art more generally: Abramsky (1988), S. G. Goodman (1995, 2001), Kazofsky (2003).
- pp. 288–293 The religious “silent majority”: N. Birnbaum (1917, 1931), S. A. Birnbaum (1925), Lang Caplan (2005), M. Prager (1955), Ravitzky (1996: 40–46).
- pp. 294–300 Interwar Yiddish scholarship: Borokhov (1913a: 18), Niger (1931), Shtif (1925), M. Weinreich (1925), Yivo (1930a, 1930b, 1936). Memoirs: (for Warsaw) Bashevis Singer (1956: 197); (for Vilna) Dawidowicz (1989), B. Katz (1991), G. Weinreich (2005). Histories: Brenner (1996: 195–197), I. Cohen (1943: 412–415), D. E. Fishman (2005: 126–137), D. Katz (1986: 34–36, 1996a: 250–254), Liptzin (1972: 129–135), Roback (1940: 357–389).

- p. 296 Vilna as a symbolic capital both of East European rabbinic culture and modern Yiddish scholarship: see Ran (1974).
- pp. 296–300 One of the more controversial policies of the Vilna Yivo was support for codification of a standard Yiddish pronunciation that tracked the northern (Lithuanian) dialect (minus some stigmatized features), and was itself based on an older standard for Ashkenazic Hebrew (see D. Katz 1993a). This standard was supported by Borokhov (1913a: 15–16, 22), Harkavy (1898: xv), Mark (1948: 16, 1951), Tsvayg (1929), M. Weinreich (1934), U. Weinreich (1949: 19, 1951), Zamenhof (1909: 54), and opposed by S. A. Birnbaum (1918, 1939, 1948: 13–14, 1954: 69–72, 1979a: 100–101), Gininger (1949: 208–211), Prilutski (1927, 1930: 158), Shpilreyn (1926: 16), Volodarski (1928: 36). Debate summaries in Schaechter (1977: 17) and D. Katz (1993c: 47–68, 1994a).
- pp. 300–306 The Soviet Union: Jews in the USSR: Kochan (1970), Schwarz (1951). Birobidjan: Schwarz (1951: 174–194), Weinberg (1998). Soviet Yiddish culture: Gitelman (1972, 1988: 88–114), Levenberg (1989), Peltz & Kiel (1985), Ro'i & Beker (1991), Shneer (2004), Schwarz (1951), Veidlinger (2000). Soviet Yiddish literature: Liptzin (1972: 194–236), Niger (1952: 207–210), Shmeruk (1964b, 1970). Prewar purges: Conquest (1990), Rogovin (1998). Liquidation of Yiddish writers and culture: Pomerantz (1962), Rubenstein & Naumov (2001). Cf. notes to pp. 372–373.
- pp. 306–310 Holocaust: Dawidowicz (1975), Gilbert (1986), Gitelman (1988: 115–143), Hilberg (2003), Klee, Dressen & Riess: (1991), Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (1995: 634–699).
- pp. 310–323 In the Land of Israel: From the period, see e.g. Leibel (1929), Pyetrushka (1929), Yidisher literatn un zhurnalistsn klub in Erets Yisroel (1929). Memoirs: Shargel (1996), Tsanin (typescript memoir sent to the author, 2 & 20 July 1999). Research: Chaver (2004: 1–44, 93–129), Kaufman (1949), Pilowsky (1977, 1980, 1981, 1986); Fishman & Fishman (1973, 1978), Shur (2000, 2003); see Beit-Hallahmi (1992). Fiction: Megged (2003).
- pp. 323–325 American Jewish history: Dawidowicz (1977), Hertzberg (1998), Howe & Libo (1979), Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz (1995: 449–528), Sarna (2004).
- p. 327 Jewish immigrants in Britain: W. J. Fishman (1975), Gartner (1973). Yiddish culture in Britain: Prager (1990).
- pp. 327–328 Secular Yiddish culture in America: Howe (1976), Michels (2005), Niger (1955), Sanders (1969), Shepard & Levi (1982), Stein et al (1969).
- p. 325–338 American Yiddish press: Glatshiteyn et al (1945), Goldberg (1941), Soltes (1925); cf. Marten-Finnis and Winkler (2006) for a contrasting European perspective.
- pp. 329–331 Alexander Harkavy: D. Katz (2005d).
- pp. 326–341 American Yiddish literature: Glaser & Weintraub (2005), Harshav (1954), Harshav & Harshav (1986, 2006), Howe (1976: 417–551), Howe

- and Libo (1979: 290–316), Wiener (1899: 118–130, 216–230), Korman (1928: xlvi–lxv, 39–335), Liptzin (1972: 89–111, 156–174, 288–353), Madison (1968: 134–381), Niger (1952: 214–216), Roback (1940: 192–230, 258–321), Schulman (1943), Wiener (1899: 118–130, 216–230), Wisse (1988).
- pp. 332–339 The *Linke-Rekhte* conflicts: D. Katz (2005a).
- p. 339 The American Yiddish school systems: National Committee of the Jewish Folk Schools (1962), Niger (1940), Yefroikin (1948).
- pp. 340–342 Yiddish theater: Berkowitz (2003), Liptzin (1972: 73–88), Nahshon (1998), Sandrow (1977), Shepard & Levi (1982).
- pp. 342–345 Yiddish names in America: D. Katz (1993c: 243–251).
- pp. 342–347 Yiddish in America: Doroshkin (1969), J. A. Fishman (1965).
- pp. 346–347 Books on (American) Yiddish for wider audiences: Rosten (1968), Samuel (1971), Wex (2005). See also Kriwaczek (2005) on the wider concept of Yiddish civilization in European history.
- p. 347 Isaac Bashevis Singer: Hadda (1997), Liptzin (1972: 506–507), Madison (1968: 479–499), Shmeruk (1986).

#### Ten: In the Twenty-First Century

- pp. 349–355 Approaches to “Yiddish Mohican syndrome”: Liptzin (1972: 446–472), Teller (1954); fiction: Ozick (1969).
- p. 354 There are few studies (or even remarks) about the near exceptionless presence of old-fashioned religious civilization in the immediate childhood environment of virtually all major secular Yiddish writers. But critic and literary historian Sh. Niger (1883–1955), in a penetrating (and for his environment daring) analysis, published in installments in New York’s *Tsúkúnt* in 1938, analyzed the profound participation of continuing literary religiosity and traditionalism as major components of modern secular Yiddish literature (see in Niger 1959: 281–429).
- pp. 355–360 Modern Yiddish studies: Althaus (1972), D. Katz (1986), Prager (1974).
- p. 356 Max Weinreich’s hopes for Yiddish academia in America: M. Weinreich (1941).
- p. 357 The major drawback of U. Weinreich’s (1968) dictionary is the extreme normativist stance adopted, condemning two “degrees of inadmissibility” for masses of accepted Yiddish words and introducing (wholly unmarked) many neologisms not extant in living Yiddish, e.g. *aléymord*, *gegvúl*, *geprúv*, *untervísik*, for (respectively) modern Yiddish *zélbstmord* (suicide), *gebít* (realm), *derfárung* (experience), *unterbavústzinik* (subconscious). Many other nonextant items are introduced to “confront” single-phrase or compound-noun English items, e.g. *khutskhúshik*, *sotsfarzíkher*, *shtotantvíkl* for common *nit durkh di khúshim* (extrasensory), *sotsyále farzíkherung* (social security), *antvíklung fun der shtot* (urban development). For native speakers, the neologisms (unfairly called “Yivoisms”—Yivo is a scholarly research institution and inherently a tent for diverse viewpoints)

are often hilarious; for elementary students, they have made way for the pseudo-Yiddish practiced by a number of today's secular teachers, students, and internet enthusiasts. See D. Katz (1991e, 1993c) for further discussion and references.

The underlying debate concerns the view of some postwar normativists who based themselves on Kloss's (1952: 17; 40–126; 240, 1967) theory of "Ausbau" languages that need to be "constructed out" from their source. It was applied to Yiddish in the sense of "a far as possible from German," principally by J. A. Fishman (1981b: 3, 56–57, 1991: 22–24, 46, 65, 282) and M. Schaechter (1980a: 212, 1980b, 1986). The Ausbauist trend has been opposed *inter alia* by Katz (1991e; 1992; 1993c), Kazdan (1973), and Mark (1964, 1966).

pp. 358–359 National Yiddish Book Center: Lansky (2004).

pp. 361–362 "Saving Yiddish": see Hoffman (1994). On efforts to redefine Yiddish nonlinguistically, cf. Rosen (1996), Shandler (2006). The one "Yiddish *in* Yiddish" secular group, Yugntruf, has been plagued by the extremist normative pseudo-Yiddish devised by a handful of sociolinguistic experimenters in New York. The literary and journalistic quality has generally been sophomoric. The recent treatment by Shandler (2006) is somewhat naive. The book's jacket design aptly symbolizes the dissonance: a romanticized "urban Yiddish scene" from early twentieth-century New York with the Yiddish signs and texts appearing in a Yugntruf Yiddish that could not have existed in the scene depicted. In the early 1970s, Yugntruf picketed the surviving Yiddish dailies on East Broadway, over vocabulary and spelling issues, presuming to "teach Yiddish" to the older generation of masters. Nowadays, its website offers thousand-dollar subsidies to people who will ostensibly move specially to Yiddish-speaking areas. Nevertheless, it is the only long-term, continuous secular Yiddishist group for younger people where *any* kind of Yiddish is spoken (though temporary communities are constructed at the various summer courses and other intensive educational experiences on offer internationally).

p. 361 Regarding the origins of "History is written by the victors": Personal communication from Sir Martin Gilbert.

p. 363 Generally accepted obsolescence of the old Hebrew-Yiddish conflict: e.g. Mendelsohn (1993: 145).

pp. 363–364 The leftist stigma: Carmichael (1993), Halkin (2002), Wisse (1985, 1997). Citations p. 364 from Wisse (1997: 38) and Halkin (2002: 49, 54).

pp. 365–366 The rightist stigma: T. Lapid cited in Bennet (2003), Golan (2005), Oz (1983: chap. 1); cf. Dine cited in Friedman (1993). Citations p. 365 from Landau (1993: 24–25), p. 366 from Efron (2003: 14).

p. 366 Announcers of the "Death of Yiddish" include Fein (1994: 8–9), Halkin (1995), Harshav (1990: 187–193), and Wisse (1996). Citation

p. 366 from Hadda (1998: 34). Samples of opposition: Bermant (1997), Botwinik (1996), J. A. Fishman (1991), Frakes (2003), D. Katz (1996b, 1999), Kerler (2007). Overview in Abley (2003: 201–228). Re Yiddish on the web, see Kerler (2007).

### Eleven: The Future of Yiddish

- p. 368 Concept of the Israeli Language: Zuckermann (1999, 2003, 2004, 2005).
- p. 370 *Ha-shém*: Note that Yiddish, by contrast, has *ha-shem yizbórekh* (“the Name, may He be blessed”). Psychic function of Yiddish: Landis (1964), Matisoff (1979), Samuel (1971), M. Weinreich (1936).
- pp. 370–371 The topic of “Israeliness” vis-à-vis “Jewishness” becomes increasingly unavoidable with the passage of time. See e.g. Oz (1983), Plaut (2002). A predictable twist is the argument of some about the presumed need of Israel to “mideasternize” itself via cultural arabization in order to achieve harmony with its neighbors (e.g. Azrieli 2006).
- p. 371 Perspectives on emergent Israeli literature: Teller (1956), Wisse (2000: 337–346).
- pp. 372–373 The *Sovétish héymland* group: Bashevis Singer (1962), S. A. Birnbaum (1979b), Brumberg (1972), Brumberg & Brumberg (1966), Shmeruk (1991), Shneiderman (1971); in the context of contemporary Yiddish writing, see: Kerler (2007)
- pp. 374–375 Works on Yiddishist thought: Goldsmith (1976), Landis (1964), D. E. Fishman (2005), J. A. Fishman (1981a, 1981b, 1991: 318–323), Liptzin (1972: 112–135); Yiddishist thought per se: Dubnov (1958), Golomb (1964, 1974), S. L. Gutman (1988), Leshtshinsky (1955), Mayzil (1939), Menes (1957), Niger (1941), Opatoshu (1949), Ravitch (1948), Roback (1958a, 1958b), Shtif (1922b), Tsanin (1966), M. Weinreich (1951), Workmen’s Circle Education Department (1968), Zhitlovsky (1917).
- p. 375 Humanistic Judaism: Wine (1995).
- pp. 375–377 The chart: Gordon and Horowitz (1996). Future of American Jewry: Dershowitz (1997), Hertzberg (1998: 365–376).
- pp. 377–378 Illusions of Jewish superiority: That is not to say that some modern, secular Jews do not have their own versions of presumed Jewish superiority.
- pp. 379–391 Yiddish among Hasidim and Haredim: Abraham-Glinert (1997), Baumel (2003, 2006), S. Epstein (1999), Fader (2000), Glinert (1999), Isaacs (1998, 1999), Isaacs and Glinert (1999), Kamen (1985), Mitchell (1999, 2003, 2006), Poll (1965).
- p. 384 Jewish English, and Yinglish: scholarly treatments include Benor (2002, 2004), Halberstam (1997), Fader (2000), Steinmetz (1986); on Yeshivish see Weiser (1995). Among more popular works (some including lexicons and dictionaries, all meant to be humorous) are Mason & Berkow (1990), Rosten (1968), Stevens, Levine & Steinmetz (2002).
- pp. 384–386 Sanctity of (or necessity for) Yiddish among sectors of Haredim: J. A. Fishman (2002), Hiley (1991). See notes above to pp. 246–255 on older

- Haredi statements per se, and more recently, cf. D. Cohen (2004: 1–12); cf. notes to 227–228.
- p. 385 Hasidic courts: This list is far from exhaustive. Other important groups are Slonim, Toldos Aaron (and offshoots) in Jerusalem, Stolinkarlin in Boro Park in Brooklyn, Machnivke in Bnai Brak, and the Vizhnitz court there.
- pp. 387–388 Haredi and Hasidic demographics: Menachem Friedman's and Barry Kosmins's estimates, pp. 387–388: personal communications. Citation p. 387: Eisenberg (1995: 1–2). See also Efron (2003: 91, 97), Kranzler (1995: 23), Landau (1993: xxi–xxii).
- pp. 389–390 Spelling: See *Code of Yiddish Spelling* (1992) that describes the broad middle ground of modern Yiddish orthography as practiced by the majority of culturally conscious writers and publishers in the period between the end of the First World War and the end of the twentieth century (online version at: [www.dovidkatz.net/dovid/PDFStylistics/1992.pdf](http://www.dovidkatz.net/dovid/PDFStylistics/1992.pdf)). It occupies a midpoint between the radical Soviet-inspired Yivo rules of the 1930s and, at the other end of the spectrum, the germanized styles (with abundant silent ayins) that prevailed in the press (of nearly all sectors) and continue in some Hasidic communities. But Hasidic publications and internet use are now approaching the mainstream usage described in the *Code*. In 2005, the most influential Hasidic weekly, the *Algemeyner zhurnal*, which reaches out to secular as well as religious readers, adopted the *Code*'s standards on nearly all points.

Although the *Code* notes ongoing variation in the spelling of the (culturally vital) words for “Yiddish,” “Jews” and their derivatives (double yud among the modernists vs. alef among the orthodox), it used double yud itself, and on that point, it appears that Hasidic Yiddish will stay with the alef; see now D. Katz (2005c).

The Yivo rules were rejected by twentieth-century Yiddish authors mostly on aesthetic and logical grounds, and they are rejected by twenty-first-century Hasidic communities on ideological grounds (the Soviet-inspired innovations wreak of an anti-traditionalist mentality in a culture where the writing system is of immeasurable importance). Nevertheless, the radical “Yivo rules” (of 1937) continue to be adhered to, often as a matter of “principle,” by the majority of university lecturers and academics in the field of Yiddish today (virtually none of whom write any works *in* Yiddish). This has become one of the curious disconnects in the field, one that students find particularly amusing when they come to read the works of Isaac Bashevis and I. J. Singer, Chaim Grade, and other masters of modern Yiddish belles lettres. The so-called “standard spelling” and the “purist anti-daytshmerish vocabulary” (see above note to p. 357), has acquired a near fetish status for various clubs and groups, again, who do not do any serious creating *in* the language. The disconnect between



the secular “Yiddish clubbists” and the living (Hasidic) communities where Yiddish is the everyday language is a matter for a sociolinguistic survey concerning inter alia the pitfalls of ill-advised sociolinguists’ strategies to “save a language.” An artificial clubhouse lingo, hilarious for native speakers, is substituted for the real thing. One of the ironies is that on many points of lexical purism *and* spelling (see notes to pp. 357 and 361–362), Hasidic Yiddish is curiously nowadays more of a continuation of the classic Yiddish secular heritage of the twentieth century than the activities of those who “profess” to continue that heritage in “official secular Yiddish” circles.

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For general strategies to maintain language life, see Crystal (2000, esp. 91–169); regarding Yiddish, see J. A. Fishman (1991).

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