

THE PARADOX OF CREATIVITY IN DIASPORA: THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Robert D. King

The topic of this chapter is the Yiddish language as an instrument of the survival of Jewishness in diaspora. Yiddish is only one of many Jewish languages that supplanted the ancestral languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, of the Jews. Almost everywhere Jews lived after their dispersion from the homeland, they created a Jewish variant of the local language. My paper discusses the Yiddish language and its emergence as a creative force in the Jewish Diaspora and as an icon of Jewish identity. Of all the languages of the Jewish Diaspora only Yiddish produced a significant literature that inspired in its users a unique creativity and sense of belonging. Language is always an icon of ethnic identity, but few languages have ever reified the spirit of its people as Yiddish did. Denied a country of their own, with religion a declining force for ethnic cohesion, the Jews of central and eastern Europe found their identity in their language — Yiddish.

Introduction

While my general interest here is the Jewish Diaspora and the language assimilation of Jews in exile from their homeland, my particular concern is with the Yiddish language — the major linguistic creation of the Diaspora. But Yiddish is not an island language, so it is necessary to locate Yiddish in the larger context of the linguistic adaptation of a people who were, until the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, forever forced to live in the lands of other people. No matter where they settled, no matter how well integrated they were into the life of the countries where they lived, no matter how much confidence they may have built up that their neighbors would leave them alone, the Jews were always apart, always different, frequently hated and forever under suspicion: they were the Other. And out of the bitter tension between Guest and Other grew not only a language — Yiddish — and a culture — *Yidishkayt* — bound to this language, but, in the nineteenth century, an efflorescence of literary creativity in the Yiddish language that is unique in the annals of despised languages.

Yiddish was only one of the languages of the Jewish Diaspora and probably not the language the average person would associate with 'Jewishness' (*Yidishkayt*). That language likely would be Hebrew. Yiddish has had a complicated and at times a troubled relationship with Hebrew, but Yiddish is not Hebrew nor is it mutually intelligible with Hebrew: they are as different from each other as English is from French. Nor is Yiddish what the Hebrew language changed into when carried into the Jewish Diaspora. The Hebrew language is, however, the place where the story begins — the story of the Jewish Diaspora, the story both of Jewishness in general and the Yiddish language in particular.

Hebrew was the ancestral language of the Jews, the language of the Bible (in Christian terms the language of the 'Old Testament' as opposed to the Greek of the 'New Testament'). As a spoken language, however, Hebrew had become almost completely extinct by two thousand years ago. Jews living in the Holy Land spoke either Aramaic or Greek (Jesus, living at the beginning of the Common Era, spoke Aramaic). Though Hebrew was by the Common Era no longer a 'living language', a language acquired in the ordinary way of give-and-take among parents and siblings and playmates, at no time in Jewish history did it disappear as a liturgical language and as the principal language of disputation among rabbis. People whose cradle language had been anything in the world but Hebrew composed substantial works in the language, often elegantly and with originality. Every Jewish boy had to learn Hebrew in the Hebrew alphabet — well or badly, as is true today — in order to become *bar mitzvah*, signifying that he had reached his thirteenth birthday and had, therefore, attained the age of religious duty and responsibility.

The reason why Jewish languages like Yiddish and Ladino are written in Hebrew characters goes back to the widespread literacy of Jews — of Jewish males at least — during the 'Dark Ages'. Observant Jewish males had to be *bar mitzvah*, though not females, who did not have a coming-of-age ceremony. 'Literacy' is of course not nearly the same thing as 'fluency': to be literate simply meant that religiously-observant Jewish males could read Hebrew.

All that aside, Hebrew had become by the onset of the Common Era a 'dead' language in the ordinary sense in which people speak of 'dead languages'. It was, nevertheless, a 'holy language': it had iconic value, a symbolic historical value, in Jewish life. Something of the nature of the symbiosis between Hebrew and Yiddish is suggested by the fact that, in Yiddish, Hebrew is normally referred to as *loshn-koydesh* 'holy language' or 'language of holy men', whereas Yiddish is *mame-loshn* 'mother tongue'. ('Mother tongue' is not quite the right translation of *mame-loshn*, for *mame* in Yiddish suggests as much 'momma' as 'mother', implying an entirely different and far more intimate association between a language and its people in emotional affect than what is conveyed by the conventional label 'mother tongue'.)

The Holy Land had passed from Jewish to Greek control and then into Roman rule during the centuries predating the Common Era. After the Roman gen-

eral Titus successfully assaulted Jerusalem and burned the Second Temple to the ground in 70 C.E., the shadows on Jewish life in its ancestral home began to lengthen. Time was up, and it would be only a short while until the Jews were driven into exile from the Holy Land. ('Exile', Hebrew *Galuth*, Yiddish *Goles*, is an enduring Jewish literary trope.) The Jewish Diaspora had begun. (On Jewish history in general see Ben-Sasson 1976, Dubnow 1967-73, and Roth 1966.)

Some of those forced into exile settled in other countries in the Middle East; some emigrated to countries that could be reached by easy sailing over the Mediterranean; some held on in Palestine. Some doubtless converted to Islam a few centuries later when Islam in its militancy of a hard birth swept through the Middle East. Many of the Jewish exiles went to Italy with the Roman legions, as soldiers — the Jews were highly valued as warriors, events like those at Masada providing the explanation if any were needed — and as what today we would call 'support personnel'. Armies need middlemen to procure horses, grain, food, portable lodging, and repairs. Jewish traders were good at this kind of thing since apart from anything else they were likely to have enough book-Hebrew to negotiate with other Jewish merchants along the path of conquest as the Roman Empire expanded north, west, and east out of Italy.

Language choices in Jewish diaspora

As Jews dispersed from their ancestral homeland in Palestine into Europe and the lands bordering the Mediterranean, it came naturally to them that they would begin to speak the language of the country in which they had settled. Linguistic choices in diaspora — and everywhere else — are almost overwhelmingly driven by economic advantage. Thus, Jews in Spain spoke medieval Spanish — perhaps a Judaicized variant of Spanish in some cases, but Spanish nevertheless. Jews in France spoke Old French or, again, very likely an identifiably Jewish dialect of Old French. Jews living along the Rhine and Danube Rivers in Germany spoke Middle High German of one sort or another — the German of 1050 to 1350 C.E. — probably always with a Jewish flavor and accent. In fact, in almost every land where they settled, a Jewish version of the local vernacular developed: Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Slavic. And other possibilities existed: the great Jewish philosopher and rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), born in Spain but resident in Egypt, composed his works in Arabic but printed them in the Hebrew alphabet.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, they settled for the most part around the Mediterranean — in northern Africa, Italy, Greece, Turkey — but the language they took with them was Spanish. In time their Spanish changed — though not by much — and matured into the language now usually called Ladino: Spanish with admixtures from Hebrew and the languages of the lands to which the Spanish emigrants had fled. Many of these Jews gave up their ancestral Spanish altogether and acquired the language of the country to which the

winds had blown them. This branch of the Jewish people is called the *Sephardim* from the medieval Hebrew word for 'Spain'.

A different set of language choices obtained among the Jews who had settled during the Diaspora in western Europe north of the Pyrenees, primarily in Germany and eastern France. The centers of settlement lay mainly along the Rhine and Danube Rivers in then nascent towns such as Cologne, Mainz, Trier, and Regensburg. These Jews are called the *Ashkenazim*, after the medieval Hebrew word for 'Germany'. Until the eleventh century C.E. Jews had lived in most of western Europe in relative peace and security, legally but often no doubt only notionally under the protection of the Holy Roman Emperor. This changed terribly for the worse with the onset of the Crusades in 1096. What began as a war against the 'Saracens' — 'Arabs', 'Turks', 'Moors' — to reclaim the sacred geography of Christianity rapidly became a war against 'infidels' of every kind, and so Jews were expropriated and massacred and expelled until finally there was nothing left but wholesale emigration away from the troubles — or conversion, though there was remarkably little of this outside of Spain.

There was no sanctuary in the west of Europe. In practical terms, the need for refuge meant fleeing to Poland and other countries of central and eastern Europe, where there was at the time little anti-Jewish sentiment and where kings craved the instant creation of a lively middle class to energize their hopelessly feudal economies. The language the fleeing Jews carried with them was medieval German which, on the soil of eastern Europe and in isolation from the German language in Germany, developed into the language called Yiddish.

The Yiddish language

The period in question, then, is roughly between 1100 and 1600 C.E.: the birth centuries of the Yiddish language. Yiddish is written in the Hebrew alphabet, like Ladino and virtually all Jewish languages (Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-French), but is some 80% German in vocabulary, 15% Hebrew, and 5% Slavic. The exact percentages depend on style and the writer's pretensions and intensity of involvement in traditional Jewish life (Mark 1954), very much as the amount of Sanskrit that modern Indian writers inject into their vernacular is a matter of style and affect (King 1997:12). The marginal vocabulary of Yiddish depends on where the Yiddish language is spoken — American Yiddish borrows from American English, French Yiddish borrows from French. During the glory years of eastern European Yiddish language creation, Polish Yiddish borrowed much from Polish in phonology, morphology, and the lexicon. However, the basic grammatical structure of Yiddish has remained thoroughly German.

Hebrew, the ancestral Jewish language, lay dormant — never completely dead, not completely alive, either — its use confined to the rabbinate and the synagogue. The language had a long slumber. In the late nineteenth century, however, there began a revival of the Hebrew language both in eastern Europe and in Palestine, as it was called then. The force behind the revival was more

secular than religious: its purpose was to proclaim one's 'Jewishness' against a hostile European world that sanctioned every form of anti-Semitic excess, from the Dreyfus affair in France to 'blood libels' and pogroms in Russia to the mindless dissemination and widespread acceptance, even among people who knew they were a forgery, of the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Language as icon

To speak Hebrew became, therefore, an iconic act. Language as icon, as a symbol of identity and unity against an outside world, is perhaps the most basic social function of language. As the great British linguist, J. R. Firth (1957:185), wrote:

The bonds of family, neighborhood, class, occupation, country, and religion are knit by speech and language. We take eagerly to the magic of language because only by apprenticeship to it can we be admitted to association, fellowship, and community in our social organization which ministers to our needs and gives us what we want or what we deserve.

Thus, to speak Hebrew in the everyday situation — to speak it as a secular act, to speak it in the orchard and the smithy, not only in the synagogue — was an act of defiance: it was to assert that one belonged to the worldwide community of Jews and was a proud member of that small but growing band of Zionist pioneers who had returned to the ancestral home. By the 1920s a majority of the Jews living in Palestine spoke Hebrew, though this represented only a tiny minority of the world's Jewish population. But, even as late as 1881, it is highly improbable that Hebrew could have been the sole language of anyone anywhere in the world. (On the rebirth of the Hebrew language, see Bar-Adon 1975, Blanc 1968, Chomsky 1957, and Fellman 1974. On specifically the literary reinvigoration of Hebrew in the modern period, see Patterson 1961, 1989).

World War II and the Holocaust brutally reduced the world's Jewish population from some 11,000,000 to around 5,000,000. Jews gained the right to emigrate to Palestine, and they did so in large numbers. When, in 1948, the new country of Israel wrested its independence from the British, the question was: what should the language of the new country be? If such things could be settled by population statistics, Yiddish would have been the leading candidate since most of the eastern European Jews who had survived the Holocaust and managed somehow to get to Palestine were speakers of Yiddish. Yiddish, however, suffered under various disabilities, one of which was that it was stigmatized as the 'language of the ghetto': it was thought of as a victim's language. One could not imagine Ladino as the language of free post-1945 Israel — nor German, obviously. (Though, to mention German as a possible language of Israel now appears cruel, which is not what I mean at all. There was a time, well before Hitler's rise to power and the Holocaust, when German was so widely regarded as 'the language of science' that its use for teaching science and engineering was advocated, even in then Palestine.) English would have been a possibility since Israel (as Palestine)

had been an English protectorate, and educated Israelis knew English well. Other things being equal, probably English would have been chosen over Hebrew or Yiddish.

Other things are never equal, however, when it comes to language and its iconicity; practical considerations pale into insignificance alongside the power of the icon: Hebrew it would have to be, the national language of the newly reborn Israel. Nothing else, no other language could possibly do for a new Israel — not English, not Yiddish, not Ladino. Hebrew, as 'dead' a language as it had been over most of its Common Era history, linked the Jewish past and the Israeli future as no other language could. Hebrew was a sublime symbol of hope, of aspiration — not only of Jewishness but of a muscular strain of Jewishness that would never permit another Holocaust to massacre its people: *Never Again!* became the rallying cry of modern Jewish pride and militancy. The Hebrew language is its symbol, its icon.

The moral of the story of the revival of Hebrew is that, sometimes, rarely, always under very special circumstances, though usually not even then, the iconicity of language can contribute to the making of a miracle. In the normal scheme of things, the attempted revival of Hebrew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would have failed — such is the fate of almost every language revival that has ever been attempted in the history of linguistics. Languages once dead normally stay dead; unlike Lazarus, they do not rise again. Diaspora is not a favorable environment for the preservation of a language, let alone its revival. The fact that Hebrew was the language of the Bible — which gave Hebrew a mighty iconic salience — was probably a necessary condition for the initial success in reviving the language, but that fact taken by itself would have been far from a sufficient condition for the eventual wholesale rebirth and subsequent stabilization of the Hebrew language in Israel. Life in diaspora — in every diaspora — is always heavy with icons of memory.

There were people who did not believe Hebrew would long remain the language of reborn Israel. The novelist and essayist Arthur Koestler was one of them. Koestler (1949:311-5) felt that there were too many problems with the script, which he thought should be romanized, and the archaic nature of the language, which, he felt, could not be brought up to the requirements of the twentieth century. But Koestler underestimated the power of the Hebrew language to modernize and adapt. Always somewhat 'tone deaf' in matters Jewish — he was himself Jewish, though raised in a thoroughly assimilated Hungarian family — Koestler completely overlooked the unique salience of the Hebrew language as an icon of Jewish identity. He did not understand that part of the power of the Hebrew language as icon derives from its script: the script of the Bible, holy.

Linguistic question mark

In the context of diaspora, there is almost always a linguistic question mark hovering over the future prospects of the language: will our language survive in di-

aspora? The answer, sadly, is in most cases: No. The rebirth and restoration of the Hebrew language in Israel is an event unique in the annals of language history. The Irish attempted the same heroic act in regard to the Irish language. (The term 'Irish' is the preferred designation for this language in Ireland today, rather than 'Gaelic'.) A short digression would be useful here, for preservation of language (and more generally cultural identity) is a major question in diaspora studies. The Hebrew and Irish cases limn the spectrum of possibilities.

Although by the late nineteenth century the Irish language already seemed destined for extinction, having been replaced by English over several centuries of English hegemony, it secured standing as a badge of community by becoming transformed into an icon of Irish identification, hinting at a lost Celtic past — wild, stormy, magical — which, if restored, might make anything possible, even freedom from British rule. The decline of the Irish language was regretted, and efforts were made to resurrect spoken Irish and increase the numbers of its speakers. Clubs were formed, prizes for the best poems and essays offered, but nothing arrested the decline.

The Gaelic League was founded in 1893. One of its goals was to 'de-Anglicize' Ireland; another was 'to foster Irish as the national language of Ireland and to spread its use as a spoken language'. The restoration of the Irish language as *the* national language of Ireland became a major item in the Irish nationalistic agenda. The fusion of nationalism and language is, of course, by now a commonplace. (See King 1997:23-28 for a brief introduction to the topic with a number of bibliographical references for further study. On specifically the attempt to restore the Irish language see Breathnach 1956, 1964, Macnamara 1971, O Cuív 1969, and Thompson 1968.)

The Gaelic League would probably have been one more well-intentioned effort to come to naught had it not been for the growth of revolutionary sentiment in favor of Home Rule, which culminated in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, after much suffering and bloodshed, including a civil war. The leaders of the Home Rule movement were almost all prominent members of the Gaelic League.

When the Irish Revolution ended with independence from Britain in 1922, the whole situation changed almost overnight. Those who thought that Irish would rise like a phoenix from the ashes of British occupation because a new Irish government was in command were soon to be sadly disappointed. A daunting array of problems faced the Irish government new to power; there were unanticipated challenges, new accommodations to be made, new alliances to be formed, reasons to reorder priorities, new hardships to replace the familiar ones. Understandably, perhaps, though on the face of it paradoxical, the creation of the Irish Free State brought with it a neglect of the Irish language revival. What was there that did not have priority over language as Ireland grappled with independence? The energy generated by the linguistic movement to resurrect the Irish language was absorbed in the success of the political movement, and even though

the protection and expansion of the Irish language ranked high on the official agenda of the free Irish government and still does, the life had gone out of the Irish language movement in the cold dawn of 1922. Since independence, the Irish government has undertaken heroic measures to restore the language, but its decline continues, though, through a combination of official measures and for a variety of complicated reasons, something like stasis has been reached.

A parenthetical comment is in order here. Contrary to what I have generally and most sadly believed and written about (cf. King 1997:34-35), I think now that the Irish language will never die out though it is not likely to become in any practical sense 'the national language of Ireland' again. I base this conclusion on the observations from a research trip there in November, 1998. The difference between the situation of Irish in Ireland and minority languages elsewhere fighting for their continued existence lies in the resolve of the Irish government. The government will spend any amount of money to support any initiative that might just possibly increase the number of Irish speakers by even one, and they will do that forever. Lucky indeed the endangered language that has a government behind it. Even luckier — and rarer — is the language whose homeland government is in a position and of a disposition to nurture it in diaspora.

But, to return to the Jewish Diaspora, one must observe what happened and what did not happen in that Diaspora. What did *not* happen was that the ancestral language of the Jews, Hebrew (or its sister Semitic language, Aramaic, which replaced it and became a regional-religious lingua franca), survived into exile as the spoken language of the Jews. It survived only in the way I have described. Hebrew survived in something like the way Sanskrit has survived in Hinduism or Latin in Roman Catholicism. Jews gave up whatever language they carried with them into Diaspora and acquired the language of the country in which they settled. In some cases, and perhaps in most, they created Jewish versions of those languages (Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-French, Judeo-Slavic, and so on), but what they did *not* do was to preserve the languages they brought with them into exile.

The exiled languages

Certainly these ancient languages endured here and there for a time, for a generation or two or even longer, depending on who was speaking them, and the familial commitment of those who were speaking them. This is the way of diaspora. But it is also the way of diaspora that exiled languages expire without constant reinforcement from the homeland; and sometimes they expire even then, especially in a melting-pot country like America. A two-way traffic in culture and language is required for the survival of a language, and that the Jews did not ever have.

What *did* happen, however, was that Jewishness survived. The Jewish religion survived wherever Jews survived: in Europe, in the Middle East, in North and South American, in India (among, for example, the 'Black Jews' of Cochin).

and even in China. And this fact is in itself perhaps the most remarkable in all of Jewish history: survival. One might well say that the most creative act in the whole of the Jewish Diaspora was this: that Jewishness survived. As Irving Howe (1969:93) has written:

The will to survive — whether in some distant villages of Iraq or in the major centers of Western civilization — remains a factor of profound moral weight. It cannot simply be explained by any of the usual socioeconomic categories. Jews have wanted — apparently as a value-in-itself — to remain Jews, and at least until recently that has been the dominating fact in their history.

There is so much about all of this — about preservation of national feeling, of religion, of language and culture in diasporic situations — which we do not understand. The Jews lost their Palestinian homeland to alien rule two thousand years ago. They were dispersed all over the face of the earth, persecuted, massacred, and subjected to intolerable pressures to assimilate. Yet they never lost their ethnic and religious identity, their feeling of Otherness. For two thousand years, even in the darkest times, even in the ghettos of eastern Europe during the Holocaust with slaughter of their brethren audible in the streets, devout Jews, and many not so devout, have finished the Passover meal with the cry 'Next Year in Jerusalem!'

The Celts, on the other hand, once lived throughout most of western Europe and well into central and eastern Europe. The Celts of the British Isles had their island isolation, the natural defense of the Channel against invaders and the cultural and religious fevers of the Continent, every possible excuse for remaining apart and different. Yet they lost their national feeling except for pockets of Celtic-ness in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. On the Continent, only the Bretons remain as a reduced remnant of a once mighty pan-European Celtic presence — and the Bretons are Celts returned from the British Isles.

The Jews lost their land but somehow managed to hang on to their sense of nationality in the Diaspora for two millennia. The Celts remained in their land, in their islands, yet lost their sense of nationality under foreign conquerors in less than a millennium. Why did things turn out so differently? Why were these 'ethnic identities' — Jewish and Celtic — so opposite in their doggedness? Tentative and suggestive answers to these questions are easily formulated; rarely can we find compelling answers to our questions. Modesty becomes those of us who pretend to understand the exigent bonds between language, identity, nationalism, and preservation of culture in diaspora.

Creativity in Yiddish

Let us consider now the Yiddish language and its emergence as a creative force in the Jewish Diaspora and as a unique and paradoxical icon of Jewish identity. Of all the languages of the Jewish Diaspora — Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Slavic — only Yiddish produced a significant literature that in-

spired in its users a unique creativity. And here we must consider how Yiddish arose.

The traditional view of how the Yiddish language came into being can be found in Weinreich (1954, 1980). The question of the origins of the Yiddish language has been a very lively area of research in the past two decades, and varying degrees of revisionism can be found in Faber & King 1984, Jacobs 1975, Katz 1985, 1987, King 1987, 1990, 1992, and Wexler 1993. Eggers 1998 gives a balanced analysis of opposing views. Finally, *the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenzic Jewry* (Herzog, Weinreich, Baviskar 1992) is a monument of uniquely impressive intellectual distinction. Students of other diasporas will do well to study the *LCAAJ* to see just how much can be accomplished in recording the culture and language of a vanished people: in this case, the Jews of eastern Europe.

The Yiddish language was formed between 1100 and 1600 C.E., the result of Judeo-German transported to the Slavic east and allowed to develop there in relative isolation from the German dialects of Germany proper. Some of the earliest Yiddish literature consisted of fantastic tales written especially for women — something they could read to fight off boredom during services in the synagogue as the men discharged the major responsibilities of worship.

In common with many of the vernacular languages of Europe, it was not until relatively late — the nineteenth century — that Yiddish started gaining ground in its arduous progress toward respectability as a language. People unfamiliar with their histories often take it for granted that languages of western Europe such as German and Italian have always been esteemed and taken seriously. It is not true, of course. French was not always loved. German in 1700 was not regarded as a socially acceptable language; it was not 'clubbable'. German scholars wrote in Latin, while French was favored for other purposes.

In 1685 Berlin was a town of 15,000 inhabitants whose swinish proclivities and lack of polish were a mortification for their ruler, Friedrich Wilhelm, the Grand Elector. In that year the Edict of Nantes, which had pledged religious toleration to the Protestants in France, was revoked. Some 25,000 Protestant Huguenots emigrated to Brandenburg on the invitation of Friedrich Wilhelm. Five thousand of these refugees settled in Berlin, increasing its population by a third. The Berlin upper classes inevitably were pulled toward the Huguenots, with their superior French ways, their *culture* and their *couture*, their *éclat*. Huguenots became the cultural doers and leaders in Brandenburg. They were held to be models of deportment and good breeding. They established themselves as teachers in the best Brandenburg schools. One of their pupils was the son of Friedrich Wilhelm, later to become known as Frederick the Great, greatest of German francophiles. Voltaire was his teacher, and Frederick all his life spoke French in preference to German.

Voltaire regarded German as fit only for talking to soldiers or to horses. He wrote, in 1750 (Welles 1985:268):

Je me trouve ici en France. On ne parle que notre langue. L'allemand est pour les soldats et pour les chevaux; il n'est nécessaire que pour la route.

I might as well be in France. Only our language is spoken. German is for soldiers and horses; you do not need it, save when traveling.

By the end of the century, by 1800, however, German had become a language that had to be taken seriously: a supple, subtle, stylish instrument of literary creativity with great writers like Goethe and Schiller as its representatives. The story of how this happened — how in one century German went from being a language thought fit only for soldiers and horses to a language that could take its place alongside French and English — is elegantly told in Blackall (1978).

Yiddish was not essentially different; only its literary ripening came later, and much more falteringly and never with the self-assurance of German or Dutch or the Scandinavian languages. An essential aspect of diaspora is that people live in a land which is not their own, in which they are a minority. Germans had a place they could call home, even if there was, politically and legally, no 'Germany' until 1871; even if the notion of 'Germany' was only an amalgam of kingdoms and principalities with little in common save something like a common language. As Jacob Grimm said in 1846: 'a nation is the totality of people who speak the same language.' How much easier it is to accept the Grimm axiom when the totality of people speaking the same language coexist on the same piece of geography, as did the Germans and Italians (whose unification likewise came late). What was one to make of the 'Jewish nation' of eastern Europe — a totality of people speaking the same language, Yiddish, but scattered among a dozen countries? The true answer to that question is that they were indeed a nation, the Jewish nation, and that they were bound by language, religion, and culture to themselves — but other people, non-Jews, often did not see it that way. Jews were always the Other, at most tolerated Guests — a people without a country.

Absent a homeland, a people almost inevitably has to struggle with insecurity, with alienation, even with self-hatred. The Yiddish language reflects the Jewish struggle with self-hatred. Sander Gilman (1986:1) puts the case in this way:

Of all the strange phenomena produced by society, certainly one of the most puzzling is self-hatred. Indeed, when the history of Western attitudes toward those perceived as different, whether black or Jew or homosexual, is studied, the very idea of black, Jewish, or homosexual self-hatred seems a mordant oxymoron. Why hate yourself when there are so many willing to do it for you! But the ubiquitousness of self-hatred cannot be denied. And it has shaped the self-awareness of those treated as different perhaps more than they themselves have been aware.

Yiddish as a self-hating language

Yiddish was a self-hating language, a despised language. Despised not by everyone, of course, and despised not especially by anti-Semites, who despised the people who spoke it rather than the language itself, and who probably were not interested one way or the other in language, but by many Jews for whom Yiddish was their native language. It was looked down on by German-speaking Jews as 'bad' German, 'corrupt' German: this was the legacy of Moses Mendelssohn, leader of German Jewry during the Enlightenment, who had demanded of his coreligionists that they forswear Yiddish in favor of 'real' German, i.e. German without a Yiddish accent or flavor. Yiddish was looked down on by the lovers of Hebrew as an unworthy instrument — a language of women, children, and tradesmen, not intellectuals — a tainted, unworthy implement of expression.

Advocates of adaptation and assimilation demanded that Jews give up Yiddish and speak the language of whatever country they lived in: Polish, Russian, Romanian. It was said that Yiddish 'had no grammar'. One of its most squeamish opponents, an otherwise distinguished German-Jewish historian of the nineteenth century, Heinrich Graetz, called it a 'semi-animal language', a 'repulsive stammer'. For a time, in the late nineteenth and well into the early twentieth century, the accepted term for the Yiddish language, even among intellectuals writing creatively and well in it, was *Zhargon* 'jargon'.

One wonders how a language could survive so much self-dislike, so much self-contempt, so much paradox, so many obstacles, but survive them Yiddish did (though the inferiority complex has always remained, even until today). However, by the middle of the nineteenth century writers had begun to take their talents into new literary territory for this scorned language. Most of them experimented in their early days with writing in other languages — Polish, Russian, Hebrew — but to write in Polish or Russian was for a Jew to make a statement redolent of assimilation to the world of the non-Jew, the *goy*, the Gentile; and to write in Hebrew was to write for a tiny elite. Writers may want many things, but above all they want people to read what they write, and they want people to buy their books and editors to publish their stories and poems. They want to make a living from their writing, and that means writing in a language that people can read and understand. For these eastern European Jews, who were testing their literary limits in the late nineteenth century, that desire for acceptability soon came to mean writing in Yiddish, the despised language, the *Zhargon*. 'Jargon' it may have been to some, but it was a language that people spoke and read, and they bought books and magazines and newspapers in this maturing language.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were masters of Yiddish prose, especially short fiction: Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, and Y. L. Peretz. Of these, probably Sholom Aleichem is best known outside of Jewish letters: *Fiddler on the Roof* was put together from his stories. These writers set the stage for an extraordinary flourishing of Yiddish literature. Y. L. Peretz (1852-

1915) exemplified the complicated intricacy of creativity enmeshed in conflicting traditions (Liptzin 1947:12):

Peretz experienced all the ferment and restlessness that swept Jewish life from the mid-nineteenth century until the First World War. He was reared in the orthodox religious tradition that had persisted with but slight changes since the Middle Ages. Early in life, however, he ate of the sweet and somewhat poisonous fruit of the Enlightenment or *Has-kala*. Nor did the heady wine of Jewish Romanticism or Hassidism pass him by without leaving profound imprints upon his personality. He participated in the rejuvenation of Hebrew and led the movement for the elevation and purification of the Yiddish tongue. He was part of the cultural revival in the lands of the Diaspora, but there also penetrated to him the call of the Lovers of Zion.

By the 1920s Yiddish literature, as Sander Gilman (1986:279) puts it, 'entered the age of modernism with a flourish, producing modernist poets and novelists of world rank'. This literature was self-inspired, but its creativity was fired by developments in other languages such as German, Russian, and English. After the massive emigration of Jews from eastern Europe to the Lower East Side and points west — a Diaspora, as it were, within a Diaspora — some of Yiddish poets did their best writing in America (Hrushovski 1954:265):

Concerning the manner in which the influence of foreign literatures was experienced, we should add that the stimulus which upset the old melodic equilibrium did indeed come from German expressionism and Russian modernism (in addition to the changes in Jewish life). But true free rhythms were created in Yiddish in a significant degree primarily in America. The influence of the American moderns is strongly in evidence, both in content and in means of expression, and even more perhaps in the manner of poem construction in free rhythms. It was only in America that the Yiddish poem freed itself of counted measures and equal stanzas.

The American experience — the Diaspora within a Diaspora — encouraged literary risk-taking in the Yiddish brought by writers to America. Though much of their subject matter remained embedded in eastern Europe, in the villages and towns of Poland, Lithuania, Romania, and Russia, Yiddish writers came quickly to see things through the wider window of opportunity that America offered (Howe 1976:417):

The beginnings of Yiddish literature in America are prosaic in circumstance, utilitarian in purpose, often crude in tone. The poetry and prose that Yiddish writers started publishing in the 1880s appeared mostly in newspapers devoted to ideological persuasion; it had to compete with a mushrooming of cheap popular romances, *shundromanen*, bought for a few pennies by the immigrant masses; and it was cut off from both world literature and the blossoming of

Yiddish prose fiction that had begun in eastern Europe. At a time when Yiddish poets in America were still entangled with the rudiments of craft, Mendele, Sholom Aleichem, and Peretz, the classical trio of Yiddish literature, were producing major works in Poland and Russia. Yiddish writing in America, at this point, had a relation to Yiddish writing in eastern Europe somewhat like that which a century earlier American writing had to English.

The Yiddish language brought forth creativity in all genres: in poetry, in the theater, in the short story, in the novel, in literary criticism. (Liptzin 1963, 1972 and Roback 1940 are comprehensive surveys of Yiddish literature. Roskies 1984 and Wisse 1991 probe into the deeper recesses of creativity in Yiddish literature.) Sholem Asch and I. J. Singer, the prematurely deceased brother of the better-known Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, were writers whose Yiddish novels became bestsellers and critical successes in English translations in the 1940s (Howe 1976:448-451). Eventually, of course, Yiddish in the New World began to decline as the immigrant generation aged and their children became fluent in English. The Holocaust (1939-45) ended traditional Jewish life in the Old Country — *Yidishkayt*.

How Yiddish made the progress from a language thought contemptible even by people who spoke it to a language which earned for one of its greatest masters, Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978, is a topic for another day. A major culture-linguistic milestone was the First Yiddish Language Conference, held in 1908 in Czernowitz (Yiddish spelling: Tshernovits), then a modest trans-Carpathian outpost of the Austrian Empire, now a drab post-Soviet city located in Ukraine not far from Chernobyl (Fishman 1991; Goldsmith 1976, 1997; King 1998).

Language conferences cannot make of a language something it is not. The practical consequences of the Czernowitz Conference have been much debated among linguists and others, but it was at the very least a symbolic watershed event in the long march of the Yiddish language toward equality, dignity, and respect. It sorted out, to the extent then possible, the roles that Yiddish, Hebrew, and non-Jewish vernaculars were to play. After Czernowitz, nothing would ever be quite the same for Yiddish, for Yiddish-speaking scholars and intellectuals, and for Yiddish literature. The Yiddish language had arrived. The language was on the move from L(ow) to H(igh), as sociolinguists put it, and if Hebrew or Russian or German thought they had a monopoly on H functions in Jewish life, they would now just have to move over and make way for this pushy upstart that had grown up in the small towns (*shtetlekh*) of eastern Europe in a complex environment at once warm and nurturing on the inside, yet inhospitable and always threatened from the outside.

Conclusion

Language is always an icon of national and ethnic identity, but few languages have ever reified the spirit of its people as Yiddish did. Denied a country of their own, with religion, which had bound them together through two thousand years of 'Next Year in Jerusalem!', no longer the shared monolith it had been for so long, the Jews of central and eastern Europe found their identity in their language. It became, to use a phrase of W. H. Auden's, 'a way of happening, a mouth'. That this once despised language came so far is the consummate act of Jewish irony, of paradox — the ultimate act of creativity in the Jewish Diaspora. It was, after all, the instrument of Jewish survival.

REFERENCES

- BAR-ADON, Aaron. 1975. *The Rise and Decline of a Dialect: A Study in the Revival of Modern Hebrew*. The Hague: Mouton.
- BEN-SASSON, Haim Hillel. 1976. *A History of the Jewish People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- BLACKALL, Eric A. 1978. *The Emergence of German as a Literary Language*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- BLANC, Haim. 1968. The Israeli koine as an emergent national standard. *Language Problems of Developing Nations*, ed. by Joshua A. Fishman, Charles A. Ferguson, & Jyotorindra Das Gupta, 237-51. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- BREATHNACH, R.A. 1956. Revival or survival? An examination of the Irish language policy of the state. *Studies* 45.129-45.
- . 1964. Irish revival reconsidered. *Society* 53.18-30.
- CHOMSKY, William. 1957. *Hebrew — The Eternal Language*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.
- DUBNOW, Simon. 1967-73. *History of the Jews*. South Brunswick, NJ: T. Yoseloff.
- EGGERS, Eckhard. 1998. *Sprachwandel und Sprachmischung im Jiddischen*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- FABER, Alice, & Robert D. KING. 1984. Yiddish and the settlement history of Ashkenazic Jewry. *The Mankind Quarterly* 1.393-425.
- FELLMAN, Jack. 1974. *The Revival of a Classical Tongue: Eliezer Ben Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew Language*. The Hague: Mouton.
- FIRTH, J. Rupert. 1957. *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. London: Oxford University Press.
- FISHMAN, Joshua. 1991. 'Status planning': the Tshernovits Language Conference of 1908. *Yiddish: Turning to Life*, 231-90. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- GILMAN, Sander L. 1986. *Jewish Self-Hatred*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- GOLDSMITH, Emanuel S. 1976. *Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.

- . 1997. *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- HERZOG, Marvin I., Uriel WEINREICH, & Vera BAVISKAR. 1992. *The Language and Cultural Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry, 1: Historical and Theoretical Foundations*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- HOWE, Irving. 1969. The East European Jews and American culture. *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America*, ed. by Peter I. Rose, 92-108. New York: Random House.
- . 1976. *World of Our Fathers*. New York: Schocken Books.
- HRUSHOVSKI, Benjamin. 1954. On free rhythms in modern Yiddish poetry. *The Field of Yiddish I*, ed. by Uriel Weinreich, 219-66. New York: Linguistic Circle of New York.
- JACOBS, Neil G. 1975. Yiddish origins and creolization. Unpublished MA thesis. University of Texas at Austin.
- KATZ, Dovid. 1985. Hebrew, Aramaic and the rise of Yiddish. *Readings in the Sociology of the Jewish Languages*, ed. by Joshua A. Fishman, 85-103. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- . 1987. *Origins of the Yiddish Language*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- KING, Robert D. 1987. Proto-Yiddish morphology. *Origins of the Yiddish Language*, ed. by Dovid Katz, 73-81. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- . 1990. On the origins of the *s*-plural in Yiddish. *Studies in Yiddish Linguistics*, ed. by Paul Wexler, 47-53. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- . 1992. Migration and linguistics as illustrated by Yiddish. *Reconstructing Languages and Cultures*, ed. by Edgar C. Polomé & Werner Winter, 419-39. Berlin New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- . 1997. *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 1998. The Czernowitz conference in retrospect. *The Politics of Yiddish*, ed. by Dov-Ber Kerler, 41-9. Thousand Oaks, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- KOESTLER, Arthur. 1949. *Promise and Fulfillment*. New York: Macmillan.
- LIPTZIN, Solomon. 1947. *Peretz*. New York: YIVO — Jewish Institute of Research.
- . 1963. *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature*. New York: T. Yoseloff.
- . 1972. *A History of Yiddish Literature*. Middle Village, NY: J. David.
- MACNAMARA, John. 1971. Successes and failures in the movement for the restoration of Irish. *Can Language Be Planned?*, ed. by Joan Rubin & Björn H. Jernudd, 65-94. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.
- MARK, Yudel. 1954. A study of the frequency of Hebraisms in Yiddish: Preliminary report. *The Field of Yiddish I*, ed. by Uriel Weinreich, 28-47. New York: Linguistic Circle of New York.
- O CUÍV, Brian. 1969. *A View of the Irish Language*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- PATTERSON, David. 1961. *The Foundations of Modern Hebrew Literature*. London: Liberal Jewish Synagogue.
- . 1989. *Out of Bondage: Two Centuries of Modern Hebrew Literature*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies.

- ROBACK, Abraham A. 1940. *The Story of Yiddish Literature*. New York: YIVO — Jewish Institute of Research.
- ROSKIES, David G. 1984. *Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ROTH, Cecil. 1966. *The World History of the Jewish People*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- THOMPSON, F.G. 1968. *Maintaining a National Identity*. Dublin: The Celtic League.
- WEINREICH, Max. 1954. Prehistory and early history of Yiddish: Facts and conceptual framework. *The Field of Yiddish I*, ed. by Uriel Weinreich, 73-101. New York: Linguistic Circle of New York.
- WEINREICH, Max. 1980. *History of the Yiddish Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- WELLES, Charles J. 1985. *German: A Linguistic History to 1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- WEXLER, Paul. 1993. *The Ashkenazic Jews: A Slavo-Turkic People in Search of a Jewish Identity*. Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers.
- WISSE, Ruth R. 1991. *Making of Modern Jewish Culture*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

