



Chart 15.2 Secular Yiddish: the language and the power

Left- and right-wing politics

As noted earlier, in the United States and many other countries, the passion for Yiddish is sometimes tied with liberal values of equal rights for races, genders and sexual persuasions, and anti-war movements; that is, leftist by many definitions. There is an emotional and historic link at work with earlier generations that were socialist or social democrat or otherwise leftist, and there is the (historically justified) aura of classic secular Yiddish culture as pro-minority, pro-underdog, non-violent and at least non-right-wing Zionist alternative in contrast to the ‘pro-power nationalist right-wing Jewish camp’, or however it might be labelled. The vast majority of supporters of Yiddish in these countries are staunch supporters of Israel, though tending toward the left of politics within the pro-Israel camp. In all events, such proclivities are not politically potent, and are in general terms part of much larger Jewish configurations of ‘anti-Likud but pro-Israel’ diaspora politics. These features are part of the typical (and stereotypical) profile of the conventional Yiddish enthusiast who is in most cases wholly or partly Jewish by self-identification, and him- or herself of East European Jewish background.

Nevertheless, the propensity of Yiddishless Yiddish — the movement and industry that engage in myriad ‘Yiddish’ activities but ‘not in Yiddish itself’ — for extremes of left and right politics continues, remarkably, in the twenty-first century. The simple explanation is that the vast heritage that can be claimed without being studied is an

attractive weapon in an arsenal of ideology. In other words, we are leaving the empowerment of self-advancement and organizational grandeur, massive new buildings and enrichment, and we are returning to old-fashioned actual believers in far-left and far-right politics, for whom Yiddishless Yiddish is worth instrumentalizing.

Among some left-wing younger assimilated Jews and perhaps rather more non-Jews, there is a trend to 'take up Yiddish' as a politically and culturally attractive pro-Jewish activity that is consciously or unconsciously intended to counterbalance the worry of being thought of as anti-Semitic in light of extreme anti-Israel politics. While of course Israel is (and should be) criticized as any other state, by citizens, diasporas and outsiders alike, it has often been demonstrated by specialists that the constant, overarching and zealous obsession with Israel-bashing and its rampant demonization, irrespective of the latest news from the Middle East, is a (and in parts of western Europe and the Middle East *the*) major type of contemporary anti-Semitism as unanimously determined by the leading scholars in the field (see Heni 2013: 385–451; Small 2013; Wistrich 2010: 465–542).

In Germany particularly, but also in Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Poland, among others, the phenomenon of the politically active left-wing and often anti-Israel student of Yiddish is serially encountered (my colleagues and I have met several thousand over the past three decades in European Yiddish educational settings, especially on summer courses). For them, Yiddish is often much more than a means of proving that one is not anti-Semitic because of a harsh critical stance toward Israel. For many, in the very lands where the Holocaust occurred, there is the identification with the victim rather than the perpetrator or collaborator nation-state. It is at the same time a genuine and profound espousal of a romanticized pre-Holocaust left-liberal Yiddish tradition that is being reclaimed through immersion in the actual learning of a language and its literature. There is the political and emotional feeling that the Holocaust destroyed the ethos of the Bund and other leftist-and-in-Yiddish movements and that this legacy should be reclaimed. For these European, usually multilingual and experienced language-learning students — and here is the paradoxical rub — the investment of time and resources in mastering Yiddish can be vastly greater than among the sentimental Jewish 'adherents of Yiddish' for whom Yiddishless Yiddish, or some or another kind of Yiddish-lite, and love of all that is today Jewish mainstream are the order of the day, without needing to worry too much about vocabulary, syntax, phonology and nuances — or nuisances — like that. Time and again, instructors at intensive international

Yiddish programmes, particularly summer courses, are struck by leftist non-Jewish students who speak and write fine Yiddish, in marked contrast to North American and other western Jewish participants who are proudly Jewish, proudly pro-Israel and proudly pro-Yiddish, though weak on the language-learning side of things. One of the external contributory factors here is the dominant monolingualism of the major English-speaking countries in contrast to the multilingualism that comes naturally to much of continental Europe.

Taken cumulatively over recent decades, the quality of real Yiddish mastered by typically young, mostly non-Jewish, generally European and leftist students has very often vastly outstripped the rudimentary and vaudevillian Yiddish remnants common to many American Jewish 'Yiddish lovers', or the 'purist' Yiddish artificiality of much of the (embarrassingly) tiny Yiddish-in-Yiddish secular youth crowd.

What is even newer, and unique to post-Soviet Eastern Europe, is a tendency of elements of the new far *right* to see in investments in Yiddish a remarkably useful tool for covering for, and deflecting attention from, vast state-sponsored campaigns of Holocaust revisionism and the toleration of neo-Nazi and Nazi-adulating activities. The issue has been most evident in the Baltic states and most burning in Lithuania. The region's nationalist political establishment has invested much national treasure in disseminating the theory of 'Double Genocide' to replace the Holocaust in modern European history (see Katz 2009, 2011). The new model posits absolute equality of Nazi and Soviet crimes. It is rooted in nationalist attempts to deflect attention from massive local collaboration with the Nazis during the Holocaust, which resulted in one of the highest proportions of Jew-killing in Europe (around 95 per cent), largely at the hands of enthusiastic local volunteers. Trying to minimize the historic destruction, the investment in 'Double Genocide' enables the sowing of enough confusion to rewrite the entire history. For example, most local Holocaust perpetrators were also anti-Soviet and many are therefore recycled as 'national heroes' (see *Defending History* 2014a). In Lithuania, Holocaust survivors were accused of 'war crimes', from 2006 onward, for having survived by joining the anti-Nazi Soviet-sponsored partisans in the forests (see Gloger 2008). From 2011 onward, Holocaust survivors were also accused of 'libelling' national heroes; that is, the Nazi collaborators who were 'also' anti-Soviet activists (see Melman 2011). A number of states in the region have inflated the meaning of the word 'genocide' by parliamentary fiat to encompass most or all Soviet crimes, in order to effect the equalization. The 'constitution' of the revisionist movement is the 2008 'Prague

Declaration', which boasts the word 'same' five times to cover Nazi and Soviet crimes. One of the major engines of the movement has been the Lithuanian state's 'International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania' (see Arad 2012). None of this reflects on the people of the Baltics or of Lithuania, but rather on the nationalist establishments ensconced in politics, academia, media and sometimes the arts. In one of the major shows of force *against* the 'Double Genocide' movement, eight extraordinarily courageous Lithuanian parliamentarians, all social democrats, signed the anti-Prague-Declaration 'Seventy Years Declaration' in 2012 (Seventy Years Declaration 2012). The debate rages on.

What is astonishing for observers of the Yiddish scene is how deeply 'Yiddish' has become involved. In its pre-Holocaust incarnation as Vilna (Polish Wilno, Yiddish *Vilne*), the Lithuanian capital Vilnius was, as noted earlier, a world-class centre of Yiddish learning and culture. Thanks in part to an imaginative right-wing Jewish politician who took the time and trouble to learn Yiddish, a policy developed of countering the irksome Holocaust issues ('Double Genocide', persecution of Holocaust survivors and glorification of perpetrators, among them) by a lavish array of activities and memorials that give 'honour to Yiddish'. Vilnius might be the world's only city with an appreciable number of city history plaques *in* Yiddish (as well as Lithuanian) on the addresses where famous Yiddish writers and personalities lived. Pre-war Vilna, as already mentioned, was of course home to the Yivo.

Once the incarnation of Yivo in New York moved decisively away from Yiddish *per se* in recent years, and took to looking for related good causes to justify its existence and fundraising, the Lithuanian government investment got under way. In 2011, there was a major scandal over Yivo's having as guest of honour the then Lithuanian foreign minister, who had been taken to task by the country's small Jewish community for his anti-Semitic pronouncements (see Jewish Community of Lithuania 2010; Berger 2011; cf. Zuroff 2012b). In 2012, the Holocaust survivor community was shocked when the director of Yivo participated in a symposium on the Holocaust in Vilnius allegedly held to camouflage the same week's reburial with full honours of the remains of a major Holocaust collaborator from the United States (see Katz 2012). The same year, Yivo's director became a member of the state's commission on Nazi and Soviet crimes. While Yivo has been the 'biggest catch' for the Lithuanian government's right-wing establishment, it has not been the only one. A number of American Yiddish institutions have participated in state-sponsored events in Vilnius (see Katz 2014b), and it has been part of a larger campaign to

include more general Jewish academic, religious and cultural organizations as well, frequently also in London (see Zuroff 2012a).

This far-right 'Yiddish' link has also been evident in a number of books, usually 'roots memoirs' where naive American authors can receive Baltic government support and largesse in return for writing glowing memoirs about their trips to their ancestral home and particularly governments' current 'reconciliation efforts', which are often the PR components in larger history revisionism campaigns that glorify Holocaust perpetrators and support 'Double Genocide' (see Katz 2012b). Then there are the very serious historians who actually believe in a certain levelling of Nazi and Soviet crimes and invoke Yiddish as part of a lost heritage that these countries should be seeking to recover as part of their nationalistic heritage. Now that there are very small numbers of Jews left, the pre-war culture can be reclaimed as part of a political effort to demonstrate the espousal of generous multiculturalism.

One of the more irksome — and surprising — types of political instrumentalization of Yiddish involves anti-Semitism, not in the sense of the eighteenth-century anti-Semitic literature on Yiddish (see Chapter 9), but in a quintessentially twenty-first-century incarnation. The reference here is not to the current left-wing anti-Israel activists who immerse themselves in Yiddish, discussed earlier (p. 296), and who certainly do not think of themselves as remotely anti-Semitic. It is to post-Soviet nationalistic East European states for which events involving Yiddish, from klezmer concerts all the way to 'Yiddish institutes', serve as cover for a policy of simultaneous approval for the anti-Semitic far-right's neo-Nazi marches and events, and programmes and monuments honouring Holocaust perpetrators (see *Defending History* 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). The politics behind 'promote the antisemitic nationalist establishment and promote Yiddish to show our love for things Jewish' was best described by N. N. Shneidman as an effort to appease simultaneously the west and surviving remnant Jewish communities and also the domestic nationalist camp (Shneidman 1998: 167–8).

One well-meaning Los Angeles-based 'Yiddish' group that specializes in annual historic visits to the Yiddish homeland in Eastern Europe recently found itself curiously used by left and right alike: some of its literature invoked the Yiddish heritage as part of an extreme anti-Israel movement that seeks to cripple the state via 'BDS' (boycott, disinvestment, sanctions), while on-site in Eastern Europe, it fell prey to a far-right 'Yiddish' institution headed by a member of a state commission on Nazi and Soviet crimes rather than a specialist in Yiddish. But the American group and its donors were of course naive rather than in

any way sympathetic to either extreme of politics, left or right, that is making hay of 'Yiddish' and that can enlist western visitors in multiple ways. There is, of course, within Eastern Europe a much deeper and much older, formerly Christian-based, anti-Semitism lurking not far in the background. Here too 'Yiddish' makes its weird appearances. Most famously, the historic Bernardinai Catholic church in Vilnius, which continues to feature without curatorial comment an old blood libel plaque commemorating a boy allegedly 'cruelly killed in his seventh year by 170 Jewish blows' fixes things on the PR side with annual Yiddish concerts (see Katz 2013).

While it is natural that our own emphasis in these pages has been the political instrumentalization of Yiddishless Yiddish, whether for current far-left politics in the west or far-right politics in the east, it is important to take note of another side of the story. When resources are thrown at a language, culture, literature, heritage of a people, for whatever primary motive, there are myriad and unexpected results. Whether left or right in motivational origin, the Yiddish-related activities sponsored can take on a life of their own and inspire individuals to become immersed in serious study of the language, and its literature and culture. Critiques of instrumentalization often fail to take into account that courses, conferences, publications and other activities revolving around a language can be of high quality and of educational, research or cultural value, notwithstanding the initial political impetus. To report on the political impetus is to tell today's story of Yiddish and power, not to demean the contributions in many spheres that can be evident.

Concluding thoughts

Looking back over a thousand years, it has been the goal to attempt to see each time and place through its own eyes. At the conclusion of this survey, a certain wholly subjective attempt at some synthesis may be in order.

The constant of Yiddish, from its origin to its unknown future, is its status as the language of traditionally religion-centred Ashkenazic Jewry, with spurts of non-traditional culture or 'secular outbursts' coming on to the scene at various points in time. These energetic episodes include the rise in medieval Europe of a secular gentile-derived knightly romance literature in the earlier centuries of Western Ashkenaz and, many centuries later, the adoption of modern European genres and standards during the rise of modern Yiddishism in nineteenth-century Eastern Ashkenaz. Some of these societally and culturally empowering deviations from the

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