

LUCY S. DAWIDOWICZ

## YIDDISH: PAST, PRESENT & PERFECT

ON HEARING THAT the first volume of an unabridged ten-volume Yiddish dictionary has just been published, people ask, "Today?" Their skepticism reflects the common knowledge that Yiddish has fewer speakers today than ever before. Why, then, an unabridged dictionary of the Yiddish language now? The editors of the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*,\* Judah A. Joffe and Yudel Mark, linguists and Yiddish scholars, explain in their introduction that they wished to create "a monument" to the centuries of Ashkenazic creativity: "We have not forgotten for one moment what happened to our language at the bloody hand of the murderer and in the tempests of linguistic assimilation. We consider our task to be not just linguistic, but social and ethical." Or, to use the words of Hillel, "And if not now, when?" Under the pressure of history, Mark and Joffe see their responsibility as primarily to preserve the Yiddish language for the historical record and secondarily to set standards for and define its usage as a living language.

Yet however melancholy the outlook for Yiddish today, its prestige in America has never been higher. Madison Avenue dictates: "Dress British; think Yiddish."

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Yiddish is taught at many universities; Yiddish writers, in translation, have attained considerable vogue; adult education courses in Yiddish and Yiddish literature have unpredicted popularity. The Yiddish novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer recently commented on this phenomenon, formulating what may be designated as the law of Yiddish status: the fewer its speakers, the greater its prestige.

About three million people—nearly a quarter of all Jews—speak Yiddish today or know it well enough to speak. Perhaps half as many more understand it. Before the Nazi holocaust Yiddish had nearly 7 million speakers, or 40 per cent of all Jews. Back in 1900 over 60 per cent of all Jews spoke Yiddish. Most Yiddish speakers nowadays are bilingual, knowing and speaking also the language of the country they live in, but Yiddish was predominantly once the spoken language of the Jews. Statistically, English has displaced Yiddish: nearly twice as many Jews speak English, and English has nearly twice as many Jewish periodicals published all over the world (not counting Israel) as Yiddish. In the United States, where about 20 per cent of Jews speak Yiddish, the *New York Times* has many more Jewish readers than the 115,000 who buy the city's two Yiddish dailies.

The decline in the number of Yiddish

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\* *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*, edited by Judah A. Joffe and Yudel Mark. Vol. 1: אָלף — מֶם (alef—alef-vov-mem). Yiddish Dictionary Committee, Inc. 32 + 508 pp. \$15.00.

speakers and the ascendancy of English are easily explained by the great migration from Eastern Europe at the turn of the century and by the enormous Jewish losses during World War II. It is unlikely that any language would long survive the worldwide dispersal of its speakers amid alien tongues and the destruction of its linguistic base. That Yiddish has survived at all under such conditions illustrates its adaptability and its speakers' persistence. This determination to hold on to Yiddish is one of the ways in which Yiddish speakers have tried to win acceptance and status for their language.

ALMOST EVERY LANGUAGE has, at some stage in its history, aspired to political recognition and social acceptance. The struggle for recognition of the native languages in Lithuania and Latvia symbolized the peasants' defiance of the Polish- and German-speaking landowners. In Finland and Norway the native languages fought for emancipation from foreign rule. In Norway the conflict persists between *Riksmaal*, the official Danish-derived language, and *Landsmaal*, the modernized standardized form of Norwegian dialects. In Ceylon today the two million Tamil-speaking Hindus have revolted against the government's plan to make Sinhalese, the language of the Buddhist majority, the official language. Hindi is today seeking status as the national language of India, competing with the high prestige of English and the multiple claims of the regional languages. Most modern languages have suffered the disabilities of their speakers, in class, caste, religion, or nationality, but none, I think, has ever had as large a share of disabilities as Yiddish.

Yiddish developed as a vernacular among Jews, under a double disability. It was despised as faulty German by those who did not discern its distinctive character. And as a written language, it had the lowliest status, being a substitute for Hebrew among women and the meanest

and most uncultivated men. Early Yiddish books were addressed to "women and the common people who cannot study Torah." (The *Tsene-Urene* was renowned as the "women's Bible.") The status of Yiddish has been reflected in some of the more common epithets applied to it: *taytch* ("translation" or "explanation"), meaning Yiddish as intermediary between the learned texts and the common people; *mame-loshn* (literally "mama-tongue"), meaning one's own language, with emphasis on the woman and mother; *prost-Yiddish* ("plain Yiddish"), pointing to Yiddish as connected with the common and uneducated; *zhar-gon* ("jargon") and *shifha* ("maidservant"), both embodying contempt.

The struggle of most vernaculars for recognition was frequently a class conflict. The lower classes spoke the vernacular and the upper class, the nobility and the educated, spoke Latin, French, German, or whatever the prevailing cultural style was. In 18th-century Russia, after Peter the Great's reforms, when French culture flooded the upper classes, Russian was looked upon as "the language of lackeys and of all common people." Just so, Yiddish was associated with the lower classes among Jews. It was offensive to the educated upper class, and despised by the middle class aspiring to Gentile society where German, Polish, or Russian were spoken. While most vernaculars have gained status with the emergence of the middle class as an influential factor in society, the emergence of a Jewish middle class in the main spelled doom for Yiddish. (Ultra-Orthodoxy among middle-class Jews was the most significant factor in halting linguistic assimilation.) So intent were these modern skeptics, the newly educated middle-class Jews, on integration into Gentile society that they even blamed anti-Semitism on Yiddish, as a particularly objectionable aspect of Jewish separatism. At the beginning of the 19th century, German Jews appealed to Polish Jews to discard Yiddish: "How long will

you continue to speak a corrupt German dialect instead of the language of your country, Polish? How many misfortunes might have been averted by your forefathers had they been able to express themselves adequately in the Polish tongue before the magnates and kings!" (Disdain for the language of the Jewish masses is quite old. Long after Aramaic had spread as the vernacular among Jews, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi protested: "Why should the Syriac language be used in Palestine? Either Hebrew or Greek!")

**M**OST OF TODAY'S three million Yiddish speakers were born in Eastern Europe, though only about a quarter still live there. (Some 470,000 in Russia gave Yiddish as their mother tongue in the 1959 census; about 250,000 Yiddish speakers remain in Rumania, Poland, and Hungary.) Transported and transplanted to many countries of different cultural climates, Yiddish has flourished or withered, to complete the metaphor, according to the fertility of the soil and the care and skill of the gardener. Its fate has been inextricably bound up with each immigrant community and the way in which the community adapted itself to the host country. The steadfastness of Yiddish has varied from place to place for the widest variety of *objective* reasons: the general cultural level of the non-Jewish milieu, the nature of the school system and particularly the existence of Jewish day schools, the segregating tendency in many countries of the prevailing Catholic culture, the absence of a native middle class and the entrepreneurial function of Jews in industrially and commercially underdeveloped countries, the unreserved acceptance of cultural pluralism and multilingualism.

In the United States, which had the largest immigration of Yiddish speakers—well over one and a half million—Yiddish among the native-born children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants has not persisted as well as in Canada, Mexico, or

Argentina. In these countries, the durability of Yiddish may be attributed in part to a later Jewish immigration. But there are reasons other than the time lag that Yiddish is spoken more in Toronto and Winnipeg than in New York, more in Mexico City than in London, and more in Buenos Aires than in Johannesburg. The English-speaking countries, except for bilingual Canada, seem to have been less hospitable to Yiddish than the Spanish-speaking ones. As for Canada, its bilingualism is surely of profound significance for the high survival rate of Yiddish (in the 1951 census, though 95 per cent of the Jews reported they knew English, 50.6 per cent gave Yiddish as their mother tongue).

The *subjective* reasons that have kept Yiddish alive far from its Ashkenazic base are fewer but perhaps more potent than the objective ones. National consciousness, national will, and religion—old-fashioned orthodox Judaism—have been the dominant factors in preserving Yiddish, admittedly among a relatively small number of Jews. In the United States, the survival rate has been rather low.

America had much to offer the Yiddish-speaking East European Jewish immigrant: civic and political equality, unparalleled economic opportunities, unlimited educational advantages. In return, America demanded Americanization, or Anglo-conformity, as Stewart G. Cole termed this traditional pressure of the majority on the minority to conform to the basic cultural pattern. Anglo-conformity, long before its vulgarization, was considered a virtue by the Founding Fathers. John Jay wrote in the *Federalist*: "With equal pleasure I have as often taken notice, that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people, a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs. . . ."

Since 1788, the American ethos has repeatedly expressed itself in open and often violent hostility to foreignness, whether cultural, linguistic, religious, or racial. The Antimasonic party, the Know-Nothing movement, the American Protective Association, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Ku Klux Klan, and the "national origins" quota system form an unmistakable pattern of how America demanded conformity to its dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. The immigrants' retention of the old-country language, religion, and customs was viewed by the natives (sometimes justly) not merely as habitual and nostalgic, but also as ideological and political and therefore a threat to American unity.

Partly in reaction to the pressure of Americanization, exerted formally through the public school and the already Americanized Jewish community and informally in the street and factory, and partly in an overwhelming response of love to America, Jews jettisoned Yiddish very rapidly. The 1940 census showed how rapidly. Yiddish ranked fifteenth of eighteen groups in the percentage of its third-generation speakers. Only 3 per cent of those who gave Yiddish as the language spoken at home in their earliest childhood were third generation, while one-third of Spanish and French speakers were third generation, and about one-fifth of Dutch and German. Most who claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue were the foreign-born, whereas among other groups, the largest percentage admitting a foreign language as mother tongue were generally the second generation. These figures show, starkly and shatteringly, how few Jews have valued Yiddish enough to pass it on or even to claim it. The comparatively high rate of linguistic retention among Germans, despite their much earlier immigration and their high level of acculturation, suggests that the conscious effort to maintain the national language—a product of nationalism or self-esteem—was a vital factor in that retention.

In its transplanted immigrant existence, Yiddish has been cultivated only by two groups of immigrants for whom it has expressed the cultural or religious commitments of their past. They are either the non-religious (once anti-religious) socialist and Zionist radicals, or the most traditionally Orthodox Jews.

**M**OST OF THE radical immigrants were ideological Yiddishists; Hebraists among them were few. Coming to America sixty years ago, these East European Yiddish-speaking masses created not only the American clothing industry, but a host of institutions—the Jewish labor movement, the Yiddish press, the Yiddish theater, Yiddish schools, *landsmanshaften*, massive fraternal and communal organizations—through which they accommodated themselves to America and which, ironically, served perhaps more as Americanizing agencies than as preservatives of the old culture. Sharing the revolutionary traditions of pre-revolutionary Russia, they were divided on their particular Jewish ideologies (Diaspora nationalism or Zionism), but agreed that Yiddish was the language of the Jewish masses. They were the heirs of a tradition that went back to the late decades of the 19th century, to the *narodnichestvo*—Russian populism, going to the people.

This movement had had a great impact on Jewish enlighteners and radicals alike, opening their eyes to the possibility that Yiddish, the language they despised and loathed, might be used as a vehicle for their propaganda. The Westernized *maskilim*, who thought the benighted Yiddish-speaking Jews needed secular education and Western culture, finally agreed that enlightenment, transmitted even in what they considered an unworthy language, was better than no enlightenment. As for the Jewish radicals, it soon became obvious to them that they could preach socialism, revolution, labor unity to the people only in the language of the people. Few of the leaders among the radicals knew Yiddish

and many had to learn it while teaching revolution.

Both the *maskilim*, often believing Jews, and the revolutionaries, non-believers, propagandized against the fanaticism and rigidity of degenerating Hasidic courts, against the rabbinic narrowmindedness that kept the people fettered in superstition. They succeeded in the long run, with the aid of great processes like the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, in attenuating the adherence to Judaism. Thus, wherever the secular teachings had prevailed, Yiddish was often the one remnant of a purely Jewish culture that could be taught and transmitted as part of an acceptable Jewish heritage. The vernacular became the hallmark of Jewish identity and the symbol of Jewish national self-consciousness.

It was this kind of linguistic nationalism among Jews that Ahad Ha'am particularly detested. In the tradition of the Russian *maskilim*, for whom rational humanism and high culture were the greatest desiderata, Ahad Ha'am considered the ideological Yiddishists a threat to the survival of Judaism. He wrote in 1909 to Simon Dubnow, the Jewish historian and architect of cultural autonomism: "If after thousands of years the Jewish people is to start developing its culture from the very beginning, if it is to fashion for itself a new literary language and new 'literary and cultural values' which are nothing more than a pale reflection of other cultures; if it is to be just like the Lithuanians and the Ruthenes and so forth: then I can see no point and no purpose in a national existence on so low a level."

Dubnow, also a *maskil*, was a lukewarm partisan of Yiddish as the basis of linguistic nationalism. In answer to Chaim Zhitlowski, who had become the ideologue of Yiddishism, Dubnow wrote: "Yiddish is dear to us and we must use it as a uniting force for the greater half of our people in the coming generations; but, to erect our entire national culture upon 'Yiddishism' means to cast off from us

immediately millions of Jews who do not speak this language and to prepare millions of others for bankruptcy at a later time."

In another essay, in reply to Ahad Ha'am's views, Dubnow compared the Jews to a cripple with one natural leg, Hebrew, and one artificial leg, Yiddish. "On these two legs our people has stood and survived for many generations," he wrote, "just as in former years it stood on the linguistic dualism of Hebrew and Aramaic."

This was a period when nationalist ideologies flourished and when no one questioned the then popular notion that language and nation were inseparably fused. Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism provoked small nations to seek a new national mystique through the elevation and cultivation of their own national languages. The Jews shared in this nationalist ferment and ideological explosion and, in the long run, the Yiddish language was the beneficiary. The *Jewish Daily Forward* in New York City, the Montreal Jewish Public Library, the Colegio Israelita de México, the Workmen's Circle Yiddish schools, are part of the heritage of that period, however remote the ancestry may now seem.

YIDDISH HAS HAD a more direct line of continuity among the Orthodox, particularly the Hasidim. The tradition of *targum* is an ancient one among Jews, dating back to the Septuagint. Aramaic, as the language most widely spoken by the Jews, became the language of translation par excellence in the Talmudic period. The rabbis prescribed that a pious Jew should read the weekly portion on the Sabbath twice in Hebrew and once in translation. As the Jews in the course of centuries migrated away from the Aramaic-speaking Near East, the Aramaic *targum* became unintelligible, but tradition had enshrined it as a semi-sacred language, and it has persisted as such. (It is an amusing commentary that the Yid-

dish expression *targum-loshn*, literally "language of translation," means something unintelligible, the equivalent of the English "It's Greek to me.")

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, urged his followers to use Yiddish because that way they could achieve spontaneous expression. The marvellous tales of Nahman of Bratzlav, the sayings of Dov Ber, the preacher of Mezritch, the prayers and poems of Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, gave Yiddish a sanction over and above its use merely as a vernacular. In a Yiddish textbook used in the Orthodox Beth Jacob schools for girls in interbellum Poland, a poem described Hebrew as the language of holiness and of the Torah. It was paired with a poem identifying Yiddish not only as the language of millions of Jews, but also as semi-sacred, the language of Reb Levi Yitzhak and Reb Nahman of Bratzlav.\* In elevating the common and uneducated man, in teaching that the unlearned man was the equal in God's eyes of the scholar, that fervor and faith could compensate for ignorance, the Hasidic rabbis succeeded in elevating not only the common people, but also their language, lending it the dignity of the intercourse with God. Today, in Hasidic-based Talmud Torahs and yeshivas, Yiddish still remains the language of translation and interpretation and is, I suspect, more effectively mastered than in some secular Yiddish schools. The reason may be—though I am surely simplifying—that among the Hasidim Yiddish still fulfills a real function in their transplanted but living culture. For they believe a Jew must speak Yiddish; otherwise he speaks "*goyish*," that is, any non-Jewish language. They have no need to

\* Two of the verses read: *Yidish loshn, hartsik loshn/fun milyonen brider./Reb Yitskhok-Levi hot mit dir/geshafn frume lider./ S'hot Reb Nakhmen mayselekh oyf yidish undz gegeben./ Yidish loshn, mame-loshn/freyd fun undzer leb.* (Yiddish language, tender language of millions of our brothers. Reb Levi Yitzhak composed devout poems in Yiddish. Reb Nahman gave us stories in Yiddish. Yiddish language, mother tongue, joy of our life.)

ideologize Yiddish, for it is part of an organic whole, where the whole person and the whole Jew are identical. But this is scarcely true of most secularists among whom Yiddish has shrunk from an ideology into a cult or, even worse, a sentimentality.

The sentimentality is, in a way, endemic to Yiddish. Languages have their characteristics. German has been described as the language in which to give orders, Russian the language to swear in, French the language of elegance. Yiddish is the language of tenderness and endearment, it is indeed a *mame-loshn*. I recall a vivid illustration of this in a Swiss movie, *The Last Chance*, about refugees from Nazism, where many languages were used. A grandfather spoke Yiddish to his little granddaughter, Chanele. The Yiddish dialogue between them touched me more than anything else in the film. I cannot remember now whether it was the poignancy of the situation or the evocative power of Yiddish that called forth from me tears for the destroyed Jewish world of Eastern Europe. For Yiddish, originally the expression of a culture and its way of life, became first a symbol and then a substitute for that culture. Today, it has become the embodiment of a tragically lost past. That is why the Yiddish dictionary is important. It will contain the complete wealth of Yiddish, offering in place of sentimentality and tears, words.

## II

THE EDITORS ESTIMATE that upon completion the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language* will contain about 180,000 words. In comparison with Webster's 450,000, Yiddish may seem poor, but not in comparison with other major European languages like French, Russian, Spanish, or Italian, whose total vocabularies are estimated to range from 140,000 to 210,000 words. But though Yiddish is undoubtedly not what the linguists call a "sociologically complete" language, being deficient in scien-

tific, technical, and military vocabularies, and meager in botanical, zoological, and agricultural terminology, it is nevertheless linguistically abundant in other areas of expression—religion, personal and social relations, morality, ethics, intellect, and feeling.

For the first time in the brief history of Yiddish lexicography, each word's complete record is given. Stress is shown and pronunciation given for Hebrew words (Yiddish is phonetic). Each word is grammatically described: part of speech, gender for nouns, verbs characterized as transitive or intransitive, with inflectional forms for nouns and verbs. Etymologies are given for basic words. Substandard borrowings from other languages are indicated (Germanism, Slavism, Americanism, Hispanism); regional and local dialects are indicated (Lithuanian dialect, Ukrainian localism). Special labels are used to indicate subject matter (mathematics, music, trades and professions); other labels identify the vocabulary by particular user—the speech of the *talmid-khokhem* (the religiously learned man), the language of the ghetto and concentration camp, thieves' argot. Status and usage labels are also given: archaic, neologistic, rare, ironic, slang, vulgar, coarse. Definitions are extraordinarily precise and subtle in their distinctions. *Oyg* ("eye") has thirty-four different meanings; *agude* ("union") has six; *avekshteln* ("to stand up" or "to set down" are its more common meanings) has seventeen definitions.

All this is topped off by an extraordinary richness of quotation, drawn from folk usage and literary sources. Elijah Bahur's *Bovo-bukh* of 1541, the *Mayse-bukh* of 1602, the statutes of the kehillah of Cracow of 1595, a contemporary Yiddish account of the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, are among the early literary sources. The recent ones include the Yiddish press of New York and Buenos Aires and contemporary Yiddish writers all over the world. Between them is the incredibly rich treasure of Yiddish litera-

ture, not only the pre-classical Haskalah and Hasidic writings, and not only the three modern fathers, Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz; not only fiction and poetry, but also the scholarly, historical, linguistic, political, journalistic, and philosophical writings that appeared at a time when Yiddish was flourishing.

**H**OW DOES ONE decide what words go into a dictionary? Who defines their status? The practice varies. In France, the French Academy; in India, the government's Language Commission; in England, the Oxford English Dictionary; and in the United States—at least until the publication of the 3rd Edition—Webster's Unabridged. But whatever the source, the basic criticism is universal: the standardizers are attacked either for being too conservative, for not admitting new words, new usages, new definitions; or for being too radical, for not protecting the language against corruption and vulgarity.

The makers of dictionaries, like the interpreters of Jewish law, may be put in two categories: *mekilim*, lenient interpreters, and *mahmirim*, strict ones. In the United States, for instance, the editors of Webster's 3rd Edition are avowed *mekilim*. They were following an old lexicographical tradition which Oxford linguist Archibald H. Sayce summed up: "The sole standard of correctness is custom and the common usage of the community."

The editors of the Yiddish dictionary share this outlook. They have defined as a word in the Yiddish language "every word used by a group of Jews, thinking and speaking in Yiddish." They are obviously *mekilim*, and as such bound to incur the wrath of the *mahmirim*. Standardization is difficult enough in all tongues, even for so high-status a language as English, as the present violent controversy over Webster's 3rd Edition demonstrates. What about Yiddish then? It has no country, no government, no academy, no permanent dictionary committee, no ministry of education, no geographical limits,

no higher education to speak of—just words and speakers.

The first attempt to standardize Yiddish was the Yiddish Language Conference held in Czernowitz in Rumania in 1908. It was initiated by Nathan Birnbaum, one of the great (and unjustly neglected) personalities of the recent Jewish past, who wanted to have Yiddish proclaimed as the “national” Jewish language. The specific purposes of the conference were to deal with standardization of spelling and grammar and the compilation of a dictionary. But little was accomplished, because the conference became a platform for quarrels between Yiddishists and Hebraists. Time was short and the ideologically charged atmosphere was not conducive to the laborious and tedious tasks of linguistic standardization. The conference adopted the position that Yiddish was *a* (not *the*) national language of the Jewish people: this, like most compromises, satisfied no one. (Yitzkhok Leibush Peretz, who took a leading role at the conference, had argued that Jews had no national language: Hebrew was no longer the national language and Yiddish, aspiring to it, was not yet it.)

No progress in standardization of Yiddish was made until after World War I. Only then were modern school systems established in which Yiddish was the language of instruction. (The Polish Minorities Treaty had guaranteed cultural or national minorities the right to schools in their own languages.) A new university-educated intelligentsia arose, identifying itself, like the earlier populists, with the Yiddish-speaking masses. They helped to create a wide network of institutions which made it possible for Yiddish to aspire to high culture. One of these was the Yiddish Scientific Institute—Yivo (an acronym based on its Yiddish name), founded in 1925, which became for the Yiddish-speaking world an academy and university in one, bringing to Yiddish a luster and prestige among educated people that it had scarcely ever before enjoyed.

Much of this achievement may be credited to Max Weinreich, one of Yivo’s founders and directors, who has been largely responsible for the high repute of Yiddish in the halls of Academe.

THE YIDDISH SCHOOL systems, after the First World War, in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, the rapid growth and proliferation of the Yiddish press and book publishing, and over all the unique authority of Yivo, made possible some standardization where cultural anarchism had been rampant. Yivo and the Yiddish schools in Poland agreed in 1936 on one hundred and fifty rules for simple, hyphenated, and compound words, plurals, abbreviations, spelling, and punctuation. But the rules were not universally accepted: those that seemed too radical, departing too much from tradition, were often disregarded. Most of the daily press has resisted standardization, modernizing its spelling only with the speed of glaciers. Even today, the orthography of the Yiddish daily press is far from consistent and scarcely correct by modern standards.

The editors of the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*—both connected with Yivo for a long time: Yudel Mark has been editor of Yivo’s periodical *Yidische Shprakh* for over twenty years—felt a few rules should be reviewed. They decided, on the basis of replies to a questionnaire from some two hundred Yiddish writers, linguists, teachers, editors, and journalists, to retain the silent *alef* (which Yivo had eliminated) between combinations of *vov* (generally when the double-*vov*, the consonant, followed or preceded the single-*vov*, the vowel) and *yud* (as vowel, semi-vowel, and diphthong). The other important difference from the old Yivo standards concerns the spelling of compound words or phrases (whether separated, hyphenated, or as one word). The editors concluded that meaning must determine the word unit: for example, in the new dictionary *farayorn* (“last year”) is one word rather than the three *far a yorn*.



These deviations from the Yivo rules deprived the dictionary of Yivo's imprimatur. But Yivo in fact had given the dictionary working space, staff cooperation, and moral support, and perhaps for this reason or in an excess of courtesy, the editors of the dictionary published, in the prefatory matter, the Yivo's *ne imprimatur*, explaining that it could not give its sanction to the dictionary because the dictionary had not given its sanction to Yivo's orthography.

Of course, most of the words in the Yiddish dictionary are like words in any language. *Ober* is a conjunction like "but"; it is also an adverb and even a substantive, used in precisely the same sense as "But me no buts." But Yiddish is, I think, more Jewish than English is American. Yiddish holds the mirror up to nature, recording and reflecting Jewish history and Jewish dispersion. The etymologies of the words and the labels affixed by the editors reveal the spread of Yiddish from the Rhineland eastward and then outward: Western Yiddish, Hungarian Yiddish; then the Ukrainian, the Lithuanian, White Russian, East Galician dialects; the later subversive penetrations from the German, the Russian, the Polish, English, and Spanish; the exotic kinds of Yiddish in Alsace and in 19th-century Jerusalem under Turkish rule. *Oysshmaydn* ("to cut out," "to carve") seems an ordinary verb, yet, unexpectedly, it contains a chunk of Jewish folklore. In defining the word, the editors quoted Peretz: "The famous forest looms darkly in the corner of the sky; on these trees our ancestors carved the names of the tractates of the Talmud which they finished studying on their way." The reference, the editors explain, is to a legend about Jewish settlement in Poland. The first Jews who came to Poland stopped in a small forest near the town of Laszczew, where they carved the names of the Talmud tractates they had studied on their long wanderings. Then they heard a voice: "Po-lin" (Hebrew: rest here). That is where they

settled and the way Poland got its name.

ORDINARY WORDS ARE permeated with Jewish history and tradition. Then there are the special words. Take a place name, *Odessa*, for example. It is defined this way:

Geographical name. Large city on the Black Sea, the Ukraine. In 1797—246 Jews; in 1914—165,000, a third of the population. Nicknames: Odessa hoboes, free-livers, crooks, pickpockets, knaves. To live like God in Odessa = to live in comfort. Explanation: No one bothers God in Odessa, no one asks anything of him, people leave him alone; parallel to: to live like God in Paris. Proverbs: "Odessa is Little-Paris." (Mendele, *Fishke the Lame*: "Odessa is Little-Stanislavchik," *ironic*.) "Hell burns ten miles around Odessa" (it is a very sinful city). "God protect us from Kamenetzer helping hands and Odesser rakes." Saying: "Don't belittle the Odessa moon" (*ironic*, when someone describes the wonders of the big city). "An Odessa moon"—a beautiful woman (Ukrainian and White Russian Yiddish expression). "The wise men of Odessa" = the scholars and writers of Odessa in the Haskalah period and at the beginning of the 20th century (Mendele, Ahad Ha'am, Dubnow, etc.) "Odessa Yiddish" = full of Russian words.

A miniature social and cultural portrait emerges, reflecting the ambivalence of the folk about the well-to-do, secularly educated, Haskalah-minded, skeptical Jewish community of Odessa.

*Oysleyzgelt* ("ransom") is another example of a word given specific colorations to all its meanings by Jewish history. The definitions and quotations refer to *pidyon ha-ben*, the ceremonial redemption of the first-born; *pidyon-shevuyim*, ransom for a prisoner or money paid to ward off persecution or avoid great peril, with citations from medieval history through the Nazi occupation; money paid to avoid conscription in Czarist times; and, finally, to German restitution ("atonement payments").

The dictionary is indeed more than a collection of words and definitions; it is a vast repository not only of the Yiddish

language, but of Jewish customs, folkways, and history. The dictionary, when completed, will, I am rash enough to predict, stand beside Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Mendele, and Yehoash's translation of the Bible as one of the great achievements of Yiddish.

The dictionary, too, is a marvelous witness of how Yiddish has preserved Hebrew. The words and expressions from the Bible and Talmud which are extensively used in Yiddish have received their formal acknowledgment in the dictionary; particularly the speech of the *talmid-khokhem*. The definitions of *ahavas-yisroel* ("love of Israel"), for example, encompass a Jewish tradition, beginning with the Pentateuch, and going through the Talmud, the Rambam, the Kabbalists, down to Hasidism and modern times:

1. Love of Jews for the Jewish people, for all Jews, expressing itself in constant readiness to help Jews, to seek and find merit in Jews. Derived from the commandment to love one another "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18) and from Rabbi Akiba's saying "This is a great principle in the Torah." Maimonides ruled that *ahavas-yisroel* was a positive commandment of the Torah. Before praying pious Jews used to resolve to love Jews as themselves: "I am prepared to take upon myself the positive commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself" (*Kavaanat Ha'ari*). "The *ahavas-yisroel* spark in each Jew should be kindled" (Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, *Likute Diburim*).
2. Trait of loving Jews even with their faults; interceding on behalf of the Jewish people and arguing with God about how wonderful the Jewish people are (reflected especially in hasidic writings and folklore, in stories about Reb Levi-Yitzhak of Berditchev, Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov, Reb Abraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt, and others).
3. Love of a non-Jew for the Jewish people, for Jews. *Ahavas-yisroel* of the pious among the Gentiles. "From love for the daughters of Israel he came to love of Israel"—said about a non-Jew who converts to Judaism for love of a Jewish girl.

Hebrew, of course, has a particular vitality in Yiddish. Without Hebrew Yid-

dish appears dull and listless. Yehoash once said that the Hebrew words wore top hats. They have dignity, style, tradition, elegance. These qualities they bring into Yiddish. Their absence impoverishes the language, cutting it off from the culture, the religion, and the very traditions that shaped it.

For, in the final analysis, the religious culture created the Yiddish language. The religion and the way of life it imposed on its believers separated the Jews from their neighbors in medieval Germany. It determined the vocabulary and from the very inception made Yiddish different from German. Later on, other factors came into play, strengthening and supplementing the role of Judaism in shaping Yiddish: residential separation and occupational differentiation; governmental and popular anti-Semitism and the persecution of Yiddish itself which, in fact, only reinforced the language; restriction of educational opportunities and discrimination in employment. Finally, national consciousness—most nearly a substitute for Judaism—and the will to maintain Yiddish. Today, it appears that only the most old-fashioned kind of Judaism, national consciousness and national will, remain as crucial factors to perpetuate Yiddish.

**I**N A SMALL way, national consciousness has manifested itself among some young American Jews, most of them third generation, for whom Yiddish does not have the associations of ignorant immigrants which their parents felt so intensely. Mostly, these third-generation Jews do not know Yiddish. A study of an Eastern seaboard Jewish community made about ten years ago showed that among parents, two-thirds of whom were second generation, about half could speak Yiddish, while of their children, nearly all native, less than 10 per cent could speak it. A more recent study of a Midwestern community was even more depressing. Over half of the parents, mostly native-born, had heard Yiddish spoken at home when

they were children, but only a little more than a third could speak it and even fewer could read. Among their children, a bare 5 per cent could speak it, and nearly all only poorly.

For those who know a bit, Yiddish serves as a form of Jewish identification in a broader group—the use of a word or expression helps to locate other Jews, or perhaps merely kindred spirits. Sometimes it is the object of curiosity and occasionally Yiddish becomes the discovery of roots. Marcus Lee Hansen, the historian of immigration, once formulated “the principle of third-generation interest,” that “what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.” In their quest for their origin, and that background which gives their Americanness specificity and value, many young Jews are curious and sometimes eager to know where their grandparents came from and what their culture was like. Yiddish is something they would like to know or, at least, know about.

Yiddish can help give the individual access to his past, the world from which his parents came and whose culture, however attenuated its form, has had some influence on him. Yiddish is also important for the group past. Ahad Ha'am, sharp-sighted and penetrating as he was, was nevertheless mistaken when he predicted that no one would ever claim for Yiddish as for Hebrew “that it must be studied as a matter of national duty.” Today, the importance—sometimes the crucial importance—of Yiddish for an understanding of the history and culture of Ashkenazic Jewry for the last five hundred years has been generally acknowledged. Neither Hasidism nor the Jewish labor movement, neither Zionism nor the Agudas Israel

movement, can be understood without Yiddish. The scholar will need Yiddish for his work and his Yiddish, in time to come, will have to depend greatly upon Mark's and Joffe's *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*.

WHAT I HAVE WRITTEN reminds me of a Hasidic story with which Gershom Scholem closes his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: “When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the ‘Maggid’ of Mezritch was faced with the same task, he would go into the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done, became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rizhin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done.”

For those who remember the place and perhaps the prayers, telling the story may not seem anywhere near enough. But if telling the story is the only way left to recall the past, let us try to tell it as well as we can and use the *Great Dictionary* to find the right words.