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A thousand years of Yiddish in the European arena

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Preamble

Honoured delegates, guests, and hosts: We are gathered here to consider the fate of a language and culture that have survived a thousand years of European history. The history of Yiddish is somewhat exotic, as European languages go, and if contemporary meanings can be read into history, then Yiddish may just have something to say about the borderless and the displaced among the minority languages of Europe, and about minority languages in general. The history of Yiddish, and the dialectology of Yiddish, have tended to ignore the political boundaries and divides within Europe. For centuries, the Yiddish territory constituted a vast "linguistic empire" in Europe, albeit as a minority language everywhere, in power nowhere. From a linguistic point of view, Yiddish was left free to develop entirely according to the external vicissitudes of history and the internal laws of historical linguistics, without the usual apparatus of normative academies and government edicts.

Yiddish was and remained a folk language in Western and Central Europe. It was only in its "second home" in the Slavonic and Baltic lands of Eastern Europe that it evolved into a highly nuanced medium suitable for sophisticated literature of international status. It is that modern, Eastern European Yiddish that was exported by emigrés to the satellite Yiddish centres of London, Paris, and Berlin, to other Western European cities, and overseas, early in our own century. West to east progressions from the folksy to the sophisticated are, as, we see from Yiddish, every bit as viable as those going the other way. Let us not be the ones to predict where the greatest European creations will come from in the next hundred years.

The linguistic, demographic and literary accomplishments of Yiddish were all achieved without armies, without navies, without the firing of a single shot, but rather, through the power of the word, the thought, the folksong, the poem, the novel, the treatise; through the feeling of solidarity among the members of a group dispersed throughout Europe, a group that never stopped interacting with all the coterritorial local populations in a permanent state of cultural interchange. It was give and take, all without a ledger book or accountant.

As if to illustrate how much can be achieved without the trappings of statehood, the language even has its own symbolic capital. That capital, the international capital of Yiddish, was Vilna — Vilnius —, the historic Yerusholayim d'Líte ("Jerusalem of Lithuania").

Yiddish a Quintessentially European Language

If there was ever a language that is quintessentially "European", born in Europe, matured in many different parts of the continent — from Strasbourg to Smolensk — and ultimately almost annihilated by the most barbaric totalitarian regime in world history, also, alas, in Europe, that language is Yiddish. European more than anything else quite simply because it has thrived across the time and space of medieval and modern Europe.

One of the first things to strike the contemporary student of Yiddish is the usual irrelevance of modern political boundaries to the linguistic and cultural categories of Yiddish. Cultural autonomy does not always need an army, a navy, border guards, and customs agents. Hundreds of years ago, the Jews who spoke Southwestern Yiddish, and

were largely cattle dealers and simple folk, were spread in an area coinciding with parts of modern France, Switzerland and Germany. The Northwesterners, who were, on the whole, much more "bookish", and spoke a kind of Yiddish somewhat closer to today's dialects, thrived on territories that today coincide with parts of Holland, northern Germany, and Denmark.

Turning to the modern Yiddish types, the *Litvaks*, the Jews who speak Lithuanian Yiddish, and are rumoured in folklore to be highly learned but somewhat humourless, are those whose forebears hail from the territory of Northeastern Yiddish, popularly known as *litvish* ("Lithuanian Yiddish"). Their "Lithuania" includes all of present day Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus (no modern political extrapolations intended!).

The potential for minority cultures to thrive across the political borders of Europe is of course founded upon the presence of an environment in which minority languages can thrive. That environment was sometimes stronger in earlier centuries, and it is sometimes more tenuous today, in a purportedly more modern time. Let us beware of falling into the trap of twentieth century snobbism. There may be much to learn from the past.

Let us for a moment go back two thousand years, roughly to the beginning of the common era. During the first millennium, the centre of gravity of Jewish life was in the Near East. Only the rabbinic authorities of Palestine and Babylonia could adjudicate on points of law. The new Yiddish speaking civilisation moved rapidly to initiate what we might today call a peaceful cultural revolution in favour of home rule. The founding father of this new European Jewish civilisation was the great Rabbi Gershom, known as "Light of the Exile", who is thought to have been born in Metz, around 960, and who lived most of his life in Mainz where he died around 1028. Gershom issued an edict forbidding polygamy. Now polygamy was an ancient Hebrew tradition; it will suffice to recall the exploits of David and Solomon for starters. It is not that the Jews of France and Germany were taking more than one wife a thousand years ago. It was rather a case of declaring symbolic independence, proclaiming a new European Jewish civilisation, and Gershom's ban on polygamy did just that. Legal issues could now be decided by the new rabbinic authorities of Europe. The European period in Jewish history was, we could say, formally launched.

This new civilisation rose on the banks of the Rhine to its west and the Danube to its east, more or less simultaneously. It was destined to spread in all directions, and especially, eastward. It became known as Ashkenaz. In early medieval texts, Ashkenaz refers to the German speaking lands in central Europe, but it came over time to refer to the "Yiddish area" throughout Europe. The late Max Weinreich, the leading historian of Yiddish, referred to the central European birthplace of Yiddish as "Ashkenaz I", and to its Eastern European heartland in later centuries as "Ashkenaz II".

This European civilisation, Ashkenaz, has given the world an Einstein, a Freud and a Chagall. In the immediate family backgrounds of all of them is the traditional language of Ashkenazic Jewry, Yiddish. A never ending stream of literary innovation goes back centuries. In the early sixteenth century, Elijah Levita, a native of Germany who settled in Italy, joined the complex Italian rhyme pattern known as ottava rima, with Yiddish verse, exemplifying in masterful poetry the interweaving of Romance with Germanic. By the nineteenth century, Sholem Aleichem's humour, best known today in the West via *Fiddler on the Roof,* had interlinked a Slavonic flavour with Yiddish humour. By then Yiddish had added to its Germanic and Semitic base the permanent layer of Slavonic, exemplifying yet again that what for the purist is debasement is for true culture the exponential growth of possibilities for creativity and advancement. And in 1978, the Nobel Prize for literature went to Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose works derive in no small measure from the joining of the European forms of the Kabbalah — Jewish mysticism — with insights gleaned from modern psychology and philosophy. Going back for a moment to the known beginnings of Yiddish literature, the earliest dated literary work is the Cambridge Codex of 1382, discovered in Cairo, of all places, which had a community of emigré Ashkenazim in the fourteenth century. In addition to a Yiddish version of the German Dukus Horant, the

manuscript contains a Yiddish rendition of the biblical Binding of Isaac, written in the form of a central European medieval epic romance. The creation of new cultural products from the free intermingling of east and west, of Jewish and general European, is the hallmark of Yiddish.

The Fusion Structure of Yiddish

The Jewish minority of a thousand years ago that created the Yiddish language fused linguistic elements of the ancient Orient — Hebrew and Aramaic — with a variety of medieval German city dialects, in and of itself a fusing of near eastern with European culture. It is almost as if from the very moment of its birth, Yiddish symbolised the strength of cultures interacting, participating in give and take, without the straitjackets of purism or elitism. But the fusion that is Yiddish is no casual mixture of Hebraic and Germanic. It is a highly specific formula that goes back to that linguistic genesis of a millennium ago and that is often rooted in ancient Hebraic culture. The Yiddish word for "sun" is Germanic derived *zun* but "moon" is *levóne* from the Hebrew. Some would say the Semitic word stuck because of the importance of the moon to Jews; their calendar is after all the lunar one. Others would see the "coincidental" outcome of competing forms. Either way, the Hebraic "moon" and the Germanic "sun" are thousand year old bedfellows in Yiddish.

Fusion makes for a highly nuanced semantics. As Ber Borokhov, the founder of modern Yiddish linguistics pointed out back in 1913, the Yiddish word for "God" derived from Germanic — *got* — refers to a universalistic God of all humankind. The Hebrew derived *riboyne shel óylem* refers rather to God's relationship with the Jews, what He is thought to expect and to demand. *Gotinyu zisinker*, with the Slavonic derived endearing suffixes, refers to an intimate God who is with you in your room, and whom you can feel free to be intimate with, and, who, when necessary, can even be admonished and scolded.

This third component, Slavonic, was gradually absorbed by Yiddish in Eastern Europe over the last five hundred years. It is not the Hebraic, the Germanic or the Slavonic that makes Yiddish Yiddish. It is their unending interaction in a way that is uniquely Yiddish that accomplishes that. The Yiddish word for "making fun", "kidding around" is *katoves*, derived from Hebrew (the root *ktv* meaning "write"). It is not ancient Hebrew, but rather a coinage of the Italian Jews of the early sixteenth century who needed a word for what we now know as "graffiti". They coined it to describe the practice of writing funny things on walls late at night to make fun of certain people. To engage in making fun (not necessarily in writing) is, in Yiddish, *traybn katoves,* with the Germanic verb *traybn*, literally "drive", "cause", but almost always with a mischievous connotation. The fellow who does it, originally the graffitist, so to speak, and nowadays any prankster, is a *katovesnik*, with the Slavonic suffix *-nik.* All of this, by way of the joining of Hebraic, Germanic and Slavonic, as an ongoing process.

The nuancing of Yiddish is evident throughout. *A freg ton* ("to ask"), for example, implies that it's a matter of fact question that requires a speedy factual answer. The root is Germanic and the aspectual feature is Slavonic. A *sháyle*, derived from the Hebrew is a question asked of an authority, often asking permission for something, and usually requiring a yes or no answer. A *káshe*, derived from Aramaic, is an argumentative question that implicitly challenges the authority and wisdom of what has just been said by the other party.

The Fate of Yiddish a Product of European History

The survival of Yiddish, its adaptability to ever new places and conditions, and its record of creativity, are ultimately, of course, to the credit of its speakers, the Ashkenazim. Its history, however, is inextricably intertwined with the vicissitudes of European history, and exemplifies the interrelatedness of the fate of European peoples. To start with, the

language itself is testimony to constant interaction between Ashkenazim and the surrounding European nations; otherwise the majority of Yiddish vocabulary and grammar could not possibly have derived from medieval German city dialects; that came to be because in spite of their strict adherence to cultural autonomy, the Ashkenazim were never isolated from their non-Jewish neighbours and the structure of Yiddish is the best testimony to that ongoing process of intercommunication.

Had Yiddish remained fixed to its Germanic birthplace, it is very doubtful whether it would have survived, let alone attained what it has in fact attained in the European cultural arena. Its geographic expansion resulted from some of the worst and some of the best of European history.

First, there were the Crusades, starting in 1096. On their way to liberate the Holy Grail in Jerusalem, marauding Crusaders massacred one Jewish community after another. In fact, the earliest dated Yiddish words are proper names recorded in the lists of martyrs of the First Crusade. Subsequent Crusades had similar effects through to the fourteenth century. The outbursts of violence against Jews included the Rindfleisch massacres of 1298, based on a series of blood libels, and the poisoned-well libel in the wake of the Black Plague of 1348 and 1349. All were part of the same pattern of deeply ingrained anti-Semitic myths. All of them resulted in a shift of population eastward as Jews fled persecution in search of a more tranquil life. Racial and religious intolerance led to the expansion of Yiddish and its interaction with genetically unrelated languages.

The other side of the same coin is no less potent. Racial and religious tolerance in medieval Poland and Lithuania inspired many to seek a better life in Eastern Europe; those communities were destined, over time, to become some of the most creative in the whole of the three thousand year history of the Jewish people. The best remembered symbols of tolerance are the statute of Kalish in 1264, issued by Prince Boleslav V, and its expansion by Kazimir between 1334 and 1367, and, most spectacularly, the legal status granted to Jews by the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas (Witold) in 1388 and 1389, which in effect gave the Jews what we might like to call "equal rights". Vytautas, in his writ for the Grodna community, made synagogue and cemetery land tax-free, and explicitly allowed Jews to hold whatever views they wished to hold at home, and to engage in any kind of craft. In spite of major reversals and setbacks (for example, the expulsion of 1495), there were centuries when relative tolerance in Eastern Europe enabled Yiddish to thrive and to grow in proportions — both demographic and literary — that would have defied the predictions of any contemporary observer.

Yiddish and the world of ideas

From its inception, Yiddish was the language of both the marketplace and everyday life on the one hand, and, on the other, of sophisticated Talmudic discourse in the yeshivas of Ashkenazic Europe. The language itself came to embody both strands; the Aramaic-derived words for "probably" (*mistáme*) "necessarily" (*dáfke*), and "a fortiori argument" (*kal vekhoymer*), for example, became popular even among uneducated people. Daily immersion in the ancient near eastern heritage, from the book of Genesis onward, made thousands of years of history come alive in everyday life. "Carrying straw to Egypt", a reference to the brick building materials of Jewish slaves in ancient Egypt, came to signify what the British call "coals to Newcastle" in an ironic reference to uselessness. The connotations of "drunk as Lot", "evil as Jeroboam", "wise as Solomon" are everyday expressions, devoid of any pretentiousness.

Yiddish was one of three Jewish languages of the Ashkenazim of Europe. It interacted in a complementary way with the two ancient Semitic languages the Jews had imported into Europe: Hebrew, the language of the Hebrew Bible and the Mishnah, and many commentaries; and Aramaic, the language of most of the Talmud and much of the Kabbalah, the literature of Jewish mysticism. Ashkenazim spoke in Yiddish only. Some of

them read Yiddish only although nearly all had at least rudimentary Hebrew reading skills. Then there were the learned, the rabbis, who wrote new and original works in Hebrew and Aramaic, here on European soil, right up to the Holocaust.

Now those who were learned in Hebrew and Aramaic were nearly all men. This "gender gap" was bridged, or at least compensated for, by the emergence of women as the primary readers of Yiddish, and in many cases, the primary early writers of Yiddish. The pietistic poetry of Toybe Pan in the sixteenth century, Chana Katz in the seventeenth, and Gele in the eighteenth may strike the modern writer as somewhat naive; but in their time and place they represented the emergence of women writers, writing in the universal vernacular, in a society where the formal "literary classes" wrote mostly in two non-spoken languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. The women readers and writers of Yiddish were, with hindsight, heralders of cultural liberation for both women and for Yiddish, most prominently reflected in the classic genre of *tkhines,* pietistic non-canonical poem-prayers. At the end of the sixteenth century, the *Tsene-rene* appeared. It was written by a man for women, a graceful interweaving of the stories of the Five Books of Moses and other select portions of the Bible with thousands of years of Jewish legend and lore. It became the "women's Bible" of Ashkenazic Jewry, western and eastern alike.

With the advent of Yiddish printing in the 1530s and 1540s, Yiddish developed a standard language based on the Western Yiddish dialects of central Europe. Even books printed in Poland used this standard language. Standards, even lopsided and illogical standards, can win acceptance without government edicts. Incidentally, Yiddish printing was established with the active participation of the first generation of Lutheran Protestants, both in Germany and in Poland.

By the seventeenth century, the liberal bastion of Amsterdam had become the new world centre of Yiddish printing. In the late 1670s, two competing Amsterdam publishers sought to put out the first complete Old Testament in Yiddish. Their effort at literal accuracy was a novelty for Ashkenaz, where sacred texts have always gone hand in hand with the traditional corpus of interpretation assembled over millennia.

In the late eighteenth century, Moses Mendelssohn and his circle in Berlin sought to modernise the Jewish world by doing away with Yiddish. Their campaign went hand in hand with the decline of Yiddish on German speaking soil, and Western Yiddish ultimately died out, partly as a result of linguistic assimilation of its speakers to German, and partly in consequence of the campaign against the language.

By contrast, Yiddish in Eastern Europe had by then become a much more sophisticated linguistic instrument. Yiddish was ripe for new leaps and bounds. In eighteenth century Podolia, the hasidic movement arose and spread to most parts of the Ukraine and Poland. It preached mysticism, the closeness to God of every human being, and a philosophy of happiness in daily life, all irrespective of the degree of learning attained. All three ideas led hasidism to elevate Yiddish to a level of conscious sanctity, previously unknown in the history of the language.

The opponents of hasidism were centered here in Lithuania. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, who lived and worked in the street that once again bears his name, a short walk from where we are now gathered, inspired a resurgence of high level Talmudic study. His best student, Chaim Valozhiner, left Vilna for Valozhin (Volozhin) where he established, in 1802, the greatest rabbinical academy since the days of Babylonia. The language of the yeshiva was of course Yiddish.

In the nineteenth century, the movements for secularisation and modernisation well well underway among East European Jewry. These movements advocated the use of German or Russian or Polish as opposed to the native Yiddish. In one of the great ironies of East European cultural history, the modernisers who sought to supplant Yiddish quickly

found that they needed that very language to preach to the masses the tenets of modernisation, and, almost against their own will, they forged a modern standard Yiddish that was based on the living Yiddish dialects of Eastern Europe. Around 1814, one Mendel Lefin, trained to hate Yiddish by the Berlin Jewish modernisers under whom he had studied, dared to rebel and do something outrageous, for which he was duly ostracised. He translated the Book of Proverbs into his modern Ukrainian Yiddish dialect.

The most spectacular transformation came on November 24, 1864, when the Hebrew didactic writer Sholem-Yankev Abramowitz became the first master of modern Yiddish prose, under his pseudonym "Mendele Moykher Sforim", by publishing the first instalment of his first novel in Yiddish in a weekly Yiddish newspaper in Odessa. He and his "pupils", Sholem Aleichem and Y. L. Peretz, collectively formed the triumvirate that was to establish Yiddish as a vehicle for the modern art of European fiction.

All the while, a movement was growing to elevate the status of Yiddish to a modern national language for secular literature, just as the hasidim had done a century earlier in the religious and mystical spheres. As fate would have it, a German Jew, Nathan Birnbaum, who did not speak Yiddish natively, became the most ardent advocate of Yiddish. He organised the Chernowitz Language Conference of 1908 which proclaimed Yiddish to be a national Jewish language. At that conference, a twenty-three year old scholar named Matisyohu Mieses proclaimed: "The nineteenth century gave birth to the rights of man, the twentieth has the grave responsibility of creating the rights of languages [...] We demand freedom of opportunity for the Yiddish language!"

The mass migration of Jews from the Russian Empire to a number of western countries, and especially, to the United States, opened new vistas for Yiddish. The Lower East Side of New York City became a major world centre for Yiddish belles lettres, and a phenomenal number of poets and prose writers, hailing from the most diverse East European towns and villages, began to publish their works and develop their talents.

In the years following the First World War, expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, introspectivism and other modern literary trends developed in the metropolises of both eastern and western Europe. Warsaw, Vilna and Kiev became the leading centres. Berlin, Paris and London became primary satellites. In less than a century, Yiddish had achieved the transition from folk language to the medium of a modern European literature.

Yiddish Scholarship

Just before the outbreak of the First World War, the scholarship of Yiddish — linguistic, philological, literary and folkloristic — was born right here, when the famous Vilna Yiddish publisher, Boris Kletskin (his building still stands) produced "Der Pinkes", a compendium of Yiddish scholarship, edited by master Yiddish critic Sh. Niger. The volume was opened and concluded with works by Ber Borokhov, the founder of modern Yiddish studies. In his essay, "The Aims of Yiddish Philology", Borokhov outlined the history and structure of Yiddish. In a single master stroke, he did away with hundreds of years of prejudices (by Jews and non-Jews alike) against the language of Ashkenazic Jewry. Borokhov also proclaimed the Yiddish of the "district of Vilna" to be the standard literary pronunciation, and in another single stroke, gave Yiddish its symbolic capital.

The book concluded with Borokhov's survey of "Four Hundred Years of Research on the Yiddish Language". Borokhov enumerated the works of Christian humanists, missionaries, criminologists, anti-Semites, businessmen, Hebraists and more, starting in the sixteenth century. His point was that Yiddish had for centuries been an object of fascination for scholars with various and sundry motives. The time had come for a new Yiddish scholarship concerned with the language for its own sake.

Borokhov dreamt in 1913 that there would be an academic institute dedicated to Yiddish. It was here in Vilna that his dream came true, in 1925. By then, top young Yiddish scholars had settled in Vilna and joined forces. They include Zalmen Reyzen of Koydenov, Zelig-Hirsh Kalmanovitsh of Goldingen, and above all, Max Weinreich, also of Goldingen. Here in Vilna, they began to build the first university level institution dedicated to Yiddish. That institution is the YIVO, acronym of "Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut" (Yiddish Scientific Institute), which was successfully moved to New York in 1940, thanks to the fact that Max Weinreich was in Copenhagen on 1 September 1939, preparing to read a paper on the history of Yiddish at an international linguistics conference in Brussels. Thankfully he was able to travel on to New York.

Today Yiddish language, literature and culture are intensively researched in Paris, Oxford, Heidelberg, Trier and other major European universities. There are also major international centres in the United States and Israel.

The Holocaust and Beyond

The systematic murder of East European Jewry by the invading Nazi forces, readily assisted by local fascists in each country, defies all imagination. The vast majority of the six million Jews murdered were native Yiddish speakers. As a language of millions on European soil, Yiddish perished along with its speakers. The Jews of Vilna, the symbolic world capital of Yiddish, were shipped to Ponar, where they were shot and burned. In towns and villages all round us, there are mass graves where the children, the women and the men, the young and the old, were humiliated, shot and buried, often alive. All were led to slaughter for one reason only: they were Jews.

The legislative and cultural organisations of our new Europe cannot revive the victims of the Holocaust. Nor could they restore Yiddish to its status in Europe in 1939. They can help ensure the survival of the language and its literature on European soil. In Western Europe, there are burgeoning hasidic communities, where Yiddish is the first language. In both Western and Eastern Europe, there are communities of older generation Yiddish speakers born before the War. Last but not least, there are several thousand young enthusiasts, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who are prepared to dedicate their lives to Yiddish language, literature and culture. They are without support, without guidance and without coordination. There is much to be done and time is short. Together we can take Yiddish in Europe safely into the new century. I say to this conference: the future contributions of Yiddish culture to Europe will justify our vision. Let the twentyfirst-century see the establishment of the rights of all the people of Europe, and — all its languages. Let us start modestly: with ten scholarships, to enable students of all backgrounds and from all parts of Europe to become experts in Yiddish.