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Yiddish: Language, Culture and Memory from the late 19th century to the present

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From the late 19th century, the Yiddish language and culture had an intensely transatlantic moment made possible by the rich cultural circulation between the original home of the lingua franca of Central and Eastern European Jews and Western Eu-rope, the Americas and other parts of the world.

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In the 19th and 20th centuries, millions of mostly Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazy Jews in search of physical safety, civil rights and better economic prospects left Central and Eastern Europe for other European countries (Germany, France and the United Kingdom), Palestine (later Israel), Australia, South Africa, the Caribbean and, of course, the Americas, from Canada to the United States, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. [1] In doing so, they extended the areas where their language was spoken to the furthest limits it had ever reached. But it was not until the late 19th century that Yiddish, a vehicle of identity, culture and memory intertwined with Jewish migrations since appearing in the Rhine Valley during the Middle Ages, started crossing the seas in earnest. That is when the Atlantic world, understood as both the geographical space around the eponymous ocean and the system of exchanges, interconnections and cross-fertilization in this area, played a key role in the history of Yiddish-speakers in search of a better life and in the evolution of the language they brought with them on their peregrinations.

The history of Jewish immigrants in different countries has been studied, but their assimilation in the societies where they settled must not lead to forgetting two things. First, scholars have pointed out that many of them had to balance a burning desire to belong with keeping a link to the Yiddish langue and culture, especially since the latter were acquiring literary, linguistic and political legitimacy as the massive wave of Jewish emigration from Central and Eastern Europe reached its peak between the late 19th and early 20th century. Second, and in direct relationship with the above, the desire to put down roots in the new country did not hinder, at least for the first generation of immigrants, intense exchanges between the two major centers of the Yiddish-speaking diaspora on either side of the Atlantic—the United States and the Central and Eastern European heartland. Secondary centers established in the Atlantic space or other parts of the world also took part in those exchanges.

From the late 19th century to the Second World War, the Yiddish language and culture experienced an intense transatlantic moment as Ashkenazy Jews moved from one side of the ocean to the other. This raises several questions. Who were the people and what were the conduits that made these connections between the East European Yiddish heartland and the countries of immigration possible? What part did the Atlantic space play in the cultural relations and circulation of Central and Eastern European Jews' common language between Europe, the Americas and other parts of the world? How did these connections evolve between the late 19th and early 21st century?

The dissemination of Yiddish across the world from the 19th century

In the 18th century, a number of Jews from Poland and Germany arrived in North America, where their Sephardic counterparts, whose roots were in the Iberian Peninsula before they scattered to the colonial dependencies of the Netherlands and England, had already settled the century before. In the 19th century, Ashkenazy immigrants outnumbered their Sephardic forerunners in the make-up of North American Jewry. Between 1820 and 1880, about 250,000 Jews, many of them from the German states and lands under Austrian control, arrived in the United States. Some were relatively prosperous German-speakers, but most were modest, traditional, Yiddish-speaking Jews whose ancestors had long before settled in the German-speaking parts of Europe. Approximately 30,000 Russian Jews also crossed the Atlantic during this period.

They were just a small portent of things to come. In the 1880s, pogroms and anti-Jewish laws enacted after Czar Alexander II's assassination on March 1, 1881 spurred a massive wave of Jewish immigration from the Russian Empire. Between the early 1880s and 1914, roughly 1.6 million Russian Jews settled in the United States, where they were joined by around 380,000 more from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and 80,000 from Romania. Between 1899 and 1914, about 120,000 Central and East European Jews immigrated to Great Britain, 90,000 to Canada and Argentina, 30,000 to France, 25,000 to South Africa and 10,000 to Brazil. Outside the Atlantic space, approximately 70,000 settled in Palestine.



Greeting card depicting American Jews welcoming their counterparts from the Russian Empire, New York, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1909

Source: Wikipedia

For these immigrants, most of them penniless, crossing the Atlantic was an eagerly awaited yet frightening experience that permeated imaginations on either side of the ocean both because of the hopes raised by a voyage sometimes compared to the parting of the Red Sea and the grueling traveling conditions in steerage. Negative representations, including the Titanic (1912)—many of the victims, such the famous Straus couple, were Jewish—found their way into Yiddish folklore. But the desire to leave the violence, discrimination and poverty of Central and Eastern Europe behind outweighed the fear of a crossing. That is why the rate of return, which was not *insignificant in the 1880s and '90s*, plummeted, especially after the 1903 Kichinev pogrom. According to demographer Jakob Lestschinsky, only 5.2% of the Jews who immigrated to the United States from 1908 to 1925 permanently returned to their country of origin, a rate much lower than those of other groups (55.8% for Italians and 15.3% for Germans during the same period).

Jewish immigration to the United States dried up during the First World War but briefly resumed afterwards until 1921 and 1924, when the government imposed tight quotas on immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe (they were not lifted until 1965). Many Central and Eastern European Jews still longed to emigrate, for different reasons, including the Bolshevik Revolution, the pogroms during the ensuing civil war, anti-Jewish hostility and the enactment of anti-Semitic laws in the countries that emerged from the breakup of the Central European empires. Barred from entering the United States, they set their hopes on Palestine and, in the Atlantic space, Canada, South Africa, Western Europe and Latin America, even though in the late 1920s and in the 1930s, several countries, such as Brazil in 1937, enacted laws restricting Jewish immigration. In the second half of the 1920s, approximately 40% of the Jews who left Central and Eastern Europe went to Latin American countries while, on the other side of the Atlantic, 80,000 settled in France between the wars. Despite the quotas, the United States remained a pillar of the Yiddish-speaking world until the Second World War. In the late 1920s, it had a half-million more Yiddish-speakers than the other major center, Poland.

In the neighborhoods where they lived (the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Praça Onze in Rio de Janeiro, Goes in Montevideo, Villa Crespo in Buenos Aires, Whitechapel in London and the Marais in Paris), Jewish immigrants created an intense community life through their language, which incorporated words in English (*biznis* for *business, fektri* for *factory*) or Spanish (*bayle* for *baile*, *bolitshe* for *boliche*). These words were helpful in engaging in everyday conversations in the new country's language and helped them integrate. Yiddish could be read on storefronts and heard with the inflections of Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian dialects in streets, sweatshops, stores, restaurants and apartment buildings. It was the language of the many institutions created to meet the needs of a population that, through its community life, built a microcosm continuously adapting to a new environment. Wherever they lived, the immigrants created the same organizations: synagogues, prayer halls, mutual social and financial aid societies, political groups, trade unions, youth movements, sports associations, book clubs, theaters, cinemas, newspapers and publishing houses (such as the Hebrew Publishing Company founded by Joseph Werbelowsky in 1900). Yiddish was always at least one of the languages used.



A Jewish bakery/pastry shop at 27 rue des Rosiers in the Marais neighborhood of Paris, 1895

Source: Wikipedia

The latter played a critical role in the lives of Jewish immigrants. The modern Yiddish press began expanding in Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1880s before experiencing a golden age in 1930s Poland. Jewish immigrants brought this means of communication with them wherever they went in large enough numbers. The wider the Yiddish world grew, the more vital the press became for the circulation of information and ideas. Before the Second World War, the most influential newspapers in the countries of immigration were *Di tsayt* (*The Times*) in the United Kingdom; *Parizer haynt* (*Paris Today*) in France; *Dos naye vort* (*The New World*) in South Africa; *Di prese* (*The Press*) in Argentina; *Di yidishe tsaytung* (*The Jewish Journal*) in Brazil; *Der keneder adler* (*The Canadian Eagle*) in Canada; *Havaner lebn* (*Havana Life*) in Cuba*;* and of course *Forverts* (*The Jewish Daily Forward*), founded in New York in 1897, which boasted the highest circulation of any Yiddish newspaper in the world (250,000 copies a day by the late 1920s). In some countries, however, conditions could be less favorable. For example, in 1941, Brazil's nationalist dictator Getúlio Vargas banned the use of foreign languages in education and publishing, which led to the closure of Yiddish newspapers.



Forverts newsboys waiting for their copies, New York, March 1913

Source: Wikipedia

In the late 19th and early 20th century, immigrants participated in promoting Yiddish in Central and Eastern European Jewish communities through the press, radio (from the 1920s) and many literary, artistic, political, social and educational activities. Several movements that had arisen in Europe found fertile ground in the countries of immigration, making Yiddish a key component of "Jewish diaspora nationalism", an ideology that developed in various forms in parallel, and not unrelated to Zionism. Simon Dubnow conceptualized one current, autonomism, which demanded civil rights (especially linguistic) for Jews. Members of the *Bund*, a Jewish revolutionary socialist party founded in the Russian Empire en 1897, acknowledged the ethno-national dimension of Jewishness and promoted Yiddish as the language of the Jewish proletariat without renouncing their internationalism. Territorialists (*fraylandistn* in Yiddish) sought an underpopulated area (which ruled out Palestine) where Central and Eastern European Jews could establish agricultural and industrial colonies to secure the continuity of their socioeconomic life and the development of their culture and language. Yiddisism was a cultural and linguistic movement whose goals were set out at the first international conference in support of the Yiddish language, in Czernowitz in 1908. Its advocates unconditionally promoted Yiddish, seeing as it the only true basis for forging a modern Jewish identity.

The creation of two emblematic institutions in independent Poland (1918-1939) attests to the plethora of theories, ideologies and movements that gave Yiddish a central place. One, the *Tsentrale yidishe shul-organizatsye* (TSYSHO, Central Organisation of Jewish Schools), established in Warsaw in 1921, coordinated a network of socialist-minded Yiddish-language schools. The other, the *Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut* (YIVO, Institute for Jewish Research), was a multidisciplinary research center founded in Berlin in 1925 and later established in Vilna. Its work (notably that of the famous linguist Max

Weinreich) focused on Yiddish and the people who spoke it. Both organizations received moral and financial backing from Yiddish-speaking communities around the world that wanted to help them develop their culture. From this perspective, the importance that many immigrants continued to give Yiddish around the world demonstrated not only a concern with keeping a link to the past, but also their desire to participate, in the present and for the future, in building a new Yiddish culture. The movement's epicenter remained Central and Eastern Europe, but it flourished wherever Jews from this part of the world lived. That, among other things, accounts for the expansion of intense multidirectional, transnational relations in and at the service of Yiddish, especially in the Atlantic space, between the late 19th century and the Second World War.

Intense transatlantic circulation until the Second World War

The links between the "Old Country" (di alte heym in Yiddish) and Yiddish-speaking communities across the world, as well as the relationships that developed directly between them, were based primarily on mobility. The unprecedented scale of Jewish migration from Central and Eastern Europe between the late 19th century and just before the war has already been mentioned. It is also worth pointing out that quite a few immigrants embarked upon a multi-stage odyssey taking them from one point to another on the map of Jewish migrations. Some spent several months or years in Western Europe before crossing the Atlantic, while others landed in a country on the American continent before settling down elsewhere. Moreover, immigration from Central and Eastern Europe must not be seen as a one-way street. While few returned to Europe permanently, some went back to see family or conduct business. Many Yiddish-speaking figures, such as American writers Moyshe Nadir and Joseph Opatoshu, visited the USSR to experience "real socialism" first-hand and observe "proletarian" Yiddish culture in the language that developed there in the 1920s. Most Jewish immigrants, however, nurtured ties with their relatives and birth country by corresponding. This means of communication became so important that it found its way into popular music. In 1907, singer-songwriter Solomon Smulewitz, who was born in the Russian Empire and immigrated to the United States in 1889, wrote a tear-jerker called *A brivele der mamen* (*A Letter to Mama*). It became a Yiddish classic.



The score of *A brivele der mamen*

Source: Library of Congress

Other go-betweens traveled in the opposite direction, leaving Central and Eastern Europe to visit Yiddish-speaking communities in Western Europe and the New World. They included performers in search of an audience as well as cultural, social and political activists seeking to advance their cause. Some, such as poet and playwright Leib Malach, were what today would be called globetrotters. Malach began his literary career in Poland, traveled across Western Europe and the Near East, settled for a while in Argentina, spent several years in the United States and returned to Poland for a time before moving on to Paris, where he lived for the rest of his life. Other writers crossed the seas for stays lasting several weeks or months. Between the wars, for example, famous Yiddish authors from the United States (H. Leivick) and Poland (Melech Ravitch) met with an enthusiastic reception from Argentinean Jews. The same is true of other writers who went "on tour" in Latin America. By welcoming them with open arms, Jewish immigrant organizations expressed their desire to fully belong to transnational networks of Yiddish culture at a time when the communities in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil still seemed marginal compared to those in Poland and the United States. They thoroughly enjoyed the recognition that these writers gave them in the texts they based on their travels.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, books culturally connected Yiddish-speaking communities to each other more than touring authors did. Yiddish culture first traveled from one continent to another through works that circulated widely between countries and across the ocean. They were sold in bookstores or could be read in or borrowed from Yiddish libraries that sprang up around the world. Readers found books published in the countries where they were living as well as abroad, mainly in Poland and the United States, which had the world's largest Yiddish-language publishing market. The same books could be found

in São Paulo at the Biblioteca israelita (Jewish Library) founded in 1913, Paris at the bibliothèque Medem (Medem Library) created in 1928 by Bundist-leaning Polish immigrants and Buenos Aires at the *Tsentrale yidishe biblyotek* (Yiddish Central Library) established in 1939 by the Argentinean branch of YIVO.



The founding committee of the Medem Library in Paris, 1929

Source: Wikipedia

Books brought Yiddish-speakers on both sides of the Atlantic closer together. Some authors who left Central and Eastern Europe nostalgically idealized life before immigration, often to remind "greenhorns" what they risked losing in their new lives. Others lamented the loss of Jewish authenticity and the dissolution of traditional values and behavior in upwardly-mobile Jewish families. This theme permeates the work of Shloyme Zytner, who immigrated to Uruguay, and his counterpart in Cuba, Osher Schuchinski. Nostalgia for the *shtetl*, the Jewish villages they left behind, can also be found in the publications of *landsmanshaftn*, mutual aid societies set up by immigrants from the same town. These organizations served as a bridge between the Old World and the New. For all that, immigrants did not forget the hardships they had endured in Central and Eastern Europe, as illustrated by Mordkhe Alperson's *Der Lindzhero*, published in Buenos Aires in 1937. The main character, a Jewish immigrant from Ukraine, becomes a *linyera*, an itinerant farm laborer and an archetype in Argentinean literature. But immersion in the local society cannot blot out the memory of his sister having been raped and his family killed in a pogrom during the Russian Civil War.

Like Alperson, many authors focused on the lives of Jewish immigrants. They wrote for both a public eager to see an affirmation of their own experience and Jewish readers in Central and Eastern Europe. Many books were about immigrant life in the United States, the *goldene medine* (golden land) that captured the Jewish imagination. An example is Sholem Aleichem's unfinished novel *Motl Peyse dem khazns* (*Motel, the Cantor's Son*), published in two volumes between 1907 and 1916 as well as serially in the American

Yiddish press. Some writers also took a passionate interest in Latin America, which intrigued Jews in Russia and Poland as well as those already in North America. This surely explains why in 1916 a Yiddish publisher in the United States came out with one of the first travel books about Jewish life in Latin America, *Fun vayte lender* (*From Distant Lands*), by Polish Jewish playwright and author Perets Hirshbeyn.

Meanwhile, Central and Eastern European Jews could read a host of articles in the Yiddish press about "new countries" and the life that immigrants made in them. However, these pieces also contributed to reinforcing negative images, such as the persistent stereotype of Jewish crime and prostitution in Argentina. Novels and *shund* ("trashy") plays performed from Warsaw to Paris and New York also kept this trope alive. Yiddish newspapers in Western Europe, the Americas and South Africa flooded immigrants with information on the situation of Jews in their home countries. Over the course of his life, educator and writer José Winiecki, who immigrated from Poland to Mexico in 1921, wrote articles for Polish, Mexican, Canadian, American and Israeli newspapers. Periodicals also contributed to the circulation of ideas and culture within the diaspora by publishing poets and writers to satisfy readers thirsting for Yiddish literary creation.

Some newspapers and magazines could be read both in the country of publication and abroad. Between the wars, the library of the *Poylish yidisher farband in argentine* (Polish Jewish Union in Argentina) in Buenos Aires offered publications from Poland, the United States and Palestine. Among them must have been Warsaw's weekly Yiddish magazine *Literarishe bleter* (*Literary Leaves*), which had about 20,000 readers worldwide and published articles by writers in Poland as well as elsewhere. *Literarishe bleter* kept readers abreast of developments in Jewish life and Yiddish culture both in Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic. Its readers, contributors and content made it a forum of dialogue between the Yiddish heartland in Central and Eastern Europe and immigrant communities abroad. But circulation was not always easy: between the wars, the Polish government banned Yiddish dailies from Argentina on several occasions for fear of letting revolutionary propaganda into the country.

Yiddish theater also sparked an intense transatlantic circulation of ideas and fostered cultural exchanges within the Yiddish diaspora. In the 1880s, playwrights and theater companies began moving West as part of the great Eastern European Jewish migration. In the late 19th century, London and, to a lesser degree, Paris became major centers of Yiddish theater. Playwrights and actors barred from freely exercising their art in the Russian Empire lived in Whitechapel. Many eventually moved on to the United States, where Yiddish theater flourished more than anywhere else outside the Central and Eastern European epicenter of creativity. Playwrights and actors excelling in different genres wrote and performed in romantic plays and historical operas. Important works were produced by Leon Kobrin in a "realist" vein to be more in touch with the problems and feelings of immigrants.



Poster for a Boston production of Sholem Aleichem's play *Dos groyse gevins* (The Jackpot), 1938

Source: Wikipedia

The vibrant Yiddish theater scene in the United States led to outlets abroad, for the circulation of dialogues, monologues and songs allowed audiences from Latin America to Europe to enjoy plays written in the *goldene medine*. One of them was Jacob Gordin's highly successful *Mirele Efros*, which premiered in New York in 1898 before touring the world. Actors and theater companies also performed outside the country. Artists from the United States, such as famous New Yorker Boris Tomashefsky, were already treading the boards in Central and Eastern Europe before 1914, and Maurice Schwartz's company went on a triumphant tour of Latin American in 1929. But the American Yiddish theater's international success did not deter Polish companies from crossing the Atlantic in the opposite direction. To mention just one example, in the 1920s the famous Vilner trupe (The Vilna Company) performed in Paris, New York and London.

The same round-trip circulation between Europe and the Americas boosted the growth of Yiddish cinema, which appeared in Russia in the early 1910s. Actors had already recited the dialogue of silent movies, but the golden age of Yiddish film did not dawn until the 1930s after talkies arrived. Most of the greatest successes, often based on literary classics, theater and Yiddish song, were shot in the United States—*Dem khazns zindl* (*The Cantor's Son*) in 1937—and Poland—*Der dibek* (*The Dibbuk*) in 1937, sometimes leading to fruitful collaboration between the two countries. In 1936, an American, Joseph Green, and a Pole, Jan Nowina-Przybylski, co-directed *Yidl mitn fidl* (*Yidl with His Fiddle*) in Warsaw and Krakow. The female lead, Molly Picon, was enormously popular in Poland, the United States and other countries.



Advertisement for *Yidl mitn fidl* in the Hebrew-language newspaper *Davar* (created in Palestine in 1925), June 18, 1937

Source: Wikipedia

Commemorating, rebuilding and transmitting since 1945

By the late 1930s, there were nearly 13 million Yiddish-speakers worldwide, fueling intense transnational circulation, mainly via the Atlantic crossroads. The Second World War dramatically cut off the relationship between the Yiddish world in Europe and its extensions beyond. Immigration became an impossibility for European Jews, except for a lucky few who managed to board a ship for the Americas and the 200,000 to 300,000 Polish Jews who fled to the Soviet Union. Even correspondence stopped. Jews who fell under Nazi domination suffered unprecedented violence that evolved into genocide in 1941. As information trickled in, Jews in the United Kingdom, the Americas, South Africa and Australia feared the worst while trying to fathom what their counterparts were enduring under the yoke of Hitler's Germany.

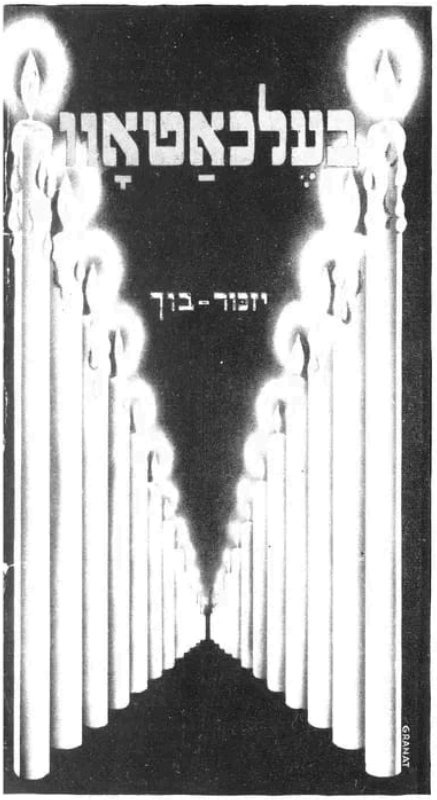
The destruction of the Jews of Europe had a catastrophic impact on Yiddish. Five million Yiddish-speakers were murdered. Historic centers of creation were wiped out, starting with those in Poland's large cities. After the war, the nearly-complete annihilation of the Yiddish-speaking populations of Central and Eastern Europe, the departure of survivors intent on leaving places that had become gigantic cemeteries and where anti-Semitism still raged, and Stalin's persecution of Soviet Jewish culture shifted the focus of Yiddish linguistic and cultural exchanges to the Atlantic space strictly speaking and Palestine (which became Israel in 1948). At the same time, the Soviet Union was tightening its grip on Central and Eastern Europe, severing, or at least weakening, the ties between Jews in the Western world and those in the Communist bloc.

The radical reconfiguration of the geography of the Yiddish world after the war confirmed the predominance of the United States, symbolized by YIVO's move to New York in 1940, over secondary yet nevertheless dynamic centers in Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, Montreal, Melbourne, Antwerp, Paris and,

temporarily, displaced person camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, which held tens of thousands of homeless Jewish survivors and refugees immediately after 1945. However, some "peripheral areas" became more preponderant in the Yiddish-speaking diaspora after 1945. For example, Argentina played a key role in the publication of Yiddish books during the first decades after the war. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, it also took in major writers and artists from Europe (such as Shmerke Kaczerginski) to help salvage Yiddish culture and ensure its long-term survival in the country.

In various countries, intense individual and collective efforts were undertaken in Yiddish to memorialize the Jewish experience during the war. On the one hand, testimonials, prose, poems and plays formed the basis of what was then called *khurbn-literatur* (destruction literature); on the other, the collection of documents and historical analyses contributed to what historian-survivor Philip Friedman called *khurbn-forshung* (destruction research). Writings and knowledge about the Holocaust circulated in Yiddish thanks to publishers that continued exporting their books. For example, in 1938, periodicals that still crossed borders and oceans despite the world's division into two blocs, and authors who arrived with the Jewish migrations of the immediate post-war period, created the CYCO (Central Yiddish Cultural Organization, *Tsentrale yidishe kultur-organizatsye* in Yiddish) in New York. In doing so, books about the Holocaust came into their own. Such was the case of Zvi Kolitz's short story *Yosl Rakovers vendung tsu got* (*Yosl Rakover Talks to God*) published in a Buenos Aires Yiddish newspaper in 1946. Kolitz was a Lithuanian-born Jew who had settled in Palestine and was passing through Argentina. The story is the fictional testament of a pious Jew who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and calls out to the Almighty when on the brink of death. It was translated into English and published in the United States shortly after coming out in Argentina. In 1954, the work resurfaced in an altered form in the famous Yiddish-language Israeli magazine *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Key*). The style was reworked and it was mistakenly presented as a genuine document.

If texts about the war years circulated transnationally, it is also because Yiddish-speaking organizations cooperated across borders and oceans to publish *yisker bikher* (singular *yisker bukh*), or "memorial books" in remembrance of towns and villages where Jewish communities were annihilated during the Holocaust. They were usually produced by *landsmanshaftn* on different continents. To mention just one example, in 1951 the *Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine* (Central Union of Polish Jews in Argentina) published the Bełchatów *yisker bukh* in Buenos Aires with the collaboration of *landsmanshaftn* in Brazil and North America. Another transnational publishing initiative with a commemorative purpose was a collection of 175 works entitled *Dos poylishe yidntum* (*Polish Jewry*) published in Buenos Aires between 1946 and 1966 under the direction of Marc Turkow. The volumes were a compilation of prewar classics and books written after and about the Holocaust and disseminated to the four corners of the Yiddish-speaking world.



Cover of the *Bełchatów* yisker bukh published in Buenos Aires in 1951

Source: The NYPL Digital Collections

While a substantial amount of creative energy was poured into remembering the victims of the Holocaust and their lost world, postwar Yiddish culture did not look only to the past. An example is the 100-volume collection *Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur* (*Masterpieces of Yiddish Literature*) published in Buenos Aires between 1957 and 1984 by Samuel Rollansky with support from a South African benefactor. The compilation turned Yiddish letters into a literary canon, but with a forward-looking bent. Rollansky wanted to provide educators with the teaching resources they needed to ensure the long-term survival of Yiddish heritage. Many activists on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond were driven by the desire to breathe new life into and pass on the Yiddish language and culture. Under their guidance, Yiddish cultural life continued after 1945 in countries that had not undergone Nazi occupation (starting with the United States) and where Holocaust survivors arrived after the war. There was a resurgence of Yiddish-speaking communities in Western Europe, especially in Paris, where three Yiddish dailies were published after the war. Journalists, writers, poets, playwrights, musicians, educators, political activists and community leaders determinedly maintained the "golden chain" of tradition, creation and transmission.

The *Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres* (World Congress for Jewish Culture), founded in New York in 1948 to promote Yiddish culture through branches in the United States, France and Argentina, coordinated their efforts. Admittedly with less intensity than before, books and newspapers continued to circulate, writers began travelling again to meet their readers and artists resumed their international tours, such as Lin Jaldati, a Dutch-born Yiddish singer based in the German Democratic Republic. During the second half of the 20th century, she performed on both sides of the Iron Curtain, in Israel and in North America. The desire to participate in the reconstruction and expansion of Yiddish culture could even be seen in minor centers, contributing to the group effort to enrich and preserve it, as the revealing title of an

anthology of Brazilian Yiddish literature published in Rio de Janeiro in 1956 suggests: *Undzer baytrog. Ershter yidisher zamlbukh in Brazil* (*Our Contribution. The First Yiddish Anthology in Brazil*). Until at least the 1960s, the postwar period witnessed a fresh burst of activity that some observers saw as a swan song.

As the children of immigrants had already done before them, those who were born in the countries chosen by their parents after 1945 or arrived with them at a very early age after the war became acculturated, whether in the United States, France or Argentina. But unlike immigrants who arrived as adults, acculturation was accompanied, as with their forerunners, by a distancing from the Yiddish language and culture. Many authors, such as Brazil's Rosa Palatnik, wrote about this process with both irony and sadness. But now there was a difference. Before the war, the steady stream of new immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe continuously replenished the Yiddish language and culture, making up for the preceding generation's assimilation. This was no longer possible. First, Jews were not free to emigrate en masse. Second, it was hard to keep Yiddish culture alive while it was under close surveillance in the USSR and its satellite states.

Yiddish-speakers and, even more so, activists dedicated to preserving and promoting Yiddish culture, faced painful questions. What role could the language still be given when its speakers had been murdered, young people were losing interest and their elders aged and died? How could it stand up to the majority language and to Hebrew, Israel's official language, which exerted a power of attraction on the new generation? Would people be satisfied with painful nostalgia for a fantasized "Yiddishland"? Translation was quickly seen as an answer to these questions. It introduced Yiddish literature to as many people as possible, starting with Jews who do not master their parents or grandparents' language, especially in the languages of the Atlantic space (English, Spanish, French and Portuguese). The movement was part of the vogue for "post-vernacular" Yiddish (Jeffrey Shandler), which can be seen in other phenomena that have transformed ways of speaking in and about Yiddish since the 1970s, such as the revival of Yiddish song and *klezmer* music and the desire of new publics to learn the language.

For several decades now, people have crossed the Atlantic in both directions to study Yiddish at intensive summer courses in the United States, Germany, France, Israel and Central and Eastern Europe. Many of them have been Jews wanting to rediscover a culture and language that may or may not have been partially passed on to them, but numerous others have no direct family ties to this cultural heritage. A shared love for the Yiddish language and culture connects people from various backgrounds in North and South America to their counterparts in Europe, Israel, South Africa and Australia. Today, they share their passion online. Moreover, due to the pandemic, websites (often originating in the United States) such as *In geveb* (*In Web*), the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project platform and the Yiddish Book Center's digital library, may now be their favorite place to discuss Yiddish. Thus, in the 21st century, Yiddish remains a cornerstone of transatlantic cultural exchanges whose contemporary transformations cannot be seen only in the light of an inexorable decline.

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NOTES

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