Postvernacular Yiddish: A Case Study of the Yiddish Book Center

Carole Renard

Submitted to the Department of Jewish Studies
of Smith College
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Justin Cammy, Honors Project Advisor

May 13, 2013
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Jewish Studies and thesis advisor, Justin Cammy, for his endless support not only throughout this process, but since I came to his office as a timid first-year three years ago. I went in to ask about a paper and found myself planning a trip to Israel. Justin has been a mentor and a tremendous resource, and for that I owe him my deepest gratitude. I would also like to thank my Anthropology advisor and second reader on this thesis, Caroline Melly, for her support and insight, and for watching me grow since my senior year of high school, when I took her Introduction to Anthropology class. Her enthusiasm and devotion to her students inspire me.

I also wish to thank Joel Kaminsky for enlarging my appreciation for Jewish Studies and offering continued intellectual stimulation.

I would be remiss if I did not thank Ernest Benz, for his wonderfully insightful and detailed notes on my numerous proposal drafts, as well as his many long and helpful emails regarding deadlines and thesis procedures. I truly appreciate his support and dedication.

I also want to thank Christa Whitney, who, never having met me, agreed to have coffee with me last summer to discuss my thesis ideas and who subsequently helped me in various ways with my second chapter.

I would also like to thank my parents. My father, for his love, faith, and support from overseas and my mother for spending more hours than I can count listening to my ideas, proofreading drafts, and boosting my confidence whenever it began to wane. Thank you also to Jojo, my younger sister, for her patience and support, for always being able to make me laugh, and for her unconditional love. To all three, I am more grateful than I could ever express on paper.

I want to thank all of my friends, here and abroad, who have listened to me talk incessantly about my thesis and have expressed nothing but interest, support, and love.

I also want to thank J.A.C., who helped guide me through this process and allowed me to discover the depths of my strength and curiosity.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my maternal grandmother, Shayndel Baila, also known as Jeanette, who is no longer with us but who fostered my connection to Judaism and who inspired my initial interest in Yiddish.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 3  
Chapter 1 – The Building .......................................................................................................................... 26  
Chapter 2 – The Wexler Oral History Project ..................................................................................... 63  
Chapter 3 – The Pakn Treger ................................................................................................................. 92  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 113  
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 117
Introduction

This thesis explores how the concepts of postvernacular Yiddish\(^1\) and Yiddish revitalization converge in the context of the Yiddish Book Center. The Yiddish Book Center, to which I will refer henceforth as the YBC, the Book Center, or the Center, is a non-profit organization situated on the campus of Hampshire College in Amherst, MA which, over 30 years ago, set for itself the mission of rescuing abandoned Yiddish books from around the world. Today, it positions itself as one of the most dynamic centers for the dissemination of modern Jewish culture in North America.

Throughout my thesis, I examine the ways that the YBC embodies the performativity of postvernacular Yiddishland, in which knowing the language is secondary to performing it as a cultural symbol. I explore the ways sentimentality, nostalgia, remorse, and guilt intersect in this unique space, as well as the way the Center capitalizes on the anxiety of language loss by identifying itself as a resource for language revitalization. I argue that the YBC provides a very particular way of conceptualizing Yiddish, namely as a performative and symbolic language rather than a spoken one. Through both its successes and shortcomings the YBC nevertheless provides insight into the complexity of Yiddish in contemporary America. As native Yiddish speakers and Holocaust survivors are beginning to disappear, a sentimental affinity for Yiddish seems to be growing. Paradoxically, this desire for the lost world of Yiddish has not translated into a noticeable increase in

---

\(^1\) Jeffrey Shandler defines “postvernacular Yiddish” as the post-Holocaust relationship between secular Jews and Yiddish, in which the secondary, symbolic value of the language has become more prioritized over its value as a mode of communication. Though this relationship began before World War II, it has become increasingly prevalent since that time.
commitment to mastering the language. The YBC, as I argue, embodies this strange
cultural phenomenon in which Yiddish is admired more for its value as symbolic
ethnic gesture than for the complexity of its language or the richness of its
literature.

Yiddish, one of the major Jewish languages, was created around a thousand
years ago by the Jews who settled in the Rhineland, called the Ashkenazim. In
contrast to Sephardic Jews, who lived in Spain and Portugal until the Spanish
Inquisition, Ashkenaz is the Hebrew word used to refer to the Jews who settled in
continental Western Europe more than one thousand years. Yiddish results from
the encounter between the medieval German dialects that immigrant Jews heard
and the Jews’ own languages, which at the time included Hebrew, the holy tongue,
and Aramaic, the more vernacular language which originates from their exile to
Babylon beginning in the Sixth Century BCE. Thus, the Western Yiddish that
originated in the Rhinelands is composed primarily of Middle High German, Hebrew,
and Aramaic. Dovid Katz, in his book Words on Fire, describes the convergence as a
big bang, as “two wholly different language families, Semitic and Germanic, [that]
were joined in an everlasting union that came to be called Yiddish.” As Jews moved
eastward through Europe in the late Middle Ages and settled in the areas of the
Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Yiddish eventually adopted a significant amount
of local Slavicisms into its vocabulary.

---

3 Ibid., 23.
4 Ibid., 24-25.
At its height, on the eve of World War II, Yiddish was spoken by around 11 million people worldwide\(^5\). The large-scale migration of Jews from the Russian Empire after the outbreak of the 1881 pogroms which continued through the interwar period, and then again among refugees after the Holocaust resulted in the establishment of Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities throughout the world, especially in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, South Africa, Australia, and later Israel. Thus, it emerged as a truly transnational, global Jewish language. By contrast, today only an estimated 1 million Jews continue to speak the language\(^6\). Though Yiddish is technically growing because Hasidic Jews, a branch of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry, continue to speak it fluently and transmit it intergenerationally, the language is nevertheless considered threatened by many people. In this thesis, I focus especially on the relationship of secular Jews with Yiddish today, and the way the Yiddish Book Center both reflects and manages this relationship.

Before embarking on this project, it is important to define certain key terms, including language endangerment, language revival, postvernacular Yiddish, and Yiddishland.

First, in order to fully comprehend the interplay between language endangerment and language revival, we must look at definitions of culture and language. Lev Michael defines both culture and language as social behaviors or

---


\(^6\) Ibid., 1.
knowledge learned through intergenerational transmission. In other words, the survival of cultures and languages rely on the natural transmission from one generation to the next. Furthermore, Michael writes that language acquisition depends on the acquisition of a language through social activity, “so that linguistic knowledge is embedded in knowledge about appropriate language use in a social context.” Furthermore, this knowledge must be not only learned but also internalized, so that speakers can eventually learn to use the language without what he terms “social scaffolding”. Thus, the transmission of language and culture depends on a social structure that supports the intergenerational, natural transmission of these behaviors.

The definition of endangered or threatened languages (as opposed to dead languages) is another essential concept to examine that informs the discussion that follows. David Crystal asserts that endangered languages are ones that are still spoken by enough people to make their survival possible, but only with enough of a commitment from community members. In other words, the language has not yet completely vanished from the community, but will likely not subsist much longer without a collective interest in its revival. Crystal also differentiates between potentially endangered language, which he defines as “socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose

---

8 Ibid., 128.  
9 Ibid., 128.  
child speakers”\textsuperscript{11} and endangered languages, which he defines as having “few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults”\textsuperscript{12}.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the situation of Yiddish is more complicated and does not fall neatly into the category of endangered language. Among secular Jews, who remember a world in which Yiddish was the language of humanism, political activism, and Jewish engagement with the world, it can certainly be considered threatened. However, among Hasidim, Yiddish is used for the opposite purpose, namely as a means to isolate themselves from contact with the secular world. Because the Hasidic population has high birthrates, Yiddish is actually growing again, so it is arguable that Yiddish is far from endangered. Though an in-depth discussion about this issue is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is an important factor to keep in mind, for it not only challenges the prevailing notion that Yiddish is dying, but also calls attention to the chasm that separates secular Jews and religious Jews, and their differing relationships to Yiddish. The fact that Hasidic Jews are keeping Yiddish alive as a vernacular language is overlooked by many people because the Hasidic use of Yiddish does not correspond with secular notions of what Yiddish was or ought to be. Thus, the popular trope of Yiddish as threatened, endangered, or dying dismisses the complexity of the language’s current situation and instead bases its vitality on whether it continues to fulfill the functions it once did among secular Jews as the language of Jewish modernity.

That said, in this thesis, I focus on the relationship of secular Jews with Yiddish today, which is experiencing a revival of sorts. The term “revival,” which is

\textsuperscript{11} David Crystal, \textit{Language Death}, 21.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 21.
often synonymous with “revitalization” and “reclamation,” describes the attempt to bring an endangered language back into use in its community and sometimes beyond. Jacqueline Urla, who writes about the revival of Basque, presents another important nuance to the term “revival.” She argues that the word can sometimes be misleading, as it suggests a return to something that was lost. She writes that, “while language advocacy often frames itself as recovery of the past, the outcomes and objectives of the movement are as much about change and reinvention as they are about reproduction. Revival is fundamentally about creating a new linguistic future.” Indeed, the exact reproduction of a language as it existed in the past makes very little sense. The need to revive a language in and of itself indicates a failure to maintain that language in current historical and geographical contexts, and therefore necessitates a renegotiation of the language. The language must be reshaped to fit the current needs and circumstances of the population if it has any chance of survival or revival. Furthermore, as Nikolai Vakhtin, who studies the resurrection of Copper Island Aleut language, writes, “language is a highly viable and an extremely flexible system; it is often not at all easy to eradicate a language.” So it is in the case of Yiddish. Though the language has been said to be dying for some time and is no longer a vernacular among almost all secular Jews, it has been reinvented for cultural rather than conversational usage.

---

Since its beginning about a century ago, linguistic anthropology has produced an incredibly rich body of literature on endangered languages. Anthropologists have studied not only endangered languages themselves, in the hopes of at least preserving records of them, but also the cultural significance of language, and strategies for language revival. Recently, such revival efforts have increased throughout the world. Jacqueline Urla writes that, “in the last decade of the twentieth century, public and scholarly recognition of language endangerment as well as new international nongovernmental organizations, Web sites, and publications addressing the decline of language diversity worldwide have grown dramatically. With over half the world’s languages predicted to lose their last remaining speakers by 2100 (Nettle and Romaine 2000), the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities have made funding for endangered-language documentation a top priority.”16 Thus, in the past couple of decades, language revival has become not only the project of local communities reconnecting to their roots, but has grown into a larger-scale, corporate venture. Indeed, as the YBC is a leading institution in the revitalization of Yiddish, the negotiation between individual and institutional efforts is a highly prevalent issue, and one that I discuss further in my third chapter when I examine some of the YBC’s fundraising tactics.

16 Urla, Reclaiming Basque, 5.
As Nettle and Romaine write, "every language has its own window on the world. Every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been vehicle to. [...] Moreover, every people has a right to their own language, to preserve it as a cultural resource and to transmit it to their children”17. Indeed, each culture, through language, offers a different perspective on the world. By losing languages, then, we lose entire conceptual frameworks. Marianne Mithun, in “The Significance of Diversity in Language Endangerment and Preservation,” writes that, “Language represents the most creative, pervasive aspect of culture, the most intimate side of the mind”18. The loss of a language is thus the loss of a culture. For though rituals and traditions may survive, they make less sense without the context provided by language.

A logical question follows: how are languages lost? The two most common causes for language endangerment or death are genocide and assimilation, the latter caused by various reasons ranging from immigration to colonization. In the case of Yiddish, a combination of the two caused its decline. The Holocaust eliminated a majority of Eastern European Jews and, in doing so, virtually wiped out Yiddish speakers from Europe, as well as the institutions in the Eastern European heartland that sustained Yiddish as an autonomous culture. Moreover, Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union against Yiddish in its many forms constitutes a second form of linguistic genocide. In 1920, the borders of the USSR contained the second largest

---

Jewish population after Poland, an estimated 2.5 million Jews. The Stalinist purges began in the 1930s, when Yiddish schools and institutes were shut down and Yiddish writers were arrested, tortured, and executed. This decimation of Soviet Yiddish culture continued until the 1950s, when, on August 12, 1952, twenty-four major Yiddish writers and Jewish cultural leaders were shot in the Lubianka prison in Moscow, bringing an end to Soviet Yiddish literature. The creation of the State of Israel also contributed to the decline of Yiddish. Early Jewish settlers in Palestine sought to abandon anything that represented life in the Diaspora. As Katz writes, “Zionism set out to create a new Jew who would resemble the ancient Israelites far more than modern European Jews,” as many considered the Diaspora Jew weak and effeminate. Furthermore, speaking Yiddish was considered a hindrance to the spread of Hebrew, which was to be revived as the official language of Israel. This sentiment went so far that there were isolated incidents of Hebraists actually threatening violence on Yiddish-speaking Jews in the land, beating Yiddish writers, firebombing kiosks, and interrupting any Yiddish events. Hebrew was considered the language of the newer, stronger Jew, and Yiddish, in turn, a threat to this Jewish reinvention.

Finally, in the United States, Canada, South America, South Africa, and Australia, immigrants hoping to advance socially and economically abandoned Yiddish for English. The pressure to abandon Yiddish predates World War II, as Jews

---

20 Ibid., 305.
21 Ibid., 310.
22 Ibid., 310.
23 Ibid., 312.
increasingly perceived Yiddish as an impediment to modernity and encouraged linguistic assimilation into German, Russian, Polish, and other European languages\textsuperscript{24}. Nevertheless, abandonment of Yiddish became especially widespread as Jews left Europe and started new lives on other continents. Grenoble and Whaley also write that speakers often abandon their native tongue “in adaptation to an environment where use of that language is no longer advantageous to them”\textsuperscript{25}. Similarly, Andrew Dalby writes that, “more often the last speakers of any language have switched to another which meets their current needs”\textsuperscript{26}. Indeed, with the case of Yiddish, Jewish immigrants to the United States and their children learned English almost immediately and left behind Yiddish, which was perceived as a hindrance to assimilation, social elevation, and economic prosperity. Thus, between the aftermath of the Holocaust and the strategic abandonment of Yiddish in the United States, within one or two generations, Yiddish virtually disappeared among secular American Jews.

Now that several generations have lived in the United States and secular Jews feel rooted in their American identity, younger generations have become more interested in rediscovering and relearning the language of their grandparents and great-grandparents. While immigrant generations and their children were quick to abandon the language for social and economic elevation (Noah Isenberg writes that immigrants’ children found Yiddish “unnecessary or, worse, such an embarrassing

\textsuperscript{24} Shandler, \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, 13.
\textsuperscript{26} Andrew Dalby, \textit{Language in Danger: The Loss of Linguistic Diversity and the Threat to Our Future} (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), xi.
reminder of immigrant poverty that they based a whole entertainment industry on the comedy of leaving it behind”27), it has now become a source of longing for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these same immigrants. Paul Meyer and Jon Meza Cuero, who write about language revitalization in Tecate, Baja California, pose the question, “Do people need to be assimilated before they can appreciate their ethnic heritage?”28.

As early as 1949, Uriel Weinreich, son of YIVO founder Max Weinreich and leading American theoretical linguist, introduced Yiddish to several American universities as a subject in the science of linguistics29. Though the language was introduced within the department of linguistics, Uriel Weinreich’s death from cancer at a young age inspired his colleagues at YIVO and Columbia University to create an intensive summer Yiddish course30. Within the past twenty-five years, Oxford, Strasbourg, Tel Aviv, and Vilnius Universities followed suit and established summer courses in Yiddish as well. While Yiddish remains a minor language in the context of the Academy, there are centers throughout the world where it flourishes as an academic subject. Today, it is taught in graduate programs at such institutions as Harvard University, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, UCLA, Stanford University, Columbia University, and Emory University in the United States, McGill and the University of Toronto in Canada, and University College London and Oxford in Great Britain, to name a few. More recently, the Hebrew University, Tel

29 Katz, Words on Fire, 356-357.
30 Ibid., 357.
Aviv University, and Ben Gurion University came together to create a graduate consortium in Yiddish studies, and interest in Yiddish is also on the rise in German, Polish, and other European universities. Yiddish festivals, celebrating Yiddish language and culture, have become ever more popular, as has Klezmer music, which both Jewish and non-Jewish musicians have begun to incorporate into their music (Oy Division and SoCalled are two examples). Yiddish has begun to appear on the Internet as well; www.derbay.com, which lists Yiddish events worldwide, and yugntruf.org, “Youth for Yiddish,” are two among many notable websites for Yiddish.

The iconic Forverts newspaper launched an interactive online site just last month, including a section in elementary Yiddish to encourage Yiddish learning. Still, interest in Yiddish remains somewhat superficial, as most secular Jews who express interest in the language are not committed to learning the language itself, but rather wish to use the language as a symbolic cultural marker.

One of the central concepts of this paper is “postvernacular Yiddish,” a term coined by Jeffrey Shandler to describe the state of Yiddish among secular Jews today. It refers to a Yiddish that is no longer used for everyday communication, but instead functions chiefly on a symbolic level. It is a phenomenon motivated primarily by desire – desire for community, for a return to the past, for a new way of being Jewish. Soldat-Jaffe, in her book Twenty-First Century Yiddishism: Language, Identity, and the New Jewish Studies, phrases it slightly differently. She writes, rather, that attachment to Yiddish is “fueled by common concern for Jewish communal continuity and the integrity of intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity”31.

---

Nevertheless, the ideas are similar, in that they indicate cultural anxiety about the future of Jewishness and cultural dissatisfaction with current Jewish community as catalysts for this renewed interest in Yiddish. Allison Schachter describes it as “an anxiety about the illegibility of the past. This is in part a fear that the past, the world of childhood and traditional Jewish texts, still exists but has become unrecognizable”\(^{32}\). While this is indeed a valid argument, anxiety about the past is nevertheless informed by anxiety about the future; if Jews were not worried about their future as a community, then there would be no reason to worry about losing the past. The fear of losing touch with what once was reveals both discontent with the present and uncertainty about the future.

In a way, Shandler touches upon another form of anxiety in his book *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*, when he writes that “the decline in the routine use of Yiddish and other diasporic Jewish languages, especially in spoken form, are both consequences and symbols of other losses: ruptures in intergenerational continuity and the erosion of Jewish sociocultural distinctiveness”\(^{33}\). Renewed interest in Yiddish thus represents an attempt to mend these ruptures. The dissolution of this cultural distinctiveness is a fairly new phenomenon for Jews, who have historically either chosen or been forced to differentiate from other groups. It makes sense that this renegotiation of identity would give rise to anxiety about identity and cultural survival. Shandler also writes that the decline of Jewish vernaculars “challenges long-cherished notions of the


tenacity of diaspora Jewry’s ‘portable culture’ and of Jewishness as a manifestly comprehensive way of life”\(^{34}\). Indeed, it is rather unsettling for a community so defined by distinctiveness and self-sufficiency to suddenly begin losing its language, culture, and traditional ways of life. In a way, the retrieval of Yiddish seems like a manageable way of dealing with this multi-faceted cultural loss.

Secular Jews’ renewed interest in Yiddish does not correspond to their motivation in learning the language, however. Shandler differentiates between devotion to and fluency in Yiddish, writing that there are many Jews who, “profess a profound, genuine attachment to Yiddish who also admit that they don't really know the language; furthermore, they don’t see their lack of fluency as interfering with their devotion”\(^{35}\). He also writes about festival-goers and the discrepancy between their enthusiasm for “the language’s secondary, symbolic level of meaning”\(^{36}\) and their actual competence in Yiddish. In other words, renewed interest in Yiddish has more to do with a feeling of loss or incompleteness than with actual interest in the language itself. The language serves as a symbol for Jewish culture, tradition, and history. Similarly, Soldat-Jaffe describes the difference as one between Yiddish speakers and Yiddish users\(^{37}\), thus marking the difference between people who actually speak Yiddish and people who use it symbolically, to fill a void or mark ethnicity.

This phenomenon is not unique to Yiddish, however. For example, Olga Kazakevich, who writes about language endangerment in Siberia and the Far East,

\(^{34}\) Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 129.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 139.
\(^{37}\) Soldat-Jaffe, *Twenty-First Century Yiddishism*, 78.
writes that, “there is a contradiction between what people say about their attitude
to their ethnic language and what they actually do in practice as far as language use
is concerned.” Many other linguistic anthropologists also address this incongruity,
which is often phrased as an avoidance strategy. Nora Marks and Richard
Dauenhauer, who write about language shift in Southeast Alaska, note that many
people look for quick and easy solutions to language endangerment which require
minimal personal effort or involvement. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer label one of
these strategies the “bureaucratic fix,” which they describe as the inclination to
“create some kind of organization to deal with language and cultural
preservation.” This is indeed observable in Yiddish, where individuals who
express devotion to the language rely on large institutions like YIVO or the Yiddish
Book Center to ensure the language’s survival, while they themselves do little to
learn or transmit the language. It is important to realize, however, that
organizations can only go so far without the involvement of community members.
As Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer write, “organizations can provide focus and
umbrellas of various kinds, but they still require the efforts and cooperation of many
individuals.” While organizations do provide an important source of support and

---

40 YIVO, or the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut, whose English name is the Institute for Jewish Research, is an organization originally founded in 1925 in Berlin and Vilna, Poland. Its main branch was transferred to New York City during World War II. It contains the largest archival collection and library of Jewish history, and has the largest collection of Yiddish-language materials in the world. The institute defines its mission as one “to preserve, study and teach the cultural history of Jewish life throughout Eastern Europe, Germany and Russia” (YIVO website, accessed March 13, 2013, http://www.yivoinstitute.org/).
organizations, language revival depends on an infrastructure that includes both institutions and individuals.

Similarly, David Crystal, in his book *Language Death*, writes that language survival depends on the commitment of the whole or a majority of the community. “People may be very ready to agree that their language needs to be maintained, but do not feel that they themselves have to be involved; they expect others to do it for them”\(^{42}\). Like Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, he adds that, while many assume that an organization will “perform the necessary miracle”\(^{43}\), “there is no such fix. Institutions cannot replace individuals. School programs, no matter how excellent, cannot replace individuals. School programs, no matter how excellent, cannot replace home-based activities”\(^{44}\). Indeed, going by the definitions of culture and language previously provided, language can only exist as a vernacular if it is incorporated into everyday life and transmitted naturally from one generation to the next. Thus, if a community is truly devoted to the revival of its language, its members must make the effort to learn and transmit the language themselves.

Another important term for this paper, and one also introduced by Shandler is “Yiddishland.” Yiddishland describes an imagined community of Yiddish speakers that transcends geographical space and even, in a way, time. It is a space that cannot be marked on a map, but rather comes to life when people use Yiddish, either in spoken or written form. The term reflects the statelessness of Jews in the Diaspora; the lack of a delineated space on the world map necessitated the conjuring of this

\(^{42}\) Crystal, *Language Death*, 118.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 118.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 118.
portable homeland defined by language. While in the past, Yiddishland was more
easily defined as the places in which millions of Jews spoke Yiddish every day, today
its definition is more fluid. Does Yiddishland exist when only two people are
conversing in Yiddish? As Shandler asks, what if only one of the two people is
speaking Yiddish, while the other one answers in English? Can one person speaking
to his/herself in Yiddish constitute a Yiddishland?45. Does the YBC, whose primary
language, counterintuitively, is English, but whose space is dedicated to Yiddish,
constitute a Yiddishland?

Yiddishland is a space that is actively created and constantly negotiated. In
her review of Shandler’s book, Miriam Isaacs writes that, “Shandler challenges the
notion that a language can survive only in the context of total cultural transmission,
a model which depends on geography and where language and culture are integrally
passed form one generation to the next”46. Thus, postvernacular Yiddish defies, or at
least stretches, the definition of language as a behavior that is intergenerationally
transmitted and socially learned. Abigail Wood also defines the phenomenon of
Yiddishland as “a present Yiddish cultural space [...] created via creative
engagement with materials of the Yiddish past”47. By this definition, anything from
attending a klezmer music concert to reading a novel in Yiddish to visiting the YBC
could be defined as visiting Yiddishland.

45 Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, 34.
47 Abigail Wood, “(De)constructing Yiddishland: Solomon and SoCalled’s ‘HipHopKhasene,’”
Furthermore, Shandler adds that, at least today, performativity is a crucial aspect of producing Yiddishland. He writes that the use of Yiddish among secular Jews today stems not from a wish to communicate, but that, “rather, it expresses an aspiration to participate in a wide-ranging cultural project of the imaginary, in which one inhabits an existence, regardless of where one lives or what one is doing”\(^{48}\). In other words, Yiddish today, at least among secular Jews, is an identity, a state of being, rather than a language for communication. Similarly, in his book, Shandler writes that non-Hassidic people having a conversation in Yiddish today are “not simply having a conversation in Yiddish; they’re HAVING A CONVERSATION IN YIDDISH. They want others around them to notice. Indeed, it seems that they aren’t only conversing (and perhaps not really conversing at all); they are performing”\(^{49}\). 

In the book, he also writes that, “every utterance is enveloped in a performative aura, freighted with significance as a Yiddish speech act quite apart from the meaning of whatever words are spoken”\(^{50}\). As Soldat-Jaffe writes, it is a way to perform Jewishness. Relevant to this notion is the fact that “Yiddish” in Yiddish means Jewish; the word designates both the language and its people. Thus, in Yiddish, performing Yiddish is quite literally performing Jewish.

Moreover, Abigail Wood adds that, “today’s imagined portrayals of Yiddishland tend to be ambitiously and extravagantly utopian”\(^{51}\). Indeed, the revival is motivated by a rather idealized representation of the culture that Yiddish

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 127.
\(^{51}\) Wood, "(De)constructing Yiddishland," 264.
represents. There is a tendency among secular Jews today to look back fondly on the perceived simplicity of shtetl\textsuperscript{52} life in the old country and conveniently forget the hardships associated with that same place. As Wisse writes, “with ignorance and distance the inclination to sentimentality increases, so that today the association of Yiddish with nostalgia is almost irresistible”\textsuperscript{53}. In reaction to this phenomenon, Helen Beer writes that, “a Yiddish cultural reclamation needs to absorb all facets of Jewish culture without either idealization or reductionism”\textsuperscript{54}. Similarly, Janet Hadda asserts that recent efforts to “re-create an imagined past have been heavy on songs, paper-cutting, and mock weddings, and rather light on poverty, suicide, and the lack of hygiene”\textsuperscript{55}. Any kind of revival is incomplete without the inclusion of the more negative, or at least darker, aspects of a culture. As Wisse writes, for the revival of an immigrant language to be successful, “sentiment would have to yield to programs of formal and serious study, and serious study of any culture usually challenges the rosy images on which much of the sentiment is based”\textsuperscript{56}. Thus, the prospect of uncovering the less appealing aspects of a language and its culture discourages many community members from fully engaging with the language and its revival.

Furthermore, in \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, Shandler writes that, “Yiddish is embodied rather than uttered. The language functions mainly, sometimes solely, at

\textsuperscript{52} Shtetls were the (primarily) Jewish small towns of Eastern Europe which were wiped out during the Holocaust. Today, the idea of the shtetl functions as a popular representation of the 19th century Eastern European Jewish lifestyle.


the symbolic level, invoking an erstwhile shared ethnic knowledge”\textsuperscript{57}. Similarly, Wisse writes that postvernacular Yiddish is a language “that is now mostly ethnic coloration”\textsuperscript{58}. It has arisen both as a result of Jews becoming more secure in their American identity, and therefore more comfortable reconnecting to their roots, and a general American trend of celebrating multiculturalism rather than demanding assimilation. In that respect, Isenberg writes that, “diversity has replaced assimilation as an American goal, and in this climate Yiddish may have the chance to flourish again”\textsuperscript{59}. Just as the term “revival” is up for interpretation, so is “flourish”; regardless, Isenberg makes an astute observation in pointing out that this new American celebration of multiculturalism has allowed Yiddish to be celebrated once again.

Larry Ray asks, “But how should these revivals be understood? Are they kitsch forms of superficial nostalgia or authentic reconstructions of social memories and engagement with a lost past?”\textsuperscript{60} In fact, the answer is much more nuanced and multi-faceted than one or the other. Rather, revivals often bring into play a combination of nostalgia, guilt, remorse, dissatisfaction with the present, and anxiety about the future, which are all intimately intertwined to motivate a language revitalization effort.

\textsuperscript{57} Shandler, \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, 141.
\textsuperscript{59} Isenberg, “Critical Post-Judaism,” 86.
Outline of the Thesis

My discussion of the Yiddish Book Center and its problematic role in the so-called Yiddish revival is divided into three chapters. The first chapter examines how space (both metaphorical and geographic space) is created and organized inside and outside the YBC building, and how Yiddish functions as a symbolic language which invites visitors to experience a Yiddishland, albeit one with no Yiddish speakers present. First, I investigate the way the design of the building reflects the cultural aims of the YBC; its intentional resemblance to a Polish synagogue and the architect’s statement that one must literally turn one’s back on the 20th century to enter the YBC provide significant insight into the YBC’s conception of Yiddish’s place in modern society. I also explore the way the language is used inside and outside the building. To this end, I examine the use of Yiddish labels, or Yiddish translations of English labels, in a space where most visitors speak English, and none speak exclusively Yiddish. I also look at the permanent exhibitions to understand better how Yiddish is conceptualized and presented, and to gain insight into the reactions (both emotional and intellectual) that the YBC hopes to evoke. Furthermore, I explore the purpose of giant hanging *alef-beys* letters\(^\text{61}\) in the central space of the building, and examine the role they play in conjuring a sense of Jewishness, community, and heritage that is so vital to the Yiddish revival movement. I also argue that the prominent display of the Yiddish alphabet embodies the vexed relationship between Yiddish as heritage symbol and Yiddish as a means of communication.

---

\(^\text{61}\) The *alef-beys* is the Yiddish alphabet, which consists of 22 Hebrew letters.
The second chapter focuses on the Wexler Oral History Project, currently being conducted at the YBC by staff and interns, and directed by a Smith alumna. The oral history project is intended to interview Jews of all ages and backgrounds about their relationship to Yiddish. My explorations in this chapter are two-fold. First, I situate the oral history project in the historical context of Jewish ethnography and analyze the contributions it makes to this field. I then move on to examine the way the interviews themselves shed light on the complexity of secular Jews’ relationships to Yiddish today and the intersection of loss, nostalgia, remorse, and guilt. Furthermore, through the interviews with undergraduate and graduate students, I examine the difficulties and frustrations of studying a language without a homeland.

In my final chapter, I examine the YBC’s publication, *Pakn Treger* (trans. “Book Peddler”), and the different ways it invites readers, both Yiddish-speaking and not, to engage with the language and culture. I answer questions such as: to which populations does the magazine cater?; how is the magazine organized, and in what ways do the different sections invite the readers into the world of Yiddish?; how does the magazine appeal to readers’ nostalgia, and to what end?; what else does the magazine aim to do?; how is the magazine a tool in larger endeavors to attract supporters of Yiddish revival? Here, I focus especially on the publication’s section, “Let’s Learn Yiddish,” as well as the fundraising tactics used throughout the publications.

Through these various explorations, I demonstrate how the YBC both engages with and embodies the concept of postvernacular Yiddish. Through its
complexities, nuances, and contradictions, it is an ideal site to examine the multi-dimensional and sometimes problematic relationships of secular Jews with Yiddish today.
Chapter 1
The Building

The architectural design of the YBC, as well as various ways its space invites visitors to engage with Yiddish, evoke questions about the institution's mission. Specifically, is it a monument to Yiddish, a museum, a book repository, a cultural center, or a virtual Yiddishland? Is its purpose to memorialize Yiddish, or to keep it alive?

History of the Yiddish Book Center

The Yiddish Book Center, originally the National Yiddish Book Center, was founded by Aaron Lansky in 1980. He discovered his passion for Yiddish as an undergraduate student at Hampshire College, and pursued a Master's degree at McGill University in Jewish Studies in the 1970's. The difficulty that he and his classmates faced in acquiring the Yiddish books assigned for classes initiated Lansky's quest. He began putting up signs around Montreal seeking donations of Yiddish books, and eventually began collecting volumes from elderly Jews or young Jews unable to read the books that they had inherited. Lansky quickly realized that there was an enormous amount of unused Yiddish books in the United States, and left graduate school to rescue them.

According to the informational panels in the YBC, scholars at the time estimated that 70,000 or so Yiddish books remained in North America. Instead, Aaron and his fellow volunteers collected that many in the first six months, and have since recovered 1.5 million volumes. In addition to the hard copies, the YBC has
began more recently to engage in a digitization process which has already resulted in most of its collection appearing for free online. Although Yiddish may be a language in decline, it is among the very first literatures to be preserved for posterity in the digital age.

Though the process of collection began in 1980, Lansky did not find a permanent home for the YBC until 1997, when he opened the National Yiddish Book Center on the campus of Hampshire College. Before Hampshire, the books were stored in various other locations in the area. In 1980, Lansky and his colleagues stored their early collection in the Silk Mill in Florence, MA, three miles north of Smith College. They had originally planned to make New York their home base, but Harvard University’s renowned professor of Yiddish literature Ruth Wisse was, according to Lansky, “dead set against it”\(^\text{62}\) because of the politics of the Jewish world in New York\(^\text{63}\); she recommended instead that they find a “Jewishly neutral location”\(^\text{64}\). At the time, they named their organization the National Yiddish Book Exchange to underscore the fact that their goal was not only to find a home for abandoned books but also to redistribute them to interested readers. They replaced “exchange” with “center” two years later, “to reflect [their] expanding mission”\(^\text{65}\) from book repository and exchange location to Jewish cultural center.

Later that year, they moved to an old redbrick schoolhouse in the nearby town of Amherst, MA. In 1986, the Center introduced a summer internship program

---


\(^{63}\) Though the politics of the Jewish world in New York is a fascinating topic unto itself, it is unfortunately beyond the purview of this thesis.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 47.
for college students, which allowed young people to learn Yiddish and sort through unpacked boxes of salvaged books. The Center remained in that location until 1991, when the town needed to use the building as a school again, and the YBC temporarily moved to the campus of Mount Holyoke College, in Hadley, MA. Luckily, at the same time, Hampshire College offered them some space on their campus, as they were seeking to surround the campus with various nonprofit organizations. Lansky describes the opportunity as “a chance to give to Yiddish what Yiddish so urgently needed: an adres, an address, a physical presence, a destination where people from around the world could come to see the books they’d helped us save and celebrate the culture they contained.”66 Between 1991 and 1997, the time it took to raise funds, hire an architect, and build the Center, the YBC split its collection between a space in the Hampshire Mall in Hadley, MA and an old mill building in Holyoke, MA. The Center operated mainly from the Mall, where they received and redistributed books. The space in Holyoke served as a book repository for copies of the books in the Mall. Finally, in the summer of 1997, the permanent building in the style of a Polish synagogue was opened to the public.

The opening ceremony is an event worth investigating. Ruth Wisse addresses both the importance of the Center and the problematic aspects of its opening ceremony in her article, “Yiddish: Past, Present, Imperfect.” She describes the event as a “homecoming” of sorts67, and describes the Center itself as “the most exciting new venture in American Jewish institutional life, at least since the founding of the

---

American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in 1954”68. Thus, she deems it the most important Jewish cultural event in over 40 years. She adds that the building “is the most beautiful, and certainly the most carefully designed, dwelling place that Yiddish has ever had”69.

After opening with these praises, she goes on to discuss the troubling aspects of the ceremony. First, she points out that there were Yiddish mistakes on both a sign and in some of the Yiddish phrases “with which some participants sprinkled their speeches”70. In a space that is supposed to represent Yiddish and by people who are supposedly champions of Yiddish, these mistakes suggest that even the most knowledgeable advocates of Yiddish in America are not completely in control of the language. Wisse attributes the errors in part to geographical location. In Poland, Yiddish speakers and scholars set high linguistic standards in reaction to the frequent denigration of the language. In contrast, “since American culture at large is so indifferent to standards of excellence, the temptation to make do with mediocrity will be almost irresistible in a field where ignorance rules”71. Wisse thus elegantly underscores the difficulties of the Yiddish revitalization movement specifically in the context of American culture, where sentiment is valued over accuracy.

Wisse also notes the absence of important Yiddish writers and scholars at the opening ceremony. Since the Center is not geared to the Yiddish cultural elite, Wisse writes that, “the Amherst Ceremony included not even token representation from

---

69 Ibid., 8.
70 Ibid., 9.
71 Ibid., 9.
the fields of contemporary Yiddish literature and scholarship”\textsuperscript{72} and that although one major Yiddish novelist, Chava Rosenfarb, was present, she was neither introduced nor asked to speak. Indeed, as the Center caters primarily to “the people,” most of whom speak little to no Yiddish, rather than scholars and speakers of Yiddish, the inclusion of Yiddish speeches and noted Yiddish figures might have alienated the many guests who did not understand a word of the language. Wisse writes that, “the opening ceremonies thereby confirmed that Yiddish in America is a contradiction in terms”\textsuperscript{73}. Indeed, the ceremony, as described by Wisse, encapsulates the complexities of Yiddish in contemporary American culture. For what is the meaning of Yiddish in American Jewish society if the opening of one of its major institutions did not include a single speech in Yiddish, a single Yiddish literary figure, and contained various linguistic Yiddish mistakes? The careless Yiddish mistakes on signs and in speeches, the preference of English over Yiddish, and the exclusion of Yiddish writers illustrate the YBC’s prioritization of Yiddish as a performative and postvernacular symbol over Yiddish as a major conversational and literary language.

The New York Times published a lengthy and much less nuanced article about both the opening and the YBC itself.\textsuperscript{74} Rick Lyman presents the ceremony and the Center in a romanticized way. He begins by describing the day thus: “Under a brilliant white tent at the edge of an apple orchard on the Hampshire College

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} Wisse, “Yiddish: Past, Present, Imperfect,” 9.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 10.
campus here today, Mr. Lansky officially opened the book center’s new home.” He goes on to describe the accomplishments of Lansky and the layout of the space, which he describes as a “sprawling repository containing the heart of the book collection and in a performing space overlooking the orchard.” He also states that, “Mr. Lansky is ready to reintroduce America to a world that almost vanished.”

Lyman is certainly not alone in this depiction of Lansky and his work. He also quotes Kenneth Turan, a Los Angeles Times film critic and chairman of the Center, who equates the building of the Center to the discovery of Atlantis, adding, “this is like discovering a lost civilization.” Turan’s phrasing illuminates both the Jewish cultural anxiety of the near-loss of Yiddish and the distance felt by the founders of the Center from the culture for whom they built a home.

Similarly, in the documentary A Bridge of Books, Lansky himself says that, “somehow it’s fallen on me to try to pick up the fragments of this world and save them for the future.” This assertion reflects Lansky’s self-perception. The statement is not inaccurate; without Lansky’s initial idea and vision, hundreds of thousands of Yiddish books may never have found a home. At the same time, Lansky presents himself here as a venerable hero-type, a kind of knight-in-shining-armor who strode in and saved the Yiddish books when no one else was doing so. The documentary is shown to visitors upon entering the building. Thus, from the beginning of the visit, Lansky and his organization present themselves as the saviors of an almost-lost world. Furthermore, his use of “somehow it’s fallen on me” suggests a sacrifice of

---

75 Lyman, “With Echoes of the Shtetl.”
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
sorts, bordering on martyrdom. Significantly, it also minimizes the work of everyone else involved in the history of the institution.

Though Lansky’s work was, and continues to be, extremely beneficial (he was awarded a so-called genius grant by the MacArthur Foundation for his efforts), it is important to note that he is far from modest about his achievements. In a way, this self-projection as the savior of threatened books is allowed, perhaps even necessary, because Yiddish is perceived by so many as endangered. In its postvernacular mode, any effort to salvage the language and culture is deemed heroic. The anxiety about what could have been lost allows Lansky to call attention to his life’s work in this way, and more importantly to raise funds for its maintenance. Thus, while Lansky’s self-promotion may bother some people, it actually reveals a cultural anxiety felt by so many Jews about the near-loss of this facet of Jewish culture.

A Permanent Home

The original building was designed by architect Allen Moore to resemble a synagogue from a typical Polish shtetl. It has since been expanded to make room for educational programs and additional book storage; the adjacent building, named “The Kaplen Family Building,” was designed by the same architect and mimics the appearance of the original building.

In his book *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, David Roskies writes about the symbolism that has been assigned to the image of the shtetl. He writes about the development of the idea of the shtetl, from an undesirable ghetto, to “the local Old
Country homeland,“ to “paradise lost”\textsuperscript{79}. He elaborates on this idea by arguing that since return to the shtetl has become impossible, it has come to represent what he calls a “useful myth of origins”\textsuperscript{80} and that, “the shtetl was reclaimed as the place of common origin (even when it wasn’t), the source of a collective folk identity rooted in a particular historical past and, most importantly, as the locus of a new, secular, covenant”\textsuperscript{81}. Indeed, in the case of the YBC, most visitors will recognize the similarity of the building to a cluster of shtetl structures. The building is undoubtedly beautiful and moving; still, it echoes this overarching idealization of the shtetl as a timeless and universal Jewish experience.

The decision to use a synagogue as the model for the YBC’s building is particularly intriguing. The modern Yiddish revival is usually associated with its staunch secularism; if the Center is meant as a secular institution, why choose a synagogue as the architectural template? The building could have been made to mimic any shtetl building, but the architect and the Center specified that the model was a synagogue. The only explanation that Lansky provides is that Moore “was particularly taken with photos of the old wooden synagogues of Russia and Poland, virtually all of which were destroyed in the Holocaust”\textsuperscript{82}. He adds that they tried to negotiate the fine distinction between evoking cultural memory and creating a “Yiddish Disneyland”\textsuperscript{83}. Finally, he writes, they successfully built a structure that

\textsuperscript{79} David Roskies, \textit{The Jewish Search for a Usable Past} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 43.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{82} Lansky, \textit{Outwitting History}, 280.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 280.
“conveyed the impression of a traditional shtetl, albeit a decidedly whimsical one”84.

Lansky does not elaborate on his use of “whimsical,” nor does he ever really explain the decision to use a synagogue as the template for the original building. Still, whether or not this was conscious, the connection of the YBC to a synagogue makes sense for several reasons other than that Moore was “taken” with the photographs. The word for synagogue in Yiddish is “shul,” which also means school, or place of learning. Thus, in thinking of “synagogue” as “shul,” the architectural model is more understandable; the YBC is a place of learning, both in terms of language, literature, and culture.

Moreover, the relatively recent, unofficial sanctification of Yiddish as a language of martyrs also illuminates the significance of the synagogue as a model for the YBC. In his article “Yiddish Studies and the Jewish Search for a Usable Past,” Roskies writes that, “For the offspring of East European Jewry, the shtetl has become a kind of sacred space” and that, “in this scheme, Yiddish becomes a strictly liturgical medium, a language of lamentation”85. Thus, as Yiddish has become a sort of holy language, the YBC as a synagogue serves as a place of worship for the language and culture. People visit to pay homage, memorialize, learn, and engage with Yiddish in different ways, just as Jews go to a synagogue to engage with Judaism in different ways. Though Lansky does not explicitly address these possible interpretations, they are worth considering when thinking about the conscious use of a synagogue as a model for the YBC’s original building.

84 Lansky, Outwitting History, 280.
Furthermore, according to Allen Moore, the building was designed so that visitors must literally turn their backs on the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. First of all, this begs the question of how the founders of the YBC visualize the place of Yiddish in the modern world. Is the YBC just supposed to be a recreated shtetl, a temporary Yiddishland\textsuperscript{86} that people can visit to escape modern reality? For Moore’s statement suggests that a choice must be made between Yiddish and the 20\textsuperscript{th} century; it certainly does not intimate any kind of coexistence. The question then arises as to whether resistance to modernization is necessary to the survival of Yiddish, or whether it is counterproductive.

The statement is made ironic by the construction of a parking lot some feet away from the YBC. While visitors do literally turn their back on the lot when entering the YBC, the building itself is nonetheless closely surrounded by a modern landscape. Despite the quiet apple orchard in the back and the scenic view of the Holyoke mountain range, it is still quite close to a busy road, several parking lots, and is across the street from some of the Hampshire College dormitories. Moore’s statement, then, seems like a denial of an inescapable reality. Moreover, the intentional contrast created between the building and its surrounding modernity reflects the discomfort and uncertainty about the place of Yiddish in the United States today. While the design does evoke powerful emotional reactions from visitors, such as loss, nostalgia, longing, belonging, and perhaps even guilt, it does not fit into modern culture, and therefore communicates a sense of resistance:

\textsuperscript{86} Yiddishland is defined by Shandler as “a virtual locus construed in terms of the use of the Yiddish language, especially, though not exclusively, in its spoken form” (Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, 33)
resistance to the modernization of the world, resistance to change, resistance to loss, and resistance to the changing position and meaning of Yiddish in modern Jewish culture. One might even say that the reconstruction of a shtetl structure belies a fear that Yiddish otherwise could not hold its own in a modern world.

**National Yiddish Book Center to Yiddish Book Center: What’s in a Name?**

The sign on the road that directs drivers to the YBC still reads, “National Yiddish Book Center,” though that title has since been changed to simply “Yiddish Book Center.” The kiosk outside the building also refers to the institution as the National Yiddish Book Center. The panel on one wall of the kiosk reads,

> “Sholem Aleykhem! Welcome to the National Yiddish Book Center – a lively, non-profit organization working to rescue Jewish books and celebrate the culture they contain. Inside our building you’ll find the world’s largest collection of Yiddish books, together with museum exhibitions, a theatre, reading room, and English-language bookstore. Outside, you’re invited to enjoy our beautiful park, ponds, picnic area, and Yiddish Writers Garden.”

First of all, the initial use of “National” necessitates a reflection on the YBC’s self-perception and its place in a global community of Yiddish revivalists. For what does the word “national” mean for a culture scattered across a Diaspora? To which nation does the word refer here? Jewish, American, Yiddish? If it is the latter, how is the idea of a Yiddish nation defined? Who is included, and who is excluded?

Furthermore, the recent removal of “National” from the YBC’s title also demands interrogation. As the institution has become one of the most important Yiddish centers in the world, was the use of “National” too confining? Is its elimination a way of implying “International”? Though these questions cannot be
answered here, they nevertheless illustrate some of the complexities of creating a Yiddish space for secular Jews who, in addition to the added complication of living in Diaspora, speak little to no Yiddish. The name change also speaks to the difficulty faced by institutions like the YBC in situating themselves and defining themselves in the broad historical and geographical landscape of Yiddish.

Gift Shop

Immediately upon entering the building, visitors encounter the small gift shop, which serves as an important site for the examination of the YBC’s relationship to Yiddish. Its mixture of Yiddish novels and academic books with kitschy Yiddish paraphernalia, like YBC t-shirts and mugs and Yiddish writer finger puppets, serves as yet another representation of the Center’s interactions with two aspects of Yiddish: Yiddish as a language of great literature and Yiddish as an ethnic marker. It also illustrates the YBC’s attempt to appeal to a wide variety of visitors and possible donors. Furthermore, the inclusion of more general Jewish material, such as Jewish cookbooks and mezuzahs, reveals the Center’s perceived purpose as not only a Yiddish center but also a Jewish cultural center more broadly.

Furthermore, the placement of the shop is interesting in and of itself, as it reflects the prominence of finances and fundraising in the Center. The placement of a gift shop in the entrance of a space meant for cultural education and revitalization reveals both the financial focus of the YBC and the intersection of culture and

---

87 Mezuzahs are small encased parchment copies of Torah portions that Jews hang on their doorposts.
materialism. Just as the gift shop is at the front of the building, fundraising and commercialism are at the forefront of the institution.88

**Books**

The entrance of the YBC overlooks a vast room whose space is mostly occupied by shelves, crates, and boxes full of old Yiddish books. The shelves, in addition to portraying the accomplishments of the YBC to visitors and allowing guests to peruse and buy volumes, serve as a permanent exhibition. The numerous shelves by no means represent the entire collection of the YBC, but enough to give visitors a sense of the sheer amount of literature collected, and enough to give the main portion of the building the rich scent of old books. Beside the bookshelves lie piles of unshelved books and cardboard boxes full of unpacked books. It is unclear whether the boxes need to be stored in this public portion of the building, or whether they could also be kept backstage. Regardless, their conspicuous presence in such a visible, public space contributes to the sense of accomplishment of the YBC, as well as to the idea that the YBC’s mission of book collecting is still necessary today. It also reveals a need on the part of the YBC to prove itself, as if visitors might be skeptical about the organization’s ongoing financial requests were there not evidence that it was still actively engaged in book rescue.

Furthermore, the presentation of the books lends itself to the kind of theatricality that is evident throughout the building. In his article for The New York Times, “With Echoes of the Shtetl, a Center For Yiddish Books in New England,” Rick

---

88 I examine fundraising more at length in my third chapter.
Lyman describes the shelves of books in the central space of the building as “a kind of open theater”. Indeed, it makes the process of book collection and donation visible and tangible, and, in a way, gives visitors a sense of participation or inclusion in the process. By witnessing the books in the process of being sorted and shelved, visitors are able to directly witness the work of the YBC. This in turn not only reinforces the feeling of community and togetherness, but also evokes a sense of awe and gratitude for the YBC.

Peppered throughout the rows of books are large boards intended to guide readers through the rich history of Yiddish literature. The exhibition is entitled “Unquiet Pages: An Exploration of Modern Yiddish Literature” and covers such topics as Yiddish literature written during the Holocaust, modernism, Soviet literature, female authors, magazines, science books, and issues of translation. The exhibition is well done and certainly communicates important information about the history and depth of Yiddish literature. Be that as it may, the creation of such an exhibition suggests that the books cannot stand on their own without thick description or context. This suggests not only an expectation that most visitors will need to be guided through the collection (since they will not be able to understand the titles or contents of the books themselves), but also turns the collection of books into a kind of anthropological exhibition. Since the richness of the literature between the covers cannot speak to most visitors, the exhibition transforms the books into symbols of Yiddish history and culture; they take on new meaning as markers of Jewishness.

While the YBC focuses much of its energy on revitalizing Yiddish, the exhibition adds a museum-like quality to the institution. Instead of adding liveliness to the shelves of books, the placards accidentally call further attention to the fact that the books are abandoned and (mostly) unread. This is in fact one of the complexities of secular Jews’ relationship to Yiddish today; while there is increasing interest in revitalizing the language, it simultaneously functions as a symbol, or even artifact, of a disappeared culture. The exhibition of these books in the center of the YBC’s building speaks to this fact. The panels attempt to provide a historical context for these cultural relics and defend their importance in a time when most visitors cannot understand them.

**Yiddish on signs and placards**

The use of Yiddish words and phrases on signs and placards throughout the space adds to the illusion of entering a Yiddishland. As Yiddish is no longer used in most public spaces, its overwhelmingly pervasive written presence throughout the visit further constructs the illusion of being in a separate, predominantly Yiddish location. The Yiddish begins with the roadside sign directing drivers to the building. Over the English “National Yiddish Book Center” is the same thing written in Yiddish. The superimposition of Yiddish and English equivalents is repeated on most of the signs in and around the YBC. Even in the parking lot, the arrow indicating “Visitor’s parking” is written first in Yiddish, and then in English. For all intents and purposes, the Yiddish on that direction sign is unnecessary, as drivers

---

90 From hereon in, I will refer to the Yiddish in Hebrew letters as Yiddish, and Yiddish in roman letters as transliterated Yiddish.
visiting the Center are most likely able to read the English portion of the sign. The question then arises as to its purpose, if its function is not practical.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s work provides insight into these questions. In particular, her book *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* provides various possible definitions for museums, including “a theater, a memory palace, a stage for the enactment of other times and places, a space of transport, fantasy, dreams,” “an advocate for preservation, conservation, repatriation, sovereignty,” “and “a place to mourn”91. Using these suggestions, and considering the YBC as some variation on the traditional museum, the use of Yiddish in and around the building makes sense; indeed, it does allow for fantasy and the enactment, however successful, of another time. It also serves as a space for the preservation and repatriation of Yiddish books and culture.

Still more questions arise from this last purpose; namely, what does it mean for Jews to repatriate books from other Jewish owners? The books are taken from Jews who want to ensure the preservation of their books in their old age, or from younger Jews who know nothing about the books, and are sold to Jews who actually want to own these volumes. The question of whether or not they can read them becomes irrelevant here, as the conscious decision to own the books automatically makes the new owners worthy. It certainly suggests a hierarchy, organized by who most deserves, or who is most qualified, to own and care for Yiddish books. Surprisingly, the primary qualification is not fluency in Yiddish, but rather the

---

conscious desire to own these works. The act of giving Yiddish books a home takes precedence over the effort to learn Yiddish.

Like the parking sign, the greeting “Sholem Aleichem” is written on the side of the entrance door, first in Yiddish, followed by its transliteration written beneath. Around the exterior of the building, other signs are also written that juxtapose Yiddish and English. These include those indicating “Great Oak Park,” “Miriam and Samuel Rotrosen Yiddish Writers Garden,” “Orchard,” and “Holyoke Range Panorama.” Inside the building, identification placards and directions are designed similarly. These include placards indicating “Main Staircase,” “Yiddish Book Repository,” “Program Workshop,” “The Robert Price Wing,” and even “Drinking Fountain Alcove” and “Restrooms.” Like the “Visitors Parking” sign, these serve no practical purpose, as most visitors will be able to understand the English portion, and almost none will be able to read the Yiddish. The signs indicating the staircase and the water fountain are especially significant, as labels for these objects are unusual even in English. Instead, they serve a more theatrical or symbolic purpose, designed to contribute to the virtual Yiddish space. As they contain both English and Yiddish, the labels also construct a kind of dual reality, in which English and Yiddish coexist, and even collaborate, in the survival of Yiddish. Moreover, the juxtaposition of English and Yiddish creates a sense of “us” versus “other” between those who can read and understand the Yiddish, and those who cannot. The exclusion of non-Yiddish readers and speakers creates a hierarchy of Jewishness, which in turn elicits feelings of guilt, shame, or even inadequacy among those who cannot read the Yiddish. Moreover, visitors who can read Yiddish are not only placed in a position of
superiority, but are given membership into an exclusive circle of Yiddish-speakers and Yiddish-writers that automatically sets them apart from other visitors.

Other questions arise from the use of Yiddish on these placards. Does the creation of a Yiddishland necessarily rely on this kind of performance? Shandler suggests that postvernacular Yiddish is inherently performative, by virtue of its being learned and used consciously, rather than transmitted naturally. He writes, further, that “in this new semiotic mode for the language, every utterance is enveloped in a Performative aura, freighted with significance as a Yiddish speech act quite apart from the meaning of whatever words are spoken”92. Similarly, at the YBC, the significance of Yiddish on signs and placards lies more in the fact that it is Yiddish than in what it is labeling. In other words, it is the symbolic use of the language itself that creates the Yiddish space.

Other questions emerge from the Yiddish labels, such as: What does it mean to be in a Yiddish space, and how else can such a space be constructed? Is the Yiddish on these signs keeping Yiddish alive? This last question brings us back to the duality, or ambiguity, of memorialization versus revival. Furthermore, if, as the architect of the building suggested, the YBC is meant to make visitors turn their backs on the 20th century, why not write the labels only in Yiddish? How is the inescapability of English negotiated, and how intrusive is its presence in a Yiddish space, if at all?

Finally, in smaller letters, at the bottom of the placards, are the recognitions for the donors. Some are written only in English, while others are written first in

---

92 Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, 127.
Yiddish and then in English. Upon inquiring about the inconsistency, I was informed that indeed, the donors, rather than the YBC, dictate how the placards are presented (i.e. in English, Yiddish, transliterated Yiddish, or a combination thereof). This in turn calls into question the role of the donors in the construction of the YBC’s space. The public recognition of donors on the signs also deepens the sense of guilt among visitors, namely for their perceived lack of participation or economic contribution to the community, however this community may be defined. For in thinking about these questions, another, larger inquiry arises: what is the community that the YBC is representing? Furthermore, what community is the YBC trying to create?

**Informational Panels**

Along the railing of the entrance level, which overlooks the ground floor on which the bookshelves are located, is a series of panels presenting Yiddish. On the first panel appears the Hebrew alphabet in various colors. The letters are divided into small groups in a way that gives them the appearance of words. The way they are organized is trivial however, as the letters serve as signifiers of a larger cultural and literary tradition and hold significance even for visitors who cannot understand them. They engage with viewers on a symbolic level, and conjure memories, both real and imagined, of a time when Yiddish thrived among Jews. In doing so, they immediately invite visitors into a surreal world founded on a vague sense of shared history and common heritage.

The presentation continues in English, with the question, “Is Yiddish hard to learn?” This is followed by the immediate answer, “Not really” and a subsequent
paragraph explaining the basic use of consonants and vowels in Yiddish, and ending with “(It’s definitely easier than learning English, where the same sound can be spelled three different ways and exceptions are often the rule!).” The parentheses create a sense of secrecy, or hushed understanding and camaraderie. The text itself also effuses an implicit sense of competition with English; though it is not overtly antagonistic, the need to add that Yiddish is easier to learn than English introduces an underlying, perhaps even unconscious, rivalry. Furthermore, the assertion that Yiddish is easier to learn than English is problematic, as it oversimplifies Yiddish and, in turn, dismisses its richness and complexity, not only as a language in and of itself, but as a literature.

The real “presentation” begins with the panel entitled, simply, “Yiddish,” written both in Yiddish and English. It briefly explains its linguistic roots, and closes with “EVEN TODAY YIDDISH IS SPOKEN IN VIRTUALLY EVERY CORNER OF THE GLOBE.” The use of capital letters for this sentence illustrates the YBC’s insistence on the idea that Yiddish remains alive, and that a global Yiddishland continues to escape obsolescence. It also communicates a sense of urgency, encouraging visitors to join the fight for the survival of Yiddish.

The following panel is entitled “What makes Yiddish so Jewish?” and offers examples of ways Jews borrowed linguistic elements from their European countries to create Yiddish, which “transformed non-Jewish elements into a Jewish frame of reference.” Next comes the panel, “Was Yiddish always a written language,” followed by “What happened to Yiddish?” and “Where will it go from here?” The panel “What happened to Yiddish?” briefly discusses the impact of the Holocaust, immigration to
the United States, and the creation of Israel on the near-annihilation of Yiddish. In bold letters, it closes with, “Within a single generation a language which had prevailed for a thousand years was all but forgotten.” The sentence here does more than communicate the monumental decline of Yiddish in the past century. Like many of the preceding passages, the sentence both expresses a sense of urgency and inflicts culpability on the generation that “forgot” Yiddish.

The last panel, “Where will it go from here?” transitions from the preceding sentence with, “But times are changing. Multiculturalism is now not only accepted but celebrated,” also in bold font. After a few sentences addressing the rise in Yiddish education in colleges and universities worldwide, the paragraph reads, “For some, the ‘rediscovery’ of Yiddish is no more than nostalgia or a sentimental connection to the past. But for others, it is a question of identity, a growing realization that unless we remember where we come from, we can’t hope to know who we are – or where we may yet go from here.” The bold lettering at the end of the sentence suggest that, though nostalgia and sentimentality are acknowledged, more important to the YBC is the idea of remembering the past in order to renew a shared sense of identity and community. It portrays Yiddish not only as a part of Jewish identity, but one that is essential in the future of Jewishness. In this sentence fragment, the YBC correlates Yiddish, identity, and the future (“where we may yet go from here”). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes about heritage as “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past”93, and

93 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, 7.
one that ensures that "practices in danger of disappearing [...] will survive"94. Indeed, the last statement of the paragraph proposes that recognition and appreciation for history and heritage are essential to the survival of Yiddish.

Hebrew letters in different colors are scattered across the panels. The letters yud and khirek yud appear in blue underneath “What makes Yiddish so Jewish?” Similarly, the panel “Was Yiddish always a written language?” sports a big yellow aleph, and “What happened to Yiddish?” bears a green tsadek in the bottom right corner. Like the multi-colored Yiddish words at the beginning of the panels, these various letters, which have no obvious connection to the panels with which they are paired.

Nearby, another series of panels describe the history of the YBC. Entitled “Collection,” it begins with a call to the visitor to “LOOK BELOW: The boxes you see are full of Yiddish books!” After the brief overview of the books’ origins, the panel explains that the immigrants’ children, most of whom did not speak Yiddish, either threw out the books or “packed them into boxes and stashed them in basements or attics, where they lay forgotten until the Yiddish Book Center came along to reclaim them. The paragraph is followed by a photograph of a “National Yiddish Book Center” truck driving down a road. The paragraph simplifies the immigrant and first-generation experiences, as the story of immigrants’ children and their relationship to the books is, of course, more complicated and varied than what is presented. It is effective, however, in once again perpetuating a dull sense of guilt in those Americans who put aside, ignored, and forgot the books, symbols of Yiddish

94 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, 150.
culture and family history. Furthermore, like the short video _A Bridge of Books_, it also serves to glorify the YBC, which is presented as the knight-in-shining-armor organization who swooped in to save these abandoned books. Indeed, this is a central motif in the YBC’s self-perception and presentation and one that permeates its various endeavors.

After explaining how the collection of books began, with the urgent appeal by the “young graduate student named Aaron Lansky” to send in unused Yiddish books, the panel continues by asking how a “handful of young people single-handedly round up more than a million books,” and is answered with “We didn’t.” The ensuing paragraph includes the word _zamlers_, defined as “volunteer book collectors.” In the short documentary _Bridge of Books_, Lansky elaborates that the idea originates from the early 20th century, when Eastern European Jewish historians organized volunteers to collect communal records. As he says, for those _zamlers_, their work ensured the preservation of their culture and life stories. Lansky’s reappropriation of the word serves to situate the YBC and its workers in a larger context of Jewish historical preservation and record-keeping. If _zamlers_ were originally volunteers working for historians, then the use of _zamlers_ in this context suggests that the YBC’s workers are not only book collectors and distributors but also Jewish historians. Thus, whether consciously or not, the inclusion of this word reveals another aspect of the YBC’s self-perception.

Next to this paragraph, another paragraph, in red, reads, “And so by the summer of 1980 we were on the road ourselves, first in rented vans, later in a truck of our own. We travelled up and down the East Coast, sitting for hours at kitchen
tables while elderly Jews plied us with tea and cookies and passed on their ‘yerushe,’
their inheritance, the treasured books that their own children and grandchildren
couldn’t read.” Again, the question arises as to the purpose of including the Yiddish
word yerushe. In this case, the use of Yiddish, as well as the use of italics,
underscores the theme of inheritance: inheritance not only of the books, but also of
a shared ancestry and culture. Though the YBC never explicitly defines this ancestry,
the vague notion of cultural heritage is ever-present. Though visiting Jews (and non-
Jews) come from a myriad of different backgrounds and cultural traditions, the YBC
is designed to make every visitor feel like a member of a larger community, one that
history and geographical borders.

Finally, after an anecdote about crossing the border to Canada to retrieve
more books, this presentation ends with the question, “how many more books do you expect?” The answer is, “there’s no way to know.” The section explains that,
though they collected over 20 times more books than expected at the beginning, the
number of donations is decreasing as the population of “older, Yiddish-speaking
Jews” decreases, and that more books now come from American-born generations.
The section ends with, “Our doors are always open, and there’s simply no telling
how many more boxes will arrive.” This closing sentence corresponds to the overall
sense of openness and projection into the future that the YBC presents. The image of
open doors communicates not only warmth and hospitality, but openness to the
unknown future of Yiddish.

Like the exhibition of books discussed previously, these various
informational panels provide a museum-like quality to the YBC. In a way, they
provide a tour of the space and contextualize it in the history of the institution. They also serve to guide visitors to a specific understanding of Yiddish and defend the importance of both the language and the YBC’s work.

**Hanging Alef-Beys**

Between the aisles of bookshelves, a parade of Hebrew letters hangs from the ceiling. Each letter appears on its own square of colored fabric, and they float in progression down the middle of the room, illuminated by the skylight directly above. The first square reads, “Ben Shahn,” and the next one, “The alphabet of creation.” Fitting with the overall atmosphere of the building, the letters are simultaneously tangible and ghostly. Though they appear solidly in black against their multicolored fabric squares, the way that they float above the bookshelves gives them an ethereal quality that corresponds with the presentation of Yiddish as magical or transcendent. Their placement, amid the bookshelves, calls further attention to the books themselves, as well as to the literary tradition from which they emerged. Indeed, like the letters distributed throughout the introductory panels, the floating *alef-beys* (alphabet) serves a culturally symbolic purpose. On one level, they serve as metonyms for the Yiddish books around which the YBC centers. As symbols of literature, however, they also evoke feelings of Jewishness and tradition, which perpetuate the desire for inclusion and participation.

Furthermore, the imagery of letters disembodied from words illustrates the YBC’s focus on Yiddish as symbolic and performative rather than as a mode of communication. The *idea* of Yiddish - colorful, ephemeral, just out of reach – is more
important than the language itself. In a way, the letters function in the space in a
similar way as the books beneath them, which hold more value as symbols of a lost
world than as literary masterpieces in their own right. Indeed, the display of letters
on their own (as opposed to letters organized into words or sentences) supports my
argument that the Book Center is more concerned with sentiment than with content.
This is further illustrated by the fact that the space is virtually free of spoken
Yiddish. Upon entering the building, visitors are greeted in English and, as most of
the staff does not speak Yiddish, English is spoken almost exclusively in the Center's
halls. Competency in Yiddish is neither required nor even encouraged for
employees. In these various ways, Yiddish as a cultural emblem is promoted over its
function as a system of communication or a language of great literature.

**Children’s Section**

Next to the bookshelves, also on the ground floor, is a section dedicated to
children’s Yiddish education. Two small, circular bookshelves occupy one corner of
the space. They contain children’s books in Yiddish or about Yiddish culture, some of
which are propped up on display. These include, ”Mrs. Katz and Tush,” “Hammerin’
Hank: The Life of Hank Greenberg,” “Beautiful Yetta: The Yiddish Chicken,” “Five
Little Gefiltes,” and “It Could Always Be Worse.” The outer façades of the shelves
sport Yiddish posters, Yiddish songs, and magnified book pages and illustrations.

Are these books meant to be read, or do they also function primarily as
symbols? As many do not date back from times when Yiddish was spoken widely,
they cannot be defined as artifacts in the traditional sense of the word; perhaps they
can be defined, however, as constructed artifacts. Shandler’s writings on the meta-
value of postvernacular translations of novels into Yiddish is applicable here. He
writes that the translators “intend for readers to center their attention not on the
original works but on the very act of these works’ being rendered into Yiddish”\textsuperscript{95}.
Indeed, though most of the childrens’ books are in English, their importance seems
to lie more in the fact that they exist than in the contribution they might make to the
transmission of Yiddish. Moreover, the fact that most of them are in English calls
into question the goals of the YBC. If one of its aims is indeed the transmission of
Yiddish, then the fact that their children’s books section is predominantly English
suggests that their focus is more on the transmission of Yiddish as culture, or
Yiddish as Jewish, than of Yiddish as a distinct language or literature. As discussed
earlier in this chapter, Yiddish as a language becomes secondary to what it
represents in its postvernacular mode.

A small wooden table and small red chairs sit in the same corner. On the
table, mad libs are available for use. A large sign nearby reads, “Yinglish” in both
English and Hebrew lettering, and specifies, “Yiddish in English.” The question on
the sign is then posed, “What do a complainer, a windshield washer, and a computer
error have in common?” and is followed by the answer, which is that “\textit{kvetch,}
\textit{spritzer} and \textit{glitch}” are all Yiddish words. The sign then defines Yinglish, and invites
visitors to “play a game of 'Yidlibs' to learn more about these words,” and to then
“look through our Dictionary to learn more fun Yiddish words.” The presentation of
Yiddish to young visitors is as an amusing form of expression. In this particular part

\textsuperscript{95} Shandler, \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, 118.
of the building, which is dedicated to children, the presentation of Yiddish introduces a difficult dilemma, for while the YBC’s portrayal of Yiddish here is oversimplified, it is perhaps necessarily so in order to better appeal to children. Young visitors would likely lose interest quite quickly if the YBC truly delved into the complex history of Yiddish. Nevertheless, the reduction of Yiddish as simply a language of joy and slapstick humor is a problematic tendency among Yiddish enthusiasts and one that breeds “superficiality and ignorance”96. Though the simplification of Yiddish in this particular context is understandable, it also educates young visitors about Yiddish in a very superficial and one-sided manner.

Moreover, the mad libs, or “Yidlibs,” are in English, but the available fill-in words in the nearby trays are in Yiddish. The game thus further illustrates the mixture of Yiddish and English in the YBC. English and Yiddish coexist here as they do in other spaces of the YBC; the Yidlibs provide another creative venue for the reincorporation of Yiddish in American society. Though the architecture was designed to emulate a Yiddishland, English nonetheless permeates most aspects of the building. Though this coexistence is not necessarily negative, and is certainly inevitable, it does bring into question strategies for language maintenance and revival, as well as the negotiation between endangered languages and the dominant languages by which they are threatened. Is there an effective strategy to revitalize a language without using another one in the process? And furthermore, is there a way to recreate or reintroduce an old culture that is impermeable to modern society?

96 Helen Beer, “Yiddish Without Yiddish?,” 16.
Other games are available near the mad libs and children’s bookshelves. One of them is a game of Yiddish telephone. Two telephone receivers are connected by a wall, which reads, “Let’s Speak Yiddish!” followed by the transliterated Yiddish equivalent and the expression in the Yiddish alef-beys. The wall also reads, “Speaking Yiddish is fun! Do you want to try?” and instructions for picking up the receivers and speaking to a friend, “or better still, a stranger.” Finally, the instructions end with “You’re ready tsu redn Yidish – to start speaking Yiddish!” As this is in the children’s section, it can be assumed that the game is aimed at younger visitors. The YBC cannot realistically expect visiting children to be fluent enough in Yiddish to carry on an imaginary phone conversation, and the statement, “you’re ready to start speaking Yiddish” is a blatant oversimplification. Instead, the game, like the others around it, serves a primarily semiotic purpose. It does, for fluent Yiddish speakers, allow certain visitors to practice their conversational skills. For most, however, it is a reminder that Yiddish can be used not only literarily but also conversationally. The use of telephones also adds a level of modernity to the conception of Yiddish, though telephones were not frequently used in the shtetl, or even turn-of-the-century New York City.

Another source of entertainment is the nearby “Moishe Pipik” restaurant. The restaurant consists of a set table with menus and photographed food on cards. The menus, which include the subcategories of meat, dairy, and parve, present the items in English, Yiddish, and transliterated Yiddish. Likewise, each food card, along with a picture of the item, displays its name in English, Yiddish, and transliterated Yiddish; at the bottom of each card, the English name rests in the middle, flanked by
its Yiddish equivalent to the right and its transliterated Yiddish equivalent to the left. The players are then free to order anything from the menu (preferably, I imagine, in Yiddish). This adds another level of performativity to the experience, as visitors can now pretend to eat at a Yiddish restaurant. Even here, however, English is present, as the game would be virtually unplayable otherwise. Thus, even while acting in this virtual Yiddish restaurant, one cannot escape the incorporation of English.

This area also offers several copies of a laminated cookbook, or Kokhbukh, also labeled in English, Yiddish, and transliterated Yiddish. The dishes included are traditional Jewish recipes, including brisket, tzimmes, kreplach, liver, kugl, homentashn, matzoh balls, bagels, and knishes. For each recipe, the name appears in English with an underlying Yiddish equivalent, followed by a photograph and description of the dish, and the recipe itself, in English. Some of the descriptive paragraphs directly connect the dish to Yiddish culture. The tzimmes recipe, for instance, explains that the Yiddish expression “‘to make a big tzimmes over something; means to make a big deal of it,” as tzimmes is a complicated dish to make. Similarly, for the liver recipe, the description begins with, “And what am I? Chopped liver? This means, and what am I, nothing? But we’ve always thought such a thing made no sense,” because liver “fills a hole in the soul like nothing else on earth.” The kugl recipe’s description concludes with, “(If this is Poland, there’ll be raisins and cinnamon too.),” explicitly evoking the image of Polish Jewry and reinforcing the connection of food with Yiddish heritage. Finally, for the knish recipe, the description defines knishes as “the Yiddish contribution to the world of
street-cart dumplings.” The recipe book invites visitors to engage with Yiddish on several different levels. First of all, it teaches the Yiddish words for Jewish dishes with which most readers are familiar. Second of all, through the descriptive paragraphs, it places the dishes in a larger context of Yiddish culture; it relates the familiar foods to Yiddish expressions and various Yiddishlands, such as New York City (with the knishes) and Poland (with the kugl). In so doing, Moishe Pipik’s restaurant and the cookbook evoke visceral reactions connecting familiar memories of taste and smell to Yiddish. These multi-sensorial memories, whether real or imagined, intensify participants’ interactions with Yiddish. Though it may appear trivial or unimportant, this “game” is actually a subtle but powerful tool in making visitors feel rooted in a longstanding cultural lifestyle.

**Theatre, Film, and Radio Room: Artifacts**

Beyond the bookshelves and children’s games, the YBC also includes a room dedicated to Yiddish theatre, film, and radio. Most of the space is taken up by an auditorium which serves to host various cultural events. Around the auditorium, however, are various posters and artifacts relating to theatre, art, and film. On one side, two panels, entitled “Yiddish Theatre” and “Yiddish Film” provide brief histories of both subjects, as well as some trivia about actors and directors, such as Leonard Nimoy, Walter Matthau, and Mel Brooks. Across from these, a screen plays clips from Yiddish films in a loop. The other side of the room is dedicated to Yiddish radio. There, among other artifacts, the YBC displays an old record player accompanied by a note reading, “Tshepet Zikh Nisht – Please don’t touch!” Nearby,
an old radio invites guests to “Tune in! Pick up the headphones, and listen to vintage Yiddish radio broadcasts from 1925-1955.”

The room is museum-like in its glass-case presentation of the various artifacts. The space is quite dark and, aside from the Yiddish film screen, quite still, as well. It feels old and static, and the Yiddish music playing softly from the radio section adds a slight tone of desertion or abandonment. The room certainly does not correspond to the feeling of liveliness that the rest of the building exudes. The room serves, first of all, to perpetuate the sense of heritage promoted throughout the YBC. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that, “Heritage [...] is the transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct. Heritage is created through a process of exhibition (as knowledge, as performance, as museum display)”97. Indeed, this room perpetuates the sense of shared history and cultural inheritance promoted by the rest of the building. Here, however, it is more in a spirit of remembrance than active engagement; it is remindful of what Shandler terms “exercises in cultural salvage”98.

The room emits a nostalgic energy, as if the objects on display were from a lost culture, as opposed to one that, as the YBC otherwise asserts, is growing. Even the various signs, such as “don't touch” on the record player and “vintage” to describe the radio broadcasts, signal both an agedness and a fragility to these Yiddish objects. In a building dedicated to reviving Yiddish, this room certainly feels more like a memorial or a space for remembrance of a culture past. This once again brings into question the motivations of the YBC and the purpose of both the building

97 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, 149.
98 Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland, 130.
and the organization. Furthermore, as the room is tucked away behind the main hall with the books, panels, exhibitions, and children’s section, it appears as an afterthought, or perhaps a reluctant inclusion of the past by an organization so focused on the present and future. Indeed, the somewhat random collection of objects, and the unfinished quality of the exhibition suggests a smaller interest in this room than in other spaces of the YBC.

**Yiddish Writers Garden**

The YBC’s space extends beyond the building itself, to the adjacent Yiddish Writers Garden. The area flanks the side of the shtetl-like building and overlooks an orchard and a view of the Holyoke Range mountains. The garden is beautiful and tranquil, rich with plants and flowers, as well as a pond and a few picnic tables. Even outside, the signs bear the Yiddish-English collocation. One large sign points visitors towards the “Miriam and Samuel Rotrosen Yiddish Writers Garden” in Yiddish and English, another one indicates the orchard in the same way, and yet another does the same for the Holyoke Range Panorama. Again, the prevalence of Yiddish on these signs contributes to the flavor of Yiddishland for which the YBC is designed.

Amidst the shrubberies in the garden, visitors come across various panels divided into squares. Each square contains the name of a Yiddish writer and his/her works; this is written in English on one side, and in Yiddish on the other. Aside from these sporadic panels and the few signs, the garden is free of anything explicitly Yiddish. It does, however, encourage an association between the statuesque shtetl-like structure and the calm and beauty of the garden and its sights. Thus, even
without the Yiddish signs and Yiddish writers’ panels, the garden itself perpetuates the romanticism that permeates the YBC and the projection of the old country as belonging to a happier and simpler time.

The garden also calls into question the role of the YBC as a literary center. For while it has assumed new roles as well, it was founded as, and still titles itself, a book center; yet the one space that is explicitly and exclusively dedicated to Yiddish writers is in a marginalized, albeit beautiful, space, tucked away behind the building. The area is generally difficult to find, and altogether inaccessible during the snowy New England winters. Even within the space itself, the writers are obscured by the bushes in which their panels are placed. Thus, the writers are virtually invisible in the writers garden, just as the garden itself is a peripheral component of the YBC.

The hiddenness of this homage to Yiddish writers is puzzling, especially considering that the YBC is supposedly dedicated to the transmission of Yiddish literature. Why is the memorial to Yiddish writers outside, behind the YBC, instead of in a permanent indoor exhibition, easily accessible at all times of the year? Why do artifacts from Yiddish film and radio get an entire room, while writers get some bushes outside?

Furthermore, why does the YBC use so many panels to describe the cultural history of Yiddish, but writes so little about Yiddish writers? This suggests a prioritization of cultural over literary transmission of Yiddish heritage, despite the YBC’s origins and name. The various authors of the YBC’s renowned book collection are literally placed aside, while the educational and cultural events and spaces take the forefront. In a way, this layout represents the YBC’s changing goals quite
accurately; though the organization began as a book warehouse and collection center, and though it continues to collect, store, and sell books, its focus has shifted to a larger project in cultural revival.

**Closing Thoughts: Symbolic Spaces**

The YBC today serves many different cultural purposes; it is a book repository, a Yiddish educational center, a space for various Jewish exhibitions and Yiddish events, and a memorial for Yiddish writers and American Yiddish culture. Neglecting any one of these aspects would limit the portrayal of the YBC; together, these different facets collaborate to create a kind of Yiddish sanctuary, where visitors can interact with Yiddish in various ways and to varying degrees.

The YBC also functions as a symbolic space. People travel to come visit the shtetl-like building, where Yiddish is a palpable reality which can be seen, heard, felt. Even the odor of old wood that emanates from the entrance of the building contributes to the multi-sensorial experience, as one might imagine that the wooden shtetl structures of Eastern Europe had a similar musky odor. The act of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes of historic sites that travelers seek destinations “where time ‘stands still’ or the past lives on, untouched by modernity”\(^99\). She writes, furthermore, that, “there is at work […] a performance epistemology that places a premium on experience – visceral, kinesthetic, haptic, intimate – and a performance pedadogy [sic] more akin to the nascent medium of virtual reality than to older

models of learning”\textsuperscript{100}. Though the YBC is not a historic site per se, as it is not located in a historically Yiddish space, it does function as a cultural and historical bubble of sorts, an attempted Yiddish-only space, as unaffected by modern society as possible. Moreover, it does use a multi-sensorial approach to forming a kind of Yiddishland that is similar to the organization of historic sites.

The various purposes of the site also arouse questions concerning the role of visitors themselves in the space. What experience are visitors to the YBC seeking? Do they visit to buy books, to explore a lost culture, experience a recreated Yiddishland, to buy a Yiddish souvenir from the gift shop? Furthermore, if people need to actively and consciously visit a Yiddish space, then is Yiddish really thriving, as the YBC claims?

In writing on Yiddish festivals, Shandler writes that, “thinking of Yiddish festivals as tourist productions is especially provocative, for it positions Jews, who make up the majority of the audiences at most of these events, as visitors in what is ostensibly their own cultural terrain”\textsuperscript{101}. The position of the YBC is similarly problematic. Certainly, some visitors are not Jewish, and visit either by curiosity or for academic purposes. Nevertheless, most visitors, or tourists, are Jewish. What does it mean to visit one’s own culture or heritage? The word “visitor” itself evokes the idea of “other” or “outsider,” and calls into question the place of Yiddish in modern Jewish culture, and vice versa. Furthermore, Shandler mentions Marjorie Esman’s term “internal tourism,” which essentially refers to tourist attractions that

\textsuperscript{100} Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, \textit{Destination Culture}, 194.
\textsuperscript{101} Shandler, \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, 136.
“enable one to visit one’s own people”\textsuperscript{102}. He writes that, “the notion of Jews attending Yiddish festivals as ‘internal tourists’ has especially challenging topical implications – for what, exactly, is their destination?”\textsuperscript{103}. Indeed, the same question can be posed of visitors to the YBC.

Roskies writes about the twentieth-century Jewish pilgrims, whose travels were designed to visit Jewish “memory-sites.” In a way, the YBC serves as a memory-site to many Jewish pilgrims, though it is less than 40 years old. It is not only one of the most important organizations in Yiddish transmission and revival efforts, but the building itself also represents a unique Jewish space and time that most visitors have not (and probably will never) experience. Furthermore, it both validates and soothes a feeling of loss experienced, whether directly or indirectly, by all Jews, and one that resonates with all visitors. That said, the idea of building the Center in a remote location which requires a pilgrimage of sorts diminishes its accessibility in order to glorify its accomplishments.

\textsuperscript{102} Shandler, \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, 136.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 136.
Chapter 2
The Wexler Oral History Project

In this chapter, I examine the YBC’s Wexler Oral History Project. I consider first how it both fits into and contributes to a larger context of Jewish ethnography and archival projects. I then move on to explore some of the interviews conducted to date and discuss the insight that they provide into the complex attitudes towards Yiddish today.

Background: The Project

One of the YBC’s current major research and archival endeavors is the Wexler Oral History Project, which is now in its third year. While the idea to conduct an oral history project had been considered for some time (a similar project was attempted fifteen years ago, but was never successfully executed), it began to be seriously discussed in October 2009, when the Center’s Fellowship program began. One of the four Fellows that year, Smith alumna Christa Whitney, set the project in motion. The first interview was conducted in February 2010. To date, the team has conducted approximately 280 interviews (each between one hour and one hour and a half, amounting to approximately 350 total hours of material), and over 150 candidates more have submitted pre-interview forms. The project is currently run by Ms. Whitney, who is on staff as Director of the Wexler Oral History Project, as well as four interns and a post-graduate Fellow.

104 In recent years, the YBC has hired four recent college graduates as part of a Fellowship program. The Fellows work full-time on various projects, such as curating exhibitions, digitizing books and rare audio recordings, creating and leading educational tours, while deepening their own experience with Yiddish language and culture.
The overall mission of the project is to examine different experiences of Jewishness, with a focus on people’s relationship to Yiddish. The YBC’s website describes the project as a way of gaining insight into “the ways in which Yiddish language and culture inform Jewish identity,” and describes the stories as providing “a glimpse into the ways in which cultural heritage is transmitted, adapted, and reinterpreted by each generation.” The program contributes to the YBC’s efforts to expand its mission beyond book collection and distribution to research and education. The interviews are available online, so the project has the capacity to inform both academics and non-academics on the development of Yiddish today. It is already a major archival achievement, and will hopefully become a prominent source for future researchers.

Like the various exhibitions and interactive aspects of the Book Center, questions arise concerning the purpose of the Oral History Project in the context of the institution. Does the project contribute to cultural transmission? Why is a center whose focus is on Yiddish books collecting oral histories, most of which are conducted in English? This is certainly not to suggest that the project is irrelevant; to the contrary, what the YBC is doing here is critical in that it is constructing an archive that records the histories and memories of a generation that is slowly disappearing, and tracking the shifting attitudes towards Yiddish and the progress of its transmission. Nevertheless, the launch and growth of this project evokes questions about how the YBC perceives its developing role as a Jewish institution, and how it seeks to present itself to the community at large. It is quite open about the fact that it has begun moving beyond the realm of Yiddish literature to engage
with other aspects of Jewish life, and this ethnographic project furthers that ambition. Its website and weekly emails to members feature various excerpts from the Wexler interviews as a way to maintain interest in the Center’s work, defend the institution’s relevance, and potentially raise the funds needed to support the work of the YBC as it transitions from a book repository to an educational institution.

In “Between Craft and Method: Meaning and Intersubjectivity in Oral History Analysis,” Mahua Sarkar defines oral history as “in-depth biography interviewing, typically of people who are excluded from or marginalized within conventional historical accounts”105. She also quotes the British oral historian Paul Thompson, who wrote that, “oral history is as old as history itself. It is the first kind of history. And it is only quite recently that skill in handling oral evidence has ceased to be one of the marks of a great historian”106. Indeed, oral history is a long established form of ethnography and historical documentation. In adopting this new project, the YBC has taken on a new role as a site of historical preservation. By recording and distributing these oral accounts, Lansky and his workers have proceeded from being Yiddish book collectors, preservationists, and distributors to also being ethnographers and archivists. In a way, the Wexler project illustrates the shifting focus of the YBC, and supports its development as an institution interested in the experience of secular Jewish culture more broadly, with Yiddish and literature reduced to only featured components.

106 Ibid., 581.
Jewish ethnography, including oral histories, is not new to the culture. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett traces the history of ethnographic efforts and cultural salvation in her article “Folklore, Ethnography, and Anthropology.” She begins in the early 19th century, citing Leopold Zunz, a German Reform rabbi considered the father of Jewish Studies, who founded the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Judentums (The Society for the Culture and Science of the Jews). She also writes about the various organizations founded in Eastern Europe in the later 19th century, such as the “Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Commission of the Society for the Promotion of Culture Among the Jews in Russia,” founded in 1889 in St. Petersburg and the “Museum für Jüdische Volkskunde” (Museum for Jewish Folklore Studies), founded in 1898 by the German Rabbi Max Grunwald. Many of these efforts were motivated by the recognition that traditional Jewish ways of life were disappearing, or at least transforming, and these various museums and organizations hoped to both “preserve a record of a disappearing way of life”107 and encourage a cultural revival and “stem the tide of assimilation.” Thus, early ethnographic projects served not only to memorialize but also to recreate a sense of shared community and heritage that had begun to fade.

Shloymer Zanvil Rappoport, a Russian-Jewish intellectual better known as S. An-sky, is considered a leading figure in the field of Jewish ethnography, though Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reveals that this type of historical consciousness existed before the turn of the 20th century, when An-sky’s work began to emerge. According

108 Ibid.
to Benjamin Lukin, An-sky first expressed devotion to Jewish ethnography and collection of cultural materials in 1907. Lukin writes that his interest was in Jewish memory, and that he “saw the long history of the Jewish people as first and foremost the development of mass consciousness and the formation of a national culture”\textsuperscript{109}, and that, today, his work would be considered cultural anthropology. An-sky’s work was important in that he sought to collect as much cultural material (in the form of artifacts, music, and oral and literary folklore) to educate Jews about their own heritage. As he said himself, every nation has a responsibility to value and encourage “self knowledge. The most important, if not the only means of achieving that aim is by studying the life of the people, its past and present, its way of life, beliefs, poetic and artistic creativity”\textsuperscript{110}. In a way, the Wexler project reflects this goal, as it is to be used not only for research, but to promote and enrich Jewish self-education.

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, established in Wilno, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania) in 1925 and moved to New York during World War II by Max Weinreich, is another key institution in the history of Jewish self-documentation. Its primary ambition was to study Yiddish culture and folklore. It focuses especially on written documents, such as books and diaries, but also collects other relevant material artifacts. One of the main divisions of the YIVO in Wilno was the Philology Section, within which was the Ethnographic (renamed Folklore) Commission. Its


\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 297.
handbook, entitled “Voz iz azoyns yiddishe ethnografye?” ("What is Jewish Ethnography?"), defines Yiddish ethnography as the “study of all branches of life within the historical territory of the Yiddish language and within distinctive groups and strata from shoemakers and yeshiva boys to the underworld”\textsuperscript{111}. Thus, like Ansky, YIVO sought to employ a holistic approach to the study of folklore, though it focused its research on Yiddish language and culture.

Jewish ethnography continued through the Holocaust, when oppressed Jews continued, even under threat, to not only record their folklore but also create and record new material. For example, the Oyneg Shabes Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, with its collection of diaries, reportages, poetry, statistical surveys, and other materials provides us with important material for reconstructing a social history of the ghetto\textsuperscript{112}. Since then, oral histories have become a popular medium for researching Jewish culture during the Holocaust. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett cites two major projects from the 1950s, one conducted by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead entitled “Life Is With People: The Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe” (1952)\textsuperscript{113}, which sought to provide an ethnography of East European Jewry before the Holocaust\textsuperscript{114} and the other conducted by Uriel Weinreich, entitled “Language and Culture Archive of Ashkenazic Jewry,” which sought to collect and preserve information about Yiddish-speaking Jews of Central and Eastern Europe before


\textsuperscript{112} For more on this, see Samuel Krassow’s book, Who Will Write Our History? : Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive.

\textsuperscript{113} The subtitle was changed to “The Culture of the Shtetl” in 1962.

\textsuperscript{114} Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Folklore, Ethnography, and Anthropology,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.
World War II\textsuperscript{115}. Countless other historians and documentary-makers have also used oral history to record and try to make sense of Jewish experiences during World War II. Recently, the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University\textsuperscript{116} and the Spielberg Archive\textsuperscript{117} have become important players in this tradition, amassing approximately 56,500 oral history interviews with survivors of the Holocaust speaking about their pre-war lives and wartime experiences.

Thus, the Wexler Oral History Project is deeply rooted in a long history of Jewish archival research, and the YBC's decision to take on such a project places it in a broader context of Jewish ethnography. Furthermore, its focus on contemporary Jewish life and culture is a refreshing change from the decades of academic focus on the Holocaust. Like the pre-war Jewish ethnographers and folklorists, the Wexler project seeks to record contemporary attitudes towards Yiddish culture and its relationship to Jewish identity. Just as the YBC in general seeks to establish a place for Yiddish in the future, the Wexler project, while acknowledging and respecting the past, moves beyond it to examine the development of Jewish culture after the shock of the Holocaust. In a way, it looks to the future of Yiddish and Jewish culture rather than the past, and represents an important step both in modern Jewish self-consciousness and in the trajectory of Yiddish ethnography.

The interviewers of the Wexler project have now collected hundreds of interviews, but for the scope of this chapter, I have limited my sample to 30. Though


\textsuperscript{116} "Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies," Yale University Library, accessed March 15, 2013, http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/.

the subjects came from various backgrounds and had widely different relationships to Yiddish, I loosely divided them into three categories: recent college and graduate students of Yiddish; older native speakers of Yiddish; and professors of Yiddish language, literature and culture. Based on these categories, I viewed the interviews of 13 students, 12 native speakers, and 5 professors. I contend that examining two different generations provides insight into the shifting relationship of Jews to Yiddish, and that the inclusion of scholars of Yiddish provides an additional perspective. In fact, as we shall see, this last group of interviews added another dimension of complication, albeit an important one. Through these three categories of interviews, I examined the different attitudes expressed about the future of Yiddish, both as a language and a culture. I was hoping to gain insight into inter-generational relationships to Yiddish, and explore the shifting perceptions of Yiddish. I found that, among my first group, nostalgia, sorrow, and the romanticizing of Yiddish was prevalent throughout most of the interviews. The students in my second group expressed varying levels of interest in learning Yiddish, but all were discouraged by the absence of a physical locus in which to use the language, thus rendering learning it frustratingly impractical. Finally, the professors whose interviews I watched expressed a wide array of opinions concerning the future of the language, thereby revealing the ideological divisions that both trouble and enrich the academic field of Yiddish.

\[118\] It is important to note that, though we have a tendency to regard scholars and professors as figures of authority on their subjects, the divergence of opinions among the 5 scholars whose interviews I watched suggests that perhaps we delegate interpretation of experience to authorities that we create and, in doing so, relegate our own experience to the consumption of those opinions.
Before proceeding with descriptions and analyses of the interviews, it is important to note that this selection represents primarily American Jewish relationships to Yiddish. There is a large number of non-Jewish European students expressing increasing interest in the language, especially in Germany and Poland. Several German and Polish universities offer chaired professors in Yiddish, and Lithuania hosts an annual Yiddish summer language program in its capital, Vilnius, which caters mainly to European students. In general, these students’ interest in Yiddish stems from a recognition that it is a necessary tool in their research on their own history. In the New Europe, it would be inconceivable to write the history of Germany or Poland without including the Jews. In Israel, interest in Yiddish among young people is tied to a recent resurgence in Ashkenzi-pride, and an effort to redress the rigor with which Hebrew culture repressed Yiddish. In addition to the graduate consortium organized between Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and Ben Gurion University, Tel Aviv University has, for several years now, hosted the international Goldreich Yiddish Summer language institute, attracting students from Israel and abroad for a month of intensive Yiddish language study.

However, Ruth Wisse complicates the so-called Yiddish renaissance in America by pointing out that many students are attracted to Yiddish because of its history of marginalization (or at least their perception of its victimization). She suggests that Jewish and non-Jewish gays and lesbians, radical feminists, neo-Trotskyites, anti-Zionists, and other marginalized communities identify with Yiddish because of what Wisse describes as a “sense of personal injury”\textsuperscript{119}. In other words,

as Yiddish was the language of an often-marginalized community and, even within that community, was considered an inferior language to the religious and academic pedigree of Hebrew, many people today have reduced Yiddish to a language of exclusion, marginality, and martyrdom. Wisse argues that these students “commit a double fault, occluding the moral assurance and tenacity of Yiddish culture in its own terms and, by attributing value to weakness, retroactively defaming the Jewish will to live and to prosper”\(^{120}\). Furthermore, they exclude the degree to which, for centuries, Yiddish was the vernacular of religiously observant Jews, and then, in the 20\(^{th}\) century, also the language of several forms of Jewish nationalist discourse. They instead exclusively focus on the history of Yiddish as the language of social and political protest, socialism, and communism. Wisse’s observations are compelling; not only do oversimplified interpretations of Yiddish neglect the rich multifacetedness of the language and culture, they actually reduce the Jewish experience to a stereotype of victimhood. In seeking a Jewish identity, they project onto Yiddish their own sense of alienation. Though these were not the attitudes expressed in the Wexler interviews that I watched, their prevalence within the Yiddish revitalization movement is important to recognize nonetheless, as such attitudes constitute one of the central ideological disputes within the world of American Yiddish culture today. The Yiddish Book Center itself struggled with such concerns early in its history when its founder worried that if the Center were to be perceived as providing a home to such appropriation of Yiddish it could put the institution’s reputation in jeopardy.

Interviews: Life and Death of Yiddish

Interviewees who had grown up speaking Yiddish or in Yiddish-speaking homes related to the language nostalgically, and bemoaned its dissolution. Many began by discussing their childhoods, and describing their upbringing in relation to Yiddish; the idea of growing up in “the Yiddish world” or “a modified shtetl” was a recurrent theme. Haim Gunner recalls that, “Yiddish was our language in the house. So I was a native speaker, who learned a cultivated Yiddish”\(^\text{121}\). Michael Steinlauf tells that, “the neighborhood where I lived in was [...] very Yiddish-speaking,”\(^\text{122}\) and Irv Zuckerman didn’t even speak English until the first grade\(^\text{123}\). Many others had similar stories, including Yechiel Schachner, who reminisces that, “as a kid, the Yiddish world was my world”\(^\text{124}\) and Jacob Schlitt, who says that, “we called [Yiddish] Jewish”\(^\text{125}\), reinforcing a common perception that the language and those who spoke it were synonymous. Furthermore, a large percentage of these interviewees spoke Yiddish intermittently throughout their testimonies, demonstrating their attachment to and familiarity with the language. They are all fluent English speakers now, and no longer use Yiddish for everyday use. Thus, the incorporation of Yiddish phrases and sentences in their story-telling functioned


more as a marker of linguistic expertise than as a necessary mode of communication. This strategy begs the question of why these men and women, who had been so quick to abandon Yiddish earlier in their lives, are now so eager to assert their ability to speak it.

Unlike the students whose interviews I watched, these men and women often used life and death metaphors in reference to Yiddish. Boris Rubenstein, for example, laments that, “It’s not gonna be a live language, a living language like it once was”\(^\text{126}\). Similarly, Yechiel Schachner says that, “we lost 6 million of our Yiddish speakers and, unfortunately, that means that the language is having trouble surviving”\(^\text{127}\), and Jacob Schlitt talks about the importance of “keep[ing] Yiddish alive”\(^\text{128}\). This type of personification reveals their deep personal connection to Yiddish; in their metaphorical presentation of the language, Yiddish becomes not just a form of communication, but a beloved component of their identity that has been lost. Nettle and Romaine use a similar metaphor in *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages* when they equate the loss of a language to the loss of a limb: “Like a limb not used, it atrophies”\(^\text{129}\). Indeed, these interviewees speak of the language as an intrinsic element of their being, and mourn its loss like a personal death. In a way, the loss of the Yiddish language serves a microcosm of Jewish loss in general; the act of mourning Yiddish language is a way of mourning the fragmentation of Yiddish culture and the disappearance of Yiddish speakers.

---

\(^\text{127}\) Yechiel Schachner, Oral History Interview.
\(^\text{128}\) Jacob Schlitt, Oral History Interview.
\(^\text{129}\) Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, 53.
In his book *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*, Mark Abley writes that, as Hebrew was revived, Yiddish “took on the aura of a holy tongue” and adds that, with the success of the Hebrew revival and “thanks to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, Yiddish became sacred”\(^\text{130}\). In other words, he argues that the recent magnetism of Yiddish is due, at least in large part, to the Holocaust and its destruction of a large percentage of Yiddish-speaking Jewry and its cultural institutions and networks. The holy aura that Yiddish has acquired is a relatively recent development; at the turn of the 20th century, Hebrew was still the *loshn koydesh*, or holy tongue, by virtue of being the language of prayer and rabbinic scholarship. By contrast, Yiddish was considered profane and, among immigrant Jews, a hindrance to assimilation and social advancement. Thus, Abley’s point is well taken; the emergence of Yiddish as holy was provoked by the losses suffered in the Holocaust. Yiddish became holy by virtue of becoming a language of martyrdom. One must wonder whether the use of “death” throughout these interviews and the rampant nostalgia for Yiddish would be as significant if the Holocaust had not occurred. The near annihilation of European Jewry caused a sudden and unnatural rupture in the use and transmission of the language, and certainly exaggerates the feeling of loss in regards to Yiddish.

That said, these interviews are conducted, for the most part, with American Jews, many of whom were already in the United States at the time of the tragedy. As Abley writes, later on, the collapse of Yiddish cannot be blamed entirely on the Holocaust. Though millions of Yiddish-speaking Jews were massacred, millions

more “grew safely old outside Europe (not only in the United States but also in the likes of Canada, Australia, Mexico, and Argentina), passing on less and less of the shtetl language to their children and grandchildren”\textsuperscript{131}. Similarly, in \textit{Words on Fire}, Dovid Katz quotes Avrom Shulman, who said in an interview that, “Neither Hitler nor Stalin ever came to America. Here there are no excuses”\textsuperscript{132}. Indeed, many Jews had already emigrated from Eastern Europe to America by the time Hitler came to power. So how do we account for the decline of Yiddish on this side of the world? The most reasonable answer is assimilation. Jews who immigrated to the United States willingly forsook Yiddish for English, which represented social and economic advancement. In so doing, they gradually allowed Yiddish (as a spoken tongue) to wither away. Though the end of Yiddish as a vernacular came about very differently in Eastern Europe and America, the ultimate result was the same; in Europe, Yiddish was lost to genocide and in America, it was lost to assimilation.

Nevertheless, as the decline of Yiddish was relatively more gradual in the United States, why are the metaphors of life and death still so prevalent? The shock and trauma of the Holocaust had repercussions all over the world, and certainly influenced this romantic cultural memory of Yiddish and the imagined Yiddishland associated with it. Perhaps also at play for American Jews, however, is a feeling of guilt for having assimilated and, in the process, abandoned Yiddish. Now that new

\textsuperscript{131} Abley, \textit{Spoken Here}, 206.  
\textsuperscript{132} Katz, \textit{Words on Fire}, 353.
generations are comfortably settled into their identity as Americans, it is safe to begin the mourning process for what was left behind.\textsuperscript{133}

The Holocaust certainly aggravates these potential feelings of culpability. While the rejection of Yiddish in the States for the sake of assimilation felt admissible when millions of other Jews still spoke it in Europe; the murder of most of those remaining Yiddish-speakers in the Holocaust, however, incited (at least for some) an experience similar to survivor’s guilt. American Jews had willingly abandoned an important part of Jewish identity that was violently torn from their European counterparts.

These issues call into question the relationship between guilt, remorse, and nostalgia. The three are certainly interconnected and influence each other, and their complex interplay ultimately defines the modern secular Jewish experience of Yiddish. Nostalgia emerges as a result of guilt, in that the feeling of responsibility for the loss of Yiddish creates an idealization of the language and culture. Furthermore, remorse implies the belief that something could have been done differently, and the revival of Yiddish can be interpreted as an attempt to both honor the loss and make reparation.

\textbf{Interviews: A Place for Yiddish in the Future}

Nettle and Romaine write that, “the pulse of a language clearly lies in the youngest generation. Languages are at risk when they are no longer transmitted naturally to children in the home by parents or other caretakers”\textsuperscript{134}.

\textsuperscript{133} Furthermore, in an era that celebrates multiculturalism, Yiddish has become more attractive again, as a marker of ethnic difference to be recovered and celebrated. The subject of diaspora nationalism is an interesting topic for further research, but lies beyond the scope of this paper.
Students of Yiddish whose interviews I watched were less likely to use life and death metaphors in reference to the language. When discussing the future of Yiddish, most expressed interest in continuing to study the language, though many did not know how they would subsequently use it, or where. Hampshire College student Wyatt Miles expresses a common underlying sentiment when he says that, “even if I could speak it, I wouldn’t have a place to speak it”\textsuperscript{135}. This statement speaks to the lack of community perceived by younger students of Yiddish. Their predecessors, many of whom grew up speaking Yiddish, talk about growing up in “the Yiddish world” or a “modified shtetl.” These men and women at least know what a Yiddish-speaking space looks like. In contrast, college- and graduate school-aged students who express interest in learning the language have never experienced a community where Yiddish is naturally spoken by everyone.

Thus, though an increasing number of students are studying Yiddish, there is still a crucial aspect of language community missing. Clearly, the language is becoming a more popular academic pursuit, but there is still no secular community, international or local, in which to use it as a vernacular dialect. There is certainly a growing Hasidic vernacular Yiddish community, to whom we owe the fact that Yiddish is technically growing rather than dying. Additionally, a few secular groups, such as Yiddish Farm Camp (a Yiddish-intensive organic farming program) or KlezKamp (a yearly Klezmer music and Yiddish culture festival), have created Yiddish-only communities, but these are generally places through which people pass

\textsuperscript{134} Nettle and Romaine, \textit{Vanishing Voices}, 8.

for a fixed length of time rather than established, permanent communities. These various camps illustrate the way that Yiddish continues to be compartmentalized. Yiddish remains an activity that one does instead of a linguistic community that one inhabits and an identity that one embodies.

Still, students’ feeling that there is no space or community in which to use Yiddish speaks to the amount of work left to do in the secular revival movement. For teaching a language is not reviving it. As Nettle and Romaine suggest, learning a language in the classroom is not comparable to transmitting that language in the home. In the latter, the language is learned naturally, in an already existing community. The language has a context, and is seamlessly incorporated into children’s cultural education. Though learning Yiddish in classrooms is nonetheless valuable and an important step in its revival, it transmits the language in an academic rather than natural setting, and is therefore automatically distinguished from students’ first languages.

The difficulty of transmitting Yiddish is reflected in the efforts of the YBC. While Yiddish is taught to students of various ages, English remains the spoken language in the building. In fact, few members of the staff speak Yiddish, and some cannot even read it; this fact in and of itself reveals the institution’s prioritization of Yiddish as a cultural symbol over Yiddish as a spoken language. Exhibitions and panels are written in English, and workers speak English to visitors and amongst themselves. It is certainly a difficult position for the YBC and other Yiddish institutions. While the goal is ultimately the transmission and, to a certain extent, the revival, of Yiddish, such a task is difficult when most visitors speak very little to
no Yiddish and most of the professional staff cannot communicate in it. Ideally, Yiddish would be regularly spoken in the corridors of the YBC, but this would immediately exclude a large percentage of the people that the YBC tries to reach. Thus, while speaking exclusively Yiddish in the YBC would theoretically be the best strategy for ensuring the transmission of the language, it is rather unrealistic considering the level of proficiency of its target audience and the difficulty in recruiting staff members who possess both Yiddish linguistic facility and the professional talents necessary to run a major non-profit.

Sasha Lansky, Aaron Lansky’s daughter, did not learn Yiddish by the time she was interviewed, when she was in high school. According to her interview, her father refused to teach her and her sister Yiddish, both to avoid excluding her mother, who did not speak Yiddish, and to avoid being ostracized. She says that, “his excuse is that [...] he thinks that it would be too hard to teach a language that, when we’re not immersed, and that the kids kind of end up being weird, as he likes to put it”\textsuperscript{136}. Her testimony also calls into question the objectives of the YBC. What does it mean when the founder of the Yiddish Book Center does not encourage his own daughter to learn the language, which then communicates certain negative attitudes about Yiddish? How are we to interpret his fear that his kids would end up being “weird” if they learned Yiddish early on? For if his goal were to ensure the survival of Yiddish books and their contents, would he not want his family to learn the language and continue the tradition of cultural and linguistic transmission? Thus, Sasha Lansky’s interview complicates her father’s expressed desire to preserve and

transmit Yiddish. It suggests, once again, that Lansky’s relationship with Yiddish is informed primarily by its function as a cultural symbol or identity than its vernacular, spoken use.

Though the YBC finds itself in this difficult position, one realistic place to concentrate successful transmission efforts would be university language programs, such as those offered in Vilnius, Tel Aviv, or New York City’s YIVO. Middlebury College, though it does not offer Yiddish classes, requires students entering its intensive summer language programs to sign pledges only to speak the language that they are learning. This type of immersion strategy, which has been known to work very well, would be a useful tool in Yiddish revitalization efforts. Though it is still not as effective as intergenerational, at-home language transmission, it would force students to engage with Yiddish more deeply than in an academic setting where Yiddish is only spoken a few hours a day in a very specific and isolated context.

Ironically, despite the YBC’s expressed commitment to revitalizing Yiddish, and though it is perhaps best placed by virtue of its financial resources, building, and collection to offer an immersion program, it has so far failed to offer any such opportunity. In fact, it has never marketed itself as a Yiddish-speaking destination for students. Despite increasing interest around the globe in revitalizing Yiddish, there is not a single major academic or cultural institution that has adopted a language immersion strategy in order to both encourage language acquisition and create a kind of “study-abroad” or “destination culture” that students currently feel is missing.
Now that most native Yiddish speakers are no longer alive, newer generations have not naturally been transmitted the language and (secular) Jews in the Diaspora no longer live in segregated communities. Yiddish therefore no longer has a space in which to serve as a vernacular means of communication. As Israel Bartal, a Jewish History professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, asserts in his Wexler interview, “a language can survive only when you have a state system to maintain it”\textsuperscript{137}. Shulman also postulates the necessity of community, though one structured bottom-up by individuals rather than the top-down paradigm proposed by Bartal. Shulman, quoted by Katz, says that, “if you want to save Yiddish, you have to build a shtetl, with a town square with its pump and stalls, and with the drunken góyishe peasants we would never want to be like, and then you’ll have your Yiddish”\textsuperscript{138}. Nettle and Romain also assert that a language “can only exist where there is a community to speak and transmit it”\textsuperscript{139}. Now that transnational movement has become much easier, the conception of community is constantly redefined and renegotiated, and the effort to create (or recreate) a linguistic community becomes all the more challenging. How are we to create a community in which to transmit Yiddish, if the definition itself of community is so dynamic? Moreover, Jewish diasporic languages tend to thrive when they serve as a barrier against outside (non-Jewish) influences so as to preserve a (religiously) traditional community. Now that religion is no longer central to many Jews’ sense of identity, such segregation is no longer necessary; to the contrary, as discussed previously, it is

\textsuperscript{138} Katz, \emph{Words on Fire}, 353.
\textsuperscript{139} Nettle and Romaine, \emph{Vanishing Voices}, 5.
perceived as an unwanted obstacle. Without the commitment to a religious lifestyle, then, Jewish languages have trouble thriving.

Though Wyatt Miles and Nettle and Romaine conceptualize community in terms of geographical space, another interviewee, Charles Corfield, brings up an interesting alternative: the Internet. In his interview, he addresses the growing role of the Internet in Yiddish communication and transmission. He notes that, “there is more stuff creeping online” and theorizes that, “technology now allows people to begin to maintain community again without being physically in the shtetl”\textsuperscript{140}. Dovid Katz agrees that Yiddish can be saved, “not as a physical society with streets and squares, but as a virtual network of small, serious islands of culture and creativity in the Internet age”\textsuperscript{141}. Though Corfield’s association of Yiddish communities with shtetls is somewhat limiting and problematic, as many Yiddish speakers also lived in cosmopolitan areas, the idea of an Internet community is interesting, and one that was not addressed in other interviews. Can an international virtual community of Yiddish speakers serve as the community to which Nettle and Romaine refer? Can virtual space revive Yiddish in a way that physical space cannot seem to do? Does an Internet community provide enough structure for revitalization efforts? What would such a virtual imagined homeland look like?

Despite the felt lack of community, most of the students are more optimistic than their parents and grandparents, and express their predictions in more nuanced terms. For instance, though Vardit Lightstone initially speaks of Yiddish as being “on


\textsuperscript{141} Katz, \textit{Words on Fire}, 295.
a very clear decline,” she concludes her interview by talking about the future of Yinglish, her word for the incorporation of Yiddish words and phrases into colloquial English, and saying that, “I think that Yiddish is very much alive and adapting”\textsuperscript{142}. Sarah Gordon, who begins similarly by expressing skepticism about the idea of cultural revival, goes on to say that, “I think things ebb and flow and change and morph”\textsuperscript{143}. Thus, though she resists the word revival, and answers her own question “Is this a movement” with “Towards what?”\textsuperscript{144}, she does see a future for Yiddish. Like Vardit, however, she does not imagine it surviving in its current state, but rather as an adaptation, or morphed form, of the way it was originally. This morphing does not necessarily entail the end of Yiddish. As Katz writes, most Jewish languages have historically been created by marrying elements of the previous Jewish language with elements of the surrounding non-Jewish language. He argues that, “each of the past Jewish languages has thereby been fated not to ‘die’ but to morph into a vital component of its successor and live on in a new incarnation”\textsuperscript{145}. By this view, the position of Yiddish today corresponds with a tendency of Jewish languages to morph, merge, and develop rather than disappear.

Nevertheless, despite a shared hopefulness, almost none of the students whose interviews I watched propose a concrete plan to ensure its survival and transmission. Benjy Fox-Rosen does say that, “ideally, Yiddish would be taught in Yiddish day schools,” which would “probably [be] the only way to really make

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Katz, \textit{Words on Fire}, 7.
Yiddish part of the mainstream Jewish context in the United States” 146. None of the other students, however, articulate a vision for the future of Yiddish. In fact, even with his statement, Benjy does not address the purpose of making Yiddish "part of the mainstream" American Jewish culture. Though he puts forward a concrete strategy for the survival of Yiddish, namely, teaching it in Jewish day schools, he does not actually elaborate on how or why a Yiddish vernacular would then be used. In response to a question about his imagined future use of Yiddish he says, “maybe I’ll yell at my children in Yiddish, I don’t know” 147. The “maybe” and “I don’t know” echo the hesitancy of Wyatt Miles and other students about their future use of Yiddish.

The lack of strategy or clear ambition suggests that, despite claims to the contrary, much of students’ interest in Yiddish is inspired by nostalgia or a romantic notion of Yiddish, rather than a desire to actually revive it as a vernacular or master it for use in their research. While academic interest in Yiddish is growing, the hope that Yiddish will once again become a vernacular dialect among secular Jews is probably unattainable. Emma Morgenstern, another student, says skeptically, “I think that people are possibly overplaying the secular revival. [...] I feel like people always tend to think that, like, now something really exciting is happening” 148. As she asks, how will this so-called revival happen if many young people interested in

147 Ibid.
Yiddish cannot even formulate where they want the language to go? In this case, is revival even the right word, or is survival more appropriate?

**Interviews: Professors**

The five scholars of Yiddish language, literature, and culture whose interviews I watched are Justin Cammy, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and Comparative Literature at Smith College; Jean Baumgarten, Director of Research at the Centre de Recherches Historiques in Paris, France; Israel Bartal, Professor of Jewish History at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; Jack Kugelmass, Professor of Anthropology and Director of Jewish Studies at the University of Florida; and Cecile Kuznitz, Associate Professor of Jewish History at Bard College.\(^{149}\)

The five professors express varying opinions on the idea of Yiddish revival. Professor Cammy is the most skeptical, stating that “I put no currency in the notion of Yiddish renaissance. […] The fact that more and more people are interested in Yiddish does not make a renaissance” and adds that, “the home now for Yiddish is the Academy”\(^{150}\). In other words, as previously discussed, the growing academic interest in Yiddish, both by students and established scholars, does not mean that Yiddish is coming back to life. Furthermore, Professor Cammy notes that many of his students have been attracted to Yiddish because they see it as “old,” “quaint,” and “grandfatherly” and that the study of Yiddish often represents an attempt to manufacture a Jewish identity. This remark lends itself to the conclusion that

---

\(^{149}\) I should note here that, while some Yiddish scholars were interviewed in Yiddish, I chose 5 English-language interviews, as I do not speak Yiddish.  
Yiddish will remain in the world of academia; if his observation is accurate, it seems that most students are more interested in using Yiddish as a means to dealing with a feeling of absence or loss than as a form of everyday communication.

Professor Bartal leaves his answer more open by saying that, while he does not see a future for Yiddish in Eastern Europe, he does see one in Israel, adding “surprisingly enough”\(^{151}\), as Israel used to be one of the places most hostile to Yiddish. While in the past, Yiddish represented an old world best left behind and was vehemently rejected, today it is increasingly perceived as a cherished, lost aspect of Jewish culture. As Israel becomes more established as a nation, and now that Hebrew is safely revived, there is more space to re-engage with secular, non-Hebrew aspects of Jewish heritage. Justin Cammy also briefly discusses the future of Yiddish in Israel, saying that, “it makes total sense to me that Yiddish would now find a home, and should find a home, in the Israeli academic universe”.\(^{152}\) Professor Bartal does not expand much on his predictions for Yiddish in Israel, but based on his assertion that Yiddish cannot be revived without the support of a structured system, it seems safe to assume that he, too, imagines Yiddish in the realm of academia.

Professor Baumgarten’s answer is even more vague. He says that, “Of course Yiddish will be never as before, related to a socio-economic life centered on Yiddish as it was,” especially in light of the Holocaust, secularization, and with “the

\(^{151}\) Israel Bartal, Oral History Interview.
\(^{152}\) Justin Cammy, Oral History Interview.
transformation of the contemporary world”\textsuperscript{153}. Nevertheless, he adds, “But we have to be confident, we have to be optimistic, because you never know”\textsuperscript{154}. He proceeds to talk briefly about the potential of new generations, as “you never know […] what they are going to do with this treasure, this fantastic and very rich culture”\textsuperscript{155}. He does not, however, provide either evidence or strategies to support this statement. He does discuss the growing interest among French Jews, who are increasingly “coming back to Yiddish, learning, studying, speaking, having a social life around Yiddish”\textsuperscript{156}. Furthermore, though he admits that learning and transmitting must be differentiated, he expresses hope in the idea that, “step by step and very slowly,” Jews will begin, once again, to transmit Yiddish to one another.

Professor Kuznitz is more ambivalent in her predictions. She notes that “Yiddish is becoming more mainstream” and that “there’s more awareness of it”\textsuperscript{157}, but does not discuss the significance of these observations. She also speaks briefly about the importance of Yiddish in academic settings, as she says that, “that’s increasingly where students come to encounter Yiddish”\textsuperscript{158}, echoing the statements of Professors Cammy and Bartal regarding Yiddish in academia. Finally, she talks about the limitations of learning Yiddish through literature in translation, as “so much is lost in translation” and adds that, “I don’t think you can really preserve a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
culture in that way”\(^{159}\). In a way, this expression of loss reverberates with the sense of nostalgia, loss, and mourning referred to previously. Ironically, the feeling of outsiderness that secular Jews now feel towards Yiddish mirrors the exclusion that Yiddish speakers felt in the Diaspora.

Finally, Professor Kugelmass is the most supportive of the idea of revival. Contrary to his four colleagues, he says that, "I’m pessimistic now about the future of Yiddish in the Academy, ‘cause I’m pessimistic about everything in the Academy”\(^{160}\). Nevertheless, he states that, “there is a Yiddish revival” and that, “clearly you don’t have to grow up in a Yiddish-speaking household to speak Yiddish”\(^{161}\). He later adds that, “The Yiddish revival suggests that there are communities of speakers that are emerging. Or at least individuals. And the language has some kind of future to it”\(^{162}\), though he does not provide any more insight into this future. Professor Kugelmass justifies his claim that there is a Yiddish revival because of the significant amount of young people who are learning Yiddish and who “produce things. They do things”\(^{163}\). His use of “produce” and “do” implies a correlation between the success of cultural revival and the material creation of culture. This paradigm seems heavily influenced by capitalist values, which dictate that success be measured by production and consumption rather than connection and community. To the contrary, as students’ interviews illuminated,

\(^{159}\) Cecile Kuznitz, Oral History Interview.


\(^{161}\) Ibid.

\(^{162}\) Ibid.

\(^{163}\) Ibid.
Yiddish revival efforts can only be successful in the context of an insular community that shares the values embedded in the language.

Thus, even among academics, there is no consensus on the direction in which Yiddish is headed. Some argue that Yiddish will only live on in the Academy, while others remain ambivalent. The issue of a Yiddish revival, whether in academic settings or beyond, is also a source of disagreement. As the definition of revival is itself so subjective, this discordance makes sense. Strategies for and conceptions of “revival” vary, as exemplified by the interviews with professors as well as students. Israel Bartal poses an interesting question when he asks, “revival or survival?”  

Though Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe writes that, “sociolinguistic survival and sociolinguistic revival are closer than you think”  

Professor Bartal is right that there is a distinction to be made. Professor Bartal’s question is another way of framing the ongoing debate about whether we are recreating engagement or whether we are preserving what remains.

**Conclusion**

The Wexler Oral History Project, which emerges out of a long history of Jewish ethnography, represents an important development in the trajectory of Jewish historical consciousness. Drawing on the motives and strategies of its predecessors, it moves beyond the past to examine current experiences of Jewishness, and Yiddish in particular. The project is a vital resource not only for academic research, but also for the enrichment of Jewish self-awareness.

---

164 Israel Bartal, Oral History Interview.
Furthermore, the interviews themselves provide insight into the way that Jews of different ages and backgrounds engage with Yiddish, and with the varying motivations and attitudes that prompt this engagement. They illuminate the ongoing debate among scholars about the nuance between Yiddish preservation and revival, and which of the two is the best goal for the language. The interviews also allow for the exploration of the relationship between nostalgia, remorse, and the romanticization of Yiddish. Students’ interviews also reveal some of the frustrations of learning Yiddish today, including the absence of a destination in which to speak the language as a vernacular and the lack of immersion programs that could serve to make up, at least in part, for the absence of such a homeland.
Chapter 3
The Pakn Treger

In this chapter, I explore the different sections of the YBC’s magazine, Pakn Treger. I focus especially on the “Let’s Learn Yiddish” section, which I argue illuminates the superficiality with which many approach Yiddish culture today. I also examine the fundraising efforts included in the publications, and the ways the magazine capitalizes on nostalgia in order to encourage charitable donations. In certain ways, contemporary capitalism demands that Yiddish be commodified to ensure the success of the YBC; this leads to questions regarding the way consumerism structures strategies for language and maintenance and revival. Here, I will investigate the relationship between he YBC’s hopes for cultural and linguistic revival, capitalism, and the way the YBC exploits nostalgia and Jewish guilt to raise funds.

Pakn Treger: Overview

The Pakn Treger is the YBC’s English-language magazine, first published in 1982. Though the Pakn Treger began as a quarterly publication, in 2009 it became biannual in an effort to cut overall costs associated with the national economic crisis. The issues include various sections including letters to the editor; articles dealing with Yiddish/Jewish literature and culture; articles addressing the programs and activities of the YBC itself, such as summer programs, Yiddish festivals, book rescue missions, conferences, and new initiatives; sections aimed at “teaching” Yiddish words and phrases; and short stories, both by established Yiddish writers
like I.B. Singer and Sholem Aleichem, and by lesser known, more contemporary authors. Some of these short stories are only in English, while others, usually the classics, are presented in Yiddish and facing English translation. Through the different sections that it offers, the magazine both mirrors and furthers the YBC’s efforts; it appeals to a wide variety of readers, all with different relationships to Yiddish and varying mastery of the language. It educates on a cultural, literary, and linguistic level, and focuses especially on the way in which the YBC has positioned itself institutionally as shaping the Yiddish present and future.

The term “Pakn Treger” literally means “Book Peddler” in Yiddish, and refers to the traveling book salesmen of the Old Country who traveled from shtetl to shtetl peddling books and distributing news. In the context of the biannual publications, the image of the book peddler serves not only as a representation of shtetl life but, more broadly, of the centrality of texts in Jewish culture. In a way, just like the architecture of the YBC is reminiscent of the hallowed shtetl, the title of these magazines is evocative of another central symbol of the perceived old Yiddish world. Moreover, for people familiar with Yiddish culture and literature, the image of the book peddler calls to mind not only the shtetl lifestyle, but also “Mendele the Book Peddler,” the pseudonym of great Yiddish literary figure S.Y. Abramovich. Thus, the title “Pakn Treger” operates on different levels of symbolism and, like the YBC itself, calls to mind both cultural and literary traditions of Eastern European Jewry.

Earlier issues of the magazine opened with a letter from Aaron Lansky, entitled “Just Between Us.” The title itself of the section echoes the kind of intimacy and cultural exclusivism present throughout the building itself. Here, too, we must
ask, who is this “us”? What kind of community is Lansky addressing? Or perhaps, what kind of community is he hoping to create? Furthermore, what is the purpose of fostering this sense of insiderness/outsiderness? It certainly creates a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose that a simple “Dear Reader” would not achieve, but to what ends? In fact, it suggests a secret community of sorts; as readers receive the *Pakn Treger* only if they make a donation, the letter is automatically addressed to a specific constituency. The insider community is one based on donations, as if donating money were somehow the ultimate proof of support for the survival of Yiddish language, literature, and culture.

Lansky’s “Just Between Us” was replaced several years later by “A Bintl Brief.” “Bintl Brief” means “bundle of letters” in Yiddish, and calls to mind the *Forverts*’ “A Bintel Brief,” which was started in 1906 by Abraham Cahan, one of the newspaper’s founders. The *Pakn Treger’s* “Bintl Brief” and the *Forverts*’ “Bintel Brief” differ, however, in that the *Pakn Treger’s* letters to the editor are primarily concerned with readers’ reflections about the magazine, while the *Forverts*’ section was similar to a “Dear Abby” column, negotiating challenges of Jewish immigrant experiences. Nevertheless, the choice of “Bintl Brief,” just like the choice of “Pakn Treger” as the magazine’s title, situates the magazine in a larger Yiddish context and literary tradition. The term “Pakn Treger” conjures an image of Old Country Yiddish, while “Bintl Brief” also places the publications in the context of American Jewish experience. Thus, in various ways, the *Pakn Treger* seeks to imaginatively bridge historical and geographical cleavages and functions as the latest link in what Yiddish

---

166 The *Forverts*, or Jewish Daily Forward, is a socialist Jewish-American newspaper founded in 1897. Though it was originally in Yiddish, today it is published weekly in English and biweekly in Yiddish.
speakers refer to as *di golden keyt*, or the golden tradition of unbroken Jewish culture.

After the “Bintl Brief,” issues of the *Pakn Treger* contain different combinations of articles about Yiddish and Jewish literature and culture, articles about the YBC’s latest initiatives, sections meant to “teach” Yiddish words and phrases, and short stories, written either in English or in Yiddish with an English translation. These sections are organized differently in different issues, and some magazines include additional elements. In the summer of 2011, for example, the *Pakn Treger* issued a list of “100 Great Jewish Books,” put together by a team of leading academics. This list reveals the YBC’s ambition to move beyond its identity as a *Yiddish* Book Center and become a *Jewish* Book Center. Sections such as the “100 Great Jewish Books” illustrate the YBC’s negotiation between a commitment to Yiddish language and recognition that an exclusive focus on Yiddish would limit its audience. The cultural articles include such issues as food, Klezmer music, biographies of Yiddish writers past and present, and short memoirs of American Jews. The articles about the YBC usually address innovations, such as the digitization of the collection, high school and college programs, and the post-baccalaureate Fellowship program. In a way, they provide records of the evolution in the YBC’s ambitions.

Articles concerning the goings-on of the YBC inform both donors and readers who are generally interested in the Center. Finally, readers interested in Jewishness more broadly can find interest in the articles on Jewish history and contemporary culture. In this way, the *Pakn Treger* mirrors the efforts of the YBC to reach all
visitors (or, in this case, readers), and reflects the institution’s ambition to become not only a literary center but a Jewish cultural one as well.

“Let’s Learn Yiddish” & “Words Like Arrows”

One of the features of most issues of the *Pakn Treger* are the sections “Let’s Learn Yiddish” and “Words Like Arrows,” each no more than a page long. Each “lesson” has a different theme, such as “Where is the snow,” “A difficult winter,” or “Back to school.” Some also provide vocabulary related to the ongoing happenings at the YBC, such as “The new building” and “Renovations.” The lessons include a list of sentences, written in Yiddish, transliterated Yiddish, and English, as well as a short vocabulary and/or grammar lesson, also presented in the Yiddish/transliterated Yiddish/English format. In this way, the “lesson” is meant to engage a wider variety of readers than if it were written only in English, or only in English and transliterated Yiddish. The inclusion of Yiddish in alef-beys illuminates a hope of attracting more advanced Yiddish readers/speakers as well. However, one could assume that a reader who is advanced enough to read the Yiddish in the original would not need this type of mini-lesson. So the question then arises: what is the purpose of appealing to this category of reader?

Furthermore, how does the section function in the context of the YBC’s ambitions? Certainly, receiving a quarterly magazine with one page of Yiddish vocabulary and grammar is not sufficient to learn the language, nor will it ensure linguistic transmission in any way. While it might not appeal to serious Yiddish students, one can imagine that the section would satisfy readers with a mild interest
in the language, especially as a cultural symbol. People who are not completely invested in learning or transmitting the language may use this section to feel a connection, no matter how superficial, to Yiddish. In a way, the people to whom this section most appeals are driven more by nostalgia and mild curiosity than genuine interest in mastering the language and culture. This tendency to desire Yiddish without actually learning it is reminiscent of what Helen Beer calls “Yiddish without Yiddish,” which she defines as, “an identification with Yiddish, but without Yiddish”167. In other words, while people are drawn to the idea of Yiddish, whether because of nostalgia, remorse, or an unfulfilled longing for community, they are not necessarily interested in interacting with its many dimensions, nor are they interested in truly reviving it. Beer writes that, despite talk of a Yiddish renaissance, “there has been a revival of interest in the language and its culture, a popular vogue perhaps, but there are no signs of a restoration of Yiddish to its former life”168. The Pakn Treger’s “Let’s Learn Yiddish” portion both reflects and satisfies this popular relationship to Yiddish.

The section is similar to books such as Weiner and Davilman’s Yiddish with Dick and Jane or Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich’s Say it in Yiddish. Like Yiddish with Dick and Jane, “Let’s Learn Yiddish” has the feel of a children’s book, and teaches only small words and phrases. Like Say it in Yiddish, it imagines a space where Yiddish is spoken conversationally, and where learning these basic exchanges would be relevant. In a sense, these exercises in imagination bring to mind Janet Hadda’s argument that many Jews are currently in the denial stage of mourning for Yiddish.

168 Ibid., 12.
The act of writing and reading these works provides an escape from the reality that Yiddish as a mode of communication is becoming obsolete among secular Jews. Though it is a fun idea to contemplate, in actuality, there is no Yiddish homeland for Jews to visit or to which they can return. As Hadda writes, when her colleagues visited their native lands during vacation, “I would be reminded that there was no Yiddishland that I could go to”\(^\text{169}\). Regardless of whether or not there was ever a “Yiddishland” (Abigail Wood, for example, argues that, “even at the height of Old World Yiddish culture, Yiddishland never existed”\(^\text{170}\)), it certainly is non-existent today, at least in physical terms.

   Indeed, the cultural anxiety caused by the absence of a homeland is part of what motivates these kinds of Yiddish phrase books. The authors of books and magazine articles intended to teach everyday Yiddish are in fact assembling a sort of virtual or imaginary Yiddish land; while reading them, one is temporarily transported to a place where such conversations could be had. They offer a “what if” situation which ultimately underscores Jewish remorse for the loss of Yiddish both to the Holocaust and to assimilation. In writing about recent efforts to produce science textbooks in Yiddish, Yiddish guidebooks to plant names\(^\text{171}\), and Yiddish books about pregnancy and childbirth\(^\text{172}\), Hadda argues that, “dictionaries of chemistry do not prove that a language is flowering. The effort to produce such


works indicates that those who love Yiddish cannot bear to acknowledge that an era has ended”173. Similarly, these conversational Yiddish lessons do not indicate that Yiddish is being revived, but rather express a denial that Yiddish no longer has a place as a vernacular in modern secular Jewish culture. If we use Hadda’s own paradigm of the mourning stages, then perhaps these kinds of publications are just another necessary step in the mourning process, one that allows Jews today to digest this complicated loss. And perhaps instead of judging whether or not a section like “Let’s Learn Yiddish” is “useful” or not, it is better to observe it as a cultural coping mechanism and observe how it evolves.

Furthermore, “Let’s Learn Yiddish” once again calls into question what constitutes Yiddishland, if anything. Can works like *Yiddish with Dick and Jane* or the *Pakn Treger’s* mini-lessons in Yiddish create a Yiddish space? Does Yiddishland need a modern, geographical nation-state, or can it exist, as Shandler suggests, when people share short Yiddish conversations or when someone reads a Yiddish book? Additionally, what is the purpose of imagining these Yiddishlands? Are they a way of resisting the geographical discontinuity caused by the Diaspora? Are they a reaction to the attempted annihilation of the Jews in World War II? Do they demonstrate an effort to hold on to an aspect of Jewish culture that is rapidly slipping away?

The section “Words Like Arrows” raises similar issues. This page is designed to transmit Yiddish proverbs and sayings. In between each proverb, the writer, Shirley Kumove, includes a paragraph or two about Yiddish culture in order to contextualize the sayings. Thus, the section serves not only to teach readers Yiddish

---

sayings, but also teach about and memorialize a culture that has disappeared. Each section provides only a handful of proverbs, however, and, although Kumove does contextualize each saying to some extent, the section is not extensive enough to provide a substantial depiction of Yiddish culture. Like “Let’s Learn Yiddish,” it appeals to readers who want a glimpse into Yiddish culture without fully committing themselves to revival efforts.

Thus, through these various sections, the Pakn Treger skillfully provides a connection to Yiddish for a wide variety of readers. “Let’s Learn Yiddish” and “Words Like Arrows” appeal to readers with a superficial interest in Yiddish language and culture. By contrast, the short stories by Yiddish writers appeal to readers with an interest in literature and provide a more advanced lesson of sorts, as readers can read the English alongside the Yiddish, and therefore advance their Yiddish reading skills. The section also provides another form of recognition and validation for the minority of readers who are already fluent in Yiddish. The inclusion of Yiddish allows them to feel like they, too, have a cultural home in the YBC.

Moreover, the coexistence of English and Yiddish on the page echoes the juxtaposition of the two languages on signs and placards in and around the building of the YBC. In a way, it reflects the way Yiddish is now dependent on English. It also suggests that the survival of Yiddish in the future is dependent on translation, as its conversational use among secular Jews has mostly disappeared. In fact, throughout the magazine, there does not exist a single section without English. Though the YBC expresses a desire to re-introduce Yiddish to Jewish life, the lack of a purely Yiddish
section in the *Pakn Treger* reveals its commitment to readers with an affection or affinity for Yiddish who seek to engage with a digestible, simple Yiddish. Thus, the YBC seems more interested in expanding the use of Yiddish as performance or symbol than reviving it as a language in its own right.

**Fundraising**

One of the most striking elements of the *Pakn Treger* magazines is the pervasiveness of its fundraising efforts. Requests for donations, subscriptions, and planned gifts, recognition of donors, and other fundraising strategies permeate the pages of its pages. Though the magazine, rich with literature and cultural articles, is a pleasure to read, the relentless requests for money are distracting and unavoidable, as they appear in various forms throughout the entire magazine. Fundraising is obviously important for a non-profit organization, and as the official publication of the YBC, it makes sense for the *Pakn Treger* to function both as a cultural journal and as a fundraising mechanism. Nevertheless, at what point do fundraising efforts begin to distract from the actual purpose of the organization? Ultimately, is the goal of the magazine to present various facets of Jewish culture, or is it to raise money? The intertwining of these two purposes raises larger issues about cultural and linguistic revival in a capitalist, consumer-driven culture. In particular, how are Yiddish revitalization efforts in the United States informed by consumerism? Furthermore, what strategies does the YBC employ to fundraise?
The complexities of gift-giving have been of anthropological interest since Marcel Mauss published his famous essay *The Gift* in 1923-1924, but the relationship between philanthropy, fundraising, and capitalism has emerged as a topic of study more recently. In 2006, The Economist published an article entitled, “The Birth of Philanthrocapitalism,” which examines recent efforts to develop a new infrastructure for philanthropy based on the model of capitalist markets. The idea centers around the concepts of investment and social return; instead of giving money as a way of giving back, philanthropists now expect tangible returns for their investments. Though in American society, the idea of getting something in return for a donation may seem natural, it is in fact a paradigm unique Western capitalism. In India, for example, religious charitable giving, or dān, is based on the idea of giving without expecting anything in return. In Hinduism, donors are expected to “detach themselves from the object that has been donated” and be unconcerned with the outcome of their donation. In her essay, “The Impulse of Philanthropy,” Erica Bornstein writes that, according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, a donation with the idea of return “is like feeding a cow with the intention of getting milk [...] or inviting relatives with the intention of getting presents.” In contrast, Western donors remain connected to their donation and the recipient of their donation, and usually expect proof that their money was used effectively. In doing so, they essentially control the actions and decisions of the organization to which they gave money.

---

in turn creates an unequal power dynamic between institutions and private
investors that risks reducing the organization to controllable commodity,
investment, or arena for self-aggrandizement.

In their book *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World*, Bishop
and Green write that, today, “philanthropy is ‘strategic,’ ‘market conscious,’ ‘impact
oriented,’ ‘knowledge based,’ often ‘high engagement,’ and always driven by the goal
of maximizing the ‘leverage’ of the donor’s money.”178 Thus, philanthropy and
donation-making are now modeled on capitalist structures and, in turn, so are
fundraising strategies. Indeed, the YBC’s fundraising is visibly informed by
capitalism. Its main strategy, which involves bombarding members, visitors, and
*Pakn Treger* readers with information about how donor money is used, reflects the
philanthrocapitalist notion that investors need evidence of the effective use of their
donations. Furthermore, the fact that the YBC has to fundraise at all is indicative of
the way that it is embedded in a capitalist society. If cultural institutions were
funded by the government, such as in many European countries, then the YBC would
not need to beg for money as it does.179

Throughout the magazines, appeals to nostalgia and guilt are overwhelming.
For example, the tear-out subscription and membership forms in the center of the
magazines assert that, “Your membership helps rescue Yiddish books and re-

---


179 The complexities of the relationship between capitalism, non-profits, and fundraising are too vast
in scope for this thesis and merit their own research project, but they are nevertheless pertinent to
this chapter. For further exploration of this topic, I recommend the arguments put forth by Erica
Boernstein in *Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi*, Matthew Bishop & Michael Green in
*Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World*, and the many included in the volume
*Philanthropy and the Nonprofit Sector in a Changing America*, edited by Charles T. Clotfelter and
Thomas Ehrlich.
energize Jewish culture for future generations.” The idea of re-energizing Jewish culture is worth examining. First of all, what exactly does re-energizing Jewish culture entail? The implication here seems to be either that rescuing Yiddish books, or revitalizing Yiddish in general, would re-energize modern Jewish culture. The wording is quite vague, however, and does not directly make any such connection. Moreover, the assumption is that Jewish culture needs to be re-energized, which is problematic in and of itself. Is the advertisement referring to secular Jewish culture? American Jewish culture? Jewish culture in the Diaspora? Global Jewish culture? Yiddish culture? Additionally, what exactly needs to be re-energized about any of these communities, and how would the YBC use these donations to do so? Furthermore, the use of “rescue” is implicitly accusative. The phrasing suggests that, by not donating, readers are turning a blind eye on the books that need rescuing. Thus, by donating, readers are invited into the circle of rescuers, while those who do not contribute money remain passive onlookers to the plight of the Yiddish books, morally culpable for its destruction. The ad is quite effective, as it implicates readers in a perceived (perhaps even fabricated) danger that demands that they open their checkbooks or bear the weight of Yiddish destruction themselves.

Likewise, notices on the magazine pages themselves cry out, “Join us!” and, speaking for the reader, claim, “Yes, I want to help rescue Yiddish books and re-energize Jewish culture for future generations. Enclosed is my tax-deductable membership check.” The repetition of “rescue” and “re-energize” evokes the aforementioned questions. Furthermore, the addition of “Yes, I want to help” automatically incites guilt, for it equates donating to helping Yiddish, and
consequently associates not donating with impeding the rescue efforts of the YBC. Thus, the reader is put in an uncomfortable position. For the ad suggests that if s/he does not give money to the YBC, s/he is not interested in contributing to the organization’s cause. The implication also ties together material gain and cultural success, as do many of the ads present in the magazine. This kind of correlation is more revealing of the capitalist culture in which the YBC is embedded than the YBC itself. In certain ways, contemporary capitalism demands that Yiddish be commodified in order to ensure the success of the YBC. Without economic gain, the organization cannot survive, nor can its ambitions be achieved.

At this point, it may be interesting to examine how these aforementioned ambitions relate to Yiddish revival, if at all. Though the YBC has expanded to engage with other facets of Jewish history, culture, and life, its primary focus has historically centered around book rescue. Rescue and revitalization are not synonymous, however, and the collection, redistribution and, more recently, digitization of Yiddish literature does not ensure the survival of a language. Certainly, these efforts on the part of the YBC are extremely important for the survival of this rich body of literature, but they are more akin to historical preservation than cultural revival.

Even the YBC’s education model is insufficient for a revival. These are still mostly limited to the Steiner summer program, which only admits 18 students, the Fellowship program, which comprises of 4 post-undergraduates a year, and a week-long summer course for high school students, which also only admits 18 students a year. Another program offered is called Tent, which consists of various week-long immersion workshops for “American Jews between the ages of 20 and 30”
This program, in addition to being extremely selective, focuses more on Jewishness than on Yiddish. For example, the three upcoming workshops have to do with Jewish comedy, creative writing, and theatre.\textsuperscript{180} These various opportunities are too small in size to even begin to ensure the spread of Yiddish among secular Jews. Moreover, they are expensive and highly selective, making for an exclusivist and elitist community. Does reaching a few dozens of students a year sow the seeds for revitalization? Such an ambition could be better achieved by offering more programs, preferably full-language immersion programs, open to any and all interested. This way, more people would learn Yiddish, and in a more intense add effective way. The YBC does not offer such intensive programs, however, nor does it allow a large number of people into the programs that it does offer. Thus, is the YBC really interested in creating a new generation of Yiddish speakers and readers? If so, why do they not concentrate more of their funding on educational programs? Furthermore, why do they make their programs so expensive and selective? If the goal is to revitalize Yiddish, what is the advantage of creating such a small cadre of Yiddish-speakers?

In fact, though they now offer some language classes, however limited they may be, for a long time, the Book Center did not even have a language teacher on staff. The postponement in hiring a teacher who would offer Yiddish language classes to college students and adults indicates that there has been little interest on the part of the YBC to promote local Yiddish competency and build a Yiddish-speaking community around the Center.

\textsuperscript{180} For more on the YBC’s educational programs, visit http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/programs.
More promisingly, the YBC’s new Director of the Yiddish Language Institute, Asya Vaisman, has been tasked with designing Yiddish language online courses. Few of these currently exist, and those that do tend to be of low quality. Considering how few students are accepted to participate in the current on-site educational programs, this new opportunity will allow a far greater number of people to learn Yiddish. Thus, though the YBC’s educational program is still rather limited, the innovation of online courses suggests a deepening commitment to teaching Yiddish in a more inclusive way.

Another ad, bequeathing readers to donate online states, “It’s easy. It’s secure. It’s a mitzvah!” The advertisement leaves little space for excuses on the part of readers, in its use of “easy” and “secure”; why would a Pakn Treger reader, someone presumably interested in the YBC and, more broadly, the future of Yiddish, decline such an offer? Furthermore, the use of mitzvah (the term mitzvah refers to the 613 commandments in the Torah, but is often used generically today to mean a good deed) operates on several different levels. First of all, the use of this Jewish word serves, as we have seen with others, to signal insiderness. For a non-Jew who might not know the meaning of mitzvah, the advertisement would bear little meaning. For a Jew reading this, however, the use of mitzvah evokes a long tradition of Jewish morality and humanitarianism, and is difficult to dismiss. Thus, the request is difficult to refuse; not only is it easy and safe, it is a good deed that is at the heart of defining Jewishness.

A different form of fundraising in the magazines is the encouragement to include the YBC in readers’ wills and planned gifts. Some pages, asking readers to
“Remember Yiddish in your Will,” claim that, “A bequest to the National Yiddish Book Center will help us keep Yiddish alive, long after you’re gone.” Like the subscription ads, the phrasing here directly connects the survival of Yiddish to money without explaining exactly how they are connected. The implication is that the primary factor in the survival of a language is financial support. While such donations certainly keep the YBC itself alive (and, in turn, do ensure the survival of Yiddish books), there is in fact no direct connection between financial support and the survival of Yiddish as a vernacular. Though money does certainly facilitate such efforts, especially in terms of funding educational programs and outreach, it does not in and of itself save a language. Instead, such a feat is dependent on education (both in language and culture), community participation and, eventually, intergenerational, at-home transmission of the language. Furthermore, the question must be posed: is “Yiddish” in “keep Yiddish alive, long after you’re gone” meant to be read literally, as the language, or is it to be translated as “Jewish,” as the YBC seems to do quite often? The ad both plays into and expresses an anxiety not only about the fate of Yiddish, but the future of Jewishness in the U.S. more broadly. In this sense, donations to the YBC are motivated more by a cultural anxiety about ethnic survival than linguistic survival.

Another ad about wills that appears frequently throughout the Pakn Tregers is entitled “Help us Continue the Tradition,” and features two photographs. The first, an old photograph of grandparents reading to a sleeping child, appears to date back to the Old Country. The second photograph, which is adjacent to the first, also features grandparents reading to a young boy, this time set on a couch in modern
times. Together, they give the impression of a seamless trajectory from the Old Country to American Jewishness. As the YBC focuses especially on Jews of Eastern European origin, the old couple in the black-and-white photographs could be anyone’s Bubbe and Zayde (Yiddish for grandmother and grandfather). Again, the appeal to nostalgia here is unmistakable, and is strategically used to encourage donations.

Underneath the two photographs, the page reads, “Books are our portable homeland and our cultural identity. Including the Book Center in your estate plans will ensure that the books you’ve helped us rescue are shared with future generations.” In one sentence, the YBC plays upon feelings of nostalgia, belonging, and guilt. The word “homeland” evokes nostalgia for the romanticized Old Country, and the addition of “portable” underscores the shared history of displacement and Diasporic camaraderie. The use of “our” further intensifies that suggestion of community; though readers of the Pakn Treger come from a myriad of different backgrounds, this small possessive pronoun gathers all of them into one group and, in turn, creates a sense of community and belonging that is not necessarily realistic. Nevertheless, it is a successful rhetorical device for fostering a sense of solidarity and responsibility. It is no longer “a” homeland or “your” identity, but a collective communal heritage.

Similarly, ads urging readers to “Keep Yiddish Alive Forever” ask for planned gifts. Here, the reader is again presented with the image of grandparents reading to a young boy. The caption begins by explaining, “Preserving Yiddish culture isn’t just about honoring memories, it’s about connecting future generations to the most
important aspects of the modern Jewish experience.” This statement echoes the ambitions expressed by the YBC to not only memorialize the Yiddish past but ensure its future as well, however such a future may look. The paragraph goes on to say that a planned gift would “help ensure our yerushe – our legacy.” The use of yerushe functions here symbolically, much like the incorporation of various Yiddish words throughout the informational panels in the YBC’s building. The ad is certainly not communicating exclusively to Yiddish speakers, as the translation, “our legacy,” immediately follows. Instead, the word serves as a marker of insiderness; it invites all Jews, even those who do not speak Yiddish, to participate in a communal effort to save a perceived shared heritage. Moreover, like the “us” in Lansky’s “Just Between Us” section, the “our” here evokes the question, who is the “our” in “our legacy”? Does it refer to all Jews? Secular Jews? Yiddish enthusiasts? Readers of the Pakn Treger (and therefore donors to the YBC)? Or perhaps none of the above? In a way, the “our” presents a subtle double-entendre, as the “our” could refer not to Jews but to the YBC. In this case, ensuring “our legacy” might not be ensuring “Jewish legacy” but rather ensuring the legacy of the YBC. It is certainly not one or the other, but the nuance should not be overlooked, as it illuminates the perceived interchangeability of Yiddish and Jewish, and of the YBC and Jewish heritage.

Furthermore, the title “Keep Yiddish Alive Forever” does not exactly correspond to the supporting text, which talks about “preserving Yiddish” and connecting to the “modern Jewish experience.” If the goal were indeed to keep Yiddish “alive,” the donations would most logically go towards expanding the YBC’s language programs and creating conditions for greater Yiddish fluency. Instead, the
focus is on the much more vague idea of “modern Jewish culture,” which allows the institution to use donations to support a full array of programs, many which have only a tangential relationship to promote increased facility in Yiddish language. The ad thus appeals more to sentimentality than a practical commitment to Yiddish language transmission. Moreover, since the Yiddish mentioned in the advertisement could refer to its second meaning—a synonym for Jewish—the campaign could also be appealing to the broader idea of keeping “Jewishness alive forever,” an objective that allows the YBC to broaden its mission.

Earlier issues also included lists of donors, as well as the ways that their money contributed to the YBC. The lists go on for several pages. As the Center became more grounded, these lists disappeared from the magazines when they could be displayed in the permanent building. Though fundraising ads continue to populate the pages of the Pakn Treger, the removal of donation lists illustrates the maturation of the YBC. Now that it has become more established as a cultural institution (to quote its website, “After three decades, we’ve emerged as one of the world’s largest, liveliest, and most original Jewish organizations”), it is perhaps more focused on securing large grants from family foundations than from individuals. Additionally, it may be that, with the building of a permanent home where donors’ names now appear on the walls and bookshelves of the YBC, there is no longer a need for them to be acknowledged in a magazine, which is so quickly tossed away.

Regardless, the use of these various fundraising strategies in the Pakn Treger magazines is worth investigating. Marilyn Halter writes about ethnic revival in the
context of modern consumer capitalism in her essay, “Longings and Belongings.” She writes that, “whereas in the pre-modern period identities were acquired with the possessions one inherited, in modern times people most often construct their identities [...] through the consumption of ethnic goods and identities”\textsuperscript{181}. Though a subscription to the Pakn Treger or a donation to the YBC are not purchases of ethnic goods per se, they do reflect a perceived need to spend money in order to reconnect to cultural or ethnic heritage. As Halter writes in her book, \textit{Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity}, “More and more, these consumer products and services are replacing traditional neighborhood and community affiliations as the connective tissue of postmodern life”\textsuperscript{182}. Indeed, with assimilation comes a loss of ethnic community, which American Jews are now beginning to miss. Now that Yiddish-speaking neighborhoods and communities have disappeared from the secular Jewish landscape in America, Jews are now reliant on institutions such as the YBC to maintain a sense of shared history, shared purpose, and shared experience. These institutions cannot exist without funds, however, and so Jews are now impelled to pay in order to both maintain and access their own ethnic heritage. Thus, the YBC’s fundraising efforts also reveal a deep cultural anxiety about the fate of Yiddish now that it has essentially ceased to exist in non-institutionalized, vernacular form.


Conclusion

The death of Yiddish has been a fear among Jews for over a century now. Even at the numerical high point of Yiddish speakers during the interwar period, increasing assimilation of Eastern European Jews led to forecasts of the language's demise. Jewish immigrants’ rapid assimilation into American culture and the horrific murder of the majority of Europe's Yiddish speakers during World War II only accelerated the fears of pessimists that the end of Yiddish was near. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, for all these years and despite all of these obstacles, Yiddish has not disappeared. Its use as a vernacular has diminished, certainly, but by no means has it vanished. To the contrary, because of the high birthrate among Yiddish-speaking Hasidic Jews, Yiddish continues to grow. Among secular Jews, organizations like the Workman’s Circle, Yugntruf, KlezCamp and Yiddish Farm Camp provide small pockets, albeit temporary ones, of Yiddish-speakers.

Furthermore, Yiddish lives on not only in literature, song, academic circles, and institutions like YIVO and the YBC, but as a distinct ethnic marker of Jewishness, what Shandler terms “postvernacularity.” Thus, Yiddish is not dying, but rather is experiencing (as it has since its very conception) a reconfiguration. Secular Jews have not abandoned Yiddish, but rather are renegotiating its place in contemporary Jewish culture.

In this thesis, the YBC has served as a useful paradigm for examining the various facets of postvernacular Yiddish. Like Yiddish among secular Jews, the YBC
is a meeting point for nostalgia, remorse, guilt, and feelings of loss. Furthermore, the institution embodies the holiness that Yiddish has taken on in its postvernacularity, and has capitalized precisely on this to expand its purpose from book repository to center for Jewish cultural life. Visibly, it continues to struggle with the interplay between Yiddish as a spoken language and Yiddish as a cultural symbol.

Educationally, it offers a limited program that is not catered to bringing Yiddish to the masses but rather focused on a small number of hand-picked applicants so that Yiddish, always the language of the Jewish masses, could somehow seem elite. The facts that its founder and president would not teach his own children Yiddish and that there has never been an effort to transform the YBC into a Yiddish-speaking environment (even partially) suggests that the social snobbery that long looked down upon Yiddish continues to linger. Though the Center claims the revitalization of Yiddish as part of its mission, this effort seems to cater especially to those Jews who are interested in Yiddish as an ethnic marker, a symbol of loss, or a historical relic, but who are not invested in learning and transmitting the language.

This is not to say that the YBC has not done well for itself and for Yiddish. Its achievements since its conception some 30 years ago are admirable: the rescue of over a million books, the digitization and free dissemination online of most of its collection, the Oral History project, a new translation fellowship program, a prestigious summer program, to name but a few. Nonetheless, the removal of the YBC’s building from the so-called “Jewish politics” of New York City allowed the institution to evade the complexity of dialogue around Yiddish that can be found in places such as New York or Los Angeles. Ironically, the relationship between the
Book Center and the local Jewish community of the Pioneer Valley remains unsteady and tenuous at best. For most of the year, the YBC’s halls remain almost entirely empty of visitors and students because it fails to offer an attractive array of courses in Yiddish language, literature, culture and Eastern European history that might draw in students and adult learners from the area. Apart from an occasional course in January and one language course taught by the new Yiddish language educator, the building is often eerily silent and empty of the young people who are necessary to fulfill the mission of language revitalization. Perhaps a more creative and active sense of local mission could transform what is now a warehouse for books, a museum, and an administrative center into a vibrant year-round classroom for Yiddish. Ironically, an institution that advertises itself as focused on the transmission of Yiddish culture does not even hold public programs during the winter months because it cannot fill its building with out-of-town visitors. All this seems to confirm that the Center caters primarily, though not exclusively, to Jews whose interest lies in the symbolic, postvernacular mode of the language rather than its conversational and literary functions.

Ultimately, the YBC’s struggles, contradictions, and shortcomings are precisely what lead me to my conclusion, which ties together issues of postvernacularity and language revitalization for communities in diaspora. I believe that the problem with the YBC lies in the word center. The word is entirely incongruous with a community that is in many ways defined by the absence of a unifying nation-state. In trying to create one center for Yiddish revitalization, the institution impedes the possibility of achieving its own ambitions. Language revival
efforts are best pursued through the promotion of inclusion and expansion within
the language community in question. Instead, the Book Center has created a
constricting and exclusive environment through their choice of location, their
educational programs, and the insider/outsiderness promoted by their fundraising
strategies. I would suggest that the development of a network, instead of the
construction of one center, is more appropriate for language revival among Jews in
the twenty-first century Diaspora.
Bibliography


