

# Yiddish language and literature, with special focus on Prague<sup>1</sup>



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## ABSTRACT:

For centuries Yiddish was the vernacular of Ashkenazi Jews, and Prague a widely known center of Jewish culture and the Yiddish language. But what is Yiddish? How and where did it arise? What characteristics distinguish it? What kind of literature did it bring forth? To what purpose and extent? What role did Prague and Bohemia, located between East and West, play in Central Europe? What factors led to the preeminence of Hebrew and Yiddish printing in Prague? Did they include the fact that an erudite book by a woman appeared there (*Menekes Rivke*) and that the adventures of the popular figure Till Eulenspiegel happen to him only in the Prague edition? The great Rabbi Loew (Maharal of Prague: 1525–1609) spoke Hebrew, but the Golem of Prague, a recent invention (1836) attributed to him, spoke Yiddish and inspired artists as diverse as the filmmaker Paul Wegener and the writer H. Leivick. By the early 20th century, however, Yiddish had become a curiosity in Central Europe, a kind of exotic pastime, if not something reprehensible dismissed by the bourgeois — even as Franz Kafka confided to his *Diaries* his love for Eastern Yiddish theater and its actors, whose tours included Prague and Berlin. The present article gives Yiddish the place its significance and richness merit, and raises awareness of the grandeur of the lost culture and language which echo softly yet today in the narrow streets of Prague.

## KEYWORDS:

Yiddish, Ashkenazi Jews, Prague, Yiddish linguistics, Yiddish literature, Yiddish theater, Franz Kafka

Yiddish,<sup>2</sup> more than a thousand years old, is a wide and largely unexplored field that suffered a brutal rupture. For with the destruction of European Jewry, Yiddish language and culture were annihilated. In recent years, however, awareness and appreciation of this rich world have grown, leading to a strong revival of interest in Yiddish. Newspapers — mainly the *Forverts* in New York<sup>3</sup> — report on it, manuscripts

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- 1 I would like to thank my close friend Roger Harmon for the beautiful translation he made of my article.
  - 2 This spelling is the one used by the YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research founded in 1925 in Vilnius and whose New York branch assumed the Institute's work in 1940: <https://www.yivo.org/> (22.6.2018)
  - 3 This daily on-line newspaper exists also in English as "The Yiddish Daily Forward": <http://yiddish.forward.com/>



from the war years are discovered and published,<sup>4</sup> plays<sup>5</sup> and musicals in Yiddish are staged,<sup>6</sup> songs in Yiddish are sung and music composed,<sup>7</sup> concerts are sponsored and cinemas and television show movies old and new, among them classics such as *Tevey der milkhiker* (“Tevey the Milkman”),<sup>8</sup> *A brivele der mamen*,<sup>9</sup> *Benya Krik*,<sup>10</sup> *A ferd ganey* (“A Complete Scoundrel”),<sup>11</sup> *Herr Zwilling und Frau Zuckerman*<sup>12</sup> — to name but a few. Two important institutions — The National Center for Jewish Film (Brandeis University)<sup>13</sup> and The National Yiddish Book Centre<sup>14</sup> with Spielberg’s Digital Library<sup>15</sup> in Amherst, MA — are in the process of collecting and digitalizing the repertory of Yid-

4 Cf. Herman Kruk: *Togbukh fun Vilner ghetto*. YIVO 1961 (English); Vassili Grossman, Ilya Ehrenburg: *Dos shvartse bukh*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1980; Marek Edelman: *Resisting the Holocaust: Fighting Back in the Warsaw Ghetto*. Ocean Press, 2004.

5 The National Yiddish Theatre in New York, the Folksbiene, performs Yiddish plays (*Fiddler on the Roof* is announced for July 4 and 5, 2018). The Yiddish version of Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* was produced at the Barrow Street Theatre. In this performance, the characters are survivors of the Shoah. At the Beckett Festival in Ireland (Summer 2014) *Vartn Af Godo* was nominated for 5 awards. There are Yiddish theatres all over the world: in Israel, Germany, France, Canada, etc.

6 The most famous one is *Anatevka* (*Tevey der milkhiker* by Sholem Aleykhem), known as *Fiddler on the Roof* performed until today. Another one is *Yentl* by Isaac Singer, starring Barbra Streisand. Such plays are usually performed in English, but also sometimes in Yiddish, for example *The Megile of Itzik Manger* by the National Yiddish Theater (see the review by Catherine Rampell, “Queen Esther’s Tale, in Yiddish, with Cartwheels, Puppets and a Union Label”, *New York Times*, May 3, 2013).

7 The American composer David Schiff (b. 1945) composed *Gimpel The Fool, An Opera in Two Acts* (1975), and wrote the libretto after *Gimpl nar* by Isaac Singer: [http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item\\_code=8.669010-11](http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.669010-11) (22.6.2018). The German composer Georg Wötzer composed *Esslinger Kaddisch I for Strings, Bariton, Live-Elektronik and Conductor*, after an epic poem by Yitskhok Katzenelson: *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk* (Song of the Murdered Jewish People). Text online: Spielberg Digital Library, <https://archive.org/details/nybc100484> (22.6.2018)

8 Adapted to the screen from one of the most famous novels by Sholem Aleykhem (Salomon Rabinovitch) about a Jewish father and his seven daughters. The great actor Maurice Shvartz played the main role and directed it (New York 1939). See <http://www.museumof-familyhistory.com/moyt/pih/tevey-der-milkhiger.htm> (22.6.2018).

9 A moving family story set during World War I about people trying to emigrate to the United States, by Joseph Green (Poland 1938).

10 This screen version of a short story by Isaac Babel from 1926 is about a Russian gangster of Jewish descent played by Yuri Shlumsky, directed by Vladimir Vilner (USSR 1926).

11 Based on a popular novel by the Polish-Jewish author and American immigrant Joseph Opatoshu, the film features Yul Brynner and Isaac Babel’s son David Babel (Los Angeles 1971).

12 A documentary film about two survivors in Czernowitz (1999) and about what remained of the Jewish Community which had produced great artists such as Paul Celan and Rose Ausländer et al.

13 <http://www.jewishfilm.org/> (22.6.2018)

14 <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/> (22.6.2018)

15 <http://archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter> (22.6.2018)

dish films and books. Around the world, universities and scholarly congresses contribute to the preservation and understanding of the Yiddish language, literature and culture. New literary journals such as *Gilgulim* (Metamorphoses) in Paris as well as the publication and translation of books by older and younger authors bear witness to the vitality of the present-day Yiddish scene. The revival hastens from success to success. Among Jews it reflects the determination of the second and now third generation to learn the language of their grandparents and great-grandparents and thus save it from extinction; among non-Jews it reflects the wish to access this once so important component of European culture. New voices renounce the mere nostalgia of the beginnings. The European Parliament in Strasbourg has recognized Yiddish as an endangered language worthy of preservation, and for the year 2003 there were plans to establish in Strasbourg a House of Yiddish Cultures uniting Western and Eastern Yiddish. Unfortunately these plans were dropped, but in Paris a *Maison du yiddish* was established, which has become a very active Yiddish Cultural Center, dedicated primarily to Eastern Yiddish.<sup>16</sup> With the New Media, the Internet has become a paradise not only for amateur Yiddish enthusiasts, but also for scholars: numerous websites devoted to Yiddish language, literature and culture are available online.<sup>17</sup> Of course it isn't quite that simple. For an important prerequisite is familiarity with the Yiddish alphabet, that is: with the Hebrew letters used in written Yiddish. Worthy of note is the EYDES-Program<sup>18</sup> which has gradually made available to the public all existing Yiddish dialects, in written and in spoken form. It consists of six thousand hours of interviews conducted in New York after World War II. The biggest obstacle to a significant revival of Yiddish is that it has become a language without a country. In other words: with the extermination of European Jewry, Yiddish has disappeared from the Eastern European countries in which it once was spoken. However, already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century famine and horrendous pogroms had led to massive emigration and the establishment of Yiddish-speaking communities in the immigration countries. Thus, before World War II cities such as New York — the most important refuge — but also Berlin, Paris, Montreal, Buenos Aires, Melbourne and Johannesburg came to host large Yiddish-speaking populations. In those days some 13 million people spoke Yiddish.

## A. THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE

Yiddish Studies are a hundred years old. The pioneer was the Yiddishist and philologist Ber Borokhov (1881-1917) with his landmark essays, the two seminal pieces

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16 Located there is the biggest Yiddish library in Europe, the Bibliothèque Medem founded in 1929 by Bundists who had emigrated to Paris.

17 One of numerous sites is Shtetl. Yiddish Language and Culture: <http://www.ibiblio.org/yiddish/shtetl.html> (22.6.2018)

18 EYDES means testimony in Yiddish. It stands for Evidence of Yiddish Documentation in European Societies: <http://www.eydes.de/Usr0CA1996DOE/> (22.6.2018)



“Oyfgabn fun der yidisher filologye” (“The aims of Yiddish philology”)<sup>19</sup> and “Di bibliotek funem yidishn filolog” (“The library of a Yiddish philologist”), which appeared in *Der Pinkes* (“The Record Book”) in 1913, edited by Shmuel Niger.<sup>20</sup> For Borokhov, the word *filologye* covered not only the language, but also literature-based disciplines such as folklore, literary history, bibliography etc. Together with his assistants, he established rules for a modernized and standardized spelling and grammar. The process was completed in 1930 by the YIVO. A standard orthography took shape: for example, *h* and double consonants were dropped. Furthermore, the use of the so-called *daytshmerizm* (Germanisms) prevalent in the 19th century was reduced and replaced by Hebrew words or those no longer in use in High German. *Khoydesh* replaced *monat*, *mishpokhe* replaced *familye*, *os* replaced *bukhshtab* etc. On the other hand, Yiddish influenced the German language, which includes some 500 Yiddish words (Yiddishisms) whose original meaning<sup>21</sup> has often shifted.<sup>22</sup> For example, *mishpokhe* was borrowed as *Mishpoke* and means “clan”, while in Yiddish “clan” is *mishpakhte*. All the countries where Yiddish was spoken integrated Yiddishisms in their own language, so for example also Czech. Borokhov’s ideas were fully recognized only after his death. Solomon Birnbaum and the father-and-son team of Max and Uriel Weinreich also devoted their lives to Yiddish language and literature. Solomon Birnbaum<sup>23</sup> was appointed to the first chair for Yiddish at the University of Hamburg in the 1920s, while Max Weinreich wrote his revolutionary doctoral thesis on Yiddish at the University of Marburg in 1923: instead of considering Yiddish as a “satellite” of German, Weinreich brought Yiddish from the periphery to the centre.<sup>24</sup> Thus he took an approach opposite to that of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Jewish Studies) and its focus on the Jewish Enlightenment, whose prestigious members — Leopold Zunz, Moritz Güde-

19 See “Ber Borokhov: *Di bibliotek funem yidishn filolog. Firhundert yor yidishe shprakh-forschung*”, in: Shmuel Niger: *Der Pinkes*, Nr. 1 (1913); Dovid Katz: “Ber Borokhov, Pioneer of Yiddish Linguistics”, in: *Jewish Frontier* (June-July 1980), pp. 114–118; “Ber Borokhov: The Aims of Yiddish Filology (1913)”, in: *Jewish Frontier* (June-July 1980), pp. 15–20, transl. by Dovid Katz: <http://www.dovidkatz.net/dovid/PDFLinguistics/1980-Ber%20Borokhov.pdf> (both articles, 22.6.2018).

20 In this first issue, Yiddish language and literature are considered as a highly scholarly field of research.

21 Cf. Štěpán Balík: *Yiddish Loanwords in Czech. Jidišové výpůjčky v češtině aneb O čem vypovídají slova*. Filozofická fakulta Jihočeské univerzity v Českých Budějovicích, Ústav bohemistiky a Jazykovědné sdružení AV ČR, 24.7.2014. The printed version will appear in *Studia Judaica*, Cracow.

22 See Hans-Peter Althaus: *Zocker, Zoff & Uzores. Jiddische Wörter im Deutschen*. Hamburg: C.H. Beck, 2010<sup>3</sup>; *Kleines Lexikon deutscher Wörter jiddischer Herkunft*. Hamburg: C.H. Beck, 2010<sup>3</sup>.

23 Salomo A. Birnbaum: *Yiddish. A Survey and a Grammar*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979.

24 Max Weinreich: *Geschichte der jiddischen Sprachforschung*, ed. by Jerold C. Frakes. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993, I.5. This dissertation has been translated into Yiddish: *Geshikhthe fun der yidisher shprakh*. Vol. 1–4. New York: YIVO, 1973; and into English: *History of the Yiddish Language*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980 (new ed. in 2 vols., Yale University Press and YIVO 2008, including all the footnotes of the Yiddish version).

mann and Heinrich Graetz a.o. — were interested in Yiddish only to the extent that it, relic-like, mirrored the Jewish life and culture of “prehistoric times”.<sup>25</sup>

#### A.I. THE TERM AND CONCEPT “YIDDISH”

The word *Yiddish* means “Jewish” and denotes a language created and first used by Jews in a non-Jewish environment — the Holy Roman Empire — in order to express their specific way of life based on Holy Scripture, i.e. the Bible and its commentaries in the Talmud. This geographical environment received a Biblical name — *Ashkenaz* — invested now with new meaning. *Ashkenaz* is connected with the invention of a language, Yiddish, reflecting a new identity and a new community. The Holy Roman Empire and *Ashkenaz* are two inseparable entities. In addition, however, there were always non-Jews who understood or/and spoke the language, sometimes out of interest, mostly with the aim of converting Jews. In the Early Modern Period Johann Buxtorf I., apart from being the greatest Christian Hebraist of his time, was curious about Jewish life and customs and collected all the Hebrew and Yiddish books he could get,<sup>26</sup> while in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Goethe, who lived in Frankfurt am Main (the city with the largest Jewish community), wanted to learn “das barocke Judendeutsch” (the baroque Judeo-German). Yiddish is an original symbiosis between two Semitic languages — Hebrew and Aramaic — and a European one — German. It is written from right to left in Yiddish letters, i.e. in letters adapted from the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew alphabet being consonantal, Yiddish devised a means of using Hebrew letters to indicate vowels. Because of its similarity to German, Yiddish was often transliterated with Gothic or Latin characters. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “Southwestern Yiddish”<sup>27</sup> of southwestern Germany (Baden), Switzerland (Surbtal) and northeastern France (Alsace-Lorraine) abandoned Yiddish characters in favor of Latin characters. *Yiddish*, today the only term used to denote the language, was not used consistently until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Max Weinreich, the word Yiddish dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century; the language itself is of course much older. Earlier it was called *loshen ashkenaz* (language of the *Ashkenazim*) or *taytsh*,<sup>28</sup> *Judendeutsch* or *Jargon*. The latter expression was the usual and neutral one at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today the word Yiddish has superseded all other terms for the language, except in Alsace, where Yiddish-speakers go on calling it Judeo-Alsatian.<sup>29</sup>

25 Abraham Tendlau: *Sprichwörter und Redensarten deutsch-jüdischer Vorzeit* (1860). Ulan Press, 2012.

26 Some were printed in Basel and are kept at the University Library. Cf. Joseph Prijs: *Die Basler hebräischen Drucke*. Olten: Urs Graf, 1964.

27 Cf. Johannes Brosi: *Southwestern Yiddish: A Study in Dialectology, Folklore and Literature*. M. Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1990.

28 *Taytsh* refers to the target language of translation done in order to make a given written or spoken text accessible to the people; *taytsh* has the same meaning as *Deutsch*, the word having originally meant “Volk”. In modern Yiddish, *taytshn* means “to translate”.

29 A subject worthy of investigation. There is a negative perception here of a dialect not considered to be “real Yiddish” or East Yiddish. People speaking “real Yiddish” see themselves



## A.II. THE ORIGINS OF YIDDISH

According to Max Weinreich (b. 1894 in Courland, d. 1969 in New York), Yiddish arose more than a thousand years ago in the Rhine and Mosel valleys, an area called Lotharingia (Yiddish *Loter*). The most important cities with Jewish communities were Speyer, Worms and Mainz (abbreviated as *Shum*) plus Regensburg. In this area Judaism acquired its specific character as expressed in the word *Ashkenaz* mentioned above. Little is known about the beginnings of Yiddish. The earliest surviving written documents date from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A dichotomy arose between Yiddish, which was developing as a vernacular language, and Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of the elite and of Biblical and Talmudic studies. In the Middle Ages, when it fell out of use, Aramaic was considered as sacred a language as Hebrew.

Weinreich distinguishes four historical periods of the Yiddish language:

**Proto-Yiddish** (-1250): from the beginnings to the Late Middle Ages. During this period Jewish communities expanded into the Upper Rhine and the Danube Basin. This is Ashkenaz I, located in Central Europe. Great figures of the time included Rabbi Gershom ben Juda (c. 960–1040), born in Metz and called the “Light of Exile”, and Rashi (1040–1105), whose commentaries on the Bible are still studied today. In Rashi’s glosses, numerous French expressions as well as several Yiddish ones are to be found. If the Yiddish words indeed originated from Rashi himself, they would be the oldest witness to the Yiddish language.<sup>30</sup> The turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century saw the first persecutions of Jews from the Rhineland in the wake of the First Crusade (1096–1099).<sup>31</sup> This marks the beginning of an endless series of massacres of Jews.

**Old Yiddish** (1250–1500): the center of gravity shifts slowly to the East, to Bohemia and Moravia, Poland and Lithuania. This is Ashkenaz II. As the oldest Jewish community in Bohemia and one of the most significant such communities in Europe, Prague was important as a Jewish metropolis with a large population and as the home of spiritual mentors, erudite scholars and great rabbis. Avigdor Kara (d. 1439) the great cabbalist and poet from Regensburg, one of the first to spread Spanish and German Kabbalah<sup>32</sup> in his country, was appointed as a *dayyan* (judge) in Prague in 1389. There,

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as speaking the “true Yiddish”. This denotes a deep social malaise deriving from the discrepancy between West- and Ostjuden.

30 Erika Timm: “Zur Frage der Echtheit von Raschis jiddischen Glossen”, in: *BGdSL (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur)* 107 (1985), pp. 45–81.

31 Henriette Benveniste: “Fierté, désespoir et mémoire: les récits juifs de la première croisade”, in: *Médiévales* 35 (1998), pp. 125–140.

32 Moses de Leon wrote the masterpiece of Jewish mysticism, the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“Book of Splendour”), and at the same time, the *Khsidei-Ashenaz* (“the Pious of the Rhineland”) developed a mystical movement called Hasidism. In the *Sefer Hasidim* (“the Book of the Pious”), written by Rabbi Juda ben Samuel or Rabbi Judah the Pious from Regensburg, the Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages is depicted very accurately, so that this book offers insight into the Jewish life and Jewish-Christian relations of that time.



the same year, he witnessed the massacre of the Jews accused, on the last day of Passover,<sup>33</sup> of having desecrated the Host.<sup>34</sup> As occurred in other Jewish communities in the Holy Roman Empire to which Bohemia belonged, the Jews were victims of pogroms triggered by the Crusades: accused of the Desecration of the Host, of Blood Libel and of poisoning wells during the Black Plague, they endured discrimination and persecution until the horror of the *Shoah* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including deportation to Terezín.

**Middle Yiddish** (1500–1750): the transition between Ashkenaz I and Ashkenaz II occurred around 1500, and Prague played a central role in it. In 1492, the year the Jews were expelled from Spain, Rabbi Jacob Pollack (ca. 1470–1541) left the German lands for Prague, then settled in Cracow after being excommunicated. He was the founder of new Talmudic studies and the inventor of the *pilpul*,<sup>35</sup> a method to sharpen the mind with questions and answers. Poland became the center *par excellence* whither students came from all over to study in famous *yeshivot*.<sup>36</sup> In her *Memoirs* written in Western Yiddish, Glückl Hamel gives an interesting description of this period.<sup>37</sup> Eastern Yiddish dialects arose. The 16<sup>th</sup> century was the Golden Age, the time of Jewish Renaissance in Prague. Rabbi Löw (1520–1609), known as the MaHaRal,<sup>38</sup> was a leading thinker and an icon of the Jewish community of Prague. He obtained from Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II the protection of the Jews. He was a famous Talmudic scholar, a Jewish philosopher and a reformer of the Jewish educational system. An opponent of the interpretation method of the *pilpul*, he emphasized the study of classic Jewish texts. Though he knew the discoveries of his time — the Copernican Revolution and the Discovery of America — his work analyses Israel’s position in the world and discusses the Tora and the commandments. His magnificent grave is one of the gems of the Old Jewish Cemetery. When it comes to famous figures, scholarly and popular cultures often mingle.<sup>39</sup> In the case of Rabbi Löw, the legend says he created a *homunculus*, the *golem*, supposed to protect Jews in times of pogroms; this myth arose in the

33 Passover was a dangerous time for Jews, who were accused of deicide. At the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the transubstantiation of Christ’s body and blood into bread and wine was defined as dogma. The host was not symbolic anymore, but a materialization of this miracle.

34 To mourn this tragedy, he wrote an elegy called *Et Kol ha-Tela’ah asher Meza’atnu* (“All the Hardships that Befell Us”), which is recited during the *Minkhah* service on the Day of Atonement by the Jews of Prague.

35 He is the founder of halakhic and Talmudic exegesis based on sharp and clever analysis. For more details and examples, see: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12153-pilpul> (22.6.2018).

36 Though a modern story, Isaac Singer’s novella “Yentl the yeshive bokher” (1962) and Barbara Streisand’s film musical version of it wonderfully depict the atmosphere of *Lernen* there.

37 Bertha Pappenheim (ed. and tr.): *Die Memoiren der Glückel von Hameln*, Weinheim: Beltz, 20053 (E-Text at de.wikisource); *Glikl. Zikhronot 1691–1719* (*Glikl. Memoirs 1691–1719*), ed. and tr. from the Yiddish by Chava Turniansky. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2006.

38 This is the abbreviation for Morenu ha-Rav Löw, Our Teacher Rabbi Löw.

39 Cf. Eli Yassif: “Entre culture populaire et culture savante. Les exempla dans le *Sefer Hassidim*”, in: *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 49/5 (1994), pp. 1197–1222.



19<sup>th</sup> century, as did many other myths, but not from Romanticism. On the contrary, it anticipated the revival in Europe of an old but entrenched accusation, that of Blood Libel (ritual murder),<sup>40</sup> which led to violent, internationally condemned anti-Semitic rioting in Hungary in Tiszaeszlár in 1882, in Bohemia in Polná in 1899 (the Hilsner Affair)<sup>41</sup> and in Kiev in 1913 (the Beilis Affair). All three unleashed violent anti-Semitic rioting. It is no wonder that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, golem stories are to be found in literature, theater (especially in Yiddish) and movies.

**New Yiddish** (1750–): except in Switzerland, Baden and Alsace-Lorraine, Western Yiddish slowly declined, while Eastern Yiddish flourished right up until the Nazi era. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the flow of emigrants led to Yiddish being spoken in new areas: North and South America, South Africa, Australia, Palestine/Israel (though it was not welcome there). The language of the immigration country enriched the Yiddish dialects spoken by Jews. These dialects belonged to two main groups: Western and Eastern Yiddish. Within Eastern Yiddish, the Polish dialect became the largest one; written Yiddish, however, used the Lithuanian dialect while adopting the neuter gender from the Polish one. Western Yiddish is older than Eastern Yiddish; between them arose the so-called Middle Yiddish, today largely extinct (Prague, Pressburg/Bratislava, Budapest).

What are the characteristics of the Yiddish language? It is a Jewish language, which, according to Weinreich, may be considered to be, like all Jewish languages (*Judesmo/Ladino, Yavanic,*<sup>42</sup> *Knaanic*)<sup>43</sup>, a *shmeltssprakh*, a “fusion language”.<sup>44</sup> For in it are reflected all the languages which contributed to its present form.

### A.III. COMPONENTS

There are four main linguistic components:

- 1) **The Semitic component of Hebrew and Aramaic:** this is the oldest linguistic layer and stems largely from the Bible and the Talmud (in Old Yiddish texts, Hebrew and Aramaic words occur less often). In Yiddish, Hebrew is called *loshn koydesh*, the holy language: *shabes, tsdoke* (alms), *kehile* (congregation), *besmedresh* (house

<sup>40</sup> Wolfgang Pascheles (1814–1857): “Jajin Kidush oder die falsche Beschuldigung”, in: *Sippurim. Eine Sammlung jüdischer Volkssagen, Erzählungen, Mythen, Chronicken, Denkwürdigkeiten und Biographien berühmter Juden aller Jahrhunderte, besonders des Mittelalters*. Prag 1856; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1976, vol. 2, pp. 5–48.

<sup>41</sup> František Červinka, “The Hilsner Affair,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 13 (1968), pp. 142–157; reprint in Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 135–161.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Max Weinreich 2008: 62: “A fusion language the stock of which was mostly Greek”; the “mistakes” show that Jews spoke a “separate language, similar to Greek”.

<sup>43</sup> Knaanic (Judeo-Czech) is an extinct West Slavic Jewish language, spoken e.g. in the Czech lands until the Middle Ages.

<sup>44</sup> Max Weinreich 2008: 29 ff.





- of learning), *brismile* (circumcision), *mitsves* (commandments), *chasene* (wedding), *kinesine* (jealousy, envy).
- 2) The component of **Romance languages**, in particular as spoken in southern and northeastern France and in northern Italy: *faunt* (child), *shpouses-fingerle* (wedding ring), *piltsel* (maid), *orn* < Latin *orare* (pray), *leyenen* < Latin *legere* (read), *bentshn* < Latin *benedicere* (bless, give thanks after eating; note that the Latin word meaning the opposite of bless, *maledicere* “to damn”, is not used; for “to damn” one uses the Hebrew word *klole*).
  - 3) The component of **Middle High German** (MGH). This component supplies the largest number of words as well as much grammar: *kumen* (to come), *zogn* (to say), *shlofn* (to sleep), *entfern* (to answer), *lernen* (to study the Scripture) *trikenish* (drought), *umkum* (Shoah), *gas* (street), *di yidishe gas* (the Jewish Quarter).
  - 4) The component of **Slavic languages**. This component is the most recent and contributed words referring above all to plants and animals: *sosne* (fir tree), *verbe* (willow), *truskavke* (strawberry), *sove* (owl), *veverke* (squirrel).

The fusion of components also occurs within a given word, different components combining in single words or expressions. For example:

Romance/German: *leyenen*, *bentshn* (to give thanks after eating, in *loshn koydesh* = *birkas hamozen*; before eating one says the blessing: *a brokhe ton*)

German/Hebrew: *doktoyrim*, *poyerim* (peasants), *derhargenen* (kill)

Hebrew/German: *tames-trayvelish* (currant, *Ribes*; cf. Swiss German *Johannstrübeli*, replacing the Christian name *Johannis/John* by the month when the berries are ripe, *tames* “Tammuz”); *Moysh rabeynus kiyele* (ladybug; *Moysh rabeynu* = Moses our teacher, replacing “Lady” (= Maria); *kiyele* = diminutive of *ku*, cow); *kol ha-meglekhkeytn* (all possibilities; *kol* = all, *ha* = Hebrew definite article)

German/Slavic: *gotenyu* (familiar name for God), *studentke* (female student), *profesorshe* (female professor)

Slavic/German: *sedl* (park; *sod* = Obstgarten, *sedl* = diminutive), *tshemodanen* (suitcases)

Hebrew/Slavic: *kolboynik* (rogue; *hum. know-it-all*), *kibutznik* (someone who lives in a kibbutz)

English/Slavic: *alraytnik* (“all right”; someone who has worked his way up)

South African/Slavic: *kaferitnik* (owner of a *kaferite*, a canteen for Blacks, i.e. [racistly] *kafers*)

Certain words have a particular meaning. The Hebrew word *sefer*, religious book, can never be used for a non-religious book; such books are called *bukh/bikher*. In the religious context of Eastern Europe, *bukh* always refers to secular literature. For example, one says: *Er kukt in di bikhlekh*, which means: he reads modern (non-Jewish) literature.<sup>45</sup> Women in frequent contact with non-Yiddish speakers knew other lan-

45 Cf. Karl Emil Franzos: *Der Pojaz. Eine Geschichte aus dem Osten*. Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag 2005. In this *Bildungsroman*, the author deals with the hero's interest in *bikher*, for which he is severely punished.



guages like Russian or Polish and read literature in them. There is such a scene in the film *Tevye*, where one of his daughters reads a book by Gorki. On the contrary, their religious husbands who studied in the Houses of Learning didn't read those forbidden books.

Certain words of German origin retain their meaning in Yiddish alone: *entzinde* (to light the Shabbes candles, West Yiddish), *ausheve* (to take the Tora roll out of the Tora shrine, West Yiddish), *der umkum* (extermination, *Shoah*), *milkhik/milkhdik* (Eastern/Western Yiddish = "dairy-", i.e. non-meat foods), *fleyshik/flashdik* (Eastern/Western Yiddish = meat foods), *minish* (neither dairy nor meat food, Western Yiddish; Eastern Yiddish *parve*), *lernen* (to study the Tora), *di shul* (synagogue), *di gas* (the Jewish Quarter: *Vos tut sikh af der yidisher gas* "What's going on in the Jewish Quarter?"). Certain expressions are specific: *Aza yor af mir!* ("May I have such a year!"), *Af alle yidische kinder gezogt gevorn* ("May all Children of Israel experience this!").

These components influenced Yiddish grammar in the respective areas. Yiddish grammar — especially the grammar of Early Yiddish — seems similar in many ways to German grammar. This is especially true regarding spoken and written West Yiddish, but Hebrew syntax is present in both West and East Yiddish:

- a) In Hebrew, all sentences begin with the verb. This can also be the case in a normal Yiddish sentence, whereas in German it only happens in questions and in exclamations:

*Iz er untervegns derfroyrn gevorn, vayl s'hot gesmaliyet a frost.*  
 "He froze to death underway because it was very cold."

- b) The auxiliary verb *zayn* is absent in the present tense. Therefore elliptical phrases are frequent.
- c) Hebrew words always begin with a consonant; in accordance with this, Yiddish words beginning with a vowel (apart from "alef" and "ayen") are preceded with a special "alef" called "shtumer alef" (mute alef) transliterated by the diacritical sign '.

Slavic languages influenced the use of verbs in Modern Yiddish, which developed primarily in Eastern Europe. According to the Slavic rules for completed or uncompleted action, Yiddish uses specific prefixes of German origin but with Slavic meaning:<sup>46</sup>

German usage: *shlofn* (sleep)/*antshlofn vern* (fall asleep); German *entschlafen*, to die or to fall asleep (poetic)

Slavic usage: *tsinden* (light)/*untersindn* (set fire to)

Slavic usage: the reflexive pronoun *zikh* in *shpiln zikh* (play), *lernen zikh* (learn) etc. and the sole form *zikh* for all reflexive verbs in all persons: *ikh shpil zikh* etc. (the older form was Germanic: *ikh shpil mikh*, *du shpilst dikh*, *er shpilt zikh*, etc.).

<sup>46</sup> Mordkhe Schaechter: *Aktionen im Jiddischen: ein sprachwissenschaftlicher Beitrag zur Bedeutungslehre des Verbuns*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Vienna, 1951 (photocopy of typescript); Ann Arbor, Mich. University Microfilms International, 1985 (book).

If there is a verb, it occurs, as in German, as the second word of a given sentence — even in subordinate clauses:

*In der fri lozt er zikh in shul arayn, vayl s'iz shabes.*

“In the morning he lets himself into the synagogue because it is Shabbat.”

In the perfect tense, the auxiliary verb and participle are not separated:

*In der fri hot er sich gelozt in shul arayn, vayl s'iz geven shabes.*

“In the morning he let himself into the synagogue because it was Shabbat.”

A further characteristic of Yiddish is the use of periphrastic verbs consisting usually of a Hebrew participle and German auxiliary verb:

*Iz er dortn mispalel geven mit der gantser kehile un (hot) zikh mesameyekh geven.*

“He prayed there together with the entire congregation and was happy.”

This example moreover shows that one auxiliary verb per sentence suffices — for *zayn* and *hobn* — where in German and other languages two auxiliary verbs would be necessary.

Yiddish linguistics and literature are fascinating topics for researchers. New discoveries await them. A year ago, the great scholar Erika Timm<sup>47</sup> from the University of Trier deciphered inscriptions on a slate shingle from a burned synagogue found during excavations in the Cologne Ghetto. These Old Yiddish inscriptions date from before the persecutions of European Jews. During the Plague (1348–49), Jews were accused of poisoning wells and were burned at the stake. Erika Timm’s discovery proves the existence of Old Yiddish texts predating the *Cambridge Manuscript* (1382). But let us peregrinate through Yiddish literature, from the beginnings to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## B. LITERATURE

### B.I. OLD YIDDISH LITERATURE<sup>48</sup>

Literature in Old Yiddish arose in the Western Yiddish language area. It developed in Germanic lands between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>49</sup> with the *Haskalah*,

<sup>47</sup> Erika Timm: “Ein neuentdeckter literarischer Text in hebräischen Lettern aus der Zeit vor 1349”, in: *ZfDA* 142 (2003), pp. 417–443.

<sup>48</sup> Max Erik: *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di elteste tsaytn biz der haskole-tekufe: fertsenter-akhtsenter jorhundert*. Varshe: Kultur-Lige, 1928; Israel Zinberg: *Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn*. 9 vols. Reprint: Buenos Aires: Alvetlekhher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1964–1970; Spielberg Digital Library (A History of Jewish Literature. 10 Vols. Cincinnati : Hebrew Union College Press, 1972–1977); Jean Baumgarten : *Introduction to Old Yiddish*



the Jewish Enlightenment, Western Yiddish literature declined. It was transmitted at first in manuscript and later in print. The richest manuscript collections are found in libraries in Germany (Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, Leipzig), Italy (Parma, Rome, Milan, Venice), Switzerland (Bern), Holland (Amsterdam, Leiden), England (Oxford, Cambridge, London), France (Paris, Strasbourg) and in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland, Russia). These collections include religious as well as secular literature. Religious texts were translated from Hebrew into the vernacular, and such translations, which included glossaries or word indices (Hebrew — Yiddish), were used in synagogues and schools. Many epics were written from the start in Yiddish, while Talmudic (*aggadoth*) or Midrashic narratives such as legends and tales — called *mayses* — are found in both Hebrew and Yiddish manuscripts. The earliest known comprehensive collection of Old Yiddish literature was discovered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the *genizah* (“book-cemetery”)<sup>50</sup> of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo, Egypt:<sup>51</sup> it is the so-called *Cambridge Manuscript* (1382), with epics featuring heroes such as Abraham, Moses and Joseph the Pious.<sup>52</sup> This *Manuscript* includes also the “Fable of the Old Lion” and a longer work entitled “Ducus Horant” which relates the capture of King Hagen’s daughter Hilda by Horant. The “Ducus Horant” belongs to the German *Kudrun Circle*, which survives in Yiddish only. Old Yiddish produced a specific literature that cannot be disassociated from its internal and external contexts marked by tension, conflict and persecution. The anonymous *Cambridge Manuscript*, for example, was compiled by Jews who fled south after the massacres of 1348/1349 resulting from accusations that Jews had spread the Black Plague by poisoning wells. At various times and places — Germany, Italy, Bohemia etc. — Yiddish authors created religious and secular works, in rhyme or in prose, mirroring the literary conventions of the non-Jewish environment. In the Holy Roman Empire, Judaism developed epics and narratives from Holy Scripture and its commentaries (Talmud, Midrash), while

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*Literature*, ed. and tr. by Jerold C. Frakes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014<sup>2</sup>; Jerold C. Frakes (ed.): *Early Yiddish Texts 1100–1750: With Introduction and Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008<sup>2</sup> (bilingual edition); Jerold C. Frakes: *The Emergence of Early Yiddish Literature. Cultural Translation in Ashkenaz*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.

49 The oldest surviving example is a pair of verses in a Makhzor or Holy Day Prayer Book hand-copied in the year 1272/73: *gut tac b'tag's'waer dis mach'sor in bes haknesses trag* (“may it be a day of joy for him who carries this Makhzor into the synagogue”). As a spoken language, Yiddish is of course much older.

50 A *genizah* is a room or receptacle for the storage of discarded documents prior to ritual burial by a member of the synagogue staff. Primarily intended for documents bearing God’s name, *genizot* may contain a wide variety of other documents or even objects.

51 Cf. Adina Hoffman, Peter Cole: *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Genizah*. New York: Nextbook, 2011.

52 Cf. Leo Fuks: *The Oldest Known Literary Documents of Yiddish Literature (c. 1382)*. Part I: *Introduction, Facsimiles and Transcription*, Part II: *Transliteration, Modern German Version, Notes and Bibliography*. Leiden: Brill 1957. The *Cambridge Manuscript* has been translated by Jerold C. Frakes (ed. and tr.): *Early Yiddish Epic*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014. Interestingly, the story of Joseph the Pious is also found in the Koran.

Christian storytelling derived from the Old and New Testaments. Given that both derived in part from shared sources, the interesting point is to detect similarities and differences between the two bodies of literature.

Yiddish literature can be seen as a “contrast literature”. The compilers or “authors” of Old Yiddish texts show an extensive knowledge of both Jewish tradition and non-Jewish literature. The result is a fine interweaving of the two. Secular works in Yiddish — condemned by the rabbinical orthodoxy — arose from yet other sources and genres:

Germanic epic and saga: *Ditrikh fun Bern*, *Maynster Hildebrant*<sup>53</sup> and *Hertsog Ernst* are lost, but the anonymous *Melokhim bukh* (Book of Kings) of 1543<sup>54</sup> and the *Shmuel bukh* or *Sefer Shmuel* (Samuel Book) by Moshe Esrim Vearba of 1544,<sup>55</sup> both printed in Augsburg, survive and are well known; the latter includes a melody to which it may be sung (*be-nign Sefer Shmuel*). The verse form derived *inter alia* from the stanza of the *Nibelungenlied*.

The Arthur Circle: *Künig Artus Hof*.<sup>56</sup>

Italian courtly romance: the chivalric *Bovo bukh* (Sir Bevis Hampton)<sup>57</sup> and the love romance *Pariz un Viene*<sup>58</sup> by Elia Levita, written in stanzas worthy of Ariosto.

The Animal Fable: *Kuh bukh*<sup>59</sup> (*Book of Cows*) by Moses Wallich, influenced by Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Marie de France’s *Lais* or Petrone’s *Satiricon*.

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- 53 These two epic poems in Yiddish are mentioned and condemned in the edifying and religious *Mayse bukh* (Book of Stories). Cf. *Un beau livre d’histoires. Eyn shön mayse bukh. Fac-similé de l’editio princeps de Bâle (1602)*. Traduction du yiddish, introduction et notes par Astrid Starck (ed.). Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek, vols. 6/1 & 6/2, ed. V. Ueli Dill and Martin Steinmann. Basel: Schwabe Verlag 2004: “And don’t waste your time reading the Book of Cows and Dietrich from Bern, and Mister Hildebrant too is unworthy. Truly they are nothing but smut [...] And they are not divine” (p. 5/F° 2r).
- 54 Cf. Max Erik: *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di elteste tsaytn biz der haskole-tkufe: fertsenter-akhtsenter yorhundert*. Varshe: Kultur-Lige, 1928. Israel Zinberg: *Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn*. 9 vols. Vol. 6: *Ayropaishe tkufe. Altyidische literatur*. Vilna: Tomor 1929–1937. Reprint: Buenos Aires: Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1964–1970; Spielberg Digital Library (tr.): *A History of Jewish Literature*. 10 Vols. Vol. 6: *Old Yiddish Literature from its Origins to the Haskalah Period*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1972–1977; Jerold C. Frakes: 2014, pp. 407–417 (excerpts).
- 55 *Das Schemuelbuch des Mosche Esrim Vearba; ein biblisches Epos aus dem 15. Jahrhundert*. Einleitung und textkritischer Apparat von Felix Falk. Aus dem Nachlass hrsg. von L. Fuks. Assen: Van Gorcum 1961 (Yiddish — German); Jerold C. Frakes: 2014, pp. 15–147.
- 56 Achim Jaeger: *Ein jüdischer Artusritter: Studien zum jüdisch-deutschen “Widuwilt” (“Artushof”) und zum “Wigalois” des Wirnt von Gravenberc*. Tübingen: Niemeyer 2000.
- 57 Judah A. Joffe (ed.): *Elye Bokher, poetische shafungen in yidish, ershter band: Bovo d’Antona*. New York: Judah A. Joffe 1949. Online: <https://archive.org/stream/nybc207004#page/n0/mode/2up> (22.6.2018)
- 58 Elijah Levita, Erika Timm, Gustav Adolf Beckmann: *“Paris un Viene”: ein jiddischer Stanzenroman des 16. Jahrhunderts*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996.
- 59 *Book of Fables. The Yiddish Fable Collection of Reb Moshe Wallich*. Frankfurt am Main, 1697, translated and edited by Eli Katz. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994.



The Carnival play or *purim shpil*,<sup>60</sup> on the other hand, was based on the Scroll of Queen Esther's rescue of the Jewish people; the earliest *purim shpil*, a paraphrase entitled *Megile*, is a forerunner of Yiddish theatre. Like the *Fastnachtspiel*, the *purim shpil* lives from the liberating overstepping of social boundaries in discourse and behavior. The "Purim Drunk" has its origin in the Talmudic Tractat *Megillah* (7b):

"Rava said: A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordechai'."

In Prague in 1720, Bak printed a *purim shpil*, the *Akta Ester — Ester mit Akhashveyresh*. The title page says: "It was acted in Prague in a regular theater, with trumpets and other musical instruments." The actors were R. David Oppenheim's *yeshive-bokherim* (Talmud students). Three woodcuts, very popular ones, adorn the text.<sup>61</sup> The *purim shpil* became a beloved and favorite event. The father of modern Yiddish theatre, Avrom Goldfaden (1840–1908), wrote the libretto and composed the music for the biblical operetta in five acts and fifteen scenes, called *Teater fun kenig Akhashveyrosh oder kenigin Ester*. More recently, the great poet Itzik Manger (1901–1969) from Czernowitz wrote the wonderful *Megile-lider* (1963),<sup>62</sup> which now belongs to the standard repertoire of Yiddish theatre. It has been performed in Tel Aviv, Dresden and other cities. In Prague, *purim shpiln* are still performed today.<sup>63</sup>

German *Volksbücher* such as *Historie von dem Kaiser Octaviano*,<sup>64</sup> *Ziben Vayzn Maynster Bikhl* ("The Seven Sages of Rome"),<sup>65</sup> *Til Ayln shpihl* (Prague 1735)<sup>66</sup>

60 Chone Shmeruk: *Maḥazot mikra'iyim be-yidish, 1697–1750*. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1979.

61 Cf. Leopold Schnitzler: *Prager Judendeutsch. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung des älteren Prager Judendeutsch in lautlicher und insbesondere in lexikalischer Beziehung*. Gräffeling bei München: Edmund Glass Verlag, 1966. On p. 12, the author mentions "Purimfestspiele, aufgeführt in Prag von Schülern des talmudischen Lehrhauses, 1774", as belonging to his corpus. Cf. woodcuts depicting Mordechai, Haman and jesters, from *Akta Ester mit Akhashverosh* (Prague: Sons of Yehuda Bak, 1720): [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bak\\_Family](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bak_Family)

62 A short excerpt can be seen at: <https://www.facebook.com/BundWikipedia/posts/10151899376142330> (22.6.2018)

63 Cf. "Purim celebration in Chabad House, Prague, Czech Republic, 2004" (Picture, Chabad House, Prague), in: *Purim-shpil, YIVO Encyclopedia*: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Purim-shpil> (22.6.2018)

64 Theresia Friderichs-Müller (ed.): *Die Historie von dem Kaiser Octaviano*. Vol. I: *Transkription der Fassung des Cod. Hebr. Monac. 100 mit 18 Federzeichnungen von Isaak bar Juda Reutlingen*; Vol. II: *Faksimile des Drucks Augsburgs, Matthäus Franck (ca. 1568)*. Hamburg 1981. One version is in German, the other in Yiddish.

65 Arnold Paucker: "Das Volksbuch von den 'Sieben weisen Meistern' in der jiddischen Literatur", in: *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 57 (1961). pp. 177–194. Online: *Ziben veyzen Meynster Bikhl. Basel: Konrad Waldkirch 1602*: <https://www.e-rara.ch/doi/10.3931/e-rara-13454> (22.6.018)

66 There is one version published in Prague at Bak's Printing House in 1735. This edition of 29 stories has some interesting and very special ones, cf. Astrid Starck-Adler: "Ayln shpihl en

and the *Schildburger*<sup>67</sup> (“The Wise Men of Gotham”)<sup>68</sup> have to be mentioned as well.

Religious works included paraphrases and translations of the Bible, books on morality and customs (*minhogim*), storybooks (*mayse bikher*) and prayer books. The most popular paraphrase book, reprinted and still widely read today, was the *Tsenerene* (“Ze’enah ure’enah”: “O maidens of Zion, go forth and gaze”, *Song of Songs*, 3:11),<sup>69</sup> a women’s Bible including the Pentateuch, the Five Scrolls (*megillot*) and the *Haftaroth* or short readings from the Prophets recited Saturday mornings in the synagogue after the Tora cantillation. The *Tsenerene* brings together commentaries old and new as well as legends from the *Mayse* literature of the time that reach back to Jewish life in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. The compiler, Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi (Janów 1550 — Prague 1624), was probably an itinerant preacher and bookseller. An early edition was printed in Basel in 1622 and followed by many reprints (e.g. Prague 1709; translated by Bertha Pappenheim 1930).<sup>70</sup>

In the age of movable type and the printing press, the most important event was the translation of the Bible. Luther created the “modern” German language; the “modern” Yiddish language originated too from the translations of the Bible and its commentaries.<sup>71</sup> Most important were those of Augsburg (1544), Constance (1544), Cremona (1560) and Basel (1583). Why the plethora of translations? The reason was simple: the Hebrew Bible and the Aramaic Talmud were read alone by a learned elite devoted to oversubtle discussion called *pilpul*, subtleties incomprehensible to the vast majority of Jews. This led in turn to a return to the Bible, a process encouraged by the Maharal, for example, who encouraged Tora study. The Bible translations allowed all believers to read Holy Scripture directly in their own vernacular. The language of the Bible being holy, it was translated “literally”. What does that mean? The word order of the original Hebrew is kept and the vocabulary approximated: *melekh ha-malakh*

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yiddish”, in: Alexandre Schwarz (ed.), *Till Eulenspiegel. Traduire l’original. Zurück zum Original*. Lausanne: Centre de traduction littéraire, 2013, pp. 159–190.

- 67 “Wund erseltzame abendtheurliche und recht lächerliche Geschichte und Thaten der Welt bekannten Schild-Bürger in Misnopotamia, hinter Utopia gelegen” (Wonderful, adventuresome and highly comical stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg in Mesopotamia beyond Utopia, 17th century). This is one amongst other versions.
- 68 The first German print (*Lalebuch*) was made in Strasburg in 1597. A Yiddish translation was published in 1727. Later on, the Schildbürger found a “home” in Eastern Europe, the shtetl Khelm/Chelm and became the Khelemer khakhomim; cf. Yehiel Yeshaia Trunk: *Khelemer khakhomim oder yidn fun der kligster shtot in der velt* (“The Wise Men of Chelm, or the Jews from the Wisest Town in the World”). Buenos Aires: Idbuj, 1951.
- 69 Jacob Ben Isaac Achkenazi de Janow: *Le commentaire sur la Torah. Tseena ureena*. Traduction du yidich et annotation par Jean Baumgarten. Paris: Verdier, 1987.
- 70 *Zennah u-Reenah. Frauenbibel*. Nach dem Jüdisch-Deutschen bearbeitet von Bertha Pappenheim. *Bereschith. Erstes Buch Moses*. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Frauenbund (League of Jewish Women), 1930.
- 71 Cf. Erika Timm: *Historische jiddische Semantik. Die Bibelübersetzungssprache als Faktor der Auseinanderentwicklung des jiddischen und des deutschen Wortschatzes*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2005.



(rules the king) = *kinigt der kinig*. A similar process had occurred when the Pentateuch was translated into Aramaic, the vernacular of the Jewish people around the time of Christ: this was called the *Targum* (“translation”).<sup>72</sup> Yiddish Bible translations were usually made by reading a passage aloud in Hebrew, then translating it a verse at a time. A translation into Synagogue Yiddish for example sounds like this: a Hebrew verse *Breyses boro elohim eth ha-shomayim veeth hoarets*, followed by the announcement *Dos is taytsh* (“this is the translation, this is Yiddish”) and then the verse in Yiddish: *In onheyb hot hkb”h* (“The Holy One, blessed be He”) *bashafen dem himel und die erd* (“created Heaven and Earth”). These Bibles, consisting of the Five Books of Moses, were called *taytsh-khumesh* (Yiddish Pentateuch).

Morality books (*muser-sforim*) were especially produced for women. The most famous is the *Sefer Brantshpigl* (“Burning Mirror”, Cracow 1596)<sup>73</sup> “for women and for men who are like women”, i.e. for non-scholarly men, as Moses Henokhs Altshul Yerushalmi puts it in his prologue. Like the books of customs (*minhogim sforim*) first printed in Venice in 1593, morality books teach how to study and observe the commandments, how to behave, how to discipline the body, how to care for one’s health and hygiene (*Meneket Rivkah*), how to deal with marital sexuality and morality, how to fight against magic and superstition, against the misuse of language and against lying and obscenity. Morality books consider the imperatives of Jewish ethics and convey the virtues to which civil society ever strives.

Story books (*mayse bikher*) were a genre of edificatory and entertaining literature with a messianic aim. They include Jewish *exempla*, Talmudic and Midrashic legend as well as tales from international lore; the most complete and famous collection is the *Mayse bukh* (1602,<sup>74</sup> Prague 1665)<sup>75</sup> with 255 stories, including for the first time the *exempla* on the Pious Rabbis from the Rhineland. In his prologue, the compiler writes: the *Mayse bukh* “will be read both by the rabbis and their wives and by every-

72 In Arabic areas the Bible was translated into Arabic, leading to a Jewish Arabic language or “Judaeano-Arabic”. This language is still spoken today by Jews from the Maghreb (North-eastern Africa). An interesting aspect of this language is its combination of two Semitic languages.

73 Sigrid Riedel (ed.): *Moses Henochs Altschul-Jerushalmi “Brantshpigel”*. Transcribed and edited from the editio princeps of Krakau 1596. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993, p. 12. Reprints Basel 1602 (Conrad Waldkirch) and Prague 1610 (Yaakov ben Gershon Bak).

74 *Un beau livre d’histoires. Eyn shön mayse bukh*. Fac-similé de l’editio princeps de Bâle (1602). Traduction du yiddish, introduction et notes par Astrid Starck (Ed.). Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek, vols. 6/1 & 6/2, ed. V. Ueli Dill and Martin Steinmann, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2004.

75 Cf. Erika Timm: *Graphische und phonische Struktur des Westjiddischen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer 1987. The work includes “Beria und Simra” (521–557) printed by the Bak Family; the text “Beria und Simra” ends with a “mayse” from the *Mayse bukh* (ibid., 515–518). This print “sold” by the Frankfurt Library in April/June 16, 1937 to Salman Schocken was long deemed lost, but it has just been discovered at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, where it had been sent with other precious books to save them from the Nazis. Cf. Elisabeth Singer-Brehm: “Das Prager Maisebuch von 1665”, in: *Jiddistik Mitteilungen* 55/56 (April/November 2016), pp. 1–12. An analysis of both edition would be of great interest.





one else. Even by a scholar well versed in *gemara*, who will quote *midrashim*, stories and *aggadoth*.<sup>76</sup> It is the cornerstone of narrative literature in Yiddish, and all subsequent writers drew from this inexhaustible well, the most famous one being the Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer.<sup>77</sup>

Prayer books for daily (*sidur*) or festive prayers (*makhzor*) were widely printed, and their distribution generated significant income. Supplication prayers for women (*tkhines*)<sup>78</sup> allowed women to express emotions and for a long time were the only female-oriented genre permitted.<sup>79</sup> Written at first by men, eventually such books came to be written by women who excelled in the genre.<sup>80</sup> Prague was particularly prolific in printed *tkhines* from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards; collections of *tkhines* were published there in 1586 and 1590 and, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in 1650, 1660, 1674, 1682 and 1688.

## B.II. YIDDISH PRINTING IN PRAGUE<sup>81</sup>

Jewish printing in Prague began in 1512 with a Hebrew prayer book or *sidur*. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish Renaissance in Prague witnessed a flowering of learning and crafts which attracted artisans and scholars from all over Europe, and the Jewish authority known as the Maharal contributed to the city's brilliance. In those days Yiddish, the vernacular language of Ashkenazi Jews, flourished throughout Europe. The invention of printing, "the crown of all science", had a revolutionary impact on Jewish religious and cultural life. It made learning, reading and writing accessible to a wide and demanding audience, as books in Yiddish found new readerships among women and uneducated men. For despite the bilingualism of Jewish society, a point emphasized by Max Weinreich and others, those able to read Scripture in the original were but a small elite. Prague distinguished itself furthermore as the home of two Jewish printer dynasties, the Kohen ("Gersonides") and Bak families, active (except during conflicts between the Czech and the Habsburg monarchies) from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century — for elsewhere (e.g. in Basel) printers of Jewish literature tended to be Christian Hebraists. In Prague, Jewish printers cooperated with Christian craftsmen for their machinery and expertise. 1512 was a memorable year in the history of Hebrew letters, for it saw the publication of the first Hebrew book (a *sidur* or prayer

76 Astrid Starck 2004: pp. 4–5 (f<sup>o</sup>1v).

77 Astrid Starck-Adler: "Bashevis's Interactions with the *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Tales)", in: *The Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. by Seth L. Wolitz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, pp. 119–133.

78 Devra Kay (ed. and transl.): *Seyder Tkhines. The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 2004.

79 *Tkhines*, Basel: Konrad Waldkirch 1609. Bilingual Hebrew & Yiddish.

80 Kathryn Hellerstein: *A Question of Tradition. Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture.

81 Jean Baumgarten: *Le peuple des livres. Les ouvrages populaires dans la société ashkénaze XVIe–XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Albin Michel 2010, pp. 295–304; Shlomo Z. Berger: *Yiddish Books in Prague* (2nd version). Online: [http://www.academia.edu/6981167/Yiddish\\_books\\_in\\_Prague](http://www.academia.edu/6981167/Yiddish_books_in_Prague) (22.6.2018).



book) by a group of Prague printers led by Gershom ben Shlomo Kohen Katz (d. 1544); the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this prayer book was celebrated in 2012 by the Jewish Museum in Prague.<sup>82</sup> It was a first in Europe, and Prague became the leading center for Jewish printing north of the Alps. Together with his brother Gronem Katz, Gershom went on to print a wonderful *Haggada*<sup>83</sup> (1526) with sumptuous wood engravings by Hayyim Shakhor (Schwartz).<sup>84</sup> It contains a paraliturgical song with the words *Adir hu / Almekhtiger got*. These are the first lines ever to be printed in Yiddish. The printing and circulation of Yiddish books was closely connected to that of Hebrew books, which usually preceded them. An exception was Basel, where Yiddish printing in *extenso* preceded Hebrew printing: there, two Yiddish epics, rhymed paraphrases in *vaybertaytsh* (“women’s Yiddish”, i.e. the special typeface used for Yiddish literature), were printed in 1557: the *Sefer Doniel* (reprints: Prague 1609 & 1673)<sup>85</sup> and *Di Megile*,<sup>86</sup> both by Jakob Kündig. An interesting example of the preeminence of the vernacular is the sermon on forbidden wine held by the Maharal and printed in Hebrew. Since most people understood not Hebrew but Yiddish, their mother tongue, the sermon was probably held in Yiddish and translated into the “Holy Language” for publication.<sup>87</sup> Gershom Kohen specialized in prayer books for Germany and Poland. Dealers were often the owners of print shops, and books were produced for an international market extending beyond the Holy Roman Empire. Prague remained a Jewish printing centre from the 16<sup>th</sup> until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Yiddish printing was less important than Hebrew, ca. 20%. Most Yiddish books published in Prague appeared between 1553 and 1629, i.e. between the decline of Italy and the rise of Amsterdam as Jewish printing center. They were printed in *vaybertaytsh*, derived from the semi-cursive Ashkenazi writing but in fonts less neat than that of Basel. Large numbers of Prague titles were exported to Poland. It would be interesting to compare Yiddish printing in Basel,<sup>88</sup> where there was no Jewish community, and in Prague with its large and important one.<sup>89</sup>

82 For this occasion, the Jewish Museum organized an exhibition at the Robert Guttmann Gallery: “You won’t need to see a rabbi.’ 500 Years of Hebrew Printing in Bohemia and Moravia.” Catalogue: Olga Sixtová (ed.), *Hebrew Printing in Bohemia and Moravia*. Prague: Academia and the Jewish Museum in Prague, 2012.

83 Ritual for Pessah, the Jewish Easter celebration. *Adir hu* is sung during the Seder meal.

84 Hayyim ben David Shakhor (Schwartz), he too a Hebrew printer in Prague from 1514 to 1526, joined Kohen in 1518.

85 “*Doniel*”: *das altjiddische Danielbuch nach d. Basler Druck von 1557*, ed. Wulf-Otto Dreessen and Hermann-Josef Müller. Vol. 1: *Transcription*; vol. 2: *Facsimile*. Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1979.

86 Joseph Prijs: *Die Basler hebräischen Drucke (1492–1866)*. Olten: Urs-Graf, 1964, pp. 139ff., 146ff. The latter is an *editio unica*.

87 Judah Loew ben Bezalel (c. 1525–1609): *Derush al ha-Torah al ha-Mitzvot*. Prague: Solomon ben Mordecai Katz and Moses ben Bezalel, 1593. JMP, call no. 4.727. Cf. Exhibition.

88 Clemens P. Sidorko: *Basel und der jiddische Buchdruck (1557–1612)*. Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek Basel, Vol. 8. Basel: Schwabe Verlag 2014.

89 Shlomo Z. Berger: *Yiddish Books in Prague* (2nd version). Online: [http://www.academia.edu/6981167/Yiddish\\_books\\_in\\_Prague](http://www.academia.edu/6981167/Yiddish_books_in_Prague) (22.6.2018).



Yiddish printing in Prague covered all the genres of Old Yiddish literature, and a catalogue like the one Prijs established for Hebrew and Yiddish printing in Basel would be most welcome.<sup>90</sup> One can speak of a “classical stock” which supplied the printing houses of Europe and whose language was a literary Western Yiddish read by Jews from Western and Eastern Europe; it began with Bible translation and continued with paraphrases from the Bible and the *Midrash*, prayer books, morality books, historical books and story books.<sup>91</sup> Thanks to David Oppenheimer, the chief rabbi of Bohemia and Prague and a collector of Jewish books printed in Prague, many such books have survived. They are now at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Two books had an indisputable pedagogical influence and show in turn the influence of the Maharal, who valued textual comprehension over “pilpulic” discussion: the Yiddish glossaries *Beer Moshe* on the Pentateuch & Five Scrolls, and the *Lekah tov*<sup>92</sup> on the Prophets and the remaining books of the Bible. The author of these glossaries was the teacher, translator, editor and publisher Moses Sertels (d. 1614/1615); they were published in 1604/1605 by Moses ben Joseph Bezalel Katz and became indispensable for teachers in Jewish schools in Europe.

### B.III. A UNIQUE PUBLICATION IN PRAGUE: MENEKES RIVKE (“REBECCA’S WET NURSE”, 1609)<sup>93</sup>

Education in the vernacular was a primary goal of both Christian and Jewish circles during the Early Modern Period. Erasmus emphasized the importance of educating young girls and women. There was a reason for this above and beyond the new market for printed books they represented. In early bourgeois society, women’s role was domestic: they helped with their husbands’ work — for example as baker, butcher, printer etc. — but were above all responsible for their children’s religious education. Thus Yiddish, the vernacular language, became the privileged vehicle of education.<sup>94</sup> But not all women were ignorant of Hebrew. Since the Middle Ages, educated women in Germany and Italy read in the synagogue. They were called *firzogerins* (“women who prompt”).<sup>95</sup> One such woman was Rivke bas Meir Tiktiner (d. ca 1550). She belonged to a learned family. As an erudite “female rabbi and preacher”, her duty was to convey religious knowledge in her homilies. These sermons formed the basis of Rivke’s scholarly, original and “modern” book on morality and homiletics. A “Man-

90 Prijs 1964.

91 Cf. Maéße Béria vé-Simra (Bak ca. 1618–1629), in Erika Timm 1987: 503–553.

92 The *Lekakh tov* is one of the few early Jewish prints still to be found in Prague.

93 Rivkah bat Meir Tiktiner: *Menekes Rivke* (“Rebecca’s Wet Nurse”, 1609). Erlangen: Old University Library. A photocopy of the original is in the library of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

94 Astrid Starck: “Wie weiblich ist Jiddisch? Übersetzung und Metamorphose am Beispiel des Maysebuchs (Basel 1602)”, in: *Tagung des Instituts zur Erforschung und Förderung österreichischer und internationaler Kulturprozesse (ISNT): Das Verbindende der Kulturen*. Wien, 2003. Online: [http://www.inst.at/trans/15Nr/07\\_2/starck15.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/15Nr/07_2/starck15.htm) (22.6.2018)

95 Cf. Shmuel Niger: “Di yidishe literatur un di lezerin”, in: *Der Pinkes* 1 (1913), pp. 85–138.



ual of Wisdom and Piety”, it is entitled *Menekes Rivke* (“Rebecca’s Wet Nurse”) and was not published until some fifty years after her death, first in Prague (1609), then in Cracow (1618).<sup>96</sup> It is the only morality book of female authorship known to survive, and as such it is of unique value. It is embedded in the urban, mercantile Jewish milieu of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Prague<sup>97</sup> and hence reflects the ethical and pedagogical preoccupations of the time and its author’s moral responses to them. It is a highly erudite book with numerous allusions to the Bible. Thus it follows the Maharal’s educational program of acquiring and comprehending primary texts. Rivke mentions *aggadot* from the Talmud — fewer though than appear in other morality books (e.g. the *Brant shpigl*) — and quotes ethical books or *muser sformim*; these include the *Reshit Khokhmah* by Rabbi Eliahu da Vidas (“The Beginning of Wisdom”, Hebrew, 16<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>98</sup> the *Sefer Orakh Khayyim* (“The Path of Life”, anonymous, Yiddish, Basel 1602), the *Sefer ha-Middot* (“The Book of Character Traits”, Hebrew) known as *Sefer Orkhot Tsaddikim* (“The Ways of the Righteous”, anonymous, Yiddish Isny 1542, Hebrew Prague 1581) and others which she had read in Hebrew or Yiddish. This rich intertextuality shows that women — and men — who read the *Menekes* had already obtained a solid religious education. Hebrew verses from the Bible are followed by Yiddish translations, signaled thus: *Dos iz taytsh*. These books were read aloud at home on Shabbat afternoons, thus sharing knowledge among readers and listeners, both the educated and the less or uneducated.

Seven chapters, reflecting the seven arms of the *Menora* and the seven pillars of wisdom,<sup>99</sup> are devoted to the duties of a righteous, pious, God-fearing woman. Love divine and human plays a major role. The *Menekes Rivke* attains a mystical dimension. The woman has to unite wisdom of the body and wisdom of the soul.<sup>100</sup> Her duties include good deeds toward the household and servants, the children’s education — not distinguishing between boys and girls — and moral and social behavior towards her husband, her parents and her in-laws. *Menekes Rivke* is an edifying book with a messianic aim. It exhorts women — and men — to pursue ideals of conduct and social practice conducive to the Redemption of the world (*ge’ule*).<sup>101</sup>

“In recompense of this we will merit the Redemption of the [Messiah], who will make peace in the whole world” (f<sup>o</sup> 36a).

<sup>96</sup> “*Meneket Rivkah*”: *A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women by Rivkah Bat Meir*. Edited with an introduction and commentary by Frauke Von Rohden. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Rivke insists that people “should not imitate the nations in food, drink, or manner of dress, neither marrying them nor mingling with them” (F<sup>o</sup> 20b).

<sup>98</sup> Eliyahu ben Mosheh de Vidas: *The Beginning of Wisdom. Unabridged Translation of the “Gate of Love” from Rabbi Eliahu de Vidas’ “Reshit Chochmah”*. Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 2002.

<sup>99</sup> “Wisdom has built herself a house; she has carved her seven pillars” (Prov. 9.1)

<sup>100</sup> Neoplatonism had a strong influence on Jewish thinkers.

<sup>101</sup> The messianic aim is evident in all Yiddish literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.



*Menkes Rivke* emphasizes the woman's virtues: she is to be at home and not outside the house, and is to be modest and obedient to her husband. Thus Rivke conveys an exhortation based on the Bible and found in morality books compiled or written by men, such as Moses Henokhs Yerushalmi's *Brant shpiql*. At the same time, she refutes the persistent accusation uttered in those books that Eve brought death into the world, that she is a murderer and that therefore she has to atone for her crime by suffering in childbirth.<sup>102</sup>

This new perspective offered by Rivke is closely connected to a concern of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: the parent's love for the child and the care taken by the parent for the child's body and soul. Health and hygiene become an important concern: bathing the child is recommended, as is nursing by its own mother.<sup>103</sup> The techniques of nursing and bathing are described in a very sensitive way (f<sup>o</sup> 22a-b). The mother is admonished not to take the child with her into bed at night. Why? Presumably to prevent it from being crushed, a mishap that occurred often and was denounced at the time.<sup>104</sup> Rivke describes the physical and spiritual connection between mother and child and writes how important the thoughts of a pregnant mother are if her child is to become a devout and erudite scholar. Rivke's vision<sup>105</sup> is based on a religious belief, which anticipated what we have come to know today: how receptive the embryo is.<sup>106</sup> Reflecting the position of the educated and devout woman of 16<sup>th</sup> century Prague, Rivke emphasizes the woman's mission to change the world and make it worthy to receive the Messiah *hic et nunc*.

#### B.IV. PRAGUE AND YIDDISH IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Western Yiddish went into decline. During the *Haskalah* in Berlin, two languages alone were recognized as being of cultural significance: German and Hebrew. Yiddish was highly criticized and rejected by the Western world. In order to help familiarize Jews with German, the Yiddish-speaking Moses Mendelssohn translated the Bible into German written in Yiddish characters.

While Western Yiddish no longer produced important works of literature, Eastern Yiddish, which developed in a Slavic environment, went its own way. Scholars and writers from Poland and Russia who had come to Berlin now moved back as adepts of the *Haskalah* wishing to educate their people. They could choose between Hebrew,

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<sup>102</sup> It is worth indicating that in most traditional societies, natural functions of the woman's body such as menstruation, childbirth and in some cases nursing are subject to ostracizing patriarchal rules.

<sup>103</sup> Nursing is an interesting social topic throughout the centuries: the mother was often prevented from nursing her own child, either for puritanistic or economical reasons.

<sup>104</sup> In the *Mayse bukh*, for example, this problem is evoked through the parable of the Judgment of Solomon (mayse 228, pp. 738–742).

<sup>105</sup> The *Mayse bukh* has two stories illustrating the influence of the parent's thoughts during the conception of the child and anticipating its future: Nr. 134 and Nr. 249.

<sup>106</sup> There is also a popular belief that if a pregnant mother desires strawberries in winter she will have a child with a strawberry on his bottom (or elsewhere).



Russian or Polish, and Yiddish. Hebrew was elitist, Russian and Polish were *galkhes* (Christian) languages. That left Yiddish. The writers who developed Yiddish literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century — Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835–1917),<sup>107</sup> Sholem Aleykhem (1859–1916)<sup>108</sup> and Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852–1915) — wrote in all three languages. But in order to reach and touch, to educate and entertain the Jewish masses, they had to use the language that reflected the *shtetl* and its quirks and quarrels, its joys and sorrows. This was the beginning of a tremendously vivid linguistic, literary and cultural adventure, a Yiddish Renaissance with great Yiddish writers, artists and intellectuals from Poland, Russia and, due to emigration, America. The movement expanded first throughout Europe wherever Jews were in transit and left behind their cultural imprint; Yiddish theatre revolutionized the genre. Later on, peregrinating through foreign countries, Yiddish made discoveries, integrated them and enriched its own specificity, so that in each emigration country a new construct emerged. All together, these constructs constitute what I call *yidishofonye*.<sup>109</sup> Thanks to this Yiddish-speaking diaspora, Yiddish language and culture survived annihilation by the Nazis — but only just.

Between 1881 and 1910, trying to escape the horrendous pogroms perpetrated in the Ukraine by the Cossack “Black Hundreds” under the rule of the Russian Tsar Alexander III, Jews fled westwards to Bohemia and Moravia. Thus Eastern Jewish culture physically met Western Jewish culture. This happened in Prague, and the privileged vector was theatre; indeed, Eastern Yiddish writers were well informed on Western Yiddish and German-Jewish culture, in the original language or in Eastern Yiddish translation. In Prague, Yiddish — called *Judendeutsch* — was still alive at the time, but not lively anymore, since the Jewish upper classes spoke German. The days when Prague Jews performed *purim shpiln* and other Yiddish plays in the vernacular were neither long gone nor forgotten, but all that was considered “prehistoric” and at most of antiquarian interest. Inspired on one hand by German nationalism and its Romantic legacy, on the other by Alexander von Humboldt’s ethnographic and geographical essays, a general interest in folklore and in the collection of legends and tales — cf. the Brothers Grimm — developed in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is when the “historical” Rabbi Loew became a legendary and major figure in Jewish folklore,<sup>110</sup> first compiled in German. A whole range of authors, mostly Jewish, were to contribute to this legend, publishing separately or in anthologies. While Franz Klutschak (1814–1886) published “Der Golem des Rabbi Löw” in his journal *Panorama* (1841),<sup>111</sup> Wolf Pascheles

107 Sholem Yankev Abramovich wrote under the pseudonym “Mendele the Bookseller”.

108 “Good Morning” was the pseudonym of Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich.

109 Cf. Astrid Starck-Adler: “Das Jiddische als Kulturvermittlung und der Begriff der Jiddisophonie”, in: *Trans. Internet Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, 16 (June 2006). Online: [http://www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/O6\\_6/starck-adler16.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/O6_6/starck-adler16.htm) (22.6.2018).

110 For an exhaustive analysis and bibliography of the different stories, cf. Edan Dekel & David Gantt Gurley: “How the Golem Came to Prague”, in: *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 103/2 (Spring 2013), pp. 241–258. Online: <http://jqr.pennpress.org/media/23891/JQRnewArticle.pdf> (accessed 22.6.2018).

111 Cf. Hillel J. Kieval: “Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish Culture and the Invention of a Tradition”, in: *Languages of Community. The Jewish Experience in Czech Lands*. Berkeley: Uni-



(1814–1857) assembled an exhaustive collection of stories written by different authors and called *Sippurim* (Prague 1847).<sup>112</sup> It contains two stories told by the ethnographer and author Leopold Weisel, who was interested in the Jewish folklore of Bohemia. The first story, “The Golem” (vol. I, pp. 51–52), evokes Rabbi Loew’s cabbalistic knowledge and magical power enabling him “to make alive figures formed with clay or carved in wood, in order to do one’s work like real human beings” (p. 51).<sup>113</sup> Rabbi Loew is like a *Baal Shem* (“Master of the Good Name”). The *shem* (magical word) Rabbi Loew puts into the golem’s mouth<sup>114</sup> to bring him alive has to be removed during the Holy Sabbath. But once, the rabbi forgets to do so and, as in Goethe’s “Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, the golem goes out of control and rampages wildly in the streets. Word gets back to the rabbi, who is confronted with a dilemma: how to stop the golem without violating the Sabbath? But in the Old-New Synagogue (*Altnayshul*), the office has not yet started. The rabbi removes a letter from the Golem’s forehead, and it returns to its passive state. Frightened, Rabbi Loew desists from creating such dangerous “fellows”. Until today it is said that the golem’s remains are kept in the attic of the Old-New Synagogue! The second story, “Yayin Kiddush or False Accusation” (vol. 2, pp. 5–48), recalls the infamous days when Jews were accused of ritual murder<sup>115</sup> and how the great rabbi — thanks to a supernatural gift from God — saves *in extremis* the Jewish people from persecution.<sup>116</sup> Later on, elements from both stories are combined in Eastern Yiddish legend. The golem becomes both an intermediate between Western-German and Eastern-Yiddish folklore and a distinguishing factor between them.<sup>117</sup>

If on one hand a deep gap existed between *West-* and *Ostjuden*, i.e. between German-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jews, on the other hand artists and intellectuals

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versity of California Press 2000, pp. 95–113; “Franz Klutschak’s Rendition of the Golem Folktale”, *Panorama des Universums*, vol. 8 [1841]. Online: <http://california.universitypressscholarship.com/mobile/view/10.1525/california/9780520214101.001.0001/upso-9780520214101-appendix-1> (22.6.2018).

112 Wolfgang Pascheles (hrsg.): *Sippurim. Eine Sammlung jüdischer Volkssagen, Erzählungen, Mythen, Chroniken, Denkwürdigkeiten und Biographien berühmter Juden*. 5 Sammlungen in 2 Bänden. Hildesheim: Georg Olms (reprint Prague 1856<sup>4</sup>).

113 A kind of “robot” *avant la lettre*!

114 There are different ways of bringing him to life. The most famous one is to put the word *emeth* (truth), written *alef-mem-tav* (the first, middle and last letter of the alphabet), on the Golem’s forehead. To render him passive, the rabbi removes the letter *alef*, which represents the Creator of the universe, leaving *mem* and *tav*, which spell the word “dead”, “corpse”.

115 On ritual murder, cf. Ronnie Po-chia Hsia: *The Myth of Ritual Murder. Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

116 Rabbi Loew hears a voice informing him of the thwarted plot — Blood Libel — against the Jews, which would lead necessarily to retaliation. He finds the two bottles of blood under the Ark and fills them with wine. This enables him to save the Jews. The interesting thing in this story is that the ritual murder has been stirred up by a “bad” Jew who wants revenge for having been excluded from the Jewish community.

117 Apparently there are no Golem stories in Western Yiddish, but the word is not unknown: it is used, as in Eastern Yiddish, for a dummy, an awkward man.



of both sides cooperated in a Jewish cultural magazine called *Ost und West* (“East and West”, Berlin 1901–1923). Intended as a bridge, the magazine sought to familiarize assimilated Western Jews with the rich cultural world of the *Ostjuden* in order to forge a modern Jewish identity. The determination to collect Jewish folksongs and folktales in Eastern Europe echoed the Western determination to do so at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The folklorist Yehuda Leyb Cahan (1881–1937) collected and published folksongs — *Libelider*<sup>118</sup> — old and new<sup>119</sup> as well as folktales.<sup>120</sup> Some Yiddish writers became collectors and authors of old legends they revisited and adapted. In 1890, before writing his “Golem”,<sup>121</sup> Peretz went on an ethnographic fieldtrip through Poland to study Jewish customs and preserve Jewish popular culture (*Bilder fun a provints-rayze*, 1891).<sup>122</sup> It became essential for Eastern European Jews to preserve their Jewish heritage. In contrast to Western Europe, where anti-Semitism was also virulent but where influential personalities stood up for Jews — for example Émile Zola in the Dreyfus Affair —, Eastern European Jews had no protection against the anti-Semitic rampages of the mob. This was especially true at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and before and during World War I,<sup>123</sup> a period characterized by massacre and destruction — themes we shall find in Leivick’s *Goylem*. In this context, the collection of popular treasures was seen as being extremely urgent. An-ski (Solomon Zanwil Rappoport, 1863–1920), later an ethnographer influenced by the Narodnik Movement, published part of the material he collected for the Jewish Museum in St. Petersburg under the title *Der yidisher khurbn* (“The destruction of the Jews”).<sup>124</sup> He wrote the most famous play in Yiddish: *The Dybbuk oder Tsvishn tsey veltn* (1914). There An-ski explores a legend based on the cabbalistic, mystical belief in the *Dybbuk*, a restlessly wandering soul’s reincarnation in a foreign body offering it relief; he uses the legend to create a love story in an Eastern Jewish religious and cultural context. For his *Goylem*, Leivick too uses an old legend connected to Kabbalah and mysticism — the use of divine names to bring to life a non-human being. But whereas in Western stories the golem was merely the rabbi’s servant, in Eastern stories it becomes the protector of the Jews. Leivick goes a step further: his golem is both the protector of the Jews and their Savior. The question is: Why did the Maharal need the golem, since in earlier stories he could ward off bad luck with his knowledge alone? Why is there an abyss between spiritual knowledge

118 Yuda Leyb Cahan : *Yidishe Folkslieder. Mit melodies*. Bd. 1. New York: Literarisher farlag, 1920; YIVO 1957<sup>2</sup>.

119 Yuda Leyb Cahan: *Studies in Yiddish Folklore*. Ed. by Max Weinreich, New York: YIVO, 1952.

120 Yuda Leyb Cahan: *Yidishe folksmayses oys dem folksmoyl gezamelt*. Bd. 1. New York-Vilne: Yidishe Folklor-Bibliotek, 1931.

121 Isaac Leybush Peretz: *Dertseylungen, mayslekh, bilder. Ale verk*, Bd. II. New York: CYCO, 1947, pp. 310–311.

122 Ibid, pp. 117–209.

123 An-ski reports on the destruction of Jewish communities and the civilian population by the Russian Army during World War I in: *The Enemy at His Pleasure: A Journey Through the Jewish Pale of Settlement During World War I*, tr. by Joachim Neugroschel, Macmillan, 2003, p. 253. This work has become a major source in the historiography of the war’s impact on civilian populations.

124 Sholem An-ski: *Der yidisher khurben*, in: *Gezamelte shriftn*, Bd. 5, Vilne: Farlag “An-ski”, 1922.





and physical force? The mingling of Maharal and Golem in the same story makes visible two kinds of response — one upstream, the other downstream — to an event which seemed connected to the past and definitely extirpated from society: the old accusation of ritual murder and its devastating consequences, the pogroms. The two responses are reflected in Leivick's *Goylem*, which sounds so prophetic of the *Shoah*. More than a legend, based on mystical and cabbalistic elements — the creation of a human being, the peregrination of a soul in search of a body with which to be reunited<sup>125</sup> — Leivick's *Goylem* tells a human tragedy of silence, violence and dereliction.

#### B.IV.A. PRAGUE AND LEIVICK'S DRAMATIC POEM *DER GOYLEM* (1921)<sup>126</sup>

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writers, poets, dramatists and filmmakers showed interest — “historical”, folkloristic, nationalistic or ideological — in a great Jewish character, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel or Maharal. To him they now added a deuteragonist: the golem, which became even more famous than its creator! The golem appeared in narratives, expressionistic fantasy films<sup>127</sup> and theatre plays<sup>128</sup> mostly set in an imaginary, rebuilt and “refurbished” Jewish Quarter (Josefov).<sup>129</sup> Today the fictional and critical literature on the golem legend is rich, diverse and embraces all kinds of “golems”.<sup>130</sup> The golem became a kind of archetype leading to numerous genres in literature and film.

The golem taken from a mound of dust and kneaded and shaped into a human being has a long Jewish tradition stretching from the Bible and Talmud<sup>131</sup> down to our

125 There are similarities between Leivick's *Goylem* and An-ski's *Dybbuk*.

126 Leivick Halpern: *Der goylem. A dramatische poeme in akht bilder*, in: *Ale verk*, Vilne: Farlag Kletskin, 1921. Digitalized version (Spielberg Digital Library): <http://www.yiddishbook-center.org/books/search> (see Leivick reading from *Der goylem* “Nisht gerufene”, 5tes bild, 121–134). This major work of Yiddish literature, performed as a drama by the Habima Theatre in 1925, is unfortunately unknown to non-Yiddish speakers.

127 Franz Wegener (1874–1948): *Der Golem* (1915; now lost), *Der Golem und die Tänzerin* (1917) and what is considered his masterpiece: *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1920).

128 Leivick's *Golem* is a dramatic poem, but it has been staged many times until today.

129 Gustave Meyrink: *Der Golem (1913–14)*. Fischer Verlag, 1981; Paul Wegener: *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* (1920); Eduard Petiška: *Golem a jiné židovské pověsti a pohádky ze staré Prahy* (převyprávění pro mládež, 1968; more of a fantastic novel); Leo Perutz: *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke: ein Roman aus dem alten Prag*. München: dtv, 2011 (begun in 1924 in Vienna, the book was finished in 1951 in Tel Aviv and first published in 1953 by the Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt); Friedrich Torberg: *Golems Wiederkehr und andere Erzählungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968 (set after World War II and the Holocaust).

130 Cf. Veronika Ambros: “How Did the Golems (and Robots) Enter Stage and Screen and Leave Prague?”, in Cornis-Pope & Neubauer (eds.) 2004: pp. 308–320; on Leivick's *Golem*, see pp. 313–314.

131 The word appears first in Psalm 139:16 for an “unshaped form”, then in the Talmud, in Tractate Sanhedrin 38b referring to Adam made from dust, and Sanhedrin 65b as a mute being. During the Middle Ages, the mystical *Sefer Yetsira* (Book of Creation) dealt with this problem. Rabbi Juda the Pious and his disciple Rabbi Eleazar of Worms wrote a com-



time.<sup>132</sup> It begins with Adam, the first man. The stories are numerous. In the context of Eastern Yiddish literary and theatrical production, the dramatic poem by Leivick postdates the plays Kafka saw between 1911–1912, but the legend of the golem and its modern “coming into the world” are closely connected. Kafka himself sketched out a golem in his *Diaries*<sup>133</sup> using a very original approach.<sup>134</sup> Yiddish theatre arose at the same time, around 1850. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the past, invented or reinvented through myths, became a source of national pride. It gave new nations a foundation. For the Jews, the situation was different: in the absence of a Jewish nation there was a Yiddishland, a “language-land” transcending borders. Prague, the gateway to Eastern Europe, had its own brilliant Jewish past in the person of the prestigious Maharal: a historical and mystical figure protecting the Jews against the false accusation of Blood Libel and the resulting pogroms.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a radical shift took place within the golem legend. This shift was connected to catastrophic events spawned by the anti-Semitism virulent in all of Europe, when, as mentioned above, accusations of Blood Libel again found fertile ground:<sup>135</sup> in Tiszaeszlár in 1882,<sup>136</sup> in Xanten in Prussia in 1891, in Bohemia in 1899 (the Hilsner Affair), in Kishinev in 1903 followed by indescribable pogroms, in Kiev in 1911 (the Beilis Affair). Political leaders (Masaryk, Kossuth) intervened, writers (Thomas Mann, Anatole France, Conan Doyle) and religious authorities (the Archbishop of Canterbury) protested vehemently. In 1909 Yudl Rosenberg (1859–1935) published in Poland a storybook, purportedly ancient, entitled “The Mira-

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mentary on it and were the first to use the word *golem* for this kind of creature. In the Christian world too, interest was great and the name given was *homunculus*.

132 There are numerous literary and critical works on this subject and I don't want to take coals to Newcastle! *Česká pozice*, Úterý, 18. listopadu 2014, announces a marionette performance in New York by Vít Hořejš (held Dec. 4, 2014 at La MaMa theatre).

133 Kafka wrote one page about the creation of the golem, cf. “Aufzeichnungen aus dem Jahre 1916”, in: *Tagebücher 1910–1923 (Gesammelte Werke)*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, p. 363. In her book *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture 1808–2008* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), Cathy S. Gelbin mentions the short story “Das Stadtwappen” (The City Coat of Arms, 1920) as alluding to the golem, p. 89.

134 The Maharal works openly in a washing trough, like a washerwoman, and with anger. Everybody can step in to feel and lick the “bitter” clay, a way of swallowing/learning the unknown: “Bitter, bitter, das ist das hauptsächlichste Wort. Wie will ich eine schwingende Geschichte aus Bruchstücken zusammenlöten?” This reminds old legends where knowledge — the seventy languages and those of animals and plants (cf. *Mayse bukh*, op. cit., Nr. 143) — is swallowed or licked. At school, the Hebrew letters were smeared with honey so that the young boys could associate the sweetness of the honey with the learning of the Hebrew alphabet.

135 Cf. Gershom Scholem, “The Idea of the Golem,” in: *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York: 1965, pp. 158–204.

136 A year later a book appeared in Strassburg, which was German at the time. Cf. Max Sulzberger: *L'affaire de Tizza-Eslar*. Strasbourg: C. Mucquardt, 1883.

cles of the MaHaRal” (Hebrew *Nifla’ot Maharal*, Yiddish *Nifloes Maharal*).<sup>137</sup> Rosenberg pretended to have found an old manuscript at the library in Metz, written by none other than Isaak Ben Samson Katz (d. 1624), the Maharal’s son-in-law. One suspects that Yudl Rosenberg knew Weisel’s stories, since the *Sippurim* had been translated into Yiddish and published in 1857. In Rosenberg’s bestselling storybook, the author, a Hasidic scholar and a specialist of Kabbalah, wrote a story in which the Maharal, born during the Seder of Pessah, and the Golem, an alchemic Paracelsian creature consisting of the four elements (fire, air, water, earth: p. 13), have a shared mission. Chajim Bloch<sup>138</sup> translated Rosenberg into German, usurping Rosenberg’s fame without mentioning him.<sup>139</sup> In Yudl Rosenberg’s version, the Maharal is invested with cabalistic knowledge and power enabling him to bring to life a clay figure, the *golem*, which will be in charge of thwarting plots against the Jews, thus protecting them from the accusation of ritual murder:

“The Maharal used the Golem only to save the Jews from trouble. And through the Golem he accomplished many marvels. He used him principally to fight against Blood Libel, which at the time hung over the Jews and brought them much trouble.”<sup>140</sup>

The resort to the Maharal as golem-creator is not fortuitous at all. The stories about Blood Libel run through the storybook like a leitmotif, and each story is a variation of this devastating type of historical event occurring in the 16<sup>th</sup>, but also in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The golem is materialized, externalized counter-violence in response to the institutionalized violence of Christian society. Jews are saved either by the cabalistic knowledge of the Maharal or by the golem, a mighty fighter disguised as a non-Jew who captures enemies and brings them to the city hall to be judged. It would be worth making a detailed comparison between Rosenberg and Leivick, who seems to have known Yudl Rosenberg’s stories and to have taken over the idea of a strong masculine defender, a Zionist national figure, in his dramatic poem:<sup>141</sup> “Leivick’s innovation was to make the Golem fight for the freedom of the Jewish people,

137 Yudl Rosenberg: *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague*. Translated from the Hebrew and edited with an introduction and notes by Curt Leviant. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. (Original work: R. Yidel Rosenberg, *Nifla’ot Maharal*, Piotrków — Warsaw: Zeilingold, 1909.)

138 Chajim Bloch: *Der Prager Golem, von seiner „Geburt“ bis zu seinem „Tod“*. Wien: Österreichische Wochenschrift, 1917.

139 Cf. Klaus S. Dawidowicz: *Die Kabbala: eine Einführung in die Welt der jüdischen Mystik und Magie*. Wien: Böhlau 2009, p. 234.

140 Cf. Rosenberg: 1909: 16, Mayse 11: “Tsu vos hot der Maharal benutst dem goylem: Der Maharal hot benutst dem goylem nur matsil tsu zayn yuden fun tsores. Un er hot dorkh dem goylem bevizen fil oyses-umofsim. Am maynstens hot er ehm banutst tsu shtrayten gegen dem aliles dam, vos hot in yene tsayten shtark gehersht iber yuden, un hot zey gebrenst fil tsores.”

141 Eli Rozik: *Jewish Drama & Theatre: From Rabbinical Intolerance to Secular Liberalism*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013, p. 176.





in the contemporary spirit of nationalism, which conformed to Zionist ideology, and particularly to the artistic policy of the Habima Theatre".<sup>142</sup>

Born in Minsk (Belarus), Leivick came from a traditional Jewish family.<sup>143</sup> He attended a *yeshiva* (Jewish academy) for seven years. In 1905, though, he joined the *Bund*, a Jewish socialist movement favoring Jewish self-defence and fighting to overthrow the anti-Semitic tsarist aristocracy. Arrested in 1906, Leivick reasserted in court his revolutionary commitment; convicted, he was sentenced to jail followed by lifetime exile in Siberia and forced labor. He spent four years in prison and suffered torture there. Released, he endured a four-month march in a column of chained convicts from Moscow to Siberia. Fortunately, he was able to flee from the penal colony and escape to New York. There he became a representative of the modernist poets *Di Yunge*. While in the USA, he wrote about the upheavals in his former homeland.

One of the innate markers of Yiddish literature is its messianic dimension, both literal and figurative and heightened during times of persecution and war. In his early dramatic work Leivick uses this dimension as an appropriated metaphor, and in the *Golem* he takes it up again. There is a profound connection between *The Chains of the Messiah* (1908), written in Hebrew after the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905 (Yiddish translation: 1939), and the *Golem*, written after the successful 1917 Revolution. Several motifs resonate already in *The Chains of the Messiah*: "First the yearning for Redemption (*ge'ule*); second the tragic drama of the Redemption; third the wish to hasten the Messiah's coming [...]; fourth rebellion".<sup>144</sup> Leivick's dramatic poems on Messianic Redemption are also dramas on Revolution, because the Redeemer is also a Revolutionary. The messianic age is valid not only for Jews but for the entire world. In 1932 Leivick writes *Di ge'ule komedye* ("The Comedy of Redemption"), the last piece of his "Trilogy" and a kind of sequel to the *Golem*. For him, the world is not yet ready for the Messiah; because humankind is inhuman, darkness still overcomes light and Gog and Magog reign unchallenged.

The *Golem* is an expressionist dramatic poem characterized by complexity, refraction and metamorphosis. The abyss of the human soul, the acting out of sexual impulses (the golem kisses Dvoyrel in public and expresses his desire for her in the cave), split personality (Maharal/golem, golem/Messiah), the multiplication of personalities and reduction of characters: all this and more make the poem a kind of puzzle whose pieces the reader has to put together him- or herself. With its accumulation of horrendous events — the accusation of ritual murder or Blood Libel, the Ukrainian pogroms, World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Civil War's massacres and millions of dead — the poem has to be put in a wider historical context than the

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<sup>142</sup> In 1925 the play was performed in Moscow in Hebrew translation. The Yiddish premiere took place only in 1929 in Cracow, Poland. For the numerous subsequent performances, cf. Zalmen Zylbertsvayg: *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, Bd. 2. Warsaw: Libris, 1934, pp. 1059–1075. Online: <http://www.archive.org/stream/nybc201090#page/n2/mode/2up> (22.6.2018).

<sup>143</sup> For a detailed and critical biography of Leivick, cf. Shmuel Niger: *H. Leyvik 1888–1948*. Toronto, Kanade: Gershom Pomerantz Esay Bibliotek, 1951.

<sup>144</sup> Shmuel Niger 1951: 172.



17<sup>th</sup> century alone. In the middle, there is a key piece that illuminates the entire poem. It is a summary of centuries of anti-Semitism in the person of Tadeush, a priest who “organizes” ritual murder followed by massacres and whose virulent monologue is adorned with the usual clichés. Upon the Jewish idea of Messianic Redemption, Leivick superimposes the Christian yearning for Redemption from the Jews. This is why Tadeush throws out Jewish beggars and cripples — swindlers all in his eyes — from his tower in the ruined castle where they are staying. Speaking in the name of the Church and of his religious community, he explains that the Jews have no one to blame but themselves for their persecution. In a word: the very sight of them incites hate and renders peace and freedom impossible:

*Undzer harts vil r u und fr i d n.*

*Vil o p r u e n fun aykh, derleyzn zikh fun aykh...*

*Ir leygt oyf undzer kop, oyf undzere gevisns (113)*

“Our hearts want peace and freedom / They want to rest from you, to be redeemed from you... / You lie on our heads, on our conscience.”

Driven by violent rage, Christians will continue waging war on Jews until their final redemption from them. *Derleyzn*, redeem, occurring twice, is a strong symbol of religious salvation:

*Mir veln tsindn shayterhoifns mer un mer,*

*Biz vanen ir vet undz fun aykh derleyzn (id.)*

“We will light stakes more and more / Until we are redeemed from you.”

The monologue is an indictment of the Jews and an exhortation to murder:

*Mir hobn aykh geroydef; veynik nokh — Mir veln mer!*

*Mir veln undzer benkenish nokh ru un fridn*

*Nokh guts un libshaft shtiln nor in ayer blut” (id.)*

“We have been persecuting you; it’s too little — we want more! / We want to soothe our yearning for peace and freedom / For good and love only in your blood.”

How premonitory these verses are! And how right the Maharal was to create the golem. Tadeush points out scornfully that the Jews do not defend themselves. He reproaches the Jews’ passivity:

*...Vos makht ir nit keyn oypshtand oyf undz*

*Vi mir oyf aykh, mit fakeln un hek? — (114)*

“Why are you not rebelling against us / As we do against you, with torches and axes?”

Tadeush goes on to accuse the Jews of not wanting to acknowledge their crime, which is to drink Christian blood at Passover. There is a gradation in the accusation, because Jews were accused of using blood for making unleavened bread, but not of drinking



it. After this incitement to hatred, which shows that the only Messiah who will master the situation is the Messiah ben Joseph, the fighting one who has to overcome the enemies of Israel, the “powerful” Tadeush is frightened to death by the strange steps he hears. He and the monk accompanying him try to flee like cowards, invoking God the merciful, but they are beaten and thrown out the window. The golem, who promised the Maharal not to kill them, seems to follow Tadeush’s advice in hitting back!

The monologue reinforces the poem’s crux and places it front and center: the dilemma between Jewish non-violence and non-Jewish violence. Before Passover, the Maharal sends the golem as a spy through the alleyways of the Jewish Quarter to catch the conspirators; in order not to be recognized, he is disguised as a *goy*, wearing non-Jewish clothes tightened by a rope with which he will catch them and bring them to the town hall to be sentenced. The antithesis passivity vs. hitting back, self-defense and survival is metaphorically signified by the struggle between darkness and light, apocalypse and rebirth.

Leivick was looking for a new way of reflecting on the hurly burly and chaos of the world. Thus he uses nonlinear discourse and verticality of movement (up to the castle and down to the underground). The poem is based on antinomies like silence and hasty speech, emotional utterance breaking the flow of dialogue sometimes reduced to interjection, single words without syntactic context, shouting, snatches, repetition *ad absurdum* and breathlessness. Rhythm plays an important role and can be seen in connection with the traditional klezmer or jazz music then just entering literature in the USA.<sup>145</sup>

Dreams, the perverters of time and space, are another privileged language. The oneiric dimension of the poem establishes a bridge between the Biblical Joseph — the golem is called Yossele — and Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams (Traumdeutung, 1900)*. Dreams — mostly nightmares — play a major role throughout the poem, mixing and mingling characters, times and places and thus allowing the unconscious to emerge. They foretell the future, they inspire terror, they make unsuspected connections visible — the rabbi and the golem are one and the same person, says the golem to the Maharal who during the whole poem is busy keeping the golem at arm’s length, as if a complete stranger. He is always shocked when he hears his “creature’s” dreams. In his dreams, the golem endorses the fate of the Jews: he is the object of humiliation, of mockery. He is attacked and buried alive, but the rabbi’s granddaughter saves him. Everybody in the Jewish community rejects him, and the rabbi has the power of life and death over him. The golem didn’t want to come into the world. He wanted to stay a lifeless heap of clay at the riverside:

*Ikh bin gekumen warnen dikh. Bashaf mikh nit,  
Nit nem mikh fun mayn ruikayt avek (14)  
[...]  
Tsu vos ikh vel nor tsuleygn mayn hant,  
oyf shtoyb un ash tsheshotn vet es vern... — (id.)*

<sup>145</sup> Even in Europe, ever since Kafka introduced the jazz trumpet at the end of his novel *America* or, even more apropos, in *The Man who Disappeared (Der Verschollene)*. *Verschollen* refers to a sound which has faded away or a person who has disappeared in war.

*Nit bayt mir oys mayn finsternish, mayn shtilkayt  
oyf dem geroysh fun gasn un fun mentshn* (15)

“I came to warn you. Do not create me, / Take me not from my repose [...] / Upon whatever I will put my hand, / it will turn into dust and ashes ...- / Exchange not my darkness, my stillness / for the noise of alleyways and people.”

But it is not dreams alone which allow a different reading. In the cave — in the depths of the unconscious — the golem and the Messiah speak the same words, because they are one and the same person, says the golem. The golem is clairvoyant like the rabbi: they cannot be separated. The poem consists of eight scenes, from the golem’s creation to his destruction. The time has not yet come for Messiah ben David to appear unexpectedly as a Young Beggar whom the Maharal sends away and who represents the Maharal’s wish to induce Redemption. But the Maharal believes in a strong Messiah, with fists and an axe (the golem), the one he created with cruelty in his eyes (19), the one who spreads terror and, in the end, acts like a tornado. Here we find a parallel to Leopold Weisel’s *Golem*. Going crazy, he breaks windows with his axe and jumps into the street:

- *Der meshores der goylem...mit a hak.*

- *Shoyn tsveyen ibern kop getrofn*

- *Er makht khorev Prog!*

- *Er shlydert hayzer!* (241)

“The servant, the golem...with an axe / Already he has struck ... on the head / He destroys Prague! / He hurls houses!”

the people say to the Maharal. The difference is that in Weisel’s story, the golem destroys only material things, whereas in Leivick’s poem he turns against the people he is supposed to defend — and is conscious of his terrible deed. Another difference is the golem’s love of the Maharal, evident throughout the poem but not expressed explicitly. Leivick presents the golem’s rage as a consequence of this unrequited love. Read nowadays, the *Goylem* is a terrifying anticipation of the *shoah* in a prophetic vision.

Each of the eight scenes has a title<sup>146</sup> and is like a picture shedding light or darkness on the characters and establishing new reactions between them. The most enigmatic character is the golem, who is mute or talkative, sleeps deeply or is fully awake, is frightening or reassuring, is the same or another, is obedient or rebellious — he wants to slip out of his skin, he aspires to leave the darkness and to stand in the light. He goes through metamorphoses. The main characters have a *Doppelgänger* in form of a shadow<sup>147</sup> or ghost visible only to themselves (cf. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*). Apart

146 1. *Leym* — *Clay*; 2. *Vent* — *Walls* (27–47); 3. *Durkh finsternish* — *Across darkness* (49–85); 4. *Bettler* — *Beggars* (87–119); 5. *Nicht gerufene* — *Unbidden* (121–134); 6. *Antplekungen* — *Revelations* (135–169); 7. *In heyl* — *In the cave* (171–214); 8. *Di letste shlikhes* — *The last mission* (215–254).

147 Cf. B. Rivkin: “Der shotn vos geyt faroy’s”, in: *H. Leyvik: zayne lider un dramatishe verk*. Buenos-Aires: Farlag “Yidbukh”, 1955, pp. 175–182.



from the cabbalistic body of thought (creation of the golem), the poem appeals to the Hasidic belief in the hidden righteous called *Tsadikim* and known as the *Lamed-vovnikes* (36 righteous), usually poor craftsmen, thanks to whom the world will be saved and the Messiah will come. As a woodcutter and water carrier, the golem belongs to them; as Yossele, the name the Maharal gave him, he reinforces the messianic dimension of the drama: he recalls the Messiah ben Joseph in post-Biblical Scripture who wages war against the forces of evil represented by the enemies of Israel. He will be killed, but he proclaims the Messiah ben David. The latter appears in the poem as a young beggar, together with an old beggar, the prophet Elijah. The young beggar feels out of place and arrives unexpectedly, hoping to be needed and heard. But the Maharal tells him that his time has not yet come and sends both beggars away. In a later scene, the young beggar, this time enchained,<sup>148</sup> is thrown into the dark cave and there meets the golem, the “only Messiah”; during their dialogue, the young beggar repeats the golem’s words, because he says that he and the golem are one. Not only poor craftsmen, but also disabled people and beggars speak in the poem. Their presence onstage shows Leivick’s interest in social, ethical and national issues and recalls Peretz’s Hasidic stories<sup>149</sup> and his great play *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (“A Night in the Old Marketplace”, 1907).<sup>150</sup>

The *Golem*,<sup>151</sup> surely Leivick’s most impressive work,<sup>152</sup> was written between 1917 and 1920 concurrently with the “Four Pogrom Poems”.<sup>153</sup> Many Yiddish writers, like the Russian-Jewish poets Kvitko, Bergelson and Markish,<sup>154</sup> tried to find their voice, and many painters sought a palette for the pogroms in their work, so for example Issachar Ber Ryback (1897- 1935)<sup>155</sup> and Marc Chagall.<sup>156</sup> In the *Golem*, Leivick lets his character Tankhum speak, a father who lived through a pogrom on Passover and lost his son, a young man who had his limbs chopped off and had an eye put out. The fa-

148 Cf. Leivick’s early drama in Hebrew: *Di keytn fun Meshiekh* (1909), later in Yiddish (“The Chains of the Messiah”, 1939).

149 “Oyb nisht nokh hekher” (“If Not Higher”), in: *Khsidish. Ale verk*, Bd. IV-V, pp. 98–102; “Bontsyeh Shvayg” (“Bontsche the Silent”), in: *Dertseylungen, mayselekh, bilder. Ale verk*, Bd. II. New York: CYCO 1947, pp. 412–420.

150 In: *Dramatische verk. Ale verk*, Bd. VI-VII. New York: CYCO, 1947, pp. 181–280.

151 For a detailed analysis and contextualization of the poem, cf. Pao-hsiang Wang: “Necessary Monster: H. Leiv[i]ck’s Drama *The Golem*”, in: *Journal of Theater Studies* 6 (July 2010), pp. 1–26.

152 The poem has been compared to Goethe’s *Faust* and to Dante’s and Milton’s *Inferno*.

153 Cf. Shmuel Niger 1951: 147–168.

154 Cf. David G. Roskies: *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1999.

155 Issachar Ber Ryback: *Pogrom*, 1918. The artist and sculptor painted eight impressive aquarelles depicting pogroms in the Ukraine; the exhibition *Berlin Transit* (2012) made them available to the public for the first time since 1924, in: *Berlin Transit. Jüdische Migranten aus Osteuropa in den 1920er Jahren*. Jüdisches Museum Berlin: Wallstein, 2012, pp. 39–41.

156 Cf. the Jewish Museum exhibition *Chagall: Love, War, and Exile*, including a painting called *Pogrom*.





ther, who carries his son with him in the Chariot of Fire,<sup>157</sup> resurrects him every year at Passover (p. 74); but immediately after, the son relives the same pogrom over and over again as a “repetition compulsion”.<sup>158</sup> This recalls Jesus’s suffering on the cross and his resurrection, told over and over every year.

In the poem there is also a character called The Man with the Cross (p. 202), appearing with the Young Beggar, the Messiah ben David. In the 1920s Jewish artists saw themselves as Jesus on the Cross, emphasizing his Jewishness.<sup>159</sup> Uri Zvi Grinberg wrote a poem called “Before the Cross/INRI”, for which he was condemned in Poland as an iconoclast and blasphemer.<sup>160</sup> In this poem Grinberg soliloquizes with his brother Jesus the Jew, who like him suffers; but forgetting his Jewishness with the passing of the centuries, he witnesses, now petrified and distraught, the anti-Jewish pogroms perpetrated in his name. Chagall followed the same inspiration and painted numerous paintings of Jesus on the cross; the most famous one is *The White Cross*.<sup>161</sup> Tankhum’s son, who suffers between resurrection and massacre, chariot and pogrom, shows that Leivick raises the issue of the coming of the Messiah, and through this reliving he stresses the cyclic and transtemporal character of the pogrom, illustrating Nietzsche’s theory of the Eternal Return. Tankhum himself, at the end of the poem, will fall victim to the golem’s axe: “Fargosn blut — / Yidish blut —” (“Spilled blood — / Jewish blood”, p. 241) he says to the Maharal after having been savagely attacked by the golem whom the Maharal had created to protect the Jews. And he adds: “Farshteynt im” (“stone him”, *ibid.*) In an early dialogue with the Maharal, Tankhum spoke of revenge. He and his son embody martyrdom. The idea of repetition is supported by structural features that make up the framework but also are literary elements functioning like intertextual quotations. For example, the settings — castle ruin (= Prague) with its five towers, the subterranean realm beneath with its secret, labyrinthine passages, the cave — are literary motifs from medieval and Romantic literature and the Gothic novel.<sup>162</sup> They are connected to uncanniness and angst; there, evil people and evil spirits are on the lookout. There indeed Tadeush and the monk hatched their plot; the latter kills a Christian and takes his blood in two bottles to the synagogue, but the Maharal who is clairvoyant sees through the plot (on Passover

157 Cf. Ezekiel 1:1–3:27.

158 Sigmund Freud: “Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through)”, 1914; “Jenseits des Lustprinzips (Beyond the Pleasure Principle)”, 1920.

159 Cf. Matthew B. Hoffman: *From Rebel to Rabbi. Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007; Neta Stahl: *Other and Brother: Jesus in the 20th Century Jewish Literary Landscape*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

160 Uri Zvi Grinberg: “Farn tseylem”, in: *Albatros 2* (Warsaw 1922), pp. 3–4.

161 In the abovementioned Chagall exhibition, 20 paintings and works on paper depict Jesus. Though Chagall witnessed a pogrom in Vitebsk when he was a student, his paintings were made later in a similar political context: *White Crucifixion* (1938), *The Artist with Yellow Christ* (1938), *Persecution* (1941), *Descent from the Cross* (1941), *Study for The Yellow Crucifixion* (1942), *Apocalypse en Lilas: Capriccio* (1945/47), *In Front of the Picture* (1968–71).

162 Sex and violence in the Golem are further such motifs. Cf. Matthew Lewis: *The Monk*. London: Michael Trayler, 2007.



they *always* accuse the Jews of ritual murder, and can “prove” it) and sends the golem to foil it, but not to kill them, which however the golem does, reacting to vague impulses of independence.

The play is themed around “Blood”: Blood Libel, bottles of blood, Jewish blood, Tadeush wants to spill Jewish blood, there is blood on the golem’s axe, Jewish blood spilled in the end by him who knows what he did (pp. 241–242). A strange episode happens in the cave. The Young Beggar — the Messiah ben David — and The Man with the Cross are there, exhausted and thirsty. They want to drink. The golem gives them the bottles of blood. Recognizing this, they are horrified and neither wants to drink even a drop (pp. 201–204). This recalls the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation; in the Eucharist, the bread and wine are changed in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

**26** While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

**27** And he [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you,

**28** for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 20: 26–28).<sup>163</sup>

Blood is the word the Maharal inculcates repeatedly into the golem’s head, adjuring him not to forget it: “Dos vort heyst blut” (“The word is blood”, pp. 168–169); this is also the word the Maharal repeats in the end, accusing himself of having impatiently attempted to induce Redemption, although it was against the order of things (“seyder haoylem”). He wanted to put an end to the suffering of his people:

*Ikh hob gevolt farmaydn blut un blut fargosn* (243)  
 “I wanted to avoid blood and have spilled blood.”

It is a deeply ethical problem the Maharal deals with in the dramatic poem. To fight against injustice, one increases injustice. This theme has been depicted by Goethe in his play *Götz von Berlichingen* and by Heinrich von Kleist in his novella *Michael Kohlhaas*. Both characters finally admit that the injustice they caused is more important than the one they had to suffer. Is this Leivick’s message, the message of a man who fought himself and had to suffer for taking action? Did Leivick in his poem “convey the tragic failure of the dream of a new world that would allow for the emergence of a new Jewish type”?<sup>164</sup>

<sup>163</sup> This led to another accusation, the Desecration of the Host, which is not present in the poem but which led to massacres of Jews in Prague, accused of stabbing the Host with an awl, making Jesus bleed and thus killing him again. Cf. note 33.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Cathy S. Gelbin: *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture 1808–2008*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011, p. 89.

B.IV.B. KAFKA AND THE YIDDISH THEATER<sup>165</sup>

In his personal longing and individual quest for Jewishness, Kafka turned to Eastern Europe and found in Eastern Jewish culture an antidote to the emptiness of his Western Jewish background. The Yiddish theater he saw in Prague and Berlin was a revelation.<sup>166</sup> The actors and actresses, above all Yitskhok Löwy and Mrs. Tschissik, showed him a “natural” language: lively, colorful, exuberant, tragic, full with laughter and tears, mimic and gesture, a soul- and body-language.<sup>167</sup> Kafka found a community of spirit and joy of life. Yitskhok Löwy introduced him to Yiddish literature, to Hasidism and mysticism, to the values of Eastern European Jewry and to Jewish pride based on Jewish history. Starting with Kafka’s *Diaries* and the investigation of Yiddish literature mentioned there, certain critics have sought to establish parallels between Yiddish theater and the author’s literary oeuvre,<sup>168</sup> and plays seen by Kafka have been transliterated into the Latin alphabet and provided with glossaries to make them easier for non-initiates to read and understand.<sup>169</sup> There are also abbreviated versions of these plays in German prepared for the Berlin Board of Censors.<sup>170</sup>

Kafka experienced Yiddish theater for the first time in 1910 in Prague, together with his friend Max Brod. In 1911 and 1912 he regularly attended Yiddish plays at the Café Savoy, a shabby venue ironically called by Löwy “the temple of culture”. There Kafka saw some 20 plays and attended recitals of popular song and poetry readings. There, women played men’s roles. What kind of roles were they? Kafka didn’t know, but was free to let his imagination roam. Far from getting bogged down in the situations they created, the actors had a freedom of facial expression and a physical dexterity which fascinated him. It was in those days that Kafka wrote his most important works, the short story *Das Urteil* (“The Judgement”) and the novella *Die Verwandlung* (“The Metamorphosis”), and began revising his novel *Der Verschollene* (“The Man who Disappeared”, aka *Amerika*). He made friends with actors from Lemberg, the capital of Galicia. This ancient province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was home to a large Yiddish-speaking population. Kafka’s *Diaries*<sup>171</sup> bear witness to the sympathy he felt

165 This chapter is based on the following article: Astrid Starck: “L’influence du théâtre yidich sur Kafka dans son roman *Der Verschollene*”, in: *Nouveaux Cahiers d’Allemand*, Université de Nancy, February 1997, pp. 17–26.

166 Franz Kafka: *Tagebücher 1910–1923*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983 (October 1911–February 1912).

167 On the influence of Yiddish on Kafka’s oeuvre, cf. David Suchoff: *Kafka’s Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

168 Evelyn Thorton-Beck: *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater. Its Impact on his Work*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971; cf. also Iris Bruce: “The Yiddish Theatre”, in: *Kafka and Cultural Zionism. Dates in Palestine*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007, pp. 34ff.

169 Kazuo Ueda: *Transkription der jiddischen Texte, die Kafka sah, in die lateinische Schrift mit Anmerkungen*. 4 vols. Fukuoka: Kôchi University, 1992–2000.

170 Peter Sprengel: *Scheunenviertel-Theater. Jüdische Schauspieltruppen und jiddische Dramatik in Berlin (1900–1918)*. Berlin: Fannei & Walz Verlag, 1995.

171 Franz Kafka: *Tagebücher 1910–1923*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983. All subsequent quotations have been taken from this edition.



toward Yiddish actors, the enthusiasm he felt for their theatricality<sup>172</sup> and his propensity for Jews of Eastern Europe. Kafka identified with them to a large extent,<sup>173</sup> which was incomprehensible to most of his friends and family.<sup>174</sup> It was thanks to actors from Lemberg that Kafka discovered a Judaism which his father had been incapable of passing on to him.<sup>175</sup> Via his education, Kafka belonged to a Western Judaism well on its way to assimilation and for which Jewish rites and customs were devoid of meaning. The situation was quite different with Eastern Judaism, still deeply attached to roots which, although subject to criticism, were nevertheless known. The gulf between Western and Eastern Judaism was a problem discussed ardently at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and gave rise to a number of important publications.<sup>176</sup> The Jewish world was in a state of ferment. In the wake of the Enlightenment, Western European Jews rid themselves of all that which smacked of ghetto, and a large number converted. In Eastern Europe, Jews sought national identity either through creation of a European “Yiddishland” and official recognition of Yiddish as a language (obtained finally — thanks to the efforts of Nathan Birnbaum — at the Conference of Czernowitz in 1908) or through return to Palestine (the Zionism of Theodore Herzl) and revival of Hebrew (the life work of Ben Yehuda).

Kafka’s first contact with a living Judaism took place in the Yiddish theater; not until later did he occupy himself more intensely with Zionism. Modern Yiddish theater, proceeding from the ancient Purim plays,<sup>177</sup> originated in Romania in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its founder, Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908), a native of Russia, had worked under extremely difficult and precarious conditions before immigrating to the United States. The author of some 60 plays, Goldfaden was actor, musician, stage-manager, playwright and director in one.<sup>178</sup> He was bound by official

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172 Such actors included Kafka’s friend Itzhak Löwy, Madame Tschissik — of whom he was enamored — and numerous others mentioned in his *Diaries*.

173 “Das Mitleid, das wir mit diesen Schauspielern haben...ist eigentlich nur das Mitleid über das traurige Schicksal vieler edler Bestrebungen und vor allem der unseren” (“The pity we feel for these actors [...] is in fact the regret we feel for the sad fate of many noble aspirations, above all our own”). In: Franz Kafka: *Tagebücher 1910–1923*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983 [October 22nd, 1911, p. 83]. Löwy himself became an actor against his father’s wishes.

174 Above all his father, who couldn’t stand Kafka’s familiarity with such “vermin”.

175 “(Ich) verstand nicht, wie Du mit dem Nichts von Judentum, über das Du verfügtest, mir Vorwürfe deshalb machen konntest, daß ich...nicht ein ähnliches Nichts auszuführen mich anstrengte” (“[I] didn’t understand how the quantum of Judaism known to you could suffice to reproach me for my effort to live out a similar quantum”). In: Franz Kafka: “Brief an den Vater”. In: *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*. *Gesammelte Werke*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983. p. 144.

176 See e.g. the monthly *Ost und West* (Berlin 1901–1922) and Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude* (Berlin 1916–1924).

177 The *purimshpil*, comparable to the *Fastnachtspiel* (Carnival play), depicts the story of Esther who saves the Jews from annihilation at the hands of Haman, a minister of King Ahasverus.

178 Goldfaden’s oeuvre was varied. His earliest plays were comedies in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Following the Russian pogroms of 1881, he wrote plays calling into question



censure and, where Yiddish was prohibited, was obliged to perform certain plays in “German”.<sup>179</sup> On October 14<sup>th</sup> 1911, Kafka saw *Shulamis* (1880), a historic operetta which, in his eyes, merited being called an opera. Based on a Talmudic legend,<sup>180</sup> its language recalls that of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>181</sup> Goldfaden made the Sulamith legend into a melodrama with chorus and intermezzi to be sung and danced. Above all, Kafka admired Goldfaden’s musical taste,<sup>182</sup> and we know that music plays an important role in *Der Verschollene* (*Amerika*). Kafka’s love of Yiddish theater did not blind him, though, and he did not hesitate to criticize the poor staging of a play. This was the case regarding both Goldfaden’s *Bar Kokhba* (1882), a play dramatizing nationalistic-Zionistic ideals (Rabbi Akiba, taken by some for the Messiah, leads Jewish resistance against the Romans) and Abraham Sharkansky’s (1869–1907) *Kol Nidre* dramatizing the Inquisition and the Marranos — Jews who, in order to remain in Spain, converted while continuing to practice Judaism in secret.<sup>183</sup> Attributes of this incognito, disguised Judaism can be seen as characteristic of Kafka’s oeuvre.

We shall forego enumerating all the plays seen by Kafka, the list of which is readily available.<sup>184</sup> Suffice it to evoke Yosef Latayner (1853–1935),<sup>185</sup> whose play *Di seydernakht* (“The Eve of Passover”) depicts the kidnapping of a Jewish child by a Christian serv-

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a frantic assimilation and extolling ideas, taken quite literally, of the Enlightenment. His late plays dramatize nationalistic-Zionist ideals. Cf. Helmut Dinse, *Sol Liptzin: Einführung in die jiddische Literatur*. Stuttgart: Sammlung Metzler, vol. 165, 1978.

- 179 Cf. *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*. Vol. 2: *Alveltliker yidisher kultur-kongres*. New York, 1958, pp. 77–87.
- 180 Tractate Ta’anith 8a, Babylonian Talmud. In Goldfaden’s play, Sulamith is saved by Absalon, who pulls her out of a desert well she has fallen into while trying to drink. They promise themselves to each other, with a wild cat and the well as witness. Sulamith returns to her father in Bethlehem, while Absalon returns to Jerusalem, where he marries the rich and beautiful Abigail who bears him two children. One is torn to pieces by a wild cat, the other falls into a well. Only then does Absalon remember his vow. Full of remorse, he leaves Abigail and returns to Sulamith who has feigned insanity to avoid marrying the suitors proposed by her father. Absalon and Sulamith marry. This legend is contained in the *Mayse bukh* (nr. 101), the collection of medieval stories and legends first printed in Yiddish in Basel (1602). The legend of Sulamith is entitled there “Das einer sol haltin was er zu sagt das lernen mir es dor [...] fun einer gruben und fun einem wislein” (“That one should keep a promise we learn from a well and a weasel”): the cat is replaced by a weasel.
- 181 See ch. 7.
- 182 Kafka: “Goldfaden, verheiratet, Verschwender auch in großer Not. An hundert Stücke. Gestohlene liturgische Melodien volkstümlich gemacht. Das ganze Volk singt sie” (“Goldfaden, married, spendthrift even in dire straits. About 100 plays. Liturgical melodies stolen and made into folksongs. Everyone sings them”). In: *Diaries*, October 23rd, 1911, p. 84.
- 183 Born in Lubave, Scharkansky emigrated to the United States. He was the author of poems, satire and plays.
- 184 Evelyn Tornton Beck, op. cit., pp. 214ff.; Kazuo Ueda, op. cit., pp. IVff.; Peter Sprengel, op. cit., p. 25.
- 185 Latayner was born in Jassy, Romania and died in New York. In his native country Latayner coauthored Yiddish plays with Goldfaden, whom he strove to imitate but never equaled.



ant<sup>186</sup> and an accusation of ritual murder — Kafka knew about the Beilis Affair<sup>187</sup> — and Yakob Gordin (1853–1909),<sup>188</sup> the playwright held by Kafka to be far superior to all others. One of Gordin’s plays, *Der vilder mentsh* (The Wild Man), written for the great actor Yakob Adler (1855–1926),<sup>189</sup> was staged in Prague by the playwright’s friend, Yitzkhok Löwy (1887–1942).<sup>190</sup> *Der vilder mentsh* tells the story of a man of humble spirit and his young stepmother Zelde. She has twisted his dotard father around her little finger and, together with her lover, pilfered all his wealth; the protagonist, in love with her, cannot master his instincts and ends up killing her. Kafka’s favorite play was *Got, mentsh un tayvl*. In *Got, mentsh un tayvl* Gordin retells the legend of Faust and his pact with Satan. Masik — the Yiddish Mephisto — wagers with God that, like Job, the extremely devout scribe Herschele Dubrovner will commit evil if tempted by a winning lottery ticket.<sup>191</sup> And indeed the old man allows himself to be corrupted. He abandons his wife, marries his young niece and mutates into a heartless, pitiless businessman. In the end, though, Dubrovner recognizes Masik’s true nature and, overwhelmed by remorse, hangs himself.

Latayner’s plays, with their predilection for false accusation, and Gordin’s morality plays do not lack comic moments. They portray the life of the *shtetl*, the Eastern European market village, and the problems which arose there due to the villagers themselves or due to the conditions imposed upon them as Jews. The humor of these vignettes is largely based upon paradox and unmasks the absurdity of their situation. It is a kind of self-irony verging on derision with a dose of optimism necessary for

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186 Child kidnapping for the purpose of forced conversion actually happened. In the Middle Ages such kidnappings were the stuff of legend, the most celebrated of which undoubtedly was that of the future Jewish Pope Elkhanaan, a story found also in the *Mayse bukh* (nr. 187). See also Joseph Sherman: *The Jewish Pope. Myth, Diaspora and Yiddish Literature*. Oxford: Legenda 2003.

187 *The Judgement, The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony* bear implicit witness to it. Cf. Iris Bruce: “The Spectre of Ritual Murder”, in: *Kafka and Cultural Zionism. Dates in Palestine*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007, pp. 57ff.

188 Born in Mirgorod (Russia), Gordin was a follower of the ideas of Tolstoy. In 1891 he immigrated to New York. In 1892 he staged his play *Di frayhayt* (“Freedom”), which was hugely successful. Together with the actor Jacob Adler, he managed a theater and adapted European plays such as Shakespeare’s *King Lear* for the Yiddish stage. His play *Sappho* thematized women’s rights and female emancipation. He was innovative and ahead of his time.

189 Adler had made his debut in Goldfaden’s theater company. In 1888 he emigrated to the United States and became a star of the Yiddish stage. He excelled in tragic roles.

190 Löwy was born in Warsaw to a poor and extremely devout family for whom the stage was tabu; he made his debut in Purim plays, the only kind of theater allowed. Unknown to his parents, he performed in Warsaw before leaving for Paris, where he became a professional actor. In addition to touring, he lived in Berlin and Budapest; he returned, though, to Warsaw and during the war years participated in the theater of the Ghetto. In 1942 he was murdered by the Nazis at Treblinka.

191 The winning lottery ticket is a leitmotif of Yiddish literature of the time. The *locus classicus* is the episode “Dos groyse gewins” (“Big Profit”) from *Tevye der milkhiker* (“Tevye the Milkman”) by Sholem Aleykhem.



survival and illustrated by the recurring phrase “Shver tsu zayn a yid!” (“It’s hard to be a Jew!”), denoting sadness and bitterness but also pride and chosenness. Kafka was seduced by these actors who played and sang as Jews for Jews,<sup>192</sup> who expressed themselves in a language which was their own and corresponded to their spirit and lifestyle.<sup>193</sup> Kafka felt a kind of symbiosis with the actors, even if he didn’t always understand everything they said in Yiddish. And given the minimalism of the stage and props used by the actors of the Café Savoy, the actors themselves loomed all the larger.<sup>194</sup> It is they who shall “furnish” the stage with their typical gestures inherited from Talmudic discourse, filling the available space and giving their acting weight, joining gesture to word and replacing word with gesture, with their extravagant costumes and epic, repetitive performance, where comedy and tragedy are cheek to jowl, where body — in its total participation via song and dance — becomes language, expression, challenge.<sup>195</sup> It is they who shall people *Der Verschollene (Amerika)*, a novel which at least in part seems to retrace the history of these marginal, barely tolerated actors performing on shabby European stages the very plays being presented luxuriously in America, the land where the playwrights now lived. Kafka speaks twice of Löwy getting chased off like a misfit by the manager of the Café Savoy:<sup>196</sup>

“Suddenly one sees Löwy, who’d seemed to have disappeared, shoved — with hands and maybe even knees — out the door by the headwaiter R. He’s supposed to have been simply thrown out.”<sup>197</sup>

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192 *Diaries*, October 5th, 1911. p. 61.

193 Kafka’s remarks about Yiddish contain more romanticism than linguistic reality. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the liberating, imaginative, even surrealistic role that Kafka conferred upon Yiddish as opposed to the German which weighed upon him like a yoke. Cf. “Rede über die jiddische Sprache”. In: *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande. Gesammelte Werke*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 306ff.

194 “The simple stage awaits the actors just as silently as we do. Three walls, one chair and a table shall suffice for all that is to transpire. Thus we, the audience, expect nothing from the stage and props, and all the more from the actors. Hence we are drawn in unresistingly as a voice sings from behind the wall. The play begins.” In: *Diaries*, October 6th, 1911. p. 67.

195 Frau Tschissik: “From the multiplicity of their true mimicry emerge time and again thrusts of the fist, gyration of the arm drawing to the body the convolutions of an invisible train, a posing of the extended fingers upon the breast. For artless mimicry suffices not. Their mimicry is not multifarious: a terrified glance at the antagonist, the search for an escape route from the tiny stage, a soft voice which only through imperceptible increments and inner resonance becomes heroic, the exaltation which — starting from the wide open face, continuing to the high forehead and on to the hair — permeates their very selves... the self-sufficiency in solo song unaccompanied by any instrument, the rising up in the face of adversity that forces the viewer to fret for the entire body — that and not much more was the entire repertory of their mimicry”. In: *Diaries*, October 22nd, 1911. p. 83.

196 One cannot help but recall Karl being chased off by the head page of the “Hotel Occidental”.

197 *Diaries*, October 14th, 1911, p. 75.



And later:

“Thus a headwaiter wanted to eject Löwy from the hall, while the doorman — a former brothel employee turned pimp — shouted the petite Tschissik down.”<sup>198</sup>

In those days, actors had a bad reputation in the eyes of the right-minded, and even more so *Jewish* actors from *Eastern Europe*, the provenance of all such immigrants. Kafka wondered if these actors and their plays would find favor in the eyes of his fiancée Felice Bauer.<sup>199</sup> What if there’s a technical malfunction and the curtain crashes down out of control? The whole theater company would be immediately condemned for its “scandalous comportment”.<sup>200</sup> Theirs was the same sort of fate accorded the unjustly maltreated heroes they sought to defend in their plays:

“Although the coffee house’s regular customers and employees love the actors [...] they *despise* them too<sup>201</sup> — just like in historical times! — as starvelings, itinerants, fellow *Jews*.”<sup>202</sup>

This perpetual rejection cut Kafka to the quick and resonates in his entire oeuvre. It corresponds to a choice made by the artist to struggle against the self-satisfied *mores* of bourgeois society. There is nothing nostalgic about Yiddish theater. On the contrary: with its minimalism, its repertory of gestures and its clamor for sentiment, Jewish theater shares the values of expressionist theater. The most celebrated director of Yiddish theater, Mikhl Vaykhert, was a contemporary and acquaintance of Max Reinhardt.<sup>203</sup>

Kafka chose America no doubt because many Jews had chosen it, but by no means did he regard it as Paradise. As in Yiddish literature, America shall be the land of the sweatshop, the pigeonhole garment atelier where one sweats blood and water — as witnessed to by the expression “fun shif in shklaf” (“from the ship into slavery”), referring to the passage from immigrant boat to hellhole — the land of insalubrious tenements in New York’s Lower East Side crashed in by disembarking immigrants,<sup>204</sup> a district traversed by Therese and her mother during a blizzard, the site of her suicide surrounded by bricks — a Ramses-like reminiscence of slavery

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., October 28th, 1911, p. 94.

<sup>199</sup> Franz Kafka: *Briefe an Felice*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982 [November 3rd, 1912, pp. 72ff.]

<sup>200</sup> A symptomatic fact of the novel is the disproportion of “crime” and punishment. Hence Karl, having left his lift for two minutes, has to run for his life.

<sup>201</sup> Note here the ambivalence, the double bind.

<sup>202</sup> *Diaries*, October 28th, 1911, pp. 93ff.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. Mikhl Waykhert: *Zikhroynes 1890–1918* (“Memoirs”). Vol. I. Tel Aviv: Farlag “Menora”, 1960, pp. 261–270.

<sup>204</sup> Cf. the novel by Sholem Ash, *Amerika* (1911), and the poem by Morris Rosenfeld, “Di likht ferkoiferin. A bild fun der oremer gas” (“The Light-Seller. Portrait of an Impoverished Alley”), read to Kafka by Yitzkhak Löwy. In: Kazuo Ueda, op. cit., pp. 197ff.



in Egypt.<sup>205</sup> Uncle Jacob's America serves only to illustrate a fallacious myth.<sup>206</sup> Karl, the hero of Kafka's novel, is by turns the young Jewish boy seduced by the Christian servant,<sup>207</sup> "Bar Kochba" the defender of the oppressed,<sup>208</sup> "Nakhuml" the employee liable to unlimited exploitation,<sup>209</sup> "Salmen" unjustly accused,<sup>210</sup> "Lemekh" subject to his stepmother's advances,<sup>211</sup> the vagabond under suspicion because lacking



205 Evelyn Beck sees an affinity between Moyshe Rikhter's play *Moyshe Khayit als gemaynderat* ("Moses Khayit as City Councillor") and Kafka's *Der Verschollene*. Thus Moyshe (Nakhuml's son) abandons a young, pregnant woman in Palestine and flees to the United States. But for him too America is no Eldorado. He endures poverty and the living conditions are those of Egypt. Is there a difference between Ramses and New York? In: op. cit., p. 128. The metaphor of Egyptian slavery is evoked in the Afro-American spiritual.

206 Regarding the choice of first name, one wonders if the millionaire actor Jakob Adler was decisive.

207 "Manchmal kniete sie in ihrem engen Zimmerchen neben der Küche und betete zu einem hölzernen Kreuz" ("Sometimes she got down on her knees in her little room next to the kitchen and prayed to a wooden cross"). In: *Der Verschollene*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994, p. 35.

In *Di seydnakht* ("The Eve of Passover"), a Christian servant kidnaps Karl in order that he be baptized. Raised in a Christian environment, Karl falls in love with Rachel, a young Jewish girl, who foregoes his love for her parents' sake — neither knowing that they are brother and sister. Later on, Karl's stepbrother Dimitri accuses Rachel's parents of killing in order to obtain blood. Karl shows up and the Christian servant confesses her crime. Karl and Rachel can now love one another as brother and sister.

208 Karl defends the coal trimmer, discriminated against because he is German. Cf. Kafka's remarks reported by Gustav Janouch: "'Juden und Deutsche haben vieles gemeinsam,' sagte Kafka... 'Sie sind strebsam, tüchtig, fleißig und gründlich verhaßt bei den anderen. Juden und Deutsche sind Ausgestoßene'" ("Jews and Germans have a lot in common", Kafka said... "They are ambitious, able, industrious and thoroughly hated by everyone else. Jews and Germans are pariahs"). In: *Das Kafka-Buch*, hg. Heinz Politzer. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980, p. 105.

209 Cf. note 38.

210 Cf. *Di seydnakht* ("The Eve of Passover"): False accusations of the "stall-master" and torture inflicted by the head porter leave Karl no chance of escape. The scene is especially cruel and condenses centuries of history.

211 Two parallels may be drawn here. Firstly, regarding Klara's struggle with Karl (p. 72): in *Di seydnakht* we find on the wall of Salmen Kohn's house (Rachel's father) a picture of Joseph and Potiphar and the following remark "Dovid, vi kumt in dayn hoys asa bild? A froy rangelt zikh mit a yungen man, un vi di froy zet oys, oysgelasn" ("David, how did such a picture get into your house? A woman wrestles with a young man, and she looks wanton"). In: Ueda, op. cit. Vol. I, pp. 8ff. Secondly, regarding Karl's calling Klara a "Katze, tolle Katze" (p. 73: "a cat, a mad cat"), in *Der wilder Mensch* "Lemekh" says: "Neyn, tate, nit keyn ketsele is zi, nur a kats, a groyse vays kats" ("No, mother, it isn't a kitten, it's a big white cat"). In: *ibid.*, p. 98.

The young Jewish-American girl who fights or boxes seems to be an ancillary theme. See the Yiddish film *Mizrekh un Mayrev* ("East and West"), shot in Vienna in 1923 by Sydney Goldin.



identification.<sup>212</sup> We see here intertextuality at work. There are also distortions: the music, never serene, always suggests non-fulfillment; Karl plays military music only, Brunelda is authorized to shout and scream only. But music is omnipresent, like a parallel language, a ‘maternal’ or ‘feminine’ *Ursprache* devoid of signification. There is no love story, whereas in the majority of plays seen by Kafka, love is the point of departure; be it happy or sad, it is to love that the stuff of operetta accretes. Kafka’s concept of woman is that current around the turn of century: she is mother or prostitute.<sup>213</sup> Now the mother, so to speak, is absent, and the women who are present — except for the chef-cook — try to seduce Karl. In this attempted seduction, however, one could see the assumption of a role inflicted upon women since Eve and which Kafka’s women appropriate as emancipatory language.<sup>214</sup> This would explain the omnipresence of an absent but perpetually subliminal sexuality.

The influence of Yiddish theater appears to converge with that of expressionist theater. Indeed, the themes of Yiddish theater — father-son conflict, the mother/prostitute dichotomy, expression (extreme gesticulation, incendiary discourse, absence of transition), atmosphere (theater or circus,<sup>215</sup> mime and its attitudes, music) — all that is to be found in *Der Verschollene* and its theatricality, if only because its scenes unfold in precise locations: the coal trimmer’s cabin, the captain’s office,<sup>216</sup> the country house, the Hotel Occidental, Brunelda’s room. Exactitude of place, however, is transgressed by the play of light and shadow which establishes a climate of insecurity and alienation. This atmosphere disappears at the end of the novel, where the women are transformed into “musician angels” who contemplate Karl, but with an eye which is amused rather than concupiscent.<sup>217</sup> Is the world, moreover, not turned upside down? And is it not men who are become drum-beating “demons”? This episode has been likened to the staging at the Café Savoy of the Prologue in Heaven in *Got, mentsh un tayvl*: perched on platforms, in long white robes, angels surround the Creator whom one does not see — portrayal of any kind is forbidden — but whose voice one hears accompanied by the sound of the shofar.<sup>218</sup> The angels extoll the natural order of the universe in which a place devolves to each of us.<sup>219</sup>

212 Sprengel says that a touring Jewish theater company was deported from Berlin for lack of identification.

213 A theme revisited by later dramatists such as Aharon Zeitlin (born 1898).

214 One recalls here the transgressive role of the prostitute in literature and expressionist opera. Brunelda exemplifies this in caricature. Her overflowing flesh constricts her and she becomes a heap of apples.

215 Brunelda makes one think of Miranda, the “fattest woman in the world” shown in the circus. Cf. Hilke Thode Arora: “Hagenbeck et les tournées européennes: l’élaboration du zoo humain”, in: *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales. 150 ans d’invention de l’autre*. Sous la direction de Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Sandrine Lemaire. Paris: La Découverte 2011, pp. 150–159 (chapitre 10).

216 It is in these two locations that Karl utters, as stage procedures, his asides.

217 We do not agree with the notion that the successive encounters with women are repeated seduction attempts. See Detlef Kremer: “Verschollen. Gegenwärtig”. In: *Franz Kafka. Text und Kritik*, ed. H. L. Arnold. München, 1994, p. 243.

218 The horn of the ram. Its sound announces the arrival of the Messiah.

219 Beck: op. cit. p. 126



Did Yiddish theater give birth to the “Nature Theater of Oklahoma” joined by Karl near the end of *Der Verschollene*?<sup>220</sup> One thinks too of Kafka’s sojourn at Jungborn, where guests, in symbiosis with nature, lived nude, did sports, danced and put on plays.<sup>221</sup> He seems to have been enthusiastic about this communal life. In fact we witness here the confluence of two ways of life, of two philosophies so to speak based on a *Weltanschauung* contrary to the norms of society. Thus Yiddish theater, in a language *non grata* from the start, is anti-establishment. Nudism, in Kafka’s view, arises as the antithesis of and alternative to industrialization and urban dehumanization. The last chapter of *Der Verschollene* seems to be simultaneously answer and overture, rehabilitation and transfiguration, and ultimate confrontation between the writer and the writing against which his characters hurl themselves. The text is his, but in order to live it must pass through others, in this particular case through the actors who breathe life and movement into it. And that is exactly what happens. As in Woody Allen’s *Purple Rose of Cairo*, where the hero exits the screen to live his life with an admirer in the cinema audience, Karl succeeds in escaping the yoke of letters thanks to an original inspiration liberated by the trumpets.<sup>222</sup> It is a true *tohu vabohu*, an indescribable cacophony, a sonorous chaos.<sup>223</sup> Music which, muted, makes its way toward all and against all, a path through the novel — behold, it reverberates in the skies, propagated by a multitude of giant women poised on pedestals so high that they would seem to be at the mercy of the least puff of wind:

“Hundreds of women, dressed in white robes and with angels’ wings on their backs, were poised on pedestals and blew into long gleaming golden trumpets.”  
(p. 297)

Their instability is only apparent. Karl is swallowed up in this thunderous universe to which he is welcome — he’s read it on the poster — and where he is promised a future. But the world he comes from is codified, it is a world which believes that *it* has to set the tone:

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220 Walter Sokel: *Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie. Zur Struktur seiner Kunst*. München 1964. p. 507. Sokel was one of the first to relate the Yiddish theater of Prague to the Nature Theater of Oklahoma.

221 It was at Jungborn (“Heimstätte und Musteranstalt für reines Naturleben” [“home and paradigm of a pure, natural life”]) that Kafka, as he wrote to Max Brod, worked out the project of his novel. Cf. Klaus Wagenbach: *Franz Kafka*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 1983, pp. 124ff.

222 Cf. Genesis 1,2: ... “and the Divine Presence (*ruah elokim*) hovered upon the surface of the waters”. In: *Tanach. The Stone Edition*. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications: 1998, p. 3.

223 “Es war ein wirrer Lärm, die Trompeten waren nicht gegeneinander abgestimmt, es wurde rücksichtslos geblasen. Aber das störte Karl nicht” (p. 296: “It was a confused noise, the trumpets were not together, each blew at will. But that did not bother Karl”). This corresponds to “ein Durcheinander von Sprachen” (p. 198: “a confusion of languages”) and to “das Durcheinander der Stimmen” (“the confusion of voices”) where one insists on incomprehension — the Tower of Babel.



“You all play badly,” said Karl. “Let me have a try.” (p. 299)

...and where solitude is *de rigueur*:

“No problem,” said Fanny and gave him a trumpet. “But don’t wreck the ensemble, or else I’ll be fired.” (ibid.)

Against all hope, the trumpet allows Karl to play a nuanced phrase he’d hardly considered possible. It’s significant that Karl lays siege to a feminine universe which until now has been closed to him. Thus he transgresses his gender and tries out a variety of roles: “trumpeter”, “artist”, “actor” — “honorable” callings all, offered by the biggest theater in the world, the greatest philanthropic enterprise anywhere. Karl navigates among the possibilities, he comes and goes from one role to another. But the world of words, of classification, of account books lies in wait for him. Deadly writing has not spoken its final word. No identification papers, no salvation. Some take papers out of their pocket, another looks under the mattress of the stroller for a pile of papers, and all brandish them high. But Karl has tasted the air of liberty. No longer shall he let himself be petrified. He plays the game, he brandishes an empty hand. Not yet has all been won. The world of bureaucracy peopled by males alone (the boss, the secretary, the employee, the arbitrator), this world of technology — *engineers* are what they need — impinges on his prerogatives. Karl’s mother bursts into his thoughts. She superimposes herself on the family “Kalla”. It is she who introduced him to music. Music will allow Karl to escape once and for all from being put into words. He lets his name fade like a dying tone (the meaning of *verschollen*) and chooses a new name, “Negro”, which is a new role. A trumpet player? Are we not in the theater?

In his fragmentary novel *Der Verschollene* Kafka enacts, in a manner both personal and indirect, his encounter with the Yiddish theater and hence with Eastern European Judaism. He transposes Eastern European Judaism to America, the land of immigration that neither he nor his actor friends, who perform throughout Europe plays written in America, shall ever see. Thus arises a heavy flow of two-way traffic between literature and theater, Europe and America, the written and the spoken word, immutable and dynamic text declaimed or sung or danced. Such text allows renewal in an original language, Yiddish, which is a kind of music regained.

While lecturing on Yiddish at Charles University, I was delighted to attend the World Premiere of this novel’s adaption for the Kolowrat Theatre on May 21, 2014. Staged by Gregory Gudgeon and produced by the prestigious Prague Shakespeare Company in collaboration with the National Theatre, *AmeriKafka*, performed like a Yiddish play, showed magnificently how committed Kafka was to Yiddish theatre. Using minimalism of means and interchangeability of characters, exuberance as a manifestation of absurdity, hustle and bustle as an expression of angst, with sprinkles of humor and joy of life, the experimental staging of Kafka’s novel superimposes three worlds — German, Yiddish and American — and gives an essential and original understanding of Kafka’s last, unfinished novel. This astonishing encounter showed me that Yiddish is still “alive” in Prague. Seventy years after the Shoah and the liberation of

Auschwitz, it is a duty not to let Yiddish, spoken by 13 million Ashkenazi Jews before the Holocaust, and its rich literature and vivid culture disappear. The origin and development of Yiddish and the creation of an original literature transcending centuries and borders are outlined in this article. What remains to be done is a detailed investigation of Prague's essential role in and original contribution to the elaboration and consolidation of Yiddish.

