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**Codified Traditions? YIVO’s filologische sektsye in Vilna and Its Relationship to German Academia**  

Daytshmerish toyg nit

In June 1938, Max Weinreich, then head of YIVO’s (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*) philological section in Vilna, published an article which became one of his most popular texts to appear during his long career as a leading scholar of Yiddish language. The pamphlet, *Daytshmerish toyg nit* ‘Germanisms are not acceptable,’ is widely known for its strong impetus against the influence of German on Yiddish. In blaming the Yiddish speaking masses, and even famous lexicographers and writers, for their thoughtless adaption of vocabulary and grammatical elements from German, Weinreich insisted on the purity of Yiddish *klal-shprakh*: in cases where there was no suitable term in Yiddish, he recommended using internationalisms. In addition to this, he instructed his readers not to be too anxious when picking up expressions from Slavic languages, while introducing German words to Yiddish was regarded as a sincere “act of linguistic impotence.”

Max Weinreich’s campaign to protect Yiddish against borrowing from German should be seen against the background of YIVO’s long-standing attempt to establish a standardized written form of Yiddish, which could serve the practical needs of a highly diverse society. As all proponents of early linguistic and national movements, Yiddishists like Weinreich faced the problem that Yiddish lacked the prestige of a “fully-fledged” language. Thus, borrowing from other surrounding languages was considered highly dangerous. This was especially the case with German, which had served as a *lingua franca* among Eastern European Jews for a long time. Moreover, the fact that Yiddish is closely related to German from a linguistic point of view, and that state authorities, and also the *maskilim*, regarded Yiddish as “corrupted German” (*jargon*), boosted the efforts of Weinreich and other members of YIVO to eliminate Germanisms.

Given these facts, the relationship between YIVO and German academia – used in its broadest sense, i.e. with respect to both YIVO’s scholarly work connected to German and its exchange with the scientific community in German

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2 Ibid., 105.  
3 Ibid., 106. Translations my own.
speaking countries – may seem to be a hopeless case. Yet, several documents from the YIVO archives – including minutes of meetings of the philological section (filsektsye) and Max Weinreich’s personal papers – paint a more colorful picture.

This article sheds light on the attitude of YIVO’s filsektsye towards German by underlining its ambivalent character. The following aspects are of particular importance: the impact of German language or German scholarship on the daily work of YIVO’s philological section, mutual contacts between YIVO and the German speaking academia, and the way in which members of YIVO dealt with German scholars interested in the field of Yiddish after World War II.

German Language and Scholarship in the Daily Work of YIVO’s Philological Section

YIVO’s philological section was established in Vilna in 1925. It represented, on a smaller scale, what the Diaspora Nationalism project meant to YIVO’s founders. From its earliest activities, the philological section was divided into different subdivisions whose members had specific tasks: the terminological commission was responsible for developing and codifying new vocabularies for scientific disciplines as well as for trades and crafts; the orthographic commission had to formulate spelling rules to be implemented in the Yiddish-language educational system; and the linguistic commission conducted field research in order to establish grammatical norms, such as the use of grammatical gender in spoken Yiddish. The philological section thus took a more pragmatic approach, like that stipulated by philologist Nokhem Shtif in his famous memorandum on the foundation of a Yiddish scientific institution: academic research in Yiddish should concentrate on concrete matters and only later pay attention to theoretical problems.

The members of the philological section came from different backgrounds. Some lived in Vilna or other cities in Poland, others were from abroad in nearby Lithuania, New York, Palestine, or Germany. Most had been enrolled at Russian

6 Tsvey yor arbet far dem yidishn visnhaftelekhn institut 1925–1927. A barikht far der tseyt fun merts 1925 biz merts 1927 [The Yiddish Scientific Institute. Account of Two Years Organizing Work] (Vilna: [s. n.], 1927), 29, Footnotes. Both footnotes mention the current members of the
universities, and only very few could be considered as linguistic experts in the classical sense. Instead, they were enthusiasts of Yiddish language and culture. It was in these circumstances that Max Weinreich, as an actual doctor of philology, and through the effect of his charisma upon his contemporaries, soon became the most influential member of the group. He headed the section from 1925 until he left Vilna for New York in September 1939.

Weinreich’s strong commitment to the philological section is especially important when one takes into account his own linguistic background. Max Weinreich was born into a Jewish family in Courland (today’s Latvia), where most people spoke German and Russian. His mother tongue was German, only later was he introduced to Yiddish by a friend. Weinreich became an ardent “convert” to Yiddishism, a phenomenon well-known from other young national movements in Europe. He earned his PhD at the University of Marburg, where he submitted a thesis in 1923 dealing with the linguistic history of Yiddish. It is most significant that Weinreich already at this early stage of his career had an interest in the contemporary status of Yiddish: his manuscript’s final chapter underscores the important role of modern Eastern Yiddish for the cultural life and the growth of national consciousness among Eastern European Jews. Further, Weinreich stresses the need to establish a Yiddish research center, which should draw on methods of German dialect research.

terminological and the ethnographical commissions; the only sub-committees of the philological section that did, in fact, exist at the time. The orthographical and the linguistic commissions were still to come.

7 See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, From that Place and Time. A Memoir, 1938–1947 (New York: Norton, 1989), 82. Dawidowicz, who had spent a year at YIVO in Vilna as a member of the research training program for young academics (aspirantur), wrote about Weinreich’s extraordinary will power: “He [Weinreich, MN] could create worlds if he decided to do so.”

8 In New York, Max Weinreich and his son Uri re-established YIVO and tried to resume their research undertaken in pre-war Vilna. See Kuznitz, YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture, 181–189.

9 Dawidowicz, From that Place and Time, 82–83.


12 Ibid., 306.
If one takes a closer look at working methods of the philological section, it becomes apparent that there was a huge gap between internal research and external self-presentation. A reader of *daytshmerish toyg nit*, or other similar articles, would have been rather astonished to notice the extent to which the three subdivisions – for terminology, orthography, and linguistics – relied on the example of German and other surrounding languages, especially Russian and Polish. Only a few months after the terminological commission had been established, the question of working language arose. This was less a problem of mutual understanding, than of systematization. Every new term in Yiddish had to be written down on a record card together with a translation into another European language. Eventually Latin, Polish, and German were chosen, most likely because of academic traditions and easy access to available literature.

In March 1928, the terminological commission sent a letter to Dr. Mark Lifshitz in Zwickau, who was developing a terminology of internal medicine. In order to speed up Lifshitz’s research, the commission explicitly recommended Guttmann’s *medizinische Terminologie. Ableitung und Erklärung der gebräuchlichsten Fachausdrücke aller Zweige der Medizin und ihrer Hilfswissenschaften*. This medical dictionary was published by the German-Jewish doctor Walter Guttmann (1873–1941), who had been working for the Kaiser Wilhelm Society for the Advancement of Science, a predecessor of today’s Max Planck Society, in Berlin. The book was reprinted in numerous editions, and owed its popularity to Guttmann’s etymological interpretations and the high quality of its explanatory illustrations – thus providing a tool of practical significance, also, for YIVO in Vilna. Examples like this prove that YIVO’s philological section was quite eager to draw inspiration from German vocabulary if needed, whereas western European languages – mainly English and French – seemed to be less important. However, it was crucial that this (hidden) German influence did not lead to imitation, but instead to adaptation.

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13 Minutes of meeting of the terminological commission, Vilna, 8 May 1926, YIVO Archives, RG 1.1, folder 616.
14 Ibid.
15 Letter of the terminological commission to Dr. Mark Lifshitz, Vilna, 6 March 1928, YIVO Archives, RG 1.1, folder 617. It was not possible to get biographical information about Mark Lifshitz.
Moreover, there is evidence that the philological section actively used German patterns of language planning as a model. Paradoxically, this was primarily due to questions of purism, i.e. the famous attempts of Weinreich and other members of the section to combat incorrect syntax and foreign-derived words, especially those of supposed German origin, as seen in Daytshmerish toyg nit.

In January 1930, Max Weinreich developed an outline to rebuild the whole philological section. He suggested that the section and especially its linguistic subdivision should cut itself off from “ordinary” Yiddish speaking people in order to avoid a negative impact on YIVO’s concept of standard Yiddish, the so-called klat-shprakh. Instead, members of the filsektsye should inform the public about common linguistic mistakes made by the press and writers. For this purpose, Weinreich encouraged the establishment of so called shprakh-vinkelen in several newspapers; they were supposed to publish newsletters on a regular basis which listed the above mentioned language errors together with “popular explanations” of how to better avoid them. This very special type of announcement was designed along the lines of a similar initiative, developed by Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein, as Weinreich stated.

The Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein, founded in 1885, not only condemned French loanwords in German, but also tried to influence how people spoke in the privacy of their homes. The latter approach was also very important for Max Weinreich, although his idea of shprakh-vinkelen was only realized in 1938, when the popular language journal Yidish far ale ‘Yiddish for Everyone’ was established. In almost every issue of the short-lived journal, one can find articles headed fraynd shraybn – mir entfern ‘you ask – we answer’ or undzer brifkastn ‘our letterbox,’ where subscribers were given the opportunity to improve their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge of Yiddish by reading expert answers to (most likely faked) questions. For example, in July 1938, a certain M. Vegmeyster from Warsaw was interested in the polite way of asking for something: He was to

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18 Max Weinreich, Strategic plan for the Philological Section of YIVO and its four sub-committees, Vilna, January 1930, YIVO Archives, RG 1.2, folder 1.
19 Ibid., 31.
20 Ibid.
21 For the ideological background of “Allgemeiner deutscher Sprachverein” see a pamphlet written by the first chairman of the “Sprachverein”: Herman Riegel, Ein Hauptsstück von unserer Muttersprache, der allgemeine deutsche Sprachverein und die Errichtung einer Reichsanstalt für die deutsche Sprache, 2nd revised and enlarged edition (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1888).
learn, that the noun “bite” was Germanified (daytshmerish), and therefore not suitable; instead he should use the Hebrew derived bekashe.23

Analyzing these questions, it becomes quite clear that Weinreich, and at least some of his colleagues, actually feared possible confusions between Yiddish and German. This can also be seen from Weinreich’s personal notes for a Yiddish dictionary, which he compiled around 1939/1940: he carefully wrote down German vocabulary lists for which there did not exist any equivalent in Yiddish.24 The case of Western Yiddish, which had almost entirely disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century, provided a frightening example.25 It was also for this reason that Max Weinreich tried to initiate a competition to single out the best essay written in Yiddish. One of the two topics to choose was “the fight against Yiddish language in Germany between 1750 and 1850,” and the cash prize offered by YIVO was 100 Dollars26 – an amount which, at the time, was quite substantial.

**Mutual Contacts between YIVO and German Speaking Academia**

Considering mutual contacts between YIVO’s philological section and the German speaking academia, these contacts officially existed to a far lesser extent than we can trace the influence of German on the daily work of the section. Nevertheless, correspondences of the philological section demonstrate that YIVO’s members were quite eager to donate their publications to other scientific institutions in Poland and abroad, which largely included German-speaking countries. In March 1926, for example, the Prussian State Library in Berlin sent a letter to Max Weinreich in order to thank him for several copies of “Yidishe filologye.”27

Other attempts to spread the idea of YIVO and its political and cultural program among German speaking scholars can be found in promotional

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24 Max Weinreich’s notebook containing notes on specific words (around 1939/1940), YIVO Archives, RG 584, folder 121.
26 Weinreich, “Strategic Plan for the Philological Section of YIVO,” 72.
27 Postcard of the Oriental Department of the Prussian State Library to Max Weinreich, Berlin, 10 March 1926, YIVO Archives, RG 1.2, folder 203.
literature, such as small booklets, or Weinreich’s article on Yiddish language for the seventh edition of *Meyers Konversationslexikon*, which was published by the Bibliographisches Institut in Leipzig. The letters Weinreich received from Leipzig reveal that he insisted on rewriting a former version of his abstract where he had not mentioned YIVO and its part in standardizing Yiddish. Although the editors were quite reluctant to proliferate his article, Weinreich was finally successful. He was thus able to secure a prominent place for YIVO and its sections, whereas other similar institutions in the Soviet Union were rather neglected.

Occasionally, one can also find some indication of cooperation between members of the *filsektyse* and German or Austrian scholars of Yiddish. Jubilee and commemorative publications, which were dedicated to outstanding researchers in the field of Yiddish, are good examples for such encounters where Yiddishists and specialists in German studies, Jews and non-Jews, met. This applies especially to the Festschrift printed in honor of the German-Jewish philologist Alfred Landau (1850–1935), in which Weinreich also tried to place articles written by non-Jewish German-speaking scholars. In a circular letter to colleagues in Western Europe he offered the possibility of writing an article in a foreign language although the volume as a whole was to appear in Yiddish.

One of the very few Non-Jews who actively took part in the philological work of YIVO before World War II was Franz J. Beranek (1902–1967), a young scholar from the German speaking parts of Czechoslovakia. His work is germane to examining how members of YIVO dealt with German scholars interested in the field of Yiddish after 1945.

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28 See *Das Jiddische Wissenschaftliche Institut* (1925–1928) (Berlin: Verein zur Förderung des Jiddischen Wissenschaftlichen Instituts, 1929); Max Weinreich, *Das Jiddische wissenschaftliche Institut* (“Jiwo”), *die wissenschaftliche Zentralstelle des Ostjudentums* (Berlin: [s. n.], [1931]).


31 See three letters of the editor-in-chief [Schriftleitung] of Bibliographisches Institut Leipzig AG to Max Weinreich, Leipzig, 1 February, 10 February and 11 June 1930 and an undated manuscript by Max Weinreich containing the revised version of his article, YIVO Archives, RG 584, folder 304.


33 Circular letter of Max Weinreich [in German], Vilna, 2 May 1925, YIVO Archives, RG 1.1, folder 603. In the end, all articles were published in Yiddish and Willy Staerk, a professor for Old Testament from the University of Jena, was the only non-Jew who contributed to *Landoy-bukh*. See *Landoy-bukh*, table of contents, n. p.
YIVO and German Scholars Interested in Yiddish after World War II

Born in Moravia in the beginning of the twentieth century, Beranek studied German philology at the German division of Prague University. Although he had no Jewish background, he developed an increasing interest in questions of Yiddish and soon came into contact with Max Weinreich and the philological section in Vilna. In 1935 he gave a conference speech at YIVO and, in 1936, he was able to publish this small study about Yiddish in Czechoslovakia in the “YIVO-bleter.” Since YIVO could hardly find any experts for the history of Yiddish in the Czechoslovak region, the members of the philological section energetically tried to promote Beranek’s research. Thus, even in February 1940, when the political conditions at Vilna had become rather complicated, Beranek got an answer to his request to publish a manuscript on Yiddish dialects in Carpathian Ruthenia: although Zelig Kalmanowitch, co-founder and head of the institute, saw no possibility for publishing it in the near future, he declared his interest in Beranek’s study.

What followed can be read in Alan Steinweis’s and Christopher Hutton’s works on antisemitic scholarship and the role of linguistics in the Third Reich. Franz Beranek was unwilling to understand the difficult and soon very dangerous situation of YIVO, and its members whose lives were threatened both by the Soviet army and Nazi Germany. Instead, he was mainly interested in pursuing his academic career. Therefore, he offered his manuscript to another institution which was far more influential at the time, the “Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands” in Berlin. The “Reichsinstitut” had been founded in Berlin in 1935 and was intended to become the very center of National Socialist

34 The talk was given on 18th August, 1935. Beranek was the only guest in Vilna who had made his way from Czechoslovakia. See Franz Beranek, “Jidish in Tshekhoslovokey [Yiddish in Czechoslovakia],” Yivo bleter 9 (1936): 63–75, 63.
35 Letter of Zelig Kalmanovitch and rb [?] to Franz Beranek, Vilna, 12 February 1940, YIVO Archives, RG 584, folder 293 A.
36 Alan Steinweis, Studying the Jew. Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 152–156; Christopher Hutton, Linguistics and the Third Reich: Mother-tongue Fascism, Race and the Science of Language (London: Routledge, 1999), 212–220. Steinweis puts his focus on Beranek’s moral failure as due to his career ambitions, whereas Hutton seeks to locate Beranek’s problematic understanding of Yiddish as “neither German nor non-German” (Hutton, Linguistics, 217) as part of his nationalistic Weltanschauung.
37 Franz J. Beranek, Die jiddische Mundart Nordostungarns (Brünn, Leipzig: Rudolf Rohrer, 1941). Page 8 reveals that the book was printed with the support of the “Reichsinstitut.” Hungary appeared in the title due to the fact that Carpathian Ruthenia, which was a part of interwar Czechoslovakia, had been annexed by Hungary in March 1939.
Reading the preface of Beranek’s book, one can see how the author had changed his mind about Yiddish: it is presented as a “derivative (Nebensprache) of High German,” worth exploring for ideological reasons, as part of the efforts of Nazi scholarship to solve the “Jewish Question.” Beranek continues on to characterize research on Yiddish as having been very poor so far – a statement only possible if he simply ignored what the linguists working for YIVO had published over the last sixteen years.

Unsurprisingly, Beranek’s overtures to revive his former connection with YIVO in the 1950s were sharply rejected by Weinreich and his colleagues in New York. Naturally, they were disappointed by Beranek’s opportunism during National Socialism from a moral point of view – a top Weinreich dealt with in his ground-breaking book Hitler’s Professors. Moreover, the members of YIVO were not inclined to accept Beranek’s conception of Yiddish as a German dialect and intrinsic part of Germanic studies. Beranek himself was apparently not able to understand why his former friends did not want to continue their pre-war academic dialogue. Despite the fact that his research approach to Yiddish was considered inappropriate by several linguistic experts, he nevertheless became one of the leading figures of Yiddish studies in Germany after 1945. Since 1962, he held an extraordinary professorship for Germanic studies with special regard to Yiddish at the University of Gießen, and focused on Yiddish and Sudeten German dialects. Thus, in 1965, he published Westjiddischer Sprachatlas, a description of Western Yiddish dialects. Simultaneously, he was responsible for the Sudetendeutsches Wörterbuch, a dictionary of the German dialects of Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia. It was published in cooperation with Collegium Carolinum, a

39 Beranek, Die jiddische Mundart Nordostungarns, 8.
40 Ibid., 7.
41 Ibid., 8.
42 Steinweis, Studying the Jew, 154–155.
43 Max Weinreich, Hitler’s Professors. The Part of Scholarship in Germany’s Crimes against the Jewish People. 2. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). The book was originally written in Yiddish and appeared in English in 1946. Weinreich does not mention Beranek’s case; Steinweis assumes that this was due to its minor importance for Weinreich. See Steinweis, Studying the Jew, 155.
44 Steinweis, Studying the Jew, 156.
45 Hutton, Linguistics, 219.
research institute for the history of the Bohemian lands in Munich, which was dominated during the 1950s by scholars that had been expelled from Czechoslovakia after 1945.48

**Conclusion: a History of Ambivalence**

While the relationship between YIVO’s philological section and German academia was never neutral, or even relaxed, it would be over-simplistic to understand German only as a negative counterpoint to Yiddish. Rather, German also served as an important role model.

Apparent in the daily work of the *filsektsye*, their members very much relied on the example of German (and other surrounding languages), when it came to language planning, by standardizing orthography and terminologies for various disciplines. Moreover, Max Weinreich, who had been enrolled at a German university, was very familiar with German academic traditions, in terms of language politics, and drew inspiration from them even in developing his thoroughly anti-German linguistic purism. One must carefully distinguish between internal research methods, which were driven by practical considerations, and the external self-presentation of the philological section, which was part of YIVO’s political program of Diaspora Nationalism. The fact that some non-Jewish German philologists also took part in the philological work of YIVO, before World War II, offers proof of the open academic culture at YIVO at that time. The break-up of this was caused not only by the Shoah, but also by the insistence of some German scholars on Yiddish being a variety of German.

The history of YIVO’s philological section and German academia, of Yiddish and German, is therefore a history of ambivalence. Not shared, but rather an entangled history, or even *geteilte Geschichte* in the true meaning of the German word – a history both divided and shared at the same time.

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