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**THE NEW YIDDISH DIALECTOLOGY: A REVIEW
OF ALEXANDER BEIDER'S *THE ORIGINS OF
YIDDISH DIALECTS***

Alec (Leyzer) Burko

Alexander Beider, The Origins of Yiddish Dialects. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 800 pp.

Much as Max Weinreich's *History of the Yiddish Language* synthesized scholarship on the subject up through the mid-1960s, Alexander Beider's new book does the same for the half century since. The volume represents a comprehensive and convincing revision of its esteemed predecessor, no less than a new standard work. In particular, Beider overturns many of the assumptions of what he terms the "Jewish-oriented" approach to the subject, and relies more on the older "Germanist" approach, which he regards as ideologically neutral. He shows the fallacy of looking at Yiddish in isolation from modern German dialects, which often show similar or identical developments, a situation that suggests a more recent origin for Yiddish. Whereas Weinreich and other Jewish-oriented "millennialists" often view Yiddish as a separate language from the beginning of Jewish settlement in German lands in the ninth and tenth centuries, Beider argues that the language branched off from Early New High German at the end of the fifteenth century. More radically, he argues that the westernmost Yiddish dialects, once spoken in southern and western Germany,

Switzerland, and Alsace, are not based on the same German dialect as Eastern Yiddish, so that the two can almost be regarded as separate languages.

As dramatic as the claims of the book are, from the start, Beider assures readers that his frequent criticism of Weinreich's methodology is not a manifestation of an Oedipus complex. At times, his text reads something like a point-by-point legal rebuttal to Weinreich. But given Weinreich's influence in the field of Yiddish, Beider is justified in taking the bull by the horns, and on most points of contention he appears to be right. He joins a chorus of scholars who have failed to find evidence to support Weinreich's theory that the linguistic "fusion" of Yiddish occurred in the Rhineland in the Old High German period, creating a new mixed language with a different grammar and a significant Romance component. Beider is equally critical of the alternative "Bavarian" hypothesis, as he demonstrates in great detail how Yiddish cannot derive from either Rhenish or Bavarian dialects. Instead he offers a theory all his own.

His rethinking of the field even goes so far as to depart from the traditional Weinreichian nomenclature used in Yiddish linguistics, replacing relatively opaque terms like Central Yiddish and Northeastern Yiddish with the more familiar Polish Yiddish and Lithuanian Yiddish. This is especially helpful with the unfortunately named northeastern and southeastern Western Yiddish, which he terms simply East German Yiddish and Czech Yiddish, respectively. Changing much of the accepted terminology unilaterally is a bit *khutspedik* on Beider's part, but, like many of his innovations, it is a good idea which somebody should have thought of long ago.

Making use of his first doctorate in mathematics, Beider applies a mathematical approach to historical linguistics, reducing complex problems to manageable quantities which can then be easily compared. Through an ingenious system of abbreviations, he condenses an enormous amount of information into the very brief space of six-hundred pages. In fairness, many readers would have appreciated if the book were somewhat longer and the abbreviations expanded, in order to be spared the endless flipping back and forth between the text and the abbreviations list. But whatever its faults, Beider's book offers us the first comprehensive synthesis of Yiddish dialectology, giving equal weight to Eastern and Western dialects. His is the first work to approach a comparative historical Yiddish grammar. It is a technical masterpiece which can provide a firm basis for further elaboration and correction in the future.

Unlike most works of Yiddish dialectology, which are mainly descriptive, Beider offers us an ambitious unified theory. Beider argues that westernmost Yiddish descends mainly from the East Franconian dialect (spoken near Nuremberg), while the rest of Yiddish derives from Bohemian, the German dialect which Czech Jews adopted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, before many of them migrated east into Poland. This theory will inevitably be criticized for sacrificing too much complexity for the sake of its mathematical elegance. However, it is the responsibility of his critics to test his theories to see if they can accommodate more data. For the purposes of this review, I will make some suggestions regarding the East Franconian connection, but I have only tried to test the Bohemian connection, because it is the most relevant for speakers of modern

Yiddish: the Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian dialects familiar to us today all derive from a common Proto-Eastern Yiddish spoken in the Kingdom of Poland four or five hundred years ago. I leave testing Beider's many other theories to reviewers who are more expert in Old Yiddish, Hebrew and Slavic linguistics, Yiddish and German dialectology, and everything else.¹

I.

Perhaps Beider's most innovative and counterintuitive idea is to attribute separate histories to the German and the Hebrew components within Yiddish. While the Hebrew component displays a fundamental unity across all the different dialects—because it was everywhere inherited as the common cultural language of European Jews—the German component varies significantly, and most conspicuously between the westernmost dialects and all the others. The unity of the Hebrew component and widespread borrowing between Yiddish dialects have created the impression that they all descend from one “Proto-Yiddish.” But, in fact, through a tabulation of almost three hundred different features—phonological, morphological, lexical, and orthographical—Beider shows that westernmost Yiddish dialects appear to be based mainly on East Franconian while the rest of the other dialects are based on Bohemian.

Beider's distinction between the west and the rest follows the work of fellow linguist Manaster Ramer (to whom the book is dedicated). Both critique the traditional division between Western Yiddish (WY) and Eastern Yiddish (EY), based mainly on the long *ā* vowel in *flāsh mit bāner*—“meat with bones”—versus Eastern Yiddish *fleysh mit beyner*. Instead, they single out only the westernmost dialects of Western Yiddish in contrast with all the rest. Thus Czech Yiddish and East German Yiddish, which are technically WY (based on the *ā* vowel), actually share the same ancestor as EY. Beider suggests that Dutch Yiddish, which combines eastern and western traits, began in the westernmost group, but became a mixed dialect due to centuries of immigration of Jews from eastern Europe.

Another major conclusion of Beider's comparison of dialect features is that the earliest texts written by Ashkenazim in their vernacular(s), mainly from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, can be assigned to different parts of the German dialect map and do not represent the ancestor of modern Yiddish dialects. In that early period, Beider argues, Ashkenazim spoke a Jewish variant of the local German dialect wherever they happened to live (plus a Hebrew component, some inherited Romance elements, and some isolated innovations in the German component). Beider claims that these Jewish variants of German dialects do not constitute a separate language with system-level differences, which would include regular phonetic changes across whole classes of words. Only later did their speech depart significantly, in its German component, from

¹ I thank Alexander Beider, Christoph Landolt, and Leah Schäfer for their helpful comments and corrections. I thank the editors of *In geveb* for this rare opportunity to publish in my native tongue.

that of local Christians, so that by the end of the fifteenth century we can speak of Yiddish as a separate language.

To be sure, though this argument dismisses much of Weinreich's Rhineland theory, there is what to be salvaged from it. Much like Weinreich argued, Beider admits that all Yiddish dialects inherited a bundle of peculiarities from the earlier varieties of German that Jews had spoken, including many personal names and a significant number of terms from western German dialects which were canonized in the traditional translation language used in *heder*. In this way, modern EY still has some vestiges of the speech of the first Ashkenazic communities in the Rhineland, even though the Rhenish dialects do not actually represent its parent language. Many early Ashkenazim must have also spoken Bavarian dialects (in Regensburg, for example), but it was not their speech which gave rise to Yiddish. Beider shows that many so-called Bavarian features in Yiddish are also widespread outside of Bavaria (in Bohemian, for example). At the same time, Bavarian has a number of peculiarities, not shared by other German dialects or by Yiddish, which make it highly unlikely that Yiddish could develop out of Bavarian.

The main question hanging over Beider's theory (as he acknowledges) is whether Yiddish actually derives from the two German dialects, East Franconian and Bohemian, or only appears to do so coincidentally. As a language developed among Jews coming from many different German-speaking territories, Yiddish contains a mix of features found in Upper and Central German dialects. Because East Franconian and Bohemian are both transitional dialects, straddling the border between Upper and Central German, they also contain a mix of such features. Is this a case of dialect mixing producing similar results independently, or can we say definitively that westernmost Yiddish developed out of East Franconian and the other Yiddish dialects out of Bohemian? The existence of particularities and innovations shared by Yiddish and these dialects exclusively would be a stronger indication that Yiddish really developed out of them—but those are hard to come by.

To be fair, Beider does not press his case too hard: he suggests that the apparent unity of westernmost Yiddish results not from a common "Proto-Western Yiddish" (which he always writes in scare quotes), but that there were originally different regional westernmost varieties which adapted to the East Franconian type by a process of convergence and interdialectal borrowing. Given the exceptional mobility of the Jewish population throughout history, this seems like a good possibility, and the idea allows him to accommodate a number of irregularities in westernmost Yiddish which cannot derive from East Franconian.

The best evidence to link westernmost Yiddish to East Franconian specifically consists of the long *ā* for Middle High German (MHG) *ei* and *ou*; the plural diminutive suffix *-lich* (as in EY *kreplekh*), which occurs in patches elsewhere, but is mainly East Franconian; and the kinship terms *harle*—"grandfather"² and *frāle*—"grandmother." It

² Curiously, the form *Har(r)l(a)*—"grandfather"—also covers a large part of west Bohemian (North Bavarian-speaking), but it is absent from Czech Yiddish, where the word is *deide*, directly related to EY

is worth noting, however, that such an \bar{a} occurs much more widely, for example, in Frankfurt, which was for centuries a major center of Jewish life in Germany. Beider suggests that the WY \bar{a} may have multiple sources, but it may be that even just one subdialect of WY, westernmost Yiddish, may itself have multiple sources.³

It is worth pointing out here some instances where westernmost Yiddish does not look like East Franconian. The lengthened MHG *a* appears as \bar{a} in Franconian Yiddish (FrY): MHG *name*—“name,” *hase*—“hare” > FrY *nām̄ə*, *hās*, but in East Franconian is raised to \bar{o} .⁴ Apparently, FrY also occasionally displayed /š/ for /x/ or /ç/, which can also be traced back to Frankfurt (and the Rhine Franconian dialect). It is possible, then, that Beider has not given the other dialects contributing to westernmost Yiddish their due. It may be a compromise between the main dialects Jews spoke originally (including East Franconian), rather than a direct offshoot of East Franconian specifically. But I should leave this question to the WY experts.

II.

Regarding the Bohemian theory of the origin of EY, I have done some homework. In retrospect, it is surprising that no scholar before Beider proposed Bohemian, because it is a natural compromise between two dialects which are often proposed as forming the basis for Yiddish: Bavarian and Silesian. The idea did not even occur to the Yiddish scholar Franz Beranek, who was himself a native of southern Moravia and an authority on Bohemian (and, incidentally, a Nazi). He authored an atlas of Sudeten German (aka Bohemian) and was the principal compiler of the (still unfinished) *Sudetendeutsches Wörterbuch*.⁵ Of course, it is possible that Beranek missed the forest for the trees and concentrated on minor differences internal to Bohemian rather than on the broad similarities to Yiddish which Beider highlights. It seems more likely, however, that Beranek knew Bohemian too well and was too aware of the significant differences between it and Yiddish (see below) to be able to conceive of Beider’s theory.

Like Beider, Beranek noticed the similarities between Czech Yiddish, East German Yiddish, and EY, as compared to the westernmost dialects. However, he explains them not through a common origin in Bohemian, but through East European

zeyde. Deutscher Wortatlas (DWA), vol. 21, ed. Walther Mitzka (Gießen: Wilhelm Schmitz Verlag, 1951-1980), map “Grossvater.”

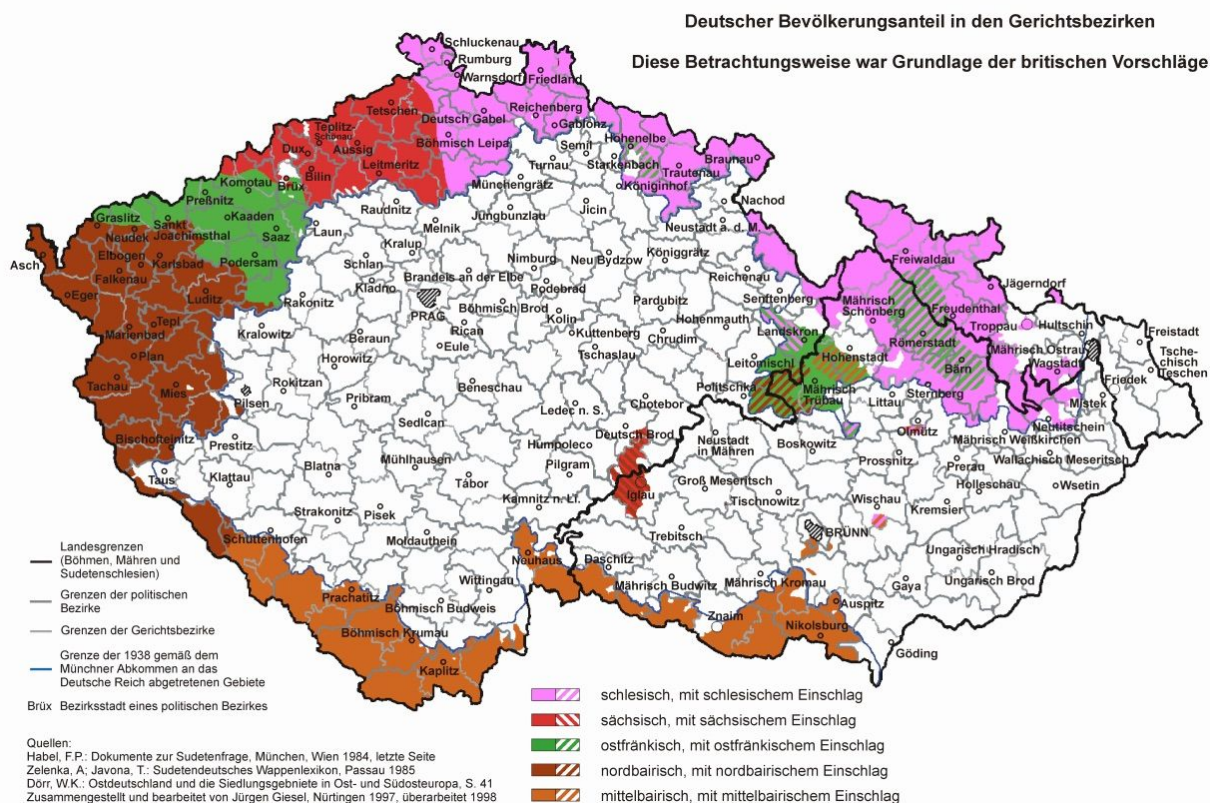
³ Beider suggests two separate sources for the WY \bar{a} : East Franconian for the westernmost dialects, and Austrian city dialects for Czech and East German Yiddish. But from the dialect maps of Bohemian (see below) it seems clear that the widespread \bar{a} in Bohemian was itself brought by settlers from East Franconia. See Ernst Schwarz, *Sudetendeutsche Sprachräume*, 2. Auflage (München: Verlag Robert Lerche, München, 1962), 30.

⁴ Franz Beranek, “Die fränkische Landschaft des Jiddischen,” *Jahrbuch für Fränkische Landesforschung* 21 (1961): 288.

⁵ *Sudetendeutsches Wörterbuch: Wörterbuch der deutschen Mundarten in Böhmen und Mähren-Schlesien*, begründet von Ernst Schwarz; betreut von Franz J. Beranek, Hertha Wolf-Beranek, Horst Kühnel; herausgegeben im Auftrag des Collegium Carolinum von Heinz Engels (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1982-).

Jewish migration back into East Germany and the lands of the Hapsburg Empire.⁶ This is also a reasonable explanation, and would justify the traditional designation of Czech and East German Yiddish as transitional dialects.

Despite the significance of the Bohemian connection and before I go into it in detail, it must be said that Beider mischaracterizes Bohemian by attributing to it more coherence than appears in the literature. German dialectology describes Bohemian not as a dialect per se, but as a patchwork of distinct dialects, each corresponding closely to the one spoken in Germany and Austria on the other side of the border: Northern and Central Bavarian, East Franconian, Upper Saxon, and Silesian.



Deutsche Mundarten in Sudetenland, via <http://www.schoenhengstgau.de>

The division into distinct dialect areas, which goes back to when Germans first settled there in the Middle Ages, ought to complicate Beider's calculations, because the features which he cites to show that Yiddish cannot derive from any one of these Bohemian-adjacent dialects apply just as well to the corresponding parts of Bohemian. For example, the Upper Saxon and Silesian parts of northern Bohemian exhibit the same shift of $\hat{o} > \bar{u}$ (*tūt* for MHG *tôt*, "dead"), and the Bavarian parts exhibit the same shift of $b- > p-$ (*pōd* for MHG *bade*, "bath"), which are both absent in Yiddish (EY *toy*, *bod*). German neutralization of consonants (full or partial merging of k, t, p with g, d, b)

⁶ Franz Beranek, *Westjiddischer Sprachatlas* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1965), 152.

characterizes Upper Saxon, East Franconian, and Bavarian—including the corresponding parts of Bohemian⁷—but not EY, Czech Yiddish, or East German Yiddish. Should we then conclude that Yiddish derives its unmerged consonants from only the northeastern Silesian part of Bohemian but its original *ô* vowel (reflected in EY *toyt*) from elsewhere?

In Beider's defense, Bohemian is relatively neglected in the linguistic literature, partly for political reasons. The Soviet dialectologist Žirmunski (one of Beider's main sources) leaves Bohemian off the map entirely, along with the German dialects once spoken in Poland. Žirmunski merely notes that these territories, from which ethnic Germans (like Beranek) were expelled at the end of World War II, "have been returned to their original inhabitants by decision of the Potsdam Conference."⁸ The status of Bohemian and Silesian as colonial German dialects on originally Slavic territory, even (in the case of Silesian) partly overlapping with EY geographically, should have made them obvious candidates as sources of linguistic influence. But for Yiddish scholars intent on finding an ancient *yikhes* for Yiddish, the association with the German "east colonisation" did not make Bohemian and Silesian attractive prospects, especially during and after the Nazi war against the Jews. Seventy years later, however, Beider has less cause to shy away from seeing EY within the colonial German context. He demonstrates, for example, that a large number of Yiddish place names in Slavic countries, whose development appears puzzling (*Brisk, Kroke*), actually derive from medieval German, rather than directly from the Slavic original.

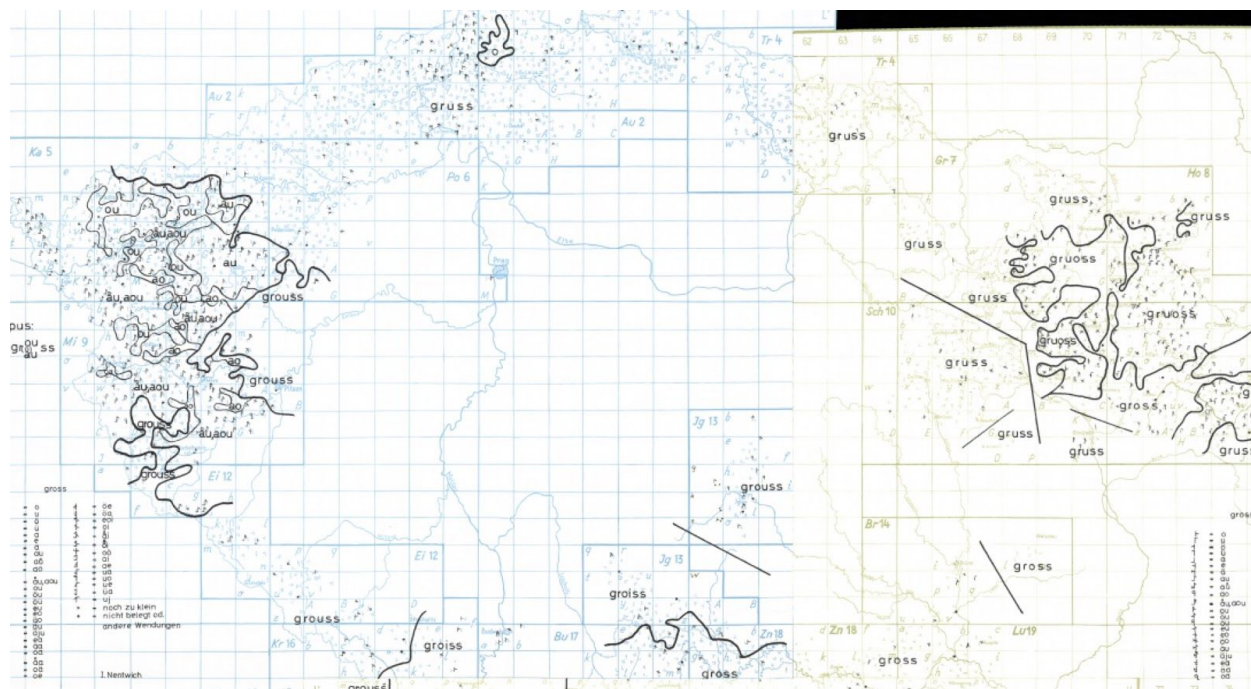
While other German dialects are well enough defined to make it clear that EY cannot derive from them directly, Bohemian appears in Beider's book partly as an unknown quantity, full of possibilities. Several times he notes that "we have no information" about this or that feature in Bohemian (108, 125, 489)—which is not always true, strictly speaking. He relies mainly on two sources here: Virgil Moser's grammar of Early New High German, which treats Bohemian along with all the other dialects, and Franz Jelinek's Middle High German dictionary, from late medieval Bohemian sources.⁹ Since both works are based on the written language, which was partly standardized even in the Middle Ages, they do not adequately reflect the patchwork of dialects that were actually spoken. Information from the modern dialects, in particular, shows that the match with Yiddish is messier and more tenuous than Beider presents it.

One could counter Beider's claims by looking at Beranek's *Sudetendeutsches Wörterbuch*, which for many words gives a jumble of forms taken from the different

⁷ Franz Beranek, "Grundzüge der binnenhochdeutschen Konsonantenschwächung in den Sudetenländern," *Bohemia* 5 (1964): 312.

⁸ Viktor Schirmunski, *Deutsche Mundartkunde*, ed. Larissa Naiditsch (Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, 2010), 42.

⁹ Virgil Moser, *Frühneuhochdeutsche Grammatik. 1. Band: Lautlehre, 1. Hälfte: Orthographie, Betonung, Stammsilbenvokale; 1. Band: Lautlehre, 3. Teil: Konsonanten, 2. Hälfte (Schluss)* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929, 1951); Franz Jelinek, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch zu den deutschen Sprachdenkmälern Böhmens und der mährischen Städte Brünn, Iglau und Olmütz (XIII. bis XVI. Jahrhundert)* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1911).



The southern (Bavarian) forms *grois* and *grous* agree with Yiddish, while the northern (Upper Saxon and Silesian) *gruss* (= *grūs*) does not. Should we say that EY took the *ei* reflex of the MHG *ei* from north Bohemian and the *oi/ou* reflex of the MHG *ô* from the south? If so, it would represent an internal Yiddish development in contact with a variety of dialects and not the continuation of any one variety of Bohemian. Beider does not cite the *Sudetendeutsches Wörterbuch* or the maps of the *Deutscher Sprachtlas*, but if he had, it would have quickly undone his elegant tabulations.

It is possible (though unlikely) that Bohemian was less fragmented in the late Middle Ages than in the twentieth century. Presumably, Prague German, at least, was a genuinely mixed dialect which could not be assigned to any one of the major dialects listed above. We could assume that EY derives especially from there, because of Prague’s central role for Czech Jewry. Unfortunately, it is difficult to check the match because Prague German is not reflected in modern German dialectology: the original dialect was mostly displaced by Standard German by the late nineteenth century, which is the reason Prague German was renowned as the “most beautiful and purest way of speaking” in the Hapsburg Empire.¹⁰ The late medieval and early modern written sources from Prague that I have seen do not display any special similarity to Yiddish, especially in the early fourteenth century, when the language looks too Bavarian (initial *p-* for *b-* and *ch-* for *k-*). Later, it comes to look more East Central German and so a little more like Yiddish—but also more like Standard German.

¹⁰ Jaromír Povejšil, *Das Prager Deutsch des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Schriftsprache* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, Hamburg, 1980), 115.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a widely held theory that the German standard language originated in the usage of the imperial chancery in Prague during the fourteenth century, long before Martin Luther disseminated it through his Bible translation. A spoken standard supposedly developed out of the encounters between speakers of the various dialects at the imperial court. Modern scholars do not give the court so much credit, but it would be a strange irony if the linguistic heir to the court language of the Holy Roman Empire was not Standard German, but Yiddish. Perhaps one day someone will find the “smoking gun”—the imperial edict that reads like Sholem Aleichem.

III.

On the website of the *Deutscher Sprachatlas*,¹¹ I listened to dialect samples from about a hundred and fifty different locations in the Czech Republic, recorded in the 1950s and 1960s as part of an effort to preserve the dialects of the expelled German-speaking communities. Since it is unrealistic to expect the modern dialects to preserve the state from which Proto-EY could have arisen five or six-hundred years ago, my diligence went unrewarded: no location sounds much like Proto-EY would have sounded. On the other hand, most locations sound much more like EY than does Standard German, thanks to widespread unrounding of rounded vowels (*böse* /beːz/ ‘angry’; cf. EY *beyz*), apocope of final *-e* (*müde* /miːd/ ‘tired’; cf. EY *mid*), East Central German consonantism (*ep̩l*), raising of MHG *â* and lengthened *a* > *ō* (/šlōːfən/ “to sleep,” /zōːgən/ “to say”; cf. EY *shlofn*, *zogn*), use of the prefix *der-* instead of *er-* (EY *dertseyln*, “to tell”); and the Bavarian pronouns *ös* and *enk*—“you” (*ets* and *enk* in Polish Yiddish). In one spot (Aberthamy), I was surprised to hear *nachten*—“yesterday” and *kelev*—“dog” (EY *nekhtn*, *kelev*); but it turns out that the first is not so rare while the second proves only that German dialects borrowed from Yiddish.

In the Schönhengst area of Moravia one can hear the diminutive plural *-lich*, which appears to have come with East Franconian settlers;¹² probably, as Beider suggests, it was previously more widespread. Here is a dialect sample from Lanškroun (Landskron), a town in the Schönhengst area, which is about as good/bad a match for Proto-Eastern Yiddish as all the others:

<https://soundcloud.com/in-geveb/landskron>

Reading through some of the dialect and older literature, I found a number of individual correspondences which could strengthen Beider’s case (some of which he discusses himself): *achpar*¹³ for *achtbar*—“worthy” (EY *akhpern*); *ackern*¹⁴ instead of

¹¹ <https://www.regionalsprache.de/>

¹² Schwarz, *Sudetendeutsche Sprachräume*, 298-99.

¹³ L. E. Schmitt, *Die deutsche Urkundensprache in der Kanzlei Karls IV. (1346-1378)* (Halle/Salle: M. Niemayer, 1936), 30.

¹⁴ DWA, vol. 8, map “Pflügen.”

pflügen “to plow” (EY *akern*); frequent *brenge*¹⁵ along with *bringen*—“to bring” (EY *brenge*); *Dornrose*¹⁶ for *Heckenrose*—“Dog Rose” (EY *dornroyz*); *ebicleich*¹⁷ in Schönhengst, Moravia, for *ewig*—“eternal” (EY *eybik*); *Fleischer*¹⁸ instead of *Metzger* or *Fleischhacker*—“butcher” (EY *fleysher*); some *fliehen*¹⁹ for *fliegen*—“to fly”—in north Bohemian (EY *flien*); *fodern*²⁰ for *fordern*—“to demand” (EY *fodern*); the forms *vregen* and *frogen*²¹—“to ask” (EY *fregn*). In Prague German of the sixteenth century, the past participle form *gewesen*—“been”—competed with *gewest*,²² and northwest Bohemian also offers us *g(e)wēn*²³ (EY *geven*, *gevezn*, *gevezt*). *Tischler*²⁴ instead of *Schreiner*—“carpenter” (EY *tishler*); *Hacke*²⁵ instead of *Beil*—“axe” (EY *hak*); *Junge*²⁶ instead of *Bub*—“boy” (EY *yung*, *yingl*); *leb(e)*²⁷ for *Löwe*—“Lion” (EY *leyb*); *leger*²⁸ for *Lager*—“camp” (EY *geleger*); parts of south Moravia have *Knoten*, *Knode*, *Kneidl*²⁹ for *Docht*—“wick” (EY *knoyt*, *kneytl*); *louken*, *leuken*³⁰ for *leugnen*—“to deny” (EY *leykenen*); *mermilstein*³¹ for *Marmor*—“marble” (EY *mirmshteyn*); *reden*³² instead of *sprechen*—“to speak” (EY *redn*); in northern Bohemian even some *rejchern*³³ for *rauchen*—“to smoke” (EY *reykhern*); *schelten*³⁴ for *schimpfen*—“to curse” (EY *sheltn*); *swebel*³⁵ (with a *-b-*) for *Schwefel*—“sulfur” (EY *shvebl*); in north Moravia, frequent

¹⁵ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 23; Schmitt, *Urkundensprache*, 31; Alois Bernt, *Die Entstehung unserer Schriftsprache* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1934), 48.

¹⁶ DWA, vol. 3, map “Heckenrose”.

¹⁷ E. Korkisch, “Zur mittelalterlichen deutschen Kanzleisprache im Schönhengst,” *Deutsche Volksforschung in Böhmen und Mähren* 1 (1939): 190.

¹⁸ Emil Skála, “Zum Prager Deutsch des 16. Jahrhunderts,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 94 (1972): 303.

¹⁹ Schwarz, *Sudetendeutsche Sprachräume*, 199.

²⁰ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 67, 105. Franz Beranek, *Atlas der sudetendeutschen Umgangssprache*, vol. I (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag: 1970), map 75 “Der Tischler”; DWA, vol. 9, “Tischler.”

²¹ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 22; Jelinek, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 890.

²² Skála, “Zum Prager Deutsch,” 294.

²³ Schwarz, *Sudetendeutsche Sprachräume*, 115; Bernt, *Schriftsprache*, 13.

²⁴ Skála, “Zum Prager Deutsch,” 303.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* Though southern Bohemian mostly has *Bub*: Beranek, *Atlas der sudetendeutschen Umgangssprache*, map 38, “Der Junge”; DWA, vol. 4, map “Junge.”

²⁷ Jelinek, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 450.

²⁸ Schmitt, *Urkundensprache*, 31.

²⁹ DWA, vol. 18, map “Docht”.

³⁰ Franz Jelinek, *Die Sprache der Wenzelsbibel in ihrem Verhältnis zu der Sprache der wichtigsten deutschen Literatur- und Rechtsdenkmäler aus Böhmen und Mähren im XIV. Jahrhundert und der kaiserlichen Kanzlei der Luxemburger. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der neuhochdeutschen Schriftsprache* (Görz: Gedruckt in der Hilarianischen Druckerei, 1898), 68, 105.

³¹ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 22.

³² Skála, “Zum Prager Deutsch,” 303.

³³ DWA, vol. 19, map “rauchen.”

³⁴ Skála, “Zum Prager Deutsch,” 303.

³⁵ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 59; *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 701.

Töpp(e)l, Teppl, Tippl instead of Tasse—“cup” (EY *tepl*); *treher*³⁶ for *Träne*—“tear” (EY *trer*); *turkeltaube*³⁷ for *Turkeltaube*—“dove” (EY *turkltoyb*); *Ungirn*³⁸ for *Ungarn*—“Hungary” (EY *Ungern*); *weisen*³⁹ instead of *zeigen*—“to show” (EY *vayzn*); frequent *Wehtag*-forms⁴⁰ for *Weh*—“pain” (EY *veytik*); often *ze-* or *zu-* for *zer-*⁴¹ (PolY *tse-*, LitY *tsu-*); very occasional /š/ in *-nis*: *hindernusche*⁴²—“hindrance” (EY *hindernish*); occasional *um-*⁴³ for *un-* (EY *um-*); in a few parts of north Bohemia and Moravia, *kominkehrer*⁴⁴ (from Czech *komín*) for *Schornsteinfeger*—“chimney sweep” (EY *koymenkerer*); in north Moravia *Owend* (more often *Owet*)⁴⁵ for *Abend*—“evening” (EY *ovnt*). Many of these forms are widely found elsewhere, but some (like *kominkehrer* or the /š/ in *-nis*) appear to be rare and have greater diagnostic value. One corner of southwest Bohemian (North Bavarian-speaking) maintains the old kinship terms *Schwä(h)er*—“father-in-law” (EY *shver*), *Schwieger*—“mother-in-law” (EY *shviger*), *Eidam*—“son-in-law” (EY *eydem*), and *Schnur*—“daughter-in-law” (EY *shnur*).⁴⁶ But since these relics from MHG used to be common, they are not evidence for any special connection.

Because Bohemian offers such a grab bag of features from four major dialects, it is not overly surprising that it exhibits many features corresponding to EY. On the one hand, this makes it an ideal location to search for Yiddish origins, since it offers the necessary ingredients for the Yiddish “cholent.” On the other hand, the particular Yiddish combination of features does not appear to have a precursor in any one variety of Bohemian. Saying that Jews spoke “Bohemian” could, in this case, mean much the same as saying that they originally spoke Jewish varieties of Bavarian, East Franconian, Upper Saxon, and Silesian, which eventually merged into a separate idiom. What need is there to posit “Bohemian” as an intermediate stage?

Given the difficulties in tracing Yiddish dialects back even to two separate German dialects, the language tree model seems like an inadequate solution for Yiddish origins. Beider, in fact, agrees that the model is inadequate and would welcome

³⁶ Jelinek, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 722.

³⁷ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 69; Jelinek, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 339, 210.

³⁸ Schmitt, *Urkundensprache*, 30.

³⁹ Skála, “Zum Prager Deutsch,” 303.

⁴⁰ DWA, vol. 3, maps “Kopfweh” and “Zahnschmerzen”; vol. 4, map “Bauchweh”; *Sudetendeutscher Wortatlas*, ed. E. Schwarz (München: Verlag Robert Lerche, 1958), vol. 3, map 85 “Kopfweh”, map 104 “Zahnschmerzen”.

⁴¹ Bernt, *Schriftsprache*, 145.

⁴² Emil Franz Rössler, *Das Altprager Stadtrecht aus dem XIV. Jahrhunderte, nach den vorhandenen Handschriften zum ersten Mal herausgegeben und erläutert* (Prag: J. G. Clave’sche Buchhandlung, 1845), 53, 58. Though it is possible that <sch> here simply represents /s/. Karl Weinhold, *Mittelhochdeutsche Grammatik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1967 [1882]), 199.

⁴³ Jelinek, *Sprache der Wenzelsbibel*, 67.

⁴⁴ DWA, vol. 18, map “Schornsteinfeger.”

⁴⁵ *Schlesisches Wörterbuch*, ed. Walther Mitzka (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1963), vol. 3, map for “Sonnabend”, btw. pp. 1298-99.

⁴⁶ DWA, vol. 6, maps “Schwiegervater,” “Schwiegermutter,” “Schwiegersohn,” and “Schwiegertochter.”

improvements: every such model must be a simplification. He argues, however, that the language tree model is still better at explaining more system-level features of Yiddish than is Weinreich's model of development internal to Jewish languages.

Yiddish consonantism, in particular, is clearly related to that of the neighboring German dialects. The *pf* in westernmost Yiddish *kopf*—"head" and *epfel*—"apple" matches the local German, just as the *p* in EY *kop* and *epl* matches Silesian in the east. Frankfurt Yiddish even exhibits the same initial *p*- in *paif*—"pipe," *pefer*—"pepper," *punt*—"pound" as in local Rhine Franconian (unlike EY *fayf*, *fefer*, *funt*).⁴⁷ Similarly, German neutralisation of consonants occurs in roughly the same territory in westernmost Yiddish as in German.⁴⁸ Beider notes that in many cases where EY consonantism differs from Standard German (and westernmost Yiddish, for that matter), it agrees with Silesian: the *p*- in *poyer*—"peasant," *preglen*—"to fry," *pitsl*—"a tiny bit"; the *k*- in *kegn*—"against," etc. Nevertheless, it is clear from Yiddish vocalism (which is surprisingly consistent across the whole territory) that EY did not develop out of Silesian⁴⁹ and that Frankfurt Yiddish did not develop out of Rhine Franconian: it is a case of linguistic symbiosis, which could be likened to a *Sprachbund*. Weinreich probably did not find it profitable to reconstruct Proto-Yiddish precisely because it is so difficult to disentangle the internal Yiddish development from the influence of surrounding German dialects.

Under the circumstances, rather than establishing a direct genetic relationship, it would be safer simply to draw parallels between Yiddish and German dialects—hundreds of which Beider has drawn here for the first time. In the case of East Franconian, he concedes that the link may be fortuitous. But he displays more confidence in the link to Bohemian, partly for reasons of historical plausibility: it is reasonable to assume that early Ashkenazim did not move directly from western Germany to Poland, but rather migrated over generations through Bohemia, where they acquired the local dialect(s). (In a similar way, German colonists acquired the Silesian dialect during their multi-generational migration eastward into Poland.)

Beider's Bohemian scenario is plausible. Nevertheless, because Bohemian consists of four major dialects, none of which, individually, can serve as the parent language for Yiddish, it is not a particularly helpful linguistic concept. One way or another, the mix of features present in Yiddish must be assigned to different dialects. Even if the four dialects represented in Bohemian played a major role in the development of EY—which seems likely—the influence of other dialects outside of the Bohemian matrix cannot be excluded; most notably, the influence of the earlier Jewish varieties of western German dialects which, according to Beider, were spoken before the sixteenth century.

⁴⁷ Beranek, *Westjiddischer Sprachatlas*, 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, maps 28, 30.

⁴⁹ According to Beider's model, Silesian did have a secondary influence on Proto-EY consonantism, after the Bohemian-speaking Jews settled in medieval Polish towns, where Silesian-speaking German colonists already resided. However, because much of "Bohemian" itself is actually Silesian, it is unnecessary to posit this second stage of influence in order to account for Silesian features in EY.

IV.

Leaving aside Beider's attempt to find a definite origin for EY, one of the important outcomes of this project is that it can be fruitfully extended to create a comparative etymological dictionary. Such a resource would elucidate the multiple genealogies of the different Yiddish forms through a comparison among Yiddish dialects, with their German cognates, and with reference to early Yiddish sources. A thorough word-by-word comparison of the lexicon could establish more precisely the relationship among the dialects and transcend the limitations of the language tree model. Beider claims that, starting in the sixteenth century, early Yiddish sources correspond to the ancestors of two modern dialects: Southwestern Yiddish in the west and Czech Yiddish in the east. Consideration of the forms in early sources could confirm or complicate this thesis.

When the editors of the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*⁵⁰ proposed including etymologies, the Weinreichs objected to using the standard MHG forms because they would be deceptive. (Instead, they suggested leaving out etymologies altogether.) EY *epl*, for example, does not derive from standard MHG *apfel*, but, it appears, mainly from the widespread East Central German dialect form usually written *äppel* (which is not even listed in the MHG dictionary). Similarly, EY *ovnt*—"evening" does not really derive from standard MHG *âbent*, but, it seems, mainly from an East Central German form corresponding to southern Silesian (northwest Bohemian) *owend*. The forms in the other Yiddish dialects may be more closely related to other German dialects, yet to be established.

An example of what such etymologies might look like:

עפל / epl

EY /epl/

Proto-EY **epl* < MHG (East Central German) *äppel*; cf. southern Silesian (northern Bohemian) *epl*

Czech Yiddish *apl* < MHG (East Central German) *appel*; cf. southern Silesian (northern Bohemian) *apl*

Dutch Yiddish *epel* < MHG (West Central German [?]) *äppel*

Southwestern Yiddish *epfel* < MHG (Upper German) *epfel*; Elye Bokher's *Shmoys Dvorim* 1542 אפפיל

אונט / ovnt

EY, Czech Yiddish and East German Yiddish *ovnt*

Polish Yiddish, Ukrainian Yiddish /uvnt/, Lithuanian Yiddish /ovnt/; Proto-EY **ovnt* < MHG (East Central German) *âbent*, *âvent*; cf. southern Silesian (northeastern Bohemian) *owend*

Southwestern Yiddish, Dutch Yiddish *obend*; Swiss Yiddish /oubə(nd), o:bəd/; "Proto-WY" **ovnt* < MHG *âbent*; Elye Bokher's *Bovo d'Antona* 1541 אובט; *Shmoys Dvorim* 1542 אובנט; *Pariz un Viene* 1594 אובנט אוביט.

If this trick were repeated a few thousand times, Beider's theories could be definitively confirmed (or not), or at the very least we could begin to reconstruct the

⁵⁰ *Der groyser verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh*, eds. Yudel Mark and Judah A. Joffe (New York-Jerusalem: Komitet farn groysn verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh), 1961-1980. The four published volumes of the GDYL are now searchable online thanks to Raphael Finkel: <https://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/yiddish/searchGroys.cgi>

precise relationships of Yiddish dialects to each other and to East Franconian, Bohemian, and the other German dialects. The unpublished materials from the *Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry* could be of use here, since the editors planned to dedicate a future volume to WY specifically, and WY is where many of the secrets are buried. Perhaps one could also turn to the papers of Florence Guggenheim-Grünberg, who recorded extensive interviews for her own atlas of Yiddish on Alemannic territory; another resource could be the papers of Franz Beranek, since he failed to indicate his sources in his published works and, presumably, he did not just make it all up.

Until experts in Yiddish and German dialectology take up such a project, Beider's work is the best that we have. But I hope I have shown here that there is still a lot of work to do.