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YIDDISH STUDIES FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Mikhail Krutikov
translated by Saul Noam Zaritt

Abstract: *How can one promote innovation in foundational Yiddish scholarship? Mikhail Krutikov calls for the revival the intellectual relations, coordination, and exchange between the different corners of Yiddish Studies.*

Leyzer Burko's [field report from the 2014 AJS conference](#), "The Future of Yiddish Studies," touches on very important matters. In one way or another the future of Yiddish and Yiddish culture is of great concern for all of us. The question is not an abstract one—whether Yiddish will live on and in what forms—but rather a concrete question about the ways and means for ensuring continuity between today and tomorrow. In order to critique various positions expressed at the conference, our colleague Burko donned the mask of an "old-school Yiddishist." His concern is that the essential foundations for the continued growth of Yiddish scholarship are weak. His not-so-modest hope is that the great Yiddishist projects—the *Groyser verterbukh*, the general encyclopedia, the theatre lexicon—will someday be completed.

One could counter this argument by pointing to the fact that we *do* possess impressive new bibliographic and textual resources, like the [Index of Yiddish Periodicals](#) as well as the growing number of digitalized libraries of Yiddish literature, press, and audio materials. One can add to this the fact that for other branches of humanistic study such grand projects are not very popular these days either. To be sure though, the

weakness of the essential foundations of Yiddish scholarship is a justified concern, especially since Yiddish has no institutional parent, and Yiddish researchers are spread across the seven seas of the academic diaspora. To put things in historical perspective, Yiddish literature as we know it was largely a product of the technological revolution of early modern Europe, when new book printing technology helped expand the corpus of texts and readership across the continent. Today's digital revolution likewise greatly helps to expand both the availability of Yiddish materials and their potential audience. One can hope that new developments in digital humanities will make it possible to advance these stalled great projects on a new technological level.

Burko mentions in his report the thoughts of the young Yiddish scholar Saul Zaritt (editor of *In geveb* and translator of this article), that "there is a need to tell a more complicated story of Yiddish culture and to promote real innovation in the field" in order to maintain interest in Yiddish among a younger generation. And the current moment is indeed decisive in the history of Yiddish studies. A generation has arrived for whom Yiddish is not a native language and where a Yiddish cultural atmosphere is an object of study rather than a lived experience. Necessarily this new generation will have different conceptualizations of Yiddish than those who grew up in a Yiddish speaking environment, let alone those from the shtetl itself. It will be difficult—and, indeed, problematic—for the younger generation to feel and act as "natives" born and bred in the cultural "Yiddishland." And, one might add, it is only natural that each generation of Yiddishists thinks of itself as the last generation, and the tradition of such cultural pessimism has deep roots in Yiddish cultural history.

And so, how can one "promote real innovation" in Yiddish studies? This would mean, it seems, to follow the venerable maskilic tradition of adjusting to the themes and problems that are dealt with in the "larger world," sometimes even disregarding the established "tradition." This was also the way of modern Jewish culture, both in Yiddish and Hebrew, during its heyday before and after the First World War. Discontinuity has been the engine of innovation in Yiddish culture: after all, Bergelson cared little for Sholem Aleichem, and Bashevis dismissed the entirety of American Yiddish literature. The very idea of Yiddish research arose as an intellectual answer to the challenge of modern nationalism rather than out of the age-old tradition of religious study. Something similar is taking place now as well: the most innovative research today in Yiddish is precisely in those fields which inspire wider interest as in, for instance, gender studies, political theory, and Holocaust studies. One must also highlight the growth of Yiddish studies in Germany and Poland, where Yiddish has a particular role within the new problematics of tolerance and multiculturalism. The new emergence of interest in Yiddish among young Israelis seems to have similar ideological roots.

But what can we make of studies of Yiddish *lishmo*, for its own sake, as in fundamental projects in lexicography, bibliography, and the history of the Yiddish

language and literature? These subjects are in a neglected state, and one of the reasons is precisely what Burko's "old-school Yiddishist" explained. The new generation lacks the foundational education which begins in elementary and high school and is reinforced in university, just as one learns other languages with state infrastructures. This problem will not be solved easily or quickly, as the field is already beholden to the existing models of *College Yiddish* and the Yiddish summer programs, which are the best available options today. The price that is paid in order to continue Yiddish scholarship is the fragmentation of the field. The next generations of scholars will not have the comprehensive knowledge of Yiddish culture and language of their academic parents and grandparents. Certain parts of the Yiddish cultural heritage, such as modernist poetry or women's literature, will consequently be more popular than other parts. Such texts fit today's cultural agendas and methodological approaches better. In contrast, other genres, like realist prose, are likely to remain, for now, in relative neglect since the intellectual and aesthetic demand for them is meager.

What can be done then to encourage interest in Yiddish research? First of all, there is a need to revive the intellectual relations, coordination, and exchange between the different corners of our diasporic world, from Birobidzhan to Buenos Aires. In particular, American students need to overcome their linguistic provincialism and learn more about the work that is being done in other languages, first and foremost in Hebrew, German, French, and Polish, but also in Russian, Spanish, Romanian. Hopefully, *In geveb* can play a mediating role in facilitating this intellectual exchange. Through such a collective undertaking there can be an attempt to fill in the gaps in each individual's knowledge. Yiddish culture possesses a rich intellectual heritage, which can still serve as a solid foundation for the future.

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