

**Ilan Stavans and Josh Lambert, eds. *How Yiddish Changed America and How America Changed Yiddish* (Brooklyn: Restless Books Inc., 2020) 481 pp, ISBN : 978-1632062628.**

For anyone with an interest in Jewish studies, and particularly those attached to the Yiddish language, this book is a veritable treasure trove. It contains essays, poems, extracts of plays and novels, cartoons, memoirs and interviews – some translated from Yiddish, a few from other languages, but most originally written in English – all related in one way or another to the Yiddish language, or more generally to Jewish culture in America. The contributors include most of those whom you would expect to find in a pantheon of modern Yiddish letters (Singer, Asch, Chaim Grade, Irving Howe), along with a number of those you wouldn't (Emma Goldman, Allen Ginzburg, Sophie Tucker, several political cartoonists). The articles are grouped into six large sections. The first, entitled 'Politics and Possibility,' covers Ashkenazi immigrants' initial encounters with the New World; the second, 'The Mother Tongue Remixed,' addresses the effects of that encounter on the language they brought with them; the third deals with Ashkenazi cuisine; the fourth section, obscurely entitled 'American Commemoration,' focuses on the production of Yiddish writers in America, with an impressive range of samples provided in English translation; the fifth section, called 'Oy, the Children!' highlights some of the brilliant cultural figures of the following generation, who no longer wrote in Yiddish; and the last section includes articles by authors from Canada and Latin America. Each section and every article is prefaced by a short introduction, which includes, where appropriate, the name and pedigree of the translator.

In an anthology of this scope, selecting a few articles that stand out as exceptional is no easy task. There's a delightful short story by Grace Paley entitled "Goodbye and Good Luck"; and Cynthia Ozick has a remarkable essay on Sholem Aleichem's literary revolution. In it, Ozick notes: "Yiddish is as amenable to translation as any other language – though that may mean, despite certain glorious exceptions, not very." Alas, as a translator myself, I have to agree with Ozick; many of the pieces translated from the Yiddish are not quite up to the standard of glorious. One notable exception, however, is the translation of Jacob Glatstein's short story, "Summoned Home," which is so good that it's difficult to imagine it having been originally written in another language. For those unfamiliar with "Maus," Art Spiegelman's powerful graphic novel, there is a short four-page extract which will hopefully send readers back to the original. Among the four Canadian contributions, two merit special mention: Naomi Seidman's insightful essay entitled "Is Hebrew Male and Yiddish Female?," in which she explores the origins of this fanciful notion; and Goldie Morgentaler's "Bontshe Shvayg in Lethbridge," in which she delicately describes teaching Jewish literature to non-Jewish students in conservative Alberta.

One criticism that could be directed at this volume has to do with its catchy title and the claim it makes that Yiddish actually changed America. Now the editors make the questionable claim that Yiddish is both a language *and* a culture, but no dictionary that I consulted agrees with them on this; they all define the noun solely as a language.<sup>2</sup> So did that language actually bring about significant changes in America, as the first half of this book's title suggests? That is highly doubtful; and in fact, the articles in this collection provide little or no evidence for the truth of such a claim. What is far less doubtful, on the other hand, is that many of those immigrant *speakers of Yiddish*, along with their descendants, did exert a disproportionate influence on the countries of the American continent and may indeed have brought about significant changes there. Notice, however, that we're not talking about the language here; rather, the agents of those purported changes were people who happened to speak Yiddish. Would their impact have been any less had they all suddenly decided to speak Polish or Esperanto? Probably not...

Why is this important? As it turns out, the book under review contains several instances of this kind of 'slippage' or systematic ambivalence, whereby the properties or achievements of people are somehow attributed to the Yiddish language itself. Consider the following, taken from the aforementioned essay by Cynthia Ozick on Shalom Aleichem:

It is hard to be pretentious or elevated in Yiddish, and easy to poke fun. Yiddish is especially handy for satire, cynicism, familiarity, abuse, sentimentality, and resignation, for a sense of high irony, and for putting people in their place and events in bitter perspective: all the defensive verbal baggage an involuntary migratory nation is likely to need *en route* to the next temporary refuge. In its tenderer mien, Yiddish is capable of a touching conversational intimacy with a consoling and accessible God... Yiddish is a household tongue, and God, like other members of the family, is sweetly informal in it. (p.315)

What are we to make of such statements? That it is more difficult for people to formulate an elevated oration in Yiddish than in some other language? Or conversely, that it is somehow easier to poke fun of someone in Yiddish than it is, say, in English? What does it mean for a language to be a household tongue? Are there any languages<sup>3</sup> that aren't household tongues? From a linguistic and/or philosophical point of view, such assertions appear impossible to validate.

Or consider Bashevis Singer's celebrated remark, given in his 1978 Nobel acceptance speech, that Yiddish is "a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics..." Let us assume for the moment that the assertion is true. (My English-Yiddish dictionary tells me it isn't.) What exactly was Singer trying to suggest here? That Ashkenazi Jews are such a peace-loving lot that their language can't even express notions akin to war and aggression? Which is clearly a pile of *nareshkeit*. Rather, this seems another instance of the kind of 'slippage' I was

referring to above, this time confusing an historical contingency – the fact that European Jews were seldom if ever in positions of power – with an inherent property of their language. Again, the important point is this: People are responsible for their actions, good or bad, whatever language they speak; but the language itself is innocent, or neutral (if you prefer).<sup>4</sup> As a linguist I feel very strongly about this.

If there is one area in which the Yiddish language did unquestionably bring about an observable change in America, it was in English, the language of the dominant majority. Is there any need to list the many lexical borrowings that English has imported from Yiddish over the years? (Dubious readers can consult a lengthy Wikipedia article on that very topic.) More intriguing, perhaps, are the non-lexical Yiddish constructions – some syntactic, others intonational – that have also been adopted by English. Several of these are described in Ilan Stavan's article on Leo Rosten, the author of *The Joys of Yiddish*, still a best-seller more than fifty years after its initial publication. Among the wonderful examples Rosten cites in his introduction to *The Joys*, there is: "Derisive dismissal disguised as innocent interrogation: 'I should pay him for such devoted service?'" (p.121) So yes, Yiddish has had a definite *linguistic* impact on American English and its other regional variants – although earth-shattering, it isn't.

What about the second half of the book's conjoined title, which focuses on the changes Yiddish has undergone since its arrival in America? Here, we are on more solid empirical ground, because serious linguistic studies have been conducted documenting, for example, the decline of the Yiddish case system among Hasidic speakers of Yiddish.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, none of these studies are mentioned in the present anthology. In fact, not a single word of Yiddish appears in this volume's 480 pages, which is surely somewhat surprising.

A final word on this hardcover edition put out by Restless Books, with support from the Yiddish Book Center. Although many of the articles can be individually accessed on the internet and elsewhere, it is certainly convenient to have them all gathered together and printed on quality paper in this fine volume. At \$29.95 USD, it's a real *metsiehl*!

**Elliott Macklovitch**

Université de Montréal

**1**

No fan of Ashkenazi cuisine, I confess to not having read any of the articles in this section.

**2**

Here is the entry for the noun Yiddish in Webster's Third International, for example: "A High German language spoken by Jews chiefly in eastern Europe and areas to which Jew from eastern Europe have migrated...". And the following entry for the adjective reads: "of, relating to, or characteristic of Yiddish <a Yiddish word>, < Yiddish newspapers>, < Yiddish literature>". Note the class of nouns being modified here.

**3**

Latin perhaps; but surely this is the exception that confirms the rule.

**4**

Sholem Asch and Michael Chabon fully understood this. The characters in their works included in the anthology - a brothel owner in the first case and a group of policemen in the second - behave just as we would expect such characters to behave, regardless of the fact that they converse in Yiddish.

**5**

"Complete loss of case and gender within two generations: evidence from Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish," Zoë Belk et al., *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics*, November 2020.