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Yiddish, or Jewish German?

The Holocaust, the Goethe-Institut, and Germany's Neglected Obligation to Peace and the Common European Cultural Heritage

Ідыш, або габрэйскі нямецкі?¹

Халакост, Інстытут імя Гётэ, і занядбанае абавязачельства
Германіі да міру і агульнай эўрапейскай культурнай спадчыны

Abstract: The vast majority of Holocaust victims and survivors were Ashkenazim. Their main language was Yiddish. Yiddish is very close to German, the main difference being that the former is written in Hebrew letters, while the latter in Latin ones. Postwar Europe's moral foundation is Holocaust remembrance. But this remembrance to be effective, it must be active in the absence of Holocaust survivors. A way to ensure that could be the novel school and university subject of Yiddish for reading purposes. As a result, researchers and interested Europeans would start reading documents and books in Yiddish again. Germany's premiere cultural organization, Goethe-Institut, is uniquely well-placed and morally obligated to facilitate the relaunch, popularization and cultivation of the skill to read Yiddish-language sources and publications for both the sake of research and for pleasure.

Keywords: Europe, Goethe-Institut, Holocaust remembrance, *Katastrofe*, Yiddish

Рэзюмэ: Пераважная большасць ахвяр і тых, хто выжыў, былі ашкеназі. Іх асноўнай мовай быў ідыш. Ідыш вельмі блізкі да нямецкай мовы, галоўнае адрозненне заключаецца ў тым, што першая напісана іўрытскімі літарамі, а другая – лацінскімі. Маральны падмурак пасляваеннай Еўропы – памяць пра Халакост. Але гэта памяць для таго, каб быць эфектыўнай, яна павінна быць актыўнай у адсутнасць тых, хто перажыў Халакост. Спосаб гарантаваць гэта можа быць новы школьны і ўніверсітэцкі предмет ідыш для чытання. У выніку даследчыкі і зацікаўленыя эўрапейцы зноў пачнуць чытаць дакументы і кнігі на ідыш. Прэм'ерная культурная арганізацыя Германіі, Інстытут імя Гётэ, мае унікальнае становішча і маральна абавязана садзейнічаць перазапуску, папулярызаванню і развіццю навыку чытання крыніц і публікацый на ідыш як для даследаванняў, так і для задавальнення.

Ключавыя словы: ідыш, Інстытут імя Гётэ, Катастрофа, памяць пра Халакост, Эўропа

¹ The author chooses to include an abstract in Belarusian to express solidarity with the prodemocracy protesters in Belarus, 2020–21.

Introduction²

After World War II, the Holocaust and its remembrance became the foundation of renewed political and civic morality in postwar Europe and across the West, as epitomized by the heartfelt pleas: “Never again” and “Lest we forget.” Until recently, voices of quite numerous Holocaust survivors used to function as a corrective for discrediting any political statement or project that veered too closely to the no-go danger zone of fascism, nazism, populism, authoritarianism, racism, institutionalized discrimination, or totalitarianism. However, now, seven and a half decades after the war, last survivors will depart soon. We will be left alone with their all-important legacy. If we do not take this never-ending obligation seriously, merely rhetorical repeats of pledges and ritualized commemorations will not make Europe immune to another genocide, ethnic cleansing or totalitarianism. Holocaust survivors’ legacy will be squandered. It is us – Europeans – who consciously and painstakingly must act upon and cultivate this legacy, if we wish to continue employing it for shielding us and future generations from another descent into darkness. Paying passive respects to the Holocaust is not an option. It will not do. The new, eleventh, commandment for the time without Holocaust survivors is “Thou shalt not be indifferent” (Turski 2020).

This essay takes up the challenge of this moral and very existential dilemma. One of the curious moral blind spots in present-day Europe is the ossified collocation “Judeo-Christian values,” which is invoked time and again as the spring fount of Europe’s civilization and culture (Kamusella 2020). Yet, neither the Hebrew script, nor a single Jewish language is taught and employed as a matter of course in Europe’s schools or universities. Scandalously, nowadays, not a single Jewish language enjoys official status in the European Union, or any European country. The “Judeo” leg of the continent’s supposedly “Judeo-Christian” values is observed in breach and remains bereft of any practical meaning. Even more tragically for our burden of active Holocaust remembrance, the German-cum-European Genocide of Jews is studied mostly through sources written in German and other European languages, such as Czech, Dutch, French, Polish, Russian, Slovak or Ukrainian. But German is the language of the (main) perpetrators, while the other ones are languages of bystanders-cum-facilitators-cum-beneficiaries (Gross 2018, 901).

What about the Jewish language(s) of Holocaust victims and survivors? In the vast majority of cases it was Yiddish. A vast

² I thank Anna Kałuza for welcoming this essay to *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne*, my two peer reviewers for their corrections and suggestions for improvement, and Tomasz Kalaga for smoothing the rough edges of my prose. Obviously, I am responsible for any remaining infelicities.

galaxy of Yiddish-language books, periodicals, newspapers and other types of publications has been neglected and let go to waste in Europe. Fortunately, in the United States, the National Yiddish Book Center (Amherst MA) saved most of this endangered heritage at the very last moment, during the 1980s and 1990s (Lansky 2004). Several European archives and research institutes also preserved some Yiddish-language handwritten and book collections of import (cf. Jewish Historical Institute, n.d.). Hence, one way of active Holocaust remembrance could be to develop the school and university subject of Yiddish for reading purposes. Obviously, it is the responsibility of all Europeans. Yet, Germany's premiere cultural institution, namely, the Goethe-Institut, is uniquely well-placed and morally obligated to facilitate the relaunch, popularization and cultivation of the skill to read Yiddish-language sources and publications, both for the sake of research and for pleasure.

From Ethnic Cleansing to Embracement

In 1492, the Emirate of Granada (إمارة غرناطة, *Imārat Ġarnāṭah*) fell into the hands of crusaders. After over seven centuries, the history of multicultural Muslim Iberia came to an end. The success of the Christian Reconquista was followed by the flight and subsequent expulsions of remaining Muslims and Jews. The Christian kingdoms of Portugal and Spain were to become "pure" in their faith, that is, homogenously Catholic. Even those Muslims and Jews who had converted to Christianity, so-called "New Christians," were not safe. Expulsions of Moriscos ("Moors") and Conversos ("Converts") – or descendants of Muslim and Jewish converts, respectively – recurred through the early seventeenth century. Most Jewish expellees went to North Africa and the Levant, where they were warmly welcomed by rulers of Morocco and the Ottoman Empire. The Sephardim community, as they came to be known, have retained to this day their Romance tongue of Spanyol ("Jewish Spanish"), or *Judeoespañol* in Spanish and ג'ודיאו-איספאניול, *djudeo-espanyol*, in Spanyol itself. The Sephardic community (יהדות ספרד, *Yahadut Sefarad*) of about 2.3 million constitutes one-sixth of all the Jews. Nowadays, most Sephardim (1.4 million) live in Israel, but sizeable communities of 400,000 and 300,000 members thrive in France and the United States, respectively (eSefarad, n.d.).

After more than half a millennium, Lisbon and Madrid finally had a change of heart. The Portuguese and Spanish states expressed their sincere regret at what had happened, and extended heartfelt apologies to Sephardim (but, *not* to Muslims of Iberian-Andalusian origin). Furthermore, in atonement for this crime of ethnic cleansing, in 2015, these two governments offered an easy-

track to Portuguese and Spanish citizenship for the descendants of the Jewish expellees (Consulate of Spain in Los Angeles, n.d.; BBC News 2015). All Sephardim are welcome to apply. Madrid even rolled back by two years the cut-off deadline for applications, from 2019 to 2021 (Jewish News 2020). Over 30,000 Sephardim applied for Portuguese citizenship (Grimley 2019), and as many as 130,000 for Spanish citizenship (Jones 2019).

However, recently, the Spanish authorities came to a conclusion that a mere offer of citizenship is too little too late. That passive acceptance is a faulty sort of tolerance. Instead, the ball is still in Spain's court to prove that the country and its inhabitants truly embrace their Sephardic co-citizens, including their culture and history. In order to ameliorate this deficiency, in 2020, the Instituto Cervantes established a branch in Thessaloniki (Salonika), Greece (Instituto Cervantes 2020). Until the Holocaust (or more correctly, Shoah, that is, שואה *šō'āh*, "catastrophe" in Hebrew), this was the world's largest Sephardic city. At 60,000 Jewish inhabitants used to constitute the plurality of Thessaloniki's population in 1940. Today, the community of a mere 1,200 Sephardim remains in Greece's second largest city. Madrid founded the Instituto Cervantes in 1991 for the sake of promoting Spanish language and culture around the world. Now, this institute's Thessaloniki branch is tasked, first of all, with preserving and teaching Spanyol, alongside the cultivation of Sephardic heritage. However, the teaching and propagation of Spanyol among non-Jewish Greeks is also high on the agenda (Jones 2020).

Yiddishland

Ashkenazic Jews (אשכנזים, *Ashkenazim* in Yiddish, or יהודי אשכנזי, *Y'hudey Ashkenaz* in Hebrew) add up to four-sixths of all the world's Jews, that is, around 10 million. Nowadays, half of them live in the United States, a quarter in Israel, while in Europe the largest Ashkenazic communities (in excess of 200,000 members) reside in Britain, Germany and France (DellaPergola 2019). From the Middle Ages to the Shoah, they used to create a vibrant and multicultural European civilization in the midst of the continent. In the wake of the Black Death, often blamed on Jews, Western Europe's monarchies sought political and transcendental safety in Christian confessional homogeneity. As a result, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Ashkenazim were expelled from England, France, or the Holy Roman Empire. They found safe haven in Central Europe's polyconfessional and multiethnic realms of Poland-Lithuania and Hungary. The ready acceptance of Jews in Central Europe, sharply contrasted with their repeated expulsions from Iberia, and thus earned Poland-Lithuania the Jewish sobriquet of פּוֹלין, *Polin*. It may be interpreted as a sup-

posed message from God that reads פה קו “here” לין lin “[you should] dwell” or “rest [here].”

Askenazim’s intensely literate civilization extended from what today is Estonia in the north to Romania in the south, and from the Czech Republic in the west to Ukraine in the east. Due to the civilization’s language of Yiddish, this invisible continent of Ashkenazic culture is now often referred to as יידישלאַנד, Yiddishland. The core of Yiddishland was located in present-day Lithuania, Belarus, central and eastern Poland, eastern Slovakia, western Ukraine, eastern Hungary, northern Romania and Moldova (cf. *Der Verbreitung* 1881; Lemée 2018). Ashkenazim constituted pluralities and even majorities of the inhabitants of towns and cities in this core area. Unfortunately, during the Great War, the bloodiest – or eastern – front between the Central Powers and the Russian Empire cut through Yiddishland. Subsequently, the largely porous imperial frontiers that had separated Ashkenazic communities were replaced with more numerous and jealously guarded frontiers of nation-states in quest for ethnolinguistic “purity.” Yiddishland became radically fragmented. In the course of the two brief interwar decades, Ashkenazim found themselves caught between the rock of Central Europe’s increasingly authoritarian nationalisms and the hard place of Soviet totalitarianism. Finally, in the hellish fires of World War II, totalitarian Germany and its allies from across occupied Europe perpetrated the greatest of crimes, the planned Genocides of Jews and Roma (Open Society Foundations 2019; Mémorial de la Shoah, n.d.).

At seven to eight million, the population of Europe’s Ashkenazim in the mid-1930s was equal to that of the Netherlands (Council of Europe 1971, 3). However, the Yiddish culture with its centers in New York, Warsaw, Wilno (Vilnius), Budapest, Miensk, Kyiv, Moscow, or Leningrad (St Petersburg) was definitely more worldly and sophisticated than its Dutch counterpart. Yiddish publishers, newspapers, music record producers, theaters, film producers, schools, sports and culture organizations, political parties, research institutes, radio stations, or music halls created, modernized and constantly reshaped Yiddishland and its culture. All the European classics – Austen, Cervantes, Dante, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Goethe, Mickiewicz, Pushkin, Shakespeare, or Zola – were steadily translated into Yiddish. In turn, the modern classics of Yiddish literature – be it Sholem Aleichem (Rabinovich), Asch, Bergelson, Der Nister (Kahanovich), Katzenelson, Kreitman, Kulbak, Molodowsky, Peretz, Sforim (Abramovich), Singer, or Sutzkever – were translated into English, German, French, or Russian. Unlike a typical reader of Dutch, Italian or Polish books, their Yiddish counterpart juggled at least two, and, more often than not, even three, four or five languages at the same time. In their customary polyglotism, Yiddish-language readers and in-

tellelectuals were more European than the majority of non-Jewish Europeans, typically enclosed in the monolingual compartment of their language and culture.

From Genocide to Rhetoric

The Shoah cost six million Jews their lives. In their majority, the victims were Ashkenazim. After World War II no survivors were expected or wanted by their Christian neighbors. Jewish survivors' former home towns and non-Jewish neighbors turned a cold back to them, or even chased away returning Jews, or murdered them in pogroms. Nothing doing. The victorious Allies pretended not to see. They had more pressing issues to attend to than Auschwitz or Buchenwald. The unfolding of the Cold War overshadowed the Shoah. This East-West confrontation somehow "justified" the freeing of leading nazis from prisons and co-opting them in the administration, industry and education of West Germany, Austria, or East Germany. Anti-Semitic campaigns suppressed any remaining vestiges of Jewish life across the Soviet bloc and sent remaining survivors into exile. Shoah survivors were hounded out from Europe, so that their presence would not keep reminding self-righteous Christian perpetrators and bystanders about their *magnum crimen* (great crime). So that Christian Europeans would not need to face any pangs of conscience and could become safely reassured in their self-declared Europeaness of "high culture," "civilizedness," and "haute culture." The two most obvious choices of emigration for unwilling Jewish expellees and refugees from Europe's Yiddishland were either Israel (founded in 1948), or the United States (cf. Miller 1986; Miller 2019).

Who today remembers that in Yiddish the Shoah is referred to as קאַטאַסטרױפֿע or *Katastrofe* (Catastrophe)? Hence, to the majority of survivors (alongside historians who emerged from their ranks) it was the *Katastrofe*, not Shoah (Smith 2019). It was the Yiddish-speaking and writing Ashkenazic historian Mark Dworzecki, who in 1959 established the world's first-ever Chair in *Katastrofe* Studies at Bar-Ilan University, near Tel Aviv (Cohen 2015). The nazi Genocide of Jews, and the anti-Semitic expulsions of survivors after the war destroyed Yiddishland, its culture and language. Yet, no European statesman, high-ranking hierarch of any Christian Church, or writer of all-European stature cared to express, or at least feign, any surprise or a deep regret. The finality of the made-in-Germany *Endlösung* (final solution) of the "Jewish problem" seemed to suit all non-Jewish Europeans. The future-oriented Israel was not interested in the *Katastrofe*, either; while its voice in the international arena did not really count until the Eichmann Trial in the early 1960s (United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum, n.d.). A timid revival of Yiddish language and culture in communist Poland was cut short in 1968, when the Jewish cultural institutions and schools were closed down, and most of the remaining Jews were repressed and expelled from the country (Sieradzka 2018). Sadly, in Israel, ideologically wed to the Zionist ideal of Jewish monolingualism in Hebrew, there was no place for Yiddish, either (Kafriksen 2019). (As late as 1983, Yiddish began to be taught in this country at Bar-Ilan University [Department of Literature of Jewish People, n.d.].) America alone offered a safe haven for Yiddish language and culture, but no active support that would prevent the rapid decline in the use of this language. If two-thirds of the Dutch were exterminated, and entire Dutch language and culture were destroyed in such a wholesale manner in the span of a mere four to five years, would Europe and the world remain so unmoved by such an event, so deafeningly silent? I doubt it. I believe that an avalanche of protests and condemnations would not cease, because genocide of a Christian people in the midst of Europe would be an altogether different matter. It would be radically different from the genocide of the Jews in the center of the civilized continent of Europe, wouldn't it? Let us face this reality of badly concealed hypocrisy and double standards.

Unlike Portugal or Spain, reunited Germany had to be shamed in order to face up to its responsibilities entailed by the *Katastrofe* (Whitehouse 2019), including the provision of German citizenship for repressed German Jews and their descendants (Connolly 2019). Unfortunately, to this day, Berlin has not considered extending an offer of German citizenship to all Jews and their descendants repressed and exterminated on Berlin's orders across Germany-occupied Europe. However, during the last three decades that followed the end of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, it at least has appeared that Germany has become an increasingly welcoming country for Jewish immigrants, students or professionals. The Berlin Jewish community grew rapidly to 30,000 (Strack 2018). However, the steady rise of anti-Semitic sentiments in Germany and across Europe since 2015 (Riegert 2019) reversed this growth (Goldberg 2015). The 2019 synagogue shooting in Halle was a wake-up call (DW 2020). Europe's sole sizable Jewish community not directly touched by the *Katastrofe* is located in Britain. But anti-Semitism is definitely on the rise also in this country (Elgot, Stewart, and O'Carroll 2020).

In 2019, Europe's currently most respected statesperson, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, decided to oppose this widespread increase in anti-Semitism, intolerance and xenophobia. She went on a highly symbolic visit to Auschwitz (Strack 2019) and gave a heartfelt speech:

Auschwitz. This name stands for the millions of European Jews who were murdered, for the betrayal of all civilised values that was the Shoah. [...] Remembering the crimes, naming the perpetrators and commemorating the victims in dignity is an unending responsibility. It is non-negotiable, and it belongs inseparably to our country [Germany]. [...] [W]e need to state this more clearly: we will not tolerate anti-Semitism. Everyone must be able to feel safe and at home in Germany, in Europe. [...] We, all of us bear responsibility. And that responsibility includes remembrance. We must never forget. No line can ever be drawn under this past, nor can it ever be downplayed. [...] We remember the six million murdered Jews and here in particular the around one million Jews who were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. [...] I bow my head before these individuals. I bow my head before the victims of the Shoah. I bow my head before their families. (Merkel 2019)

But remembering, commemorating, and bowing one's head before the victims' families is not enough. It is just words, words, words. Uprooting anti-Semitism is a more promising attitude of relevance for the present and future of Germany and Europe.

What is Missing?

Commonly, Yiddish is treated as a dead language, though Hassidic communities across the world use it as the language of their everyday communication. So, at least 700,000 people speak Yiddish each day, half of them in Israel and the other half in the United States, with some noticeable communities in Britain or Belgium (Wodziński and Spallek 2019, 212–213). In 1997, the Steven Spielberg Yiddish Library was launched, and at present offers 12,000 digitized Yiddish-language publications (Digital Yiddish Library, n.d.). Across Central and Eastern Europe various libraries and research institutions offer digitized Yiddish-language press titles and archival documents, including the monumental Ringelblum Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, n.d.). Yet, more often than not, scholars specializing in the Holocaust Studies, World War II, Central and Eastern European history, or even the Jewish Studies have no working command of Yiddish.

To most this curious and rarely pondered fact does not appear shocking, given that Europe's Jews are still treated as though they were a colonial people that do not properly belong to the continent of Europe and its civilization. Studying the history of colonized peoples solely through the lens of the colonizers' languages is still a sad norm. Hence, a typical student of US history

does not know Navajo, or a student of the Rwandan Genocide is unable to read Kinyarwanda. In Europe such a blasé attitude can be observed only with regard to Roma and Jewish history. On the contrary, it would be unthinkable for a scholar specializing in the Netherlands or Italy *not* to have a working command of Dutch and Italian, respectively. No peer would treat them seriously, and they could not count on any university or research positions in these fields.

The sole European country that treats Yiddish language and culture seriously is Sweden (cf. Sveriges Jiddischförbund, n.d.). Traditionally, Sweden was never part of Yiddishland. But during and after World War II, many Jews and *Katastrofe* survivors found safe haven in this country. Likewise, numerous expellees from communist Poland's renewed postwar Yiddishland decided to leave for Sweden in 1968, instead of America or Israel, which appeared to them too un-European and foreign (Andersz and Górnio 2018). Since 1976, activities of Sweden's Yiddish-speakers have been coordinated by the Sveriges Jiddischförbund (League for Yiddish in Sweden) (Yiddish Sources, n.d.). On this basis, in 1999, Stockholm took the decision to recognize Yiddish as one of this country's minority languages (alongside Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani and the three Saami languages) (Yudelson 2019). Under the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, apart from Sweden, six other countries recognize Yiddish as a minority language. Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine used to be the original home of Yiddishland, which is not the case of Bosnia, Finland and the Netherlands (Council of Europe 2020).

Nowadays Sweden is Europe's (and actually, the world's) sole country where Yiddish-language institutions, services and resources are readily available, constantly developed and supported by the state. Many Swedish institutions offer information to users in Yiddish, including the country's National Library (National Library of Sweden, n.d.). Non-Yiddish-speaking parents may request lessons of Yiddish for their children attending public schools on the basis that it is one of the country's *arvspråken* (heritage languages) (Schwarz 2018). The positive and proactive environment has led to a small publishing boom in Yiddish children books (Ingall 2019), and in the production of Yiddish music videos, especially to facilitate the learning of this language (Kotzik 2017). Out of Sweden's 25,000 Jews, around a fifth can at least understand Yiddish (Kopjick 2012). Perhaps 2,000 of them speak and write this language actively, which may be a good basis for a revival of cultural Yiddishland in today's Europe (El-Roeiy 2015).

Germany's and Europe's Obligation

The aforementioned Instituto Cervantes is at the forefront of the preservation and development of Spanyol, or Jewish Spanish. Sweden has supported the revival of Yiddish, and the Steven Spielberg Library has gathered and made available to all the neglected wealth of Yiddish-language books and periodicals. Where does Germany find itself in this unique process of cultural transfer and cultivation, beyond the ritualized rhetoric of remembrance, regret and oft-repeated apologies to *Katastrofe* survivors and their families? Should not the Goethe-Institut (founded in 1951 [Goethe-Institut, n.d]) with its 150 branches strewn across the globe (Goethe-Institut, n.d.) bolster and popularize the knowledge of Yiddish? Would it not matter more than another high-principled speech or monument? Words alone do not suffice.

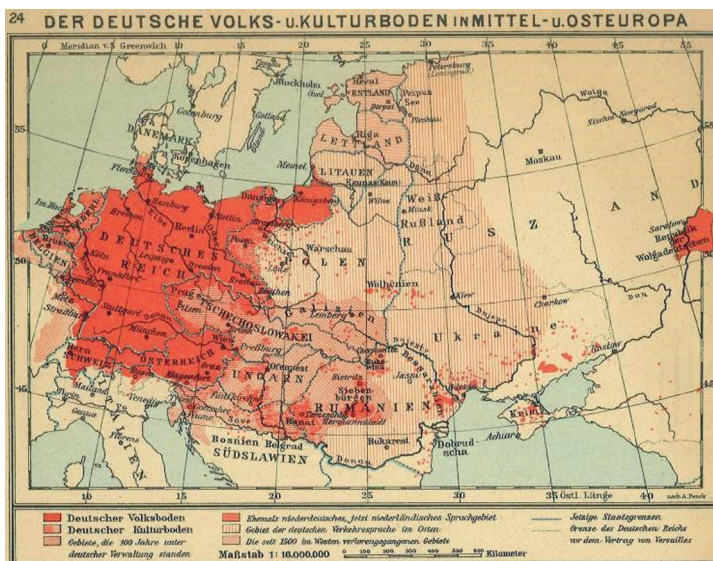


Figure 1. German nation and language in Europe (Böttcher 1930)

The name of Yiddish (ייִדיש) is an abbreviation from the original German-language name, *Jüdisch-Deutsch*, or “Jewish German.” In vocabulary, grammar and history, Yiddish is closer to German than Dutch. Actually, German and Yiddish share the same dialectal base of *Mittelhochdeutsch* (Middle High German) which, at present, extends from Luxembourg and Trier in the west to Dresden and Leipzig in the east (Witmore 2016, 14). As such, Yiddish is more similar to standard German than many German dialects, be it Niederdeutsch (Lower German) in northern Germany (Gooskens, Kürschner, and Bezooijen 2011), Bavarian in Bavaria and Austria, or Alemannic in Switzerland (Wikimedia Commons 2008). In the interwar period, despite growing anti-Semitism, German textbooks and atlases included ubiquitous maps of the geographic extent of the use of the German language (Figure 1).

They proudly showed that people spoke German from eastern France to the Volga in the Soviet Union, and from Finland and Leningrad (St Petersburg) in the north to Trieste, the Danube and the northern Black Sea littoral in the south (Kamusella 2019). Obviously, in the eastern three-quarters of this area users of German were none other than Ashkenazic Jews in their majority (cf. Figure 2). They would typically refer to their language as Yiddish rather than German. But a German- and a Yiddish-speaker do not have many problems in communicating, apart from some Slavic and Hebrew words not employed in standard German (Ikhveysnit 2010) The standards of both languages share the same dialectal base of Middle German(ic) (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. Map of traditional dialects of Yiddish (in Russian) (Koryakov 2008)
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yiddish-dialects-ru.png>
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Hence, the sole serious hurdle to accessing Yiddish that needs to be scaled is the script, namely, Hebrew letters used for writing this language. In a way, it could be said that Yiddish is a German language written in the Hebrew writing system. By the same token, German is a Yiddish language written in the Latin alphabet. Yiddish is a Jewish German, while German is a Christian Yiddish. To a degree, both tongues are the two sides of the same single coin of the biscriptal Yiddish-German language. Switching between Hebrew and Latin characters is just a technical issue of mastering twenty-odd letters in the other script. Not a big deal in the larger scheme of things social and political. In former Yugoslavia, each educated person could read and write the country's main official language of Serbo-Croatian in both its official alphabets, Cyrillic and Latin. Nowadays, the post-Yugoslav lan-

guages of Montenegrin and Serbian are also written in these two alphabets as a matter of course. An educated Montenegrin or a Serb does not even notice in which script a perused newspaper or book happens to have been published.



Figure 3. A map of the Central German Dialect/Mitteldeutsche Mundarten nach 1945 (ohne Pennsylvaniadeutsch, Siebenbürgisch-Sächsisch) (Brichtig 2012) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mitteldeutsche_Mundarten.png Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0 Unported)

The Goethe-Institut is best placed to take up the challenge of representing and promoting the Jewish – or rather Central European – three quarters (in spatial terms) of the common Yiddish-German language. The first step would be to prepare bicultural Latin-Hebrew, teaching materials for learners to master the Hebrew script of Yiddish-German. This, alongside a list of vocabulary and grammatical differences between Yiddish and German,

would be a ready basis for spreading the reading skill in Yiddish across Germany and other Germanophone countries. Yet, the real challenge for the Goethe-Institut would be to revive the heritage of Yiddish culture and a command of Yiddish in Yiddishland's pre-*Katastrofe* centers. Interwar Europe's ten cities with the largest number of Yiddish-speaking Jews were, if ranked, Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, Odesa, Łódź, Berlin, Wilno (Vilnius), Chişinău, Miensk and Iaşi (Magocsi 2002, 109). It would be a must for the Goethe-Institut's branches to focus more on Yiddish than German alone in these once largest centers of Yiddish culture, which would obviously also include New York City.

Devoting a tenth of the Goethe-Institut's branches to promoting Yiddish does not appear to be a big ask. Yet, it would be a welcome proactive step. A small step toward making amends for the irreparable destruction wreaked by the *Katastrofe*, which Germany and the Germans (alongside the Austrians and other Europeans) perpetrated during the war. A step that would finally transcend the boringly passive and ritualized rhetoric of Holocaust remembrance. What is atonement good for without reparations? But almost no *Katastrofe* survivors are still around to whom indemnification could be paid. What remains instead is this pale apparition of Yiddishland on the Swedish life support, into which a second life could easily be breathed. Hand in hand with Yiddishland, Yiddish-German used to be a world language before the *Katastrofe* (cf. Viereck, Viereck, Ramisch, and Wildermuth 2002, 244, diagram A). Bereft of its Jewish three-quarters, the Yiddish-less German of nowadays is a mere official language in several Western European countries. The tongue's romance and promise of dynamic and attractive multiculturalism open to the world are gone. Yet, it is possible to regain these sought-for values.

A critic may opine: "Impractical dreams." Johann Wolfgang Goethe's younger colleague of Jewish origin, Heinrich Heine, would strongly disagree. As early as 1821, more than a century before the *Katastrofe*, Heine presciently prophesized that "[w]here they burn books, they will in the end also burn people" (Heine, in Tzitzikos 2017). No civil servant burns or calls for burning books in today's Germany or Austria. On the contrary, the state institutions and school curricula in both countries resoundingly condemn intolerance and extol the freedom of speech and of conscience. But is not the willful forgetting about Yiddishland – these three-quarters of common Yiddish-German, the tens of thousands of Yiddish publications and millions of documents in Yiddish – a tacit form of "book burnings," a form of dumping the most European of modern Europe's cultures onto the heap of history?

The danger is that by doing this we all may sleepwalk into a repeat of the darkest of the continent's pasts. The bottom line, an indispensable inoculation to this ever-present danger, is "Yid-

dish for reading purposes.” Such a versatile and multi-purpose subject could be offered – with the *Heine-Goethe-Institut*’s generous assistance – as a matter of course at universities, at least to students of modern European history and culture, of German philology (*Germanistik*), of the *Katastrofe* studies and of human rights. This would be a good beginning, a proverbial first step in the right direction – a step towards light and away from Europe’s genocidal twentieth century.

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