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CURIOSITIES
OF
YIDDISH LITERATURE

By

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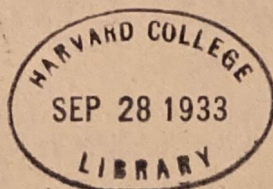
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TO THE MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER

WHOSE NATURAL RESIST-
ANCE TO THE CURRENT
OF ASSIMILATION HAS PRE-
SERVED FOR HER SON
VISTAS OF A RECEDING
CULTURE, THUS ENABLING
HIM TO FORGE ANOTHER
LINK IN THE ENDLESS
CHAIN WHICH KEEPS AN
ANCIENT PEOPLE ALIVE
AND FREE.

FOREWORD

This book may strike both critic and reader as peculiar. First of all the purpose of the publication will puzzle them, and then again the nature of its contents.

On the surface it certainly looks like propaganda for Yiddish. But propaganda is always frowned upon, except when countries pay millions annually for the booming and boosting of their policies and cultures in other lands. There is scarcely a state which does not indulge in this sort of traffic; and the minor countries are very lavish with their funds in this respect, considering their limited means.

To speak of propaganda in connection with the Yiddish culture is like accusing an unemployed workingman of profiteering. No, the very thought of propaganda coupled with Yiddish must evoke a smile, for there are no funds even to preserve the valuable material that has already accumulated in spite of adverse conditions, let alone the luxury of creating a favorable impression abroad. If in these pages I can do something to offset the terrible injustice done to the culture of ten or more million Jews whose brains and purse-strings are not coordinated and whose spokesmen have not the power to levy taxes nor the ability to compete with the

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political and religious organizations in raising money for a cause which is at the very foundation of Jewish survival—if then this little publication can do something toward gaining a better understanding of the Jewish folk-spirit, then I shall consider my task not an altogether thankless one.

It is not propaganda, but a sense of justice which prompts me to place on record a number of facts and to bring into the compass of a single volume, a collection of utterances on the subject of Yiddish by a galaxy of men whose fame equals their monumental achievements in various fields of science and scholarship.

The utter contempt with which Yiddish has been treated by the educated Jew and the systematic neglect which has fallen to its lot in academic circles, as well as the natural indifference of the masses to its destiny, have induced me to bring to the fore some odd bits of information, as well as not a few significant observations on the present status of Yiddish and its culture. The assimilated Jew, who for social and material reasons, has already made up his mind—or rather whose inferiority complex has already made up his mind for him—to become more and more alienated from his People will scarcely be convinced by an encyclopedia of evidence.

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It is pathetically strange that men and woman who have received no more than a high school education, or at most a professional training, will often flout all philological authority on the matter of Yiddish. They will repeat their silly comparisons of Yiddish *vs.* German phrases to demonstrate that Yiddish is only a corrupt German; they will decant on the lack of grammatical and orthographical rules in Yiddish; they will further dilate on the unmusicalness of the language as compared with Italian, and will ever and anon point out the shabby condition and uncouth manners of those who speak Yiddish as the crowning argument against the claim of Yiddish to be incorporated into the commonwealth of languages. These very people, whose everyday parlance betrays the Yiddish idiom, together with the Yiddish intonation, indeed in some cases resembling the talk of the characters in *Nize Baby*, singularly enough, possess the self-complacence to set themselves up as arbiters of what constitutes a language, in defiance of the most learned philologists of their age, and take comfort in the thought that their children and grandchildren will have no truck with the "Ghetto Jargon", but will express themselves in the latest street slang.

It is, of course, not for the wilfully blind that these data were compiled, but for the host of fair-

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minded observers who hitherto had nothing to guide them except what the Rialto of assimilation provided. The pulpit, the Anglo-Jewish press, and the Zionist platform have all conspired to belittle the language which crystallizes the thought and feeling of the bulk of the Jews. The Yiddish *intelligentsia* is impressed with all sorts of books, both American and foreign, through which there runs a Jewish theme, no matter how slight, while the reservoir of all Jewish motives, in Yiddish, is entirely overlooked.

To many of the earnest seekers for knowledge in the Yiddish field, the facts were hitherto inaccessible. Librarians would often consult prominent Jews, perhaps Rabbis, for particulars on books, plays, folk-songs, etc., without realizing that these people are not *au courant* with the Yiddish movement.

In certain quarters, it will be taken for granted that my ardent defence of Yiddish emanates from an inimical attitude toward Hebrew. Such a supposition is unfounded. I recognize the pristine glory of the Hebrew literature, its variegated history and symbolic continuity which serves to bring together the learned of Israel for thirty centuries under a single banner, but I cannot shut my eyes to the historical evolution of the Jewish people. I

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cannot concede that a small minority of a people can dictate to the large majority as to what its language is to be, and while I respect the aspirations of the Palestine Settlement to make out of an ancient language a living tongue, I cannot bring myself to give up the culture interwoven with the life and thought of the millions for the lucubrations of the hundreds who have deliberately set up a barrier between themselves and the masses. Above all, do I despise the snobbery and fanaticism with which Yiddish is combated in politically colored Hebraistic circles, which are afflicted with a sort of inverted Nordic complex. One might think that nothing worth while could be written in Yiddish, as if the imagination, conception, or creative impulse is dependent on the prestige of a given language. Dante was one of the first to explode that bubble.

To sum up: One may be a friend of Hebrew and yet appreciate the merit and *raison d'être* of Yiddish as the language of the millions of Jews who are scattered in every country under the sun. Yiddish should no more be repressed in Palestine than Hebrew in Soviet Russia. The growth of a language can be interfered with only on Hitlerite principles. Indeed much of the attitude of certain "Hebrewites" toward Yiddish smacks of the Swas-

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tika tactics in Hitler's Germany. The gentlemen who wield the "big stick" have yet to learn that leaders can help along the process of history but cannot do violence to progress. Languages are natural growths. The fact that Yiddish has attained its present status is proof positive of its vitality and possibilities.

Since this book was written with the purpose in view of *interesting* the reader, more emphasis was placed on the *variety* of the information than on the systematic *order* of the facts. This is neither a bibliography nor a history but a guide-book calculated to appeal to the uninitiated. For that reason, many tit-bits were included which would seem to the scholar insignificant; but curiosities, let it be borne in mind, are not always important items, and besides, more than one trivial observation has led to the discovery of fundamental laws. The miscellaneous character of this work necessarily makes it a bit scattered, but the index will obviate the difficulty of following up a given topic for the serious student.

Finally, the title may be cavilled at by the capitious critic. While I readily admit that the little volume deals with the Yiddish culture in the broad sense, and with the language almost as much as with the literature, it is nevertheless the *literature*

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which focuses the attention of the general reader as the fullest expression of a particular culture. Certainly among the Jews, it is the crystallization of the culture, and it is in the Yiddish literature, including poetry, drama, and the press, that the Jewish folk-spirit has thus far revealed itself most poignantly.

In the preparation of such a work, aside from the constantly changing circumstances, the most annoying feature is the orthography of authors' names. The perplexity which the bard of Avon gave rise to in the literary world, because of the lack of uniformity in the spelling of Shakespeare, need only be multiplied a hundredfold in the field of Yiddish literature, and we obtain an inkling of the situation. The name Dinezon has at least four variants; names ending in "witch" are often converted through the substitute "witz." Historians, as a rule, (Wiener) for no good reason, transliterate names of writers into German. Many authors, both in Poland and America write their name differently in Polish or English and in Yiddish. The phonetic discrepancy between Reizin and Reizen, Yehoash and Yehoyesh, as also between the "eff and "ev" forms, is troublesome for one who seeks to fix the spelling of authors' names for all time.

It is a bit odd that in scores of names of Yiddish

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literati, both in this country and abroad, the Yiddish spelling and the English, Polish, Russian, or German spelling do not correspond phonetically. Perhaps this in itself is an anomaly of Jewish life. On the very copyright page of Yiddish books printed in Poland, authors' names are not always correctly spelt, but apparently only transliterated by someone in the publishing house. Hence, a directory of Yiddish writers' names in Latin characters is certainly a desideratum.

My method has been to transliterate all names of writers who lived in a country using a non-Latin alphabet phonetically into English. As for Polish, Austrian, and American Yiddish writers, it was found advisable to adopt the non-Yiddish spelling, as used by the authors themselves, provided it coincided phonetically with the Yiddish form; e.g., although the author of "Yoshe Kalb" has been referred to in America as Singer, he nevertheless writes his name in Polish, Zynger, i.e. according to the Yiddish pronunciation, so there is no justification for Americanizing his name; but since Zalmen Reizen spells his name in Polish *Rejzin*, it is apparent that we must take the Yiddish spelling for our guide. In some cases, concessions had to be made, e.g., notwithstanding the fact that the poet Bloomgarden's pseudonym was pronounced "Yehoy-

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esh", he signed himself "Yehoash" in English, and as this form is so well known and has been so widely used, it was thought best to leave it as it is in deference to more or less established usage, especially as only the vowels are affected here. At this stage of our literary history, we must take into consideration the question, how well-known a given name is before insisting on consistency. Foreign readers should bear in mind that my transliteration follows the requirements of English phonetics, thus "ine" is equivalent to "ein" in German, and "sh" is pronounced like "sz" in Polish or "sch" in German.

If the regularization of proper names offers a problem in the compilation of our data, the task of comparing writers and placing some at the top of their respective *genres* is not only troublesome but embarrassing (*"Comparisons are odious"*). What individual will take it upon himself to serve as final arbiter in such delicate matters, especially when we are so close to the contestants? I have, however, decided that if this publication is to serve as a *vade mecum* for the uninitiated, it were better to err in one or two cases than to give no specific information which could be useful to those whose time is limited and who wish to make themselves acquainted with the most representative writers in each field.

In evaluating the various productions, I have en-

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deavored to steer clear of all bias or prejudice. My judgment is objective in that I would first consult the accepted opinion. There are some appraisals about which there can scarcely be two opinions. In most instances, however, particularly in the non-fiction and poetry fields, I had no precedents or authorities upon which to base my first awards. At all times, however, the statements are the result of considerable deliberation. It is inevitable that there should be disagreements with them, but I feel confident that I should have no difficulty in defending my point of view against partisan, autistic, or carping critics.

The whole edition of the book has been limited to six hundred copies and the type destroyed not for the purpose of adding another curiosity to those already included, but for the sake of economy. One may be reasonably certain that with five hundred copies for sale, the book will be out of print before very long.

A. A. ROBACK.

Cambridge, Mass.

May 20, 1933.

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(SECOND UNIVERSITY EXTENSION COURSE)

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SYLLABUS OF YIDDISH LITERATURE

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- III. *The Classical Poets:* Peretz fragmentary and undisciplined but qualitatively of artistic height—Morris Rosenfeld the lyric realist, revealing unusual intensity, dramatic depth and rhythmic qualities, has written much of mediocre quality—Frug national poet “carnivalist” of Jewish life in gentle irony and lamenter of its tragedy—Bialik the prophetic consoler of his people — Yehoash (Bloomgarden) poet of ideas with emphasis on the abstract—Translator of “Hiawatha” and Bible.
- IV. *The Semi - or Post - Classical.* Abraham Reisen, poet of the masses, appealing ditties breathing sincerity and full of mild pessimism—the dreary romanticism and languor of David Einhorn—Passages of Schneiur, in graceful metre—Neidus the craftsman of verse and poetical diction.
- V. *Poetry in America*—Difficult to explain why poetry flourished in the New World more than any other genre of writing—Nearly a

CURIOSITIES OF YIDDISH LITERATURE

hundred poets in America who have made handsome contributions to the literature: Slonim, Lyessin, Reisenblatt, I. J. Schwartz's epic poems (Kentucky, George Washington) Halpern's massive verse, temperamentally hewn, Rolnick and the "Young" group (Mani Leib, Z. Landau, Iceland (Eisland), M. Kaplan, Dillon, Nissenson, Schweid, R. Ludwig—dramatic and epic poetry (Leyeles, Leivick, Boreisha's *Zavel Rimer*—Segal—Gross—Krul's pious appeals—Bialostotzki — Almi — Weinper — Auerbach's Oriental scenes—Winograd—Lutzky's philosophical personifications—Feinberg's revolutionary scenes — Malekh's nationalistic legends and ballads. A score or more of poetesses—services of Alice Stone Blackwell in rendering Yiddish poetry into English.

- VI. *Various modernistic movements (vers-libre) imagism, introspectivism, sound effects and artificial technique. (Kurtz, Licht, Platner).*
- VII. *Contemporary poetry in Poland: U. Tzvi Greenberg, Kulbak (now in Russia), Segalowicz, Katzizne (Kacyzna), Rawitsch, Königsberg (sonnets), Papiernikov, Kirman.*

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sidic verse of Maskilim (Gottlober, Michael Gordon); café singers; naïve apostrophization by Ehrenkranz (Zbarzher), Ber(e)nshtein, the Broder singers; B. Schafr, sentimental verse; revolutionary poetry; Frischman's few but remarkable odes; fables in Yiddish.

THE CLASSICAL POETS: Prophetic style of Bialik; lyric realism of Morris Rosenfeld; Peretz's romantic ballad "Monish"; Frug portrays collective Jewish life; Yehoash, the intellectual poet; the poetic prose of Asch.

THE EPIGONES: The demarcation line between the classical and post-classical period; Reisen's appealing ditties; Schneiur's graceful lyricism; Neidus, craftsman of verse and poetic diction.

CONTEMPORARY PERIOD IN AMERICA: "Di Yunge" twenty years ago and today; various modernistic movements. *Experimental Schools* (Leyeles' introspectivism) Kurtz; Minkow; Stodolsky; Persall's Latin transcriptions (*Na Venad*); technical effects; long lines and short lines; "placard" poems; Lutzky's primitive cosmology; subjectivism and imagism; lyricism; impressionism; symbolism in modern Yiddish poetry (Russia); expressionism. *American Midwestern group* (Mattes, L. Miller,

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A. Esselin, E. Korman). *Los Angeles group* (Brownstone, Frampol).

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YIDDISH WOMEN POETS: in the seventeenth century; reminiscences and family life chief feature; epic note entirely lacking; chief Yiddish poetesses: Sarah Reizen, Roza Jakubowicz, Miriam Ulinower, Rachel Korn and Kadia Molodowski (Poland), Anyuta Piatigorskaya (Russia), Leah Hoffman, Fradel Stock, Rachel Okrent (U. S.), and Malke Locker (Palestine).

TEMPER OF YIDDISH POETRY: comparison with Hebrew poetry. How can we judge status of Yiddish poetry? How does it compare with poetry in other languages? Translations into and from Yiddish. (Asen, Carlin, Lapin, Schwartz, Katzenellenbogen, Koikhov *i.e.* Shtern.)

FORMS OF YIDDISH POETRY: Idyll (Rolnik); romance (Yehoash); rondo (Leyeles); ballad (Man-