

Yitskhok Niborski, with the assistance of Simon Neuberg,
 ווערטערבוך פֿון לשון-קודש-שטאַמיקע ווערטער אין יידיש
(Paris: Medem bibliotek, 1997; revised ed. 1999), pp. xiv + 306.
Yitskhok Niborski and Bernard Vaisbrot, with the
collaboration of Simon Neuberg, יידיש-פֿראַנצייזיש ווערטערבוך,
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by Jerold C. Frakes

Yiddishists, both professional and amateur, have become so accustomed to their reliance on Uriel Weinreich's *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary* (New York: YIVO, 1968), with occasional recourse to Alexander Harkavy's *יידיש-ענגליש-העברעאישער ווערטערבוך*, 2nd ed., New York: Hebrew Publ. Co., 1928; repr. New York: YIVO, 1988), and even less frequent use of Yudel Mark's and Judah Joffe's *גרויסער יידישער שפראך ווערטערבוך פֿון דער יידישער שפראך* (vols. 1-4, New York: Committee for the Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language, 1961-1980), that we have lost sight of the fact that the state of Yiddish lexicography is utterly abysmal. While each of these dictionaries is a magnificent achievement and a splendid example of its type of dictionary, the fact remains that what we have are two bi- or tri-lingual (advanced) student-level dictionaries (one a half-century old, the other three-quarters of a century old), and the first four volumes of an unabridged, comprehensive dictionary that covers only the first letter of the alphabet. This is nothing less than an embarrassment for a language of culture with a literary tradition as broad and deep as Yiddish.¹

The two volumes under review here do not altogether transform this situation, but they do substantially modify the limitations, for with the publication of these two dictionaries,

Yiddish lexicography has, for the first time in several decades, made substantial progress, which is just cause for celebration by Yiddishists worldwide. In the case of the first item, the dictionary of the Semitic component of Yiddish, it is unlikely that any but the most advanced researchers and scholars will ever need more than is offered here. The second item, the Yiddish-French dictionary, cannot be comparably comprehensive, simply because in a single volume its range is not a single component, but rather the entire language.

The primary editor of the dictionary of the Semitic component of Yiddish, Yitskhok Niborski, is well-known to Yiddish studies. Born in Buenos Aires, he has lived in France since 1979, and teaches at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisation Orientales and Universite Paris 7. He is the co-author of a Yiddish-Spanish dictionary (Buenos Aires 1979) and the introductory Yiddish textbook, *Chalom yidish* (2 vols. + 24 cassettes; Paris: Europe-Formation-Conseil, 1983). The dictionary is entirely in Yiddish; that is, definitions of the Semitic-component Yiddish words are provided in Yiddish. The volume is designed for the use of both advanced students of Yiddish and readers with an "average" knowledge of Yiddish, whether they know Hebrew or not. The volume is not intended to be a normative lexicographical summa, but rather, as the author modestly suggests, presents an intermediate stage in the process of codifying the Semitic component of Yiddish. The contents derive from collecting the materials of all existing dictionaries, plus the editor's own materials and observations, in addition to some materials from Simon Neuberg. Most of the words derive from the usage of the works of Sholem Abramovitsh (Mendele), Sholem Rabinovitsh (Sholem Aleichem), Y.L. Peretz, Eliezer Steinbarg, and Isaac Bashevis (Singer); the remaining 130 writers listed in the source list provide additional lexical items but are not systematically mined. The editor notes that a complete dictionary of the Semitic component of Yiddish would likely be twice the size of this volume, which he then modestly deems merely a glossary of a few literary and essayistic works. The prefatory matter is very brief (10 pp.) but adequate for its purposes and audience. In addition to an orientation in the use of the dictionary, there is

also a list of abbreviations, a bibliography of the six earlier dictionaries consulted in the preparation of this volume: Harkavy, Weinreich, Mark Yehoash-Spivak (אײדיש ווערטערבוך, New York, 1911, 1926), N. Pereferkovitsh (העברייאזמען אין אידיש, Riga 1931), and Israel Steinberg (העברעזמען אין דער יידישער שפראך, Wroclaw 1943); and a list of the authors from whose works the lemmata were drawn. Individual entries in the lexicon itself consist of the lemma; phonetic transcription; gender and plural form of nouns; definition, sometimes with an indication of the field of usage (math, hassidic, etc.) or nuance (ironic, vulgar, etc.); examples of literary-usage, with source author; idioms, with explanation. The phonetic transcription (in the Hebrew alphabet) often presents a compromise among multiple pronunciation traditions: folk, learned, hassidic, dialectal. The dictionary excludes biblical phrases, since their inclusion would unnecessarily duplicate the comprehensive work of biblical concordances. Difficulties in defining Semitic words with another Yiddish word are circumvented by using, when unavoidable, a *daytshmerish* or international word, following the Yiddish adage: 'when you need the thief, you cut him down from the galows.'

Examples of entries:

יוצא מן הכלל (ן/יוצאים-מן-הכלל) דער [יויצא-מין-האקלא'ל] אויסנעם;
זעלטנקייט.
• ס'איז אין יעדן כלל פֿאַראַן אַ יוצא-מן-הכלל; אין אַ שלעכטן נאַרישן דור
וועט איר אַמאָל געפֿינען גוטע אויפֿגעקלערטע יחידים (ממרו"ס).
כתב-יד (ן) דער / דאָס [קסאָוויאַד] האַנטשריפֿט; מאָנוסקריפֿט.
• מע זאָל זײַן כתב-יד נישט דערקענען (פרץ).
דאָס שמואל-בוך איז דערגאַנגען צו אונדז אין עטלעכע כתב-ידן (מ. וויינרײַך).

The second item here reviewed, the bilingual Yiddish-French dictionary, is edited by Niborski and Bernard Vaisbrot, who teaches Yiddish language and literature at Université Paris 8 and, like Niborski, has worked on earlier bilingual dictionaries: Yiddish-French (Paris 1982), and French-Yiddish (Paris 1989). The primary virtue of this volume is immediately apparent: it includes some 37,000 words, which makes it the most comprehensive bilingual dictionary of Yiddish in exis-

tence. It includes words for standard usage, literary usage, contemporary material culture, colloquial and conversational usage, rare literary words, dialect words, and abbreviations; definitions treat issues of language register, context, and style; information concerning pronunciation and word stress is included; idioms are listed under the entry for the idiom's key word. The editors made use of the earlier dictionaries by Harkavy, Weinreich, Mark, and for the first time in any Yiddish dictionary, the vast compilations included in Nokhem Stutshkov's thesaurus, *דער אוצר פֿון דער יידישער שפראך* (New York: Yivo, 1950).

The preliminary matter in this volume is much more copious than in Niborski's dictionary of Semitic component, since it has a broader and thus in some cases less knowledgeable audience. There is, for instance, a lengthy introduction to usage and the organization of information (vii-xxx); a table of the alphabet (xxxi-xxxii) with transcription, name of letter, and pronunciation description; tables of dialect variations in pronunciation (xxxii), abbreviations in French and Yiddish (xxxiv-xxxv), abbreviations of the semantic fields used in entries (xxxv), symbols used (xxxvi), irregular past participles (xxxvii-xxxix), verbal prefixes and converbs (xxxix), and common suffixes (xli-xli). Prescriptive tabuization of vocabulary deemed *daytshmerish* and thus of "doubtful admissibility" or "not admissible" in standard Yiddish, according to Weinreich's dictionary, is not to be found here, where description not *prescription* is the rule. Thus Niborski/Vaisbrot identify some words as *germ.*, *slav.*, *amér*, to indicate that their late adoption from German, Slavic or English makes many *stylistes* counsel against their use (xxx), but do not themselves proscribe that use.

Examples:

יוצא מן הכלל דער (ן/יוצאים-מן-הכלל)

[YOYTSE-MINAKLA'L—YOYTSM-]

exemption (a la règle); personne/chose remarquable

manuscrit; écriture (tracé)

כתב-יד דער/דאס (ן) [KSAVYA'D]

אי'בעררייסן וו (אי'בערגערייסן)

déchirer (en deux); interrompre; couper (électricité, etc.);

rompre avec qqn); en rester là

chanson, chant; poème; lied

ליד דאָס (ער)

Most Anglophones will immediately wish to compare this volume to Weinreich's dictionary, and the comparison is both useful and appropriate. Niborski/Vaisbrot is 1/3 longer than the corresponding Yiddish section of Weinreich and includes comparably more material, more entries, and more idioms. For instance, beginning with מאה Weinreich includes: מאהאָן, מאה, מאהאָנען, מאה-דעה, מאוואָליי, מאוימדיק, מאָוס, מאָזאָיק, מאָזאָליע, מאָזלען. Niborski/Vaisbrot offer: מאה, שוואַרצער מאה, מאהאָן, מאהאָנען, מאהאָרי'טש, מאה-דעה, מאהילניק, מאה'ינעווע, מאהיקאָנער, לעצטער מאהיקאָנער, מאהאָרי'טש, מאוואָליי, מאווע, מאווען, מאוור'ע, מאוימדיק, מאָוס, מיאָוס, מאָזאָיק, מאָזאָליע, מאָזורקע, מאָזט, מאָזלען. At the same time, however, one must keep in mind that Niborski/Vaisbrot is a uni-directional dictionary; that is, it is only useful for translating *from* Yiddish, not *into* Yiddish, and thus unlike Weinreich, it cannot be used to determine how to render a particular English (or French) word or phrase into Yiddish. While this is a major consideration, few Anglophones will lament this aspect of Niborski/Vaisbrot, for when they are trying to think of how to say something in Yiddish, they rarely think in French. While some potential users might well lament their own ignorance of French, that should be no practical deterrent to using this dictionary. They may recall the countless times that they have faithfully looked up a word in Weinreich and Harkavy and found nothing (and then noted that the word does not begin with alef; which generally makes consulting Mark's dictionary irrelevant). At that point in their frustration they might well have preferred to look up the Yiddish word in Niborski/Vaisbrot and then check that French definition in a French-English dictionary, which would have not only required the same amount of time, but also have yielded the sought-after definition. In most senses, what Niborski/Vaisbrot offer in their Yiddish-French dictionary is a combination of the best features of Weinreich's dictionary (linguistic rigor) with those of Harkavy's (breadth of coverage of the vocabulary of the classic period of modern Yiddish literature, es-

pecially the Slavic component), and including, in addition, material from Mark's dictionary, the broad range of vocabulary from Niborski's dictionary of the Semitic component, and the encyclopedic range of Stutshkov's thesaurus. In the peculiarly poorly equipped lexicographical niche that is Yiddish studies, Niborski/Vaisbrot have competently and without great fanfare provided the field with what is quite simply the best dictionary of Yiddish published thus far in the history of the field. *Hourra!*

NOTES

1. Some readers may additionally use the fine bilingual Russian-Yiddish dictionary by M.A. Shapiro, *Русско-е идишский (ידו) словарь* (Moscow: Russkij yazyk, 1984), which has, however, the same bilingual, gloss-like function as do the works of Weinreich and Harkavy.

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