"Spatsir durkh 'Lover's Lane'": The Uses of English in American Yiddish Literature

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Introduction

A number of scholars have recently explored the place of Yiddish in English: how Yiddish words, phrases, intonation, and syntax have crossed over into English, inflecting speech patterns and cultural performances. A broad consensus reached by these studies is that, far from simply giving way to English, Yiddish has enjoyed a second life inside English – in spite of (and in defiance of) allegations of its demise. Hana Wirth-Nesher sounds echoes of spoken Yiddish in post-immigrant Anglophone texts, arguing that this accented English defines the "Jewish voice" in the United States.[1] Jeffrey Shandler introduces the notion of "post-vernacular" Yiddish, a form of the language that functions not as a means of communication but as a signifier of Jewishness, surfacing in venues from comedy to tee shirts to coffee mugs to literature.[2] And Sarah Bunin Benor explores the formation of a new American Jewish vernacular, sometimes called "Frumspeak" or "Yeshivish," which draws heavily on Yiddish and whose mastery is required for inclusion in many

modern Orthodox circles.[3] These studies limn the porous boundaries between Yiddish and English, proving a more general point that languages do not simply or neatly displace one another as their speakers acculturate to new societies; instead, a minority language can continue to "occupy" a dominant language in unpredictable and subversive ways.

The present study extends these discussions by considering the opposite phenomenon: the place of English in Yiddish. Focusing on five texts written between 1909 and 1957 in high, middlebrow, and low genres, I consider how and to what effect English words, phrases, and syntax are incorporated into Yiddish literary works. While these works provide useful evidence of the ways actual Yiddish speakers infused their speech with Anglicisms, my concerns are less with empirical speech patterns than with the artistry of American Yiddish literary culture. I ask how the use of Anglicisms becomes a textual device, a strategy for making various kinds of interventions. My claim is that evocations of English in early-twentieth-century Yiddish writing are just as nuanced and "strategic" as evocations of Yiddish are in subsequent Anglophone ones. Mediating between languages – and carving out a mobile identity that draws on both – turns out to be a hallmark of American Jewish culture from the beginnings of the Eastern European migration. Call this, then, a study of "pre-vernacular English." It shows how Yiddish literary culture absorbed and mirrored American English back to Yiddish speakers at the very moment they were undergoing the trials of acculturation. As with the studies mentioned above, I hope to illuminate some of the enduring ways Jews have re-defined their cultural identities in the face of the seemingly totalizing force of American culture and American English.

Americanizing Yiddish

From their beginnings as a speech community, Yiddish speakers have dwelt in and among multiple languages. In addition to the Hebrew and Aramaic used for study and prayer, they have been surrounded by various non-Jewish languages and dialects in the public sphere, including (depending on the region) Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Byelorussian, German, Spanish, French and English. Finding themselves in such polyglot environments, Yiddish speakers have regularly engaged in "code switching," which can be defined as the use of "non-integrated and recurrent loanwords, as well as the insertion of whole utterances in the recipient language, including parts of utterances, from (a) stock language(s)."[4] Given the fact that Yiddish is itself a mixed language that constantly absorbs new vocabulary from other languages, it is often debatable whether a specific word or phrase qualifies as code-switching rather than emergent *Yiddish* usage. Nevertheless, despite this fluidity, it is evident that Yiddish speakers themselves have seen their language as having relatively clear boundaries, at least in theory. Notice the plethora of phrases going back to the eleventh century used to demarcate Yiddish from other languages (e.g., *b'loshn Ashkenaz* ["in the language of Ashkenaz"] or *bilshoynéynu* ["in our language" or "in our usage"].[5]

While Yiddish has constantly incorporated elements of surrounding languages, the encounter with American culture placed certain unprecedented pressures on the integrity of the language. From the moment of their arrival, Eastern European Jews absorbed countless English words and phrases for the extraordinary variety of new phenomena they encountered or for familiar phenomena that were freighted with new meanings. Yiddish speakers began using *shap* for shop; *tenement-hoyz* for tenement; *apreyter* for operator – along with an ever-increasing series of words such as *yunyen, hayskul, beysbol, dzhez, forman, sobvey, intervyu, steytment, menefektshere, gengster, pedlar, muvis, ayzkrim, eleveyter, teks, londre*, etc.[6] Some borrowings had seemingly sufficient equivalents in standard Yiddish. Thus *brekfes* often substituted for *frishtik*, *bize* for *farnumen*; even *rabay* for *rov*. In general it must have seemed that the older Yiddish lexicon simply appeared outmoded before the novelty of American experience, whose special aura could only be captured through a new English word. For instance, the notion

of "busyness" may have had a new American quality – more frenetic, more calculated, but also geared toward success.

Alongside lexical changes, Yiddish speakers developed what linguists call "calques," word-for-word translations of idiomatic phrases. Thus Yiddish speakers were soon saying *makhn a leben* ("to earn a living"), *aroysgeyn mit a meydl/a bokher* ("go out with a girl/a boy"), *nemt aykh tsuzamen* ("get yourself together"), *letstn yor* ("last year" – in place of *far a yorn*), *ikh bin kalt* ("I am cold" – in place of *mir iz kalt*), *gebn kredit far* ("to give credit for"), *es nemt tsayt* ("it takes time") and so on.[7] Finally, as with previous instances of the Yiddish absorption of outside languages, English words were inserted into Yiddish syntactic structures: a "*neksdorike*" was a female living in the adjacent apartment (since this was a stereotypical figure somewhat akin to a "*yente*," there was no real male equivalent), *di striten* was used for the plural of "street," *titshern* was used for a female teacher and on and on. Such changes brought echoes of idiomatic English into Yiddish, effecting a thorough transformation in the language. Far from a deliberate effort to expand the Yiddish lexicon, linguistic adaptation must be seen as a largely automatic byproduct of acculturation to American life.

To be sure, the use of English became a sign of differentiation between seasoned immigrants and newcomers, the *griners*. English came to be seen as a language of prestige and success, making linguistic adaptation all that much more inevitable and thoroughgoing. At the same time, the precise connotations of English words developed new nuances when brought into Yiddish. Linguistic accommodation is and never was a one-way street. A word such as "*boychik*" suggests an original American Jewish invention, conjuring a figure with more cunning and bravado than the more neutral "boy" would suggest. The word *payde* in American Yiddish typically refers to "wages," unlike the American English "payday."[8] And, Yiddish speakers have used *loyer* to refer exclusively to a lawyer in the United States, while *advokat* was retained in reference to lawyers elsewhere. More generally, the effect of a Yiddish accent and the recontextualization of English in Yiddish lent new shades of meaning to Anglicisms. To this extent, at least, American English has been "Yiddishized" in the mouths of Yiddish speakers even as their Yiddish became Americanized.

Reactions to linguistic change ranged widely in the immigrant community. The editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Abraham Cahan, encouraged newcomers to adapt to their environment, and to facilitate this process he included considerable English words in his newspaper. However, by the time he notoriously admitted *vinde* in place of *fenster*, a backlash was already well underway. By the end of World War I, lines were drawn between the permissivists and the purists, those who embraced linguistic adaptation and those who saw it as a threat to the integrity of the mother tongue. In the 1919 edition of the yearbook *Dos naye land* (The New Land), the permissivist position was strongly articulated in an article entitled *"Vi zoln mir shraybn yidish in amerike?"* (How Should We Write Yiddish in America?).[9] The author, one L. Elbe, noted that Yiddish had always drawn from surrounding languages. Moreover, he argued that exposure to English could only enrich Yiddish. "Take for example the word '*farbatshen*'," he wrote, "which the local Jews have taken from the English word 'botch,' to ruin something. This neologism gives a much stronger impression." Elbe also accepted, even admired, new words such as "*neksdorike*," which conjured a vivid image of a meddling neighbor in place of the more neutral *shkheyne* (neighbor). And insofar as English words were embedded in Yiddish syntactical constructions, the soul of the mother tongue was fully intact.

On the side of the purists, Isaac Bashevis Singer warned in 1943 that Yiddish writers should stick to stories about shtetl life; the American context was so new that only a fully Anglicized Yiddish could address it.[10] The result would be a wholly corrupt language whose inner integrity would be lost: for better or for worse, authentic Yiddish was tied in its range of reference to phenomena linked with the Old World. More pointedly, Chaim Zhitlovsky was aghast at the "wild-growing Yiddish-

English" he heard around him in America. He charged that this "potato-chicken-kitchen language" had little in common with "the cultivated language of Yiddish culture all over the world."[11] Zhitlovsky's position, which resonated with his socialist-territorialist ideology, influenced the Yiddish school movement and organizations such as the *Yidish kultur gezelshaft*, which was created in the late 1920s to foster Yiddish education and culture in the U.S. As Eric Goldstein has noted, however, such organizations were by the 1930s fighting a losing battle. By this point Yiddish was rapidly losing ground to English; a "pure" Yiddish was increasingly hard to come by. Even members of the *gezelshaft* could not avoid infusing their Yiddish with Anglicisms. When the poet B.J. Bialistotsky addressed the society in 1934 about recent developments, he enthused over the opening of many new *brentches* (branches), only to "apologize and quickly explain that he had, of course, meant *tsvaygn*."[12] By this point, American Yiddish had become a dialect in its own right.

While such debates devolved into polemics and, finally, a desperate wringing of the hands on the side of the purists, literary artists were busily crafting Americanized Yiddish into a new expressive medium. If "potato-chicken-kitchen" Yiddish was the order of the day, it would need to be brought into the culture's representational forms if these forms were to offer a mirror of contemporary life. Moreover, as long as Anglicisms stood out from standard Yiddish, as long as a gap could still be felt between *heymish* Yiddish and neologism, it was possible to include the use of English in a broader repertoire of representational strategies used to address the unique experience of Jews in the United States. Anglicisms could be used to signal broader themes: questions about Jewish identity, modernity, and the meaning of acculturation. And so the use of English became a literary device to be wielded, often a thematic focus of its own. In the examples that follow I discuss a range of approaches used by Yiddish writers to represent the new bilingual matrix of American Jewish life.

Narratives of Immigration

One use of English in American Yiddish literature was to symbolize the immigrant's initial shock at the foreignness of the New World. The feeling of dislocation, the difficulties adapting to new social and cultural norms, the sheer wonderment at a land known alternately as the *goldene medine* and the *treyfene medine* – such themes are often condensed into the motif of a greenhorn coming into contact with English, tasting it for the first time on the tongue. Consider the opening scene of the very first Yiddish novel about life in America, Leon Kobrin's 1909 *Di imigranten* (The Immigrants; subtitled *a roman oys dem leben fun rusishe iden in amerika* [A Novel from the Life of Russian Jews in America]).[13] The novel begins in a dingy tenement room early in the morning. The immigrant Boris Etinger addresses his wife Anyuta in awkward, newly-acquired English:

> "*Va taims*?" Hot er gefregt mit a shmeykhl oyf zayn english, velendik ir vaysn az er amerikanizirt zikh.
> "'*Vat taym iz it*,' zogt men boris," hot zi im farikht, kukendik oyf im vaykh mit ir shvartze, kluge oygn un haltendik beyde hent untern hantukh.
> "'*Taym*' tsi '*taaims*' oykh mir a shprakh! Oyf di khuliganes gezogt gevorn. Hostu gehert a shprakh? Di tsung ken tsebrokhn vern," hot er geredt vi tsu zikh aleyn. "Mir dakht zikh az ikh vel ot di tarabarshtsine zikh keynmol nisht oyslernen reden oykh ven ikh zol do afile oplebn tsvantsik yor. *Tayms*!... *Va taaims*!... *Va*!....*Va*!..." (pp. 8-9)

> ["*Va taims*?" he asked, smiling at his English and hoping to show her how Americanized he had become.
> "'*Vat taym iz it*' is what they say, Boris!" She corrected him, looking at him tenderly with dark, intelligent eyes, her hands beneath her apron.
> "'*Taym*" or "*taaims*' – what a language! It's for hooligans. Have you ever heard such a language? It'll make your tongue break," he said as if speaking to himself. "I believe I'll never learn this nonsense even if live here for another twenty years. *Tayms*!… *Va taaims*… *Va*!... *Va*!..."]

As he struggles to pronounce the simplest English phrase Boris is

marked as a figure of the past. His wife's superior English reflects a gender division familiar from shtetl life, where women's involvement in the marketplace enabled greater familiarity with surrounding languages. By contrast, Boris remains stuck in memory – more an exile from the Old Country than an immigrant to the New. Indeed coming to America brings about a harsh departure from his former bourgeois status; he will remain out of sync with American society, even outside of time altogether. It makes sense, then, that he fails to pronounce the very phrase that immigrants will need to orient themselves to the present ("What time is it?"). Clinging to Yiddish and Russian – and resisting the world of American English – are symptomatic of Boris' lack of preparedness for the trials of acculturation. Kobrin's intended readers presumably would have themselves known more English than Boris, leading them to see his resistance to English not as inevitable but as the result of a problematic psychological condition. Even as the narrative partly sympathizes with Boris, then, he serves as a negative model for the Jew in America, a casualty of history.

A portrayal of the opposite phenomenon, an excessive Americanization, can be seen in a brief text written in 1918 by Sholem Asch entitled "*Der Amerikaner*."[14] The narrative presents an anticipatory image of America glimpsed by a young musician en route to the New World. On the ship he encounters an older figure who has already been thoroughly acculturated into the world of American business and its attendant phraseology. Sporting a healthy belly and a cigar in his mouth, this second figure represents the successful parvenu Jew, the *olraytnik*; and he delivers a monologue that would have scandalized the purists among the *Yidish kultur gezelshaft*:

Sey yong men, ikh her az ir zent a muziker un klaybt zikh itst tsu iberrashn gants nyu nork mit ayer shpil. *Vel, mr. poderevski, ay want tu tel yu somting…* Kunts, shmunts, azelkhe zakhn hobn mir shoyn gehert, un mit ayer shpileray dortn oyf der pyane vet ir keynem nit iberrashn… *No ser…* Amerike darf *biznes, end dats al!…* In nyu york az a muskier vil makhn a *sukses* darf er frier tsugreytn di

por toler, kedey tsu kenen gute briderlekh oyf a moltsayt aroysnemen, a kritiker underkoyfn, oder dem redaktors vayb blumen brengen. *itis ol in di geym!*

[Sey, *yong men*, I hear that you're a musician and you're planning to surprise all of New York with your playing. *Vel* Mr. Poderevski, *ay vant tu tel yu somting…* Art, shmart. Such things we've all heard already and with your playing on the piano there you won't be surprising anybody… *No ser…* America needs *biznes, end dats al!…* In New York if a musician wants to be a *sukses*, he must first have a few dollars to take your friends out to a meal, to bribe a critic, or buy flowers for the conductor's wife. *Itis ol in di geym!*]

The *Amerikaner's* jaded sense of American life as an elaborate game, centered on material gain, sounds like Dale Carnegie's advice avant la lettre. His Anglicisms take the form of epigrammatic pronouncements (*end dats al!*, *Itis ol in di geym*), as if English were a set of magical keys to success. Seeing the young musician as a man of promise, he advises him to skirt the distractions of the big city and take up residence in a small Midwestern city, where he can win influence by charming the "*leydis*," and impressing the local dignitaries, ideally a minister. All of this will lead to a "*stedi* income," and eventually a small fortune. The *Amerikaner's* expressions, unintelligible to the new immigrant, create an aura of mystery and triumph. Finally, we read that the *Amerikaner's* words sound to the young musician "like a most beautiful concert." Asch's narrative thus ends on a darkly ironic note: old world artistry will be compromised by the success ethos, just as Yiddish will be corrupted by the pat formulas of American phraseology.

Asch's readers would have recognized the *Amerikaner* as an object of parody, a grotesque figure with flair but no substance. His corrupted Yiddish matches his spiritual corruption. Interestingly, Asch himself was affirmative about the prospects of American life. In a later novel such as *East River* (1946), he depicts New York City as a space that offers Jews the possibility for social harmony in the embrace of an open pluralistic society. American capitalism is not shunned in this novel, but neither does Asch endorse a wholesale abandonment of

Jewish culture and memory. As with many works of satire, then, the representation of excess in "*Der Amerikaner*" serves implicitly to define a middle ground, an ethic of moderation. Readers of Asch's satire are positioned somewhere between the greenhorn-*Amerikaner* polarity. Certainly the hybrid language of Asch's speaker defines an outer limit of the Yiddish-speaking community: anyone who talks like this is already an *Amerikaner*.

Given that uncertainty still hung around the very category of the boundaries of standard Yiddish (recall that the Czernowitz conference had just occurred and Asch had been present), it can be argued that this text – and others like it that use Anglicisms to critique pretentiousness – work to establish a tacit border between standard and corrupt Yiddish. Drawing such a distinction was clearly a concern for Yiddish prose writers in America, who wanted at once to address the American scene and to uphold a sense that they were forging a coherent literary culture in Yiddish. The paradox here is that, in making the point that this is a standard literary Yiddish, Asch calls upon his reader's understanding of English. Here, then, is a text that implicitly forges a Yiddish – and by extension *Jewish* – space within America. From opposite ends of the spectrum, then, Asch and Kobrin both use English to make similar points: proffering negative examples, they construct what might be called a normative immigrant ethos, an attitude that neither negates the past nor cancels the future. These works implicitly affirm the value of upholding the integrity and separateness of Yiddish, even as they recognize the ubiquity of English in the immigrant's world.

In Sholem Aleichem's *Motl peyse, dem khasns* (Motl Peyse, the Cantor's Son), American English is used less to parody certain character types than to bring into relief the sheer strangeness of American life. This text foregrounds the ingenuity of the Yiddish-speaking immigrant who maintains some immunity before the allurements of America: Motl reinterprets this strange land, together with its language, through the lens of his own playful sensibility, which remains intact throughout. A

two-part novel, unfinished at the time of the author's death in 1916, *Motl* focuses on the adventures of a nine-year-old boy whose family undergoes a series of disasters in the Old Country, including the death of his father, before setting sail for New York. Here they settle down on the Lower East Side amid the throngs of Jewish immigrants, including countless transplants from their home shtetl, Kasrilevke. Motl's family purchases a grocery store, and, when the manuscript ends, appears to be launched on a modest path of upward mobility. Throughout the narrative Motl remains an emblem for unencumbered exuberance; his father's death functions symbolically as a release from the weight of the past. (Dan Miron calls Motl the "happiest among Sholem Aleichem's child protagonists, perhaps the only genuinely happy boy protagonist in a contemporary Yiddish literature rife with miserable orphans"[15]). His sensibility is also linked to what we might call the buoyancy of Yiddish, which comes into relief precisely when he moves away from the shtetl.

From the moment of his arrival, Motl's encounter with the New World takes the form of a sometimes baffled, sometimes enchanted encounter with strange American words. Consider the following passage, where Motl attempts to explain the new forms of labor in New York:

> Der elterer bokher, kletsel hot er geheysn in der heym. Do heist er sem. Far vos epes sem? – Veys ikh nit. Ikh veys nor, az er fardint shoyn gelt. Er iz ayngeshtelt in a "*peyper-boks-fektori.*" Ir veyst dokh ober nit mit vos men est dos, badarf men aykh fartaytshn. Dos iz a fabric vu me makht shakhtln fun karton-papir. Meynt nit, az dos iz aza shverer *dzshab* (*dzshab* heist a melukhe). Er aleyn besakh-hakl makht nokh nit keyn shakhtln. Er tsetrogt zey nor. Heyst es do oyf zeyer loshn: er "*delivert* zey." Dos heist, er nemt in yeder hant a bondel shakhtln fun a tsen tuts un loyft mit zey iber di enge *striten*, tsvishn *kars* un oytimobils. Me darf akhtung gebn, zey zoln kholile nit tsekevsht vern. Er bakumt derfar drithalbn toler a vokh un hoft oyf a "*reiz.*" Dos heist oyf a khasife. S'iz meglikh az mit der tsayt zol er nemen dray toler a vokh. Dos iz dervayl. Shpeyter a bisl zogt im tsu der *bos* (a balabais heist do "*bos*") az er vet im oyslernen di arbet, vi azoy tsu makhn di shakhtln. Er zogt tsu im: "Du zay nor a *gud boy*, vest du zayn ollrayt." Oyf unzer loshn heyst es: "Zay a mentsh vest du esen in suke."[16]

[The oldest boy, Barrel we called him back home. Here he's called Sam. Why Sam? I don't know. All I know is that he's already making money. He's working at a "*peyper-boks-fektori*." In case you don't know what that is, I'll translate. That's a factory where they make boxes from cardboard. Don't think it's such a difficult *dzshab* (*dzshab* is kind of work). He himself doesn't make any of the boxes. He carries them around. In their language here they say: he "*delivers* them." That is, he takes a bundle of ten dozen boxes in each hand and runs through the narrow *striten*, between *kars* and automobiles. He's got to watch out that the boxes don't get crushed. For this he makes two-and-a-half dollars a week and hopes to get a "*reiz*," that is a raise. Maybe in time he'll make three dollars a week. That is, for the time being. He's been promised by the bos (an owner is called a "*bos*"), that in a little while he'll teach him how to make boxes. He tells him: "You just be a *gud boi*, then you'll be *ollreyt*." In our language that means: "If you're a mentsh, you'll eat in the suke."]

If Asch's *Amerikaner* has mastered American life and phraseology, Motl remains charmed by the mysteries all around him. A portly boy from home with a logical nickname ("Barrel") is suddenly transformed into "Sam," a triumphant monosyllable floating free from the weight of all bodies. And in this strange world money can be made simply by carrying around boxes. Given his surprise, it makes sense that Motl continually insists on the gap between "our language" and "their language" – metonyms for "our culture" and "their culture." Indeed, when he "translates" English, he ends up proving just how incompatible the worlds of Yiddish and American English are. Nowhere is this clearer than in Motl's "translation" of the boss' phrase: "Zay nor a *gud boi*, vest du zayn *olreyt*" becomes "Zay a mentsh, vest du esen in suke." The humor here lies in the failure of correspondence: a "gud boi" evokes a child who conforms to outer standards; a "mentsh" bespeaks a deeper personhood, an ethic of fairness and generosity. Even more glaringly, being "olreyt" stands for shrewd upward mobility, while sitting in a suke suggests the intimacy of community, presumably also a place with sweet treats to eat. Between these two versions of a boss' advice lies the difference between the business ethos of America and the warm familiarity of the shtetl; the latter remains Motl's instinctive frame of reference.

Misunderstandings, multilingual punning, and false etymology turn out to be recurrent motifs in Motl's narration. On his arrival in New York, he believes Ellis Island belongs to a certain Ella; he then mishears "Elevated" as "Elevator" and is told that it is called thus because it gets you places "later." He is told that "foyrniture" comes from the Yiddish *forint* (in front) and the English "chair." He rides what he calls the "sobhey," which he believes combines the Yiddish word for a he-goat – a *tsop* – with the exclamation "hey." This leads to a debate between his friends, one of whom charges that the New York subway has nothing to do with goats, since the one flies while goats have to be dragged along. And this turns into a parable about America, where everything flies. Sholem Aleichem is clearly up to his old tricks here, familiar from the Tevye and Menakhem Mendel stories. Mis-translation is a technique there as well for observing the gap between cultural registers – and for implicitly celebrating the earthy sensibility of the folk. Thus, Tevye's sensibility is revealed most clearly when he gives his own commonsensical folk glosses to weighty biblical and Talmudic phrases.[17] And Motl, the immigrant-as-child, remains immune to the soul-crushing effects of American capitalism, remaining the joyous, ever-curious boy of the shtetl he was at the beginning.

Motl positions himself as a tour guide for an imagined interlocutor with no knowledge of America. Sholem Aleichem was In fact writing for a mixed audience of European Jews and American Jews who were presumably *more* acculturated than Motl. By having Motl translate words like "job", "deliver", "raise", and "boss", the text reminds both sets of readers just how foreign these concepts are to a sensibility nurtured in the shtetl, how strange they sound on the Yiddish tongue. The accumulated effect of these mistranslations is to defamiliarize the American scene: we see the immigrants' effort to fit the new landscape into categories from the Old World, and through his failure we gain a renewed feeling for the novelty (and insanity) of America. We also come to appreciate the ability of the young Jewish immigrant to achieve some

measure of autonomy before this world. Motl is exemplary in his ability to absorb English words and the American scene more broadly into a recognizably Eastern European Jewish consciousness. Moreover, his acts of (mis)translation establish an intimate space linking speaker and audience in an implied community of shared values. In this way the text uses English to re-assert the *difference* of the Yiddish-speaking community. English is admitted into the text only to demonstrate the ongoing vitality and flexibility of Yiddish. And Yiddish endures, in Sholem Aleichem's text at least, as an expressive form that preserves and protects Jewishness even in the face of the novelty of American life. The question for readers of this unfinished manuscript is whether this sensibility can endure, whether American Jews can maintain some genuine feeling for the rhythms and outlook of the Old Country.

At Home in America

The status of English in *Motl* is made explicit in the text: it is understood to fall outside of Yiddish proper, "*undzer loshn*," as Motl repeatedly says. In this way the text absorbs English partly as a means of identifying what is authentically *Yiddish* and hence *Jewish*: the appearance of English becomes an occasion for marking – or constructing – a distinctly Jewish sensibility. A similar effect is achieved by Joseph Opatoshu's novella of immigrant life *Fun nyu-yorker geto* (From the New York Ghetto).[18] Opatoshu includes English words and phrases in nearly every paragraph in the voice of the third-person narrator as well as spoken dialogue. He conjures the lived texture of New York through the appearance of "*nyus-dilers*" (news dealers), a "*steyshoneri-stor*" (a stationary store), and the "*eleveytor*" along with countless phrases such as "*gud taym*" (good time), "*di gantser geng*" (the whole gang), etc. The protagonist, Sam, wakes in the novel's opening scene and gazes at the posters of "*prays fayters*" (prize fighters) on his wall. But even while weaving countless English words into his text, Opatoshu calls attention to their otherness by putting each one in quotation marks, and announcing in a footnote that these are "*anglitsizmen*." On the

level of plot as well, Opatoshu's novel emphasizes the limits to Jewish acculturation in America: as much as Sam admires the "*fayters*" in the greater ring of American society, his place remains in the Jewish ghetto, just as on the page Yiddish is consciously separated from Anglicisms.

Some of the most striking examples of Yiddish-English code-switching in narrative can be found in one of the "lowest" genres in American Yiddish culture, namely radio melodramas. Yiddish radio debuted in 1926 and enjoyed a golden era in the 1930s and 1940s, serving a community that was already largely acculturated. As Ari Kelman writes in *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States*, "Yiddish radio emerged at the intersection between Jewish immigration and mass media (…) (and) captured the ways in which Jewish immigrants imagined and constituted themselves, their relationships with one another, and their relationships to their home in the United States."[19] One of the longest running and most popular Yiddish radio series was "*Bay tate mames tish*" (Around the Family Table), broadcast from 1935 to 1940, sponsored by the B. Manishevits company and written by the Yiddish linguist, playwright, director, translator, and actor Nahum Stutchkoff.[20] Broadcast on Sundays at noon, these half-hour plays were highly melodramatic stand-alone pieces that took themes from the everyday lives of immigrant Jews: an upwardly mobile family wants the son to marry up though he loves a poor girl; a family loses its business and must depend on the charity of others; a Jew wants to marry a Catholic, and so on. These pieces were produced for the Yiddish-speaking listener who was already thoroughly immersed in English.

The following example comes from an episode with a typically byzantine plot. A woman named Berta marries a man who turns out to be a gangster. After having a child, he gets sentenced to life for an alleged murder. From prison, he tells his wife to raise their young daughter believing her father is dead. Years later, the daughter, Helen, plans to marry a boy from an Orthodox family who wants to recite the *El male*

rachamim prayer for the assumed-to-be-dead father under the *khupe*. Terrified at the prospect of sacrilege, the mother brings her worries to her rabbi. He calls upon her to visit her gangster husband in prison and beg him for his permission to proceed with the prayer – which is precisely what happens in the tear-soaked final scene. In the scene excerpted below, the family is awaiting the rabbi, though the daughter Helen has no idea what the visit concerns.

Berta: Ikh dervart a mentshn vos darf bald kumen aher.
Helen: Vos far a mentshn?
Berta: Reb shteynberg… Der rov fun der *kongregeyshon*… Mir darfn mit im epes iberedn vegn der *seremoni*.
Helen: Azoy gikh?… Der khasene iz dokh ersht in tsvey vokhn arum.
Berta: *Vel.*
Helen: *O key vit mi*… Iz vos tate?
Berta: Vos iz?
Helen: *Vatsemeter vit yu*… ma? Zayt a por teg vi du geyst arum azoy nidergeshlogn… azoy… *Yu beter teyk ker ov her pop… pipl don't layk* ongeblozene makheteynim.

KLINGEN
Philip: Ha, ha… *O key may tshayld… Ayl teyk ker ov her*…
Berta: Dakht zikh az men kling…
Helen: *Ayl si hu it iz.*
Philip: Bizt nit klug, berta… In kinds gegnvart darfstu nit zayn azoy…
Berta: Nu vos zol ikh ton… Ikh ken zikh nit helfn.
Helen: Dos iz der *rabai madher… Kon in rabai.*[21]

[Berta: I'm waiting for someone who is supposed to be here soon.
Helen: Who is it?
Berta: Rabbi Steinberg… The Rabbi from my *kongregeyshon*… We need to discuss something with him about the *seremoni*.
Helen: So soon?… the wedding isn't for another two weeks.
Berta: *Vel.*
Helen: *O key vit mi*… What is it mama?
Berta: What it is?
Helen: *Vatsemeter vit yu*… ma? For a few days now you've gone around so gloomy… Like this… *Yu beter teyk ker ov her pop… pipl don't layk* depressed in-laws…

RINGING
Philip: Ha, ha… *O kay may tshayld… Ayl teyk ker ov her*…
Berta: I think someone's ringing…
Helen: *Ayl si hu it iz.*
Philip: You aren't being smart Berta… In the kid's presence you shouldn't be like that.
Berta: So what should I do… I can't help it.
Helen: This is the *rabai madher… Kon in rabai.*]

This passage would be incomprehensible to Yiddish-speakers in Warsaw or Lodz. Both the characters and presumed audience speak English fluently, and entire sentences are spoken in English. Presumably this hybrid language is precisely what Stutchkoff, an astute linguist, heard around him, but his representation of speech is also a deliberate aesthetic decision, reflecting the central theme of his melodrama: the conflicts of an American Jewish community caught between the pressures of acculturation and the pull of tradition. In this sequence, English is used for public and formulaic moments of the conversation ("*kon in, rabbay*"). The daughter, who doesn't grasp the deeper meanings of her situation, uses more English. It is instructive that her concerns about external appearances are expressed in English ("*pipl don't layk* depressed in-laws"). And the word *kongregeyshon* suggests a thoroughly Americanized version of Judaism, the "respectable" world to which the family aspires. By contrast, when Helen leaves the room, the parents return to the weighty religious matter before them, and they turn back to a pure Yiddish ("*In kinds gegnvart darfstu nit zayn azoy*"). In this way Yiddish is coded as the language of intimate exchange, private concern, and moral seriousness.

This movement between Yiddish and English conjures a community in flux, drawn by conflicting value systems. But there is something ultimately reassuring about Stutchkoff's radio melodramas – and this in two connected ways: Yiddish remains the language of intimacy,

and traditional Jewish values remain intact. The most common leitmotif in *Bay tate mames tish* is that of a Jewish community reunited under shared beliefs and loyalty to origins (even the gangster Jewish father gets recuperated as a figure of affection and moral courage). Thus at precisely the same time that the purists among the *Yidish kultur gezelshaft* were waging a losing battle to save Yiddish from outside influences, Yiddish popular culture was offering the consoling message that the essential core of Eastern European Jewish culture could remain intact. This more optimistic vision rested on a view of Yiddish as at once flexible in the extreme and distinct as a Jewish language. To recall that Stutchkoff was himself a serious linguist, who went on to produce a massive thesaurus *Der oyster fun der yiddisher sprakh*, suggests that his interest in American Yiddish went beyond a mere desire to pander to the masses. Rather, he saw Yiddish as an expansive, adaptive language, capable of transforming itself while retaining its integrity in the face of American life.

Coda: The Limits of Accommodation

It might be argued that the legacy of Stutchkoff's macaronic Yiddish-English can be found today in parts of the Orthodox world. The practice of "Frumspeak" might be said to have been anticipated by the code-switching characters of 1930s Yiddish radio melodrama. But within the precincts of Yiddish high culture, there remained a suspicion that Yiddish could absorb so much American English without being changed utterly. While Sholem Aleichem's *Motl* and Stutchkoff's radio plays suggest different ways that an Eastern European sensibility could endure despite linguistic adaptation, there were also those who demurred from such optimism, seeking more strenuously to keep English at a distance. Aron Glanz-Leyeles offers an example of this attitude in a short poem entitled "*Spatsir durkh* 'Lover's Lane'" (A Stroll through "Lover's Lane"), from his 1957 collection *Baym fus fun barg* (At the Foot of the Mountain).[22] One of the architects of American Yiddish modernism, Leyeles was a founding member of the *Inzikhistn*, the Introspectionists, who burst

onto the scene, manifesto in hand, in the early 1920s. Leyeles was an ingenious innovator, bringing inventive poetic forms into Yiddish poetry, and he was also a tireless advocate for Yiddish in America, dividing his energies between literary production and work on behalf of cultural organizations such as the Workman's Circle and the New York daily *Der tog*, where he was a staff writer for three decades. This short late work offers a mini-demonstration of the multiple linguistic streams that make up the Yiddish language:

Spatsir durkh "Lover's Lane"

"Lover's Lane" iz lang, geshlenglt, tsit zikh bargik, tolik,
Un defirt tsu a beys-oylem. Kh'red do on simbolik.

S'iz a yidisher beys-oylem, frum geplant un lib gekhovet,
Un er trogt dem shtoltsn nomen fun dem kinig dovid.

Rund arum a keyt fun berglekh – sosnes, dembes, brezes,
Frume tsvaygn royshn iber shtume yidn-geyzes.

Di matseyves mit di nemen – gold in shvartse kargn –
Zogn on, fun vifl lender m'iz gekumen shtarbn;

Vi es hobn zikh fun vayt getsoygn yidn-eydes
Un nisht ale zaynen do gevorn tates, zeydes.

Preplen beymer iber zey, elegish un baladish,
Zest a grupe in a vinkl, herst a nayem kadish.

[A Stroll through "Lover's Lane"

"Lover's Lane" is long, snakelike, rising and sinking into valleys,
And it leads to a cemetery. I don't mean this symbolically.

It's a Jewish cemetery, piously planned, tended with care,
And it carries the proud name of King David.

All along a chain of hills – pine trees, oaks, birches,
Pious branches murmur over silent tribes of Jews.

The tombstones, their names in gold and black outline –
Tell of the lands from which they've come to die.

How communities of Jews came from afar,
And not all of them became fathers or grandfathers.

The trees converse over them – elegiac, ballad-like.
A group gathers in a corner; you hear strains of a new Kaddish.]

The poem simulates a journey along a road to a Jewish cemetery where Jews from all over the world are buried. We assume we are in the United States since the road is called "Lover's Lane," a generic term for a secluded, romantic road fit for an evening tryst, typically in an automobile. By naming the road, the poem announces its central paradox: Jews are mourning in a land given over to pleasure and frivolity. As it works through this paradox, the poem also reflects implicitly on the position of the Yiddish language in America. With the exception of the fourth stanza, every couplet rhymes a word from a different language source: a Germanic word ("tolik") rhymes with an international word ("symbolic"), a Slavic word ("gekhovet") rhymes with the Hebraic name of Israel's preeminent king ("Dovid"), etc. The final lines even introduce a word that may be originally French, German, or Russian ("baladish") alongside a Hebraic word ("kadish"). The international context for the poem's discourse is mirrored in the phrase about the various lands from which the Jews have come to die.

Leyeles's skillful act of selecting and combining words from different strata of Yiddish comes up against a limit. The English words in the poem stand apart, set off by quotation marks and placed at the beginning, not the end, of the line. It is as though English is the one language that cannot be integrated into Yiddish: the phrase "Lover's Lane" can neither be incorporated into the mood of nor the Yiddish

lexicon of the poem. Words from multiple languages can be incorporated seamlessly into the poem; English is the exception. Thus even as Leyeles' poem implies a reader who knows English (or at least the phrase "lover's lane"), the poem also sets up a tacit barrier between English and Yiddish. Unlike all the other languages that Yiddish speakers came into contact with, English appears as something unassimilable into Yiddish. The English phrase in the poem's title speaks for freedom and pleasure, while Yiddish has become a language of mourning.

And yet this dichotomy may be too strict for this poem. After all, there is a playfulness in the poem's use of rhyming words, as we have seen, along with a tacit confidence that Yiddish culture *can* endure in America. The final line hints that something new and curious is afoot, even among Yiddish speakers. We might ask what this "new Kaddish" is that is heard at the end of Leyeles' poem. Could it possibly be something like this poem itself, a speech act that opens Yiddish to a range of international languages, even English? If so, this short work might be another vote of confidence for the flexibility of Yiddish. For Leyeles as well, Yiddish might prove flexible enough to admit other languages while still keeping faith with the experiences and sensibilities of Eastern European Jews.

A premise of the foregoing discussion is that Jewish acculturation in the U.S. placed extraordinary pressure on the integrity of Yiddish, arguably greater than in other language environments, such as in Russia or Israel. This situation has led in various directions, including an accelerated integration of new words on the one hand and gestures of principled rejection, a self-protective purism on the other. In this essay I have presented a range of strategies used by Yiddish writers to absorb American English while simultaneously critiquing the world it signifies. These strategies seek to keep American English at arm's length even as they make use of it; they incorporate English while also coding it as *other* to authentic Yiddish. A paradox here is that the reality of language mixing might turn out to bolster the *idea* of "authentic

Yiddish." It is precisely in a context like the U.S., where actual Yiddish has been so compromised, that an idealized view of Yiddish as a symbol for Jewishness itself begins to gain traction. To be sure, the Shoah marks a key transition point here: Leyeles and others develop a hypersensitivity to linguistic layers at the moment that Yiddish becomes a signifier for the destroyed world of Eastern European Jewry. But I suggest that a concern to define Yiddish in opposition to English is present from the earliest Yiddish American works. Anticipating the later emergence of "post-vernacular" Yiddish, these works already invest the Yiddish language with a symbolic function, using it to define a *Jewish* space, whose borders must be actively upheld and maintained. Asch and others use parody to defend this space; Sholem Aleichem uses his signature style of anarchic play and mis-translation; and Stutchkoff introduces a macaronic Yiddish-English that reserves *mamaloshn* for special moments of intimate exchange. In each case, the inevitable presence of American English is deftly woven into the text, which, by determining the meaning of this new majority language, achieves a measure of distance from it.

Notes

1 Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
2 Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
3 Sarah Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012.
4 Anne Szulmajster-Celnikier, "Code-Switching in Yiddish: A Typology," *La linguistique* 2, vol. 41 (2005), pp. 87-107, <www.cairn.info/revue-la-linguistique-2005>.
5 Dovid Katz, "Yiddish." *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe,* <www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Language>.
6 Much has been written about American Yiddish. See Sol Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English: A Century of Yiddish in America.*
Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986; Judah A. Joffe, "The Development of Yiddish in the United States," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* 10 (1943), pp. 601-607; J.H. Neumann, "Notes on American Yiddish," *Journal of English and German Philology* 37 (1938), pp. 403-421. For discussions in Yiddish of the changing nature of Yiddish in the United States see esp. the symposium in the inaugural issue of the journal *Yidishe Sprakh*: "Yidish in Amerike," *Yidishe Sprakh* 1 (1941), pp. 18-47.
7 Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English*, p. 37.
8 This word appears in a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer: "After a while I was bringing my paycheck – the payde, they called it – to Libby." "Property," *The New Yorker*, December 9, 1972, p. 41.
9 L. Elbe, "Vi zoln mir shraybn yidish in amerike?" (How Should We Write Yiddish in America?), in Abraham Reisen, ed., *Yorbukh dos naye land.* New York: Reisen, 1919.

10 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America" [Dos problem mit yidishe proze in amerike, 1943], *Prooftexts* 9 (1989), pp. 5-12.

11 Quoted in Eric Goldstein, *1929: Mapping the Jewish World*. Edited by Hasia Diner and Gennady Estraikh. New York: New York University Press, 2013, p. 123.

12 Ibid., p. 124.

13 Leon Kobrin, *Di imigranten: a roman oys dem leben fun rusishe iden in amerika*. New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1909. For a discussion of this novel, see Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905-1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

14 Sholem Asch, "Der amerikaner" (1918). Quoted in Chaim Ostrowsky, *Jewish Classical Literature*. New York: Folkways Records, 1960.

15 Dan Miron, "Introduction," in Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*. Translated by Aliza Shevrin. New York: Penguin Books, 2009, p. xxi.

16 Sholem Aleichem, Motl peyse, dem khazns. New York: Morgn/Frayheyt, 1937.

17 See Michael Stern, "Tevye's Art of Quotation," Prooftexts 6 (1986), pp. 79-96; and Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 165-168.

18 Joseph Opatoshu, *Fun nyu-yorker geto*. New York: Idisher literarisher farlag, 1914.

19 Ari Kelman, *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 57.

20 For an overview of Stutchkoff's career, see Amanda Seigel, "Nahum Stutchkoff's Yiddish Play and Radio Scripts in the Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library," *Judaica Librarianship* 16 (2011); and Amanda Seigel, "Matzah and Cream Cheese: Nahum Stutchkoff's Yiddish Radio Programs and Commercials," *Afn shvel* 348-349 (Summer/Fall 2010), pp. 37-43.

21 Nahum Stutchkoff, Unpublished manuscript. Dorot Jewish Division in the New York Public Library.

22 Aron Glanz-Leyeles, "*Spatsir durkh 'Lover's Lane'*" (A Stroll through Lover's Lane), in *Baym fus fun barg* (At the Foot of the Mountain). New York: Tsiko, 1957.