

HISTORY OF THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE

REPAIRING A SLIP OF THE TONGUE

By **RUTH R. WISSE**

What most Americans know of Yiddish is some strange sounding words (schnorer, tchatchke, fresser), and concepts like maven (expert), chutzpah (nerve), and kibitz (to look on and offer unwarranted advice to others). Jewish comedians and humorists have successfully turned the embarrassment of immigrant speech into a comic asset. But in doing so they also trivialized the language, as if it were only fodder for fun. Max Weinreich's "History of the Yiddish Language" rehabilitates this impression of Yiddish - though doesn't deny its comic potential.

Weinreich considers Yiddish one of the greatest creations of the Jewish people, and the embodiment of Ashkenaz - a reinforced system of Jewishness that emerged in Europe in the 11th century.

The Yiddish language developed more than a thousand years ago on the banks of the Rhine and Moselle Rivers. Weinreich proves that Yiddish was not, as some believed, a borrowed version of German, but rather an autonomous and organic fusion of elements of the sacred tongue Hebrew with languages of German and later Slavic lands. The study of Yiddish is intriguing because of the way Jews continued to develop their indigenous culture while integrating new material from the surrounding population. Jewish linguistics is as singular as Jewish history.

This two-volume work contains an equal number of pages of text and footnotes. When I studied with Weinreich at Columbia, he remarked that he would not publish the text without the notes even though no more than 10 people would consult them - and he knew all of them.

Weinreich writes with charm, explaining every concept he uses, winning readers with a treasure of examples. Mer shokhtim vi hiner (more ritual slaughterers than chickens) is the Yiddish equivalent of "the supply is greater than the demand." Something ephemeral lasts from ester-tones biz Purim (from the Fast of Esther, until Purim, which is the following day). The Jewish hypocrite practices moydim biz der erd, shmad-shtik bizn himl (bows all the way to the ground in prayer, but commits heretical offenses that rise to high heaven). These and hundreds such idioms demonstrate Weinreich's contention that Yiddish is a repository of the Jewish way of life. So richly had Yiddish absorbed religious tradition that he felt it could continue to sustain Jewish life even once its speakers no longer ate kosher, fasted or prayed.

In this he was mistaken. When Weinreich began his study of Yiddish in Europe during World War I, it was spoken by more than 10 million Jews - more than had ever simultaneously used a Jewish language. Weinreich safely reached America in 1940, but most Yiddish speakers were destroyed with their communities dur-

ing the khurbn, the Yiddish term for Holocaust. Most Yiddish-speaking immigrants to America adopted the language of the land - all but those who wanted to insulate a religious way of life from the rest of American society. The Jews of Israel realized that in returning to their homeland they had to resuscitate Hebrew as the only language that united all Jews. Yiddish itself proved no substitute for the religious civilization that had brought it into being. But, paradoxically, the audience for Weinreich's "History" may be greater now that the number of its speakers has declined.

Ruth R. Wisse is the Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University.

History of the Yiddish Language: Volumes 1 and 2

by Max Weinreich
Yale University Press