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REAL AND IMAGINARY YIDDISHLAND.
A JOURNEY ALONG THE BORDERS OF A BORDERLESS NATION

Introducing Yiddishland

In spring 2018, a course titled “Language is Migrant: Yiddish Poetics of the Border” was taught at the University of Chicago by Anna Elena Torres. The following excerpt from the syllabus sums up some of the issues raised by the peculiar relationship between language and nation, state and borders, when it comes to Yiddish:

What and where are the borders of Yiddish? How do the “borders” of the Yiddish language shape its poetics? [...] As a diasporic language unattached to a single nation, Yiddish has long been constructed as subversively internationalist or cosmopolitan, raising questions about the relationship between language and the state, vernacularity and statelessness.¹

The following pages will explore the concept of Yiddishland, a loosely-defined label variously and liberally applied to different manifestations of Yiddish culture. Several images of Yiddishland in relation to Jewish Ashkenazi identity and sense of nationality will be examined, placing them in context throughout Jewish history and focussing on the need for redefining ideas of Yiddish cultural, linguistic, and national space following the Holocaust. Further insight will be provided by the analysis of relevant fiction, where Yiddishland is re-enacted as a place of the memory.

Yiddishland: Where? When? What?

A discourse about a real or imagined, current or past homeland of Yiddish speakers can-

not leave out the cultural concept of Yiddishland. The meaning of *Yiddishland* is seemingly self-explanatory: a land where Yiddish is spoken, the country of Yiddish, and so on. Actually, a clear definition of the term is far more elusive and the implications of its usage are rather complex. To begin with, the adjective *yidish* in Yiddish simply means “Jewish”. It can refer to the Germanic Jewish language born a thousand years ago in the heart of Europe, which was spoken daily as the first language by at least eleven millions Ashkenazic Jews from all walks of life before the Second World War and is «now used by *khareydim*, [...] performers and humanities scholars», as well as by «many amateurs».² But it can also refer to the Jewish experience as a whole, including an idea of people and nation. In other words, a semantic distinction between *Yiddish* and *Jewish* is simply not available to Yiddish speakers. Therefore, when the term *yidishland* is used in Yiddish, it bears a far broader meaning, not at all restricted to the language, compared to when it is used (and spelled Yiddishland) in other languages. Chaim Zhitlowsky (1865-1943) recalled his perception of present-day Belarus in the second half of the 19th century as a Yiddishland, and it is evident that his usage of the term is meant to denote both the language and the Jewish experience. In the following passage from his essay *In a yidisher medine* (“In a Jewish/Yiddish state”), each occurrence of the untranslated *yidish* can be understood as either “Yiddish” or “Jewish”:

I was born to a pure *yidish* home; I spent my childhood and my first youth in a pure *yidish* environment, and had I not known theoretically that we Jews lived in exile and had I been asked to describe

¹ A.E. TORRES, *Stealing the Border: A Reflection on Teaching Yiddish Borderlands Literature*, «In geveb» (September 2018): [https://ingeveb.org/pedagogy/stealing-the-border-a-reflection-on-teach-](https://ingeveb.org/pedagogy/stealing-the-border-a-reflection-on-teach)

ing-yiddish-borderlands-literature (accessed 13th December 2018).

² J. SHANDLER, *Adventures in Yiddishland. Post-vernacular language and culture*, University of

my life experiences as they appeared at first glance, I would have not been mistaken to say that I lived in a *yidish* land [...]

Such a pure *yidish* life [...] could without exaggeration [...] lead to the illusion that we were not the ones who lived in exile among the “Russians”, but maybe quite the opposite: that the “Russians”, with whom we had dealings, lived in exile among us, in our own *yidish* land [...]

The goys in our city, in Vitebsk, [...] were a minority [...]

They spoke the “ruling language of the land” – *yidish* – and quite a fine *yidish*, with the right *yidish* spicy idioms.³

Anisomorphism issues also arise when it comes to the concept of Yiddishkeit. The term is commonly associated with the expressions of the popular culture of Yiddish-speaking Jews, such as their humour or their music. Yet *yidishkeyt*, literally “Jewishness”, is understood by native speakers as referring to the quality of being Jewish or to the Jewish way of life.

The indissoluble relationship between Yiddish language and Jewish people was central to Yiddishist ideology and to the advocates of Yiddish nationalism, such as Chaim Zhitlowsky. But it also was a common belief among unassimilated Yiddish-speaking communities in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe. The Italian author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi (1919-1987), in his memoir *La tregua* (“The Truce”, 1963), recalls the encounter with two Jewish girls in the Soviet Union during his journey back home from the camps. The girls questioned his and his fellow travellers’ Jewishness on the basis that they were not Yiddish speakers:

“You don’t speak Yiddish, so you can’t be Jews!” In their language, the sentence amounted to flawless reasoning.

Yet we really were Jews, I explained. Italian Jews: Jews, in Italy and in all of Western Europe, do not speak Yiddish.

For them, it was a great novelty, a comic oddity, as someone affirmed that there are Frenchmen who do not speak French. I tried to recite to them the beginning of the *Shema*, the basic Jewish prayer: their incredulity subsided, but their cheerfulness increased. Who had ever heard Hebrew pronounced in such a ridiculous way?⁴

It is noteworthy that also Russian *evrejskij jazyk*, literally “Jewish language”,⁵ actually refers to Yiddish rather than to Hebrew. In a language that has long been coterritorial to Yiddish, the latter is the Jewish language par excellence, or the language of the Jews, tout court.⁶

Keeping in mind the semantic ambivalence illustrated thus far, we can understand the concept of Yiddishland as a space defined by Yiddish language and Ashkenazi Jewish culture. If this answers, at least partly, to the question «What is Yiddishland?», more questions arise, such as «Where is Yiddishland?» or «When, if at all, did or does Yiddishland exist?».

Jewish communities speaking their own Germanic language lived in Central Europe at the turn of the second millennium; their language and culture later spread into Eastern Europe, where they underwent an independent development following the contact with the Slavic world. Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich (1894-1969) called these two regions, respectively, Ashkenaz I and Ashkenaz II,⁷ the latter gradually superseding the former, which began to fade into cul-

California Press, Berkeley, CA 2006, p. 184.

³ KH. ZHITLOVSKI [CH. ZHITLOWSKY], *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn*, vol. 1, Dr. Khayem Zhitlovski Yubiley Komitet, Nyu York 1935, pp. 119-120 (the translation from Yiddish is mine). «Russians» is in quotes in the original since it refers to Byelorussians.

⁴ P. LEVI, *La tregua*, Einaudi, Torino 1997, p. 134 (the translation from Italian is mine).

⁵ The distinction between “Jewish” and “Hebrew” is not available in contemporary Russian, as well as in contemporary Italian. Following a semantic shift, the usage of Russian *evrej* and Italian

ebreo, both originally “Hebrew”, was extended to the meaning “Jew”, since *žid* and *giudeo* took on a derogatory connotation.

⁶ In Russian, Hebrew is called *drevneevrejskij jazyk*, literally “ancient Jewish language”. Modern Israeli Hebrew, on the other hand, is referred to through the endonym *ivrit*.

⁷ M. WEINREICH, *History of the Yiddish language*, ed. by P. Glaser, tr. by Sh. Noble, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2008 [M. VAYNRAYKH, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh*, YIVO, Nyu York 1973], p. 3.

tural assimilation from the 18th century.⁸ Should we locate Yiddishland in Ashkenaz as a whole? Or should we regard Ashkenaz I and Ashkenaz II as two temporal, local, and mutually exclusive instances of Yiddishland?

In the 1560s, a Jewish woman called Rokhl (Rachel) Zusman complained that her son did not write to her often enough; her letters, written in Yiddish and sent from Jerusalem, were found in Cairo, where the son lived.⁹ In 1942, a performance of *Di kishef-makherin* (“The sorceress”), one of the most popular operettas by the father of modern Yiddish theatre, playwright Avrom Goldfadn (1840-1908), was staged by Yiddish Art Union in Cairo.¹⁰ Should we thence include Egypt in Yiddishland?

In the 1930s, crowds flocked to theatres and cinemas in New York and Warsaw to watch the same shows in Yiddish. Does this mean that Yiddishland stretched across the Ocean? Taking into account these and other instances of a space defined by Yiddish language and Ashkenazi Jewish culture, should we go so far as to affirm that the entire world is Yiddishland?

In the working definition above, the idea of *space* has to be questioned. In the first place, Yiddishland as a spatial entity, wherever it is located, has not to be understood as a continuous space but rather as an archipelago. This also applies to the historical region wherein modern

Yiddish culture has its roots – the Russian Pale of Settlement along with the neighbouring regions under the Habsburg Monarchy (later the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and the Kingdom of Prussia. Roughly corresponding to modern-day Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Lithuania, and eastern Poland, the Pale of Settlement was the westernmost territory of the Russian Empire in which the residency of Jews was allowed, although with many restrictions.¹¹ Created after the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, it was only abolished in 1917. At the turn of the 20th century, the Pale and the neighbouring regions hosted one half of the Jewish population worldwide.¹² Jews amounted to a high percentage of urban population, and in many small towns all the inhabitants or the overwhelming majority were Jews. Notwithstanding, they remained a minority in every province.¹³

Lacking geographical continuity, Yiddishland must necessarily be conceived as a dematerialised space. Despite its name, it cannot be focused on land and throughout its history it can always be described as «a territory without borders, army, or flag».¹⁴ The idea of Yiddishland appears to be situated at the polar opposite of Zionism, which is indeed land-centred, being Zion a synecdoche for the Land of Israel, and promotes the revitalisation of spoken Hebrew, a «hyperterritorialized language».¹⁵ Nevertheless,

⁸ This era is also marked by the transition from old to new Yiddish literature. Cf. J. Baumgarten, *Introduction to old Yiddish literature*, tr. by J.C. FRAKES, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005 [*Introduction à la littérature yiddish ancienne*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1993], pp. 386-387.

⁹ J.C. FRAKES, *Early Yiddish texts 1100-1750. With introduction and commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, pp. 313-315.

¹⁰ YIVO archives: <http://www.yivoarchives.org/?p=collections/controlcard&id=354280> (accessed 1st December 2018).

¹¹ «There were further restrictions even within the boundaries of the Pale. For the first half of the nineteenth century, Jews were banned from the cities of Kiev, Nikolaev, and Sevastopol. Jews were not allowed to live in peasant villages in Mogilev or Vitebsk provinces, or in villages inhabited by Cossacks or state peasants in Chernigov and Poltava provinces. As a measure against smuggling, Jews

were barred from new settlement in villages within a 50-verst zone (about 33 mi. or 53 km) from the empire's western frontiers. On the other hand, Jews of all social estates were allowed free movement within the Pale». J. KLER, *Pale of Settlement*, in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pale_of_Settlement (accessed 10th December 2018).

¹² Cf. R.H. ROWLAND, *Geographical patterns of the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement of late nineteenth century Russia*, «Jewish Social Studies» 48/3-4 (1986), pp. 207-234.

¹³ *Ibid., passim* for details on the population distribution.

¹⁴ G. SILVAIN - H. MINCZELES, *Yiddishland*, tr. by D. Wharry, Gingko Press, Corte Madera, CA 1999 [*Yiddishland*, Hazan, Paris 1999], p. 11.

¹⁵ B. MANN, *Yiddish encounters Hebrew*, in L. RABINOVITCH - SH. GOREN - H.S. PRESSMAN (eds.), *Choosing Yiddish. New frontiers of language and*

it is equally far from those panethnic utopias based solely on language, such as the Esperanto movement, that are completely unrelated to the idea of nation.¹⁶ Taking into account the polysemy of the adjective *yidish* as both “Yiddish” and “Jewish”, Yiddishland is necessarily defined on an ethnic basis and not solely on a linguistic one. It falls within an accepted definition of *nation* as a «body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language».¹⁷ It cannot refer to a people «inhabiting a particular state or territory»¹⁸, given both its inherently diasporic nature and the consequences of mass migrations. Nonetheless Yiddishland retains a «geographic specificity»,¹⁹ deeply rooted in the Eastern European homeland, as will be shown below.

Yiddishland and the Revolution

The awareness of the existence of a Yiddish nation emerged and was more clearly defined during the years of the debate between Yiddishists and Hebraists, the supporters and promoters of Yiddish and Hebrew, respectively, as the Jewish national language.²⁰ While Hebrew was the natural choice for Zionists, Yiddish found its political voice in the General Jewish Labour Bund (*Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland*, “The General Union

of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia”), commonly called simply *The Bund*. Founded in Vilna in 1897, the Bund had its main goal in the liberation of the impoverished Jewish masses in the Russian empire, which, in addition to the unbearable poverty of the working classes, suffered legal discrimination, persecutions, and massacres. In pre-Bolshevik Russia and pre-WWII Poland, that is before both countries were ruled by a single Communist party, it was by far the major Jewish political party. The Bund had a prominent role in the fall of the tsarist regime, in the Russian Revolution, and later in the Polish anti-Nazi resistance,²¹ but it also promoted an original idea of Jewish/Yiddish nation.

Yiddish nationalism was based on a re-evaluation of the *golei*,²² the diasporic exile, which was no longer seen in a negative light. Bundists had always opposed Zionism, sticking «to the deep “diasporic consciousness” of the great majority of Jewish workers, who wished to continue to live in the cultural, linguistic and geographical space in which they were born».²³ An essential element in their ideology was the concept of *doikeyt* (literally “hereness”), that is the tendency to focus on the future of the Jewish people «here», in the Diaspora.²⁴ The concept of *doikeyt* and its political implementation are summarised in the slogan appearing on a Bund elec-

culture, Wayne State University Press, Detroit (MI) 2013, pp. 253-255: 254.

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning, *en passant*, that these two ideas of linguistic community on opposite sides of the spectrum – the revival of Hebrew and the invention of Esperanto – owe their existence to two Ashkenazic Jews born a couple years apart and a few hundred miles from each other in the Russian Empire: Eliezer Perlman, better known as Eleazar Ben Yehuda (1858-1922), and Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859-1917), respectively.

¹⁷ Oxford Dictionary of English, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, see *nation*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ J. SHANDLER, *Imagining Yiddishland. Language, place and memory*, «History and Memory» 15,1 (2003), pp. 123-149: 131.

²⁰ Cf. B. SPOLSKY, *The languages of the Jews. A sociolinguistic history*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 250-252. For a collection of early 20th-century cartoons inspired by the atti-

tudes towards Yiddish and Hebrew – often personified as a young and an old woman or a maid and an aristocrat – see: J.A. FISHMAN, *Cartoons about language: Hebrew, Yiddish, and the visual representation of sociolinguistic attitudes*, in L. GLINERT (ed.), *Hebrew in Ashkenaz. A language in exile*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, pp. 151-166; ID. (ed.), *Never say die! A thousand years of Yiddish in Jewish life and letters*, Mouton, The Hague - Paris - New York 1981.

²¹ Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, was a Bundist.

²² Ashkenazi pronunciation of the Hebrew *gālūt*, “exile”, “diaspora”.

²³ A. BROSSAT - S. KLINGBERG, *Revolutionary Yiddishland. A history of Jewish radicalism*, tr. by D. Fernbach, Verso, London - New York 2016 [*Le Yiddishland révolutionnaire*, Balland, Paris 1983], p. 53.

²⁴ On the concept of *doikeyt* and, more generally, the history of the Bund and its role in the Rev-

tion poster from ca. 1918:²⁵ *Dortn vu mir lebn, dort iz undzer land!* (“There, where we live, there is our country!”). The Bund fought for a Jewish national autonomy linked to culture and language, not to territory. Diaspora is therefore, in the Bundist ideology, an integral component of the Jewish nation, necessarily conceived as a discontinuous space and a transnational homeland.

A practical implementation of this idea of Jewish nation was suggested, even though for few years only, by the national emblem of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. The emblem adhered to the classical Communist iconography: crossed hammer and sickle atop a rising sun, surrounded by wheat ears wrapped in a red ribbon bearing the USSR State motto – *Пролетарии всех стран, соединяйтесь!* (“Proletarians of all countries, unite!”). In the earlier versions of the emblem, the motto was repeated in four languages, representing the four nationalities that constituted the republic: Belarusian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish.²⁶ As from 1937, that is in the midst of the Stalinist Great Terror, both Yiddish and Polish were removed from the emblem. It is also worthy of note that the Yiddish motto *Proletarier fun ale lender, fareynik zikh!* never appeared on the State emblem of the Soviet Union in use between 1924 and 1991, although in its four successive versions it included up to sixteen languages.²⁷ The revolutionary idea of nation promoted by the Bund was never accepted by the Bolsheviks;²⁸ some Marxist theorists even accused the Bundists of nationalism and resorted to classical antisemitic tropes on Jewish particularism.²⁹

It is disputable whether the ideas of a Jewish nation materialised in the Birobidžan project, the Soviet experiment of a Yiddishland in the Russian Far East. Stalin’s response to both Zionism and Jewish autonomism was the establishment of a Jewish district on the northern bank of the Amur river, which marks the border with Chinese Manchuria. This landlocked area was chosen for both economic and military reasons: the necessity to develop an inhospitable land while strengthening a vulnerable territory infiltrated by China, threatened by Japan, and host to the last remnant of the White Guard. The settlement in the region was encouraged and cultural autonomy was initially recognised, obviously based on Yiddish, given the boycott of the Hebrew language in the Soviet regime.³⁰ Despite the harsh geography and climate, in 1928 the first settlers arrived, mainly from the Ukraine and Byelorussia, but also from overseas.³¹ In 1934, only after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the district was elevated to region as the “Jewish Autonomous Oblast” (*Еврейская автономная область*), with its administrative centre in the newly founded town of Birobidžan.

In addition to being a superimposition, the Soviet Far Eastern Yiddishland never succeeded. Due to isolation, harsh conditions, and a policy reversal in the protection and recognition of the Jewish minority in the USSR, it never attracted mass migration. Today Jews are less than one per cent of the region’s population³² and Yiddish is barely, if at all, spoken.

olution, see M. PIERI, *Doikeyt. Noi stiamo qui ora! Gli ebrei del Bund nella Rivoluzione russa*, Mimesis, Milano 2017.

²⁵ D. BLATMAN, *Bund*, tr. by D. Fachler, in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund> (accessed 20th December 2018).

²⁶ V.A. POCELOEV, *Гербы Союза ССР. Из истории разработки*, Politisdat, Moskva 1987, p. 107.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92, 139, 151-153.

²⁸ On the debate about federalism and centralism, see PIERI, *Doikeyt*, cit., pp. 159-176.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-156.

³⁰ In the long-lasting battle between Hebrew and Yiddish, the latter was backed by the Evsektsia, the Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party,

and therefore by the state power. Even though not officially prohibited, Hebrew was dismissed as the language of the “enemy of the people” – clerics, Zionists, and the bourgeoisie – whereas Yiddish was perceived as the language of the working class. Cf. Y.A. GILBOA, *A language silenced. The suppression of Hebrew literature and culture in the Soviet Union*, Herzl Press, New York 1982.

³¹ On the U.S.-based Jewish organisations sponsoring immigration to Birobidžan from outside the Soviet Union, see H.F. SREBRNIK, *Dreams of nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan project, 1924-1951*, Academic Studies Press, Boston (MA) 2010.

³² *Итоги Всероссийской переписи населения 2010 года* (“Results of the 2010 all-Russian population

Jews always have been a small minority of the inhabitants of the J.A.R. [Jewish Autonomous Region] and by no means has the region ever embodied the national or cultural aspirations of Soviet Jews [...] The Jews of Birobidzhan have lived the fiction that they inhabited the national homeland of Soviet Jewry. But with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they now find themselves confronted with the challenge of transforming this fiction into a reality.³³

In spite of the signs in Russian and Yiddish on public buildings, the monuments celebrating Jewish arts, and the streets named after Yiddish authors, it remains a Yiddishland without Jews.

A Yiddishland that once was

The idea of Yiddishland as a space defined by language and the Ashkenazi Diaspora is clearly expressed on the cover of a 1950 book, a poetic cycle by Leon Feinberg. Its title, *Yidish*, is printed on a world map where various Jewish centres appear, such as Vilna, New York, and Tel Aviv. The references to a global and transnational expansion of this language and culture, as well as to the intrinsically diasporic nature of the Yiddish nation, could not be more explicit. Yet, in order to further clarify the point, a quatrain follows the picture:

From Vilna to Buenos Aires,
From Tel Aviv to New York,
The kingdom of the Yiddish word,
Miracle of generations, has spread.³⁴

Also titled *[Y]idish*, a 1930 poem by A. Almi celebrates Yiddish culture as «An empire

census”), in *Федеральная служба государственной статистики* (“Federal Service of State Statistics”): http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/itogi_2010.htm (accessed 2nd November 2018).

³³ R. WEINBERG, *Stalin's forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the making of a Soviet Jewish homeland. An illustrated history, 1928-1996*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 1998, p. 13. An interesting account of the Jewish experience in Birobidzhan and the Soviet Union is also offered as a memoir in M. GESSEN, *Where the Jews aren't: The sad and absurd story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region*, Schocken, New York 2016.

³⁴ L. FEINBERG, *Yidish. Poeme*, Shaulzakh Druk,

of scattered, beautifully blossoming islands».³⁵ Yiddishland is clearly painted as an archipelago, a country that has dispersion as an integral component. Verses go on listing a series of places and environments around the globe – natural landscapes, different climates, cities, and countries – as the global, borderless Yiddish territory. «Along the Vistula, along the Dniester and the Dnieper, / Along the Thames, Hudson, Mississippi [...] In Mexico, in Cuba and Canada / Yiddish culture takes roots and the hardest soil will bear fruit».³⁶

As seen in both poems, the idea of Yiddishland in the first half of the 20th century could not leave out *dos alte land*, “the old country”. Images of Yiddishland before the Holocaust conjured a transnational space rooted in a specific geographical region, which was still populated by millions of Yiddish speakers and could still be called home by more millions around the globe. The extermination of European Jewry and the resulting eradication of Yiddish culture from Eastern Europe mark a watershed. Thenceforth, every attempt to define or imagine Yiddishland cannot ignore «the massacres committed during the Second World War, which have – one can say – beheaded this culture, its elites, its substrate».³⁷ In the post-WWII scenario, Yiddishland is an uprooted transnational reality. Therefore, as Shandler correctly puts it, «after the Holocaust, conjuring Yiddishland has become more of an exercise in memory».³⁸ In several cases, an exercise in fiction.

If we are looking for representations of Yiddishland in literature both before and after the Holocaust, we find that Yiddish author and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (Yitskhok

Nyu York 1950 (the translation from Yiddish is mine).

³⁵ A. ALMI, *Idish*, in SH. ERDBERG (ed.), *Far idish: a zamlbuch*, Natsyonaler Kounsil fun Yong Izrael, Nyu York 1930, p. 59 (the translation from Yiddish is mine).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Le Yiddishland, un continent disparu*, interview with Alain Guillemoles (video excerpt from the news), TV5 Monde (30th November 2010): <https://information.tv5monde.com/info/le-yiddishland-un-continent-disparu-5790> (accessed 15th December 2018. The translation from French is mine).

³⁸ SHANDLER, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, cit., p. 40.

Bashevis Zinger, 1902-1991) is an extremely interesting source. Bashevis' novelistic Yiddishland – which spans from the 17th-century Poland to contemporary America – is neither caricatural nor mythological; it is simply memory and personal experience providing a background to the stories of characters living an inner conflict. It is worth examining some passages from his *Shadows on the Hudson* (*Shotns baym Hodson*), a novel first serialised in the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, then published as a volume in 1957, and finally translated into English in 1998. The novel, which follows a group of Polish Jewish émigrés in New York City in the aftermath of the Second World War, offers precious suggestions for a better understanding of the ideas of Yiddishland. The persistence of a concrete, material, and precisely localisable homeland is acknowledged already in the opening lines:

That evening the guests gathered in Boris Makaver's apartment on the Upper West Side. The apartment building into which Boris had just moved reminded him of Warsaw [...] Whenever Boris gazed into the courtyard and listened to its silence, the bustle of America evaporated and he thought European thoughts.³⁹

References to the reality of the old country are ubiquitous. In this case, the mind of the characters is repeatedly brought back to images of urban and rural life in Poland:

He seated himself behind the wheel and Anna snuggled up close to him, as she had once before when she was a little girl and rode with him in a droshky [...] The traffic lights changed from green to red and the car stopped next to a muddied bridle path. Grein could smell the horse dung. He inhaled deeply: the odour reminded him of Warsaw, of his childhood, of a journey by ox wagon to some distant relative in a small village.⁴⁰

Paying attention to the seemingly most insignificant details, such as habits, expressions, and unconscious gestures, the characters portrayed here by Bashevis continually reveal

themselves as a community uprooted from the Old World. It is the case of dropped old-fashioned habits that resurface when the old country is temporarily reconstituted during meetings: «Solomon Margolin rarely wore his monocle in America, but now he sat in Boris Makaver's living room with one eye focused and staring ahead, exactly as if a monocle were jammed against it».⁴¹ A direct witness, and a particularly attentive one such as Bashevis, can also offer an interesting glimpse of the sociolinguistic reality, which appears quite different from the one imagined in contemporary realizations of Yiddishland. Simplification and touristic reduction of sites and cultures is a general tendency; in the case of Yiddishland, we are witnessing what Dan Miron described as «radical Judaization of the image of the eastern European shtetl».⁴² With regard to the language, the idea was taken up by Shandler who spotted the «radical Yiddishization»⁴³ of re-enactments that are more Yiddish than the original. In particular, an ideal past is conjured and shown as strictly monolingual, in contrast with the complexity of the historical reality. In order to gain a better insight into the actual Yiddishland that once was, one should look at photographs of a Jewish street in pre-war Eastern Europe, where the shop signs are in Polish or Russian rather than in Yiddish. Or listen to the following banter between two characters of *Shadows on the Hudson*:

«Good night, Mr. Makaver».

«Don't be in such a hurry, Panie Grein, and please don't call me "Mister". What kind of "Mister" am I?» Boris replied courteously, with old-fashioned formality.

«How should I address you? As Reb Borukh?»⁴⁴

References to actually spoken languages are found frequently, the switch from one language to another is a common phenomenon, and characters more than often interact in Polish. The same applies to the reality portrayed by other novels by Bashevis set in pre-war Warsaw, such as *The family Moskat* (*Di familye Mushkat*,

³⁹ I.B. SINGER, *Shadows on the Hudson*, tr. by J. Sherman, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 1998, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴² D. MIRON, *The literary image of the shtetl*, «Jewish Social Studies» 1,3 (1995), pp. 1-43: p. 4.

⁴³ SHANDLER, *Imagining Yiddishland*, cit., p. 143.

⁴⁴ SINGER, *Shadows on the Hudson*, cit., p. 27. *Panie* and *Reb* are the Polish and the Yiddish equiv-

1950) and *Shosha* (1978). In short, multilingualism is part of everyday life both in the Old World, the Eastern European homeland, and in the New World, the American *goldene medine* (“golden country”). Even the dreams are multilingual: «His eyes were open but he was already dreaming. Something in him was speaking a broken mixture of Yiddish, Polish, English, Hebrew. He was simultaneously in New York and Warsaw. Through some trick of the conscious mind, Anna was both herself and Esther».⁴⁵ The here mentioned Esther is shown in her flat on the outskirts of New York City, yet described, by the Old World’s standards, as a *shtetl* aristocrat. How are we supposed to read the ubiquitous references to an unbreakable bond with the Eastern European homeland? Bashevis himself comes to our aid with his reflections upon Yiddish fiction in America:

It is time to make it clear that, through his language, the Yiddish writer is bound to the past. His boundaries are, spatially, the borders of Poland, Russia and Rumania, and, temporally, the date of his departure for America. Here he must, in a literary sense, dine on leftovers; only food prepared in the old world can nourish him in the new [...].

Yiddish literature is a product of the ghetto with all its virtues and faults, and it can never leave the ghetto.⁴⁶

In the conclusion of this article appeared in 1943, Yiddish language is likened to an old mother, supposedly a dying one:

Our mother tongue has grown old. The mother is already a grandmother and a great grandmother. She wandered with us from Germany to Poland, Russia, Rumania. Now she is in America, but in spirit she still lives in the old country – in her memories [...] When she starts talking about the past (through the mouth of a true talent), pearls drop from her lips. She remembers what happened fifty years ago better and more clearly than what happened this morning.⁴⁷

alent, respectively, of Mr.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁶ ID., *Problems of Yiddish prose in America*, tr. by R.H. Wolf, «Prooftexts» 9,1 (1989), pp. 5-12 [Problemen fun der yidisher proze in Amerike,

As seen in Bashevis’ works and confirmed by his reflections, post-war Yiddish fiction refers to a Yiddishland that once was, rooted in Eastern Europe. In this case, we are dealing with an attentive observer and a faithful teller of the historical and sociological reality chosen as a background for his novels and portrayed in all its complexity. Other forms of contemporary re-enactments, revivals, and attempts at cultural recovery unvaryingly bring back the *shtetl* in more or less mythicized versions. In any case, we are dealing with an imagery that is always strongly characterised by the evocation of a specific time and place: pre-war Eastern Europe. The break cannot be ignored when exploring the idea of Yiddishland after the Holocaust; as Barbara Mann puts it:

If Ashkenaz was “home”, how can we begin to theorize the various diasporic “Yiddishlands” that have emerged since the break, especially in relation to normative Jewish notions of homeland and exile? Ironically, when Yiddish moves out of Europe it remembers the *alte heym* in terms that evoke the enduring memory of Jerusalem and the temple: the *landsleyt* (compatriots) may well be in exile (again) but the abiding object of their longing and nostalgia is not *Eretz Yisrael*, but the streets and grand public spaces of Lodz and Minsk, and the steppes and forests of the Ukraine.⁴⁸

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research has recently added to its invaluable online reference library a new publication titled *Yiddishland: countries, cities, towns, rivers*.⁴⁹ It is a topographical index based on an uncompleted project by Mordkhe Schaechter, who had been collecting data from oral interviews, and not only from printed sources, in order to reflect the pronunciation of native Yiddish speakers rather than official toponyms. With regard to our subject, it is interesting to note that once again, and even by one of the world’s leading institutions for Yiddish studies, Yiddishland is restricted to a specific geographical area:

«Svive» 2 (1943), pp. 2-13], pp. 9-10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁸ MANN, *Yiddish encounters Hebrew*, cit., p. 254.

⁴⁹ *Yiddishland: countries, cities, towns, rivers*: <https://yivo.org/Yiddishland>.

Our definition of *Yiddishland* includes present-day Austria, Belarus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine, as well as the European regions of Russia. This includes what M. Herzog (1965:7) designates “Yiddish Language Area”, as well as neighbouring countries with at least a few Yiddish place names of long standing.⁵⁰

The unbreakable bond with a specific place and time is most evident if we look at an institution dedicated to an invaluable operation of Yiddishland recovery – the National Yiddish Book Center (NYBC). Founded in 1980 by Aaron Lansky for the purpose of finding and saving Yiddish books around the world, in 1997 it embarked on a large-scale digitisation project. The institution currently holds more than a million volumes, while its digital library contains 12,000 titles, which can be accessed online and downloaded free of charge. Other collections also accessible for free include archival audio recordings, audiobooks, children’s literature, and *yisker bikher* (“memorial books”).⁵¹ This enterprise was made possible by grants from Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation. In other words, the recovery, preservation, and sharing of Yiddish culture falls within the scope of a foundation established for the commemoration of the Holocaust.

The extensive collection of *yisker bikher* is a further testimony to the bond with a Yiddish homeland. These memorial books, collaboratively written by survivors during the 1950s and 1960s, document with meticulous care Jewish life in pre-war Eastern Europe, recalling places and communities erased in the Holocaust. Each book is dedicated to a village, town, city, or region to preserve history, memoirs, photographs, and lists of names. Detailed maps, often drawn from memory, show streets, landmarks, and sometimes even the names of the people living in each house. Produced from a Jewish point of view, with Yiddish place names instead of the of-

ficial ones, *yisker bikher* provide the geography of a disappeared Yiddishland.

If that is not enough, the implicit connection with the past is immediately evident in the distinctive architecture of the NYBC’s headquarters in Amherst, Massachusetts. Designed by architect Allen Moore, the buildings pay homage to the architecture of old Jewish villages in Eastern Europe, resulting in the refounding of a *shtetl* in New England.

The place of the roots is therefore central to any depiction of the idea of Yiddishland. Whilst Yiddishland is necessarily conceived as a transnational entity, inherently diasporic, it is still closely linked to a well-defined, even though vast and discontinuous, geographical and cultural landscape. That landscape saw the sudden and nearly total disappearance of Jewish life; if we add to that the fading of Yiddish as a vernacular,⁵² Yiddishland lacks its constituent elements. One may speculate about its future and its capacity for adaptation, yet in the current state it remains a place of the memory. A Yiddishland proclaiming its independence from both land and language, and yet surviving as an uprooted and speechless country, simply does not exist. As much as the idea is attractive and not lacking a certain charm, it appears to be little more than a self-comforting idealisation. This is the only possible conclusion when addressing the issue with an unbiased approach.

A Yiddishland that could have been

Six decades ago, the prominent linguist Uriel Weinreich (1926-1967) and his wife, folklorist Beatrice Silverman Weinreich (1928-2008), published a Yiddish-English phrasebook as part of a series by Dover Publications covering several modern languages.⁵³ *Say it in Yiddish* by the Weinreichs stands out today from the rest of that series as being still relevant and quite easily available.⁵⁴ But it probably stood out from

⁵⁰ *Introduction:* https://yivo.org/cimages/topintro_rev_jun_17.pdf, p. 11 (accessed 20th December 2018). The work cited in this passage is M.I. HERZOG, *The Yiddish language in Northern Poland*, Indiana University, Bloomington (IN) - Mouton, The Hague 1965.

⁵¹ <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections>.

⁵² It is worth noting the even the YIVO’s and the NYBC’s websites are in English.

⁵³ U. WEINREICH - B. WEINREICH, *Say it in Yiddish*, Dover, New York 1958.

⁵⁴ SHANDLER, *Imagining Yiddishland*, cit., p. 124.

the beginning, due to the peculiarity of Yiddish compared to each of the twenty-four other languages advertised on the back cover. Its front cover claims that «[n]o other phrasebook for travellers contains all these essential features», the features including «[o]ver 1,600 up-to-date practical entries [...] Extensive food list and menu guide». Between the covers, following a brief guide to Yiddish alphabet and pronunciation, it offers lists of expressions arranged in the categories that readers are used to finding in phrasebooks. In addition to several useful expressions, such as basic words, introductions, and greetings, it mostly lists phrases and sentences needed for travelling to a foreign country: asking for directions, buying tickets, getting on a bus, checking into a hotel, ordering at a restaurant, and even seeing a dentist. It gets especially surreal when it guides the reader through customs declarations.

It is easy to assume that, as with the claim on the cover, the same (or nearly the same) set of standard phrases and common situations appears in all the phrasebooks of the series; and they do. The peculiarity of *Say it in Yiddish* lies exactly here, in its assimilation to other phrasebooks despite the clearly different status of the language. A tourist, in 1958 as well as today, could try to say *Here is my passport (my visa)* or *I have nothing to declare* in Finnish, in Japanese, or in Hebrew while crossing a border. But the question arises as to when and where one would have a chance to say to custom officials *Ot iz mayn pas (mayn vize)*⁵⁵ or *Ikh hob nit vos tsu deklarirn*.⁵⁶ Even though Yiddish is far from being a dead language,⁵⁷ crossing the borders of a Yiddish-speaking country remains an exercise of imagination.

This small paperback came into the focus of debate in 1997, when American author Michael Chabon wrote a brief essay questioning the purpose of a guidebook to a «land of ghosts»:⁵⁸

Probably the saddest book that I own is a paperback copy of *Say it in Yiddish*, edited by Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich. I bought it new, in 1993, but the book was originally published in 1958. According to the back cover, it's part of the *Say it* book series, with which I'm otherwise unfamiliar. I've never seen *Say it in Swahili*, *Say it in Hindi*, or *Say it in Serbo-Croatian*, nor have I ever been to the countries where any of them might come in handy. As for the country in which I'd do well to carry a copy of *Say it in Yiddish*, naturally I've never been there either. I don't think anyone ever has.⁵⁹

The article was fairly misunderstood and bitterly received by many,⁶⁰ probably distracted by the occurrences of «hoax»,⁶¹ «tragic [...] joke»,⁶² and other provocative definitions. Far either from mocking the old phrasebook or diminishing the Weinreichs' devotion to the cause of Yiddish, Chabon firstly focuses on the mixed emotions evoked in him by a «heartbreakingly implausible book»⁶³ and then delves deeper into the idea of a Yiddish-speaking country. He legitimately wonders «[a]t what time in the history of the world was there a place of the kind that the Weinreichs imply»,⁶⁴ namely a place where a traveller could flip through the pages of their phrasebook and find a translation for *Here is my passport (my visa)* or *I have nothing to declare*. Such a place, it goes without saying, never existed. Phrase after phrase, the Weinreichs bring their readers to «a fantastic land»⁶⁵ and put up «a wistful toy theatre».⁶⁶

⁵⁵ WEINREICH, *Say it in Yiddish*, cit., p. 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁷ On the status of the Yiddish language today, its maintenance among Haredim and its value for secular Jews, see J. MYHILL, *Language in Jewish society. Towards a new understanding*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon - Buffalo (NY) - Toronto 2004, pp. 141-147.

⁵⁸ M. CHABON, *Guidebook to a land of ghosts*, «Civilization» (1997), pp. 67-69. Reprinted in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, 4th Estate, London

2010, Appendix pp. 15-19. The latter is the edition quoted here.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Cf. SHANDLER, *Imagining Yiddishland*, cit., pp. 123-125.

⁶¹ CHABON, *Guidebook*, cit., p. 15.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Chabon evokes two scenarios for a Yiddish-speaking country. The first is a post-war independent Jewish state; an alternative Israel («Call it the state of Yisroel»)⁶⁷ where Yiddish, not Hebrew, was established as the official language. This idea will provide the setting, a decade later, for one of his novels. In the second scenario, the author visits hypothetical distant cousins in «a Europe that might have been», where «the millions of Jews who were never killed produced grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren».⁶⁸ Misunderstood for a bad review, Chabon's essay turns out to be a lament over a wiped-out world, a wistful glance at the memories of a lost future.

The lost future is given tangible form in Chabon's 2007 novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. When the protagonist, homicide detective Meyer Landsman, recalls having heard some suspects speaking a language that «sounded like» Hebrew, he specifies that it was not «synagogue Hebrew». The narrator explains that «the Hebrew he knows is the traditional brand, the one his ancestors carried with them through the millennia of their European exile, oily and salty as a piece of fish smoked to preserve it, its flesh strongly flavored by Yiddish».⁶⁹ That is the Ashkenazic Hebrew to which Yiddish speakers are accustomed, only used «for talking to God», whereas the Hebrew he had furtively heard

was not the old salt-herring tongue but some spiky dialect, a language of alkali and rocks. It sounded to him like the Hebrew brought over by the Zionist after 1948. Those hard desert Jews tried fiercely to hold on to it in their exile but [...] got overwhelmed by the teeming tumult of Yiddish, and by the painful association of their language with recent failure and disaster. As far as Landsman knows, that kind of Hebrew is extinct except among a few last holdouts meeting annually in lonely halls.⁷⁰

If the roles of the two struggling languages and their destinies are inverted in the passage above, it is because *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, besides being a detective story, is an alternative history novel set in a fictive present-day Yiddishland. In Chabon's fictional universe, a temporary settlement for Jewish refugees during the Second World War was established in the area of Sitka, Alaska.⁷¹ As is usual in this genre, the novel hints at many differences in the world's history starting from the divergence point. For example, Soviet Union fell under the Nazis, the war in Europe lasted longer, and the atomic bomb was dropped on Berlin in 1946.⁷² Jews murdered in the Holocaust were two millions instead of six millions as in the real history.⁷³ The State of Israel was destroyed by Arab countries in 1948, only three months after the Independence,⁷⁴ and Palestine – not unexpectedly – is consumed by a violent never-ending conflict involving foreign powers and irreconcilable factions.⁷⁵ The Alaskan settlement, on the other hand, attracted many refugees from Europe, such as the protagonist's family, exiles from Łódź, Poland. Therefore, in the world of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the few surviving Israeli Hebrew speakers are the defeated, militarily and linguistically, as stated in the passage quoted above, thus taking on the role played by Yiddish speakers in our world. Although the settlement is a federal district and not an independent country, and its interim status is about to expire, Sitka, Alaska is a Yiddish-speaking metropolis. It is the Jewish homeland that could have been, with its northern imagery populated by reindeers, igloos, snowflakes,⁷⁶ with «Polar Bears»⁷⁷ instead of sabras. But more than by anything else this northern homeland is shaped by Yiddish cultural heritage. Chabon scrupulously creates a «Jewlaska»⁷⁸ where the buildings, landmarks, and streets are named after person-

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶⁹ CHABON, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, cit., p. 286.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Such a plan was actually given consideration, with little support and much opposition, in 1939. Cf. G.S. BERMAN, *Reaction to the resettlement of World War II refugees in Alaska*, «Jewish Social Studies»

44,3-4 (1982), pp. 271-282.

⁷² CHABON, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, cit., p. 136.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

alities from the old country: the story opens in the Hotel Zamenhof on Max Nordau Street⁷⁹ and the reader follows the characters through Zhitlovsky Avenue,⁸⁰ Korczak Platz,⁸¹ Peretz Street,⁸² Ansky Street⁸³ and so on. But most interestingly, names from the Eastern European landscape are employed to mark the new homeland, such as «Shvartsn-Yam» (“Black Sea”)⁸⁴ and «Dnyeper».⁸⁵ Again, the place of the roots is central to any depiction of Yiddishland, even a fictitious one. An alternative history hypothesis cannot imagine a Yiddishland without a deep connection to a well-defined geographical landscape. The Yiddish nation has its strength in the lack of borders, but its soul lies on the banks of the Dnieper or the Vistula, in the disappeared *shtetlekh* or in the streets of a forever-changed Warsaw.

A last passage from Bashevis’ *Shadows on the Hudson* is worth quoting with regard to the lost homeland. The following are the words with which Anna Makaver’s character abruptly puts an end to her furtive conversation with Herz Grein by the window, while the snow falls on New York City:

«Oh, I can’t bear to hear about God. After what happened in Europe, I don’t dare even to mention the word God – because if God really does exist and allowed it all, it’s even worse than if He did not exist.»

«Either way it’s bad».

«Look – it’s snowing outside!».

[...]

Grein was seized by nostalgia, a hankering he had never felt before that combined Hanukkah, Christmastide, Warsaw. He wanted to embrace Anna, but he restrained himself.

[...]

«Winter still comes», he murmured.

«Yes. Very often I’m amazed there’s a world here at all».⁸⁶

Anna reveals her amazement at the fact that a world still exists. That world is here and now, where a community found refuge. But that world does not appear to be Yiddishland, which is an ever-present image for the novel’s characters, yet recalled and commemorated as a lost world.

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SUMMARY

Yiddishland is a concept variously applied to manifestations of Yiddish culture, although its definition is problematic due to both translation issues and the deterritorialized nature of Yiddish cultural, linguistic, and national space. This paper will explore various instances and understandings of Yiddishland throughout history, including Yiddish nationalism, the revolutionary experience, and the Birobidzhan experiment. Re-enactments of Yiddishland following the sudden disappearance of the Ashkenazi homeland in Eastern Europe will be analysed, as well as depictions of Yiddishland in post-Holocaust fiction. The conclusion will emerge that despite its inherently diasporic nature, Yiddishland in all its instances appears as deeply rooted in a pre-war Eastern European landscape.

KEY WORDS: Yiddish culture; Isaac Bashevis Singer; Michael Chabon.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 35.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 199.

⁸⁶ SINGER, *Shadows on the Hudson*, cit., pp. 16-17.