

Banishing Yiddish: On Tacit Anti-Semitism in Academia

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Speaking in late May 2019, shortly after the elections to the European Parliament, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned of the continuing, and nowadays increasing, anti-Semitism in Germany and across Europe.¹ The tell-tale sign of this worrying trend is that each readily identifiable Jewish institution – be it a synagogue, Jewish school, museum, or a social club – requires 24/7 protection by the police, plainclothes, or even soldiers; while CCTV is a matter of course. How then can these few Jews remaining after the Holocaust in Europe feel safe? One of the goals of the Allies' victory over wartime Germany's murderous Nazi regime was to redress the wrongs perpetrated by it. The war's most horrific tragedy was Germany's planned industrialized extermination of the continent's Jews. The Allies shamed by the fact that they had allowed the Holocaust to happen in the first place, supported the emigration of survivors to North America and Western Europe, and also extended protection over Israel founded in 1948. On the other hand, after the war, (West) Germany has readily given citizenship to any Jew who may want to settle in this country, which once attempted to exterminate them.

Almost eight decades after World War II, all these efforts have not translated yet into providing the same level of security to Jews, as enjoyed by other citizens of European countries; citizens who profess other religions than Judaism, or culturally are connected to other faiths than the Jewish religion. Still, being identified or identifiable as a Jew, due to religion or culture, places one in danger's way. Unsurprisingly then, the permanent police protection is also a commonplace in the case of Jewish institutions elsewhere in Europe, be it in Estonia, France, Hungary or Poland. This is *not* a normal situation. This clear acknowledgement of ever-present danger faced by Jews in today's Europe is a failure of making amends for the wartime wrongs, indeed, a failure of democracy. In turn, this failure encourages anti-Semites of all political stripes, many of whom see this worrying situation as a proof that Nazi Germany won at least when it comes to the policy of making Europe *Judenfrei* ('free of Jews'). Isn't the police protection to keep intruders *out* in some insidious ways similar to wartime ghettos that were to keep Jews *in*, separate from the rest of the supposedly 'racially superior' population?

In this manner, Jews who have lived in Europe for over two millennia are effectively denied the right to their homeland; safe within undeclared ghettos, always with Plan B at the back of their head to leave swiftly, when an existential need strikes. The Russian imperial and prewar Romanian policies of treating Jews as 'foreigners' (инородцы *inorodtsy* in Russian) or 'aliens' (*străini* in Romanian) with no right to full-fledged citizenship continues in a underhand manner. Officially, a Jew is considered to be a fellow Frenchman, German, Pole or Hungarian, if in possession of a respective country's citizenship. Her religion is a private matter, as in the case of Catholics, Buddhists,

¹ Kate Connolly. 2019. 'Spectres of the Past': Angela Merkel Sounds Alarm Over Antisemitism. *The Guardian*. 28 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/28/spectres-of-the-past-angela-merkel-warns-against-rise-of-far-right>.

Protestants, Orthodox Christians, atheists, or Muslims. Likewise, in light of the constitution, her Jewish ethnic or cultural origin does not make her any less French, German, Polish, or Hungarian; not unlike the German(ic) surnames of such Polish national heroes as Romuald Traugutt or Emilia Platter, which do not nullify their Polishness.

In reality, however, the legacy of political anti-Semitism, which was widely accepted in Europe until the mid-20th century, continues. The Holocaust even more 'normalized' this anti-Semitic attitude, though paradoxically the vast majority of this continent's Jews were murdered, while most of the survivors left Europe. Europe has been left *without* a single village, town or a city quarter that would boast a Jewish plurality of inhabitants, let alone a majority. This blow to European society, culture and history makes the oft-repeated thesis on the 'Judeo-Christian roots of Europe' an empty phrase, a political incantation devoid of meaning. Latter-day anti-Semites see the concept of Judeo-Christian tradition as a preposterous contradiction in terms, and may even consider it an American imposition on Europe. It was none other than the administration of the US President Franklin D Roosevelt, who in the 1930s, coined this concept for the sake of countering the Nazi ideology, and then deployed it also for giving a moral direction to the postwar reconstruction of (Western) Europe.²

However, the governments of (Western) European countries readily accepted the concept of Europe's Judeo-Christian basis as their own. This concept allowed these governments to distance their countries from the war, and from more or less direct and willing participation in the German-led project of the Holocaust. On the other hand, the Judeo-Christian values became a new ideological foundation, on the basis of which Europe's warmongering nation-states managed to overcome their murderous mutual animosities, making European integration possible. The process's main fruit is the European Union, or the main guarantor of the continent's peace and stability. Accordingly, Europe's universities have been tasked with developing an improved understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to implement it in their teaching and research as guiding principle.

Yet, little or no attention is actually paid to the 'Judeo' element in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As a test of this proposition, let us have a look at the place of Yiddish in university curricula and research at present. Until the Holocaust, Yiddish was the largest (in the sense of the number of speakers) language of the world's Jewry. Between the mid-19th century and the 1920s, it was developed into a significant medium of literature, politics, scholarship and mass media, on a par, for instance, with Dutch or Hungarian. What is more, due to the Jewish diaspora and its closeness to German, Yiddish became one of the main languages of international communication from the United States' East Coast and across Europe to the Soviet capital of Moscow. At once, it was a language of Jewish tradition, modernity and future. But during the war the future of Yiddish and Jewry in Europe was cut short by German genocidaires and their European helpers of a variety of ethnicities and nationalities.

² Cf Rachel Gordon. 2013. FDR and the Judeo-Christian Tradition. *Religion in American History*. 29 Apr. <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2013/04/fdr-and-judeo-christian-tradition.html>; Gene Zubovich. 2016. The Strange, Short Career of Judeo-Christianity. *Aeon*. 22 Mar. <https://aeon.co/ideas/the-strange-short-career-of-judeo-christianity>.

Nowadays, this par excellence European language of Yiddish is nowhere in official use across the continent of Europe. Actually, no state in the world accords any official status to this language. At present, in Europe, Yiddish is recognized as a mere minority language in Bosnia, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden and Ukraine.³ But this is only a slight reversal in the continuing degradation and marginalization of Yiddish. The positive development took place as late as during the last two decades, thanks to the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages that came into force in 1998. Without the fall of communism and the healing of the Cold War division of Europe, Yiddish would not have enjoyed even the status of a minority language, as it neither did in Western Europe, nor in the Soviet bloc before 1989.

The revival of teaching and studying Yiddish language and culture at Europe's universities commenced during the optimistic and liberal postcommunist decade of the 1990s. Numerous centers for Jewish studies sprang up across the continent, and most offer Yiddish as part of their teaching programs.⁴ However, strangely, in Poland, or the country where a plurality of Yiddish-speakers lived before World War II, Yiddish is *not* offered in departments or institutes of Germanic languages at the University of Warsaw,⁵ Jagiellonian University in Cracow,⁶ the University of Silesia in Katowice,⁷ the University of Wrocław,⁸ or at the University of Gdańsk.⁹ This insidious ghettoization of Yiddish in centers of Jewish studies, so that it would *not* have to be taught in 'purely Aryan' and aptly *Judenrein* ('cleansed of Jews') departments and institutes of Germanic languages, also obtains at other universities in Europe. For instance, Yiddish is offered in such a center at Charles University in Prague,¹⁰ but not in this university's Department of Germanic Languages.¹¹ A similar situation can be observed at the University of Vienna,¹² where Yiddish is taught jointly by the institutes of Jewish studies, Egyptology and ancient history.¹³

Refreshingly, Germany's most prestigious University of Heidelberg departs from this predictable pattern and includes Yiddish as part of the curriculum for the Germanic languages.¹⁴ But unfortunately, the ghetto-like separation for Yiddish continues at

³ States Parties to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and their regional or minority languages (listed by language on p.6). 2018. Council of Europe. 1 Jan. <https://rm.coe.int/states-parties-to-the-european-charter-for-regional-or-minority-language/168077098c>.

⁴ Magdalena Kozłowska. 2011. Gdzie w Polsce można się nauczyć jidysz? http://jidyszland.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/KONF_02.pdf.

⁵ <http://www.germanistyka.uw.edu.pl/zaklady/zaklad-jezykoznawstwa-germanskiego/>

⁶ <http://www.ifg.filg.uj.edu.pl/instytut/struktura>

⁷ <https://www.ifg.us.edu.pl/zaklady/>

⁸ <http://www.ifg.uni.wroc.pl/zaklady/>

⁹ https://ug.edu.pl/20485/filologia_germanska

¹⁰ <https://pcjs.ff.cuni.cz/en/the-prague-summer-school-of-jewish-studies-2018-early-modern-yiddish-in-prague-language-and-literature/>

¹¹ <https://tarantula.ruk.cuni.cz/KG-4.html>

¹² <https://www.univie.ac.at/germanistik/fachbereiche/>

¹³ <https://ufind.univie.ac.at/de/course.html?lv=060133&semester=2007S>

¹⁴ https://www2.gs.uni-heidelberg.de/kvv/ss08/ling/mantovan-kromer_jiddistik.php

Humboldt University in Berlin,¹⁵ the University of Hamburg,¹⁶ Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich,¹⁷ or Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main.¹⁸ In Switzerland the same pattern of separation and ghettoization is monotonously repeated, as evidenced by the cases of the universities in Bern¹⁹ or Basel.²⁰ Yet, at the Free University of Berlin, Yiddish is even 'better' insulated from the 'true Germanic' languages, being consigned to the Institute of Eastern European Studies. Thus, in line with the stereotypical anti-Semitic view, Yiddish is 'rightfully' bundled with the 'barbaric' Slavic languages, which the more distances it from the 'civilized and Aryan' Germanic idioms.²¹

But isn't Yiddish a Germanic language? Isn't it in vocabulary, structure and pronunciation similar to German, Swedish, Dutch or English? So what is it that convinces scholars and university administrators to ghettoize Yiddish, keep it separate from other Germanic languages? Is it a falsely construed reverence for matters Jewish, or perhaps an unrealized or shrewdly concealed anti-Semitic conviction of Nazi Germany's *Rassenkunde* ('science of race') that the Jews are a 'race apart.' That they do not, cannot, and will never belong to Europe and its 'gloriously Aryan' civilization? I fear it is the latter. That is how deeply, after 1945, the roots of the dual Judeo-Christian tradition have struck into the conscience and practices of intellectual discourse and research at Europe's universities. Consciously or not, across the length and breadth of the continent, generations of scholars, intellectuals and university administrators have repeatedly dug up and cast away the 'Judeo' root of Europe's Judeo-Christian values, leaving the continent precariously teetering on its single leg of Christianity's Misericordia and the Gospel's message of love, so awfully compromised during the Holocaust.

This deeply anti-Semitic trend, without any explicit message to accompany it, has been time and again reproduced with each academic graduation in successive waves of alumni during the last seven decades and a half after World War II. Formally, the postwar guiding principle of full respect for all, regardless religion, language, race, skin color or origin, is respected. The Judeo-Christian ideological basis of postwar Europe, its culture and politics is seemingly upheld and celebrated. But in reality, Jews, their culture and Yiddish are confined to their ghetto-like corner at Europe's universities. Without saying it openly, most understand that the label 'Jewish studies,' tacitly denotes 'not belonging to Europe and its culture.' Jewish studies may constitute part of *Ostforschung* (or Germany's traditional and often ideologized field of research on 'inferior Slavic' Eastern Europe), but in reality are a constituent element of 'Oriental' – pardon me – Middle Eastern studies.

¹⁵ Yiddish: https://agnes.hu-berlin.de/lupo/rds;jsessionid=47760E8EB412EABE46CFE08826C12D7C.angua_root?state=verpublish&status=init&vmfile=no&publid=122616&moduleCall=webInfo&publishConfFile=webInfo&publishSubDir=veranstaltung; Germanic languages: <https://www.linguistik.hu-berlin.de/en>

¹⁶ <https://www.philosophie.uni-hamburg.de/jewish-philosophy>

¹⁷ https://www.jgk.geschichte.uni-muenchen.de/jgk_neuzeit/personen/mitarbeiter/wiecki_evita/index.html

¹⁸ [http://www.uni-frankfurt.de/42965591/Seminar für Judaistik?legacy_request=1](http://www.uni-frankfurt.de/42965591/Seminar_für_Judaistik?legacy_request=1)

¹⁹ <https://www.judaistik.unibe.ch/>

²⁰ <https://jewishstudies.unibas.ch/de/home/>

²¹ https://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/geschichte/studium/02_lehre_archiv/13wise/j_R_s_Jid.html

Should then the continuing anti-Semitism in Europe really surprise Chancellor Merkel, other European politicians, thinkers, and commentators? What else to expect if universities and professors – seen as paragons of objectivity, reason and impartiality, in their scientific and scholarly capacity to decide what is correct or incorrect and true or false – implicitly reproduce anti-Semitism in the very structure of how they organize teaching and research on matters Jewish? The outcome is obvious – their example convinces the public that it is fine to be anti-Semitic, however for the time being this view should not be voiced openly, until a right moment comes. With the rise of illiberal, pro-authoritarian, fascist-like, radical and populist tendencies across Europe during the 2010s, it seems that this moment has just arrived. Some already feel free *not* to have to conceal their anti-Semitic views in public.

What can come next, we already know from recent history – open discrimination, forced emigration, public humiliations, exclusion from the body politic, ethnic cleansing and the ‘final solution’ of genocide. But why to blind walk into repeating the murderous error time and again. Isn’t it better to use the observed situation of Jews and their culture in today’s Europe as the de facto barometer of the quality of European democracy? Then, it would become apparent to all that something must be amiss, if Jewish institutions and temples must be guarded day and night by policemen. Should the situation not be righted, no political, economic or welfare reforms will suffice to prevent Europe from sliding into darkness again.

Part of an answer how to deal with this danger is offering Yiddish as an integral part of the curriculum in university departments and institutes of German(ic) languages. What is more, why not to make Yiddish into another official language of the European Union? At the same time, if atoning for the crimes of the past is to be at long last genuine and proactive in Germany, Austria and other countries whose populations participated in planning and carrying out the Holocaust, Yiddish must be made into an obligatory school subject across *all* the German(ic)-speaking countries. Likewise, at least this language’s Hebrew script should be taught to *all* schoolchildren across Europe. Only then would the ‘Judeo’ half of the Judeo-Christian tradition and values would be filled in with real everyday practice. All Europeans would become partly Jewish, as they are already partly Greek and Roman in their cultural origins and choices. Then no space would be left for open or concealed hatred against Jews, or fellow Europeans and co-citizens, whose religious choices and origin are a private matter.

Isn’t hating all things Jewish a deeply anti-European thing to do, which goes against the continent’s Judeo-Christian tradition? Anti-Semitism is the dumbing of Europe, which belittles it and makes the continent into a half-Europe, a distorted reflection and contradiction of itself. The anti-Semite *cannot* be a European, the continent of his abode is the inferno of self-hate. Let’s speak Yiddish, lest we forget.

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