

Yiddish, or Jewish German?

The Holocaust, the Goethe-Institut and Germany's Neglected Obligation to Peace and the Common Cultural Heritage

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From Ethnic Cleansing to Embracement

In 1492 the Emirate of Granada (إمارة غرناطة *Imārat Ġarnāṭah*) fell into the hands of crusaders. After over seven centuries the history of multicultural Muslim Iberia came to an end. The success of the Christian Reconquista was followed by the flight and subsequent expulsions of remaining Muslims and Jews. The Christian kingdoms of Portugal and Spain were to become 'pure' in their faith, that is, homogenously Catholic. Even those Muslims and Jews who had converted to Christianity, so-called 'New Christians,' were not safe. Expulsions of Moriscos ('Moors') and Conversos ('Converts') – or descendants of Muslim and Jewish converts, respectively – recurred through the early 17th century. Most Jewish expellees went to north Africa and the Levant where they were warmly welcomed by rulers of Morocco and the Ottoman Empire. The Sephardim community, as they came to be known, have retained to this day their Romance tongue of Spanyol ('Jewish Spanish'), or *Judeoespañol* in Spanish and ג'ודיאן-איספאניול *djudeo-espanyol* in Spanyol itself. The Sephardic community (יהדות ספרד *Yahadut Sefarad*) of about 2.3 million constitutes a sixth of all the Jews. Nowadays most Sephardim (1.4 million) live in Israel, but sizeable communities of 400,000 and 300,000 members, respectively, thrive in France and the United States.¹



(Source: Wikimedia Commons,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Logotipo_del_Instituto_Cervantes.svg)

After more than half a millennium, Lisbon and Madrid, finally had a change of heart. The Portuguese and Spanish states expressed their sincere regret at what had happened, and extended heartfelt apologies to Sephardim (but, *not* to Muslims of Iberian-

¹ <https://esefarad.com/?p=78745>

Andalusian origin). Furthermore, in atonement for this crime of ethnic cleansing, in 2015, these two governments offered an easy-track to Portuguese² and Spanish³ citizenship for descendants of the Jewish expellees. All Sephardi are welcome to apply. Madrid even rolled back by two years the cut-off deadline for applications deadline, from 2019 to 2021.⁴ Over 30,000 Sephardim applied for Portuguese citizenship,⁵ and as many as 130,000 for Spanish citizenship.⁶



19th c. SEPHARDIC FAMILY, BOSNIA

(Source: Wikimedia Commons,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sephardic_family_in_Bosnia,_19th_century.jpg)

However, recently, the Spanish authorities came to a conclusion that a mere offer of citizenship is too little too late. That passive acceptance is a faulty sort of tolerance. Instead, the ball is still in Spain's court to prove that the country and its inhabitants truly embrace their Sephardic co-citizens, including their culture and history. In order to

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-31051223>

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[http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Consulados/LOSANGELES/en/ServiciosConsulares/CSLA/Paginas/CSLA%20\(English\)/Nationality-for-Sephardic-Jews.aspx](http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Consulados/LOSANGELES/en/ServiciosConsulares/CSLA/Paginas/CSLA%20(English)/Nationality-for-Sephardic-Jews.aspx)

⁴ <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/spain-extends-deadline-for-sephardic-jews-to-claim-citizenship/>

⁵ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Turning_Portuguese

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/02/132000-sephardic-jews-apply-for-spanish-citizenship>

ameliorate this deficiency, in 2020, the Instituto Cervantes established a branch in Thessaloniki (Salonika), Greece.⁷ Until the Holocaust (or more correctly, Shoah, that is, *שואה* *šō'āh* 'catastrophe' in Hebrew), this was the world's largest Sephardic city. At 60,000 Jewish inhabitants used to constitute the plurality of Thessaloniki's population in 1940. Nowadays, the community of a mere 1,200 Sephardim remains in Greece's second largest city. Madrid founded the Instituto Cervantes in 1991 for the sake of promoting Spanish language and culture around the world. Now, this institute's Thessaloniki branch is tasked, first of all, with preserving and teaching Spanyol, alongside the cultivation of Sephardic heritage. However, the teaching and propagation of Spanyol among non-Jewish Greeks is also high on the agenda.⁸

Yiddishland

Ashkenazic Jews (*אַשכּנזים* *Ashkenazim* in Yiddish, or *יהודי אשכנז* *Y'hudey Ashkenaz* in Hebrew) add up to four-sixths of all the world's Jews, that is, around 10 million. At present half of them live in the United States, a quarter in Israel, while in Europe the largest Ashkenazic communities in excess of 200,000 members reside in Britain, Germany and France.⁹ From the Middle Ages to the Shoah they created a vibrant and multicultural European civilization in the midst of the continent. In the wake of the Black Death, often blamed on Jews, western Europe's monarchies sought political and transcendental safety in Christian confessional homogeneity. As a result, during the 14th and 15th centuries Ashkenazim were expelled from England, France, or the Holy Roman Empire. They found safe haven in central Europe's polyconfessional and multiethnic realms of Poland-Lithuania and Hungary. The ready acceptance of Jews in central Europe, sharply contrasted with their repeated expulsions from Iberia, and thus earned Poland-Lithuania the Jewish sobriquet of *פּוֹלין* *Polin*. It may be interpreted as a supposed message from God that reads *פה* *po* 'here' *לין* *lin* '[you should] dwell' or 'rest.'



⁷ https://www.cervantes.es/sobre_instituto_cervantes/prensa/2020/noticias/extension_salonica.htm

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/30/thessalonikis-jews-we-cant-let-this-be-forgotten-if-its-forgotten-it-will-die>

⁹ [https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/2018-World_Jewish_Population_\(AJYB,_DellaPergola\)_DB_Final.pdf](https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/2018-World_Jewish_Population_(AJYB,_DellaPergola)_DB_Final.pdf)

(Source: *Ethnologie française*, https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ETHN_182_0225--history-memory-of-litvak-yiddish-spaces.htm)

Askenazim's intensely literate civilization extended from what today is Estonia in the north to Romania in the south, and from the Czech Republic in the west to Ukraine in the east. Due to the civilization's language of Yiddish, this invisible continent of Ashkenazic culture is now often referred to as ייִדישלאַנד Yiddishland. The core of Yiddishland was located in present-day Lithuania, Belarus, central and eastern Poland, eastern Slovakia, western Ukraine, eastern Hungary, northern Romania and Moldova.¹⁰ Askenazim constituted pluralities and even majorities of the inhabitants of towns and cities in this core area. Unfortunately, during the Great War the bloodiest – or eastern – front between the Central Powers and the Russian Empire cut Yiddishland. Subsequently the largely porous imperial frontiers that had separated Ashkenazic communities were replaced with more numerous and jealously guarded frontiers of nation-states. Yiddishland became radically fragmented. In the course of the two brief interwar decades, Ashkenazim found themselves caught between the rock of central Europe's increasingly authoritarian nationalisms and the hard place of Soviet totalitarianism. Finally, in the hellish fires of World War II, totalitarian Germany and its allies from across occupied Europe perpetrated the greatest of crimes, the planned Genocides of Jews¹¹ and Roma.¹²



Ashkenazic family, Ukraine, c 1910

(Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashkenazic-Family.jpg>)

At 7-8 million, the population of Europe's Ashkenazim in the mid-1930s was equal to that of the Netherlands.¹³ However, the Yiddish culture with its centers in New York,

¹⁰ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bf/Juden_1881.JPG

¹¹ <http://www.memorialdelashoah.org/en/archives-and-documentation/what-is-the-shoah.html>

¹² <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/what-roma-genocide>

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<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VgAmAQAAMAAJ&q=dutch+population+8+million+1930&dq=dutch>

Warsaw, Wilno (Vilnius), Budapest, Miensk, Kyiv, Moscow, or Leningrad (St Petersburg) was definitely more worldly and sophisticated than its Dutch counterpart. Yiddish publishers, newspapers, music record producers, theaters, film producers, schools, sports and culture organizations, political parties, research institutes, radio stations, or music halls created, modernized and constantly reshaped Yiddishland and its culture. All the European classics – Austen, Cervantes, Dante, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Goethe, Mickiewicz, Pushkin, Shakespeare, or Zola – were steadily translated into Yiddish. In turn, the modern classics of Yiddish literature – be it Aleichem (Rabinovitch), Asch, Bergelson, Der Nister (Kahanovich), Katzenelson, Kreitman, Kulbak, Molodowsky, Peretz, Sforim (Abramowitch), Singer, or Sutzkever – were translated into English, German, French, or Russian. Unlike a typical reader of Dutch, Italian or Polish books, their Yiddish counterpart juggled at least two, and more often than not even three, four or five languages at the same time. In their customary polyglotism, Yiddish-language readers and intellectuals were more European than the majority of non-Jewish Europeans, typically, enclosed in the monolingual compartment of their language and culture.

From Genocide to Rhetoric

The Shoah cost 6 million Jews their lives. In their majority, the victims were Ashkenazim. No survivors were wanted. Their former home towns and non-Jewish neighbors turned a cold back to them, or even chased Jewish survivors away, and murdered them in pogroms. Nothing doing. The victorious Allies pretended not to see. They had more pressing issues to attend than Auschwitz or Buchenwald. The unfolding of the Cold War confrontation overshadowed the Shoah. This East-West confrontation somehow 'justified' the freeing of leading nazis from prisons and coopting them in the administration, industry and education of West Germany, Austria, and East Germany. Antisemitic campaigns suppressed any remaining vestiges of Jewish life across the Soviet bloc and sent remaining survivors into exile. Shoah survivors were hounded out from Europe, so that their presence would not keep reminding self-righteous Christian perpetrators and bystanders about their *magnum crimen* (great crime). So that Christian Europeans would not need to face any pangs of conscience, and could become safely reassured in their self-declared Europeanness of 'high culture,' 'civilizedness,' and 'haute couture.' The two most obvious choices of emigration for unwilling Jewish expellees and refugees from Europe's Yiddishland were either Israel (founded in 1948), or the United States.

Who today remembers that in Yiddish the Shoah is referred to as קאַטאַסטרױפֿ *Katastrofe* (Catastrophe)? Hence, to the majority of survivors it was the *Katastrofe*, *not* Shoah. It was the Yiddish-speaking and -writing Ashkenazic historian Mark Dworzecki, who in 1959 established the world's first-ever Chair in *Katastrofe* Studies at Bar-Ilan University, near Tel Aviv.¹⁴ The nazi Genocide of Jews, and the antisemitic expulsions of survivors after the war destroyed Yiddishland, its culture and language. Yet, no European statesman, high-ranking hierarch of a Church, or writer of all-European stature cared to

[+population+8+million+1930&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjEl6emrfqAhU3QUEAHcavBUIQ6AEwAnoECAEQAg](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17504902.2015.1062272>

express, or at least feign, any surprise or a deep regret. The finality of the made-in-Germany *Endlösung* ('final solution') of the 'Jewish problem' seemed to fit all non-Jewish Europeans. The future-oriented Israel was not interested in the Katastrophe, either; while its voice in the international arena did not really count until the Eichmann Trial in the early 1960s.¹⁵ A timid revival of Yiddish language and culture in communist Poland was cut short in 1968, when the Jewish cultural institutions and schools were closed down, and most of the remaining Jews repressed and expelled from the country.¹⁶ Sadly, in Israel, ideologically wed to Jewish monolingualism in Hebrew, there was no place for Yiddish, either.¹⁷ (As late as 1983 Yiddish began to be taught in this country at Bar-Ilan University.¹⁸) America alone offered a safe haven for Yiddish language and culture, but no active support that would prevent the rapid decline in the use of this language.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons,

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Extermination_camps_in_occupied_Poland_\(2007_borders\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Extermination_camps_in_occupied_Poland_(2007_borders).png))

Had two-thirds of the Dutch be exterminated, and entire Dutch language and culture be destroyed in such a wholesale manner in the span of a mere four to five years, would

¹⁵ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/eichmann-trial>

¹⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-marks-50-years-since-1968-anti-semitic-purge/a-42877652>

¹⁷ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-latest-fearsome-national-security-threat-yiddish-1.7947906>

¹⁸ <https://hebrew-literature.biu.ac.il/en/node/1901>

Europe and the world remain so unmoved by such an event, so deafeningly silent? I doubt it. I believe that an avalanche of protests and condemnations would not cease, because a genocide of a Christian people in the midst of Europe would be an altogether different matter. Radically different from the genocide of the Jews in the center of the civilized continent of Europe, wouldn't it? Let us face this reality of badly concealed hypocrisy and double standards.

Unlike Portugal or Spain, reunited Germany had to be shamed in order to face up to its responsibilities entailed by the Katastrofe,¹⁹ including German citizenship for repressed German Jews and their descendants.²⁰ Unfortunately, to this day, Berlin has not considered extending an offer of German citizenship to all Jews and their descendants repressed and exterminated on Berlin's orders across Germany-occupied Europe. For the three decades that followed the end of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, at least it appeared that Germany has been a welcoming country for Jewish immigrants, students or professionals. The Berlin Jewish community grew rapidly to 30,000.²¹ However, the steady rise of antisemitic sentiments in Germany and across Europe since 2015²² reversed this growth.²³ The 2019 synagogue shooting in Halle was a wake-up call.²⁴ Europe's sole sizable Jewish community not directly touched by the Katastrofe is in Britain. But antisemitism is definitely on the rise also in this country.²⁵

In 2019, Europe's currently most respected statesperson, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, decided to oppose this widespread increase in antisemitism, intolerance and xenophobia. She went on a highly symbolic visit to Auschwitz,²⁶ and gave a heartfelt speech:

Auschwitz. This name stands for the millions of European Jews who were murdered, for the betrayal of all civilised values that was the Shoah. [...] Remembering the crimes, naming the perpetrators and commemorating the victims in dignity is an unending responsibility. It is non-negotiable, and it belongs inseparably to our country [Germany]. [...] [W]e need to state this more clearly: we will not tolerate antisemitism. Everyone must be able to feel safe and at home in Germany, in Europe. [...] We, all of us bear responsibility. And that responsibility includes remembrance. We must never forget. No line can ever be drawn under this past, nor can it ever be downplayed. [...] We

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-50398227>

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/29/germany-to-ease-citizenship-law-for-descendants-of-nazi-victims>

²¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-where-jews-want-to-live/a-46229120>

²² <https://www.dw.com/en/anti-semitism-on-the-rise-in-the-eu/a-50820057>

²³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/is-it-time-for-the-jews-to-leave-europe/386279/>

²⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-halle-synagogue-shooting-suspect-charged-with-double-murder/a-53201696>

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/15/labour-to-apologise-to-antisemitism-whistleblowers>

²⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/at-auschwitz-angela-merkel-expresses-shame-over-barbaric-crimes/a-51559332>

*remember the six million murdered Jews and here in particular the around one million Jews who were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. [...] I bow my head before these individuals. I bow my head before the victims of the Shoah. I bow my head before their families.*²⁷

But remembering, commemorating, and bowing one's head before the victims' families is not enough. It is just words, words, words. Uprooting antisemitism is a more promising attitude of relevance for the present and future of Germany and Europe.

What is Missing?

Commonly, Yiddish is treated as a dead language, though Hassidic communities across the world use it as the language of their everyday communication. So at least 700,000 people speak Yiddish each day, half of them in Israel and the other half in the United States, and with some noticeable communities in Britain or Belgium.²⁸ In 1997 the Steven Spielberg Yiddish Library was launched, and at present offers 12,000 digitized Yiddish-language publications.²⁹ Across central and eastern Europe various libraries and research institutions offer digitized Yiddish-language press titles and archival documents, including the monumental Ringelblum Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto.³⁰ Yet more often than not scholars specializing in the Holocaust Studies, World War II, central and eastern European history, or even the Jewish Studies have no working command of Yiddish.

This fact does not appear shocking, given that Europe's Jews are still treated as though they were a colonial people that do not properly belong to the continent and its civilization. Studying the history of colonized peoples solely through the lens of the colonizers' languages is still a sad norm. Hence, a typical student of US history does not know Navajo, or a student of the Rwandan Genocide is unable to read Kinyarwanda. In Europe such a blasé attitude can be observed only with regard to Roma and Jewish history. On the contrary, it would be unthinkable for a scholar specializing in the Netherlands or Italy *not* to have a working command of Dutch and Italian, respectively. No peer would treat them seriously, and they could not count on any university positions in these fields.



פארבאנד פאר יידיש אין שוועדן

Sveriges Jiddischförbund

(Source: Sveriges Jiddischförbund, <http://www.jiddischforbundet.se/pajiddisch>)

²⁷ <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-en/news/speech-by-federal-chancellor-dr-angela-merkel-marking-the-10th-anniversary-of-the-auschwitz-birkenau-foundation-auschwitz-6-december-2019-1704954>

²⁸ Wodziński, Marcin and Spallek, Waldemar. 2019. *Chasydyzm. Atlas historyczny*. Cracow: Austeria, pp. 212-213.

²⁹ <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/digital-yiddish-library>

³⁰ <http://www.jhi.pl/archiwum-ringelbluma/pelna-edycja>

The sole European country that treats Yiddish language and culture seriously is Sweden. Traditionally, Sweden was never part of Yiddishland. But during and after World War II many Jews and Katastrofe survivors found safe haven in this country. Likewise, numerous expellees from communist Poland's renewed postwar Yiddishland decided to leave for Sweden in 1968, instead of America or Israel, which appeared to them too un-European and foreign.³¹ Since 1976, activities of Sweden's Yiddish-speakers have been coordinated by the Sveriges Jiddischförbund (League for Yiddish in Sweden).³² On this basis, in 1999, Stockholm took the decision to recognize Yiddish as one of this country's minority languages (alongside Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani and the three Sami languages).³³ Under the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, apart from Sweden, six other countries recognize Yiddish as a minority language. Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine used to be the original home of Yiddishland, which is not the case of Bosnia, Finland and the Netherlands.³⁴

Information on the National Library of Sweden in Yiddish
 (Source: National Library of Sweden, <https://www.kb.se/languages/yyidys.html>)

Nowadays Sweden is Europe's (and actually the world's) sole country where Yiddish-language institutions, services and resources are readily available, constantly developed and supported by the state. Many Swedish institutions offer information to users in Yiddish, including the country's National Library.³⁵ Non-Yiddish-speaking parents may

³¹ <https://chidusz.com/marzec-1968-szwecja-lukasz-gorniok-paideia-emigracja/>
³² <http://yiddish-sources.com/sveriges-jiddischforbund>
³³ <https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/sweden-and-the-survival-of-the-yiddish/>
³⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/languages-covered-en-rev2804/16809e4301>
³⁵ <https://www.kb.se/languages/yyidys.html>

request lessons of Yiddish for their children attending public schools on the basis that it is the country's *arvspråk* (heritage language).³⁶ The positive and proactive environment led to a small publishing boom in Yiddish children books,³⁷ and the production of Yiddish music videos to help with the learning of this language.³⁸ Out of Sweden's 25,000 Jews, around a fifth at least understands Yiddish.³⁹ Perhaps 2,000 of them speak and write this language actively, which may be a good basis for the revival of a cultural Yiddishland in today's Europe.⁴⁰



(Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Logo_GoetheInstitut_2011.svg)

Germany's and Europe's Obligation

The aforementioned Instituto Cervantes is at the forefront of the preservation and development of Spanyol, or Jewish Spanish. Sweden has supported the revival of Yiddish, and the Steven Spielberg Library has gathered and made available to all the neglected wealth of Yiddish-language books and periodicals. Where is Germany in this unique process of cultural transfer and cultivation, beyond the ritualized rhetoric of remembrance, regret and oft-repeated apologies to Katastrophe survivors and their families? Shouldn't the Goethe-Institut (founded in 1951⁴¹) with its 150 branches strewn across the globe⁴² bolster and popularize the knowledge of Yiddish? Wouldn't it matter more than another high-principled speech or monument? Words alone do not suffice.

³⁶ <https://ingeveb.org/blog/sutzkever-in-scandinavia>

³⁷ <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/sweden-yiddish-childrens-media>

³⁸ <https://forward.com/culture/390381/swedish-music-videos-teach-children-yiddish-sveriges-jiddischforbund/>

³⁹ <https://kopjik.wordpress.com/yiddish-around-the-world-וועלט-די-וואָרם-די-יידיש-אַרום-די-וועלט/yiddish-in-sweden/>

⁴⁰ <https://newvoices.org/2015/05/06/is-swedish-yiddish-the-key-to-europes-jewish-future/>

⁴¹ <https://www.goethe.de/en/uun/org/ges.html>

⁴² <https://www.goethe.de/en/wwt.html>

24 DER DEUTSCHE VOLKS- u. KULTURBODEN IN MITTEL- u. OSTEUROPA



German nation and language in Europe
(Source: Ernst Böttcher. 1930. *Teubners Geschichtsatlas*. Leipzig: Teubner)

The name of Yiddish (ייִדיש) is an abbreviation from the original German-language name, *Jüdisch-Deutsch*, or 'Jewish German.' In vocabulary, grammar and history, Yiddish is closer to German than Dutch. Actually, German and Yiddish share the same dialectal base of *Mittelhochdeutsch* (Middle High German) that at present extends from Luxembourg and Trier in the west to Dresden and Leipzig in the east.⁴³ As such, Yiddish is more similar to standard German than many German dialects, be it Niederdeutsch (Lower German) in northern Germany,⁴⁴ Bavarian in Bavaria and Austria, or Alemannic in Switzerland.⁴⁵ In the interwar period, despite growing antisemitism, German textbooks and atlases included ubiquitous maps of the geographic extent of the use of the German language. They proudly showed that people spoke German from eastern France to the Volga in the Soviet Union, and from Finland and Leningrad (St Petersburg)

⁴³ <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4534&context=etd> (p 14)

⁴⁴ http://www.let.rug.nl/gooskens/pdf/publ_dialectologia_accepted.pdf

⁴⁵ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche_Dialekte#/media/Datei:Deutsche_Dialekte.PNG

in the north to Trieste, the Danube and the northern Black Sea littoral in the south.⁴⁶ Obviously, in the eastern three-quarters of this area users of German were none other than Ashkenazic Jews in their majority. They would typically refer to their language as Yiddish rather than German. But a German- and Yiddish-speaker do not have many problems to communicate, apart from some Slavic and Hebrew words not employed in standard German.⁴⁷



Middle High German dialects

(Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mitteldeutsche_Mundarten.png)

Hence, the sole serious hurdle to accessing Yiddish that needs to be scaled is script, namely, Hebrew letters used for writing this language. In a way it could be said that Yiddish is a German language written in the Hebrew writing system. By the same token, German is a Yiddish language written in the Latin alphabet. Yiddish is a Jewish German, while German is a Christian Yiddish. To a degree both tongues are the two sides of the same single coin of the Yiddish-German language. Switching between Hebrew and Latin letters is just a technical issue of mastering twenty-several letters in the other script. Not a big deal in the larger scheme of things social and political. In former Yugoslavia, each educated person could read and write the country's main official language of Serbo-Croatian in both its official alphabets, Cyrillic and Latin. Nowadays, the post-Yugoslav languages of Montenegrin and Serbian are also written in these two alphabets

⁴⁶ <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/01/16/yiddish-german-from-central-europe-to-the-holocaust-and-back/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qQSAEMq5ko>

as a matter of course. An educated Montenegrin or Serb does not even notice in which script a perused newspaper or book happens to have been published.



Yiddish dialects in 1900

(Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yiddish-dialects-ru.png>)

The Goethe-Institut is best placed to take up the challenge of representing and promoting the Jewish – or rather central European – three quarters of the common Yiddish-German language. The first step would be to prepare bicultual, Latin-Hebrew, teaching materials for learners to master the Hebrew script of Yiddish-German. This, alongside a list of vocabulary and grammatical differences between Yiddish and German, would be a ready basis for spreading the reading skill in Yiddish across Germany and other Germanophone countries. Yet, the real challenge for the Goethe-Institut would be to revive the heritage of Yiddish culture and a command of Yiddish in Yiddishland’s pre-Katastrofe centers. Interwar Europe’s ten cities with the largest number of Yiddish-speaking Jews were Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, Odesa, Łódź, Berlin, Wilno (Vilnius), Chişinău, Miensk, or Iaşi.⁴⁸ It would be a must for the Goethe-Institut’s branches to focus more on Yiddish than German in these once largest centers of Yiddish culture, obviously, also including New York City.

Devoting a tenth of the Goethe-Institut’s branches to promoting Yiddish does not appear to be a big ask. Yet, it would be a welcome proactive step. A small step toward making amends for the irreparable destruction wreaked by the Katastrofe, which Germany and the Germans (alongside Austrians and other Europeans) perpetrated during the war. A step that would at long last transcend the boringly passive and ritualized rhetoric of

⁴⁸ Magocsi, Paul Robert. 2002. *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*. Seattle WA: University of Washington Press, p. 109.

Holocaust remembrance. What is atonement good for without reparations? But almost no Katastrofe survivors are still around to whom indemnification could be paid. What remains instead is this pale apparition of Yiddishland on the Swedish life support, into which a second life could be easily breathed. Hand in hand with Yiddishland, Yiddish-German used to be a world language before the Katastrofe. Bereft of its Jewish three-quarters, the Yiddish-less German of nowadays is a mere official language in several western European countries. The tongue's romance and promise of dynamic and attractive multiculturalism open to the world are gone. Yet, it is possible to regain these sought-for values.

A critic may opine: 'Impractical dreams.' Johann Wolfgang Goethe's younger colleague of Jewish origin, Heinrich Heine, would strongly disagree. As early as 1821, more than a century before the Katastrofe, Heine rightly prophesized that '[w]here they burn books, they will in the end also burn people.'⁴⁹ No civil servant burns or calls for burning books in today's Germany or Austria. On the contrary, the state institutions and school curricula in both countries resoundingly condemn intolerance and extoll the freedoms of speech and conscience. But isn't the willful forgetting about Yiddishland, the three-quarters of common Yiddish-German, the tens of thousands of Yiddish publications and millions of documents in Yiddish – a tacit form of 'burning books,' a dumping of the most European of modern Europe's cultures onto the heap of history?

The danger is that by doing this we may sleepwalk into a repeat of the darkest of the continent's pasts. The bottom line, the indispensable inoculation to this danger is 'Yiddish for reading purposes,' to be offered – with the *Heine-Goethe-Institut's* generous assistance – as a matter of course at universities to at least students of modern European history and culture, of German philology (*Germanistik*), of the Katastrofe studies, and of human rights.

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⁴⁹ <https://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/Blog?item=250&returnoffset=30>