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Languages and Morality in Postwar Europe: The German and Austrian Abandonment of Yiddish

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Abstract

In postwar Europe the remembrance of the Holocaust (קאַטאַסטראָפע *Katastrofe* in Yiddish) endows the continent's societies and politics with a clear-cut moral dimension. All agree that remembering about and research-ing the Holocaust is necessary for preventing a repeat of the murderous past in the future. Yet, no reflection is really devoted to the most revealing fact that the wartime genocide's main victims – Jews – exist no longer in Europe as a community with their specific Yiddish language and culture. Due to the twin-like closeness between Yiddish and German, prior to the war, Yiddish speakers ensured a world-wide popularity for the German language. After 1945, Yiddish-speaking Holocaust survivors and Jewish poets exorcised and reinvented the then-murderers' language of German, so that poetry could be written in it again. In reciprocation, Germany and Europe – shockingly and quite incomprehensibly – abandoned their duty to preserve and cultivate Yiddish language and culture as a necessary "inoculation" against another genocide. Forgetting about this duty imperils Europe and its inhabitants; the danger now is sadly exemplified by Russia's ongoing genocidal-scale war on Ukraine. Not a single Yiddish library exists in today's Europe, which is an indictment in itself.

שפּראַכן און מאָראַל אין אײראָפּע נאָך מלחמה דײטשלאנד און עסטרײך האבן פארלאזט יידיש
shprakhn un moral in eyrope nokh m(i)lkh(a)m(a)h:
deytshland un estreykh habn farlazt yidish
טומאַש קאמוזעלא

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אוניווערסיטעט פון סט ענדרו

הקדמה
h(a)kd(o)m(e)h
Introduction

What do morals have to do with languages? *First of all*, morality as the capacity or the principles to distinguish between good and evil, or right and wrong, is construed and expressed through language. *Second*, human societies as cohesive groups are bound through language, or in other words, speech. It is nature (some would say a deity) that in the course of evolution hard-wired humanity for speech. Talking to one another, the members of a group weave and maintain a dense web of shared group-specific obligations, references, notions, and institutions (Dunbar 1996). The product of this speech-mediated constant and regular interaction is social reality that ensures cohesion for the group in question. Social reality is a set of imaginings that is entirely stored in the heads (that is, the brain, or its specialized part, namely, the neocortex) of a group's members who share these imaginings. In the Western parlance of modernity, social reality is dubbed as "culture" (Searle 1996).

Speech is part of nature, biology, and evolution. Yet, *thirdly*, it comes in group-specific actualizations, known in Europe as "languages" (*Einzelsprachen*). Each language of this type is a product of group effort and human inventiveness, and as such it is part of social reality. Quotidian and constant bonding of a group's members through speech spawns, shapes, and changes, from generation to generation, the group's specific language. *Fourth*, in Europe, what is seen as language is now invariably associated with popular literacy, or the skill to read and write in a specific *Einzelsprache*. Unlike it is often but incorrectly maintained, writing is *not* part of language. It is a technology of the graphic representation of speech. After all, we do not see the cassette tape or CD-ROM with recordings of a person's words as part of language, or speech itself.

In the West it is commonly believed that a true language must be written (unwritten languages are often disparaged as dialects and patois). Hence, it "naturally" comes together with its own writing system, formally acquired in the course of obligatory elementary education, which is a recent historical development of the past two centuries (Kamusella 2016). In Western Europe, most people are quite myopic about script and its choice, because the area's *Einzelsprachen* are written exclusively in Latin letters. The differences in the use of the Latin alphabet for writing Danish, English, Irish, or Spanish boil down to different orthographies and some diacritics. Following the accession of Greece to the European Union (then known as the European Communities)

in 1981, and Bulgaria in 2007, the Greek alphabet and Cyrillic, respectively, were added to the EU's previously single official script, the Latin alphabet. So, at present, the European Union sports three official scripts, in which the Union's 24 official languages are written. Out of these 24 languages, 22 are written using Latin letters, while Bulgarian is written in Cyrillic and Greek in the Greek alphabet.

Writing seen as the production of texts and documents is the mainstay of the modern state's ubiquitous administration, which touches each citizen's life on a regular basis, in the form of official certificates of birth, marriage, and death; in identity documents (especially passports); or tax returns. The production and maintenance of social reality within the boundaries of such a modern state is generated through obligatory elementary education. In turn, universal literacy turns the state's population into habitual readers and (increasingly) writers, who interact with one another and the state through the press, the audio and visual mass media of radio and television, and during the past two decades, through the internet (social media) that rolls the earlier media into one, alongside telephony.

Fifth, the practices, norms of, and legal requirements imposed on the written and audio (oral) employment of a given language and its writing system amount to what is known as *language politics*. One state may largely leave language politics to the citizens and their choices, while another may make it into an instrument or even the foundation of politics. The latter case is typical of Central and Eastern Europe, where ethnolinguistic nationalism predominates as the main ideology of statehood formation, legitimation, and maintenance. It proposes that all speakers of a language constitute a nation, which should be housed in its own and unshared nation-state. In turn, the language in question is elevated to the level of the nation-state's sole official and national language (Kamusella 2017-2018).

The European Union's language politics is a compromise sum of its member states' language politics. As a result, the EU is a multilingual and polyscriptal polity (or polity-like international organization), unlike – in most cases – its constituent member states that tend to be monolingual (with some exceptions, as for instance, Finland with its two official languages of Finnish and Swedish), and *all* of them are monoscriptal. Each of these states prescribes the use of single script for its official and national language(s).[2]

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2 This normative monoscriptality in the EU's member states may be breached in the future, if Bosnia and Montenegro join the Union. In these two post-Yugoslav states, both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets are official.

Yet, in the not-so-distant past, prior to World War II, other scripts than the current EU's three of Cyrillic, Greek, and Latin letters were quite widespread across the continent for writing and publishing in Europe's numerous languages. I mean, especially, the Arabic, Armenian, and Hebrew writing systems. Books and newspapers in Arabic script were widely published in a plethora of Turkic *Einzelsprachen* and the Indo-European tongue of Tajik (that is, "Soviet Persian") across the Soviet Union until the mid-1920s. Arabic script was used for the same purpose in the case of Albanian until 1908, and Turkish in Turkey until 1928, and in Bulgaria to the end of World War II in 1945 (Selvelli 2018). In addition, Slavic (Serbo-Croatian, or now we would say Bosnian) publications were produced in this script also in interwar Yugoslavia until the Axis powers and their allies partitioned this state in 1941 (Lehfeldt 1968).

Nowadays, any widespread employment of the Armenian language written in its eponymous alphabet is largely limited to the post-Soviet state of Armenia. Yet, until the 1915 Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian language and script were in official use across Anatolia, the Near East, and the Balkans. In addition to the Armenian language, ethnically Armenian communities used Armenian letters for writing other languages they happened to speak, be it Greek, Slavic, or Turkic (Pratt 1866). In this custom, they followed many Balkan Orthodox Christians, who used Greek letters to write Albanian, Slavic, and Turkic (Elsie 1991). Armenian Genocide survivors and refugees brought along their language and script to France and California. But after three generations they mainly switched to French and English in the mid-20th century.

Last, but most importantly for this article, until the Holocaust, the world's and Europe's Jews wrote and published in their numerous community languages with the almost exclusive employment of the specifically Jewish writing system of Hebrew letters. In interwar Europe, such Jewish community languages mainly meant the Germanic language of Yiddish ("Jewish German") and the Romance one of Spanyol ("Jewish Spanish"), which is also known as Ladino ("Latin"). Spanyol was spoken and written in the Balkans by Sephardim, who constituted the majority (and then plurality in the 1930s) of the inhabitants of Salonica (Thessaloniki) prior to the Holocaust.

Before World War II, out of the world's over 17 million Jews, 10 million resided in Europe, mostly in the central and eastern areas of this continent. At that time, 13 million of the world's Jews spoke Yiddish, including almost 9 million in Europe. Obviously, they wrote Yiddish with the use of Hebrew characters, from which the Yiddish alphabet is composed. The extermination

of 6 million predominantly Yiddish-speaking Jews during the Holocaust meant the loss of almost half of the globe's Yiddish speakers (Katz 2005; Vital 2022). But the tragedy was worse than the statistics can lead one to believe. The surviving half of Yiddish speakers lived spread out thinly around the world, among invariably dominant speakers of other languages. Yiddishland,[3] the patria of Yiddish speakers, or in other words, the Central European galaxy of predominantly or overwhelmingly Yiddish-speaking villages, towns, and cities, was completely erased (Canin 2018; Hetman 2021). However, this Yiddishland was crucial for replenishing and anchoring the globe's Yiddish-speaking diaspora. Without Yiddishland to fall back on, the world's Yiddish language and culture declined rapidly.

Not a single Yiddish-speaking locality survives now in Europe or elsewhere in the world. However, orthodox Hassidic communities, with about 0.75 million members, maintain Yiddish as the language of their everyday communication, typically at the level of a town or city quarter (or even just in a single neighborhood or designated street), be it in Israel, North America, or Western Europe (Wodziński and Spallek 2019: 212, 216-217).

In postwar Europe, the increasingly ritualized remembrance of the Holocaust and the often but unthinkingly repeated invocation of "Judeo-Christian values" are seen as a necessary prevention of any repeat of genocide on this continent in the future (Kamusella 2020). Yet, this belief underpinned with such ritualistic practice (or rather, *non*-practice) has not been effective, given the 1995 genocide of Bosniaks (Muslims) in Srebrenica perpetrated by Serbs, or the ongoing genocide of Ukrainians in 2022 at the hands of Russian soldiers (*An Independent* 2022). I propose that what lies at the heart of this failure is this very ritualism, which without thinking becomes largely meaningless. Relying on words and ceremonies alone, shying away from any concrete actions, is insufficient to stem the rise of antisemitism in postcommunist Europe (Ward 2021), let alone prevent the occurrence of another genocide.

Commemorating the Holocaust and genocide prevention must be grounded in a morally driven activism to be effective. People must engage, rather than, half-asleep, idle through another boring Holocaust remembrance event. Otherwise, all the officially approved effort is good for nothing. When talking to colleagues and students, I was surprised that they are not at all astounded by the absence of even a single, however small, Yiddish-language library in

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3 "Yiddishland" is an informal coinage for the Central Europe of Ashkenazic Jews, or their immigrant settlements in the United States. This term appeared in the early 20th century (Van Tassel Sutphen 1904: 271), but gained wider currency only at this century's end (Brossat and Klingberg 1983; Ngram 2022).

today's Europe; or that there is no brisk trade in second-hand Yiddish books, which were produced in millions of copies before World War II, and in tens of thousands of copies until the 1968 ethnic cleansing of communist Poland's Jews. That Yiddish language and culture are not taught and researched in university departments of Germanic languages but are rather dispensed with or at best consigned to the new scholarly ghetto of Jewish studies. Even more surprisingly, primary and secondary sources on the Holocaust in Yiddish, or the victims' language, are shunned in preference to documents and publications in German, that is, the murderers' language.

Strangely, German-speaking descendants and users of this murderers' language in today's Germany and Austria are oblivious to the fact that only thanks to principled efforts of Yiddish-speaking Jewish poets the genocidal German was exorcised into this postwar language in which writing poetry is possible again. For this feat that was totally unimaginable in 1945, Yiddish language and culture are forgotten as "dead." Worryingly, this attitude is a clear boost to pro-nazi tendencies and forces nowadays, because it appears to prove that the Third Reich's policy of "Final Solution" was successful, despite the Allies and postwar Europe's protestations to the contrary (Knight 2021).

I propose that only the actual use of and engagement with Yiddish language and culture, as part and parcel of active Holocaust remembrance, may save Europe from another genocide. For this purpose, why not to make Yiddish and its Hebrew script official in the European Union? Why not teach, as a matter of course, the Hebrew letter-based script of Yiddish as one of the two equal alphabets of the single Yiddish-German language in German and Austrian schools? Why not re-establish some dedicated Yiddish-language libraries in Europe? These are simple and straightforward questions, to which, at present, neither the EU nor concerned Europeans are able to provide clear-cut answers. This article seeks to analyze the moral and pragmatic dimensions of Holocaust remembrance, or rather their sorry absence in today's Europe, from the perspective of postwar Europe's curious language policy on Yiddish. This policy of turning a blind eye to the wartime destruction and the continuing postwar neglect of the continent's Yiddish language and culture endangers democracy in postcommunist Europe.

However, not to leave the reader completely empty-handed and crestfallen, in this text I show how Yiddish terms and phrases may be easily introduced in a comprehensible manner to as yet non-Yiddish-reading publics with the

prop of stop-gap romanization.[4] Should the practice catch on and Yiddish-for-reading-purposes starts to be offered as an interesting and useful school and university subject across Europe, the use of Yiddish will be successfully rekindled. Such a development would recognize the Yiddish poets' postwar rescue of German and would ensure a better and safer future for all of Europe. The European Union and Germany could hasten this project by establishing a Central Yiddish Library צענטראלע יידישע ביבליאטעק *tsentrale yidishe biblyatek* with national branches across the continent's countries.

דער סוף פֿון יידיש־דײַטש
der suf fun yidish-daytsh
End of Yiddish-German

In interwar Germany propaganda pamphlets and maps claimed that the area of the use of the German language extended from eastern France in the west to Moscow and the Volga in the east, from Scandinavia in the north to Trieste and northern Yugoslavia in the south (Böttcher 1930: 24). Despite the loss of the German overseas colonies in the wake of the Great War, Berlin insisted on promoting German as a *Weltsprache* (world language), or a language of international communication. In the sphere of scholarship and the production of academic publications, German had indeed achieved this elevated status during the second half of the 19ᵗʰ century. Between 1908 and 1923, the plurality of all the world's research publications were brought out in German (Viereck, Viereck and Ramisch 2002: 244). As a result, across the globe, universities offered the subject of German for reading purposes to make it possible for researchers in the United States, Japan, or Brazil to access this wealth of information on offer in German-language learned journals and monographs.

Yet, three-quarters of the claimed spatial area of the German language found themselves *outside* Germany and Austria. In the ethnolinguistic sense this vast multilingual space constituted יידישלאנד *yidishland* Yiddishland, or the not formally demarcated country of אשכנזים *ashk(e)hn(a)zim* Ashkenazim. It was them who spoke their Germanic tongue of יידיש *yidish* Yiddish and wrote it down in העברעיש *hebreish* Hebrew letters. Ashkenazic Jews also took care to acquire official languages of the countries of their residence. However, because, out of all the Germanic languages German is closest to Yiddish, Ashkenazim aspired to learn German, too. Interferences between the kindred

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4   In this essay I follow the romanization system developed by ייוואָ YIVO, that is, the ייִדישער וויסנשאַפטלעכער אינסטיטוט *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yiddish Alef-Beys 2022).

languages were strong and deep (Lötzsch 1992). Many poorer Ashkenazic Jews with limited access to education ended up writing Yiddish in Latin letters as a kind of aspirational German. But even they expressed pride at being able to read literature and newspapers in the שפּראַך *shprakh* language of שילער *shiler* Schiller and געטע *gete* Goethe.

German and Austrian גוים *goym* goyim denigrated Yiddish as a זשאַרגאָן *zhargon* "jargon," "kitchen German," and "not a real language." This attitude, however, when it suited German propaganda, did not prevent Berlin from claiming Yiddishland tacitly as an integral part of the German-language area. What was traditionally seen from the perspective of the German capital as the space of "higher" German culture in Central and Eastern Europe, during the נאַצי *natsi* nazi 1930s became ideologized into a *Lebensraum*. This "living space" was seen as supposedly earmarked by נאַטור *natur* nature or גאָט *got* god for the exclusive use of the "racially superior" German nation (פֿאָלק folk *Volk*).

In the course of World War II, nazi Germany conquered this "living space," or in other words, סענטראַל און מזרח אייראָפּע *sentral un m(i)zr(e)kh eyrope* Central and Eastern Europe. The next step was to empty Yiddishland of the "racially inferior" peoples and repopulate it with "purely Aryan" Germans. In German ideologues' eyes, the former were *Untermenschen,* "subhumans," whose lives were "unworthy to live" (*Lebensunwertes*). Out of these peoples, the Jews were targeted first and most thoroughly. The plan of *Endlösung* ("Final Solution") was to exterminate *all* of them, to erase the Jews as a people. In the course of the subsequent קאַטאַסטראָפֿע *Katatsrofe* (Holocaust), the דייטשן *deytshn* Germans of עסטרייך *estraykh* Austria and דײַטשלאַנד *deytshland* Germany killed fellow German(ic)-speakers, who happened to profess ייִדישקייט *yidishkeyt* Judaism, or their ancestors had done. The (nearly) identical language did not stop perpetrators in their tracks, to think and reflect on what they were actually doing. With absentminded abandon Christian German-speakers were killing *non*-Christian German(ic)-speakers in the name of the nazi racist ideology.

Nazi propaganda claimed that thanks to this genocide the promised *Lebensraum* would be finally won for a German nation "starved of living space." In reality, the geographic spread of the use of the German (or rather Yiddish-German) language was thus shrunk by three-quarters. After the war, not a single German- or Yiddish-speaking locality remained in the erstwhile Yiddishland. It turned out that it was Yiddish that had made German into a *Weltsprache*, or rather Ashkenazim who next to their homely Yiddish were proud to read and write in German, be it in צפֿון אמעריקע *ts(a)fun amerike*

North America, קאסטא ריקא *kosta rika* Costa Rica, ארגענטינע *argentine* Argentina, דרום אפריקע *drum afrike* South Africa, אויסטראליע *oystralye* Australia, or the סאוועטן פארבאנד *savetn farband* Soviet Union. With the destruction of Europe's Ashkenazic Jews, German was radically cut down in prestige and its geographic spread. It became limited mainly to postwar Germany and Austria. German was reduced in stature to the level of just another European language, though to this day German retains the distinction of Western Europe's highest number of "native" (L1, or first language) speakers, who amount to about 120 million.

די יידישע רעטונג פון דער דייטשער שפראך
di yidishe retung fun der deytsher shprakh
Yiddish Rescue of German

In 1949 the German philosopher of Jewish origin טעאָדאָר אַדאָרנאָ Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) claimed that "after Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric" (After Auschwitz 2001). This dictum used to be widely interpreted as the sheer impossibility of composing poetry after the Katastrofe, especially in German. During the war, this "truly nazi and *völkisch*" German language was "purged" of "racially inferior" elements, or in other words, of its Siamese twin of Yiddish. Yiddish-German was torn asunder, and its globetrotting Jewish half was murdered and incinerated in the death camps' high-capacity crematoria. For nazi Germany it was not sufficient to kill all Jews and all Yiddish speakers. The plan was to obliterate all books and periodicals written in Yiddish and published with the use of Hebrew letters (Fishman 2017).

The world's Jews, their culture, their history, were to vanish forever, as though they had never existed. The plan was carried out almost in full. Yiddishland and its Ashkenazic population were obliterated. Remnants fled to America or Israel, which was founded in 1948. The Soviet bloc countries duly followed the postwar Kremlin's antisemitic turn and suppressed Yiddish culture and education, which Katastrofe survivors briefly cultivated for a mere couple of decades in the wake of World War II (Grözinger and Ruta 2008).

In the freshly postwar Germany and Austria, then still under the Allied occupation, compulsory de-nazification also meant drawing a veil of oblivion over what had happened. Most nazis and genocidaires escaped any responsibility for what they had done. In public discourse, the Katastrofe, Ashkenazim, and Yiddishland were conveniently forgotten. In the wake of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963-1965), some reckoning with the genocidal past commenced, though quite reluctantly in West Germany during the 1970s. In Austria a similar process began very shyly, following the Waldheim

Affair (1986) (Gruber 1991), and in East Germany only after the German reunification. Meanwhile, neither in Germany and Austria, nor elsewhere in postwar Europe, did any state or institution take care of dusty and rotting Yiddish publications, which nazis had failed to burn, pulp, deface, or destroy in another manner.

It was only half a world away from Yiddishland, in the פאראייניגטע שטאטן *fareynigte shtatn* United States, where young descendants of Katastrofe survivors began gathering Yiddish book and periodical collections carelessly discarded across the East Coast, following the demise of their last Yiddish-speaking owners. In 1980 a ייִדישער ביכער-צענטער *yidisher bikher-tsenter* (Yiddish Book Center) was founded. Seventeen years later, it was granted in perpetuity its current seat in Amherst, Massachusetts, located on the campus of Hampshire College. In today's world this center remains the *sole* dedicated preserve of the Yiddish book (Lansky 2004). Not a single Yiddish-language book library survives elsewhere in the world (with the qualified exception of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archives and Library Collections in New York). Most poignantly, there is *none* in Yiddishland, or Central Europe, where Yiddish language and culture emerged and used to thrive not so long – a lifetime or two – ago.

However, in the sorely unnoticed absence of Yiddish – what a fit of absentmindedness – publishing and poetry in the diminished post-Katastrofe German language has flourished nevertheless. How was it possible after Auschwitz? It should not have happened, namely, all this postwar poetry and literature in German words. This unimaginable rescue of the genocidal German language came from the still lingering pale shadow of murdered Yiddishland. In spite of the Katastrofe, the hard-working Yiddish language came to the aid of German.

This feat of hope against hope actually took place in טשערנאָוויץ *tshernovits* Czernowitz, or the capital of Austria-Hungary's easternmost crownland of בוקאָווינע *bukovine* Bukovina (Bukowina). Prior to the Great War, this city was conveniently located at the meeting point of Austria-Hungary, רומעניע *rumenye* Romania, and the רוסלענדישע אימפעריע *ruslendishe imperye* Russian Empire, or where Yiddishland used to thrive then. Not surprisingly, it was in טשערנאָוויץ Czernowitz that in 1908 Yiddish writers, intellectuals, politicians, scholars, and publishers gathered at the famous first Yiddish Language Conference (ערשטע ייִדישע שפראַך קאָנפערענץ *ershte yidishe shprakh kanferents*) to discuss how to modernize their language and improve its image (*di ershte* 1931). Thanks to this unprecedented effort, in the dynamic symbiosis with German and Central and Eastern Europe's other

tongues, Yiddish quickly became an equal of Europe's other national and state languages during the first half of the 20th century (Weiser and Fogel 2010).

In 1918 עסטרייך-אונגארן *estraykh-ungarn* Austria-Hungary broke up and Czernowitz was tossed around like a ball among the region's old and new states, in turn, each of these polities increasingly belligerent and antisemitic. First, Czernowitz became Cernăuţi, when Bukowina was granted to Romania. In 1940 the Kremlin grabbed this city, then renamed as Чернівці *Chernivtsi* and allocated to Soviet Ukraine. Yet, during the Soviet period, gradually the Russian form of the city's name, Черновцы *Chernovtsy*, became dominant. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Ukrainian version won. In the meantime, Bukovina's different ethnic groups vaguely remembered that this city used to be called, in their own languages, چرنوویچ *Çernoviç* in Osmanlıca (Ottoman Turkish), Չեռնովցը *Ch'ernovets'* in Armenian, Czerniowce in Polish, Czernovicum in Latin, or Tschernowitz in German.

Czernowitz's simultaneously fertile and febrile cultural and polyethnic atmosphere produced a generation of multilingual and convinced Europeans who shunned any narrow national, confessional or ideological categorizations (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010). Some survived the Soviet occupation and the subsequent Katastrofe, which in Romania was planned and carried out by the Orthodox Romanians themselves. Nazi Germany nodded approvingly to this initiative (Ioanid 2008). The second Soviet liberation-cum-occupation, followed by Stalin's antisemitic struggle against "rootless cosmopolitans" – that is, Katastrofe survivors – convinced the remaining polyglot Czernowitzers that it was high time to flee to the West. But not before they saved poetry and the German language.

ראָזע אויסלענדר *roze oyslndr* Rose Ausländer (1901-1988) was born in Austria-Hungary, came of age in Romania, and escaped interwar poverty to the United States. Then the budding poet returned home to take care of her sick mother, just in time to experience the horrors of World War II and the Romanian *soluţia finală* ("final solution"). Her conversations with a generation-younger פאול צעלאן *paul tselan* Paul Celan (1920-1970) in the Czernowitz ghetto launched him on the path of innovative poetry. Ausländer survived the Katastrofe in this ghetto. Celan was sent to a concentration camp in Transnistria (or today's Moldova and Ukraine's Odesa region) that Romania had seized from the Soviet Union. Both poets lost most of their family members and friends in the Holocaust.

Already in 1945, drawing on Ausländer's metaphor of *schwarze Milch* (black milk) or שוואַרץ מילך *shvarts milkh* (The Genesis of Paul 2014), Celan wrote

his most famous poem טויט פוגה *toyt fugh* "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue) (Celan 1945). In and with this text he built a refuge tomb in the clouds for his murdered and unburied mother. The poet also pointed his accusing finger at the Germans and Austrians: "Death is a master from Germany." Both poets struggled with the fact that their מאמע לשון *mame loshn* mother tongue (*Muttersprache*) was transformed into a *Mördersprache* (murderers' language) unworthy of any poetry. To regain life, their lost families and homeland, Ausländer and Celan vacillated but eventually refused to abandon היינע היינריך *haynrikh hayne* Heinrich Heine's and Ashkenazim's German language to nazi Austrians and Germans. Drawing on Yiddish, Bukovina's Germanic dialects, English, and French, these two poets singlehandedly de-nazified and reinvented German as a post-Katastrofe *Dichtersprache* (poets' language) (Baranyi 2020). To a degree, briefly after the war, Celan's translations from Russian and Ukrainian into Romanian served a similar purpose, because – let us not forget – Romanian used to be another murderers' language, *limbajul ucigașilor* (Crețu 2020).

Meanwhile, in 1946, the exasperated Ausländer returned to America and chose to write in English. For her it would be unbearably disgusting to continue writing in the language of the nazi murderers. But after the two postwar decades, things changed. In 1957 she met Celan again, this time in Paris. The two *Katastrofe* survivors and friends discussed poetry, as they had done in Czernowitz (Ausländer 1995). Ausländer felt that the reinvented *Dichtersprache* of German called her. In 1964 the poet came back to Austria. However, the undisguised antisemitism in postwar Vienna was too much for her to bear. The following year Ausländer settled in a community of fellow Czernowitz Ashkenazim in Düsseldorf, West Germany. Not only Austria but also Germany was too repulsive to Celan to consider settling down there. He preferred obscurity in Paris, safely insulated by the French language from the still murderously poisonous and pro-nazi language of German during the initial postwar decades.

At first Celan's transformation of the *Mördersprache* into a genuine post-Katastrofe *Dichtersprache* was not appreciated either in Germany or in Austria. Even Adorno, who lacked any knowledge of Yiddish and its alphabet, was unable to recognize Celan's achievement (Arno 2021). At the other end of West Germany's political spectrum, Adorno's incomprehension was shared by another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). He was an opportunist. In Hitler's Germany Heidegger became a leading nazi ideologue in academia. But after the war he sought his former student-turned-world-famous-thinker חנה ארענט *kh(a)n(a)h arent* Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975)

help and references, in order to be seen as a scholar and democrat worthy of being reemployed at the de-nazified University of Freiburg. His wish was granted in 1950.

Seventeen years later, in 1967, Celan made an effort to meet and talk to Heidegger, despite the poet's deep misgivings. The German philosopher was evasive and unrepentant. Celan immediately saw through Heidegger's deception. Heidegger stuck to his nazi convictions and the *Mördersprache*. Unable to bring himself to embrace Celan and Ausländer's *Dichtersprache*, Heidegger was dismissive of Celan. In a suitably patronizing fashion, the philosopher commented to the other participants of this meeting that he regretted the poet's "mental instability" (Theophanidis 2014).

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The Peril of Forgetting

The *Mördersprache* appeared to have won, taking along most Germans and Austrians as faithful captives. This realization was unbearable for Celan. Like numerous other Katastrofe survivors, the poet took his own life. In 1970 he chose freedom in the clouds reflected in the Seine, next to his mother and kin who perished in the השואה Shoah (Ausländer 1975). Afterward, in his stead, between 1965 and her death in 1988, Ausländer fleshed out the *Dichtersprache* with an ocean of poems. Practically, each year a new collection of her poems came off the press. Gradually, Heidegger's *Mördersprache* receded.

But this *Mördersprache* did not completely disappear. It is still out there, lurking in the shadows that welcome darkness. The *Mördersprache*'s poison all the time seeps back into poetry, books, public discourse, when a guard is lowered. Antisemitism, antitiziganism, authoritarianism, racism, xenophobia, discrimination, or "illiberal democracy" have been on the rise across the West during the past decade. Until the beginning of the 21st century's third decade, politicians and intellectuals of Germany, Austria, Europe, and the world could afford to be careless with words. Had they crossed the forbidden threshold from *Dichtersprache* to *Mördersprache*, Katastrofe survivors were still around to intervene. But as soon as in literally a couple of years, the very last Katastrofe survivors will depart, then we – Humanity – will be left alone to our own devices.

In the 94th year of his life, in 2021, one of these last Katastrofe survivors, journalist and historian מאריאַן טורסקי Marian Turski, presented all of us with a small book. His gift is the much-needed 11th Commandment: "Thou shall not be indifferent" (Turski 2021). Because indifference to however small

an act of discrimination incrementally leads to yet another genocide. It kills. After all, as Turski emphasized in his 2020 speech on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of this death camp, "Auschwitz did not fall from the sky" (Turski 2020). Ordinary people built it, like you and I.

Flirting with this or that *Mördersprache* is never innocent, it is flirting with Auschwitz itself. The more people do not care about what they are doing and saying, the more Celan and Ausländer's *Dichtersprache* is imperiled, alongside democracy, open society, stability, and peace (Golinkin 2022). Europe is now at a crossroads of history (Ukraine Conflict 2022). And again, perdition is a tangible possibility, unless each German, every Austrian, and each single European makes an effort to stay clear of all *Mördersprachen*.

How to achieve this moral but elusive end? A simple recipe does not exist. Yet today we are lucky to have the legacy of Celan's and Ausländer's poetry and thought to fall back on. The main message distilled from both poets' words amounts to the straightforward moral compass of Turski's 11th Commandment. What is lacking, however, is the patient day-to-day practice and cultivation of this principle of empathy and help for one another, alongside a clear realization that a new Katastrofe may erupt in the near future, should we stop taking care.

What I can suggest for consideration is a modest proposal, a simple exercise in זען *zen* Zen-like meditation. In your leisure time, please, take a seat, close your eyes, and think where Yiddishland now is. Why do most Ashkenazim lie unburied under the busily oblivious feet of the present-day Europeans? (Sendyka 2021). What happened that Celan had no other choice but to build a grave for his mother and other Katastrofe victims only in the clouds? How does it come about that no dedicated Yiddish library or cultural center remains on the Old Continent, the original היים *heym* home of Yiddishland? Is it right that each German or Austrian can strike up a conversation with a Yiddish speaker when they happen to meet one, while they are totally unable to read even a single line in a Yiddish book? Isn't it curious that the last place where the remnants of Yiddishland should be anchored on this planet is Amherst in Massachusetts, 7,000 kilometers, as the crow flies, from Yiddishland's informal capital of ווארשע *varshe* Warsaw? Would we really consent to letting Yiddish go, so that this language and its heritage have no choice but to join fellow Katastrofe victims and survivors in the clouds of Celan's "Todesfuge"?

Is the answer, No? Are you sure? I know that nowadays Celan's poems get regularly translated and published in the majority of European languages. The centenary of the poet's birth in 2020 was celebrated in this manner (Borso 2020; Corbea 2020; Rykhlo 2020; Torres Mariner 2020). But what was it an

occasion for? For business as usual or for reflection and a permanent change for the better? If the latter, why is it that the Yiddish language from which Celan's and Ausländer's poetry sprang is so utterly consigned to oblivion in today's Germany, Austria, and Europe? The leaven of Yiddish allowed for the successful transmutation of the *Mördersprache* of German into a renewed *Dichtersprache*. This miracle will not last unless Yiddish and its alphabet are taught as an integral part of the German language and literature curriculum in each school across Germany and Austria, alongside the two countries' university departments of German, or דייטשישע שטודיעס *deytshishe shtudyes* (that is, *Germanistik* in German). After all, Yiddish and German, alongside their respective writing systems of Hebrew and Latin letters, are none other but the inseparable two sides of the same coin, namely, the Yiddish-German language (Kamusella 2021).

The attempt at erasing this language's Yiddish obverse in Hitler's Germany and German-occupied Europe resulted in the Katastrofe and the destruction of Yiddishland, together with its Jewish inhabitants. By the same token the language's reverse was degraded to the level of an odious *Mördersprache*, while its Christian speakers, that is, one-dimensional Yiddish*less* German-speakers, became a collective death master from Germany (and Austria).

Let us not squander the Yiddish rescue of postwar German and European culture. At least let Germans and Austrians read in Yiddish again, or rather in both varieties of their *single* Yiddish-German language. Other Europeans must also care. Most speak Katastrofe bystanders' languages, be it Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch, Estonian, French, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Slovak, Russian, Serbian, or Ukrainian. Yet quite a few converse in somewhat forgotten further killers' languages (*Mördersprachen*), for instance, Croatian and Romanian. It would not be really a great ask to teach *all* European schoolchildren the Yiddish alphabet of a mere 22 letters. In the looming absence of Katastrofe survivors and witnesses, such a moral vaccination would prevent the future generations of Europeans from the imminent danger of forgetting about the Katastrofe. What is more, it would also coax them to observe the 11th Commandment: that they should never allow their tongues to become languages of murderers and complicit bystanders again. This moral inoculation against genocide and totalitarianism would be literally invaluable, at once so poetic and so cost-effective.

Postscript

When I completed the first draft of this essay at the turn of 2022, little did I know that the issues under scrutiny would become timelier than I expected,

due to Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war on peaceful Ukraine. Incongruously and frighteningly, the Kremlin abuses the history and vocabulary of the Allied struggle against nazi Germany in order to justify its invasion of Ukraine, which from day one has been conducted in a genocidal manner on the horrific scale of total war. Moscow's officially declared goal is to "de-nazify" Ukraine. This is a cynical and anachronistic propaganda ploy that has nothing to do with the liberal and democratic character of present-day Ukraine (Putin's Claim 2022). Unless, without saying it openly, the Kremlin sees these foundational values and qualities of the West as hallmarks of "nazism" (Kamusella 2022).

The "norm" of Russia's barbaric onslaught on Ukraine and the Ukrainians is marked by scorched earth and the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, hospitals, schools, museums, or libraries. The mass and social media let us observe in real time the flattening and destruction of entire cities in a couple of weeks, mass killings of civilians, or multiplying instances of rape deployed as an instrument of warfare (Balachuk 2022; Cultural Destruction 2022; Hinsliff 2022; Lee and Faulkner 2022). Simultaneously, "victorious" Russian marauders excel at robbing Ukrainian apartments, houses, factories, shops, companies, or warehouses. The Russian officers, troops, and freshly installed occupation administrations look on approvingly and help themselves to bigger loot (Ship 2022).

The Russian armies attacked Ukraine from Belarus and Russia on February 24, 2022. Now, when I am writing these words at the turn of June 2022, a mere three months have elapsed. The war rages on. Meanwhile, about 14 million Ukrainians, more than a third of the entire population, have been displaced. Out of this number half had no choice but to look for safety abroad, while the others are internally displaced from eastern to central and western Ukraine (Ukraine Refugee 2022). There is no end in sight to this tragedy. The Russian forces have already abducted 200,000 parentless Ukrainian children to be made into Russians (Russia Has 2022), whereas 1.3 million Ukrainians have been deported – mostly against their will – to Russia (Over 2022). Many of these developments may already meet the criteria of genocide as defined by the United Nations (*An Independent* 2022), while Moscow officially announces its intention to destroy Ukrainian language and culture, alongside its desire to erase the very name "Ukraine" from any use and remembrance (Sergeitsev 2022).

Should the Russian government be successful, Ukrainian language and culture would be obliterated as thoroughly in Europe as nazi Germany and its European allies erased Yiddish language and culture during the Katastrofe

(Holocaust). Would then Europeans as quickly and with no reflection accept the destruction of Ukrainian language and culture, as they did in the case of Yiddish language and culture eight decades earlier? Would they agree to the liquidation of any remaining Ukrainian libraries and to the pulping of Ukrainian books? Why do Europeans keep forgetting? Why does their remembrance of the Katastrofe fail to prevent new genocides in Europe? The future of democracy and liberalism in Europe and the West urgently depends on an honest discussion devoted to these existential questions.

I do not know what future awaits Russia and the Russians in the wake of their barbaric war on Ukraine. Yet, from the perspective of language politics, the postcommunist Kremlin's genocides in Chechnya and Ukraine have been rapidly making Russian into another murderers' language (язык убийц *iazyk ubiits*). Subsequently, it will be exclusively up to Chechen and Ukrainian poets whether they will consent—like Celan in the case of German—to exorcise Russian into a *Dichtersprache*, in which poetry could be written again. As Goethe and his writings did not save nazi Germany from itself, neither will Pushkin's poetry protect or ensure impunity for rashist Russia.

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(February 2022)

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