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YIDDISH LITERATURE: A PATH TO ETHNIC AWARENESS

Although approximately ten million people, representing about 60 percent of world Jewry, considered Yiddish their native language prior to 1940, the majority of these were killed in the holocaust. As a result of immigration, acculturation, assimilation, or cultural repression, most of the survivors have moved consistently away from Yiddish. In the past twenty-five years, Yiddish has been on the wane, and many have begun to proclaim that its end is in sight. Ironically, however, now that it is spoken by so very few, the Yiddish language, as well as Yiddish literature, seems to be attracting a great deal of attention in this country. The interesting and complex causes of this development range from sentimentalism to solid intellectual and academic concerns. The growing ethnic awareness of American Jews has contributed no small amount to this stimulation of interest in Yiddish culture.

Prior to the final decades of the last century Yiddish had great difficulty establishing itself as a literary language. For centuries before this the Yiddish vernacular was spurned by most scholars, who preferred Hebrew. The writing that did appear in Yiddish was oriented towards women readers, who were generally less educated than men. It was not until the 1860's, when the first Yiddish periodical was founded and when Mendele Mocher Sforim, seeking a wider audience, turned from Hebrew to Yiddish, that Yiddish began to be elevated to a literary level of some merit and repute. Sforim was soon followed by Sholom Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and Shalom Asch, to mention only a few of the best known Yiddish writers at that time. Yiddish culture and literature began to blossom almost immediately, attaining a zenith

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of development between the 1880's and the late 1920's. In these years Yiddish thought, press, theater, poetry and fiction flourished in Eastern Europe as never before or since. Today, Yiddish artistic creativity seems everywhere on the decline, with the notable exceptions of the continuing work of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Chaim Grade and several others in this country and in Israel, as well as the revival of Yiddish theater in several areas of North and South America.

A considerable amount of attention is now being directed at Yiddish language and literature, despite the rapid and regrettable decline in the numbers of those able to read and write Yiddish. Indications of this can be seen everywhere. Perhaps most remarkable, because of its broad appeal to non-Jews as well as Jews, was the phenomenal stage and film success of *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on stories by Sholom Aleichem. Leo Rosten's best seller *The Joys of Yiddish* experienced a similar broad based acceptance, although its appeal may have been somewhat more limited than that of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Rosten has demonstrated the richness and beauty of the Yiddish language and its impact on present day English. Indeed, it has become quite fashionable for Americans of Jewish and non-Jewish extraction to introduce Yiddish words or expressions into their vocabulary. Such words as *chutzpa*, *shlemiel*, *shlep*, *shtick* and *yenta* are just a few examples of the numerous Yiddish words that are being incorporated into English. In addition to his exhaustive and convincing examples of the influence of Yiddish wit, humor and vocabulary on English, Rosten's work also documents the adoption by English of various Yiddish linguistic devices to convey nuances of affection, emphasis, skepticism, sarcasm, etc.

Another indication of the renewed interest in Yiddish language and literature is the fact that credit and non-credit courses on these subjects are being proposed and introduced into the curriculum at colleges and universities across the country. A similar tendency is reflected in the curricula of programs sponsored by Hillel, by synagogues, and by bureaus of Jewish education. New translations and editions of Yiddish literature have been appearing in recent years in large numbers, such as *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Literature*, by Joseph Leftwich and the re-issue

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of the collection *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, by Howe and Greenberg, which includes an excellent seventy-five page introduction to Yiddish literature and culture. Sol Liptzin has written a masterful history of Yiddish literature in several volumes. Isaac Bashevis Singer is in great demand as a speaker on college campuses and he has nearly become a folk hero, so intense is the interest of the younger generation in him. Only a part of this can be ascribed to Singer's often manifested concern with psychic phenomena. His short stories have appeared in translation in a wide variety of American publications, such as the *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Not only are his works now studied in university courses, but they are also becoming the subject of a number of full length critical evaluations.

The resurgence of interest in Yiddish and Yiddish literature seems to be directly related to the growing ethnic awareness of Americans, particularly young Americans. Many Americans of diverse ancestry are today engaged in what has come to be referred to as a "search for roots." This involves an examination of their cultural heritage and a desire to learn about, and/or return to, the frequently colorful and rich old-country traditions of their grandparents or great-grandparents. A rather large number of Jews seeking to familiarize themselves with the ways of their Eastern European ancestors seem to be discovering that Yiddish literature can serve as an excellent vehicle through which to be transported and introduced to this past.

Approximately three and a half million Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews fled to America between the 1880's and the end of World War I. These immigrants generally began to divest themselves of some of their old-country customs in an attempt to become Americanized. Their children began to depart from the ways of their Yiddish speaking parents on a much larger scale. They often tended to subordinate the traditions, values, and language of their parents, which they sometimes regarded with scorn anyways, to the drive to become a successful American. In moving so far away from the practices and traditions of their Eastern European parents and grandparents, parents of the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's, although successful as Americans,

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transmitted little of their heritage to their own children. The little that was passed on sometimes appeared bland and hypocritical to young Jews maturing in those decades. Recently, however, many of these Jews have begun to realize the degree of beauty and richness inherent in the culture of their grandparents and great-grandparents and they yearn to know more about their heritage. This is why so many college students in the 1970's are turning in relatively significant numbers to various facets of Jewish studies in general, including Yiddish and Yiddish literature. A return to the security and warmth of community, tradition and ceremony also helps to counteract the apparent sterility, loneliness and frustration of life in a mass technological society constantly tottering on the brink of nuclear destruction through accident or warfare.

Jews today seem to be struggling to rediscover their roots and to grasp onto them in an attempt to find purpose and direction, as well as to learn about their heritage. This is perhaps one of the major attractions of Yiddish literature: it recreates the unique and mysteriously attractive world and culture of Eastern European Jewry prior to its destruction. Throughout this literature a sense of identification and solidarity with a meaningful past is expressed, as well as a reclaiming of past roots. Though sometimes critical of rigidity, superstition, and the tendency of *shtetl* inhabitants to accept their miserable lot without protest, Yiddish writers, by and large, depicted *shtetl* life lovingly, with great compassion and humor. What primarily emerges from a study of Yiddish literature is the warmth, the irrepressible faith and the simple devotion and goodness of these people. Despite the mustiness, backwardness and poverty that dominated the Eastern European Jewish townlets, locked as they were out of the mainstream of European progress, the people portrayed by the Yiddish authors strive to remain true to their identity. The heroes of Yiddish literature are unenlightened as to the ways of the modern world and oppressed by various governments; the tragedy of their lives is unmistakable. Yet, this is overshadowed by their unwillingness to yield to total despair or to abandon their faith and their time honored sense of morality.

The value of Yiddish literature does not reside simply in its

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capacity to depict and transmit the world of Eastern European Jewry to a young generation apparently seriously striving to come to grips with its heritage. Once young people begin to familiarize themselves with Yiddish literature they discover that there are important universal themes inherent in this literature, to which they can readily respond. A major theme throughout Yiddish literature, for example, is a strong sense of human precariousness. Lives are presented that seem to be caught in a world which is both incomprehensible and uncontrollable. The struggle of the heroes of Yiddish literature to adjust to such conditions is, of course, quite similar to the situation of young Americans in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Despite the sometimes strong undercurrent of desperation and doubt in the works of I. B. Singer, Jonah Rosenfeld, Zalman Schneour and, sometimes, Peretz, the themes of hope and faith generally predominate. Many of the works of Peretz and Sholem Asch, as well as a number of others, are strongly infused with an unquenchable spirit of endurance. Faithfulness to a moral concept enabled the heroes of Yiddish literature to transcend their outward suffering and occasional doubts.

Another theme of Yiddish literature that seems to appeal to moderns is the compassion that is constantly expressed for the poor, as in nearly all the works of Sholom Aleichem, as well as in many of the stories of Asch and Peretz, to name only a few. The theme of anti-heroism is very strong throughout Yiddish literature. The many elements and aspects of folklore inherent in Yiddish literature also tend to be of great interest to the young people attracted to this literature. Numerous Yiddish stories borrow freely from folk materials and folk tales. The religious enthusiasm and ecstasy characteristic of Hasidism, as well as tales of wonder-working rabbis, especially as related by Peretz and I. J. Singer, provide a similar attraction.

Despite the renewed interest in Yiddish language and literature and the continuing creative output of various individuals, the future appears rather bleak. Although this conclusion is, of course, highly speculative, it appears valid because of the aging of the authors, and because of the diminution in the numbers of those who can read and speak Yiddish. It is doubtful that any

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Yiddish writers will emerge from the ranks of the young people who are seeking their roots in Yiddish literature; most of them are reading this literature in translation, and those who are studying the Yiddish language rarely have courses available to them beyond the introductory level, although this situation could change if the demand were to increase. Nevertheless, a familiarity through Yiddish literature with the Eastern European Jewish tradition of coping with the many misfortunes inflicted on this community has much to offer to contemporary, often alienated, American Jews. Readers are instilled with a sense of pride and are provided with a special kind of sustenance. They frequently discover, perhaps for the first time, a sense of warmth and purpose in being part of this ancient Jewish community with its wealth of meaningful traditions and values and are encouraged to preserve it and contribute to it. The world to which Eastern European Jewry was exposed appeared just as incoherent and absurd to its inhabitants as today's world seems to many. Yet young Jews turning to their past in an attempt to learn about their heritage reap a significant lesson when they perceive the extent to which the heroes of Yiddish literature steadfastly insisted on the necessity of a moral basis for human actions — despite the evidence of their senses.