

DAVID E. FISHMAN
The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture
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Although it took place relatively recently in the history of east European Jewry, the heyday of modern Yiddish culture can often seem far removed in sensibility from Jewish cultures of today, whether in North America, Europe, Israel, or elsewhere. More than simply a matter of the decline in number of Yiddish speakers worldwide, which peaked at around 11,000,000 on the eve of World War II, this development is due to the profoundly different nature of Jews' language use in the post-war world and changes in the symbolic meanings Jews invest in languages. It can be daunting for contemporary students of Yiddish culture to enter into the complexities of historical, social, political, cultural, and ideological forces, aesthetic as well as activist, elitist as well as popular.

In light of this challenge, David E. Fishman's *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* is a welcome addition to the fields of Yiddish and east European Jewish studies. Fishman, a professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, offers a concise overview of this singular period in ten short chapters that take the reader from the beginnings of modern Yiddish political and cultural activity in mid-nineteenth-century tsarist Russia to the flourishing of Yiddishism in inter-war Poland and the Soviet Union. Fishman does so with even-handed clarity, delineating distinctions among the era's many movements, parties, organizations, and institutions, as he indicates how their differences are often understood. In particular, Fishman is eager to offer correctives to common misperceptions of the politics of this era. For example, in the book's fourth chapter, he challenges the simplistic reputation of Bundists as stalwart champions of secular Yiddish culture, noting the extent to which the Bund often followed, rather than led, the rise of Yiddishism. Similarly, Fishman complicates other overly schematic ideas about Yiddishists as anti-Zionist or antireligious (Chapter 7).

Drawing in part on essays that Fishman previously published elsewhere, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* offers both broad accounts and more closely circumscribed case studies. The latter are especially revealing of how the historian discovers and analyses the larger issues of the day as they were encountered in public undertakings, including a highly charged meeting of the Hevrat Mefitse Haskalah in St. Petersburg of 1905 (Chapter 3) and the range of responses among Vilna's ideologically diverse Jewish communities to the 200th anniversary of the Vilna Gaon's birthday in 1920 (Chapter 8). While none of these chapters is exhaustive, given the book's overall brevity (the chapter on Max Weinreich, in particular, leaves one wanting more), they do provide, whether individually or as a whole, an overview of modern Yiddish culture in tsarist Russia, inter-war Poland, and inter-war Soviet Russia that is informed and straightforward, especially valuable for newcomers to the study of Yiddish.

Fishman is at his best in providing thoughtful analyses of the politics of Yiddish, particularly with regard to tsarist Russia. His discussions of Yiddish culture itself are at times less fully developed, especially for the inter-war period, for which the author's own analysis tends to follow uncritically his observation that Yiddish *kultur-tuers* of the period regarded the purpose of their work as 'advancing a Jewish political goal' (97). Fishman's sociological approach to studying culture rightly calls attention to the full

range of Yiddish cultural undertakings of the period and, in particular, stresses the need to consider the difference between intellectuals' often highly ideological visions of Yiddish culture and how it was actually engaged by the public. At the same time, this approach invites consideration of Yiddish culture from other perspectives. For example, in his discussion of Yiddish culture in inter-war Poland, Fishman states that 'the absence of clear-cut professional boundaries was in part a sequence of the weak economic base of Yiddish culture in Poland. Intellectuals [such as Zalmen Rejzen, Alter Kacyzne, and Kh. Sh. Kazhdan needed to "dance at many weddings" in order to make a living (89–90).' While Fishman characterizes this lack of professional specialization among the leaders of Yiddish culture as a sign of its immaturity, one might argue that their professional hybridity was an innovative, even avant-garde feature of their undertakings, when considered in light of other concomitant modernist cultural enterprises. The diverse career of Kacyzne, for example--embracing not only poetry, prose, and theatre but also photography and film--might be compared to such a mid-twentieth-century west European modernist polymath as, say, Jean Cocteau.

Perhaps such comparisons are less readily made because of the cruel fate of east European Yiddish culture and so many of its creators (including Kacyzne, who was murdered in Tarnopol in July 1941). Indeed, Fishman concludes the volume with an account of the rescue of 'Jewish cultural treasures' from the YIVO Institute and other Vilna libraries that were destroyed during World War II (his chapter is adapted from an essay originally published by YIVO to mark the return in 1996 of some of its materials, which survived efforts to destroy them by both Nazism and Stalinism). This last chapter of Fishman's text offers a chilling epilogue to his account of the efflorescence of modern Yiddish culture in eastern Europe. Yet it should not be considered the final chapter in this subject's history. The political opportunities that enabled the return of these materials to YIVO also inaugurated a new episode in this history, as eastern Europe has become a new centre of scholarly and cultural activity involving Yiddish. Indeed, Fishman has been among the first scholars to help re-animate Jewish studies in the former heartland of Yiddish culture. Thanks to his efforts, in this volume and elsewhere, we can hope that more chapters will be added to the turbulent chronicle of Yiddish in the modern era.

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