

Where Did the East European Jews Come From?

An Explosive Debate Erupts from Old Footnotes

CHERIE WOODWORTH

Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman, with notes edited by Paul Glasser. 2 vols. 1,752 pp. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York City, 2008. ISBN-13 978-0300108873. \$300.00.

There are several hundred thousand Yiddish speakers today, perhaps half a million. Some Yiddish enthusiasts claim as many as four million. The shtetls of Ukraine and Lithuania, where Yiddish was the fabric of life, have faded away to dust. Yiddish was born in about the tenth century, and thus rounded out an even millennium before being pulled under the tide of history. If you want to know not just what Yiddish is but where it came from, how it managed to survive and even to flourish, you can do no better than the new edition of Max Weinreich's *History of the Yiddish Language*—but be sure to read the notes. They extend for over 750 pages, are now published in English for the first time in the new Yale edition, and contain the most interesting, and controversial, part of what had seemed till now a fairly straightforward and unchallenged historical narrative.

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Weinreich's original text and notes were published in 1973, four years after his death.¹ A partial translation into English—without the notes—was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1980. Yale's new edition thus finally makes available for the first time the greater part of Weinreich's work—the notes are longer than the text—thoroughly edited by Paul Glasser. The notes cite research in two dozen languages and took more than a decade to edit and check even after they were translated. (*What? Only a decade?* If you are the typical non-scholar, you could say this with Yiddish-inflected irony. If you are a philologist or historian, however, you might say this with sincerity and admiration.) The notes are not just the formal apparatus, reassuring to any scholarly reader and essential to understanding Weinreich's many-stranded argument about the relationship between culture and language. They also provide a subtle counter-argument. Weinreich was a careful, fair, and judicious scholar, and it was in the notes to his monumental work that he not only supported his conclusions but also gave place to the vexing confusion of counter-evidence to his main, and beloved, story of Yiddish origins and, by implication, the origins of millions of East European Jews and their descendants in America.

Popular histories struggle to simplify the story, as in the rambling and superficial *Yiddish Civilization* or the painfully breezy *Story of Yiddish*, which claims that Yiddish has been no less than the Jewish savior.² Those with their eyes fixed on the future optimistically advertise a Yiddish Renaissance, as in Dovid Katz's *Words on Fire*.³ And Yiddish lives in the popular imagination, fed by humorous tidbits meant for cultural tourists who want a taste of a fabled world: *Yiddish with Dick and Jane*, *If You Can't Say Anything Nice, Say It in Yiddish*, *Yiddish for Dogs*, and *Just Say Nu*, which boasts that it can list 13 names for the human buttocks, from polite to prurient.⁴ Rabbi Benjamin Blech [sic], <<[sic] seems odd to me, since that is the name given—it's not a mistake. Why not drop or use (really)?>> the author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Learning Yiddish*, dictates a list of dozens of must-know Yiddish

¹ *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh: Begrifn, faktn, metodn* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1973).

² Paul Kriwack, *Yiddish Civilization: The Rise and Fall of a Forgotten Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2005); and Neal Karlen, *The Story of Yiddish: How a Mish-Mosh of Languages Saved the Jews* (New York: William Morrow, 2008; New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2009).

³ Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004 and 2007).

⁴ Ellis Weiner and Barbara Davilman, *Yiddish with Dick and Jane* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004). Also by the same authors in the parodic vein, *Yiddish with George and Laura [Bush]* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006); Janet Perr, *Yiddish for Dogs: Chutzpah, Feh!, Kibbitz, and More. Every Word Your Canine Needs to Know* (New York: Hyperion, 2007); Michael Wex, *Just Say Nu: Yiddish for Every Occasion (When English Just Won't Do)* (New York: St. Martin's, 2007), which follows the same author's earlier *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).

words, which he claims have already entered American English: not just bagel and klutz, but also hey mish, yortsayt, and yok.⁵

Yiddish as a venue for the hip cultural cognoscenti, Jewish or not, is far from its life in recent (that is, 20th-century) history: Jewish intellectuals often treated Yiddish with contempt, and the State of Israel subjected it to “overt and profound linguistic antagonism” as the state promoted Hebrew.⁶ Hip and funny Yiddish is also far from its life with native speakers today, who are largely isolated, some by choice, others by geography and poverty. Isolation is the very reason why they still speak Yiddish. Yiddish speakers are found in the last remnants of Jewish villages in Moldova, Romania, Hungary, and Ukraine. Ethnographers, led by Indiana University historian Jeffrey Veidlinger, are trying to record their voices and memories for the Archive of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories before they die out. Yiddish speakers are also found in the self-isolated communities of the Orthodox Jews of Williamsburg, New York, and in some very Orthodox communities in Israel (the Haredim, who reject the state and its language, Hebrew), but these speakers are far from eager proselytizers of the language. Yiddish is taught as a foreign language at a handful of universities in the United States and Europe, including Indiana University, UCLA, Columbia, and Oxford. Yiddish-language institutions such as the Vilnius Yiddish Institute have received funding from cultural preservation commissions in the European Union. The language also lives in the fantastically mundane Alaska of Michael Chabon’s recent *Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, where the hardened detectives, street junkies, shabby chess masters, and dowagers all speak Yiddish, though we are, sad to say, given their world only in American English, for Chabon himself is of the rootless modern American generation. According to his own account, Chabon was pricked into writing the novel by a traveler’s guide from 1958, *Say It in Yiddish*, which evoked a world that, by 2000, was not only lost but impossible.⁷

Dovid Katz, one of the champions of modern Yiddish, admitted that “for anyone to whom modern Yiddish and its literature and culture are dear, the most bitterly painful time is the present,” because the last native speak-

⁵ Benjamin Blech, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Learning Yiddish* (Indianapolis: Alpha, 2000), 26.

⁶ Jerold Frakes, “Introduction,” *Early Yiddish Texts, 1100–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); “contempt,” xliii; “antagonism,” li. The antagonism arose not out of hostility toward Yiddish speakers, but because Hebrew was adopted as part of the political mission of Zionism. See also Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ Michael Chabon, “Imaginary Homelands,” republished in his new collection of essays, *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing along the Borderlands* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2008). *Say It in Yiddish* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958) was written by Max Weinreich’s son, Uriel, a linguist, scholar, and inspirational leader of Yiddish studies at Columbia.

ers of prewar Europe—writers active into their 80s, 90s, and some, even, beyond—are dying.⁸ It is hard to speak or write dispassionately about the tongue that the eminent literary critic Harold Bloom (whose first language was Yiddish) called “a murdered language.”⁹ It seemed that all the attention for Yiddish fell, deservedly, on its recent history and imminent future, and its origins long past posed few unanswered questions of academic or general interest. This settled and accepted story was due to Weinreich’s legacy and his seemingly definitive study. It is now challenged in an explosive way by an Israeli scholar, Paul Wexler, who, like Weinreich, is a linguist. Wexler has been marshaling his arguments for two decades to make the radical, implausible, impossible argument that Yiddish did not come from Germany but from the Slavic lands, and the East European Jews came not from the Rhineland but from Persia via the Caucasus and the Khazar steppe. This challenge to Weinreich’s historical narrative is academic and impersonal for Wexler but deeply personal and a matter of identity itself for most of Wexler’s readers. To understand why, you have only to look more at Weinreich’s biography and his grand project to preserve the lifeblood of pre-Holocaust Jewish culture.



Max Weinreich was born near Riga in the last years of the Russian Empire. Like the Oxford scholar and political philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin, who was also from the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia of Riga, Weinreich grew up in a German-speaking home in this multiethnic city where German was the language of educated discourse and Russian the language of politics and administration. He became fascinated with Yiddish as a young man. He studied at St. Petersburg University, received a doctorate at the University of Marburg, and in 1925 founded the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO) in Vilnius (Wilno)—the center of Yiddish culture.¹⁰ Weinreich was YIVO’s moving spirit: he named it; its headquarters were Weinreich’s apartment;

⁸ Katz, *Words on Fire*, 349.

⁹ “A Murdered Language,” the original title given by Harold Bloom to his review of Weinreich’s book for the *New York Review of Books* (55, 17 [6 November 2008]), was changed by the editor to the more upbeat “Glories of Yiddish” (Harold Bloom, personal communication).

¹⁰ Max Weinreich’s biography and historical context, as well as that of his son Uriel Weinreich (the Columbia linguist who wrote *Say It in Yiddish*), can now be found in Gershon D. Hundert, editor-in-chief, *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2 vols. (New York: YIVO, 2008), 2,400 pages, with maps and illustrations; and Marvin Herzog, editor-in-chief, *The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry* (New York; YIVO, 1992–). Three volumes have been published to date; ten are planned.

he was the core of its staff.¹¹ “His determination was a powerful engine that propelled him forward relentlessly. . . . He could create worlds if he decided to do so,” recalled his colleague Lucy Dawidowicz. “His most distinctive physical features were an irresistible smile . . . and his penetrating eyes, which . . . saw everything, even deep inside you.”¹² Weinreich was a leader who could gain the allegiance of those great and small on behalf of his beloved Yiddish. He convinced Sigmund Freud to become a member of the honorary YIVO board; Albert Einstein was also a member.¹³ This single-minded devotion to promoting Yiddish, both the academic discipline and the popularizing zeal, comes through clearly in his *History*.

In September 1939, Weinreich was in Denmark at an academic conference with his older son, Uriel, when war broke out. He, wisely, did not return to Vilnius, and his wife and younger son joined them abroad. Weinreich became a professor of Yiddish at City College and re-established YIVO in New York City. Max Weinreich died in 1969; his son and heir to the calling, Uriel, predeceased him by two years. YIVO still operates today as a thriving center of scholarship on Ashkenazi Jewish culture. *History of the Yiddish Language* was Weinreich’s life work, not only in that it summed up decades of research. More than 750 pages of footnotes may seem excessive and self-indulgent, but to philologists there is no more passionate expression of devotion. Weinreich had both the ardor and the blindness of a lover; he wrote his magnum opus all in Yiddish, which was neither his native language nor one that could find more than a handful of readers.

Despite this, many of the most important arguments made in Weinreich’s *History* have seeped into, even permeated, Jewish Studies and from there migrated to popular Jewish self-consciousness. Weinreich’s basic story of the beginnings of Yiddish in the Rhine valley and its centrality in creating a European Jewish culture are repeated everywhere, and without question. But the pillars of Weinreich’s argument are too broad, their foundations in a millennial-old history too unstable, to be as unshakable as his subsequent readers have made them. Weinreich knew this very well. He was too careful a scholar to buy into a simplistic view, and that is the story revealed now in the publication of the notes.

Weinreich’s first innovation in the *History* was to argue, against apparent common sense and abundant personal experience, that Yiddish was formed not through isolation but through constant interaction combined with a chosen separateness. The walled-off ghettos of 18th-century European cities,

¹¹ “Weinreich, Max and Uriel,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews of Eastern Europe*; David Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), chap. 9; Lucy Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938–1947* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 81–83 and passim.

¹² Dawidowicz, *From That Place, 82*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

although they preserved Yiddish, were not the environment that gave it life. Weinreich's innovation was to argue that "Jewish otherness"—and the language that goes with it—"cannot be the result of 'exclusion'; it is not even the result of exile" (208).

Where others had persistently told the story of confinement, prejudice, and persecution, Weinreich spoke of independence, self-government, self-assertion, and community building. It was undeniable that "without communal separateness there is no separate language," and so the separateness of the Ashkenaz <<Ashkenazi?>> community was necessary for Yiddish to arise (175). But the modern explanation for that separateness, according to Weinreich, got the story exactly backward. Nineteenth-century Jewish activists, demanding rights of citizenship, created the story that the Jews had been locked in ghettos since the Middle Ages, "and thus excluded from society at large and its intellectual development; in this forced isolation"—an influential Jewish assimilationist argued—"both their mode of life in general and their language in particular became corrupted" (175).¹⁴

Weinreich would not hear of corruption; he sang the achievements of Yiddish. The idea that Yiddish is a bastard dialect or jargon of German is thus one of the first perfidious assumptions he attacked without mercy. The 19th-century Jewish advocates of acculturation sought to achieve "emancipation" of the Jews by insisting that Jews abandon their "jargon" and speak proper German; this, naturally, would have killed Yiddish. Paraphrasing their arguments damningly, Weinreich wrote, "let the sun of tolerance arise anew and the Jews will again become Germans in culture and will differ from their fellow citizens only in religion. Perhaps one should not be too severe," Weinreich continued, with circumspect compassion, "with those who use historical fictions because of a legitimate political aim" (176).

For Weinreich, based on both the linguistic and historical evidence, there could be no doubt that up until the 18th century "the Jews *wanted* to be by themselves. . . . Separate residence (strange as this may appear in the light of present Jewish and general conceptions of rights) was part of the privileges granted the Jews at their own request" (176) so they could worship together; provide for their own slaughterhouse, bathhouse, cemetery, and social hall; study together; run their own rabbinic courts; supervise tax collection; and when necessary, protect themselves from attacks.

Archeology supports this part of Weinreich's argument. Befuddled tour guides in Prague struggle to explain why, given the expectation of exclusion of Jews, the city's famous Jewish quarter, Josefov, is so central to the old town. (One misguided explanation is that the Jews were given land near the

¹⁴ Although Weinreich does not here name the author of the views he (perhaps, unfairly) summarizes, from references in other notes one can deduce that he is responding to Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig, 1870) (n. 2.28, A134).

river that was too marshy for the other city inhabitants, prone to flooding and disease-bearing miasmas.) But Prague's Josefov is typical. Weinreich's point is that exclusion could also be exclusivity; restrictions also came with designated privileges. In Trier, Mainz, Aachen, Cologne, Worms, and more than 100 medieval towns in Central Europe, the Jewish district was both a central and a prime location, close to the economic heart of the city. The German Bishop Rüdiger, granting a charter of the city of Speyer in 1084 wrote, "I thought that I would increase the glory of our city a thousandfold if I were to include Jews" (n. 3.1, A141–42).



Weinreich's second argument is equally counterintuitive. Though in some places Yiddish and German were mutually understandable, he assiduously argued that they are different languages. But Weinreich deployed his formidable linguistic artillery to argue, contrariwise, that despite significant variations in spoken and written Yiddish across the expanse of Europe (western Yiddish, more purely German; eastern Yiddish, heavily Slavic; southern Yiddish, with influence from Hungary and the Balkans), Yiddish forms one language and shares one cultural sphere and worldview, quite distinct from the surrounding culture. In short, Yiddish and German are different, but all Yiddish is one.

Yiddish had been studied by outsiders (Christians) since the Renaissance.¹⁵ The judgment that Yiddish was a corrupted jargon of German was formalized by the 18th century. Scholars divided languages into the pure, root languages—such as German—and the composite languages. English, Yiddish, and to some degree French were judged to belong to the latter category. (Small surprise that these founders of philology were Germans.) The achievements of these German philologists in many areas, such as biblical criticism, are up to this day at the foundation of textual studies (of medieval chronicles, for example). Fortunately, their less than helpful paradigm of "pure" languages vs. mongrel ones was replaced with a better explanation of language development when French and English scholars—with a better <<repetition of "better" deliberate?>> understanding of the "mongrel" languages—reached a comparable level of sophistication. By the mid-19th century, the formal study of languages made room not just for a pure "root" but for a variety of Germanic languages. By the end of the 19th century, accomplished Yiddish writers such as Solomon Jacob Abramowitsch (who wrote under the name Mendele Mocher Sforim, "Mendele the Bookseller"),

¹⁵ Jerold C. Frakes, *The Cultural Study of Yiddish in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

the first modern Yiddish novelist, were demonstrating the powers of Yiddish as a literary language of a well-developed cultural sphere.¹⁶

In his account, Weinreich repeatedly stressed both diffusion and fusion: diffusion of language through its bearers (both living speakers and texts) and fusion of its component parts (German, Hebrew, and Slavic). Weinreich's model for Yiddish could be profitably applied to other mixed languages—for example, English. As it turns out, many of the world's languages not only borrow from other languages but are mixed enough to merit the term *mongrels*. Weinreich's arguments about Yiddish thus helped demolish the final trappings that bound old-fashioned ideas of linguistic evolution to a mechanistic and linear schema. Weinreich's arcane investigation into the deep roots of Yiddish adapted easily to modern ideas of language as an open symbol system or a constantly regenerated semiotic code.

Once he demonstrated that Yiddish is an independent language, Weinreich explained how it came to be, first as an altered language formed among medieval Jewish trading settlements in the French–German borderland along the Rhine valley. Weinreich deduced from traces left in early Yiddish that these first Jewish immigrants to the heart of Europe spoke a Romance language, having left Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek behind when they left the eastern Mediterranean, although Hebrew and Aramaic were still languages of study. But early on (in the 10th or 11th century) these Jews from Rhineland France, presumably through contact with Jewish settlements in southern Germany, converted from old Judeo-French to western Yiddish, which was more purely German with some elements of Latin or early French. In subsequent centuries—when, exactly, is a source of considerable debate—this language moved east with Jewish emigrants, settlers, and refugees, either in the 12th century (after the Crusades and persecutions) or in the 14th or 15th. There it picked up a significant cargo of Slavic vocabulary and expressions and became the Yiddish more familiar today: eastern Yiddish.¹⁷

With his 1,000-year history, Weinreich thus removed the East European Jews from both the poor *shtetls* (the cliché associated with Jewish immigrants to America of the 19th and early 20th century) and their tragic end. Distancing them from their Slavic neighbors, who had little cultural cachet in America, and bypassing the association with Germany, which had become toxic after 1945, he placed their roots in glorious France.

¹⁶ Abromowitscz's first Yiddish novel, *Das Kleine Menschel*, was published in 1865.

¹⁷ Wexler, "Yiddish—the Fifteenth Slavic Language. A Study of the Partial Language Shift from Judeo-Sorbian to German," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 91 (1991): 11, states that at most 10–15 percent of the vocabulary of Yiddish is Slavic. (As will be seen below, it is in Wexler's interest to emphasize the number of Slavic words in Yiddish, so this count is certainly not too low.) In the traditional view, it is the influence of Slavic languages (as *adstratum*—a later addition) that so dramatically changed phonology (pronunciation) and syntax (word order) and made eastern Yiddish so distinct from German.

Though logical, this story is too simple. The historical, demographic, and geographical evidence does not support this neat story line, and Weinreich himself gave the evidence in his notes. To begin with, the textual evidence is curiously vexing. Yiddish blossomed in printed books from the 16th century onward, but Weinreich argues that Yiddish began in the 10th century in the Rhineland, and there are little more than a dozen extant texts in Yiddish from before 1400. Many of these early traces of Yiddish are only a few lines long and, aside from the marginal glosses of the Talmudic scholar Rashi (c. 1100) from the Champagne region, the early texts do not congregate in the “right” geographic area. (Nearly half were found in Cairo, Egypt.)¹⁸

Weinreich’s argument is linguistic, but by leaving crucial information in the notes, it was easy to read it also as demographic: that because the Jews of Eastern Europe, numbering as many as ten million by 1900, spoke Yiddish (Judeo-German), they must have come from German lands. If Yiddish did arise in the tenth century in the Rhine valley—which is plausible—the real question is how millions of Jews in Eastern Europe came to speak Yiddish, for the Jewish population of Europe certainly did not begin, or concentrate, either in the Rhineland or in German lands more broadly. The question then is why the local Jewish dialect of the Rhineland, spoken by a small minority of European Jews, became the lingua franca in long-established, and more populous, Jewish communities across Europe. As Weinreich clearly reports (in footnote 2.13, which is actually an essay that stretches for 20 pages), by the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries Jews had settled all over Central and Eastern Europe. In 801 a Jewish emissary was named at the court of Charlemagne in Aachen. By the ninth and tenth centuries, Slavic- or Greek-speaking Jews had come up through the Balkans and settled in Budapest. In the tenth century there were Jews in Magdeburg, under the Emperor Otto I, and Jewish merchant colonies on the north shore of the Black Sea. (These were probably Greek-speaking, though they would also likely have had commerce with Turkic, Slavic, and Genoese traders). By the same time, Jews had settled in Prague—not German- or Yiddish-speaking Jews but Slavic- or Greek-speaking, having come up from the Byzantine Empire and still tied to it by trade.¹⁹ Soon after, there was a Jewish mercantile district in Przemysł

¹⁸ Fourteen texts have been dated before 1400: Rashi’s glosses (southern France, c. 1100), the Worms couplet (1272–73), glosses on an Aramaic dictionary (1290, Cologne region), comments on a prayer book (13th–14th century, Germany?), a love poem (14th century, Italy?), two “oaths of peace” (1385, Zurich, and 1392, Germany), two medical fragments (1396–97, Germany, and 14th century), and five documents (short narrative tales) from Cairo, c. 1382; Frakes, ed., *Early Yiddish Texts*.

¹⁹ From the travelogue of Ibrahim ibn Yakub, of 965: “The city of Prague is constructed of stone and mortar. Among cities, it is the most crammed with merchandise. From the city of Cracow there come to her Rus and Slavs with goods. And from the lands of the Turk [Hungary] there come to them Moslems, Jews and Turks [Hungarians].” A62 n 2.13.

(Poland), which brought in trade goods from Ruthenia and Byzantium.²⁰ In the 11th century, we have the first evidence of the Jewish communities of the Rhine valley, though it is crucial to Weinreich's argument that he maintain that they settled there much earlier in order to explain their subsequent dominance of European Jewish culture. Judging from the name of one of the city's quarters, "Zhidov," and an early Hebrew text, Jews in Kiev predate the arrival of the Rus'.²¹ By the later 12th century, there was already a Jewish district in Płock, Poland; the Jews thus arrived in Catholic Poland before the Dominican monks.²² By the 13th century, Jews had settled in Warsaw and Cracow. In the same century, the grand duke of Lithuania issued a decree addressed to two different communities of Jews: those coming from the west (Poland? Germany?) and indigenous Jews of the Grand Duchy's lands to the south and east. Yet despite the evidence for medieval Jewish towns throughout Eastern Europe, the standard narrative of medieval Jewish culture includes only the Sephardic Jews of Iberia and the Ashkenazi Jews of the Rhineland, the "cradle and center of Jewry."²³

But if there were already Jews established in Poland, Hungary, and Ruthenia, how is it that they all ended up speaking Yiddish? That story is more complicated, and much more in dispute.



If Yiddish-speaking Jews emigrated from the Rhine valley to Eastern Europe and brought their language with them, they would have encountered indigenous Jews with their own languages. But how many of these indigenous Jews were there, and what did they speak? Jewish historians have estimated the population of East European Jews to have been between 10,000 and 55,000 at the end of the Middle Ages (in the year 1500).²⁴ Johannes de Saxonia observed in 1297, "It should be noted that Jews do not have the same common

²⁰ Przemysł was not noted by Weinreich, but is noted in passing by Andrzej Buko in *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Poland: Discoveries, Hypotheses, Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 261.

²¹ Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). The authors date the earliest Hebrew document to before 930 A.D. (71). The "zhidovskye vorota" and "Zhidove" quarter of Kiev are mentioned twice in the *Ipat'evskaia letopis' (Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei, 2* <<Place: Publisher, Date?>>) under the annal entries for 1146 and 1151 (*ibid.*, 57).

²² *Ibid.*, 283. In addition, it was discovered in 1940 that the Jewish cemetery at Lutomiersk (near Łódź) was atop early medieval Viking burials, suggesting that the Jewish cemetery was also medieval (*ibid.*, 408–9).

²³ Javier Castaño, Alfred Haverkamp, and Renate Engels, *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2004).

²⁴ Jits van Straten gives a bibliography of previous estimates of population in his deceptively mild-mannered article, "Early Modern Polish Jewry: The Rhineland Hypothesis Revisited," *Historical Methods* 40, 1 (2007): 39–50, esp. tables 1 and 4.

language everywhere, for in Alemannia [Saxony], they have another common language, and it is a Slavic one" (n. 2.13, A71). Weinreich was not shy about citing studies that supported the chief rival to his "Rhineland theory." Under the "Slavic theory," Jews in Poland and Ukraine did not come from German lands but adopted Yiddish as a late import brought by new immigrants. By this hypothesis, "Russian"-speaking Jews converted to Yiddish, as recounted by the author and public educator Isaac Baer Levinsohn in 1828: "Our elders have told us that several generations ago, the Jews in these parts spoke only the Russian language" (n. 2.13, A76).²⁵

The census of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of 1764, however, reported 590,000 Jewish inhabitants. Because the census did not count children under the age of one year, and it is assumed that many tried to deliberately evade the count, the historian Raphael Mahler in 1946 estimated that the correct number was closer to 750,000.²⁶ The Russian census of Poland and the Pale of Settlement in 1897 counted 1.32 million Jews.²⁷ These numbers have raised some questions before: at least one historian called the increase in Jewish population a "demographic miracle."²⁸ Jits van Straten, a microbiologist by training and genealogist by avocation, recently reconsidered the demographic statistics for Jewish and non-Jewish populations in 19th-century Europe and the explanations given for the "miracle," and finds them grossly inadequate: it would have required not a metaphorical but a literal miracle defying the laws of nature for the Ashkenazi Jewish population to increase that fast.²⁹ We find a premonition of this problem with the numbers in Weinreich's notes, when he discusses the population estimates of all Ashkenazim (including Germany) from the 12th century to the 20th (n. 2.29, A135–36). Even allowing for an initial population of 100,000 Ashkenazim in 1170—that is, twice as high as other estimates—Weinreich

²⁵ Weinreich quotes Levinsohn's *Teuda be-Israel; oder, Eine Ermahnung an jeden bessern Izraëlitzen* (Vilna, 1828). The continuation of Levinsohn's quotation clarifies that he is speaking of "Russian" generally: "the Russian language spoken by the old inhabitants of the Volhynia (Podolia) and Kiev provinces and of other provinces that had been under Polish rule up to 1772." Levinsohn is also known as the author of a memo (1827) on the culture and history of the Polish-Russian Jews written to Prince Carl Christoph Lieven, imperial minister of education, in answer to 34 questions put to him by Prince Lieven.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41 (Mahler, cited by van Straten). Van Straten carefully takes into consideration the varying geographic boundaries of Poland, the Commonwealth, Congress Poland, and then Poland and the Pale of Settlement, and adjusts his numbers so as to cover, as accurately as possible, the same geographic area each time.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 42, table 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41–42. Van Straten cites the *History of the Jewish People*, ed. Heim Ben-Sasson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), which argued that in the 19th century, Jewish populations in Europe grew twice as fast as non-Jewish populations.

²⁹ The investigation is summed up in "Early Modern Polish Jewry," and laid out in more detail in van Straten's earlier article, with H. Snel, "The Jewish 'Demographic Miracle' in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Fact or Fiction?" *Historical Methods* 39, 3 (2006): 123–31.

expresses discomfort with reporting the work of others who cited unusually high growth rates in order to reach a total Ashkenazi population of 14 million by 1930. <<AM asks if it's okay to change sentence order, as here, to clarify that 100,000 is not = to other estimates>> Whatever factors may have made such a phenomenal growth possible, “demographers owe us an explanation,” Weinreich pointedly wrote, “why these factors affected only Ashkenazim, not Sephardim and other Jewish communities ... [who] remained numerically about the same as in 1500” (A136).³⁰ There is indeed a genuine problem: how to account, demographically, for the millions of Jews who appear on the records in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Hungary, and elsewhere by the 19th century. Immigration following the medieval Crusades and expulsions from Western Europe, followed by 400 to 500 years of natural biological growth, are not enough to account for the size of the East European Jewish population. The numbers simply don't add up. Two scholars from disparate fields of inquiry have recently tried anew to solve this puzzle, first noted at least a century ago: Paul Wexler from comparative linguistics and David Goldstein from genetics.

The title of Paul Wexler's detailed study, *The Ashkenazic Jews: A Slavo-Turkic People in Search of a Jewish Identity*, is not shy about his claim: Yiddish has Slavic grammar, syntax, morphemes, phonemes, and lexicon, with a smaller input from Turkic. Wexler made the case that Yiddish is a “relexification”—a massive borrowing of Germanic words onto a basically Slavic structure, as opposed to Weinreich's view that Slavic words were added to a Germanic structure. Wexler's claim applies not only to the language: “The bulk of their [Ashkenazi Jewish] religious practices and folkways also prove to be of Slavic origin” and thus “the Ashkenazic [sic] Jews may be in the main *ethnic Slavs*”—Wexler added his own italics, in case readers should not get the point.³¹ Wexler's preferred term for modern Judaism was “Judaized

³⁰ Discomfort with exceptionally high growth rates can be sensed as well in Weinreich's report of the proportional increase of Ashkenazi Jews relative to Sephardi Jews in fig. 4 (173). The Sephardi population numbers show slow growth in the Middle Ages, followed by a gradual decline from the 14th through the 19th centuries, and then a bounce upward again after 1860. The numbers are always between one and two million. The Ashkenazi population, on the other hand, shows an even more gradual increase from the 12th century through the 17th, then a somewhat sharper increase, before the slope of the line takes off almost vertically after the year 1800, indicating a population surge from 1.5 million to nearly 15.6 million in only a century and a half. This incredible surge parallels the table given by van Straten (“Early Modern Polish Jewry,” figure 1) when he compares what others had reported for Jewish population growth rates with known growth rates in Europe (British Isles, European Russia, the Netherlands, Poland, and France): compared with the others, the Jewish growth curve not only exceeds that of other populations; it must be almost vertical to account for the numbers cited.

³¹ Paul Wexler, *The Ashkenazic Jews* (Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers, 1993), 6, 8. Wexler also relegated the Rhineland Jews, whom Weinreich emphasized, to a small and marginal

pagano-Christianity,” though he used the term rarely on the grounds that it was too cumbersome.³²

Weinreich and Wexler agreed that the key to the deep history of the East European Jews—the history stretching back deep into the origins of Yiddish, where documentary evidence becomes scarce—would be found in linguistics. They also agreed that language was the key to understanding the culture of the European Jews over the millennium that followed, but their books disagreed diametrically on what the linguistic evidence meant.

It would have been easier to ignore Wexler’s argument if he had made it without grubbing through the details. But Wexler had already made a career as a respectable Slavic linguist.³³ One reviewer called Wexler’s expertise “awe-inspiring” and wrote that Wexler practiced “a painstaking methodology that warrants emulation, working meticulously, never proposing a hypothesis unless thoroughly developed and supported.”³⁴ Wexler knew Hebrew and had published analyses of it. And he had not only studied Yiddish but also taught it at YIVO. Wexler knew his argument would make people mad: “I am aware that discussions of ethnic reconstruction and the origins of religious and superstitious practices often provoke emotional reactions; this is especially true when traditional views are being challenged.” The reception to his argument by Yiddish, Germanic, and Slavic linguists, on the contrary, was, or at least seemed, quite dispassionate, framed in the jargon of the trade (discussions of dialectology, isoglosses, substratal and adstratal components, diphthongization, and such). Critics commended Wexler for being “interesting,” “striking,” and “provocative,” then dismantled his examples, poked holes in his logic, and dismissed his conclusions in no uncertain terms.³⁵

role in the development of Yiddish. The core of Wexler’s argument was first laid out in a monograph-length article, “Yiddish—the Fifteenth Slavic Language.”

³² Wexler, *Ashkenazic Jews*, 23.

³³ His studies in Slavic linguistics include, for example, *A Historical Phonology of the Belorussian Language* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1977) and *Purism and Language: A Study in Modern Ukrainian and Belorussian Nationalism (1840–1967)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

³⁴ David Marshall, “Comment: Finally, the Other Shoe Drops,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 91 (1991): 151–214, here 183.

³⁵ The responses (rebuttals) to Wexler were published in the same issue of the journal. Bernard Comrie, “Yiddish Is Slavic?” 151–56; James Dow and Thomas Stolz, “The Sorbian Origins of Yiddish: Linguistic Theory in Search of Historical Documentation,” 157–65; Paul Glasser (the editor of the new edition of Weinreich’s notes), “Comment,” 167–74; Edward Stankiewicz, “Comment,” 205–13. Three of the published reviewers accepted Wexler’s thesis. Gunter Schaarschmidt, “Comment,” 187–95, accepted Wexler’s basic argument “without challenge” (187). Neil Jacobs, “Comment,” 175–81, praised Wexler for “present[ing] a massive amount of arguments” (180) that boldly “suggest solutions for a number of general problems which traditionally have plagued the Yiddish linguist” (176). See also Marshall, “Comment: Finally, the Other Shoe Drops,” 183–86 (Marshall’s “other shoe” refers to the hypothesis and evidence first broached by Wexler in an earlier book,

Comparative linguistics poses two genuine, and interconnected, problems when its methods are used to make arguments about history. The first is that in its most specialized details, the evidence and arguments are inaccessible to outsiders; Wexler will not be able to persuade historians about the origins of the Jews by discussing lexical inventories and phonemic shifts (especially as long as other linguists return fire with equally arcane and scientific-sounding counterarguments about other phonemic shifts). Second, despite its stress on precision and details, comparative *historical* linguistics is not as scientific as it seems; lost forms must be reconstructed, development must be interpolated, and thus no argument is definitive. The majority view among Yiddish linguists—a very small but committed cadre of scholars—is that Wexler’s argument is untenable.

Genetics might provide us with an exit to this uncomfortable, and vexingly arcane, linguistic argument. Recent studies of markers on the Y chromosome of Ashkenazi men hold out the possibility of determining, with apparent mathematical precision, how many Ashkenazi men share markers distinctive to the European, Middle Eastern, or other (for example, Central Asian Turkic) gene pool. The results are inconclusive, puzzling, and unexpected. David Goldstein, a molecular geneticist at Duke, undertook to trace Y markers among two Ashkenazi subgroups: the Cohanim (the class of priests narrowly defined) and the Levites (liturgical officiants from the tribe of Levi). He found that the Cohanim from both Ashkenazi and Sephardic populations shared an unusual marker on the Y chromosome that set them apart both from the surrounding non-Jewish populations and from their own communities. He traced the marker to a mutation originating about 3,000 years ago and suggested in conclusion that this showed both groups had a real and unbroken genetic link with the original priestly Jews of Israel. (He received tremendous media coverage as a result.)

The Ashkenazi Levites, on the other hand, showed a puzzling genetic signature: they did not match particularly well with the Cohanim, nor with the broader population of Ashkenazi Jews. Comparing this group with the most common Y-chromosome micro-mutations in European and West Eurasian populations (i.e., Turkic and Caucasian tribes), Goldstein concluded that though he had at first been very skeptical of the “Khazar hypothesis” that Ashkenazi Jews came to Eastern Europe from the Eurasian steppe, rather

Explorations in Judeo-Slavic Linguistics [Leiden: Brill, 1987]). Marshall’s judgment is that “Wexler does present a cogent, coherent, convincing hypothesis that deserves thoughtful consideration” (185). Marshall supplies two possible motives for the shift of Slavic-speaking Jewish populations to Germanic: pressure from the crusading Teutonic Knights and the expansion of the Hanseatic trading system.

than from Germany, he now found it “plausible, if not likely” and “worth investigating further.”³⁶

Paul Wexler has not been in the least dismayed or cowed by criticisms. In a 900-page book published in 2006, he not only reiterated his earlier heresies but added new ones, such as doubts about the historical roots of Hebrew and the assertion of a non-Jewish core for Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic, among a host of other controversial claims.³⁷ <<AM rearranged preceding sentence for greater clarity: please check and correct if necessary>> In his latest work—more linguistic studies, as well as an etymological dictionary of Yiddish—Wexler argues that the core of what became the Ashkenazi Jews originated not in post-exilic Judea, later dispersed through the Mediterranean Roman Empire, but in Persia: the Azhkenazi(c) Jews were “an outgrowth of Jewish Iranians who brought Judaism to the Khazars, and subsequently migrated westwards with Turkic-origin Jews and non-Jewish Khazars.”³⁸ Wexler had begun his career in the Weinreich school in the 1960s. He had the language background to read all of Weinreich’s footnotes before they were translated, access to Weinreich’s papers in the archives at YIVO in Manhattan, and similar scholarly skills. Even as he set out to overturn the consensus, Wexler sincerely and ardently praised the work of Max Weinreich and his son Uriel: “without their pioneering scholarship, the hypothesis presented here [in “The Fifteenth Slavic Language”] would have been inconceivable and undemonstrable.”³⁹ But after working for several decades within the historical framework laid out by Weinreich, he was not convinced. Wexler the gadfly had a point: there were many questions that Weinreich’s history made more difficult, rather than simpler.



Weinreich’s most far-reaching argument beyond the linguistic evidence is his general theory of Jewish culture, a “pattern of Ashkenaz” that formed 1,000 years ago.⁴⁰ It was this argument that transformed Weinreich’s discussion of the origins of Yiddish from an account of distant history and tied it to the present, that made the case for a Jewish identity, and that may be most difficult

³⁶ David Goldstein, “Keeping God’s House: Y Chromosomes and Old Testament Priests” and “Looking out for Number Two: The Case of the Ashkenazi Levites,” in *Jacob’s Legacy: A Genetic View of Jewish History* (New Haven: Yale, 2008), 74 and 73.

³⁷ Paul Wexler, *Jewish and Non-Jewish Creators of Jewish Languages: With Special Attention to Judaized Arabic, Chinese, German, Greek, Persian, Portuguese, Slavic (modern Hebrew/Yiddish) Spanish, and Karaite, and Semitic Hebrew/Ladino. A Collection of Reprinted Articles from across Four Decades with a Reassessment* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

³⁸ Paul Wexler, personal communication, 2 May 2009.

³⁹ Wexler, “Yiddish—the Fifteenth Slavic Language,” 215.

⁴⁰ Chapter 3, “The Language of the Way of the SHaS” is Weinreich’s explication of this argument. In the notes, see n. 3.3, A167.

for his readers to replace or abandon if they were to accept criticisms of the Rhineland hypothesis. Weinreich extended the boundary of what can be said about cultural history based on what is preserved in its language. Even when expressed in the forms closest to pure German, he wrote, Yiddish has a “specific psychic function” that is the “garb for absolutely [non]-German patterns of doing and thinking” (n. 3.3.1, A174).⁴¹ Social context created the language, but the language then created and propagated specific behaviors and values.

Here, Weinreich crossed from the more scientific side of linguistics—the comparison of attested forms, the regular metamorphoses in sounds or structures recorded in a language over centuries—to the mushier, more contestable, and more fascinating realm of sociolinguistics, the study of language in its social environment. In reconstructing the world of the Ashkenazi Jews centuries ago, Weinreich appealingly argued that two cultural activities were reflected in Yiddish, although unequally. To European Christians, Jews were linked with commerce, including what was known in the Middle Ages as usurious money lending and is now called banking. For centuries, Yiddish acted as a *lingua franca* for merchant Jews, unmatched in Europe for its reach. Yiddish was an international financial tool linking Jews from London to Odessa. Even in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Rothschild banking family—with concerns in Frankfurt, London, Paris, Vienna, and Florence—carried on internal family correspondence in Yiddish.⁴² The Rothschilds recapitulated, on a much higher and more powerful plane, the experience of the common Jewish merchant traveling through the string of Jewish settlements (the various Judendorfs, Judenburgs, and other *villae Judaeorum* dating back to the tenth century) scattered through Austria, Hungary, Germany, and Poland (n. 2.13.2) and on down to the Black Sea and the markets of Constantinople. Jewish merchants carried with them two things that traveled well: money and language.⁴³ In the analysis of the Yale Yiddish philologist Benjamin Harshav, “It is no accident that the term for ‘negotiation,’ *mase-u-matn* (‘give and take,’ literally: ‘carry and give,’ from the Talmudic Hebrew), applies to trade as well as to a dialogue analyzing a problem.”⁴⁴

But which meaning of *maseumatn*—a Yiddish word with a Hebrew root—was more powerful? Weinreich claimed that commerce left relatively

⁴¹ Although understandable from the point of view of Germanic word formation, Weinreich’s translator has given his term as “un-German.” As that has an overtone of “anti-German” (as in “un-American activities”), which is clearly not what Weinreich meant, I have changed it to the more neutral “non-German” (introduction, 4).

⁴² Niall Ferguson, *The World’s Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998).

⁴³ The formulation is Benjamin Harshav’s: “Jews, who were not allowed to own any real estate, could carry with them two ‘unreal estates,’ two sign systems, money and language” (*The Meaning of Yiddish* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999], 21).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

little mark on Yiddish; the dominant cultural stamp came from scholarship and study. Perhaps, as a scholar himself, he was predisposed to this view. Hebrew was the language of the holy texts, but Yiddish was the language of discourse and debate, community law and community meetings, preaching, popular literature, and storytelling (255). *Der seykhel trogt oys* (it stands to reason): the many catchphrases from scholarship and argumentation in Yiddish are evidence of the central place of scholarly dispute in Ashkenazi culture, for “the prestige of the students was so high in the society that everyone wanted to be among them or at least their equal as far as possible” (229)—a conclusion that, admittedly, offers great comfort and recompense to the relatively impoverished but very learned and hard-working philologist.

Weinreich pointed out that the verb *lernen*, though close to its German counterpart, had acquired a different meaning in Yiddish: it meant not just to study but study as a way of life, a pursuit that had no finite end. The social world of Yiddish emphasized by Weinreich was one of lifelong students of Ashkenaz, a culture of debate and dispute. Dispute gave rise to tension, tension provoked a release through humor, and humor eased the frictions of Jewish society and opened the door to tolerance. Thus the surprising and joyful consummation of Weinreich’s account of Yiddish history is not about the past at all but about now: traditional and secular Judaism of the modern era (from the Age of the Enlightenment up to today) manage to coexist because of the “ancient relative freedom” practiced in Ashkenazi culture and its embodiment in Yiddish (229). He promised to elaborate more on this point in the notes, but this is one thing he left out.

By writing in Yiddish, perhaps Weinreich not only demonstrated his commitment and fulfilled his love but also felt freer. This freedom was not sloppiness, for throughout Weinreich cleaves to the proper constraints self-imposed by modern scholars through an impeccable internal discipline. But Weinreich did not have to worry about boring people, or stretching their patience, or suiting a publisher who would today reject such extravagance and indulgence of the scholar’s ideal (and perhaps object to the unnecessary muddying of an otherwise straightforward and uplifting story). Preparing his work in the face of the tragic and terminal cancer of his son, the heir to his passion for a disappearing culture, Weinreich could make the notes his legacy, a memory and cultural time capsule to be unearthed and reborn now, 40 years after his death — though by making his magnum opus a final testament to Yiddish as a scientific language he also cut his work off from other scholars and from broader dialogues about European history.⁴⁵ As with

⁴⁵ For example, in the eight responses and comments published with Wexler’s long article of 1991 (“Yiddish—the Fifteenth Slavic Language”), only one scholar cited Weinreich’s original *Geshikhte fun der yidishe shprakh* rather than the abridged English translation of 1980. That scholar was Paul Glasser, editor of the notes in the full 2008 edition.

the Jewish ghettos of Europe, an exclusivity meant to protect Jewish cultural identity became a wall of exclusion as well.

When Weinreich set out to relate the history of Yiddish, he not only uncovered but also laid out in an organized, methodical fashion, a swarm of unanswered and significant questions. That is the irony of his 750 pages of footnotes: his argument about Jewish language, culture, and history is less definitive and more provocative now, in the completely annotated version, than it was in the rump translation 30 years ago. But questions, if they are robust, can be more intellectually gripping than answers, and these questions have significant implications for historians of Eastern Europe and Russia. Decades ago, the historical profession moved beyond state-centered nationalist political history, which naturally excluded stateless peoples who had little political power. Jews were living in Slavic lands more widely, earlier, and in greater numbers than is customarily acknowledged, and their interactions with the surrounding communities were dense and multifaceted. We have lagged in recognizing that the Jewish shtetls, the Jewish quarters of towns and cities, and Jewish cultural centers such as tsarist-era Wilno belong, if not to the political history of the region, then certainly to its economic, social, and cultural history.

But there is more than that. Although Max Weinreich's text, mainstream Yiddish linguistics, and mainstream Jewish history all trend in the same direction, recent demographic arguments, dissident linguistics, genetics, and some of Max Weinreich's notes trend in a different direction. To clarify the questions at issue, we have to separate the linguistic arguments of Weinreich (and Wexler) from their implied demographic and overt cultural ones. There are two distinct questions: Where and when did Yiddish begin? And where did the East European Jews come from? Traditional scholarship, following Weinreich, says that the answer to both is Western Europe (the "Rhineland hypothesis"), and the Jews are relative late-comers to Eastern Europe. Wexler's contrarian answer to both questions is the East—the Ukrainian steppe, the Caucasus, and ultimately Persia. Independent of Wexler, van Straten has shown convincingly that one needs a source population of at least 500,000 in 1500 to account for the population of East European Jews by 1900. Where were they, and why is there no record of them? We are left with two possibilities: much larger numbers of Jews (10–20 times as many) were living in German lands than we have heretofore recognized and went unrecorded, or large populations of Jews were living in the marches of Poland-Lithuania and went unrecorded. Since the written witnesses from medieval German lands are much richer and more comprehensive than those from the lands of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, one would be pressed to conclude—despite the Germanic lexicon of Yiddish—that a half-million-strong source population of Jews were living in East Slavic lands. If hundreds of

thousands of Jews had been living since the tenth century in what became Poland and the Pale of Settlement, then the implication is that Jews were not late-comers and outsiders, not immigrants or foreign elements, any more than other peoples of Eastern Europe who gained sovereign states in the centuries between 1000 and 1500. Jews were immigrants, but no more so than the Magyars (Hungarians) and some of the Slavs, since the Magyars came into the Pannonian plain from the steppe in the tenth century, and many Slavs displaced other indigenous peoples (for example, Finns, Letts, and Prussians in the north, Cumans and other Turkic tribes in the south) as they immigrated to new territories in the Middle Ages or even later. Ashkenazi Jews would have a claim to be treated by historians as an indigenous people of Eastern Europe. That would, indeed, be a revisionist history.

Center for Comparative Research and Medieval Studies Program
Yale University
New Haven, CT ZIP CODE USA
cherie.woodworth@gmail.com