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Getting in on the Ground Floor: Confessions of a Yiddish Impersonator [\[1\]](#)

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Lesson 1 of my copy of *College Yiddish* begins as follows: “*Yidn in ale lender. Yidn zaynen haynt a folk fun elf milyon.*” “Jews in all countries. Jews today are a people [numbering] eleven million.”

The lesson continues:

Jews live on every continent: in America, in Europe, in Asia, in Africa and in Australia. Today over half of all Jews live in America. Over five million Jews live in the United States.... In the United States Jews speak Yiddish and English. In Argentina and Mexico Jews speak Yiddish and Spanish. Jews in many countries speak Yiddish. Yiddish is the language of Jews in many countries. Yiddish unites Jews in all countries.

I clearly recall my classmate Bill Marrone’s bemused reaction to Lesson 1 of *College Yiddish*. On a lark, he had enrolled in the same introductory Yiddish course that I was taking at the U of Chicago Hillel, and he stuck it out long enough to learn the Hebrew alphabet and phrases like “*Yidn in ale lender.*” Bill, the son of a New York City firefighter, was a graduate of Fordham Prep, an elite Jesuit high school in the Bronx, where for several years he had been drilled in classical Greek and Latin – using textbooks with very different opening lines. I dropped the class a few weeks after Bill did, under the pressure of a heavy freshman-year course load and the upheavals of campus life in the autumn of 1968.

The backdrop to my story is a familiar one. In his recent memoir *Outwitting History*, Aaron Lansky, founder of the National Yiddish Book Center, writes:

Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1955, I heard Yiddish when my grandparents spoke to one another or when my American-born parents, whose Yiddish was imperfect but serviceable, wanted to discuss our bedtime or allowance. No one ever spoke Yiddish to me, to my brothers, or to anyone else our age. We were, after all, American kids, and there was no reason to weigh us down with the past. As with so much else, it wasn’t until I went off to college that all this began to change. (p. [9])

Yiddish was a shadowy presence in my family’s household in Minneapolis as well, and I remember listening uncomprehendingly to my parents’ conversations in the language – my mother, in her salty *Galitsyaner* Yiddish, and my father, in his American-accented *Litvak* Yiddish. They were usually talking about us, their children.

Mind you, Yiddish – and the world that it represented – was virtually absent from the standard

Hebrew school curriculums of that era. In Aaron Lansky's words:

The course they taught in Jewish history began with Abraham and Moses and continued – if we were lucky – until the defeat of Bar Kokhba and the fall of Jerusalem in 135 CE. Then, in a single dizzying leap, they skipped over the next eighteen hundred years until – *whoosh!* – suddenly it was 1948 and we were all back in Israel. What happened during those intervening centuries – how Jews ended up in Europe; where my own grandparents came from; why they spoke with Yiddish accents; even what happened during the Holocaust – these were stories never told. (p. 33)

Two years after I dropped out of my first Yiddish class, I resumed my study of the language. Minneapolis was not the easiest place to track down a Yiddish teacher in the summer of 1970. Our famous Talmud Torah was a citadel of Hebraism, and there had never been enough Yiddishists in town to sustain a Workmen's Circle *shule*. So, my father suggested that I study with his father a couple mornings each week.

Initially I was reluctant to do so, because I really didn't know my grandfather all that well. He was a dour, austere, introverted, and remote man of about 80; a short, barrel-chested chain smoker, who had moved to town only a year before I went away to college, after the death of my grandmother. Reverend Samuel Aaron Baker – he never used the title rabbi – was a 1912 graduate of the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and his parchment diploma, suitably framed (and signed by Solomon Schechter, Mordecai M. Kaplan, Louis Marshall, and one Irving Solomon), now adorns a wall in my apartment in California. After he came to Minneapolis he was hired by a Conservative synagogue, where he read Torah, led weekday services, and taught children their *haftarot*.

The textbook that Reverend Baker selected for our tutorials, *Der onfanger* [The Beginner], could scarcely have been further removed from *College Yiddish* in spirit, form, and content. *Der onfanger* was a set of children's primers compiled by the Yiddish educator Jacob Levin and issued by the Hebrew Publishing Company in the 1920s. My grandfather had used it decades earlier, when it was expected that boys would need to know Yiddish in order to deliver *drosches* – short exegetical sermons – at their bar mitzvahs. The first volume of *Der onfanger* begins with the sounding out of syllables; it continues with stories about the little children *Perele un Semele*; and it also includes quaint rhymes in the “House That Jack Built” (or “Chad Gadya”) vein, such as the one about the nobleman who sent a peasant into the forest to pick apples.

Later volumes of *Der onfanger* – there are about six *in toto* – include poems and tales for more advanced readers, and quite a few of them are depressing evocations of mind-bending poverty and toil on the streets and in the sweatshops of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn, written by such prominent Yiddish authors as Abraham Reisin, Leon Kobrin, and Solomon Libin. These stories are definitely not escapist fare. Dated as these volumes were by 1970 – in fact their very title, *Der onfanger*, would be considered excessively Teutonic by the guardians of Yiddish linguistic purity – they provided a solid basis for my learning process. By summer's end I was able to read a Yiddish newspaper; in my grandfather's case that paper was the formerly communist-line *Morning Freiheit* – one of three New York dailies that were still circulating at

that time.

Reverend Baker's daily reading preferences might seem paradoxical in view of his stringent personal orthodoxy and his vocation as a Hebrew teacher; I never saw him without a hat or a yarmulke, he kept strictly kosher, and he was *shomer shabos*. Of course, socialism was in the air during my grandfather's youth, and he had been raised in the school of hard knocks. That alone could not account for his diehard loyalty to the Soviet Union over the course of almost six decades. Be that as it may, to my grandfather the more mainstream, social-democratic *Forverts* was anathema.

Around that time I stumbled upon an article in *Midstream* by Ronald Sanders, whose book *The Downtown Jews* had been published a year or two earlier. In his article, entitled "On Learning Yiddish," Sanders wrote, "Yiddish is called *mamme-loshen*, and this seems to be to be a true description as far as it goes; for what little I had of Yiddish as a child was a mother-tongue for me, too, filtering through my mother from her dead parents to me in a rarefied form." His ancestral ties to Yiddish were if anything more tenuous than mine. While Sanders's mother was Jewish his father was an Englishman, a Tin Pan Alley songwriter whose best-known composition was "I'm a Little Tea Pot." Yiddish became his obsession, and Sanders studied the one academic textbook available in the 1950s, *College Yiddish*, cover to cover.

Ronald Sanders's account of his solitary efforts encouraged me to enroll, the following summer, in the intensive program that Columbia University offered in collaboration with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. My teachers were Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter, who concentrated on grammar and syntax, and David Roskies, who taught literature. Dr. Schaechter, then in his mid-40s, was a short, balding man with a thin and high reedy voice, and a pleasantly nasal intonation. He was a purist who spoke to the class in the artificial accent of *klal* (or standard) Yiddish, while at the same time mounting a single-handed crusade aimed at purging Yiddish of Anglicisms and *daytshmerizmen* (that is, 19th- and 20th-century borrowings from High German). He had a passion for neologisms, for coining Yiddish words and expressions relating to technological achievements in the realms of computer science and space travel. One of his pet peeves was the "potato Yiddish" that immigrants actually spoke, employing commonplace words from English, such as *vinde* (for "window" – the proper Yiddish word being *fentster*), *dzhab* (job, instead of *shtele*), or *sendvitsh* (sandwich) – for which he suggested substituting *shnitke*. When one of my classmates persisted in saying *sendvitsh*, Dr. Schaechter accused him of belonging to the "Anti-*Shnitke* League."

David Roskies was a 23-year-old graduate student at Brandeis University, and he had already carved out a name for himself as a co-founder of the Yiddishist youth group Yugntruf. The very precocious Dovid-Hirsh, as we addressed him, brought to our classroom an infectious enthusiasm for Yiddish poetry and prose – especially prose. Dovid-Hirsh was a product of Montreal's self-styled Yiddish aristocracy and a graduate of that city's *Folk Shule*. He later depicted the cultural milieu of his childhood as a "utopian experiment," with Yiddish as "the vehicle of national liberation." Roskies expressed the view that the Montreal Yiddish intelligentsia "succeeded in its ultimate goal. It has charged us with a maximalist vision of what's possible; it has allowed us to experience wholeness in a world devoid of wholeness; it has so conditioned us Jews that being anything else is simply unthinkable" (*An Everyday Miracle*, p.

36). Dovid-Hirsh was, in short, one of the Elect, and we were his acolytes.

There were about a dozen students in Intermediate Yiddish. Perhaps a third had Yiddish in their family backgrounds, and the course enabled them to brush up on their own *mame-loshn*. These were children of the *sheris hapleyte* (Holocaust survivors), who grew up either speaking or at least understanding Yiddish. A couple of the students were not native speakers but had attended Yiddish day- or afternoon schools in Montreal and Winnipeg. There were a few graduate students who enrolled because they needed Yiddish for their research. And then there were the seekers like me.

Although the classes that I took at Columbia were being offered for credit by an Ivy League university, the Summer Yiddish Program was essentially an enterprise in cultural indoctrination. In its early years, practically all of the students were Jewish and all of our instructors were as well, so there was an implicit assumption that we were *ba zikh*, amongst one's own kind. (This has since changed somewhat, with non-Jewish students from Central and Eastern Europe now comprising a significant proportion of enrollees.) Every afternoon we attended Yiddish sing-alongs; there were weekly showings of Yiddish films; we listened to a series of guest lectures, including one that was delivered by the famous poet Jacob Glatstein; and there was also an excursion to the nominally Yiddish-speaking Camp Hemshekh, in the Catskills.

A segue: And it came to pass that a few years later, as I was finishing up at the now-defunct library school at the University of Minnesota, I received a brochure in the mail from YIVO. It was a course catalog for the institute's academic arm, the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies. The most intriguing offering on YIVO's course roster was an Internship in Judaica Librarianship.

I was working part-time at the Hennepin County Library, in suburban Minneapolis, so I showed the brochure to our head cataloger Sanford Berman and asked for his advice. It seemed like a bit of a risk: suppose I were to pull up stakes, enroll in the internship, and then find myself stranded and unemployed in a city that the President of the United States had just told to "drop dead"? Sandy suggested that I write to YIVO's head librarian, Dina Abramowicz – who was listed as the course instructor – and ask if there might, just *might* be any job opportunities in her library. I did so and promptly received an encouraging letter in response from her assistant librarian, Bella Weinberg, who didn't make any promises but dangled the prospect of my being hired as a Yiddish cataloger after I completed the internship. So, in early January of 1976 I flew off to New York City.

Virtually the entire library operation at YIVO – public service, circulation, and technical services – was situated in a single room on the second floor of a once grand old townhouse on Fifth Avenue and Eighty-Sixth Street. The readers sat at wooden tables in the middle of the room, while the staff worked at desks along the periphery. In one corner "Leivick's tree" stood – this was a potted palm that had been bequeathed to YIVO by the famous Yiddish poet, H. Leivick, whose portrait also hung on the room's eastern wall (appropriately enough) alongside those of several other authors. Eating, drinking, and talking were not merely permitted in the reading room, they were practically *encouraged*. Even smoking was not altogether taboo, at least not if the offender was the capricious, arbitrary, and imperious stack attendant, Romanowicz, a tall,

angular, middle-aged man who was a law unto himself and whose domain was the entire third floor of the manse.

Dina was a short woman with salt-and-pepper hair who was then in her late sixties – not that she'd have admitted it. She was permanently ensconced in another corner of the library. Our first conversation opened in Yiddish – hers with a definite Russian accent, mine with a strong American accent – but we soon lapsed into English. Although Dina had attended a Yiddish gymnasium in Vilna, she was a pragmatist. Having been raised in a Russian-speaking household and graduated from a Polish-language university, she was no ideologue; language, for her, was above all a tool for communication. Sometimes she even spoke English *af tselokhes* – out of spite. For example, Dina and the Yiddish editor and literary critic Dr. Elias Schulman normally conversed in English – often in front of such committed Yiddishists as my former professor Mordkhe Schaechter. She had little patience for novices who constantly grasped for words as they tested their Yiddish on her, and she seldom hesitated to put them in their place. Dina did not suffer fools gladly.

Before I actually met Bella Weinberg, I imagined her as a short, stocky, middle-aged Central European; instead, I encountered a statuesque New Yorker in her mid-twenties. (There were in fact a couple of hefty Middle European women on the library staff, working there as clerks.) Bella supervised two catalogers, Moshe Yarmush and Zalman Alpert. Moish, a graduate of a *misnaged* yeshiva in Brooklyn, was around thirty, had jet-black hair and a striking “Assyrian” beard (as Theodor Herzl’s beard was sometimes described), and wore a knitted black *yarmulke*. Zalman was a plumpish, round-cheeked fellow in his mid-twenties, with thick glasses, a short, scraggly beard, a near-photographic memory, and a Litvak tendency to speak Yiddish with his “s”s and “sh”s merging into a single consonant (as in “*Gut sabes*”).

Steam heat in the winter was all that passed for climate control; during the stifling summer months the windows were opened and acrid breezes wafted through the reading room. An atmosphere of decaying elegance pervaded the building, which was designed and erected around 1910 by the eminent architectural firm Carrère and Hastings, specialists in Beaux-Arts structures – the most prominent of which was the Forty-Second Street library. Among its previous owners was an heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. By Vanderbilt family standards this five-story townhouse was a mere pied-à-terre; by contrast, for Yiddish-speaking scholars during the Fifties their presence in that edifice signified that they had not merely survived – they had *arrived*. A combination of relatively reasonable real estate prices, generous philanthropy, and compensation for the loss of its former quarters on Morningside Heights made it possible for YIVO to relocate to a prime Fifth Avenue address, and hang on there by the fingernails for almost four decades.

YIVO was not the only Jewish – or even the only Yiddishist – institution to take up quarters on the Upper East Side after the war. Six blocks north, the Jewish Museum set up shop in the former Warburg mansion; our estranged German Jewish cousins maintained their quarters at the Leo Baeck Institute on 73rd Street, off Lexington; the American Jewish Congress was around the corner from YIVO, on 84th Street; and several blocks away, on 78th Street just off Madison, stood the Atran House, seat of the Jewish Labor Bund and its famous archives, the *Kultur-kongres* (or Congress for Jewish Culture), the CYCO Yiddish book store, and Camp Hemshekh. Slightly before my time, it was also locally famous for its basement cafeteria, which specialized

in *heymishe makholim* – tasty Old Country dishes.

Cecile Kuznitz, who teaches history at Bard College, has written a fascinating doctoral dissertation about YIVO's origins and formative years in Vilna during the 1920s and 1930s. Were the narrative to be traced forward through its first three or four American decades one would uncover a sobering tale of institutional survival in the face of indifference and adversity. After World War II the institute was staffed by European-born Jews – refugees from Nazism and Holocaust survivors, including its research director, Max Weinreich (who arrived from Europe in 1940), the historian and bibliographer Philip Friedman, and the assistant director Chana Fryszdorf, a veteran of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s German reparation monies subsidized much of YIVO's activities. The invaluable Joint Bibliographical Series that YIVO and Yad Vashem published during those years was the most visible result of this funding.

When I showed up there as a library intern, a new Maecenas by the name of Uncle Sam had entered the picture – and not a moment too soon. But for the assistance rendered by the National Endowment for the Humanities during the Ford and Carter administrations, YIVO would surely have gone under – and one wonders if the American Jewish community would have noticed. During the 1970s and early 1980s, NEH underwrote the institute's graduate center; it offered YIVO matching funds to sustain its daily operations; it subsidized the reorganization of its extensive archival collections; and it enabled the library to hire catalogers to work their way through a previously uncataloged cache of five thousand Yiddish books, most of them the legacy of Vilna's celebrated Strashun Library. A perfunctory level of fundraising and a Herculean effort in creative bookkeeping ensured that grant funds were ostensibly matched.

One of the things that immediately struck me was that practically an entire generation was missing from the ranks of staff and clientele at YIVO. The graduate students and a goodly number of employees were in their twenties and early thirties, and almost everyone else – board of directors, administrators, research scholars, custodians, researchers – were in their sixties and up. With a few notable exceptions, there was practically no one in between the two dominant age groups. The generational divide was exacerbated by a cultural chasm between the American-born youth and our European-born elders. When the time came for a change in the institute's leadership (especially its lay leadership) in the 1980s, the transition proved to be quite difficult.

During the course of my semester-long internship I was taught the essentials of descriptive cataloging, chain indexing, and the Universal Decimal and Scholem classifications. These skills provided the excellent preparation that I would have needed had I subsequently moved on to a job as a cataloger at the Jewish National and University Library, in Jerusalem. Though the skills were required for cataloging in the YIVO library's four separate author-title catalogs and its numerically classified subject catalog, they were not directly transferable to positions in other North American libraries. Even so, however idiosyncratic it may have been, the training that I received under Dina's and Bella's tutelage was intellectually demanding and analytically rigorous.

During my internship I also put in a few hours each week as a microfilm camera operator,

working under the supervision of one of YIVO's most colorful and tragic personalities, Zosa Szajkowski, pen name of Szajko Frydman. Szajkowski was a ruddy-faced and temperamental man in his middle sixties, with gray hair and a bulbous nose. A Polish Jew and a communist in his youth, he drifted to France during the Thirties, and enlisted in the Foreign Legion when war was declared in September 1939. Before the war he was befriended by Elias Tcherikower, the head of YIVO's Historical Section, who at that point was living in Paris. Tcherikower presided over a massive archive documenting the pogroms that took place in the Ukraine during the period of the revolution and civil war, and Szajkowski played a critical role in hiding the archive during the war, and recovering and sending it to YIVO's reconstituted headquarters in New York afterwards, at which point he was wearing the uniform of an American Army paratrooper. He also sent over several other significant archival collections from France, as a result of which he was declared *persona non grata* by that country's postwar government. The documents that I microfilmed ran the gamut from horrifying photographs of Jewish pogrom victims to letters from the Parisian electric company, dunning Tcherikower for his unpaid bills.

My position as Yiddish cataloger was funded by one of the NEH grants. With the expansion of the library staff we needed some extra workspace, so shelves were constructed in the former grand ballroom adjacent to the reading room, and cataloging and technical services moved behind the scenes. (Half of the ballroom was also devoted to archival processing.) My desk, situated under a massive crystal chandelier, placed me in a location of some physical peril. The chandelier – whose crystals were rarely cleaned and whose bulbs were seldom replaced after they burned out – served as the main source of artificial illumination in the new workroom.

Cataloging a large collection of Yiddish books exposed me day-in-day-out to a substantial cross-section of the printed legacy in that language. That is when I first ran across a book of poems containing woodcuts by the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and discovered the brilliant parodies of *Der Tunkeler*. I also learned a lot about what Polish Jews were actually reading during the 1930s when I cataloged dozens of *Groshn-bibliotek* booklets by Kopl Dua and his many alter egos. (My all-time favorite title in that series is *Geniale sifilitiker*, about the great geniuses of Europe who, incidentally, were afflicted with venereal disease.)

Every now and again Dina sent me on errands to the CYCO bookshop, in the Atran House on East 78th Street, to see if any new Yiddish books had arrived lately. The shop's proprietor was Yankl Gutkowitz, a laconic man in his late sixties who had disheveled brown hair and a glass eye that was a trophy of his stint in the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War. Gutkowitz returned to Poland, where he remained until the anti-Semitic purges of 1968 sent him and thousands of his fellow Polish Jews packing. When he came to New York he was given a sinecure by CYCO, and was doubtless grateful to be surrounded by Yiddish books and Yiddish-speaking *landslayt*. Whenever I dropped by he was inevitably on the phone, often chatting (in his falsetto voice) with that most reclusive of Yiddish authors, his fellow Vilner, Chaim Grade.

In those days CYCO was the major North American supplier of new and older Yiddish books to the research library market.^[2] Between 100 and 125 Yiddish books were coming out annually. Yiddish publishing was concentrated in Israel, even as the authors themselves were scattered throughout the Diaspora as well as in Israel proper. Elsewhere I have described the quarter-century after 1945 as a "Silver Age" of Yiddish literature and publishing (*The Pakn-Treger*,

Spring 2006, p. 39). When I began working at YIVO in the mid-1970s, that era had already passed, and the attrition of authors and readers was palpable. Even so, three of the greatest figures in modern Yiddish literature were still active, and their books and the journals that they wrote for were available in the CYCO bookshop. Grade had just published his final book, *Der shtumer minyen*, in New York; Abraham Sutzkever continued to edit the outstanding literary journal *Di goldene keyt* in Tel Aviv; and Isaac Bashevis Singer churned out story after story for the daily *Forverts*.

Another task that Dina delegated to me was the compilation of an annotated list of new Yiddish books, for the *Jewish Book Annual*. This list had appeared in the *Annual* in one form or another since the 1940s, and Dina had produced it for the previous fifteen to twenty years. One of the Vilna YIVO's research arms, back in the 1920s, was its *Bibliografishe tsentrale*, or Bibliographical Office. The only published volume of its *Bibliografishe yorbikher* listed new Yiddish publications, both books and articles, arranged by subjects according to the Universal Decimal Classification. The New York YIVO carried on this function, both via the series of Holocaust bibliographies that it produced jointly with Yad Vashem, and through these lists of new Yiddish books that its librarians contributed to the *Jewish Book Annual*. And thus began my twenty-three-year service as the "Yiddish National Bibliographer."

The YIVO library didn't exactly have a budget for new books, and we often attempted to acquire them by flattering their authors, telling them how honored they should feel by having their works included in our prestigious library's collections – in other words, we "schnorred" them. Of course, there were occasions when we had no alternative but to order books (in a variety of languages) from such patient and forgiving suppliers as CYCO, Four Continents, Sepher-Hermon, Bloch, or Mary Rosenberg. The turn-around time for payment usually stretched for months on end. Such was occasionally the case with our paychecks as well.

About a year after I took on my assignment for the *Book Annual* the library received a shipment of new Yiddish children's books published in Jerusalem and Williamsburgh (Brooklyn, that is, not Virginia). In addition to a series of *shpanende ertseylungen* – suspense-filled tales about Hasidic rebbes – by the pseudonymous Menahem-Mendl, this shipment included textbooks for beginners, picture books, even a rudimentary Yiddish dictionary for classroom use. It was my introduction to the emerging genre of Yiddish publications aimed at *Haredi* readers – and young readers, at that – and I decided to write an article about them for the Yiddish monthly *Afn shvel* [On the Threshold], which my former teacher Mordkhe Schaechter edited.

After the article appeared in *Afn shvel*, whenever I encountered the writer Shimshon Apter, one of the YIVO library's regulars, he would express his excitement at the glimmer of *hemshekh* – continuity – that a rising generation of Yiddish speakers offered. Never mind that the writings of Apter and his cohort would be considered *treyf-posl* by the teachers of *Haredi* youth. Yet, who knows: perhaps one day a talented lamb that has strayed from the Hasidic flock will come across a copy of *Di Praysingers* or another of Apter's novels, and be inspired to become not merely a reader, but a writer of fine Yiddish fiction or poetry. Yiddish literature might yet write its own epilogue.

The Yiddish writers who were habitués of the YIVO library in those years were a colorful lot.

With a couple of exceptions, I observed most of them from a distance; they interacted mainly with Dina. I have already mentioned Dr. Elias Schulman. There was an air of dignified formality about him; he was invariably clad in a loose-fitting gray woolen business suit, as befitted his position as one of the last in a century-long line of Yiddish literary scholars, critics, and editors. With his thinning and scraggly white hair, tall forehead, bulbous nose, ample lips, and double or triple chin, there was something unintentionally droll about his appearance. In addition, he somehow managed to convey an air of bohemianism, perhaps because he was married to a painter and lived in what came to be known as the Flatiron District, next to Greenwich Village. A regular contributor to the *Forverts* newspaper, Dr. Schulman was also the editor of the monthly journal *Der veker* [The Watchman], which was published by an American Jewish socialist organization that was allied with but distinct from the more European-oriented Bund. He once confided in me his philosophy as a book critic. If he didn't have anything positive to say about a new book he wouldn't publish a review of it. This reflected a generosity of spirit combined with an acute awareness of the fishbowl environment in which Yiddish writers, critics, and readers functioned.

The writer who made the most formidable impression was the journalist S. L. Shneiderman, who continued to write for the *Forverts* well into the 1990s. A graduate of Warsaw University, Shneiderman was a crusty, sharp-tongued, pugnacious, and formidable presence by any stretch of the imagination. He applied his acute analytical and polemical skills in articles about contemporary Eastern European – especially Polish and Soviet – politics. In addition he was the author of the classic postwar travelogue *Ven di Vaysl hot geredt Yidish*, which was translated into English as *The River Remembers*. He ruffled many a feather, and refused to be troubled by that fact.

And every so often a diminutive, coquettish, delicate, and strikingly beautiful woman would drop by the library to chat with Dina. This was the poet Esther Shumiatcher, then approaching eighty. She and her late husband, the playwright Peretz Hirschbein – who traveled together to the four corners of the earth (and then wrote about it) – could at one time, justifiably, have been described as the Glamour Couple of American Yiddish letters.

YIVO also had its own stable of European-born, Yiddish-speaking writers. Szajkowski, whom I have already mentioned, was an autodidact – and it showed in his unwieldy books, which bore such titles as *Jews, Wars, and Communism*, and *Jews in the French Foreign Legion*.^[3] Then there were Dr. Shlomo Noble, an erudite and pleasant, if somewhat pedantic Judaic scholar of the old school who earlier in life had applied his yeshiva training to service as a Reform rabbi^[4], and Dr. Isaiah Trunk, author of the award-winning English-language book *Judenrat*, which was based on a study that he made of the Lodz ghetto.

One of the expressions that I have more than occasionally encountered in Yiddish texts is “*der letster Mohikaner*,” the last of the Mohicans. That this image coming straight out of James Fenimore Cooper appealed to some modern Yiddish authors ought to come as no surprise. These were after all individuals whose children and grandchildren spoke languages other than their own *mame-loshn*, and who directly or indirectly bore witness to the destruction of their European homes. There were quite a number of these “Mohicans” haunting the halls of the Vanderbilt

YIVO.

These reminiscences would be incomplete without mention of what people closer to my age were up to – and their experiences and accomplishments may serve as a foil to our antecedents' profound pessimism.

The Max Weinreich Center was the academic arm of YIVO, established in 1969 and accredited as a non-degree-granting graduate center. It offered courses on its own, credits for courses taught at affiliated universities, and fellowships to students enrolled in various graduate programs in the New York area and farther afield. The Acting Dean of the Weinreich Center – to the best of my recollection there was never a Dean *per se* – was Prof. Marvin (Mikhl) Herzog, of Columbia's Linguistics Department.

In one of the opening scenes of the Mike Nichols film *The Graduate*, the Dustin Hoffman character Benjamin is given a single word of advice: "Plastics!" Were the script to be rewritten and the setting moved to the Max Weinreich Center's offices and classroom on the fourth floor of the YIVO mansion, the motto would have to be: "Ethnography!" The Weinreich Center's students and hangers-on enthusiastically embraced the recovery of dormant and endangered folkways, speech patterns, music, and objects – and the nurturing of new and innovative forms of cultural expression deriving from this fieldwork. A steady stream of distinguished future university professors, museum curators, filmmakers, and performers passed through the Center during the Seventies and early Eighties. Many of them found their mentor in Prof. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (or "BKG"), a young folklorist who trained at Indiana University and taught then at the University of Pennsylvania. (Now she is at New York University.)

When I first met BKG, she and Dr. Lucjan Dobroszycki were preparing the landmark photo exhibit on Polish Jewry (featuring pictures from YIVO's photo archives), "Image before My Eyes," at the Jewish Museum. "Image" was intended as a corrective to the elegiac representation of Eastern European Jewish life, as conveyed by Roman Vishniac in his prewar photography. It was also intended as a counterweight to the tendency to view Polish Jewry through the prism of Holocaust awareness. "Image" labored under the additional burden imposed by the stereotypes perpetuated by the Broadway musical and Hollywood film "Fiddler on the Roof" – and for that matter, the representation of the Old Country in such older Yiddish films as "Green Fields" and "The Dybbuk." Among other things, "Image before My Eyes" revealed that Jewish parents in Vilna sent their children to Montessori schools and that the Jews of Chelm (yes, *that* Chelm) marched in May Day parades. A magnificent book edited by BKG and Dr. Dobroszycki accompanied the exhibit, and a couple years later it was joined by a documentary film directed by Josh Waletzky.

Music was in the air. A young banjo player named Henry Sapoznik noticed the old 78s that were accumulating in the hallways, and cajoled someone into giving him an office that served as a lab where these records were eventually transferred to tape (and later on, to CD). Later, Henry founded a weeklong winter retreat under YIVO's sponsorship, the Yiddish Folk Arts Institute, a.k.a. KlezKamp. Two fellow members of the pioneering klezmer band Kapelye – Josh Waletzky, and Michael Alpert – joined him on staff, along with the singer Adrienne Cooper. They were followed a few years later by two founding members of the Klezmatics, Alicia

Svigals and Lorin Sklamberg.[\[5\]](#)

When I was invited to deliver this year's Feinsein Lecture I naturally had to decide upon a topic and a title. The one that I chose connects to a long-ago conversation that I had with a friend of my parents, an art historian named Rena Neumann Coen, following my summer at Columbia. After listening to my saga, she told me that I really ought to do something with my Yiddish studies. There might even be some kind of *takhlis* to it. After all, as she put it – and these were her precise words: “You’re getting in on the ground floor.”[\[6\]](#)

Choosing a subtitle for this lecture was a little more difficult, however. Initially I went with the rather pretentious “Observations of a ‘Postvernacular’ Yiddish Librarian.” This took a leaf from Jeffrey Shandler, who in his book *Adventures in Yiddishland* writes about the radical turn that Yiddish has taken since World War II. “In semiotic terms,” he writes, “the language’s primary level of significance – that is, its instrumental value as a vehicle for communicating information, opinions, feelings, ideas – is narrowing in scope.” In other words, Yiddish is for the most part no longer used as a vehicle for everyday communication.

At the same time its secondary, or meta-level of signification – the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it – is expanding. This privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish over its primary level constitutes a distinctive mode of engagement with the language that I term *postvernacular* Yiddish. (p. 4)

As examples of this shift, Shandler discusses (among other things) board games, cartoons, collectibles, literary translations, language courses, cultural festivals, and of course klezmer music.

Upon reflection, as intense as my commitment to Yiddish culture has been, it is nevertheless very much something that I self-consciously cultivated. Indeed, there are definitely moments when I think of myself, basically, as a Yiddish impersonator. As long as I worked in places like YIVO, in the 1970s, or the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, in the 1980s, I interacted with individuals for whom Yiddish was their everyday vernacular. In effect, I had the rare privilege of spending my waking hours in two of the last living, breathing outposts of pre-1939 Yiddishland. Now I have little choice but to follow developments in contemporary Yiddishland (or post-Yiddishland) from afar.

Is Yiddish doomed? There has been a perennial argument about this since Yiddish emerged as a language of modernity. Leaving aside the tens of thousands of Yiddish-speaking Hasidim who faithfully observe the biblical commandment, *P’ru u-r’vu* – Be fruitful and multiply – and taking into account Jeffrey Shandler’s reframing of the discussion, I have come to view both the question itself and the debate that it engenders as essentially sterile and unproductive – but that won’t stop the discussion from continuing, *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseam*.

In the past year or two alone there has been a stream of serious books devoted to Yiddish, and they clearly are finding an audience. Among them are *Outwitting History*, the memoir by Aaron Lansky; *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish*, by the gifted linguistic scholar Dovid Katz; the reissue of the English translation of Max Weinreich’s *History of the Yiddish Language*

(due out in Summer 2006); the inimitably titled *Born to Kvetch*, by Michael Wex; and of course *Adventures in Yiddishland*. Plus, as Shandler points out in his book, “of the approximately two hundred doctoral dissertations and masters’ theses written in North American universities that deal in some way with Yiddish, about half were completed since 1990; only two were written before World War II” (p. 2). The authors of most of those post-1990 dissertations are a generation my junior.

When I began to study Yiddish I felt that, like the writers whom I would meet a few years later in the YIVO library, I too was one of the “*letste Mohikaner*.” With the benefit of hindsight, though – and bearing in mind Rena Neumann Coen’s wise observation – I see that, instead, I was one of the first to join a brand new tribe of *Mohikaner* – the tribe of “Yiddish impersonators.” This tribe continues to grow, and I’m both confident and relieved to know that many more of these *Mohikaner* will follow in my footsteps.

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1. I wish to express my thanks to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, for sponsoring the Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Memorial Lecture series at the annual conventions of the Association of Jewish Libraries. In addition, I would like to thank David Gilner, President of the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (CARLJS), for inviting me to serve as the Feinstein Lecturer for 2006. At this juncture I find myself in between major research and bibliographical projects, and I am not sure what my next one will turn out to be. Also, for personal reasons, I have been looking inward during the past year or so. These factors explain the focus of this lecture, which takes the form of a series of reminiscences about my longstanding interest in and connections to Yiddish, and about my early years as a librarian. The tale that I have to tell here involves no great accomplishments or deeds of heroism; nevertheless, I offer these reflections in the hope that the reader will find them of interest.

2. In addition to CYCO, Mrs. Joseph Foxman (whose late husband once worked in the YIVO library's book stacks) set up a small business and sold Yiddish books from her Ocean Parkway apartment. Among her faithful institutional customers was The New York Public Library's Jewish Division. Her son, Abraham Foxman, heads the Anti-Defamation League.

3. These books are in English; the most extended study that Szajkowski wrote in Yiddish was *Dos loshn fun di Yidn in di arba kehiles fun Komta-Venesen* (added title: *The Language of the Jews in the Four Communities of Comtat Venaisin*) (New York: YIVO, 1948).

4. In November 2005, YIVO and The Ohio State University co-sponsored a conference, "Looking Backward, Looking Forward," commemorating the centenary of Dr. Noble's birth. (For details, see the *YIVO News = Yedies fun YIVO*, no. 201 [Spring 2006], pp. 14-15.) He was also the subject of a book-length series of interviews with the ethnographer Jonathan Boyarin: *A Storyteller's Worlds: The Education of Shlomo Noble in Europe and America* (1994).

5. I wrote an article about YIVO for *The U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D™ Librarian* in 1990, and in it I calculated that performers with no fewer than three klezmer bands were represented on YIVO's

staff.

6. Meanwhile, Rena Coen's two teenaged sons Joel and Ethan were "getting in on *their* ground floor" by using a Super 8 camera to shoot home movies in suburban Minneapolis. These youthful experiments eventually led to fame and fortune, as a glance at their filmography reveals: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001054/>.