MAX WEINREICH (1894–1969): THE SCHOLARSHIP OF YIDDISH

by LUCY S. DAWIDOWICZ

MAX WEINREICH died on January 29, 1969, and his death brought to a sad close the era of East European Jewish scholarship, uniquely associated with Yiddish, the language of East European Jews. A founder of the Yiddish Scientific Institute—YIVO (now called YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), Weinreich was its chief architect, animating spirit, and standardbearer. As YIVO's head, first in Poland and then in America, he, more than any other man or institution, succeeded in gaining for Yiddish prestige and status it had never before enjoyed.

A distinguished linguist in the international community of linguists, he did not choose the prestigious academic career that his professors at the University of St. Petersburg had predicted for him, their most outstanding student. Instead he chose to associate himself with Yiddish. It became his life's goal to fashion from this folk language a refined and supple instrument, a tongue fit for learned discourse, and to win prestige for it among Jews and non-Jews. This he achieved.

Early Life

His life story reflects the history of upheaval and change of the age into which he was thrust. Max Weinreich was born April 22, 1894, into a middle-class merchant family in Goldingen (now Kuldiga), Latvia, a town of ten thousand, a quarter of them Jews. Like most Jews influenced by the prevailing German culture of that region, the former Baltic duchy of Courland, his family were lukewarm in religious observances and preferred German to Yiddish. His first school was a *heder,* though a somewhat secularized one. His parents, ambitious for their precocious youngest of ten, enrolled him, at the age of nine, in a *gymnasium* (high school), attended mostly by children of Baltic German nobility and Latvian gentry. In 1908, after five years in this upper-class *gymnasium,* with a bare handful of Jewish pupils, he withdrew because of its anti-

semitism. He continued his studies in a private Jewish *gymnasium* in Dvinsk (now Daugavpils), Latvia. When he was about twelve, he became friends with a boy who was a member of the Kleyner Bund (Junior Jewish Socialist Bund). That friendship was to affect the future course of his life. Perhaps the repressive and intolerant atmosphere in the *gymnasium* made him especially receptive to the warm friendship of a lower-class Jewish child. Perhaps it was the spirit of the times.

Tsarist Russia was in revolutionary ferment and the great wave of demonstrations and strikes of 1905 that swept Russia reached the Baltic cities and towns. Goldingen, too, witnessed a stormy demonstration in January 1905 in which the Bund took a leading role. The exhilaration of the revolution and its consequent brutal suppression affected the young Weinreich and drew him into the Junior Bund. A brilliant child, fluent in Russian and German, he began now to learn from his young comrades, besides revolution and conspiratorial techniques, Yiddish too, the language of the common people. At thirteen he began his journalistic career as correspondent for a Bundist Yiddish daily in Vilna. At fifteen, his first Yiddish translations of European literature were published and at sixteen his first articles on Yiddish.

Distinctly and distinctively Max Weinreich's identity began to be shaped in his youth. The scope of his interests was to grow and expand, his ideas to mature and deepen. Politics—the Bund, that is—brought him to Yiddish, but Yiddish eventually displaced politics in his scale of values.

At eighteen Weinreich entered the University of St. Petersburg, where his scholastic brilliance made him something of a cynosure. Yet he shared his passion for linguistics with politics. The spirit of revolution was alive at the university: Weinreich joined a Bundist student circle and wrote for Bundist publications. After the Bolshevik revolution of November 1917, he left St. Petersburg and moved to Vilna, where he edited a Bundist daily. When the war was over, Weinreich went to Germany to continue his studies. In 1923 he received his doctorate from the University of Marburg for a dissertation on the history of Yiddish linguistic studies. He returned to Vilna, where he had married Regina Szabad, of a distinguished Jewish family.

In Vilna

In 1923 some 56,000 Jews lived in Vilna, about one third of the city's population. Despite the havoc of World War I, the flight and death of thousands of Jews, the succession of governments, and finally the cap-

ture and forcible incorporation of the ancient capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania into the new republic of Poland, the Jewish community in Vilna remained intensely and vibrantly Jewish, as it had always been. Napoleon, it is said, dubbed Vilna "the Jerusalem of Lithuania" (though Weinreich thought the epithet had originated in the seventeenth century). Vilna was the historic citadel of rabbinic Judaism, the seat of Rabbi Elijah, the Vilna Gaon; for 150 years the home of the famous Romm press, printers and publishers of the Talmud and other rabbinic and secular tomes. But Vilna was also a center of Jewish secularity, a stronghold of the Haskalah and Hebrew revival. It was the birthplace of the Jewish labor movement and it early became a metropolis for Yiddish and its literature, press, theater, and school system.

In this Vilna Max Weinreich began his adulthood. He taught Yiddish language and literature at the Yiddish Teachers Seminary, was an editor of Vilna's Yiddish daily *Der Tog* and a correspondent of the New York *Jewish Daily Forward* (to which he remained a regular contributor till his last years). He was active in educational and communal institutions.

In 1924 he received from Nahum Shtif, a Yiddish linguist then living in Berlin, a pamphlet proposing the establishment of a Yiddish academy. Such an academy would be a center for research and study in Yiddish linguistics and literature, Jewish history, social studies and pedagogy; it could also serve as the authority for standardizing Yiddish—usage, grammar, spelling. A Yiddish academy, Shtif hoped, through the Yiddish school system, Yiddish press, and other cultural institutions whose medium was Yiddish, could systematically diffuse the new scholarship being produced in Yiddish. The academy would thus improve the quality of Jewish cultural life and enlarge the community of educated Yiddish-speaking Jews. These, in turn, would become consumers of the academy's high scholarship and culture.

Ideas for Jewish intellectual renewal were widespread in Berlin, then a haven for Jewish writers, scholars, and journalists who had fled Russia and Poland. But Berlin could not fulfill Shtif's plan. Vilna could—and did—because of Max Weinreich's initiative, determination, and passion. Yiddish was a socio-political reality in Vilna and Weinreich held strategic positions, on the Yiddish Teachers' Seminary faculty and as chairman of Vilna's Central Jewish Education Committee. He succeeded in winning community support for a Yiddish research institute. In 1925 YIVO was established, organized in four research sections: 1) Yiddish linguis-

tics, literature and folklore; 2) history; 3) economics and statistics; and 4) psychology and education.

Concept of Jewish Scholarship

YIVO's largest single asset was Weinreich's will power—his strong-mindedness and his capacity to work for what he believed. That was a psychological, perhaps even a metabolic, characteristic. Determination, he held, could move worlds, could make something out of nothing. He used his will power to realize a vision of scholarship in the service of the Jewish people. His youthful passion for politics was replaced, as he grew older, with a passion for scholarship. He envisaged the YIVO as a vital center that would knit the work of individual scholars together with the needs of the Jewish community. Weinreich's concept of scholarship to clarify the Jewish community's socio-cultural needs and serve them inaugurated a new phase in modern Jewish scholarship.

For over a hundred years secular Jewish scholarship had been shaped by the apologetic concepts underlying the Wissenschaft des Judentums. When Leopold Zunz and his friends founded the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden in 1819 to cultivate and disseminate knowledge of Judaism and Jewish culture with contemporary methods of scholarship, they wanted to demonstrate that the cultural level of the Jews was not inferior to that of Germans. That would prove that Jews deserved to be emancipated. Scholarship was a means to a political and social end. These scholars were not convinced of the viability of Jewish existence or of Jewish culture: most of the Verein's members abandoned Judaism within a few years. Only Zunz retained his commitment to Jewish scholarship as a way to preserve the past of a culture—which he doubted had a future.

In the mid-nineteenth century Wissenschaft des Judentums was reorganized and continued under a variety of auspices into the beginning of the twentieth century. Though Jewish scholars today are less likely than those of the immediately preceding generations to belittle its accomplishments, many of the criticisms leveled at Wissenschaft des Judentums for the narrowness of its conceptualization and scope were justified. It focused on Judaism, rather than the flesh-and-blood reality of the Jewish people, and its subject matter was usually antiquarian. Its orientation remained basically apologetic, in response to the so-called "scientific" antisemitism of Treitschke, Rohling, and LaGarde, and to the biblical scholarship of Wellhausen and his disciples. Furthermore,

East European Jews, who then constituted two thirds of the world Jewish population, seldom figured in the elitist scholarship of Wissenschaft des Judentums, or, if they did, it was as targets of contempt and derogation.

The first East European Jewish scholarly group came into being in 1891 when young Jewish lawyers in St. Petersburg, under the influence of Simon Dubnow's epoch-making booklet *On Studying the History of the Russian Jews and Establishing a Russian Jewish Historical Society,* formed the Jewish Historical Ethnographic Commission. Like the institutions of Wissenschaft des Judentums, the Commission was elitist, its subject matter somewhat antiquarian, and its approach apologetic. Jewish historical societies were then being formed in Europe and the United States largely for apologetic purposes—to demonstrate the antiquity of Jewish settlement in those countries and testify to Jewish loyalty and patriotism.

If Wissenschaft des Judentums began and long continued as an instrument to bring German Jews political emancipation, Weinreich conceived the YIVO as the instrument to bring cultural emancipation to Yiddish-speaking Jews. On YIVO's tenth anniversary he said:

> Our contribution in the struggle of the common Jewish people . for their cultural emancipation can be expressed on one foot, in a few numbered sentences: We want to fathom Jewish life with the methods of modern scholarship and, further, whatever modern scholarship brings to light, we want to bring back to the Jewish masses.
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> "Jewish life" means *all* Jewish life, its present as well as its past. This must be stressed, for it is the mark distinguishing our institution from those Judaistic institutes—with all due respect to them—which the German Jewish scholars started putting up and which their followers in other countries copied. For us the present is not less important than the past; for us the distant past is not rated more highly than the recent past; for us all study of the past is mainly a means of better understanding the present. The YIVO investigates all aspects of Jewish life—not only rabbis, scholars and writers, but also the social life of the common people; not only economic life, but also the language, the literature, the mind and spirit of the Jews.

Max Weinreich was a twentieth-century enlightener, a neo-*maskil.* He wanted to improve and uplift the East European Jewish community. He proposed to do this through research and study, by applying Western methods of critical scholarship to East European Jewish history, Yiddish language, literature, and culture. Research and study were to be of the highest scholarly quality, but were also to serve the intellectual needs of Jews, increase their self-understanding, give them intellectual fortifica-

tion against antisemitism and self-depreciation, and help them develop a healthy sense of self-esteem.

The most concrete way to do this was to use scholarship to raise the social and intellectual prestige of Yiddish and, consequently, of its speakers. On one of his trips abroad, Weinreich noted that in the ship's first-class accommodations, despite the many Jewish travellers, Yiddish was not seen or heard. In second class, he saw Yiddish signs and heard Yiddish spoken aloud. That, for him, symbolized the status of Yiddish: it was recognized only as second-class. Weinreich wanted Yiddish to be first-class and he intended to do that by making Yiddish the language of cultivated men, a medium for discourse on the most abstruse, complex, and subtle subjects in all disciplines.

The standardization of Yiddish, with normative usage, grammar, and spelling, was one of his ambitions. Without an authoritative academy to set standards and without a scholarly tradition in secular Jewish matters, Yiddish spelling had been subject to the arbitrariness of its users. Indeed, the Jewish community's physical and political dispersal discouraged uniform usage. After years of consultations with scholars, writers, journalists, and teachers throughout Europe and in the United States, the YIVO adopted a set of orthographic rules in 1936. These, somewhat modified after a consultative conference with the Central Yiddish School Organization in Poland (Cysho), were published early in 1937 and instituted in all YIVO and Cysho publications and taught in all Cysho schools. Weinreich hoped that Jewish writers and publishers would voluntarily submit to the discipline of these rules and accept YIVO's authority. Until his last days he was active in this effort.

Diversity

He was a true polymath, and no field of scholarship was alien to him—above all, languages and linguistics. He wrote on erudite, often recondite, subjects, which only a handful of scholars could appreciate. A dedicated practitioner of high scholarship, he nevertheless also popularized. He translated many literary and scholarly works into Yiddish. He edited an immense number of works about linguistics, language, and style; on the history of literature, on folklore, on history and social psychology. His productivity and breadth of interest are reflected in the bibliography of his writings: 377 items, including books, pamphlets, studies, book

reviews, newspaper articles, and translations.* Before he was forty, he had published several books on Yiddish grammar and orthography; had edited three volumes of linguistic studies published by YIVO, and was an editor of *YIVO-Bleter,* a bimonthly scholarly journal that the YIVO initiated in 1931.

In 1932 Weinreich left Vilna for Yale University, where he spent two years as a Rockefeller Foundation fellow at the International Seminar on the Impact of Culture on Personality. At a time of life when most men settle into a comfortable routine or move ahead in predefined paths, Max Weinreich turned his innovative energy in a new direction. In pursuit of new knowledge, he went to Vienna in 1934, to study with the psychoanalyst Dr. Sigmund Bernfeld, a pupil and disciple of Freud. Psychoanalysis offered dazzling possibilities for studying the impact of culture on personality and for expanding the therapeutic function of research.

At Weinreich's initiative the YIVO gathered, through competitions, over 300 autobiographies written by young Jews. These provided the raw data for his path-breaking book, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* ["The Way to Our Youth: Elements, Methods, and Problems of Jewish Youth Research"] (Vilna: YIVO, 1935). In this work Weinreich applied the advanced methodologies of diverse disciplines—psychoanalysis, social psychology, anthropology, statistics—to illuminate the problems of Jewish youth growing up in a society that legitimated antisemitism. It was especially after this time that Weinreich, when speaking of the social uses of research for the Jewish community, also stressed this psychological component: Jews needed research and study to help them learn self-esteem, to help heal the socio-psychological wounds inflicted by society on personality, to create whole individuals and whole Jews.

In 1935 the YIVO inaugurated its research-training program (*aspirantur*), to train Jewish researchers and scholars. Weinreich believed that, though the universities should provide the basic academic training that an aspiring researcher required, only a Jewish institution, steeped in Jewish learning, could provide the right training for Jewish studies. In Poland, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Jews were subjected to a *numerus clausus* in the universities. Even those admitted had little opportunity for advanced Jewish studies. At the University of Warsaw, Jewish

* Leybl Kahn, "Bibliography of Max Weinreich's Writings," in *For Max Weinreich on His Seventieth Birthday: Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature and Society* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), p. 527.

students, if they wished, could study ancient Jewish history and Hebrew with Professor Moses Schorr or modern Jewish history with Professor Maier Balaban. The Institute of Judaic Studies in Warsaw, founded by Professor Schorr, also provided facilities for Jewish scholarship. Nevertheless, Weinreich's plan for *aspirantur* was unique. He was not satisfied only to train university graduates for Jewish research by equipping them with a critical approach and methodological tools, but he wanted to imbue them with a sense of the social purpose of scholarship. Furthermore, in the *aspirantur* young scholars could learn from each other, developing an interdisciplinary outlook and overview, beyond the confines of their own specialization.

The *aspirantur* existed for only three years in Poland. In America, Weinreich again turned his attention to a center for training Jewish scholars. His last great institutional project was the YIVO Center for Advanced Jewish Studies, still in the planning stage.

In New York

In the summer of 1939 Weinreich and his older son Uriel left Vilna to attend the International Conference of Linguistics in Brussels. The outbreak of the war prevented their return home. Early in 1940 they arrived in New York and were shortly thereafter joined by the rest of the family.

Weinreich undertook to continue in New York what he had begun in Vilna, despite the gloomy prognosis about America's inhospitality to foreign tongues and foreign-language cultures. At the annual YIVO conference in 1941, he told his American audience about the magic of will power. Inertia alone did not account for the success of Yiddish in Poland. Yiddish there had benefited from propulsion and thrust: "The question is not one of numbers or place. The question is: Do we have enough vitality, enough resistance?" Two years later, in the midst of the greatest catastrophe the Jews ever endured—though its full dimensions were yet unknown—he returned to this theme: "All that is required is will power. The responsibility of every communal institution is to strengthen the will of its people." The responsibility to survive became a moral one: "We have an obligation to ourselves, an obligation to our overseas brothers and sisters in the grip of the hangman, an obligation for the entire future of the Jewish people."

If the fate of the Jews under German occupation obsessed him, the role that German scholars and German scholarship played in the

methodical murder of six million Jews tormented him. For him, scholarship had been an instrument for Jewish survival, but the Germans had turned it into a tool for Jewish death. This perversion of scholarship led him to write *Hitler's Professors* (New York: YIVO, 1946), a report on the part of German scholarship in Germany's crimes against the Jewish people—still another of his innovative accomplishments.

In the last two decades of his life Weinreich worked on his *History of the Yiddish Language,* a monumental work that he had virtually completed just before his death. Largely linguistic—i.e., employing the methodology of the science of language—Weinreich's history is no narrow specialist's book. He used linguistics to illuminate the history of Ashkenazi Jewry, to illustrate the rise and flowering of Ashkenazi Jewish culture, and to explore the socio-cultural relations between Jews and non-Jews. His wide-ranging scholarship and interdisciplinary approach, which had become hallmarks of his craft, found their consummation in this massive work, his monument to Ashkenazi Jewry. Ashkenaz, in Weinreich's definition, was the Jewish community, with its language, literature, and culture, which was born some 1,100 years ago in the Middle Rhine-Moselle territory and, in the course of centuries, slowly moved eastward. Until 1500 its metropolises were in Central Europe: Mayence, Worms, Ratisbon, Prague. Thereafter Ashkenaz shifted to Eastern Europe: Cracow, Lublin, Mezbizh, Vilna, and Warsaw. Consequently, as Weinreich put it, Ashkenaz became "freed of its territorial connotations; geography, as it were, has been transformed into history." The Yiddish language was the most striking result of the encounters between Jewish culture and the coterritorial non-Jewish cultures in the Ashkenazi community's eastward migration.

Yiddish, Weinreich writes, came into being as the linguistic vehicle of a community set apart from the outside world by its religion:

> The principal cultural determinant in the history of Yiddish is the fact that Ashkenazic Jewry came into existence as a community defined by *yi'dishkayt* [Judaism]. On the basis of evidence uncovered it can be firmly stated that *yi'dishkayt* shaped not only the conceptual world of the Ashkenazic community but its language as well. Moreover, although Yiddish never was a language of religious expression only and, in recent centuries, in growing measure has become a medium of "secular" endeavors, too, the master pattern of Yiddish as the language of a community defined by *yi'dishkayt* has not changed.*

* Max Weinreich, "*Yidishkayt* and Yiddish," in *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume,* New York, 1953.

Ashkenazi culture rested on Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism, but not on the dichotomy sacred/profane. Weinreich rectified the popular misconception that relegated to Yiddish merely the expression of secular Jewish life. Not so, Weinreich proved abundantly, reclaiming for Yiddish a central place in traditional Jewish culture. Historically, the difference developed between Hebrew as the language of recording and Yiddish as the vernacular. In time, however, Yiddish too became the language of recording, even for the sacred system. Witness *Tsene Urene,* the "women's Bible," and the Yiddish prayer books designed for women and men unlearned in Hebrew.

In "Ashkenaz: The Era of Yiddish in Jewish History," a paper read at a YIVO conference in 1951, Weinreich concluded:

> In the culture and language of Ashkenaz are wonderful transcendental values from both a Jewish and universal viewpoint. It would be a cultural catastrophe for our children and children's children if these values would vanish with the blood and ashes of the Jewish holocaust in the Second World War.

Max Weinreich preserved Yiddish for his children and children's children and transmitted it to them as a living tongue. His son Uriel turned his hopes and dreams into reality. He grew up an eminent linguist, whose chosen field was Yiddish and whose scholarship brought distinction to the name of Weinreich and to the study of Yiddish. But in March 1967, Uriel, at the age of 40, died of a cruel disease. Uriel left, besides his other work, a lasting monument to Yiddish, *The Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary.* The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.

In New York Max Weinreich concluded what he had begun in Vilna. He found the YIVO in New York housed on the lower East Side, alongside the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, small and shabby, surviving in an immigrant milieu. He left the YIVO housed on upper Fifth Avenue, in a former Vanderbilt mansion, its name and influence extending beyond the immigrant Jewish community, known in the academic world as an institution of high repute for its scholarship and publications. It had been his goal to elevate Yiddish intellectually and socially. He lived to see that goal fulfilled. To how many men is such grace given?