

Yeshayahu A. Jelinek

THE VERNACULAR LANGUAGES USED BY SLOVAK
JEWRY

In Memoriam Ori Jelinek

This study focuses on the range of languages spoken by Jews in Slovakia from the end of the 18th century to the end of the Second World War. It demonstrates that Jews in Upper Hungary used several different languages in their daily lives. In this respect we can regard them as polyglots. They inherited an array of languages from their forefathers and never completely stopped using them.

A close examination of a map of East Central Europe reveals that Slovak Jewry was located at the crossroads between West Central European Jewry and Eastern Jewry (Ostjudentum). The dividing line ran somewhere between Kežmarok (Kaesmark) in central Slovakia to Rožňava (Rozsnyó) close to the Hungarian border in the south of the country.

Yiddish and Yiddish-Datsch

For generations the Yiddish language prevailed in Upper Hungary, serving as a kind of “lingua franca” for the local Jewish population.¹ In terms of its pronunciation and vocabulary, this Yiddish was far-removed from Lithuanian Yiddish – often regarded as the “classical Yiddish”. The Yiddish that prevailed in Upper Hungary was closer to the Yiddish spoken in Moravia, and apparently also in Bohemia and Burgenland. Emperor Joseph II banned the commercial use of Yiddish (and Hebrew) throughout his empire, including Upper Hungary, and introduced the more literary German.

Yet Yiddish was not completely eliminated in Upper Hungary. It continued its fragile existence under the name “Yiddish-Datsch” or “Yiddish Deutsch”. This lan-

¹ *Benyovszky, Karl/Grünsfeld, Josef jun.:* Obrázky z prešporského geta [Pictures from the Pressburg Ghetto]. Bratislava 1993, chapter: “Slovník nářečia a hebrejských výrazov používaných v gete” [A Dictionary of Dialects and Hebrew Expressions used in the Ghetto] (pp. 125-164). – *Jelínek, Ješajahu A./Gubič, Otto/Klížan, Erik:* Jedno storočie v Prievidzi (Dejiny Židovstva na hornej Nitre) [A Century in Priwitz (Jewish History in the Horná Nitra Region)]. Prievidza 2011, chapter: “Jidiš slovníček” [“Small Yiddish Dictionary”] (pp. 129-134). – The Fond of the “Ústredná kancelária židovských ortodoxných náboženských obcí na Slovensku” [Central Office for Orthodox Jewish Congregations in Slovakia] in the Slovak National Archives in Bratislava (the collection is mistakenly termed “Ústredný zväz židovských náboženských obcí na Slovensku” [Central Association of Orthodox Jewish Congregations in Slovakia]) contains files of correspondence between several Jewish congregations. These files often include letters from the twentieth century written in German using Hebrew letters, a feature that was typical of Yiddish-Datsch. The letters include the correspondence of Rabbi Shmuel Dov Ungar, Slovakia’s Chief Rabbi, with his son-in-law Rabbi Michael Dov-Baer Weissmandel from the Holocaust period. Much of this correspondence is written in Yiddish-Datsch.

guage was spoken in the more religious, traditional congregations in Western and Central Slovakian towns such as Nitra (Neutra), Topol'čany (Nagytapolcsány), and Trnava (Tyrnau), in south-western Slovakia, and in the villages of the Záhorie district. It could also be heard in the older and poorer parts of Bratislava (Pressburg), such as the suburbs under the Schlossberg (the Tower of Pressburg) and Vidrica. There were certain similarities between the German and the Yiddish used in Pressburg and Burgenland. Nicknamed "Kraxlhuberisch", the German dialect of Pressburg was also spoken in Jewish circles in the city. Both places, the Schlossberg of Pressburg and Eisenstadt, the capital of Burgenland, were the domain of the aristocratic Pálffy and Esterházy families. Apparently, there were regular communications between the strictly orthodox (and affiliated) Jewish congregations of Pressburg and Eisenstadt, at least in the days of the K.u.K. Empire. This affiliation was reflected in their social life and in the languages spoken in both communities.

Generally speaking, older Jewish towns with orthodox congregations preserved Yiddish-Datsch. Rabbinic literature could only be studied through Hebrew and Yiddish. No German or Magyar could attend a rabbinical school (Yeshivah). In many parts of (Western and Central) Slovakia, one could encounter Yiddish expressions in everyday spoken German, expressions that had been used for specific purposes since time immemorial. Many of these expressions preserved the original Hebrew flavor of Yiddish and even revealed the extensive use of Hebrew in daily life. They were preserved, for example, in families who wished to keep certain communications hidden from strangers. Expressions of Hebrew origin were typically used in front of maids, household workers, foreigners, etc.²

German

Slovak Jews used German in everyday communications and spoke it with a strong Viennese accent. The well-known mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kollek used to boast about his Viennese origins. Actually, both his parents were born in Slovakia in the town Vel'ká Bytča (Nagybicse). They later migrated to Vienna, where Kollek picked up the Viennese accent. Only the Holocaust put an end to the extensive use of German among (Western and Central) Slovak Jews.

In bigger cities the Jews established, as far as they could afford it, two different schooling systems. The first was religious and for male pupils only. The lower classes attended "Cheder" ("room" in Hebrew) and the higher classes learned in "Yeshivah" ("session room" in Hebrew). At a meeting of Hungarian rabbis in Michalovce (Nagymihály) in 1866, it was decided to prohibit the Magyar language in synagogues and Jewish schools.³ The second system was secular, coeducational, and privately run from the outset. The language of instruction was German; Magyar was introduced only after 1907 with the Apponyi laws.⁴ Before 1939 many Jewish

² *Král, Pavel: Židé v Bytči* [Jews in the Town of Bytča]. Praha 2006, 23.

³ *Jelinek, Yeshayahu A.: Židovské náboženské obce na Slovensku v 19. a 20. storočí a ich spoločenské postavenie* [Jewish Religious Communities and their Place in Society in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Slovakia]. Bratislava 2002, 11.

⁴ *Büchler, Robert: Židovské školy na Slovensku počas 2. svetovej vojny* [Jewish Schools in

young people in Western Slovakia were fluent in German. After the establishment of the Slovak state in the same year some schools continued to teach German (and sometimes also the Gothic script). The opportunity to study German in primary schools was an incentive for many gentile parents to send their children to Jewish schools. After the foundation of Czechoslovakia most secular Jewish schools switched the language of instruction from German to Slovak. In a few places classes were still taught through German, in particular in those regions of Slovakia with a large German-speaking population. In Slovakia there were two major regions, Hauerland and Spiš (Zips), where the German language dominated. In the past Jews had not been welcome in these regions. Yet once state legislation prohibited discrimination against Jews in 1860, they were able to settle among the German population and accommodated to the German majority. A sort of friendship developed between the Jews and the Germans (nicknamed “Schwabs”, i. e. Swabians, after the region they had come from). These Jewish newcomers absorbed elements of the local Swabian dialect and accent. While in many parts of Upper Hungary Jews founded their own primary schools with German as the language of instruction, in the German-Swabian regions they refrained from doing so, sending their children to the schools run by the German majority instead.

A similar development can be seen in regions with a predominantly Magyar population. Here too Jewish parents sent their children to Hungarian schools, and even established their own schools with Magyar as the language of instruction in some places. Thus in places like Bratislava and Košice children could choose to be taught through German or Magyar.

In eastern Slovakia, to the east of the Kežmarok-Rožňava line, Yiddish dominated. This was not Yiddish-Datsch, but rather Galician Yiddish, as introduced by Galician immigrants to Upper Hungary. The Jews of Slovakia and Carpathian Rus’ – in particular the western parts of Carpathian Rus’ – were used to Galician Yiddish. This Yiddish had its curiosities. For example, instead of saying “von” (from), speakers of Galician Yiddish used to say “fin”, and were therefore nicknamed “Fins”.⁵ For the Jews of eastern Slovakia the German language was less common, although many of them eventually became fluent in the Austrian dialect.

Hungarian

Hungarian was another widely spoken language among Slovak Jews. In 1907 Budapest authorities forcefully extended the use of the Magyar language in institutes of education throughout Hungary (the so-called Apponyi laws). For various reasons (not to be elaborated here) many Jews in Upper Hungary adopted Magyar and used it as their everyday language.⁶ There were many regions where Magyar was

Slovakia during the Second World War]. In: *Büchler, Robert/Fatranová, Gita/Mičev, Stanislav* (ed.): *Fragmenty z dejín Židovstva na Slovensku* [Fragments from the History of the Jews in Slovakia]. Banská Bystrica 1991, 15-17.

⁵ Another derogatory nickname was Wasserpolaken, which suggested that on their way from Galicia to Upper Hungary they had crossed the Dunajec and Tisza Rivers.

⁶ See my book *Davidová hviezda pod Tatrami. Židia na Slovensku v 20. storočí* [The Star of

widely spoken or prevailed, for example southern Slovakia, the region close to the Hungarian border with a large ethnic Hungarian population. Here Jews adapted to the behavior and way of life of the majority (Magyar) population. Most (urban) Jews in southern Slovakia abandoned the German language – although orthodox communities continued to speak Yiddish-Datsch – and chose the Magyar language as their everyday language. This provoked the anger of Slovak nationalists who considered the extensive use of the Magyar language to be a betrayal of their nation. The Galician immigrants, who tended to speak Yiddish at home, strived to assimilate and accepted the official language of Hungary. Thus many Jews in eastern Slovakia could demonstrate their fluency in the Magyar language.

However, the Slovaks wanted the Slovak language to prevail in their homeland. The Magyar rulers undertook major efforts to oppress Slovak and replace it with Magyar. As we have already seen, elements of the Jewish population followed the official trend. Yet many other Jews supported, in one way or another, Slovak national ambitions.⁷

Slovak

For various reasons, many Jews in Slovakia also became fluent in Slovak. New Czech and Moravian migrants to Slovakia from the eastern part of Moravia closest to the Slovak border mastered the local Moravian dialect, in particular that spoken in the Haná region. The western Slovak dialect was similar to the dialect spoken in eastern Moravia, in terms of its vocabulary, pronunciation, and structure. The new immigrants from the west were therefore able to quickly learn and master the language of western Slovakia. However, once the central Slovak dialect became recognized as the official language of the Slovak nation, Jews who had settled in central Slovakia (in the Turiec district, the Upper Nitra valley, the Upper Hron valley, and Orava), adopted the literary Slovak language. They were accustomed to speaking Slovak in public, as it was often the dialect of their home-town or village. Even if they used German or Magyar in public by force of habit or necessity, they felt at home with Slovak.

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Thus Slovak Jews grew up as polyglots, familiar with the three languages spoken in their environment: German, Magyar, and Slovak. After the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic, Slovak gradually gained the upper hand, particularly among educated young people. They developed a habit of speaking Slovak at home and in public. In this way children introduced Slovak to the adult Jewish population. The German language became a kind of “lingua franca” for educated people. It was considered “noble”, and therefore parents insisted that German would continue to be a language of instruction in existing Slovak-Jewish schools. Youngsters with academic aspirations strived to become proficient in German. In some cases the Magyar lan-

David at the Foot of the Tatra Mountains. Jews in Slovakia in the Twentieth Century]. Praha 2009, 42-120.

⁷ *Ibid.*

guage had a fate similar to that of German. In Magyar-speaking regions in Southern and Eastern Slovakia and in large cities such as Košice (Kaschau, Kassa) and Bratislava, Magyar was used regularly by certain sections of the population. Between the World Wars Jewish young people in Czechoslovakia became less and less familiar with the former ruling language. Yet Slovak nationalists continued to regard them as national traitors and agents of Magyarhood, even though there was little evidence to support this view after 1918. Young Jews distanced themselves from the Magyar language and increasingly embraced a Slovak-Jewish identity. The accusations of pro-Magyar feelings leveled at the Jews were a weapon with which to punish and persecute them.