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Taking the Mother Tongue to Task

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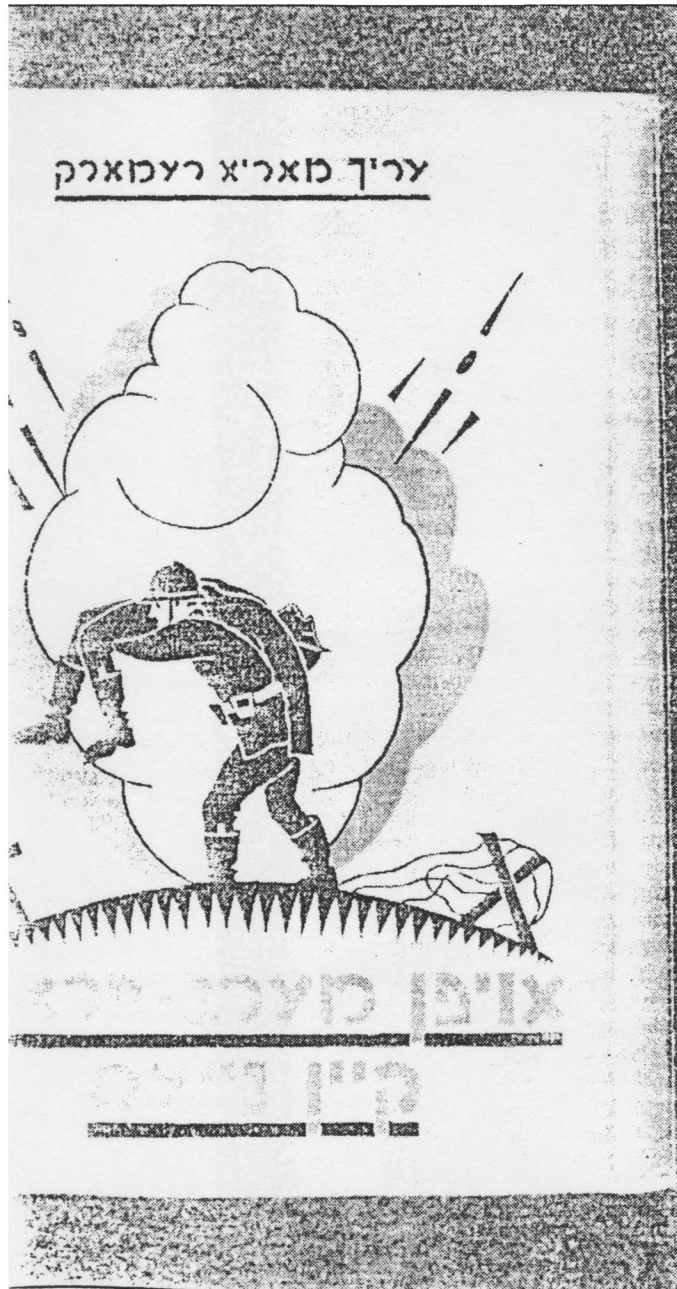
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ARTS & LETTERS

FORWARD



COURTESY SWANN GALLERIES

"Front-Kein Neis" (All Quiet on the Western Front), by Erich Remarque, translated by Isaac Bashevis Singer, first edition in Warsaw, 1929.

Taking the Mother Tongue to Task

The Meaning of Yiddish

By Benjamin Harshav
Berkeley: University
of California Press, 1990.
205 pp. \$24.95.

By KEN FRIEDEN

Scholars at American universities seldom devote serious attention to Yiddish language, literature, and culture. Scorned by many as "jargon," a ghetto dialect, or a comic anachronism, Yiddish has never received a fraction of the recognition it deserves. Only a few scholarly contributions in English — by authors such as Max and Uriel Weinreich, Dan Miron, and Irving Howe — demonstrate the importance of Yiddish as a national language.

Yiddish literary studies are entering a new phase. Inspired by the general revival of interest among readers, fresh translations and interpretations have begun to emerge. In 1986, Benjamin and Barbara Harshav co-edited "American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology." In 1987, an energetic rendition of Sholem Aleichem's "Tevye the Milkman and the Railroad Stories" appeared, translated by Hillel Halkin. And in the same year, "The Penguin Anthology of Modern Yiddish Verse" was published under the editorship of Irving Howe, Khone Shmeruk, and Ruth Wisse. Now Benjamin Harshav, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Yale University, has added a valuable book to the small available stock of scholarly English-language works about the

Yiddish tradition.

Mr. Harshav's "The Meaning of Yiddish" avoids the pitfalls of oversimplification, on the one hand, and of excessive specialization, on the other. Part One provides an introduction to the Yiddish language in its cultural contexts, from the Middle Ages to the present. Particularly helpful is an opening chapter on "Language and History," which explains the unique social conditions that enabled Yiddish to differentiate itself from Middle High German: it drew from the Hebrew of the Bible and of prayer, the Aramaic of Talmud study, and the Slavic intonations of the market place. A more technical chapter on "The Nature of Yiddish" balances linguistic issues with well-chosen literary examples. In his analysis of the origins of Yiddish, Mr. Harshav includes a fascinating digression on Primo Levi's Piedmontese-Jewish dialect of Italian.

Part Two presents the basic outlines of modern Yiddish literature from the Jewish Enlightenment to the Holocaust. Here the author's preferences are most evident: he quickly passes over the classic fiction-writers (S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz) and concentrates on the two American poets associated with Introspectivism (A. Leyeles and Jacob Glatshsteyn). This is not a comprehensive literary history, the author admits, but a "discussion of several selected topics, showing the rich problematics of the field."

In highly readable form, Mr. Harshav's book is a valuable contribution to the field. Please turn to Page 11

...sand, and a thousand more
...nes: "possible, truly possible."

stand. I took some strong trees,
planks, large stones, plaster,

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The Meaning of the Mother Tongue

Continued From Page 9

Harshav brings together a wealth of information and insight. He explains, for instance, that "in a book-oriented society, Yiddish was primarily a language of conversation," and that, as a result, fiction by authors such as Abromovitsh and Sholem Aleichem reflected the cadences and associative character of everyday speech. In poetry, he writes, M.L. Halpern and Jacob Glatshsteyn "used Yiddish as an unusual tool of talk-verse."

Another prominent strategy, familiar to psychoanalysts, is the use of questions. Mr. Harshav illustrates this tactic with a monologue from the revised preface to S. Y. Abramovitsh's "The Little Man," which is spoken by his fictional character Mendele the Bookseller: "After the first question, Jews really start pouring all sorts of questions on you, like: Where does a Jew come from? Does he have a wife? Does he have children? What is he selling? And where is he going? And more and more such questions, as it is the custom in all the Diaspora of the Jews to ask." This habit of questioning reaches the point of caricature in a Sholem Aleichem dialogue, as quoted by Mr. Harshav:

— It looks like you're traveling to Kolomea?

— How do you know I'm going to Kolomea?

— I heard you talking to the conductor. Are you really from Kolomea or only traveling to Kolomea?

— Really from Kolomea. Why do you ask?

— Nothing. Just asking. A nice city, Kolomea?

— What do you mean, a nice city?

Here the partners in conversation counter questions with questions, somewhat like a Freudian analyst who evades a patient's queries by turning the discussion back upon him or her. Self-questioning appears to be a central feature of Judaic discourse, from Enlightenment satire to Sholem Aleichem's humor and Woody Allen's wit. Mr. Harshav calls this "internal criticism of the Jewish existence."



COURTESY SWANN GALLERIES

"Wedding," plate from "Shtetl. Mayn Chorever Haym, a Gedenknish" by Issachar ber Ryback, Berlin, 1923.

The Yiddish Press is an inescapable component of modern Jewish culture. "The Americanization of the Yiddish language," Mr. Harshav writes, "was left in the hands of the uneducated masses and the mass-circulation newspapers (led in this ideological battle by Abe Cahan, the brilliant and willful editor of the New York Yiddish newspaper 'Forverts')." This paper, he says, both "helped in the absorption of masses of Jews in the New World" and "enhanced their self-knowledge."

Of course, relations between Yiddish writers and newspapers were not always ideal: "the close relationships of Yiddish writers with the popular press, on which their existence depended, were love-hate relationships," Mr. Harshav writes, "succumbing to newspaper discourse would mean giving up an 'elitist' dream of a separate culture: abandoning the press altogether would mean losing a means of livelihood and undermining any road to an audience." The introspectivist poet Glatshsteyn suggested that "every genuine poet . . . should have a lot of opportunity to write journalism so that he can write it out of his system, steam it out of himself, so that when it comes to a spoken poem, he is already shouted out."

Mr. Harshav's fine survey of Yiddish language, literature, and culture establishes a foundation for future scholarly studies. Still lacking, in English, are critical editions of the major authors' works, comprehensive literary histories and monographs on each of the important Yiddish writers.

Given the state of Yiddish scholarship in America, "The Meaning of Yiddish" is nothing less than a pioneering effort. At the same time, it can be nothing more than that. Since 1954, when Mr. Harshav made his first major contribution to the study of Yiddish versification, the field of Yiddish has remained almost as provincial as ever, relatively untouched by the rapid development of literary criticism in other traditions. Building upon the ground-breaking exertions of Mr. Harshav, Irving Howe, Dan Miron, and Ruth Wisse, the challenge for the future is to bring Yiddish studies to the highest plane of literary interpretation.

Mr. Frieden is an associate professor in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Languages and Literatures at Emory University. His most recent book, "Freud's Dream of Interpretation," was published by the State University of New York Press.

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