

# Basic Facts about Yiddish

*This updated edition of the 1946 YIVO booklet was made possible by a generous grant from the Fishman Foundation for Yiddish Culture.*



*Kinder: onfanger lernbukh farn ershtn yor* by D. Tarant and D. Friedman.  
Illustration by William Gropper, 1929. (YIVO Library)

## 1. What is Yiddish?

[Yiddish](#) has been the spoken language of a considerable portion of the Jewish people, the Ashkenazim, for the past one thousand years. It has served as the expression of everyday Jewish life, religious, secular, and every level in between. It possesses a significant literature, press and folklore and has a large musical component. Yiddish was the language of instruction in many Jewish schools and is currently taught in numerous colleges and universities throughout the world.

Yiddish is the vehicle of a rich cultural heritage; its idioms, proverbs, songs, and humor symbolize the patterns of Ashkenazic Jewish living and thinking.

## 2. The name “Yiddish”

Yiddish means “Jewish” in the language itself. Many centuries ago, “Yiddish” is what Jews called the language, although for hundreds of years it was called a variety of other names, among them, *Taytsh*, *Yidish-taytsh*, *Loshn-ashkenaz*, and *Zhargon*, all of which have been outmoded for at least 100 years.

In English usage, the name “Yiddish” was adopted around the middle of the nineteenth century in England, when Jewish immigrants starting coming to that country from Europe. With the rising immigration of the Jews to the United States, the name was also adopted there as well.

## 3. Yiddish in the United States and the World Over

The United States census of 1940 provided the number of those who declared Yiddish to have been the language they spoke in early childhood. On the basis of a five per cent sampling, the figure arrived at was 1,751,100. Specialists in the field considered the sampling inadequate and believed that the number of American Jews speaking or able to speak and understand Yiddish was actually much larger.

Before World War II, the following figures were given for Yiddish-speaking persons throughout the world:

Eastern and Central Europe.....	6,767,000
North America.....	2,987,000
Western Europe.....	317,000
Palestine.....	285,000
South and Central America.....	255,000
Africa.....	56,000
Asia (excluding Palestine).....	14,000
Australia.....	9,000
TOTAL.....	10,690,000

This total was considerably diminished as a result of the German war of extermination against the Jews during the Holocaust. Yet, the Yiddish-speaking group still constituted the most numerous language group among the Jews of the world even after the Holocaust. However, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yiddish usage was reduced by acculturation and assimilation in the United States, by forced acculturation and assimilation in the Soviet Union, and because of repression of Yiddish and acculturation to Hebrew in the State of Israel.

In the 21st century, most people who speak Yiddish in their daily lives are [Hasidim](#) and other Haredim (strictly Orthodox Jews). Their numbers are estimated to be between 500,000 and one million—mainly in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Israel. There are also many more native Yiddish-speakers who, however, do not necessarily use the language in everyday life.

#### **4. Yiddish: Connecting Jews of Different Countries**

Prior to the Holocaust, not only was Yiddish the major Jewish vernacular, but it also functioned as a means of communication for Jews around the world. Because of the broad Yiddish diaspora created as a result of immigration from Eastern Europe during the second half of the 19th century, Yiddish permitted Jews in distant lands a linguistic means with which to communicate with one another. Moreover, the Yiddish press, which existed on all continents except Antarctica, was an important resource for the dissemination of news and other information important to readers of Yiddish. In spite of the fate of the Jews during World War II, the international character of Yiddish has been preserved, albeit on a far smaller scale. The Yiddish press is still a vehicle of information on Jewish life in different countries, as are Yiddish materials online.

#### **5. How Old is Yiddish?**

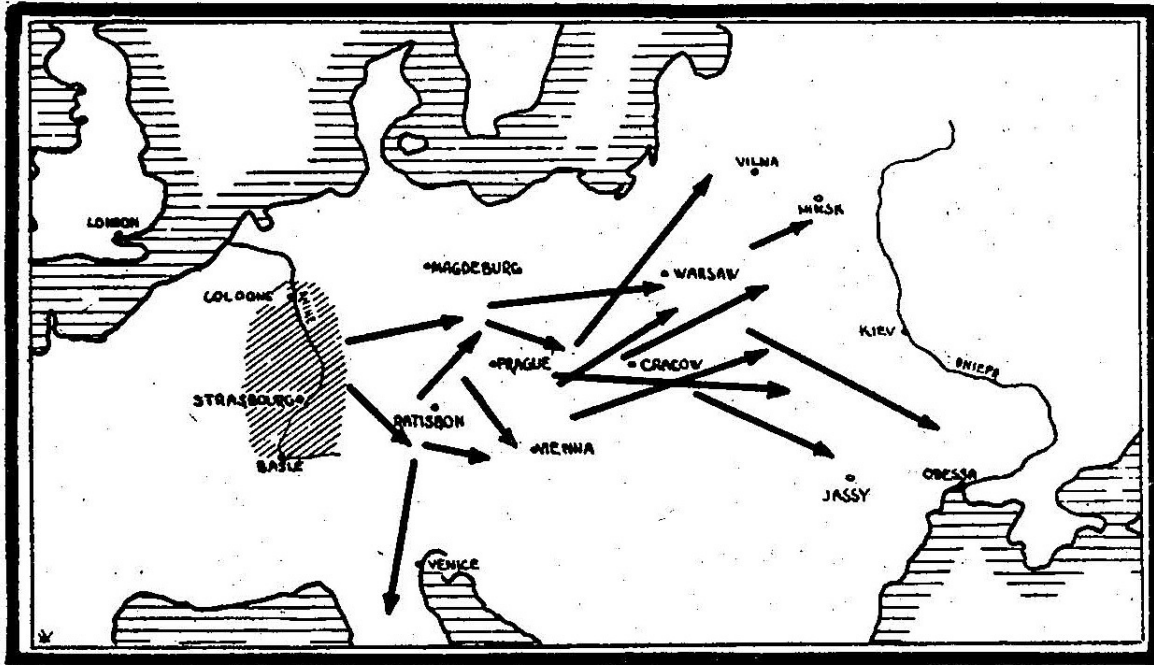
Yiddish originated around the year 1000 C.E. It is thus roughly one thousand years old—about as old as most European languages.

#### **6. History of Yiddish**

The history of Yiddish parallels the history of the Ashkenazic Jews. According to linguist and YIVO founder, [Max Weinreich](#), the language originated when Jews of Romance-speaking territories in what is now southern France and Northern Italy migrated to the middle Rhine basin. Here they shifted from a Jewish form of Romance to the local German of the period, and as they adapted it to their needs, it was permeated with the rabbinical Hebrew that had formed a component of their previous language, as well as Romance elements. Because Jews tended to live in separate communities, any language they took on would be their own unique variant thereof.

The Crusades forced many of these Jews to emigrate from the Rhine basin. Together with them, Yiddish moved eastward to southern and central Germany, and from there to what is now Bavaria, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. As a result, the German component of Yiddish shares numerous features with the Bavarian (Upper = southern) and Franconian (Central) dialects of German. From the 13th century on,

Yiddish-speaking Jews settled in growing numbers in what are now Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Rumania, and in the course of time, Eastern Europe became the center of Yiddish, as well as the most populous Jewish settlement in the world. By the 18th century, Yiddish was the language of nearly all the Jews of Europe, except for Sefardim (who lived mainly in Mediterranean lands).



From "Basic Facts About Yiddish" (©1946 YIVO Institute).

During the 19th century, Jews in western Europe began the processes of acculturation and assimilation to the dominant languages in the countries in which they lived, until, in the 20th century, only remnants of Western Yiddish were alive in Alsace and Switzerland. But while Yiddish suffered a partial loss of speakers in western Europe, there was a huge increase in the numbers of Yiddish-speakers in eastern Europe. When the great overseas migration of East European Jews began in the 1880s, Yiddish spread to numerous countries throughout the world.

The history of Yiddish is usually divided into four periods: Earliest Yiddish (up to 1250), Old Yiddish (1250-1500), Middle Yiddish (1500-1750), and Modern Yiddish (since 1750). Because many Jews were literate when Yiddish came into being, literary documents of each period have survived, with the exception of the earliest period.

While this is the most accepted theory of the origin of Yiddish, others exist, as well. Considered marginal by most scholars and mostly of recent vintage, these theories rely on linguistic evidence to claim that the origins of Yiddish can be found further

east. One theory argues that these origins are more closely related to Bavarian and Swiss German, while another claims that Yiddish has Slavic origins and was relexified into Germanic.

## 7. Structure of Yiddish

Yiddish is the result of a linguistic fusion, in other words, a combination of several sources. This is in no way exceptional, as many languages integrate components of others. As Professor Murat H. Roberts of New York University put it: "All languages are composite.... Many of them, owing to our imperfect knowledge of their history, appear more homogeneous than they are. Greek, for example... Germanic furnishes another example of hidden mixture. Homogeneous on the surface, it is hybrid underneath.... What has been said of Greek and of Germanic could be said of every other Indo-European language. Indeed, it could be said, in sober truth, of every language in the world. A homogeneous language is easier to imagine than to discover.... English is the standard example of a hybrid language.... Its hybridness is its Englishness" (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 38, 1939, pp. 23-42).

Only a language that is isolated from contact with others can truly be homogeneous. Because European Jews were always in contact with others, Yiddish was consistently infused with new admixture from languages with which Jews were in contact. Moreover, because of the nature of Jewish involvement in trade and commerce, cross-border travel was often an occupational necessity that frequently resulted in contact with speakers of other languages, whose borrowings would often serve to enrich the Yiddish language.

## 8. The Composition of Yiddish

The composition of Yiddish is a reflection of its history. Just as English consists of a balance between its two historic elements, the Germanic and the Romance, Yiddish constitutes a unique fusion of its two principal components, medieval spoken German and rabbinical Hebrew. Words of Romance origin also have survived in Yiddish to this day. As the center of gravity of the Yiddish language community shifted into Slavic lands, word formation, syntax, and vocabulary again experienced material changes. In addition to these outside influences, Yiddish, like all other languages, has undergone internal changes and developments. With its development, what resulted was the creation of an entirely new Jewish language—comparable to Hebrew and Aramaic—one that served as a carrier of Jewish culture through the centuries.

While embodying Jewish tradition, Yiddish has also served as a medium of expression for many new trends and schools of thought in recent centuries, such as Hasidism, the [Haskalah](#), the Jewish labor movement, and [Zionism](#), among others.

## 9. Dialects of Yiddish

The independent structure of Yiddish is strongly exemplified in its dialect system. While German, too, has a complex variety of dialects, Yiddish, as early as in the 17th century, developed a unique set of dialects which are quite different from those of German and can be roughly classified as follows:



Dialects of Eastern Yiddish and the North-South Divide.  
*(YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe)*

- Western Yiddish (bounded in the east approximately by the German-Polish frontier of 1939)
- Central Yiddish, also called Polish Yiddish (extending from the German-Polish frontier of 1939 approximately to the Vistula and San Rivers);
- Eastern Yiddish (eastward from the Vistula), consisting of the northeastern dialect, also called Lithuanian Yiddish, and the southeastern dialect, also called Ukrainian Yiddish.

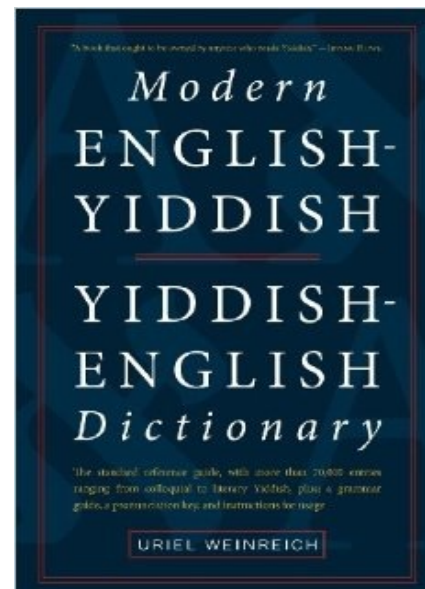
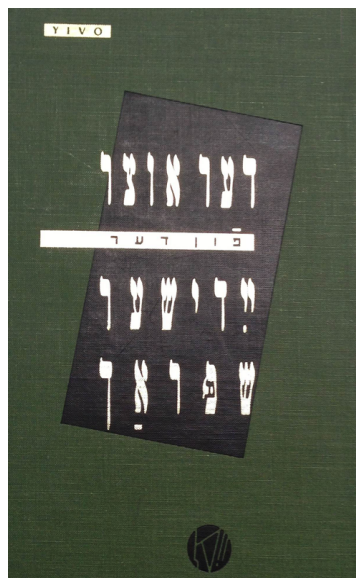
What is known as “American Yiddish” is not a dialect in the same sense of the word, but because the different dialects of Jewish immigrants were interspersed, Yiddish in America took on a variety of new features. In addition, numerous words and expressions from the English of the new environments of the immigrants entered the language.

Contemporary Yiddish spoken by American Hasidic groups in the 21st century often contains a significant amount of American admixture, as well as a large Hebraic/Aramaic component, an element that derives from the heavy emphasis on Talmud study and devotion to religious ideals in those communities.

## 10. Standard Yiddish

As in other linguistic communities, there is a fairly uniform type of language accepted and written wherever Yiddish is used. The Old and Middle Yiddish periods had literary standards of their own, based substantially on Western Yiddish. As now in use, the standard forms of Yiddish were essentially fixed by the classical writers of the 19th century. Essentially an academic project to create a common ground among a variety of dialects and not identical with any of them, Standard Yiddish provides a uniform basis from which to teach the language.

*College Yiddish*, the first textbook to teach Standard Yiddish, was written by Uriel Weinreich and published by YIVO in 1949. In 1950, YIVO published a 1000-page *Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language (Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh)*, by Nahum Stutchkoff, which contains about 175,000 words and expressions. It has been reissued several times. A periodical devoted to current issues of Standard Yiddish, *Yidishe shprakh*, is published by YIVO.





## 11. Spelling of Yiddish

Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters. The present-day spelling of Yiddish came into use around 1900, but many modifications were introduced during the First World War. In 1937, YIVO established the rules that are now considered standard. Most secular newspapers, magazines and books, as well as university and other language courses, either follow the YIVO rules or deviate only in small ways. The Hasidic press and publishers, however, continue to hold with a German-influenced spelling system that was widespread in the late 19th and early 20th century. (Ironically, it is a system originally propagated by their sworn opponents, the *Maskilim*.)

A uniform and consistent transcription of Yiddish into Latin characters, conceived by YIVO, is used by libraries, publishing houses and journalists, among others, when Hebrew characters are not available or possible. This is the standard used for transcription and is used extensively in academic publications and online.

## 12. Yiddish Literature: Post-World War II to the 21st Century

In the period preceding World War II, a number of highly gifted Yiddish poets and prose writers were actively publishing in a number of different countries. Many of those who lived in Europe perished at the hands of the Germans, but writers in the other countries carried on, and among the survivors of the European catastrophe old and new talents arose. The life and death of Jews in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps and the implications of the European tragedy for world Jewry became a major theme of post-World War II Yiddish literature.

After the end of the war, North and South America, France and Israel became centers of Yiddish writing and publishing. In Eastern Europe, Yiddish publications continued to appear in Poland and Rumania during the Communist era; since the fall of Communism, several new Yiddish publications have appeared in Poland. In the Soviet Union, all Yiddish publishing was suppressed in 1949 and the most prominent Yiddish writers were executed. In 1961, the magazine *Sovetish heymland* began publication and provided a venue for several generations of writers, both those who were born before World War II and those who were born afterwards. It continued to appear until the 1990s. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jewish life in general and interest in Yiddish in particular has revived in the successor countries.

New Yiddish books continue to appear every year; most are published by Hasidic communities in the United States and Israel. A smaller number of books are published by secular writers, many of them poets.



Basic information about Yiddish writers can be found in the four-volume biographical dictionary by Zalmen Reizen, issued 1926-1929, which lists 1,909 modern Yiddish authors; the eight-volume biographical dictionary of modern Yiddish literature, published 1956-81, is about 2,500 pages long and includes 4,000-5,000 names. There is also a ninth volume with additions and corrections, published by Berl Kagan in 1986.

### 13. Yiddish Literature: 19th Century

Three writers are considered classic in Yiddish literature since the end of the 18th century: Mendele Moykher-Sforim, known as the “grandfather” (*zeyde*) of Yiddish literature” (1834-1917), Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), and Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852-1915). These authors created a canon of high-quality literary works. Many other Yiddish writers appeared during this period, among them, Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch (aka “Shomer”), who wrote what can be considered low-quality, sensationalistic literature, which was derided by critics but which was also extremely popular.



(YIVO Archives)

### 14. Yiddish Literature: 17th and 18th Centuries

Several hundred literary works, both prose and poetry, appeared in this period. Outstanding are [\*Tsene urene\*](#) (first edition published around 1600), an imaginative elaboration of Biblical narratives intended chiefly for women, and the memoirs of

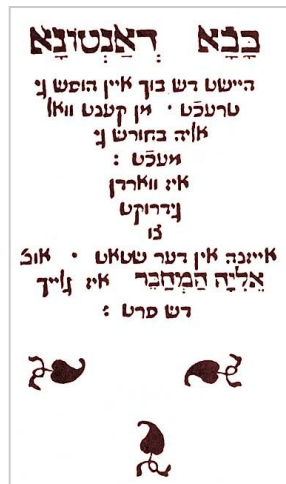
Glikl of Hameln, a Jewish woman living in Germany during the 17th century. Noteworthy, too, are many historical and religious poems.



Tsene-urene, Slavuta and Lemberg, 1848. (YIVO Library)

## 15. Yiddish Literature: Up to the 17th Century

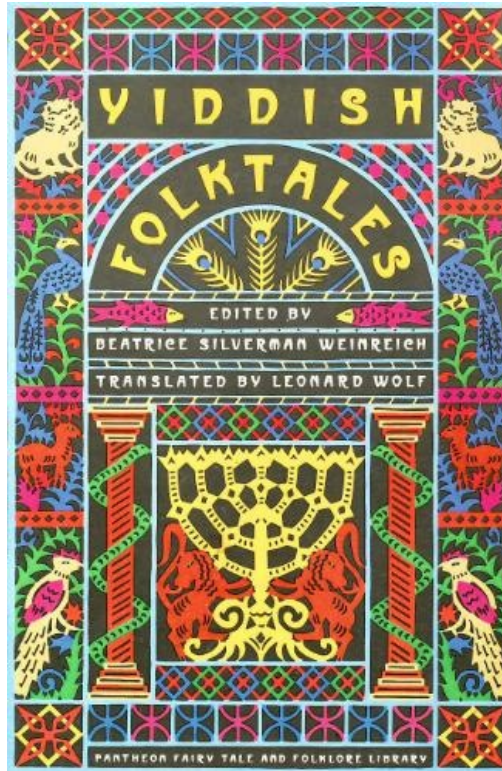
Three works of this period are considered fundamental: *Shmuel-bukh*, an epic poem centered around King David; *Bovo-bukh*, a romance on the adventures of Prince Bovo of Antona; and *Maase-bukh*, a collection of legends and folktales of the Talmudic period and after. The author of the *Bovo-bukh* was Eliyohu Bokher, also known as Elia Levita, a Hebrew scholar and Yiddish writer of great significance (1469-1549).



Frontispiece of *Bove bukh*, 1541.

## 16. Yiddish Folklore

Yiddish has an extremely broad folklore and includes many forms, among them: songs, tales, plays and proverbs. Extensive collections have been published in books and periodicals, but much remains to be done.



## 17. The Yiddish Press



Postcard featuring the mastheads of a variety of Yiddish papers. (YIVO Archives)

The earliest Yiddish periodical was published in Amsterdam under the name of *Kurantz* (1686-1687). At the outbreak of World War II, over 400 periodicals were appearing in Yiddish throughout the world.

The first Yiddish periodical in the United States, *Di yidishe tsaytung*, known in English as the *New York Hebrew Times*, was published in 1870. In the 1950s, there were four Yiddish dailies in New York: *Forverts* (*Jewish Daily Forward*), founded 1897; *Morgnzhurnal* (*Jewish Journal and Morning News*), 1901; *Der tog* (*The Day*), 1914; and *Morgnfrayhayt* (*Morning Freiheit*), 1922. According to the entries in the YIVO Library, dailies were also published in Argentina (3), Canada (2), France (3), Uruguay (2). In addition, ninety-three semiweeklies, weeklies, and other periodicals were being received by the YIVO Library in 1952 from the following countries: Argentina (12), Australia (2), Belgium (1), Brazil (3), Canada (4), Costa Rica (1), Cuba (2), England (2), France (10), Germany (1), Israel (7), Mexico (7), Poland (3), Rumania (1), South Africa (3), United States (33), Uruguay (1).

In 2014, the Yiddish *Forverts* is published daily on-line, biweekly, on paper. There are a number of Hasidic weeklies and monthlies published in New York, such as *Der yid* and *Der blat*.

## 18. Yiddish Theater



Yiddish Theater Poster advertising the play, *Mirele efros*,



featuring Ida Kaminska. Poland, late 1930s. (YIVO Archives)

Jewish folk plays, usually presented on Purim, date from the Middle Ages. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many plays of a more individual character were written. Abraham Goldfaden, who organized a troupe of professional actors in Rumania in 1876, is considered the “father of the Yiddish theater.” With the great immigration of Jews during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Yiddish theater was established in North America, as well. Nowadays, Yiddish plays are presented by professionals and amateurs in North America, Europe and Israel. Yiddish theater troupes such as the Folksbiene and New Yiddish Rep in New York and Yidish-sphil in Israel provide some of the better known productions.

## 19. Yiddish schools

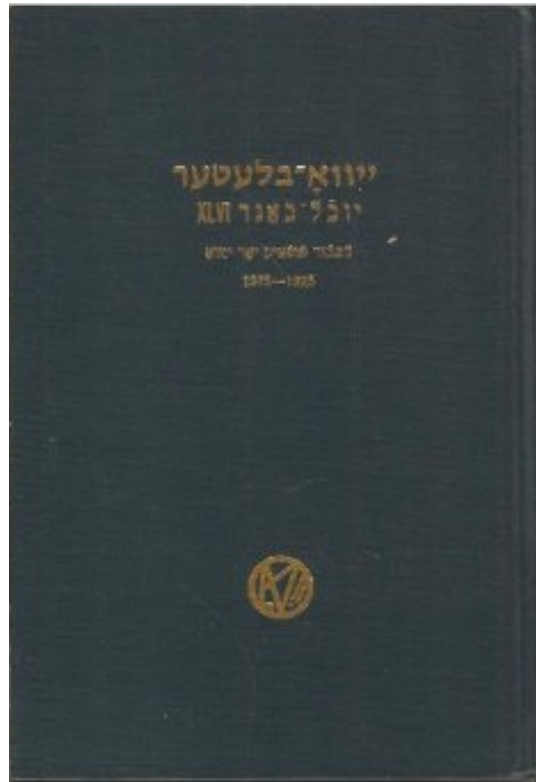
Traditional Jewish education for many centuries was conducted in Yiddish on all levels. The 20th century saw the establishment of secular Yiddish schools, and before World War II hundreds of Yiddish schools were functioning on the elementary and secondary level; in several countries of Europe there were also junior colleges and schools of engineering. In those schools, all subjects were taught in Yiddish and textbooks on science, mathematics, literature and other subjects were published.



“To which school should we send our children?” Announcement of mass meetings organized by TSYSHO, the Central Yiddish School Organization, to help parents choose to which school they will send their children. (YIVO Archives)

After World War II, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, Brazil and other countries had many day schools in which all Jewish subjects were taught in Yiddish; Yiddish schools in the United States were supplementary schools for pupils who receive general education elsewhere. Four organizations maintained such schools: the Workmen’s Circle, the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, the Jewish National Workers’ Alliance, and the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order. Today, Yiddish continues to be the language of instruction in many religious schools.

## 20. Yiddish Scholarly Literature



*YIVO-bleter*, a scholarly journal

There exists a substantial body of scholarly literature in Yiddish that is devoted to research in Jewish history, sociology, economics, linguistics, and other topics. Much of it has been published by YIVO, which was founded as an institution for research and training in the social sciences and humanities as they concern the Jewish field. Thus, together with Hebrew, Yiddish is a key to unlocking one thousand years in the life of European Jewry, and to a great deal of Jewish culture and tradition as a whole.

## 21. Yiddish in Colleges and Universities

In 1947, the College of the City of New York (C.C.N.Y.) introduced the teaching of Yiddish with full academic credits. In 1952, the Atran Chair of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture was established at Columbia University, where Yiddish studies are pursued at both the graduate and undergraduate levels; in the same year, a Yiddish chair was founded at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Yiddish is now taught in colleges and universities in the United States and in Canada, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, the former Soviet Union, Israel, Argentina and Australia. *College Yiddish* is still widely used in language classes and a number of other excellent Yiddish textbooks have appeared in recent years.

YIVO conducts an annual intensive Yiddish summer program in New York ; other intensive programs are offered in Amherst, Massachusetts; Warsaw; Vilnius; Tel Aviv; and Paris-Brussels-Strasbourg.

## 22. Yiddish as an Object of Linguistic Research

General linguists and social scientists can draw on Yiddish in studying numerous problems, such as the following: How does a new language evolve out of the special speech of an ethno-religious group? How are elements of stock languages readapted to the cultural needs of a new linguistic community? How do dialects not modeled after prototypes in the co-territorial or stock languages emerge? How is a vernacular standardized to meet the requirements of modern European civilization?



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## YIVO & Yiddish

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research was founded as the Yiddish Scientific Institute in Vilna, Poland, in 1925, by scholars, teachers, and other communal activists who saw the Yiddish language as the best medium for educating the Jewish population, and of giving the Jewish people access to their history and culture. The institution they developed produced ground-breaking scholarship in Yiddish and published scholarly journals, but also organized popular lectures, exhibitions, cultural evenings, and training seminars for teachers in Yiddish primary schools and high schools.

YIVO became the acknowledged authority on the Yiddish language and pioneered important linguistic research on Yiddish. The standards YIVO developed for Yiddish orthography, or spelling, and for the transliteration of Yiddish into English are the most commonly used by publishers and scholars. YIVO's *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*, first published in 1968, has now appeared in several editions.

YIVO continues to serve as the "world headquarters" of the Yiddish language. Hundreds of students have attended its weekly Yiddish language courses or graduated from its intensive summer Yiddish program.