What Is Yiddish?

Yiddish, the language spoken by Eastern European Jews (it literally means Jewish), is a Germanic language, with significant French vocabulary and syntax. It originated in the 13th century, with the expulsion of the Jews from France and their emigration to the German-speaking Rhineland. The language also contains Hebrew loan words for both liturgical and "family" usage, as well as Russian and Polish, the result of emigration to the east in subsequent centuries. There is an extensive medieval Yiddish literature, including chivalric romances, dating back to the early period; in 1534, a Hebrew-Yiddish dictionary of the Bible was published in Poland.

Although Yiddish uses the Hebrew alphabet and, like Hebrew, is written from right to left, it is a completely distinct language from Hebrew. (Hebrew, like its close relative Arabic, is a member of the Semitic language group.)

Yiddish was spoken by 11 million people worldwide, largely in Europe, at the time of the Holocaust. Jewish immigrants to the United States in the late-19th and early-20th centuries created a vibrant, Yiddish-based culture, which has all but disappeared as a result of assimilation. The contributions from the Yiddish idiom to American English represent a treasure-trove of hundreds of Yiddish words and expressions, in everyday usage.

Here are a few examples:

nosh—to eat a little something, a snack. "Do you want dinner?" "No, I'll just *nosh*."

shlep—to carry or drag. "I *shlep* that chair with me whenever I move."

meshugenah—a crazy person. "My brother-in-law is such a *meshugenah!*"

shtik—a routine, or obsession. "That comedian has a funny *shtik*."

kibitz—to meddle or make unwelcome comments. "Did you come to *kibitz,* or to play bridge?"

shnorrer—a beggar. A *schnorrer* knocks at the door and says, "Lady, I haven't eaten in three days!" "So," says the housewife, "you should force yourself!"

schlemiel—a fool or unlucky person. "A *schlemiel* falls on his back, and breaks his nose!" Less well known is the *schlemazel,* the perennial recipient of others' bad luck. For example, there might have been a *schlemazel* standing in just the right place, so that when the *schlemiel* fell, it was the *schlemazel's* nose that was broken.   —*PK*

And there is a touch of gall,
Of bitterness about it all.

It is drenched with tears and blood,
That comes pouring like a flood
From the wounds that never cease,
Of our Jewish agonies.

In Yiddish I have never heard
A single warm and glowing word.[34]

A passionate man throughout his life, Peretz often spoke of the difficulty of wooing in Yiddish. That he solved this problem is demonstrated not only by his later work, but by the reports of his many amorous liaisons. It is interesting to note that Yiddish speakers hearing *literate* Yiddish spoken for first time, are reported to have exclaimed about their own language, "Why, it is as beautiful as French!"

With the publication of *Monish,* Peretz, now famous, moved back to Warsaw, where he lived a bohemian intellectual's life, with many creative friends, all of whom continued to converse and write in Polish.

In 1890, he was employed by a wealthy, converted Jew, Jan Bloch, who was sponsoring a survey of Jewish life in Poland. Bloch was a financier who, among other things, had contracts to build railroads in Russia. Although a convert, Bloch was disturbed by the growing number of anti-Semites in Poland who claimed, among other slanders, that Jews were parasites. Bloch hoped to prove that Jews were productively employed and were an asset to Polish life. Peretz's job was to visit Jewish towns near Zamość, helping the locals fill out questionnaires about their everyday existence. The survey was conducted in Yiddish, of course, and Peretz became immersed in not only the language, but the folkways of rural Jewish life. He soon published a book of his adventures called, *Pictures of a Provincial Journey through the Tomaszow Region in 1890.*

He was once again unemployed, and in 1891 his friends got him a job with Community Council of Warsaw, where he worked for the rest of his life. Although the pay was low, his working hours were 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., which allowed time for writing. With his wife and son, he rented a three-room apartment at No.1 Ceglana Street in Warsaw. For the next 25 years, this tiny apartment became the center of the Yiddish Renaissance, as visiting writers from all over the Pale were offered hospitality and encouragement or criticism of their work.

The Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, in his "My First Meeting with Peretz," describes the dynamic which Peretz created among young Jewish intellectuals in Poland: