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A Question of the Future

The Czernowitz Conference Beyond Yiddishism

›Czernowitz‹, short for the First Yiddish Language Conference that took place in the provincial capital of Bukovina in 1908, is widely considered a milestone in the history of Yiddish. The event has become an integral part of Yiddish language histories,¹ histories of Yiddishism² and histories of Yiddish literature.³ The most important point of reference in contemporary articles and reports, as well as in later mentions of the Conference, is its famous declaration of Yiddish being a national language of the Jews. Chaim Zhitlowsky, who co-initiated the Conference, went so far as to call ›Tshernovits‹ a synonym of the movement: »Tshernovits has become a synonym for the so-called Yiddishist movement, as Basel has been for a long time the synonym for political Zionism.«⁴

Although the discussion about the meaning of Yiddish for the Jews dominated both the Conference and its perception, the reason for its broad reception lies, as I will argue in this paper, in the avoidance of a clear political line during the preparations for the Conference. The organizers of the Conference had agreed to avoid a »language war«⁵ in advance, and had invited all »friends of the Yiddish

1 Joshua A. Fishman: *Yiddish. Turning to Life*. Amsterdam et al. 1991.

2 Such as Goldsmith's »Modern Yiddish Culture. The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement«: The very first paragraph of the book starts with the Conference: »This study explores the Jewish cultural ideology known as Yiddishism through an analysis of the positions of the four most prominent participants in the First Yiddish Language Conference in Czernowitz (Cernauti), Bukovina, in 1908.« Emanuel S. Goldsmith: *Modern Yiddish Culture. The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*. New York 1997, p. 15; Joshua A. Fishman: *Attracting a Following to High-Culture Functions for a Language of Everyday Life: The Role of the Tshernovits Language Conference in the Rise of Yiddish*. In: *Intl. J. Soc. Lang.* 24 (1980), pp. 43–73.

3 Sol Liptzin: *The Maturing of Yiddish Literature*. New York 1970, p. X.

4 Chaim Zhitlowsky: ›*tshernovits*‹ *un der yidishism*. In: *afn shvel*, Vol. 185, New York: July/August 1968, p. 4:

«'טשערנאָוויץ' איז געוואָרן אַ שם־דבר פֿאַר דער אַזוי גערופֿענער ייִדישיסטישער באַוועגונג, ווי באַסעל איז אַ לאַנגע צײַט געווען אַ שם־דבר פֿאַר דעם פּאָליטלישן צײַאָניזם.»

5 Joshua A. Fishman: *The Tshernovits Conference Revisited. The First World Conference for Yiddish*, 85 years later, In: Joshua A. Fishman: *The Earliest Stage of Language Planning: The First Congress Phenomenon*. Berlin, New York 1993, pp. 321–332, here p. 326.

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language«⁶ to participate, sending their invitations to the widest range of Yiddish writers, journalists, cultural activists and representants of political groups.

In David G. Roskies' narration of the rise of Yiddish, which as he describes »reads like one of its own fictions«, he compares the elevation of Yiddish as a result of the Czernowitz Conference to lodging a claim to a throne:⁷ »With one bold move, the hated ›jargon‹ became heir apparent to the throne.«⁸ A metaphor that could not better synthesize later interpretations of the Conference, especially from the Zionist side: Hebrew, the ancient and prestigious language is the legitimate heir of the throne and, with the emergence of the Conference, it was now being cast down by the »ugly« second-born child, Yiddish. It was a matter of either/or, and there could be only one ruler. Not only was it a question of who had the longer or more prestigious past, but also a question of who would have the better equipment for the future.

At the time of the Conference, ardent Yiddishists were still a minority. Among those in support of the idea of developing Yiddish were a large number of people who campaigned for Hebrew as well.⁹ For this reason, the discussions during the Conference became so heated that tears were shed, and by the time the twenty-three-year-old Matatiyu Mizes held his speech about Yiddish being a language that ended in the call for equality of all languages, the Conference nearly escalated into an actual physical altercation.¹⁰ There had been intellectuals who stood up for Yiddish in the second half of the 19th century¹¹ and their number rose after the turn of the century. After 1905, the »Bund« (short for *Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland*) played a major role in promoting Yiddish by publishing in Yiddish, by founding *leyenkraysn* (reading circles) and

6 Cit. Dovid Shrayber in: *Lemberger togblat*, No. 164, 26.08.2021. In: [Yivo:] די ערשטע יידישע שפראַכקאָנפֿעֶרענץ. באַריכטן, דאָקומענטן און אַפּפּקלאַנגען פֿון דער טשערנאָוויצער קאָנפֿעֶרענץ (= Di ershte). Vilna 1931, pp. 21–22, here p. 21.

7 David Roskies: *The Emancipation of Yiddish*, Prooftexts, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1981, pp. 28–42, here p. 28.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 29. On Birnbaum's turn to Yiddishism see Jess Olson: *Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity. Architect of Zionism, Yiddishism and Orthodoxy*. Stanford 2013 and Carmen Reichert: *Von Nathan Birnbaum zu Nosn Birnboym. Das Engagement eines Wiener Bürgers für die jiddische Sprache im Kontext der national-jüdischen Bewegungen*. In: *Mehrsprachigkeit – Identität – Authentizität*. Themenheft der Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik. Ed. by Sebastian Franz and Alfred Wildfeuer. Stuttgart 2021, No. 88, issue 1–2, pp. 240–260.

9 Joshua Fishman calls the active Yiddishists therefore a »proto-elite«. Fishman, *The Tshernovits Conference Revisited* (see note 5), p. 323.

10 Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 94–96, here p. 96.

11 See Emanuel S. Goldsmith: *Modern Yiddish Culture. The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*. New York 1997, pp. 45–69.

(predominantly illegal) Yiddish evening and elementary schools and by inscribing cultural autonomy, including the right to the use of the mother tongue into their party lines.¹² The first Yiddish newspapers were in the process of acquiring a larger space in public life and Yiddish literature and theatre were developing fast – but many Yiddish speakers did not consider Yiddish a cultural or a national language.¹³ Yiddish was neither recognized legally as a minority language in the Austrian and Russian Empires nor were the Jews recognized as an ethnic minority. Even Birnbaum, the president of the Yiddish Conference, had written in 1890: »Dieses Sprachenmischmasch ist nicht geeignet, Sprache eines Kulturvolkes zu werden, am allerwenigsten aber Sprache eines Volkes, das sich aus zweitausendjährigem Golus in die lichte Höhe nationaler Unabhängigkeit empor[zur]ringen, zu seiner sittlichen Größe zurückkehren will (sic).«¹⁴ Only the so-called Jewish Renaissance movement around Martin Buber and other German Jewish cultural Zionists had started after the turn of the Century to translate Yiddish literary texts into German, with a focus on Folk literature. Apart from these highly functionalized translations that played a major role in German cultural Zionism, Yiddish was barely considered a literary language worthy of learning or translating.

From the perspective of Yiddishism the Conference has particularly been discussed as a question of success or failure.¹⁵ But the immense *khutspe* (»impudence«) of these »jargonists«, as they were referred to by their adversaries, to call in a conference for Yiddish not only impacted its adherents and ardent opponents, the Hebraists. A larger public sphere both in Europe and in the Americas was informed about the event and took part in the discussions on the status of Yiddish. For this international Jewish public, as numerous articles in different languages show, the question of Yiddish was related to the future of the Jewish people, and the future of the people for many was linked to the future language of Jewish literature. The question of the succession of the throne was a crucial one that concerned the future of Jewish communities all over the world; it was often linked to the national question, but it was, as Peretz said in his opening

¹² On Yiddish and the Bund see: David Fishman: *The Bund and Modern Yiddish Culture*. In: *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*. Ed. by Zvi Gitelman. Pittsburgh 2003, pp. 107–120.

¹³ On the reevaluation of Yiddish through its speakers after the turn of the century, see David Fishman: *The Rise of Modern Yiddish culture*. Pittsburgh 2005.

¹⁴ This language mishmash is not suitable to be a language of a Kulturvolk (people of culture), least of all of a people rising from two thousand years of Golus in the clear heights of national independence, wants to return to his moral greatness. Nathan Birnbaum: *Der jüdische Jargon*. In: *Selbst-Emancipation* 3 (15) 1890, pp. 1–2.

¹⁵ See Evita Wiecki: *Nationsbildung durch Sprache* in this volume, pp. 3–15.

speech, also a consequence of social developments in gender and of class.¹⁶ For many, the question of which language(s) should succeed the throne was, after all, the question of which language could match the ideal of a national language according to the central European model of a literature linked to the people, forming its character and contributing to a transnational »Weltliteratur«.

1 Odd, Ridiculous or Dangerous? International Reactions to the Conference

The coverage of the discussions in Czernowitz went even beyond language borders. Correspondents from Paris to New York reported about the event, including some in non-Jewish periodicals. Gershom Bader, an orthodox, bilingual writer and journalist from New York, counted seventeen members of the international press, including representatives of German, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Ukrainian and Hebrew periodicals.¹⁷ When Nathan Birnbaum gave his opening speech in Yiddish, which he learned relatively late in life, he was aware of the world's eyes on Czernowitz. He tried to rise to the occasion by addressing critics who had deemed the venture ridiculous by its very nature: »The world loves to mock people who wish to go in new directions.«¹⁸ According to Birnbaum, this mockery would not harm the organizers and participants of the Conference – on the contrary, they would shake off the laughs and teach their detractors the truth. Czernowitz was for Birnbaum, as for many participants and commentators, a major step forward into the future of Yiddish.

After all, who would find it amusing to call for a conference where writers and intellectuals discuss grammar, spelling, literature and the status of their language? Looking into the newspapers shortly before the Conference, there was critique from different sides within the Yiddish language community, but also from outside of it, especially from the German-Jewish and partly from the Hebrew press as well. French, Russian and Polish periodicals did report about the

¹⁶ Peretz also argues that the rise of Yiddish is linked to a rise of secularism.

¹⁷ Gershom Bader: אין מאכען אַ לאַרם אויף אויף דעם אידישען שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ. העברעאִיסטען טשערנאָוטוויץ. In: Yidishes togblat, organ fir kol yisroel. New York, 17.09.1908, pp. 4–8, here p. 4. According to Baader, also Serbian and Croatian Jewish writers were on site.

¹⁸ Nathan Birnbaum: [Eröffnungsrede] In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 71–74, p. 71.

דער עולם האָט ליב אָפּצולאָכן פֿון מענטשן, וואָס עס גלוסט זיך זיי צו גיין אויף די נייע וועגן.

Conference, but kept the coverage on a relatively low level.¹⁹ In Germany and the German speaking part of Austria-Hungary, with their relatively high number of explicitly Jewish periodicals and with the Jewish Renaissance movement being on the rise, there was relatively extensive coverage of the event. For the cultural Zionists who gathered around Buber, Yiddish was a core element of the new, cultural Jewish identity that was to be based on Jewish art and literature. Besides the cultural Zionists, the German orthodoxy also showed strong interest in the Czernowitz Conference.²⁰

Press from different geographical, political and religious backgrounds attacked three major weak points of the Conference: the insubstantial funding,²¹ the overconfidence of the organizers in what a number of writers and intellectuals might accomplish during a five-day discussion²² and the question of the legitimization of potential resolutions made during the Conference. Some journalists praised the idea of a conference but doubted its viability or tried to downplay its importance.²³ Whereas Joshua A. Fishman comes to the conclusion that »most initial evaluations of the Conference were negative, primarily because it did not follow the party-line of any of the pro-Yiddish political parties of the time«,²⁴ it can be said that the overwhelming response of the international press from all Jewish backgrounds was a success in itself, not to forget the innumerable positive or at least weighing criticisms that gave the Conference the necessary momentum

19 [Anonymous]: [no title]. In: La Justice, 01.09.1908, p. 2. [Anonymous]: Echos. In: La liberté, 01.09.1908, p. 2. [Anonymous]: Echos. In: Messidor, 02.09.1908, p. 2. [Anonymous]: [no title]. In: Le radical, No. 247, 03.09.1908, 3. [Anonymous]: Avsrija-venetsija. In: moskovskija Vdomostci, 30. august 1908, No. 201, p. 4. Izraelita. Tygodnik społeczny, literacki i naukowy [The Israelite. Weekly for Society, Literature and Science], Year 43, No. 37, Warszawa, 18.09.1908, pp. 365–366.

20 The orthodox weekly »Der Israelit« reported not only about the Conference: No. 35, 27.08.1908, pp. 3–4, but also related to the reports in other periodicals: [Anonymous]: Der Jargon-»Fraind«. In: Der Israelit, No. 37, 10.09.1908, pp. 3–4. Further articles on the language debate appear after the Conference, such as Spectator: Die Gärung innerhalb der russischen Judenheit. In: Der Israelit, No. 35, 27.08.1908, pp. 1–2, No. 36, 03.09.1908, pp. 5–7 and No. 38 17.09.1908, pp. 4–6. Der Israelit reported on a regular basis about eastern European Jewries and their relation to language: E. g. in 1909 and 1911, there were series on Yiddish: [Anonymous]: Eine sterbende Sprache. In: Der Israelit, No. 6, 11.02.1909, pp. 4–6 and No. 8, 25.02.1909, p. 6. [Anonymous]: Das Jargon-Judentum. In: Der Israelit, No. 19, 11.05.1911, pp. 4–5.

21 [Anonymous]: די שפראַכ־קאָנפֿעֿרענץ. In: מאָרגען זשורנאַל, New York, 04.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 15–16, here p. 15. [Anonymous]: די ייִדישע שפראַך־קאָנפֿעֿרענץ. In: טאָגבליאַט, Lemberg, 23.–30. August 1908, in: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 19–20, here p. 19.

22 [Anonymous]: [no title], American Hebrew, New York, 14.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 17.

23 Lemberger togblat, between august 23 and august 30. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 19.

24 Fishman, The Tshernovits Conference revisited (see note 5), p. 328.

to have an impact and establish its topics within Jewish public discussion worldwide.

Although most of the German Jewish critics observed the Conference with interest, with some even expressing their support, one of the most mordant critiques came from Germany, published by Dr. Abraham Coralnik, a prominent journalist, author and editor who would later himself start to publish in Yiddish. Unlike the Yiddish commentators, Coralnik's digs address Birnbaum, the organizer of the Conference, and the low prestige of Yiddish itself:

Wirklich komisch! Menschen, die nie die Jargonsprache gesprochen haben, wollen sie mit fanatischem Eifer zur Nationalsprache erheben; andere, denen nicht einmal die Anfangsgründe einer wissenschaftlichen Grammatik, einer Sprachwissenschaft bekannt sind, wollen die Aristarche des Jargon sein!²⁵

Really weird! People who have never spoken the jargon language want to make it the national language with fanatical zeal; others who do not know anything about the science of grammar or linguistics want to be the Aristarchus of the jargon!

Subsequently, he opted for Hebrew as a national language, using the Hebrew bible as a major argument. According to Coralnik, the bible is a cultural possession founding a whole culture, compared to which the »kleine Gedichte« (»small poems«) or »bessere oder schlechtere Dramen« (»better or worse dramas«) in Yiddish pale in comparison.²⁶ Coralnik stands here in the tradition of the German movement *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (*science of Judaism*) that had already used the bible in the nineteenth century (as well as rabbinic and medieval Hebrew literature) to argue for a Jewish contribution to *Weltliteratur*. His presentation of Yiddish speakers as poorly educated reflects both western and eastern European prejudices that had been spread by the proponents of the Enlightenment (*Haskala*).²⁷

The Vienna based Zionist weekly *Jüdische Nationalzeitung*, on the contrary, supported the Conference with several long articles, accompanied by a three-paged fictional dialogue between a liberal and an assimilated Jew, a student, a politician, a »good Jew« and a »reader of the regular's table« (»Stammtischvorleser«) on the

²⁵ Abraham Coralnik: Die Sprachgesetzgeber von Czernowitz. In: Ost und West. Illustrierte Monatschrift für das gesamte Judentum, No. 10, Berlin, Oktober 1908, pp. 619–624, here p. 621.

²⁶ Coralnik, Die Sprachgesetzgeber (see note 25), p. 622.

²⁷ On the perception of Yiddish during German Enlightenment: See Jeffrey Grossmann: The Discourse on Yiddish in German: From the Enlightenment to the Second Empire. New York 2000.

matters of the Conference²⁸ and by a three-page introduction to Yiddish language and literature by Samuel Meisels.²⁹ In the fictional dialogue by Salomon Kassner, »Czernowitz« is introduced as a movement supported by the youth and Yiddish writers.³⁰ The student – depicted as an advocate of the Conference – and »a good Jew« informs the others about Yiddish and the Conference. The »old liberal« on the contrary sees Yiddish as a jargon, not a language, and believes that the contribution of the Jews should conform to the customs of the »great cultural nations« (»die großen Kulturvölker«) and fears that a different position on that question could incite antisemitism.³¹ The short piece ends with the plea of the student, supported by the reader, to go together to the literary evening of Yiddish writers that, as the student believes, will change their minds.³²

The few Polish-Jewish periodicals that existed in 1908 were rather critical of the Conference. With the relatively high number of Yiddish speaking Jews in Poland and the Polish national movement being on the rise (in which many Polish Jews engaged), the topic certainly caused quite a stir. Above all, the Polish journalists seem to understand the event in the context of its national meaning. The most important Jewish-Polish periodical of the time, the Warsaw-based weekly *Izraelita*, proclaimed the Conference to be a »konferencja żargonowa« (»Jargon conference«) and only referred to it in one report and two relatively short articles that draw on translations from the Yiddish and Hebrew press. The famous declaration of Yiddish being a national language of the Jews is presented in the opening comment as something that was primarily welcomed by the youth and Yiddish writers; its critique is couched in the words of two local celebrities, Hillel Zeitlin and Y. L. Peretz: The authors quote an article by Zeitlin who followed Peretz's suggestion to view Hebrew as the national language and Yiddish as the folk language.³³

Regarding Yiddish as a national Jewish language – and Jews as a nation, respectively – was a danger to all Jews who saw their national affiliation as being

28 Salomon Kassner: Die jüdische Sprachkonferenz. Gespräche. In: Neue Nationalzeitung. Jüdisch-politische Wochenschrift. Wien, No. 35, 04.09.1908, pp. 3–5.

29 Samuel Meisels: Der Jargon. In: Neue Nationalzeitung. Jüdisch-politische Wochenschrift. Wien, No. 35, 04.09.1908, pp. 10–12.

30 Kassners dialogue might have been inspired by the student delegation from Vienna that indeed participated in the Conference.

31 Kassner, Die jüdische Sprachkonferenz (see note 28), p. 4.

32 Kassner, Die jüdische Sprachkonferenz (see note 28), p. 5.

33 *Izraelita*. Tygodnik społeczny, literacki i naukowy [The Israelite. Weekly for Society, Literature and Science]. Year 43, No. 37, Warszawa, 18.09.1908, pp. 365–366. Many thanks to Carolin Piorun for her assistance with research and translation of the Polish press.

to the countries in which they were living, not only in Poland. For historical reasons, there were hardly any Jewish periodicals in France at that time. Religion was pushed into private space in France far more radically than in Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany. Nevertheless, there was at least one small report published in various newspapers, such as *La Justice*, *Le Radical* or *La Liberté*. It only gives some very basic information both about the Conference and about Yiddish itself, apparently assuming that the readers are not familiar with Yiddish at all:

Une conférence ayant pour but de s'entendre sur les principes du ›Yiddish‹, s'ouvre aujourd'hui à Czernowitz, en Autriche. De nombreuses notabilités du monde israélite s'y trouvent réunies. / Le Yiddisch (!) n'est nullement un patois hébraïque, comme on le suppose quelquefois. C'est un dialecte composé d'hébreu et de haut-allemand, dont les juifs allemands se servait au seizième siècle après leurs émigrations de Pologne, de Lithuanie et de Bohême. / Peu à peu ce dialecte s'est enrichi de divers éléments étrangers au point de devenir un véritable langage et de créer un mouvement littéraire très important. / La littérature yiddisch (!) a été extrêmement riche. Poètes, romanciers, philosophes, abondent partout où se sont groupés les israélites du vieux et du nouveau monde. / Cependant, à l'heure présente la production se ralentit sensiblement et une école puissante réclame l'unification du langage. / A la présente conférence des Sionistes, il a été décidé de retourner à la tradition du pur hébreu comme langue internationale juive. / D'un autre côté, certains écrivains Yiddish prétendent imposer encore leur dialecte. L'assemblée générale de Czernowitz va mettre les partisans de deux écoles aux prises pendant cinq jours.³⁴

A conference aimed at agreeing on the principles of ›Yiddish‹ opens today in Czernowitz, Austria. Many notable figures of the Israelite world are gathered there. / Yiddish is by no means a Hebrew patois, as it is sometimes assumed. It is a dialect composed of Hebrew and High German, which German Jews used in the sixteenth century after their emigrations from Poland, Lithuania and Bohemia. / Little by little this dialect was enriched with various foreign elements to the point of becoming a real language and creating a very important literary movement. / Yiddish literature was extremely rich. Poets, novelists, philosophers abound wherever the Israelites of the old and new world gather. / However, at the present time production is slowing down noticeably and a powerful school is calling for the unification of language. / At the latest Zionist Conference, it was decided to return to the tradition of pure Hebrew as the international Jewish language. / On the other hand, some Yiddish writers still aim impose their dialect. During the Czernowitz's general assembly supporters of two schools will dispute for five days.

As short as the article may be, the few sentences are very revealing about the French view on the Conference. First, the article appears in non-Jewish news-

³⁴ [Anonymous]: [no title]. In: *La Justice*, 1. September 1908, p. 2. The same typing errors have been made in the reprints in the other newspapers.

papers and is therefore written in a way that it can be understood without knowing the context of the debate. Furthermore, despite its brevity, the text contains some historical inaccuracy: Yiddish originates in the 10th Century in central Europe and the vast majority of its Slavic elements date back to the expulsions from German territories towards eastern European countries from the 12th Century onwards. Furthermore, it is especially striking that the word »national« is avoided as much as possible. Here, it is not the »status« of Yiddish that is being discussed at the Conference, but the far more diffusive »principles« of the language. According to the authors, the latest Zionist congress determined that Hebrew would be the *international* Jewish language, not *the national* language of the Jews, referring to the declaration of Hebrew as the official language of the Zionist organization during the Eighth Zionist Congress held in The Hague. Furthermore, they claim that a *school*, not a political group, is demanding the unification of the *language*, not of the Jewish people.

The reason for this sensitivity towards a national Jewish issue is of course the self-conception of the French nation that is based upon loyalty to the state, the principle of laicism and the French language. It is also interesting to see that the French relation to Yiddish is completely left out: It is described as a language that originated in Germany and then went eastwards. The history of Yiddish in the Ashkenazi communities of Alsace, that at the time of the Conference were under German rule, seems to be mostly forgotten. The reason for these two major omissions, first the omission of anything national and second the omission of the French connection to Yiddish, lies in the danger of being perceived as disloyal or unreliable citizens; only a decade had passed since the Dreyfuss affair and French Jews were understandably precautionary about being perceived as anything other than French. Taking part in a Jewish national discourse would bring them exposure that the French Jews did not want in any sense, especially since it would publicly associate them with Eastern European Jews.

In Russia, the non-Jewish press also seemed to fade out the national debate, but for different reasons. The unknown author of the few lines in the Moscow newspaper *Московскія Вѣдомости* (Moscow Bulletin) uses a pejorative term for Jews when entitling the Conference on the »Jewish language« (»Жидовский язык«). By deprecating the Yiddish language and calling it a »corrupted German«, the author emphasizes the opposition of the »jargonists« to the (Hebraist) Zionists:

Жидовский язык

На-дняхъ происходилъ в Черновцахъ съѣздъ еврейскихъ литераторовъ изъ Австрiи, Россiи, Румынiи и Америки. Съѣздъ совѣщался, главнымъ образомъ, о томъ, какъ добиться признанiя еврейскаго жаргона (испорченной нѣмецкой рѣчи)

самостоятельнымъ литературнымъ еврейскимъ языкомъ. Совещаніямъ пытались помѣшать сіонисты, которымъ очень не по вкусу новѣйшее теченіе среди еврейства, но жаргонисты, послѣ ожесточѣнной драки, вытолкали протестантовъ изъ зала. Въ концѣ концовъ, съѣздъ принялъ предложенія вѣнскаго публициста Бирнбаума и варшавскаго жаргоннаго поэта Переца, по вопросамъ жаргонныхъ правописанія, грамматики, словаря, литературы, сцены и печати, а также о признаніи жаргона самостоятельнымъ еврейскимъ языкомъ, на который рѣшено перевести и библію. Интересно, какъ отнесутся къ этой затѣѣ евреи испанскіе, да и южно-европейскіе, вовсе не понимающіе нѣмецко-еврейскаго жаргона?³⁵

Jewish jargon

A few days ago a congress of Jewish writers from Austria, Russia, Romania and America took place in Czernowitz. The congress dealt mainly with the question of how the Jewish jargon (corrupted German language) can be recognized as an independent Jewish literary language. The Zionists, not very keen on the latest trend among Jewry, tried to disturb the sessions, but the jargonists, after a fierce fight, pushed the protesters out of the hall. In the end, the congress accepted the suggestions of the Viennese journalist Birnbaum and the Warsaw jargon poet Peretz on the topics of jargon spelling, grammar, vocabulary, literature, theatre and press as well as on the recognition of jargon as an independent Jewish language, in which it was decided to translate the Bible. One wonders how the Spanish Jews and also the Southern European Jews, who do not understand the German-Jewish jargon at all, will react to this idea?

The national ambition of the Conference is mentioned only *ex negativo*, leading to the most telling argument in that context: that Yiddish could not be national since it was not the language of *all* Jews.

Instead of reporting about the resolution to recognize Yiddish as a *national* language, the authors referred to it as a »language of its own«, or an independent (самостоятельнымъ) language, focusing more on the question of whether Yiddish is a language or a dialect than on the actual debate itself.

Considering Jews as a nation, however, was less of a problem in Russia than in France. Shortly after the 1905 Revolution and after some brutal pogroms, Zionism was on the rise in Russia and Jewish emigration to the US and to Palestine were generally welcomed by the Russian authorities. The very distant and dismissive tone of the article with its focus on the riotous confrontation between Hebraists and Yiddishists seems to draw an image of the Jews as a (cultureless) community at odds with itself and the world. Yiddish seen as a

35 [Anonymous]: Avsrija-venetsija. In: moskovskija Vdomoscti, 30. august 1908, No. 201, p. 4. Many thanks to Lidia Viro for her help translating the article.

corrupted German rather than a national or cultural language seems to reflect that image.³⁶

The Hebrew Press was, as Joshua A. Fishman has stated, not against the Conference in principle. In his 1988 publication, he chooses four Hebrew articles as representative for some 40 articles that he had found. It is certainly not by chance that he decided to discuss the article by the bilingual writer Gershom Bader first. Bader's predominantly positive report about the Conference should, according to Fishman, not be neglected by saying that the article was positive as it was written by Bader:

דאס איז דאך געווען די צייט פֿון אַ פֿאַרשפּרייטער, אפֿילו פֿון אַ דאָמינאַנטער, צווייִשפּראַכֿיגֿקייט
בײַ שרײַבערס און אפֿילו בײַ גאָר אַ סך לײענערס, און צווישן זײ האָבן גאָר אַ סך (בתוכם נתן
בירנבוים, דעם פֿאַרטראַכטער, פֿאַררופֿער און אָרגאַניזאַטאָר פֿון דער טשערנאָוויצער
קאָנפֿערענץ), געשטרעבט בײדע שפּראַכן אַרײַנצונעמען און אַרײַנצוגלידערן אין דער
קולטורֿעקאָנאַמײע פֿונעם ייִדישן פֿאָלק.³⁷

That was the time of widely spread, even dominant bilingualism of writers and even of many readers, and among those quite many (among them Nathan Birnbaum, the mastermind, initiator and organizer of the Czernowitz Conference) who seek to absorb and to integrate both languages into the cultural economy of the Jewish people.

Besides these positive reactions and some polemical anti-Yiddish articles that mainly argue against Yiddish being *the* national language of the Jews,³⁸ the Hebrew press was particularly interested in the role of Peretz during the Conference and in his protest against the anti-Hebrew atmosphere.³⁹ According to Fishman, a major practical consequence of the Yiddish conference in Tshernovits was the first international Conference for Hebrew, which took place only one year later in Berlin. Unlike the Yiddish Conference that took place in the Austrian province, the Hebrew Conference in the center of Europe was not only attended by journalists and writers, but also by a number of linguists and even non-Jewish experts of Hebrew language and literature.⁴⁰

36 David A. Fishman: *The Rise of Modern Yiddish culture*. Pittsburgh 2005. On Yiddishism and Hebraism in Russia see Kenneth B. Moss: *Jewish Renaissance and the Russian Revolution*. Cambridge 2009, pp. 30–56.

37 Joshua A. Fishman: קאָנפֿערענץ טשערנאָוויצער אָפּרויף אויף דער טשערנאָוויצער קאָנפֿערענץ. In: *Oyfn shvel*, New York 1988, No. 271, pp. 8–13, here p. 9.

38 Fishman, דער העברעישער אָפּרויף (see note 37), pp. 11–12.

39 Fishman, דער העברעישער אָפּרויף (see note 37), p. 10.

40 Fishman, דער העברעישער אָפּרויף (see note 37), p. 12.

2 The National Question Rearing its Ugly Head: The Controversy about the »Language of the Future«

The reports in the international press show how serious the political dangers of the Conference were understood to be, even from abroad. Critics from all political and religious backgrounds linked the question of a Yiddish Language Conference to the national question even *before* the famous resolution. A letter to the editors in the aforementioned *Lemberger Togblat* might show quite plainly that the announcement of the Conference was enough to initiate the first crucial, public debates about Yiddish being a national language. Dr. Dovid Shrayber publicly addressed the committee of the Conference, questioning a note in the press saying that one needed to agree on the »agenda of the Conference« in order to attend it.⁴¹ What exactly was the agenda one was supposed to agree with? The answer given by Yoysef Vaysman in the name of the Czernowitz Conference committee revealed that he considered the acceptance of Yiddish the core question of the Conference because it was linked to the national question:

די טענדענץ פון דער שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ איז [...]:
1. באַפֿרדערן די יידישע שפראַך, קולטור און קונסט.
2. אָנערקענונג פֿון דער יידישער שפראַך אין פּאָליטישן זין, וואָס איז דער יסוד פֿון אָנערקענונג
פֿון דער יידישער נאַציאָנאַליטעט און איז, ווייניקסטענס אין עסטרייך, אויף דער טאַגעסאַרדנונג.⁴²

The goals of the language conference are [...]:

1. To promote Yiddish language, culture and art.
2. The recognition of the Yiddish language in a political sense which is the basis for a recognition of the Jewish nationality and is, at least in Austria, on the agenda.

Whoever opposed these goals, Vaysman writes, was against Yiddish and should therefore not participate. The Conference had, as this little note in the press shows, a sort of double-bind-tendency. On the one hand, everyone who was in favor of Yiddish was expected to participate and on the other, the recognition of Yiddish was linked to the very clear political aim of recognizing the Jewish people as a national minority in the multi-ethnic state of Austria-Hungary.

⁴¹ Lemberger Togblat: »geerte redatsyon!« 26. August 1908, No. 164. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 21–22.

⁴² Lemberger Togblat: »a briv tsu der redaktsye.« 30. August 1908, No. 167. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 22.

The organizers of the Conference did not quite agree on that topic themselves. As the later reconstructed report⁴³ of the pre-conference meeting on August 29th shows, there had in fact been a heated discussion on the question of what the Conference meant in relation to the Hebrew language. To Nomberg, who raised the question, it was important to document in an explicit resolution how deeply the organizers were committed to the Hebrew language. His suggestion for the wording of the resolution is:

מיר דריקן אויס אונדזער אמתדיקע סימפאטיע צו דער העברעיִשער שפראך.⁴⁴

Otherwise, he feared, the »popularity and authority« of the authors present at the Conference might suffer.⁴⁵ Peretz, on the other hand, pointed out that no one could blame the Conference even if it did not publish a resolution on Hebrew. It was well known that he wrote both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, and if there was a conference on Hebrew he would likewise attend. Sholem Ash agreed with Peretz in this regard but emphasized the risks that such a debate could pose. To him, the question about the relationship to Hebrew could have the potential to destroy all their plans.⁴⁶ The multilingual writer Shmuel Ayznshtot claimed that despite the great number of bilingual authors, Peretz was the only one to participate in the Conference.⁴⁷ However, Peretz stressed that his participation did not mean that he was betraying Hebrew in any way.

In Peretz' opinion Hebrew was the national language and Yiddish the folk language.⁴⁸ His argument is historical. Hebrew was the language spoken at the moment the nation was born and is therefore the national language. Yiddish on

43 The original protocol that Nathan Birnbaum's son Salomon had kept was lost. According to Salomon's son David Birnbaum, after the Conference, Nathan Birnbaum asked his son Salomon to work on the protocols, editing them and putting them in order. After he finished doing so, he was asked to hand them over to a young man named Gottlieb, a participant in the Conference. It is not known what happened to the papers. (David Birnbaum in mails to the author, 26.10.2018 and 03.03.2021).

44 Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 64–66, here p. 65. We express our official sympathy of the Hebrew language.

45 Di ershte (see note 6), p. 65.

46 Di ershte (see note 6), p. 65.

47 A claim that was not exact; well-known bilingual authors were indeed missing, but Sholem Ash, Mates Mizes und Gershom Bader who also published in Hebrew, took part in the Conference.

48 Di ershte (see note 6), p. 65: פֿאַלקסשפראַך ייִדיש, אַזוי העברעיִש, פֿאַלקסשפראַך ייִדיש. אונדזער נאַציאָנאַלע שפראַך איז העברעיִש, פֿאַלקסשפראַך ייִדיש. אונדזער. In: פרץ וועגן דער ייִדישער שפראַך. [Y. L. Peretz]: י.ל. In: sot-syaldemokrat, Cracow, No. 40, 2. Oktober. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 133–134.

the contrary is a language spoken only at a certain time by a part of the Jewish people and is therefore not tied as closely to the destiny of the people as the Hebrew language.⁴⁹ Here, Peretz clearly disagreed with the above mentioned agenda of the Conference and he seemed to be certain that he was not the only one. He therefore believed that there would not be broad agreement on the question of Hebrew at this conference. Hence, he suggested refraining from passing any resolutions.

Ayznshtot's remark about the missing bilingual authors and Nomberg's comment on the risk of losing authority brought the problem to the point: More than the journalist's objections, the absence of and critique from major Yiddish writers were hurtful for its organizers. First and foremost, the two other »classic authors«, Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Yankev Rabinovitch) and Mendele Moykher Sforim/Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, were missing. Sholem Aleichem officially chalked his absence up to health reasons, but it was more likely out of fear of unpleasant political turns the Conference could potentially take.⁵⁰ Ahad Ha'am had called the Conference a »purim-shpil«,⁵¹ and Hillel Zeitlin, Reuben Brainin and Morris Rosenfeld wrote critical and sneering comments.

The role of Y. L. Peretz in the development of Yiddish has been discussed broadly⁵² and he certainly played a dominant role before, during and after the Conference, despite the fact that he could not prevent the resolution from being accepted. In his opening speech, Peretz tried to put the national question into a multi-national context and to detach it from the one-nation one-language one-state-ideology inspired by Herder and German romanticism that was predominant in Austria-Hungary at the time of the Conference:

דער שטאַט, וועלכן מען פלעגט אָפּפערן קליינע און שוואַכע פעלקער ווי פאַרצייטן דעם מולך, דער שטאַט, וואָס האָט צוליב די אינטערעסן פֿון די הערשנדע קלאַסן און פעלקער געמוזט אַלץ ניוועלירן, אויסגלייכן: איין אַרמיי, איין שפּראַך, איין שול, איין פּאַליציי און איין פּאַליצייילעך רעכט, - דער שטאַט פּאַרלירט זײַן גלאַנץ.

דער רויך, וואָס פלעגט זיך אזוי געדיכט און פֿעט וויקלען איבער זײַן מזבח, ווערט וואָס דינער און צעשטרייטער. דאָס 'פּאַלק', נישט דער שטאַט, איז דאָס מאָדערנע וואָרט! די נאַציאָן, נישט דאָס פּאַטערלאַנד!⁵³

49 Di ershte (see note 6), p. 66.

50 Fishman, Thsernovits Conference revisited (see note 9), p. 326.

51 Achad Ha'am, letter to A. L. Levinski, 03.11.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 274.

52 Dan Miron: From Continuity to Contiguity. Toward a new Jewish Literary Thinking. Stanford 2010, pp. 82–84. About the importance of Peretz for the development of Yiddishism, see: Ruth Wisse: I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture. Seattle et al. 1991.

53 Peretz, ערעפֿנונג־רעדע, In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 74–76, p. 75.

The nation-state, to which small and weak peoples used to be sacrificed – as children were in ancient times to Molokh – the nation-state, that because of the interest of the ruling classes and peoples had had to level everything, needed to make everything uniform: one army, one language, one school, one police, and one civil law – that nation-state is losing its luster.

The smoke that used to wrap itself around the sacrificial altar so dense and fat, is becoming thinner and is being dispersed. The folk, not the nation-state, is the modern concept! The nation, not the Fatherland!

Peretz answered with a people-based nationalism to the territory-based nationalism of political Zionism, but also of surrounding nationalisms. His approach was deeply based in Jewish tradition and it was to some extent similar to the one Nathan Birnbaum would embrace many years later, when he decided that religion was the only way to preserve Jewish identity.⁵⁴ Birnbaum's opening speech was hardly mentioned in the press and if it was, it was mentioned in regard to his Yiddish-speaking skills and not in the context of the strong impact he made upon his listeners. Regardless, Peretz's speech seems to have made a strong impression on his audience.⁵⁵

As Nomberg had feared, just the announcement of the conference alone was enough to provoke the reproach of separatism. The *Lemberger togblat* for example asked why one should organize a conference for Yiddish literature alone if Jewish culture was a bilingual one?⁵⁶ According to the critic, the question of the language as well as »the question of literature or literatures« (די פֿראַגע וועגן (ליטעראַטור און ליטעראַטורן) both need to be solved, and both concern Yiddish and Hebrew writers alike. At the conference itself, emotions were stirred up. An adherent of the Hebraist Fraction interrupted Peretz' speech by accusing him and the Conference of plotting against Zionism, leading to a boisterous uproar.⁵⁷

It may come as no surprise that Yiddishist, socialist, social democratic and some cultural Zionist periodicals tended to support the Conference.⁵⁸ The journal

54 Peretz's concept of nationalism reminds both of the concept of cultural autonomy that was pursued by the Bund at that time and of Dubnow's diaspora nationalism. On Birnbaum's turn to religion see Reichert (note 8).

55 Gershom Bader holds the view that Birnbaum did not deserve the applause he received after reading his prepared speech. Gershom Bader: [no title], ייִדישע טאַגבֿלאַט, New York, 17.09.1908. In: *Di ershte* (see note 6), p. 70.

56 [Anonymous]: [no title]. *Lemberger togblat*, 23–30. August, No. 162–167. In: *Di ershte* (see note 6), pp. 19–21, here p. 20.

57 Jacob Rothstein: Reactions of the American Yiddish Press to the Tshernovits Language Conference of 1908 as a Reflection of the American Jewish Experience. In: *Linguistics*, Vol. 15, No. 193, pp. 103–120, here p. 103.

58 Such as *der sotsayldemokrat* in Cracow or *der forverts* in New York.

»Undzer lebn« from Odessa, for example, calls the Conference in the title of the article »our« conference and appeals to the Conference's participants not to get lost in etymological discussions, but to focus on the major problem of creating a Jewish people.⁵⁹ The religious orthodoxy on the contrary seemed to be struggling to develop a clear position towards the Conference and its aims.

Orthodox circles observed the event in Czernowitz from all over the world, but they seemed uncertain on the question of the status of Yiddish as a national language. The religious Zionist weekly *המצפה* (*Ha-mitspe*, »the observer«) from Cracow insistently recognized the importance of the conference for the development of *national* culture. Yiddish is only a »Galut language«, but it is deeply connected with the people's soul and must therefore be encouraged.⁶⁰ Just as the secular periodicals, *Ha-mitspe* follows the Herderian cultural theory according to which language and literature reflect and form the character of a people.⁶¹ The *New Yorker* *דער מארגען זשורנאל* (*Morgn zhurnal*, »Morning journal«) on the other hand, is very skeptical about the program and does not even see any need to translate the Tanach into Yiddish (after all, there were German translations). It seems not to be aware of the inner-Austrian context of the debate and its national implications:

ווער קען עס צווינגען, פראנקרייך, ענגלאנד און דאָס 'הייליקע' רוסלאַנד, זיי זאָלן אַנערקענענען די ייִדישע שפּראַך?⁶²

It is interesting to note that these first reactions by the American orthodoxy do not take religious arguments into account. Other than the above mentioned Yiddish and orthodox periodicals, the German Jewish weekly *Der Israelit*, representing German orthodoxy, does use religious arguments in its report: One is *expressis verbis* not interested in the question whether Yiddish is a language from a linguistic point of view nor whether it can assert itself as a national language; the core matter of interest is that 10 million Jews speak Yiddish and »need [moral]

59 [Anonymous]: שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ: וועגן אונדזער לעבן. In: אונדזער לעבן, 27.08.1908. In: *Di ershte* (see note 6), pp. 22–24, here p. 24.

60 [Anonymous]: די קונפערענץ פֿון פריינט פֿון דער ייִדישער ספראַך. In: *המצפה*, 28. August 1908, No. 34, *Di ershte* (see note 6), pp. 26–28, here p. 26.

61 *Di ershte* (see note 6), pp. 26–27.

62 A. Tanenboym: גײע ביכר און צושריפֿטן. In: *morgn-zhurnal*, New York, 10.08.1908. In: *Di ershte* (see note 6), p. 16. Who can force France, England or »holy« Russia to recognize the Yiddish language? As Rothstein already remarked in his 2009 article »Reactions of the American Yiddish Press to the Tshernovits Language Conference of 1908 as a Reflection of the American Jewish Experience«, the American Yiddish press seemed not to be familiar with the context of the Conference in Europe. See Rothstein, *Reactions* (see note 57).

instruction« (»müssen Belehrung haben«).⁶³ The second major argument for Yiddish that the anonymous author makes is that its use can help to protect the Jewish community from outside influences and thus from assimilation. The Czernowitz Conference is assessed according to these values. According to the author, it would be the task of the Conference to create the conditions for a literature that would lead young people to moral purity. However, given the »immoral« writings of the most popular contemporary authors, many of whom were involved in the Conference, the author heavily doubts the utility of the Conference in that respect:

Die Einberufer der Konferenz sind **Salom Asch**, der Verfasser von »Gott der Rache«, **Peretz**, der sein hervorragendes Talent, die besten Gaben seines Geistes daran setzt, alles Erhabene im Judentum in den Staub zu zerren, und endlich **Morris Rosenfeld**, der geniale Dichter des Golus, der aber nur Elend und Leid, Ungemach und Verzweiflung sieht [...]. / Die Herren in Czernowitz werden daher auch die ethische Seite außer Acht lassen [...]. Sie werden lediglich **über jüdische Orthographie, jüdische Grammatik, jüdische Bühnen und Schauspieler** verhandeln, Dinge, über die eine Einigkeit niemals erzielt werden wird und erzielt werden kann. Ein Punkt der Tagesordnung lautet zwar: »**Die jüdische Jugend und die jüdische Sprache**«. Allein auch dieser Punkt ist bereits von den Vertretern der Jargonliteratur in der Praxis leider so gründlich behandelt worden, daß von den theoretischen Verhandlungen in dieser Beziehung nicht mehr viel erwartet werden darf.⁶⁴

The conveners of the conference are Salom Ash, the author of »God of Vengeance«, Peretz, who uses his outstanding talent and the best gifts of his mind to drag everything sublime in Judaism to dust, and finally Morris Rosenfeld, the brilliant poet of Golus, who only sees misery and suffering, hardship and despair [...]. / The gentlemen in Czernowitz will therefore also disregard the ethical side [...]. They will only negotiate about Jewish orthography, Jewish grammar, Jewish stages and actors, things about which agreement will never and can never be reached. One item on the agenda is: »The Jewish youth and the Jewish language«. Unfortunately, this point too has already been treated by the representatives of the Jargon literature so thoroughly in practice that not much can be expected from the theoretical negotiations in this regard.

This quote shows the ambiguity that German Jewish orthodoxy felt about Yiddish: On one hand, they had great hopes in the fact that promoting a Jewish language could help to prevent assimilation, on the other hand an event designed to encourage »immoral« literature was considered a threat. No other language

⁶³ Der Israelit, No. 35, 27.08.1908, p. 3. On the statistics of Yiddish speakers see Arthur Ruppin: Die Juden der Gegenwart. Berlin 1904, pp. 132–140.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 4. Emphasis by the author of the article.

had as much potential to »misguide« readers, especially non-secular readers, to lead a less religious life as Yiddish.⁶⁵

The argument for Yiddish as an important part of national Jewish culture that was expressed in *Ha-Mitspe* from Cracow can neither be found in the American-orthodox nor in the German-orthodox article. This comes as no surprise since Jewry in Germany – just like in France – was defined purely as a religion. By contrast, the American concept of a nation of will did not require citizens to give up their original cultural or ethnic identity in order to be considered loyal citizens. The debate about Jewish nationality became more of a discussion about ethnic affiliation in European nation-states like Germany or France than it was in the U.S., where Jewish ethnicity was but one of countless different ethnic identities. In Austria-Hungary, competing models of statehood and nationhood clashed:⁶⁶ The state was constructed as a multinational Empire, but its cultural theory was dominated by the Romantic Herder-reception of a *Kultur-nation*, a nation of culture according to which statehood is based on a shared culture.⁶⁷

The mere announcement of the Conference inaugurated a debate about nation and language. During the Conference, turmoil emerged when Peretz suggested founding an organization to advance Yiddish. An adherent of the Zionist camp considered this idea an attack on Zionism and several participants of the Conference tried to physically attack him as a result, but were restrained. According to Bader, who as we have seen earlier was not against Yiddish but from his orthodox perspective was rather in favor of Hebrew, the discussion almost ended in fisticuffs.⁶⁸ If we can trust the reports in the Hebrew press, there were also physical confrontations on the streets of Czernowitz that even required intervention by the police.⁶⁹ Eretz Israel soon became the epicenter of the so-called מלחמת השפות, the »war of languages« in Hebrew, or ריב הלשוניות, »fight of

65 In the 19th century, German Orthodoxy had defended its use of German, as opposed to Yiddish, as a language of sermons in the synagogue, cf. [Anonymous]: Der sogenannte Chassidismus und seine Vorkämpfer. In: Der Israelit, No. 22, 30.05.1866, pp. 375–379.

66 Pieter M. Judson: Introduction. In: Pieter M. Judson and Marsha M. Rozenblit: Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe New York, Oxford 2009, p. 1–18.

67 On the importance of the *Kultur-nation* idea in the Jewish and Yiddish context see: Mark H. Gelber: Melancholy Pride. Nation, Race, and Gender in the German Literature of Cultural Zionism. Tübingen 2000 and Verena Dohrn: Bundistische und folkistische Konzeptionen der *Kultur-nation* – inspiriert von Johann Gottfried Herder. In: Christoph Schulte (ed.): Hebräische Poesie und jüdischer Volksgeist. Die Wirkungsgeschichte von Johann Gottfried Herder im Judentum Mittel- und Osteuropas. Hildesheim 2003, p. 167–179.

68 Bader, אין טשערנאָטוויץ (see note 6), p. 8.

69 Fishman, דער העברעישער אָפּרוי, (see note 37), p. 13.

languages», in Yiddish. Riots about speeches or lectures in languages other than Hebrew happened again and again. The fact that the anniversary of the Czernowitz Conference caused physical fights between Yiddishists and Hebraists in Tel Aviv shows that the Conference had become a symbol for Yiddishism not only inside the Yiddishist community, but also for their adversaries.⁷⁰

3 The Language Debate and Class

On one hand, Peretz tried to detach the national question from the question of territory. On the other hand, he put the national question in context of three other major developments: The emancipation of the working class, of the women and from religion.

דריי אינערלעכע באַפֿרייַונגס־מאָמענטן האָבן אונדזער באַוועגונג געשאַפֿן.
[...]

עס הייבט זיך אָן באַפֿרייַען דער ייִדישער אַהמוֹן, דער אַרעמער ייִדישער אַעם־האַרץ. ער פֿאַרלירט זײַן צוטרוין אי צום למדן אי צום גרויסן גביר. דעם גרויסן גבירס «צדקה» מאַכט אים נישט סאַט, דעם גרויסן למדנס תורה גיט אים ניט קיין גליק. דער «המוֹן» הייבט אָן אַליין צו בעדעקן, צו פֿילן, וויל לעבן אין אייגן אַרעם לעבן פֿאַר זיך. און עס וואַקסט אויף דער חסידיסם, די תורה פֿאַר אַלע.

און דאָס איז דער ערשטע מאָמענט.

ייִדיש הייבט זיך נישט אָן מיט אייזיק מאיר דיק. דאָס חסידישע מעשהלע – דאָס איז דער «בראשית». שבחי בעל שם און אַנדערער ווונדער־געשיכטן זענען פֿאַלקס־דיכטונגען, דער ערשטער פֿאַלקס־דיכטער איז ר' נחמן פֿון בראַצלאַוו מיט זײַנע זיבן בעטלער.

עס האָט אויך ערוואַכט און פֿאַרלאַנגט עפעס פֿאַר זיך די ייִדישע פֿרוי, דאָס ייִדישע ווייב, דאָס ייִדישע מיידל. און עס באַווייַסן זיך אַווייבערישע ביכלעך. פֿון יבֿרי־טייטש וועט אַ מאַמע־לשון [...]

און צוויי שפראַכן האָט גאָך דאָס ייִדישע פֿאַלק. אַ שפראַך פֿאַר למדנים אין בית־המדרש: לשון, גמרא־לשון און די צווייטע פֿאַרן «המוֹן», און פֿאַר דער ייִדישער טאַכטער.⁷¹

Three inner liberating moments have created our movement.

[...]

The poor Jewish masses (hamoyn), the uneducated people (amoret) begin to liberate themselves. They lose confidence in both the great religious scholar, and in the great rich man. The rich man's charity (tsdoke) does not fill his stomach; the Talmudic scholar's Toyre doesn't make him happy. The masses long, feel, want to live their own poor lives in their own way. And Hassidism emerges, the toyre for everybody.

⁷⁰ The Sentinel, 12.10.1928, p. 25. The Sentinel, 11.01.1929, p. 45.

⁷¹ Y. L. Peretz: ערעפֿונג־רעדע. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 74–78, here pp. 74f. Translation is mine (C. R.).

And this is the first moment.

Yiddish does not begin with Isaac Meir Dick.⁷² The Hassidic tale, that is the beginning (bereyshis). The tales in praise of The Baal-Shem and other tales are folk-poetry. The first folk-poet is Reb Nakhman of Bratslav and his seven beggars.

Also, the Jewish woman, the Jewish wife, the Jewish girl awoke and demanded something for herself. And women's books have made their success. Out of ›ivre-taytsh‹, Judeo-German, (a) ›mother-tongue‹ was born ...

And the Jewish people still has two languages: a language for the scholars in the house of study – the language of the Toyre, the language of the Gemore, and the second for the masses and the Jewish daughter.

The Yiddish movement attempted to transform at least two things at once: Yiddish, from a vernacular to a cultural language, and the Yiddish-speaking masses to a Jewish nation. Unlike the majority of the Conference that voted for the famous resolution, Peretz did not regard Yiddish as a national language as of *yet*, rather he still regarded it as the Jewish folk language. His reason to deny Yiddish the status of nation-ness, as he had repeatedly pointed out in the preconference and conference, was that it lacked a high-brow literary tradition. It was a new phenomenon to which he as a person had significantly contributed, namely that professional writers who were able to write in Hebrew decided to write in Yiddish.

As pointed out in one of his later articles, Peretz defines a national language as one that is born at the same time of its people, contains its cultural heritage, and has been understood in all places and times.⁷³ It is certainly not a coincidence that in the years following the Conference, many scholars discovered their interest in the history of Yiddish language and history. One consequence of this development was the foundation of the YIVO institute in 1925.

In contrast to Mendele Moykhter Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitch) and Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Yankev Rabinovitch), Peretz has left us no personal, non-literary description of his path to Yiddish. Unfortunately, Peretz died before completing his literary autobiography *Zikhroynes* (Memories), leaving us only a section on how he became a reader⁷⁴ – the first step in becoming a writer – but no information about his decision to write in Yiddish. What we do have are some of his

⁷² Isaac Meir Dick was a Yiddish and Hebrew writer of the mid-19th century, considered to be a pioneer both of the Haskala and of secular Yiddish literature.

⁷³ [Y. L. Peretz]: פרץ וועגן דער יידישער שפראך .י.ל. In: סאָציאלדעמאָקראַט, Cracow, No. 40, 02.10.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 133–134, here p. 133.

⁷⁴ I. L. Peretz: My Memoirs. Translated from the Yiddish by Fred Goldberg. New York 1964, p. 183.

Hebrew letters, in which he describes his literary theory.⁷⁵ According to Nakhmen Mayzels, in a letter to Yona Yehoshua, Peretz mentioned the following reason for his shift to Yiddish: חביבים עלי רעיוני, לא אוכל לראותכם כגנבים בנחישותים.⁷⁶ But as the abovementioned speech at the Conference suggests, the fact that Yiddish was the only language that allowed him to reach the Jewish masses must also have played a major role in his decision.⁷⁷

With Abramovitch and Peretz writing in Yiddish, many more followed. Yet, in 1908 a large part of the Jewish public was not ready to accept Yiddish as a literary language. Apart from the historical argument that Peretz himself used to speak against Yiddish as a national language, the defenders of Hebrew accused Yiddish authors of using Yiddish more for financial than for ideological reasons. The Hebrew poet Hillel Zeitlin, who also published in Yiddish, accused those writers who published primarily in Yiddish of making easy money.⁷⁸ According to Zeitlin, one could live pretty well from the very poor jargon whereas writers as Ch. N. Bialik had trouble to make ends meet.⁷⁹ It should also be noted that Bialik himself used the metaphor of the poor worker that has been exploited as an argument against writing in non-Jewish languages: According to him, the capital goes to the factory owner who sees his workers as parasites.⁸⁰

Despite Zeitlin's argument, Yiddish writers were often seen as poor. In the previously mentioned *Lemberger togblat* (Lemberger Daily) that expressed fear of Yiddish separatism, the author wrote that some poor writers («שרייבער-קבצנים»),⁸¹

75 See David Roskies: The Small Talk of I. L. Peretz. In: In Geveb. A Journal of Yiddish Studies, May 2016, pp. 1–28.

76 Nakhmen Mayzels: זײַן לעבן און שאַפֿן. ל. ל. פרײַז. New York 1945, p. 32. I like my ideas, so I do not like to see them in chains.

77 Abramovich (Mendele Moykher Sforim), the other bilingual «classic», wrote in his «ביאָגראַפֿיע» that the lack of literary critics in Hebrew, which he sees as a symptom of a lack of readers, made him switch to Yiddish: «Back then I thought: I am watching the life of my people, and I want to give them stories drawn from Jewish roots in the sacred language. But most of the people do not know this language, and they speak Yiddish [ivre-taytsh], and what is the purpose of all the writer's work... if it does not bring any benefit to the people?» Shmuel Yankev Abramovich: מוכר-ספרים פֿון מענדעלע ווערק פֿון מענדעלע, Vol. 19, New York 1928, pp. 147–171, here p. 164.

78 In the 1930s, a debate about «shund» (trashy) literature launched, in which Molodovsky agitated against the authors of shund novels. See Efrat Gal-Ed: Niemandssprache. Itzik Manger – ein europäischer Dichter. Berlin 2016, pp. 332–335.

79 Hillel Zeitlin: וואָך-נאַטיצן. In: דער הײַנט, Warschau, 04.09.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 36.

80 Gal-Ed, Niemandssprache (see note 78), p. 328.

81 Lemberger togblat, 23.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 19.

despite perhaps being rich in talent and warm feelings («וואָרעמע געפֿילן») barely had the capital to create decent Yiddish literature, a theater and a press.⁸² The fact that this criticism came from Lemberg (Lviv) of all places, may also be due to the fact that in the city, as a stronghold of Yiddish culture, it was considered inappropriate to hold such an important conference in a provincial town like Czernowitz, in which Yiddish was indeed spoken by the poor, mostly Hasidic Jews.⁸³ But the Lemberg newspaper was not the only one to mock the poverty of the conference participants. An anonymous contributor to the orthodox New York *Morn zhurnal* wrote that he recognized the literary authority of the conveners – above all Mendele Moykher Sforim –, but as far as business matters were concerned, the author believed that America was the expert. Consequently, the critic considered the project to be financially unstable and therefore decided not to send a correspondent to Czernowitz. The amount he might otherwise have had to pay for the miscalculation would have been too great.⁸⁴

One of the major aims of the Conference was to address the problem of poverty among writers and create better conditions for them. We know that Yiddish writers were not only viewed as poor, but that a very large majority of them were indeed poor.⁸⁵ One reason for the limited participation of Russian writers⁸⁶ was simply that they could not afford to attend the Conference. The fact that publishing rights were often a very complicated issue was a challenge that Yiddish writers had to face. As the article in the *Lemberger togblat* mentioned, publishing houses as well as authors were suffering financial losses due to illegal reprints. Y. L. Peretz thus suggested establishing an association of all Yiddish publishing houses that would organize simultaneous publication of new releases both in America and Europe to undermine pirated copies.⁸⁷

82 Die ershte (see note 6), pp. 19–21, here p. 20.

83 Most of the Yiddish-speaking Jews living in Czernowitz were Hasidim. The few known poets who are associated with Czernowitz were newcomers: Eliezer Steinberg came from Bessarabia, Shloyme Bikl from Galicia. Itzik Manger was born in 1901 and left Czernowitz in 1927.

84 [Anonymous]: די שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ. In: מאָרגן־זשורנאַל, New York, 04.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 15–16, p. 15.

85 Poverty is an omnipresent motif in Yiddish autobiographies. Helen Londynski's autobiography »in shpigl fun nekhtn« for example (that has hardly been noticed by scholars) gives detailed insights into the economic situation of the Warsaw writers' circle in the early 20th century. Helen Lonsynski: in shpigl fun nekhtn. New York 1972.

86 Gershon Bader, אין טשערנאָטוויץ (see note 6), p. 8.

87 [Anonymous]: ייִדישע שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ. In: טאָגבלאַט, No. 162–167, pp. 23–30. August. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 19–21, p. 20.

Whereas Herzl had dictated a formal dress code for the Zionist Congresses, including tailcoats, white ties and top hats, the dress code of the Czernowitz Conference was more modest. As the writer Mordkhe Spektor reported in an article called »מאַמע־לשון פֿון יום־טובּ« («The Festival of the Mother Tongue»), the participants of the Conference did not did not travel in first or even second class on the trains to Czernowitz, nor did they stay in first class hotels.⁸⁸ Spektor presented them as pioneers and folk heroes, rather than as intellectuals, as ordinary people with walking sticks acting from a pure love of the people and its language.⁸⁹ Zeitlin made fun of this image in his critique of the Conference.⁹⁰

Yet, for some socialists participating in the Conference, the event was still too bourgeois. During the discussion about Yiddish being a national language, Abraham Vevyorka argued that the resolution about Yiddish and Hebrew could not be considered valid, since the Russian workers were not included in the debate.⁹¹

Outside of the Yiddish-speaking world, the socio-economic aspect of the Conference was less often discussed. The existence of different western European organizations which supported Russian Jewry, such as »Der Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden« and »L'alliance israélite universelle«, as well as numerous efforts to collect funds for Jewish refugees from the East and the Jews in Russia, show that many people were not only aware of the dire financial situation of the Yiddish speakers in Russia, but also of the difficult legal situation they faced. Since poverty and persecution were not part of the idealized image of Eastern Jewry, they were not acceptable topics for the reports in the German Jewish press.

4 The Language Debate and Gender

Although the question of which language would be the future language of the Jewish people concerned women as much as men, only one woman, the socialist

⁸⁸ Mordkhe Spektor: דער יום־טובּ פֿון מאַמע־לשון. In: אונדזער לעבן, Warschau, 30. August (d. i. 17. August), p. 34.

⁸⁹ Mordkhe Spektor: דער יום־טובּ פֿון מאַמע־לשון. In: אונדזער לעבן אין וואַרשע, 30.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 34–36, here p. 34.

אויף דער קאָנפֿערענץ זענען געקומען די מענטשן ווי פֿאַלקס העלדן אין די אַמאָליקע צייטן מיט דעם שטעקן אין דער האַנד, צוליב זייער גרויסע ליבע צום ייִדישן פֿאַלק און צו זיין לשון.

⁹⁰ Hillel Zeitlin: vokh-notisn. In: der haynt, No. 190, Warschau, 04.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 36–38, here p. 37.

⁹¹ Gershom Bader: [no title]. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 105.

Ester Frumkin⁹² from Minsk who belonged to the left-wing faction of the Bund, participated actively in the Conference.⁹³ Frumkin not only played a major role, she was the doyen of the Bundist Faction and a major opponent of both the resolution and of Peretz's suggestion to found a transnational Yiddish office. Whereas »Ester« is mentioned in some Yiddish periodicals, most articles in other languages tend not to name the participants in the debate at all. The German weekly »Jüdische Zeitung« for example does mention her as a female representative (»Vertreterin der Bundisten«) of the Bund, but not by name.⁹⁴ The fact that only her first name is stated in some periodicals shows how differently women were perceived in public. As if something private had moved into the public sphere, women tended to be identified by their first names, whereas men were presented by their full names or last names only. This is, of course, a phenomenon that not only affected Yiddish. Even today, the famous Hebrew poet Rachel Bluwstein Sela for example is mostly called Rachel or Rachel »the poetess« (רחל המשוררת).⁹⁵ Interestingly, Gershom Bader in the orthodox periodical *yidishes togblat* also omits Frumkin's name. It is unclear whether Ester Frumkin's name was omitted due to her lesser relevance in the U.S. context as a Bundist spokesperson – or if Bader considered it inappropriate for a woman to make her voice heard in public.

Frumkin spoke at the Conference for the Bundists, not for the women. It was Peretz who brought up the relation of Yiddish to women, but unlike the other two major points he had raised as being crucial for the development of Yiddish, gender did not play any significant role in the discussions during the Conference. This is worth mentioning, since Yiddish had traditionally been the language of the Jewish home, only serving as a literary language for those unable to read in Hebrew – mostly women and uneducated men. In 1919, the writer and literary critic Shmuel Niger in his essay *די ייִדישע ליטעראַטור און די לעזערין* (»Yiddish literature and the woman reader«) paid tribute to the important role women played in the development of modern Yiddish literature, both as a major target

92 Ester Frumkin was born Khaye Malke Lifshits; her married names were Frumkin and later Wichman. She published under the pen name »Ester«.

93 The wives of Y. L. Peretz and Nathan Birnbaum were present, but unlike Frumkin, they seem not to have played any role in the debates. Although Frumkin was not only active in the Czernowitz debate, but also a known leader of the Bundists, it is only now that she is being discovered by the research: Elissa Bemporad at the City University of New York is currently working on a biography of Ester Frumkin.

94 [Anonymous]: Die jüdische Sprachkonferenz in Czernowitz. In: *Jüdische Zeitung*, Wien, 11.09.1908, pp. 6–7, here p. 6.

95 Another interesting example is the non-Jewish Russian and Hebrew writer Yeliziveta Zhirkova who called herself »Elisheva«. See Moss, *Jewish Renaissance* (see note 36), p. 47.

audience and as writers. Ezra Korman did the same in his 1928 poetry anthology *יידישע דיכטעריןס* («Yiddish poetesses»). In 1908, however, the low prestige of Yiddish that was linked to the subordinate role of women (and uneducated men) in public life was addressed by translating cultural works and by providing an infrastructure that would allow better conditions for writing in Yiddish.

Yet, some of the publications about Czernowitz reflect the gendered role Yiddish played in Jewish history on a deeper level. The *sotsyaldemokrat* from Cracow, for example, criticized that unfortunately, even some of those who made their name as writers thanks to Yiddish, disdained it as a »dinstmoyd«, a (servant) maid, while considering Hebrew the »national language«. ⁹⁶ Furthermore, the German-Jewish periodical *Jüdische Korrespondenz* called Yiddish a »Mädchen für alles«, a girl for everything, ⁹⁷ and the Vilna periodical *הד הזמן* («Echo of the time») sees the Conference as a protest against those who mocked Yiddish:

מיר ווילן ניט אָפּנעמען דעם אַויבנאַן, דעם מזרח, פֿון העברעיש, מיר טאָרן אָבער נישט מספּים זײַן אַז ייִדיש זאָל זײַן ווי אַ דינסט, וואָס ה' בריינין דערלויבט זיך טרײַבן אַ שפּאַס בעת ער איז אין אַ וואַכנדיקער שטימונג – שרײַבנדיק זײַנע אַרטיקלען אין אַונדזער לעבן. ⁹⁸

It is not that we want to take over the »place of honor« (oybnon), the »East«, of Hebrew, but that we can not agree on Yiddish being treated like a (servant) maid that Mr. Brainin is allowing himself to make fun of when he is in a »weekday« mood (vokhndikh shtimmung), writing his articles for »undzer leb«. ⁹⁹

So far as is known, the correspondents reporting from Czernowitz were all men, and so were the large majority of redactors reporting through translations and compilations of other articles. ¹⁰⁰ The readers they had in mind were certainly also primarily – or even exclusively – men. A Hebrew article by a person signing »H. Harris«, for example, addresses its readers as »my brothers«. ¹⁰¹ Yet, a glimpse into Yiddish autobiographies remembering the time of the Conference in Europe shows not only how much women were affected by the question of language, but

⁹⁶ [Anonymus]: שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ. ערב דער ייִדישער שפראך־קאָנפֿערענץ, 28.08.1908, No. 5, Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 24–26, here p. 25.

⁹⁷ Spectator: Die Jargonfrage. (Schluß). In: *Jüdische Korrespondenz*, 16.12.1915, No. 18, p. 3.

⁹⁸ [Anonymus]: [no title], without date. In: *הד הזמן*, zit n. Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 33–34, here p. 33.

⁹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine, C. R.

¹⁰⁰ The Polish redactor translating and compiling articles about the conference for *Izraelita*, who signs »J.D.« seems to be the Warsaw writer, philosopher and literary critic Julia Dickstein/Dicksteinówna, later Wieleżyńska.

¹⁰¹ H. Harris: בטשערנאָוויטש קונפֿרענציע, הלאם, New York, 28.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 28.

Despite the vast amount of items on the agenda, with the promotion of literature being only one of them, a large majority of reports and comments on the Conference saw the advancement of literature as both a key aim of the Conference and an imperative need in the development of Yiddish.¹⁰⁵ From the moment the Conference was announced, the questions of who was in support of it and which writers would be present were major discussion points in the press. While supporters of the Conference tended to invoke its participants as evidence of the Conference's respectability,¹⁰⁶ its critics used them as a target. Zeitlin stated sardonically that only inferior writers like Priłutski would be present, and that one could not become a representative of Yiddish just by paying the five Gulden to participate in the Conference.¹⁰⁷ For the New York *Morgen zhurnal* the Czernowitz Conference was only worthwhile to report on because Mendele Moykher Sforim had signed the invitation¹⁰⁸ and the St. Petersburg Yiddish newspaper *Der fraynt* («The friend») opened its article on the Conference with the following statement:

שוין דער פאקט אליין, וואָס אזא קאָנפּערענץ מוז געהאַלן ווערן אין אַ לאַנד און אין אַ שטאַט, ווי קיין ייִדישע שרייבער זענען ניטאָ און ווי די ייִדישע ליטעראַטור איז אזוי גוט ווי פרעמד – דער פאקט אליין, זאָגן מיר, באַווייַסט אין וואָסער אַ לאַגע דאָס ייִדישע פּאָלק געפֿינט זיך און ממילא די ליטעראַטור זײַנע אויך.¹⁰⁹

Alone the fact that such a conference had to take place in a country and a city with no Yiddish writers and where Yiddish literature is virtually foreign – that fact alone, we say, proves in which condition the Yiddish folk is in, and Yiddish literature as well.

In spite of the great importance of the writers at the Conference, and in spite of the fact that Peretz was by far the most prominent and respected writer to participate, his attempt to have Yiddish recognized primarily as a folk language rather than a national language did not succeed. The significance of the Czernowitz declaration for the national question had been immediately understood by Yiddishists and their opponents. The social question that Peretz had mentioned in his warmly welcomed opening speech found its expression both during

105 The Lemberger Togblat for example sees the creation of a literary language as a main task of the Conference. Lemberger Togblat. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 19.

106 Der Zotsyaldemokrat. No. 35, August 28. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 24–26.

107 Hillel Zeitlin: וואָך־נאַטיצן. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 36–38, here p. 37.

108 [Anonymous]: די שפּראַכקאָנדערענץ. In: מאָרגען־זשורנאַל, New York, 04.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), p. 15.

109 [Anonymous]: ייִדישער קאָנפּערענץ. In: der fraynt, No. 186, 30.08.1908. In: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 30–31, here p. 30.

the Conference and in the reports. Developing and advancing a new secular culture was as much a matter of discussion as the question of the bible translation momentarily intensified the debate, but in terms of its share in the reports, it was definitively a minor topic. Peretz's idea of founding a permanent representative body for the Conference, an umbrella organization that would transcend political and ideological borders, reflects the difficulty of the task to find a common denominator, especially when it came to finding a permanent solution for the representation of Yiddish.¹¹⁰ The question of women failed to be included in the debate, despite the fact that – or *because* of the fact that – Yiddish was still seen as a predominantly female language. The autobiographies of female authors serve as a reminder that the reports in the press provide only a partial account of the whole story. Women did participate actively in the so-called language battle, but many found their public voice only later, in their relocation in the Americas or in Israel.

The question of who the successor to the throne could be was – just as any question of succession – not to be dissociated from its international connections. Whereas in most parts of the world, the Conference soon disappeared from the public eye, Yiddish writers kept developing some of the ideas discussed during the Conference. The idea of a Yiddishland as a cultural homeland without borders, laws or governments, succeeded in detaching the cultural question from the national and social ones and soon began to circulate in the Yiddish speaking world.¹¹¹

With the Zionist movement's allegiance to Hebrew, it was soon clear that in Israel, Hebrew was the winner of the throne. In the Soviet Union, the question was decided from outside, by the Russian state, in favor of Yiddish. In most parts of the world, however, Yiddish gave up its ambitions for power. In some religious circles and in a few secular households, it retained its traditional place in the Jewish home. For secular circles around the world, Yiddish has become a cultural language, which often also stands for a non-national self-image. Yiddish has not become אַ שפּראַך ווי אלע אַ; a language like any other, just as Israel has not become – as Chaim Weizmann once had wished – a state like Albania.¹¹²

110 Ester in: Di ershte (see note 6), pp. 131–132.

111 See Efrat Gal-Ed: Yiddishland: A Promise of Belonging. In: Journal of Modern Jewish Studies (2021), pp. 1–29. Efrat Gal-Ed: Jiddisch. Von exterritorialer Literatur zum Literaturland. In: Victor Oliver and Laura Weiß: Europäische Utopien – Utopien Europas. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf geistesgeschichtliche Ideale, Projektionen und Visionen. Berlin 2021, pp. 185–209. On Esperanto as a utopian language and its relation to Judaism, see Viola Beckmann and Liliana Ruth Feierstein (eds.): Language as Hope. L. L. Zamenhof and the Dream of a Cosmopolitan Wor(l)d. To appear in 2022.

112 Chaim Weizmann cit. Michael Brenner: Israel. Traum und Wirklichkeit des jüdischen Staates. München 2016, p. 7.