

## Kosher Dutch

### The Fate of Yiddish in the Netherlands

Some time ago I was invited to a session of a commission of the Council of Europe to discuss the state of Yiddish in the Netherlands. Since 1996 Yiddish has been recognised by the Dutch government as a non-territorial minority language in accordance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Because the charter was drawn up by the Council of Europe, it sends out a Commission from time to time to investigate the fortunes of those languages that have been accorded recognition under the charter.



Hebrew ode to King William I by Heiman Binger, Amsterdam 1814. It is mainly thanks to this king that Yiddish disappeared from the Netherlands. Reproduction from M.H. Gans, *Memorbook*. Amsterdam, 1971.

So one September afternoon every organisation involved with Yiddish in the Netherlands was expected to show up at the provincial administrative headquarters in Zwolle where the commission was meeting. The commission, which consisted of a Liechtensteiner, a Slovak and a Dutch lady, listened sympathetically to what we had to say and expressed their respect for our efforts to revive Yiddish in the Netherlands. At this we exchanged quizzical glances: revive Yiddish? We carefully explained to the commission that while we were touched by their sympathetic support, it was more a question of preserving a cultural heritage than of breathing new life into a language that had hardly been spoken in the Netherlands for over a century. Once they had grasped the situation, the commission members quickly accepted that this too was of great importance.

Since the commission was also concerned with numerous other minority languages in Europe, it is understandable that it was not fully aware of the situation of Yiddish in the Netherlands. It is to be feared though that most of the Dutch are equally ignorant of a language which is officially recognised by their own government. That is largely because previous, nineteenth-century governments were less sympathetic towards Yiddish, in which they were following the lead of King William I, who acceded to the throne in 1813 and believed that all his subjects should speak Dutch. That included the Jewish population, for whom Yiddish had until then been the main language of communication. His policy bore fruit; within a few decades practically every Jew in the Netherlands spoke Dutch, and Yiddish only survived in various words and phrases. But let us first take a look at how the language arrived in the Netherlands.

## Ashkenaz

Yiddish probably originated in the Rhineland in the tenth century. The Jews who lived there adopted the local dialect but wrote it in the Hebrew script in which their religious books were written. And because religion played an important role in their daily lives, their spoken language also contained many Hebrew words. Nowadays we call this language Yiddish – which is the Yiddish word for Jewish – but the term only came into use in the nineteenth century. Before that it was referred to as *leshon Ashkenaz* ('the language of Ashkenaz'), 'Ashkenaz' being the Jewish name for Germany, or simply *Taytsh*, meaning 'German'. Later on, as Jews moved into Eastern Europe taking Yiddish with them, the vocabulary and grammar of the language absorbed more and more Slavic elements.

Presumably some Jews were living in the Netherlands before the sixteenth century but little is known about them. However, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century several thousand Sephardic Jews fled the Spanish Inquisition in Spain and Portugal and came to the Netherlands, and particularly to Amsterdam. Members of this group, referred to in the Netherlands as the 'Portuguese Jews', spoke Spanish and Portuguese, were usually well-educated and soon carved out a place for themselves in the expanding commercial city.

Some time later, a large number of Ashkenazi Yiddish-speaking Jews from Germany and Poland arrived in the Netherlands. This mass immigration was the result of the Thirty Years War in Germany (1618-1648), the revolt of the Ukrainian Cossack leader Chmielnicki against the Polish gentry in 1648 and 1649, which had been accompanied by large-scale pogroms, and the destructive Swedish invasion of Poland and Lithuania (1655-1660). But even without such violence, the

stream of Ashkenazi or – as they were usually called – ‘High German’ Jews continued. In Amsterdam they could practise their religion without too many problems and they felt at home there in spite of the great poverty that most of them faced. This religious freedom found expression in the two great synagogues that the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities built in Amsterdam in 1671 and 1675 respectively.

The number of Portuguese Jews remained more or less unchanged through the centuries, but the number of High German Jews increased sharply. Around 1690 there were about 8,000 Jews in the Dutch Republic; 6,000 of these lived in Amsterdam, of whom 3,000 spoke Yiddish. By the end of the eighteenth century there were between 15,000 and 20,000 Yiddish-speaking Jews in Amsterdam. Although a good many of them were of Polish origin, it was the Western Yiddish from Germany that dominated. It differed from the Eastern Yiddish spoken by the Poles in its pronunciation and, more particularly, in the absence of Slavic words.

## Civil rights

In contrast to the Portuguese Jews who had considerable contact with non-Jews as early as the seventeenth century, the High German Jews tended to keep to themselves. However, that does not mean that they shut themselves off from what was going on in the outside world. Between 1686 and 1687, and possibly longer, a Yiddish newspaper was published in Amsterdam, the *Dinstagishe un Fraytagishe Kuranten* (Tuesday and Friday Newspapers), which contained mainly international news translated from the Dutch press. It is therefore natural to assume that in the eighteenth century too Yiddish newspapers were published in the Netherlands. We know for certain of one: the *Vokhentlikhe berikhtn* (Weekly Reports), of which only a single issue, that of 10 January 1781, has survived. This too presented news from Dutch newspapers in Yiddish translation.

Although Yiddish continued to be spoken in the eighteenth century, it began increasingly to resemble Dutch. There was a group of educated Jews who were influenced by the *Haskala*, the Jewish Enlightenment which originated in Germany and believed that all Jews should speak the language of their adoptive country. In 1795 some of them came together to form the *Felix Libertate* society, which also aimed to achieve full civil rights for the Jews. Although only a minority of Jews shared their views, they were more successful than even they themselves may have expected. A few months earlier, in January 1795, the Batavian Republic was established, modelled on the French Republic and espousing the French ideals of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’. Within a year the government had decided that these ideals should also apply to Jews and accordingly granted them Dutch citizenship.

Until that time the Jews had enjoyed a large degree of autonomy and the Jewish community was in fact governed mainly from the synagogues. Now that the Jews came under the authority of the secular government they were able to behave more independently of their religious leaders. One result of this was a schism in the Jewish community in which the members of *Felix Libertate* played an important role. Interestingly, they initially attempted to present their case to the Jews in Dutch-language pamphlets. These did not make much of an impact, because although spoken Yiddish had been greatly influenced by Dutch, the





The first instalment of the *Diskursn*, Amsterdam 1797. Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana. Library of the University of Amsterdam, Special Collections.



Latin alphabet remained a major stumbling block. And so the society switched to the detested Yiddish, which did have the desired effect. *The Diskursn*, polemical pamphlets written by an anonymous member of Felix Libertate, which attacked the abuses within the traditional Jewish community, the *Alte Kille*, and extolled the advantages of the new, progressive community, the *Naye Kille*, enjoyed great success. The pamphlets were so popular that the *Alte Kille* itself reacted with pamphlets in the same style, which denounced all innovation and ridiculed the adoption of Dutch as the language of communication.<sup>1</sup>

## Cultural offensive

Nevertheless, Yiddish had had its day. Already under the French occupation at the start of the nineteenth century Louis Napoleon, who was appointed King of the Netherlands by his brother Napoleon, tried to combat poverty among Jews by getting them to learn Dutch and so become more employable. His efforts bore little fruit, but this all changed after the French had left and King William I ascended the throne in 1813. He wanted to create a recognisable identity for all Dutch citizens, including the Jews, and intended to achieve this mainly through language. In future everybody would have to speak and write Standard Dutch. Jewish children were taught in Dutch, and even the preaching in the synagogues was in Dutch. The intellectual vanguard of the Jewish community, that was itself keen to get rid of Yiddish, was involved to help in this cultural offensive. Naturally there was a great deal of grumbling among the predominantly conservative Jewish population, but eventually the offensive was successful: by the end of the nineteenth century Yiddish had virtually disappeared as a spoken language.<sup>2</sup>

That did not mean that it was entirely forgotten. Jews continued to use many Yiddish words. Because many poorer Jews were badly affected by the econom-

ic crisis of the eighteenth century and some of them even resorted to crime, a large number of Yiddish words made their way into *Bargoens*, the underworld slang. Many Jews were also traditionally involved in horse-dealing, and there too a great deal of Yiddish was used, even by non-Jews. Some words made their way into ordinary spoken Dutch and are still in use today.

Of course, criminals and horse-dealers rarely leave written records of their conversations, so much of their language has now been lost. There are glossaries of the jargon used by various social groups, and Yiddish dictionaries have also been published, such as J.L. Voorzanger and J.E. Polak *Jz, Het Joodsch in Nederland. Aan het Hebreeuwsch en andere talen ontleende woorden en zegswijzen*, 1915 ('Jewish in the Netherlands. Words and Phrases borrowed from the Hebrew and Other Languages'), and the much more complete works of Hartog Beem: his dictionary *Resten van een taal*, 1967 ('Remnants of a Language'), and the collection of proverbs and sayings, *Jerôsche* (1957; Yiddish for 'heritage'). But since none of these works name their sources, it remains unclear to what extent the words cited have ever actually been used.

For late-eighteenth-century spoken Yiddish, the *Diskursn* referred to earlier are a valuable source because they were written in the form of conversations between 'ordinary people' on barges, in the street or in cafés. Another fruitful source of spoken Yiddish is the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century novels by Jewish writers such as Israël Querido, Meijer de Hond, Herman Heijermans and Carry van Bruggen. They set their books in a Jewish environment and their characters speak a language in which there is not only a great deal of Yiddish, but even some Spanish and Portuguese, which had survived, though often in corrupt form, in individual words and expressions.

## Milk fork

These books have been an important source for the recently published *Koosjer Nederlands. Joodse woorden in de Nederlandse taal* ('Kosher Dutch. Jewish words in the Dutch language'), by Justus van de Kamp and Jacob van der Wijk.<sup>3</sup> The book does not confine itself to Yiddish, but contains all kinds of 'Jewish' words that have been handed down through Dutch. These include Spanish or Portuguese words, modern Israeli concepts such as *madriech*, a leader in a youth movement, which are used by Dutch Zionists, and Dutch terms that are used in a specifically Jewish context, such as *melkvork* ('milk fork'), which is a fork that may only be used for eating dishes which contain milk products. (Jewish dietary laws forbid the consumption of meat and milk products together.) Furthermore, it also contains words that were not used by Jews but in connection with them, such as *pulsen*, the clearing of Jewish houses during the Second World War (after the notorious Puls removal company).

What is special about *Kosher Dutch* is that for each word it gives the source, so that there are no ghost words that have only appeared in lexicons and glossaries with no certainty that they were ever actually spoken. These sources date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Introduction provides a short history of the Jews in the Netherlands and pays particular attention to the peculiar characteristics of *Jodenhoeks* – a mixture of Dutch, Yiddish and Spanish/Portuguese that was spoken in the run-down Amsterdam district known as the *Jodenhoek* (Jews' Corner) where most of the city's Jews lived

until the Second World War. However, by no means all the words in the book came from there, not only because it includes non-Yiddish words, but also because there were many Jews who lived outside Amsterdam and whose language was often influenced by the local dialect. It is a pity that we are not told how and when the words ended up in Dutch. According to the authors this is usually unknown, but they have stated their intention to investigate this through a systematic study of the sources. Although they have already worked for fourteen years on preparing this book, there is clearly still much more research to be done.



Houtkopersdwarstraat in Amsterdam at the beginning of the twentieth century: this is where *Jodenhoeks* was spoken. Reproduction from M.H. Gans, *Memorbook*. Amsterdam, 1971.

Naturally, most of the material is to be found in sources from before the Second World War. But in the 1960s, at a time when the Jews who had survived the war had long been speaking ordinary Dutch, it became fashionable among mainly non-Jewish youth to use Yiddish or words derived from Yiddish. These were for the most part words already known in non-Jewish circles, usually through underworld slang, such as *smeris* (policeman), *jatten* (steal) or *tinnef* (junk, mess), but previously considered rather uncivilised. In the 1960s, the younger generation used them as a protest against their parents and they were subsequently absorbed into the spoken language. Since then, however, many of these words have become obsolete, and today's youth does not even know them.

## Revival

Although there are still Yiddish words in modern Dutch, they are not used very frequently. Paradoxically, however, Yiddish itself has been enjoying a revival of interest. There are Yiddish festivals and Yiddish language courses, and there is wide-spread interest in Yiddish music. Yiddish books are published in Dutch translation and there is a Yiddish Foundation (Stichting Jiddisj), which organises cultural events. The Foundation also produces a literary periodical, *Grine medine*, which prints existing Yiddish literature in the original and in translation, and publishes essays in Dutch. There is also an orthodox Jewish school in Amsterdam, the Cheider, in which some of the lessons are taught in Yiddish. In all these cases, however, it is not the Western variant that was once spoken in

the Netherlands, but Eastern Yiddish, which until the Second World War was spoken by millions of Jews in Eastern Europe.

After the war virtually nothing remained of the rich Jewish culture of Eastern Europe. Almost all the Jews who survived the Holocaust emigrated, often to America or Israel, where they usually tried to learn the national language as quickly as possible. And yet this did not mean the end of Yiddish. Even before the war, many East-European Jews had emigrated and until the 1960s Yiddish-speaking communities flourished, especially in the United States. Things went downhill after that because most immigrants preferred to integrate into American society. Nevertheless, Yiddish literature is still being published in the United States, and Yiddish is still actively spoken. But while earlier it was mainly members of the non-religious workers' movement who tried to keep Yiddish alive, the language is now primarily used by ultra-orthodox Jews. In Israel the speaking of Yiddish was discouraged and new immigrants had to learn Hebrew. A small group of Yiddish writers stood their ground, however, and a great deal of Yiddish continued to be spoken within the family. But in Israel too it is now almost exclusively the ultra-orthodox who actively use the language. But while the importance of the language as a means of communication has declined sharply, interest in its history is increasing, not only in the immigrant countries but also for instance in the Netherlands.

Along with the growing interest in the history of Eastern European Jewry, the Netherlands is also showing an interest in the legacy of Dutch Yiddish. Since 2005 the University of Amsterdam has had a 'Honorary Professor of Yiddish Language and Culture, in particular in the Netherlands', Professor Shlomo Berger, as well as an active programme of research into Yiddish writing in the Netherlands. In short, although the revival envisaged by the Council of Europe's Commission is most unlikely, Yiddish is still far from being forgotten. ■

#### NOTES

1. A selection from these pamphlets has been reprinted and translated in Jozeph Michman and Marion Aptroot (selection, translation and introduction), *Storm in the Community. Yiddish Polemical Pamphlets of Amsterdam Jewry*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002.
2. For the integration of Jews into Dutch society see Bart Wallet, *Nieuwe Nederlanders. De integratie van de joden in Nederland (1814-1851)*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007.
3. Justus van de Kamp & Jacob van der Wijk, *Koosjer Nederlands. Joodse woorden in de Nederlandse taal*. Amsterdam: Contact, 2006.