tsentral-eyrope in 1910: Yiddish Geography

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Introduction

In the Middle Ages, Jews used to refer to different parts of Europe with biblical Hebrew terms such as Ashkenaz, Sephard, Tsarfat, Javan, or Canaan. The ethnonym Tsarfat referred to France, Javan to Ancient Greece, and Canaan to the Slavic-speaking territories. Over time most of these names fell out of use, with the exception of the two toponyms of Ashkenaz and Sephard. Both strongly influenced how Jews perceived their European homelands. Ashkenaz was a placename employed for denoting the Germanic-speaking areas inhabited by Jews, for example, the Rhineland (Rinus) or the Land of King Lothair, or Lotharingia (Lothir). As Jews migrated into the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Poland-Lithuania), the meaning of the term Ashkenaz was broadened to include Central and Eastern Europe. The Jews of early Ashkenaz brought their Judeo-Germanic vernacular to the Slavophone territories, together with their customs and religious practices. Sephard initially meant Iberia (Spain and Portugal), before it came to encompass the Balkan Peninsula as well. After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, Sephard denotes all descendants of the Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) Jews who subsequently settled in the Ottoman Empire’s Balkans and Anatolia.

This Ashkenaz-Sephard dichotomy has split the European Jewry to this day, resulting in the two groups of Ashkenazic Jews and Sephardic Jews. Both groups differ not only due to the fact that they tend to reside in different regions. Even more importantly, they speak two different Jewish languages, namely Yiddish (“Jewish German”) and Spanyol (“Jewish Spanish,” also known as Ladino, or “Jewish Latin”). Furthermore, they pray and celebrate Jewish holidays differently, cultivate different customs, and developed distinctive cuisines. By the late nineteenth century, Ashkenazic Jews had developed a vibrant and complex Yiddish-language culture (cf Fishman 2005).

Yiddishland in Central Europe

The Ashkenazic Jews were not a uniform group. Ashkenazim from the German-speaking territories differed much from Ashkenazim living in the Slavophone areas, despite the fact that both groups are lumped together under the single name of “Ashkenazic Jews.” The Jews who had lived in Central and Eastern Europe for over eight centuries created their own unique culture. The actual cradle of this culture was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its most important medium and inspiration was the language known today as Yiddish. Drawing at this source, the Central and Eastern European Jews created the concept of Yiddishland, or the land of the Yiddish-speaking Jews. It should be understood both as a real, geographically defined place, and as a virtual homeland for numerous Jews who identify with Yiddish language and culture (Geller 2010). Moreover, the phenomenon of Yiddishland underlines the fact that typically a geographically defined place played a secondary role in understanding the Jewish civilization. The stereotype of “the wandering Jew” is still widespread, while the politics and culture of the Jewish diaspora have often conveyed “the pervasive impression, that the Jewish experience is one of displacement, lacking not only a proper territory but also a substantial spatiality or attachment to place” (Brauch, Lipphard and Nocke 2008: 1). Despite this, Jews in Central and Eastern Europe referred to their places of settlement collectively as “Yiddishland.” Yiddishland was a real Jewish “country” that overlapped with present-day Belarus (Biyarsinland in Yiddish), Estonia (Estonland), Latvia (Latland), Lithuania (Lita), Moldova (Moldawy), Poland (Poyln), Romania (Rumenye) and Ukraine (Ukraine), and partly with Hungary (Ungern), Slovakia (Slovakay), and European Russia (Rusland).

Understandably, nowadays Yiddish-speakers and their descendants are most interested in these aforementioned territories where their communities used to live and where they created a unique Yiddish civilization. This centuries-long interaction of Ashkenazim with their homelands across Central and Eastern Europe resulted in specific Yiddish-language toponography and toponyms, which frequently differ in form and spatial scope from similar terms as employed in the region’s non-Jewish languages (Geller 2010: 51). However, it should be emphasized that these Yiddish-language geographic and place names cover only the areas within Yiddishland. Other places located outside this “Jewish country” were typically referred to with their non-Jewish official names that were only transliterated into Yiddish. Many such toponyms were directly adopted from German, usually in the case of towns, cities, regions and countries located west of the River Oder (Odra). Apart from the capitals and big industrial cities, Yiddish-speakers did not develop their own specific forms for placenames in Western Europe or Scandinavia.

In Central and Eastern Europe, or Yiddishland, Yiddish-speakers creatively borrowed and adapted geographic and place names from the region’s non-Jewish languages. Furthermore,
in quite a few cases, they developed their own specific Yiddish forms of names of these localities, regions and countries that were of much emotional value or other importance to Ashkenazim. A good example of this phenomenon is the Yiddish name Lit for “Lithuania.” Importantly, from the perspective of the mental geography of Yiddishland, this term encompasses not only today’s country of Lithuania, but also parts of Latvia and Estonia, Belarus, north-eastern Poland and northern Ukraine, or the pre-1969 Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Jacobs 2005: 61). In Yiddish, Jews conserved an early modern geographic shape of this grand duchy.

The shtetls, towns, and cities of Central and Eastern Europe endowed with specific Yiddish forms of their names allow us to locate Yiddishland in the geographical space of present-day Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Poland, Romania, and Russia. Collections of Yiddish culture and folklore are understandably limited to these areas inhabited by Ashkenazim communities (Prilutski 1912; Prylutcki and Lehman 1926–1933). Hence, it is particularly difficult to determine Yiddish-language forms of names of localities where Yiddish-speakers did not traditionally live. Yiddish-language cartography for the sake of popular education in the Soviet Union developed only after World War One. What is more, in the war’s aftermath, the region’s empires broke up and were replaced with numerous ethnolinguistically defined nation-states. However, the Ashkenazim’s Yiddish-language mental map of Yiddishland (that is, Central and Eastern Europe) remained largely in place, despite any border changes. Only this assumption allows us to attempt a reconstruction of the Yiddish-language forms of the names of countries, regions, and cities for the Yiddish-language map of Central Europe in 1910.

However, the standardization of Yiddish as a language began in earnest only after the 1908 Language Conference at Czernowitz (today Chernivtsi in Ukraine), Bukovina, and Austria-Hungary, and did not progress much before the late 1920s. Following the 1905 Revolution that allowed for the creation of Jewish and other political parties in the Russian Empire (where the majority of Yiddishland was located at that time), many secular Jewish activists and intellectuals appealed for the formal recognition of Yiddish as a language equal to Russian, German, or Polish. They were displeased with the fact that the non-Jewish authorities and Jewish traditionalists disparaged Yiddish as a “jargon.” The Great War led to the German and Austro-Hungarian occupation of Russia’s western provinces in 1915–1918/19, or much of Yiddishland. In this area the Germans established a semi-colony of Land Ober Ost, where for the first time in history, Yiddish was used as an official language in local administration and education. But prior to the standardization of Yiddish in the interwar period, dialectal and regional differences yielded many parallel Yiddish forms of the same name of a locality. For example, the city of Kolomyja (nowadays in Ukraine) was known in Yiddish variably as Kolomey, Kalemey, Kalemay, or Kilemay. For the sake of the Yiddish-language map of Central Europe in 1910, I strove to identify the most popular or standard form of a given locality’s name.

Countries and Cities

The Yiddish-speaking communities of Ashkenazim created their own names for many towns and cities across Yiddishland. “The capital of Poland will always be known in Yiddish not as ‘Warszawa’ or as ‘Warschau’, but as Varshe. And the ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’ can be part of Russia, Lithuania or Poland, but we will never call it by its Lithuanian name, ‘Vilnius’, or by its Russian or Polish names (that is, ‘Vil’nà’, ‘Wilno’), but only by its Yiddish name, Vilne. Likewise, Kroke (Cracow), Ger (in Polish, Góra Kalwaria), Brisk (Brest), or Brad (Brod) are, as far as we can tell, the undisputed Yiddish names of the respective cities” (Schechter 1986: 17). On the contrary, the names of towns and cities located outside of Yiddishland were not of emotional or other importance to Yiddish-speakers. Hence, they tended to adopt forms widespread in the local languages and wrote them down phonetically with the use of Hebrew letters as employed in Yiddish. Hence, Venice became Venetsya in Yiddish, Graz—Grats, Sarajevo—Sarayevo, or Burgas—Burgas.

Most Yiddish forms of toponyms are the result of phonetic assimilation and reinterpretation either by way of German or Slavic languages. Subsequently, such assimilated Yiddish forms of placenames were adapted to the inflectional and grammatical needs of the Yiddish language. That is why in many cases the final vocalic sound appears in Yiddish as [e]: Kovno—Kovne, Grodno—Grodne, Moscow (for example, from Polish, Moskwa)—Moske, or Lomzha—Lomzhe. Many Yiddish forms, particularly those adapted from Slavic languages, were radically altered in order to better fit the Yiddish phonemic patterns. “Perhaps the best example is Zhetl (in western Belarus), which appears to be a compromise between Polish (Zdzięcioł) and Belarusian (Dyatłava)” (Glasser 2014: 9).

After World War Two and the Holocaust, many traditional Yiddish-language toponyms fell into disuse and oblivion when no local Jewish communities remained. Ashkenazic survivors often moved to different countries and areas following vast postwar border changes and expulsions. In these new places they began to use official forms of toponyms in the state language. Hence, Yiddish Frotsdai closely follows the Polish name of Wrocław, or Yiddish Gdanska the Polish name of Gdańsk. Before the war, both cities’ Yiddish-language communities used the specific Yiddish forms Breisle and Danzik, respectively. Obviously, the former is derived from the German-language form Breslau, while the latter appears to be a compromised form between the German form Danzig and the Polish form Gdańsk. The Holocaust destroyed the Ashkenazim and their Yiddishland, alongside the unique tradition of Yiddish-language cartography. This Yiddish-language map of Central Europe in 1910 hopes to recover some elements of this once vibrant geographic and toponymic Yiddish tradition for culture and scholarship in today’s Central and Eastern Europe.