

Rebecca Margolis, *Yiddish Lives On: Strategies of Language Transmission* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2023), 376 pp., ISBN: 978–0228015512.

In *Yiddish Lives On: Strategies of Language Transmission*, Rebecca Margolis offers readers a historical and contemporary look into the experiences, contributions, and motivations of Canadian Yiddish speakers, particularly native, heritage, and new speakers who identify as Yiddishists. Exploring the continuity of the language over the last seventy years, Margolis tells the story of those who have resisted the decline of Yiddish using a number of different strategies: speaking Yiddish in the home, through theater and music, on film, in publishing, and through other new media. Drawing on a variety of methodologies, including history, ethnography, sociolinguistics, digital humanities, and screen studies, Margolis draws a wide-ranging portrait of how Yiddish has evolved in Canada, and given the porous borders of Yiddishland, transnationally.

The first chapter, “Yiddish Canada, Yiddish Ideologies,” presents an overview of Yiddish in Canada, as well as its representation in the media. Margolis employs Scottish Gaelic as a point of comparison, using it to “tease out some of the themes relating to such languages, notably with regard to music and broadcasting” (33). She then moves towards delineating various ideologies of Yiddish and the discourse around whether it is in a state of “revival, “revitalization, or renaissance,” and touches upon the dynamics of secular and Haredi Yiddish as well as Yiddish in Canadian academia. The second chapter, “Yiddish Spoken in Families,” focuses on the phenomenon of raising Yiddish children in its postvernacular context—not the transmission of Yinglish, a few Yiddish words here and there, but rather of fully spoken Yiddish in full sentences. The chapter “examines the mechanisms that facilitated—and continue to facilitate—the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish by juxtaposing the Haredi and non-Haredi worlds” (51), such as speaking Yiddish in the home, teaching it in Haredi schools, or, in the case of non-Haredi families, through “enjoyable activities such as conversation, stories, and songs” (71). Margolis suggests that “both Haredi and secular Yiddish transmission among the generations constitute created language spaces” (51). She touches upon the growth of Hebrew as “subsum[ing] the role of Jewish ethnic language in Canada” because of the focus Hebrew receives in Jewish educational institutions (54). The chapter includes sections that utilize specific families as examples and displays the utility of an online survey Margolis conducted in 2017 on Yiddish use in Canada, which had 485 respondents ranging in age from under twenty to over ninety. The survey revealed “a shift from the family home and childhood classroom to other sites for Yiddish transmission” (82), concluding that “outside the Haredi world, Yiddish no longer relies primarily on family transmission for its survival and growth” (83).

Chapter three, “Yiddish Youth Theater and Activisms, the 1960s and 1970s,” focuses on a transitional time for Yiddish in Canada and the United States. As Yiddish declined as an everyday vernacular, young Jews started to mobilize to create new initiatives to “use Yiddish as a living language” (85). Despite vernacular decline, Yiddish “forms a vital element in the lives of a segment of Jewish youth raised in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s,” mostly the children of Holocaust survivors whose parents remained part of organizations that supported Yiddish upon arrival to Canada, especially the Bund. The chapter draws on three modes of “youth-oriented community activism”: the drama workshop that became Montreal’s Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre; a group and journal called *Yugntruf*—Youth for Yiddish, and the Yiddish Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress. Margolis points to the crucial legacies of all of these in the 1980s and beyond. They signaled “a revitalization for a new generation as well as for increasing numbers of young people who would gravitate towards Yiddish in the decades to come,” seeking in “Yiddish an alternative form of Jewish or other identity” (130).

The fourth chapter, “Yiddish Writing and Publishing: The 1970s and 1980s,” focuses on the publishing industry’s “disproportionate role in the transmission of Yiddish culture,” and how in a moment when Yiddish was in decline, books “continued to be written, sponsored, published, and celebrated” in Canada (131). Examining the hope to continue to produce Yiddish books despite a dwindling readership, Margolis looks at what kinds of works came out in Yiddish after 1950, “what strategies emerged to facilitate the process,” and how “those strategies shifted over time” (132). The 1970s and 1980s, which was the period that yielded the largest number of Canadian Yiddish books, coincided with two trends: first, the decline in the number of Yiddish writers as the European-born generation passed on, and linguistic acculturation among younger Jews; and two, Canadian policies of multiculturalism. This led to “a new institutionalization of support of Yiddish publishing within the Jewish community,” including the new phenomenon of Holocaust literature. She also includes a brief discussion of contemporary Yiddish publishing, including in the Haredi community.

Margolis’s book, like much work on postvernacular Yiddish culture, anticipates a common critique—the idea that Yiddishists are not able to “save” Yiddish, that indeed it’s already dead. Margolis has a clear retort to these inevitable detractors: let go of the binary of Yiddish as “alive or dead” and instead place focus on the ways that Yiddish in Canada is a story of “expansion and dynamism” (18). Margolis is honest about the fact that the Yiddish language and its surrounding culture has sustained significant loss and damage. But just as “the massive and immeasurable losses to Yiddish over the last century ... must be mourned,” so too should we recognize the language’s durability (255). What has been gained through resilience is “an active and innovative engagement with a rich language repository that shows no signs of abating in the present or future. Yiddish remains teachable, learnable, and malleable” (17–18).

Yiddish Lives On successfully covers a wide range of topics regarding Yiddish, embracing the diversity of Yiddish speakers today. While not focused on Hasidim, the book addresses the topic of Hasidic Yiddish transmission as a point of comparison. The book focuses on Canada, but points to the fact that no one country's Yiddish language activism and transmission story can be separated from the broader, transnational world Yiddishists have built for decades both in person and online. One of the great benefits of Margolis's book, moreover, is that it offers an opportunity to understand or review Canadian Jewish history and culture through a very specific lens and gives a good introduction to the topic of Canadian Jewry for those who know little about the subject. There are moments when the multidisciplinary of Margolis' approach slightly overwhelms the reader, and some chapters feel more heavily informational rather than analytical. On the other hand, the fact that Margolis works with multiple approaches allows her to accomplish a lot in four chapters, including wider arguments about language transmission more broadly—in the case of Scottish Gaelic, “the potential impacts of state recognition and government support” (33). It is refreshing to see work on Yiddish look beyond the language in this way, “expanding scholarly literature on the revitalization of endangered languages” (14) and showing how “a language and a culture can be transmitted in multiple ways other than intergenerationally, in particular in the wake of rupture caused by mass trauma or acculturation” (254).

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