

"Czernowitz — a shtetl mit Iden" (Chernivtsi, a city full of Jews)

Ilya Akselrod: Hello, everyone! This is Yiddish Podcast, an audio track from the past recorded in the present for the future. The project was commissioned by the Yiddish Center at the World Jewish Congress. I would like to introduce the participants of today's podcast: Dr. Mordechai Yushkovsky, Academic Director of the World Jewish Congress's International Yiddish Center, and Professor Wolf Moskovich, a linguist, lexicographer, polyglot, and our hospitable host today. My name is Ilya Akselrod. I'm a comedian, producer, and author of a documentary series about Yiddish. Today we are going to have a very interesting conversation. I would like to start not from your place of birth but from your early childhood in Chernivtsi, where you had your encounter with Yiddish from the very first days.

Wolf Moskovich: You see, Yiddish is my native language. This is the first language I began to speak and continue to speak to this day. I was born into a traditional religious Jewish family that observed Jewish customs and traditions in the darkest of years. On the other hand, our family was connected with Eretz Yisrael, with Israel. Some of our family members left for Eretz Israel, in the 1930s and built a future state here. We were in constant contact with our relatives. We did not disconnect ourselves for even a day from the life that was here. We corresponded in Yiddish with our relatives — this was our common language. We received parcels from there with matzah every year and thus observed all the rites associated with Jewish holidays, as was our tradition. I had a bar mitzvah in Czernowitz (the Jewish name for the city of Chernivtsi. — *Transl.*), which had been duly prepared, and so on. This is the general profile of my family.

You have claimed that I can speak a huge number of languages. Indeed, I speak a certain number of languages; some say 15, others 13. In any case, I work in practice with all the languages of Europe and have lectured in different languages in different countries of Europe and America. As for Yiddish, I had a problem with lecturing, and Mordechai was one of my students here in Israel. You see, my Yiddish is the Yiddish from home, the vernacular. The function of this variety was daily communication. But when you speak before an audience and give lectures, it's a slightly different language. You need to know all the terminology and be prepared for this. You need to know not only your home dialect but also literary Yiddish. And I had to go a long way toward mastering all aspects of Yiddish culture and tradition in general.

I'll start a bit from afar, from the environment I grew up in. Czernowitz is, one might say, the most unusual of the cities on the territory of the former Soviet Union. It belonged to several different countries, and its origins lie somewhere in the Moldavian principality. There were Polish, Hungarian, and Turkish conquerors and various influences over the years. Ultimately, it all settled down when the Austrians finally came, and Czernowitz was an Austro-Hungarian city since 1774.

This Czernowitz culture itself, including Czernowitz Jewish culture, has its foundation precisely in this period of economic and cultural prosperity. It began under Austrian rule and lasted until the end of the First World War in 1918. The arrival of the Romanians brought about some suppression of Yiddish culture. However, it was precisely during this Romanian period that many outstanding literary works in this language were created in Czernowitz. Various cultural institutions also functioned, such as Jewish libraries; the so-called *Schulverein*, a training center for the Yiddish language; Yiddish theater companies, and so forth. It all continued.

This city of Jewish tradition is known for hosting an event in 1908 at which representatives of different European countries and the United States proclaimed to the whole world that Yiddish was one of the national languages of the Jewish people, next to Hebrew. It was the first political statement about emerging Jewish self-determination, the cultural self-determination of Jews living in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Russian Empire. It was such a remarkable event that it secured Czernowitz's place in modern Jewish history as a major center of Jewish culture. Czernowitz also had a Jewish teacher training seminary which quite a few people went through, including the well-known Yiddish writer Yechiel Shraibman. Both Hebrew and Yiddish were taught there.

Under Romanian rule, Czernowitz was Romania's most significant center of Yiddish culture. Why did it happen in the Romanian period? Because a fairly large number of Jews from Bessarabia moved to Czernowitz. By and large, they observed Jewish traditions and spoke Yiddish, even more so than the local Czernowitz population. The locals were in a peculiar situation in Czernowitz. The German language was so prestigious and offered such an opportunity to enter European culture that many Czernowitz Jews switched from Yiddish to German.

Czernowitz was one of the two cities in the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with German, rather than Yiddish, as the predominant language of instruction in schools. The other one was Brody. German-language education was highly developed in these two cities, and a German-language university operated in Czernowitz. Jews, among others, enrolled there without any problems and made up most of the student population at the time. There was, so to speak, Yiddish-German bilingualism in Czernowitz. German was predominant among the wealthy Jews, who had assimilated to a greater extent, although they were also fluent in Yiddish. In contrast, the primary and, perhaps, only language among the poorest segments of the population was Yiddish. It was stimulated by two centers of the Hasidic dynasties: Vyzhnytsia and Sadgora, located next to Czernowitz back then and within city limits now. There were outstanding rabbis there. Their followers, the Hasidim, were among the poorest city residents and spoke only Yiddish, of course.

When I grew up in Czernowitz, it was generally a somewhat different city than the Czernowitz of the pre-war period. The Romanian period ended in 1944. Romania fought on

the side of Hitler and Nazi Germany but switched, so to speak, to the Allies in August 1944 to save some of its interests. During World War II, Czernowitz was the only city in Eastern Europe where the Jewish population lived. The thing was that the entire Jewish population was destroyed in neighboring Chişinău. Likewise, the entire Jewish population was exterminated in the neighboring cities of Lviv and Stanislav. So, 20,000 Jews lived in Czernowitz throughout the war. The ghetto existed for six months and then was broken up. Part of the ghetto population was sent to Transnistria, while 20,000 were kept in the city for economic purposes. However, this was standard procedure also in other places occupied by the German Romanian troops. The only difference was that all those Jews were killed at some point in 1943, while the Jewish population remained in Czernowitz until the Red Army came.

When the Red Army took Czernowitz, there were 17,000 Jews in the city, according to official Soviet sources. And then the following happened. During the war, the Germans transferred part of Ukraine's territory under Romanian control, and it was called Transnistria. The situation in those camps was much more tolerable than in other places occupied by Nazi Germany. Around 40 percent of the Jews deported from Bessarabia and Bukovina survived there and rushed en masse to Czernowitz in 1944. Why Czernowitz and not other places? This city had always been at the junction of borders, enabling people to move easily from one country to another. The border of the Russian Empire was located 30 kilometers from Czernowitz. The Romanian border is now 40 km from the city. All the Jews dreamed of one thing only: to get out of this hell and escape to the West. That was the only direction in which they could flee, as they were aware that it was not so safe to stay in the Soviet Union. In Czernowitz, it was possible to travel abroad until May 1946. Officially, this option was open not for everyone but only for those with IDs proving that they were citizens of Romania, Czernowitz, or Bukovina before the war. Thus, tens of thousands of people left the country precisely through Czernowitz, and everyone rushed there. This exodus from Czernowitz persisted throughout the Soviet period. That is, it was always possible to leave the country from this city — with limitations, for bribes but still possible one way or another. This was a special feature of Czernowitz.

The post-war population of Czernowitz included local Jews. They could not never adapt to life in the Soviet Union and tried to leave in any possible way, for which they had a formal reason. However, vast numbers of Jews from Bessarabia, Podolia, and mainly Western and Central Ukraine made up most of the city's population. These people all spoke Yiddish, unlike the local Jews, who had mostly left Czernowitz by that time. Thus, it so happened that immediately after the Second World War, Czernowitz turned out to be the very center where plans for reviving Jewish culture were proposed. A Jewish theater moved to Czernowitz and functioned there as long as was possible. In 1950, it was closed at the request of, as was typically written at that time, "workers." However, all its performances were sold out, and it was a cultural outlet where people could hear Jewish speech. The theater was a true holiday for the heart, and whole families came. It was fantastic!

Czernowitz had a Jewish Yiddish school, No. 18, in which all subjects were taught in Yiddish. After it was closed in 1948, its teachers remained in the city and became teachers of English, Russian, or Ukrainian or mastered some other professions. There were libraries in the city. Before the war, there was a huge library at the Medem Center run by the Poalei Zion party. It generally taught courses in Yiddish and trained Jewish artisans in various necessary professions. And there were private libraries that survived. Since 20,000 people stayed in the city, those libraries also remained in place, and interested individuals had access to them. So, there was literature. I read all Zionist literature in Yiddish and German from those libraries and brought along some of it from Czernowitz.

The cultural soup was such that, in terms of maintaining Jewish culture, one could only compare it with the Baltic cities, i.e., Vilnius and Riga, or Chişinău within the Soviet Union. Those cities also offered opportunities for this. Odesa always had conditions for supporting Yiddish but not to the same extent. It is enormous compared to Czernowitz, and Czernowitz remained essentially a small city with a 120,00-150,000 population, half of which was Jewish. Naturally, I spoke Yiddish in my family, with my parents. I spoke Russian with my peers because I was simply not supposed to speak Yiddish to them. They knew Yiddish to some extent but did not speak it anymore. All the artisans in the city were Jews. So, you could go to any workshop, and you would speak Yiddish there, of course.

There was kosher slaughter, kosher meat, and all this terminology. For a while, quite a few people worked in synagogues, but then only one of them was left standing, while the main synagogue was eventually turned into a cinema. There's a whole story behind it. It was jokingly called "cinogoga," and it still exists today. Until the last war, until February 24 of this year, the Jewish community had plans to take this building into its own hands and revive the center of Jewish culture there.

As far as the literary environment is concerned, authors were members, as you understand, of the Soviet Writers' Union. Such figures as Moyshe Altman and Josef Burg remained like that until the very end. Burg was essentially the last Yiddish writer in Ukraine and maybe on the territory of the whole former Soviet Union. He died relatively recently. These were people mainly from Bessarabia. The greatest of them was Altman, and he hailed from the town of Lypkany. Several other fairly important Jewish writers came from this town, such as Eliezer Steinbarg, who died in Czernowitz in 1932. All the keepers and connoisseurs of the Yiddish language are attracted to his grave in the city. To this day, rallies are held there. There is a Yiddish inscription on his tombstone.

Writers were sent into the Gulag, except for such figures as Khayim Melamud, who was a pillar of Sovietism, Soviet ideology, at that time in the city. After serving their time and after the [Khrushchev] thaw, they returned to the city, of course, but their persecution did not stop. For example, Meir Harats, an author whom I knew better than others, was subjected to indoctrination pressure for publishing one of his poems in *Volksstimme*, a Jewish newspaper in Poland. I am an editor of the series *Jews and Slavs* and have published a

transcript of Harats' persecution proceedings there. So, these people were back in Czernowitz, but they were quite cautious, afraid to reveal their works, which they had no chance of publishing. I'm talking about the situation before the early 1960s.

I lived in that city. To recreate its character for you, picture this. I am walking down the street and hear the beginning of a Yiddish broadcast from the Voice of Israel. People appear unafraid; the windows are open in the summer; I start listening to this program and continue walking. I hear the continuation of a sentence coming from the next window. I keep going and hear the entire broadcast. I can walk down this street for half an hour and hear this whole Yiddish broadcast.

What did these Yiddish radio broadcasts give us? First, a link to Israel. Most of us experienced a connection with our historic homeland, Israel. Second, as a philologist, I had an opportunity to connect with literary Yiddish. I had home Yiddish with my family, but these programs also included readings of literary works, poems, and so on. And that's how I learned literary Yiddish.

No one in the academia published any works on Yiddish. There was only one defended dissertation on Yiddish syntax in the post-war Soviet Union. It was all limited. The turning point occurred sometime after 1961 when Aron Vergelis started publishing the [Yiddish-language] magazine *Sovetish Heymland* in Moscow. Vergelis was an extraordinarily energetic and talented person. He began to establish contacts with Jewish writers in various places in the Soviet Union. He came to Czernowitz on more than one occasion. So-called readers' conferences, i.e., meetings with Vergelis and Jewish writers, were held in the city. One could purchase issues of *Sovetish Heymland* quite easily, without any problems. The problems were of a completely different nature. People like me had a problem: I was suspicious of everything official in the Soviet Union. Therefore, I would not accept any ideological Soviet publication. This was one side of the issue, and the other one was a craving for Yiddish. And this was an excellent magazine that published the works of the best Yiddish writers — probably the best Yiddish magazine in the world at the time. I loathed [the content] but still read it. Second, I could not extract from this magazine that which was of interest to me. I was also interested in Hebrew, and there were very few opportunities for studying Hebrew in those days before the Great Aliyah.

I come from a traditional Jewish family. My family was not well-off but found the means to give me a fairly decent Jewish education. I had not one but two private tutors. One was in Hebrew and Yiddish, and the other prepared me for the bar mitzvah. The first tutor ended up in prison for Zionist activities and has not been seen since. The other tutor successfully prepared me, and I had a bar mitzvah in one of the city's synagogues. Since I already knew a little Hebrew, I certainly had a great interest in Hebrew, and I was not the only one. There were probably many such people in Czernowitz. The question then arose: where to get the sources of Hebrew? Of course, private libraries had some printed materials in Hebrew, but those were outdated publications. And then we began to look for the Israeli newspaper *Der*

Weg on the newsstands. It was a Yiddish-language newspaper published by the Communist Party of Israel, which was impossible for me to read — again, for ideological reasons. However, I still picked out Hebrew words from it. Thus, I received information and just learned new Hebrew words.

Jewish culture in Czernowitz was closely linked with the Jewish tradition and the preservation of the Jewish religion. These things were closely interconnected and had to do with property qualification. All other things being equal, a poorer person would have a greater connection with Yiddish than a more assimilated one with a higher societal position. When I was no longer in Czernowitz, the authorities decided to test my ideological reliability. They sent a non-Jewish student at the university to offer me a copy of Harkavy's Yiddish-English dictionary, observe my reaction, and then report it. That is, it was even material for provocations. Yiddish was a language whose knowledge had to be hidden. However, it acquired a completely different status in the eyes of the authorities with the publication of *Sovetish Heymland*. It was already possible to openly acknowledge your command of Yiddish, openly write in Yiddish, and so on. So, those writers who were in Czernowitz seemed to come to life. They found a second wind, and although they had gone through such hard trials in the Gulag, etc., the survivors returned to work and published their works. They received an opportunity, through Vergelis, to publish their books in the Soviet Writer Publishing House. Looking back at Vergelis' activities and his magazine, I must say that this was a remarkable attempt to preserve Yiddish in the completely impossible conditions of such an autocratic regime. Moreover, thanks to Vergelis, we now have a generation of writers who were once called young and are middle-aged now. He raised an entire generation of these writers in his literary courses, which he organized at the Gorky Institute of World Literature at the same time.

When I subsequently moved to Moscow, I realized what I had lost — the Czernowitz environment that linked me with Yiddish culture, etc. I lost this environment. Yuri Stern wrote a poem that aptly captures this factor, the overall role of Czernowitz, and its place in the Jewish culture of the time. I will recite this poem now. Yuri Stern was a famous Israeli politician who came to Israel with the first wave in the 1970s. He was a member of the Knesset but, sadly, passed away. Here is his poem "I live in Jerusalem":

Leaving the capital,
We go to distant ends —
Either to the city of Czernowitz,
Or to the city of Chernivtsi.

You won't see this
Either in Moscow, or near Moscow —
Everyone around is gabbing in Yiddish —
Jews and even goys.

Residences, chambers,
 The willows are crying at the gate.
 In the building of the former synagogue
 There's a cinema, and the movie is on.

Jews have no capital;
 Jews have no country;
 We, Jews, have Czernowitz
 Given to us as a consolation.

I live in Jerusalem;
 Back in my father's house.
 The broken ends of many lines
 I have tied again in a knot.

And they asked me a stumper:
 "What's your secret?" My answer was:
 "I received a Jewish vaccination
 in the city of Czernowitz."

I was fortunate that I grew up in this city. When I came to Israel, it was very easy for me to adapt in this sense. Czernowitz gave me, in essence, this very life in an absolutely Jewish environment. What Czernowitz could not give me was the experience of being a Jew in your own country. This was something that I could not see from there, from Czernowitz. To understand what it would be like in Israel, I went to Armenia before I made aliyah. Armenia had the same ethnic soup as was found in Israel. That is, Armenia was created by immigrants from entirely different countries, and I saw how people from other countries could live together, find a common language, and so on. That experience gave me an idea of what it would be like in Israel. When I came to Israel, everything was familiar as far as Jewish culture was concerned. I spent very little time at an ulpan, as I didn't need it. I immediately immersed myself in Israeli life. Czernowitz was an element of my cultural development that greatly helped me to adapt when I was already in Israel.

My most interesting experience with Yiddish happened when I was on a ship going from Sweden to the Åland Islands. There was a conference attended by different people from different countries, including many Swedes. One of them approached me and introduced himself. He was a famous Swedish businessman, one of the richest, and he was Black. He told me that he was originally from the United States and, in case I was interested, he was the leader of the Swedish Masonic lodge. He then asked what I was doing. I told him that I dealt with Yiddish. "Great," he said and continued to speak to me in Yiddish. His Yiddish was fantastic, and we talked for many hours. Finally, I asked him: "How come you know Yiddish?" First, he invited me to participate in their Masonic lodge, telling me I was just the kind of person they needed. They always say that, but it doesn't matter. I never belonged

to the Masons. And he told me about his situation: he was an orphan from a family of drug addicts. He was raised by a Jewish family that owned a bagel shop or something like that in New York City. They spoke Yiddish, and it was the language of the family. And he was like me; it was as if we had known each other all our lives. So, he said, "You are our man." "I'm a Jew, and you don't accept Jews," I replied. To this, he said: "What nonsense! I am also a Jew!"

As far as Yiddish is concerned, this same Czernowitz factor caused 8,000 Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union in 1988. Most of them were from this fantastic city, which survived as a whole in the Second World War. There are excellent apartments there, and the Jews used to own them. Second, there were rulers in the Soviet Union who hated the Jews — and Yiddish, for that matter. One of them was Khrushchev. While still the head of the Central Committee in Ukraine, he issued a decree in 1946, which Mordechai Altshuler published. According to the text, there were speculators in Czernowitz who had to be immediately evicted. Therefore, the Jews would be rounded up on the streets and sent to the Romanian border to vacate the apartments. Apartments were the most prized possession and have remained so to this day.

Ilya Akselrod: Thank you for your attention! Stay tuned for new podcast episodes on all major platforms. See you soon!