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UCLA's First Yiddish Moment: Max Weinreich at UCLA in 1948

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(Photographs appear on the last page)

In the summer of 1948, Max Weinreich brought the world of Yiddish culture to UCLA. He was the leading figure in Yiddish scholarship in the postwar period, and the two courses he taught at UCLA appear to be first instance of Jewish Studies at the university. His courses gave new direction to his students' careers and to the academic study of Yiddish. From these courses there emerged six prominent Yiddish scholars (and at least three marriages) and evidence that Yiddish culture was a subject suitable for American research universities.

Earlier that year, a strategically placed cartoon had appeared in a Yiddish-language magazine for youth published in New York. In it, a young man announces to his father, "Dad, I've enrolled in a Yiddish class at college." His well-dressed and prosperous-looking father replies, in English, "What!? After I've worked for twenty years to make an American of you!?"¹ The founding editor of the magazine, *Yugntruf* (Call to Youth), was Weinreich's son, Uriel, himself to become the preeminent Yiddish linguist of his generation. The cartoon celebrates the elder Weinreich's inauguration of Yiddish classes at New York's City College in the fall of 1947, and it anticipates his visit to California the following summer.

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¹ Anon., "Hershele" (cartoon strip), *Yugntruf* 8:3 (Jan.–Feb. 1948), 9.

Max Weinreich was the longtime research director of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO),² founded by Weinreich and other Yiddish scholars in 1925 in Vilna, Poland (today, Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania). In the years before World War II, YIVO became the “shadow” university of the national movement of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe. It provided an academic home for Jewish Studies and for Jewish scholars and students who were often excluded by quotas from Polish universities. Weinreich had received his doctorate from the German university in Marburg and was a leading Yiddish linguist and sociologist. He attained fluency in English at Yale University, where he pursued advanced studies during the 1932–33 academic year on a Rockefeller Foundation grant. When the Nazis invaded Poland in September 1939, Weinreich was traveling to a linguistics conference in Belgium with his son Uriel. They continued instead to New York, where they were joined by Weinreich’s wife and younger son Gabriel, following their escape from the Nazis by way of Siberia, Japan, and San Francisco.

In New York, Weinreich transformed the American branch of YIVO into its headquarters. He expanded its mission from collecting, preserving, and transmitting the culture of East European Jewry to combating the forces of assimilation portrayed in the *Yugntruf* cartoon. By the time of his visit to UCLA in 1948, large-scale immigration of Yiddish speakers to the United States had not occurred since the start of World War I, and the language of younger Jews was almost entirely English. Although a significant minority of Jewish parents had enrolled their children in supplementary Yiddish secular schools as an alternative to Hebrew religious schools, the Yiddish schools had not reversed linguistic

² Yidisher vishnshaftlekher institut; today, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. [For the first comprehensive history of YIVO, see Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Nation* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).]

assimilation.³ The young Gabriel Weinreich noted in 1947, for example, that the Yiddish summer camps attended by his cohort of Yiddishly-conscious youth had become increasingly English-speaking during the previous decade.⁴

By 1947, Los Angeles ranked second only to New York in the number of “Supporting Friends” reported by YIVO.⁵ It would soon surpass Chicago in total Jewish population. Los Angeles also drew the attention of Weinreich and his close colleague, Sol Liptzin, as a site for university instruction. Best known today for his standard histories of Yiddish literature, Liptzin is also known as the first advocate in America for university courses in Yiddish language and literature. He was chair of the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages at City College (CCNY), and from 1942 to early 1947, worked successfully to obtain official approval for the Yiddish courses that Weinreich would commence to teach in the fall of 1947.⁶ In the summer of 1947, Liptzin came to UCLA as a visiting professor of German. The UCLA German Department was headed at the time by Wayland D. Hand, the well-known folklorist, and Liptzin interested his counterpart in the subject of Jewish folklore. At Liptzin’s request, the Los Angeles Friends of YIVO funded a graduate fellowship in Jewish folklore at UCLA to be administered by Hand. The recipient was Howard Bloomfield, a recent graduate of CCNY. Liptzin also arranged for Hand and Dean Paul A. Dodd of the College of Letters and Science to visit YIVO in New York during the coming winter. The result was an invitation for Weinreich to teach at UCLA in the summer of 1948.

³ The *folkshul* was an afternoon school; the *mitlshul* was held on Saturdays and Sundays.

⁴ Gabriel Weinreich, “Yidish in kemp,” *Yugntruf* 6:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1945), 6–7.

⁵ “Yivo Organizations the World Over in 1947,” *News of the Yivo* 25 (Feb. 1948), 3*. YIVO had 848 individual supporters in New York City and 422 in Los Angeles (405 in Chicago).

⁶ “Details of these and subsequent YIVO-related events at UCLA not attributed to other specific sources may be found in the bilingual *News of the Yivo / Yedies fun yivo*, nos. 19 to 29 (Feb. 1947 to Nov. 1948).

Weinreich's visit to UCLA was intended to further a plan by Liptzin and Weinreich to establish chairs in Yiddish at North American universities. The idea of a chair in Yiddish was not new. Most recently, in 1940, a short-lived chair in Yiddish language and literature had been established at the university in Vilna, held until the Nazi invasion in 1941, by Noah Prylucki, a former colleague of Weinreich's and another co-founder of YIVO.

The plan by Weinreich and Liptzin for Yiddish chairs in North America and the reasons for its slight success are the subject of current research by Prylucki's recent biographer, Kalman Weiser of York University in Toronto (whose request for information at UCLA prompted the present review and was conveyed to this writer by David N. Myers, then the longtime director of UCLA's Center for Jewish Studies).⁷ If Weinreich's visit to UCLA had resulted in the establishment of a chair in Yiddish, it would have been the first and only such chair in the postwar period. Instead, the visit represents the period's first concerted program of university instruction in Yiddish culture.

* * *

Recording events within living memory may be termed "the art of before-it's-too-late." By good fortune, at the time of this writing (in August 2011), it has been possible to supplement the written record of the 1948 events with interviews of several participants, all of whom expressed their pleasure in helping to preserve the memory of that time.⁸ For

⁷ Kalman Weiser, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 2011). He has graciously encouraged this "incursion" into his area of research.

⁸ Present-day statements by participants are from the following telephone oral interviews: Murray Feder, Dec. 24, 2010 and Mar. 4, 2011; Joshua (Shikl) Fishman and Gella Schweid Fishman, Feb. 17, 2011; Harriet (Hinde) Schutzman Friedman, Feb. 21, 2011; Eleanor (Chana) Gordon Mlotek, Feb. 18 and Mar. 4, 2011; Justus Rosenberg, Feb. 15, 2011; and Gabriel Weinreich, Feb. 20, 2011. Subsequent conversations and correspondence regarding drafts of this paper (including photo identifications) have been invaluable.

one interview, however, it was too late. Television writer-director-producer Michael “Mickey” Ross (born Isadore Rovinsky), who was a lifelong lover of Yiddish, endowed a chair in Yiddish at UCLA in 2008. At the same time, he endowed a chair in Hebrew and Yiddish at his alma mater, CCNY. He was a 1939 graduate of CCNY and had majored in social studies during Sol Liptzin’s long tenure as professor of comparative literature.⁹ In the absence of clear records, it is tempting to imagine that the aspiring writer had come to know Liptzin, that he had absorbed Liptzin’s enthusiasm for collegiate Yiddish, and that Liptzin’s plan for UCLA in 1948 may have found its response sixty years later. But Ross died in 2009, and without further documentation, UCLA’s Yiddish summer of 1948 must be considered a singular event.

The YIVO Fellows

Weinreich organized a comprehensive campaign for Yiddish at UCLA. The foremost element of his campaign was a group of preselected graduate students who served as enthusiastic emissaries for Yiddish. The Los Angeles Friends of YIVO funded twelve fellowships for graduate students to come to UCLA (one student did not attend due to family illness). Those selected as YIVO Fellows were “not only the best prepared academically, but also those who are, and can be, active in society, because the YIVO understood that only these would be able to use the course content to influence others.”¹⁰

⁹ Paul F. Occhiogrosso, executive counsel to the president at CCNY, states that Ross’s transcript does not list professors’ names and does not include any courses titled as German or Comparative Literature, although “it does indicate that Mr. Ross received ‘entrance units’ in German” from course work completed at Seward Park High School (email to the author, April 25, 2011).

¹⁰ Anon. [likely Uriel Weinreich, the editor], “Di arbet arum di kursn,” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 11.

Nearly all of the YIVO Fellows were fluent in Yiddish, and most had attended graduate seminars at YIVO. One, Joseph (Yosl) Mlotek, had been a research fellow at YIVO in Vilna, and in America he gained renown as a Yiddish educator and as an editor at the *Forverts* newspaper. His bride-to-be, Eleanor (Chana)¹¹ Gordon, had worked at YIVO in New York since 1944. She relates that when Max Weinreich's secretary, the future historian Lucy Schildkret (Dawidowicz), left for Europe in 1946, she was promoted to work with Weinreich, who became her mentor in Yiddish language and culture. As Chana Mlotek, she became a leading expert in Yiddish songs, and with her husband, prepared three bestselling Yiddish songbooks. Today at 89, she continues to serve as music archivist at YIVO and is the senior veteran of the UCLA courses. Another YIVO Fellow with a prior connection to YIVO was Harriett (Hinde) Schutzman (now Friedman), who had attended the *Sholem Aleichem Mitlshul* (Yiddish high school) with Uriel Weinreich. On Uriel's recommendation, she was hired by his father to work at YIVO, and Uriel then approached her to attend the courses at UCLA. Now 86, she recalls her summertime service as a counselor at the *mitlshul's* Camp Boiberik (near Rhinebeck, New York), also attended by other future Fellows.

Several of the YIVO Fellows were already experienced Yiddish writers whose articles had appeared in *Yugntruf* and other publications. One of the most prolific was Joshua (Shikl) Fishman, now 85, who would become known as the founder of the sociology of language. In a pair of essays written shortly before coming to UCLA,¹² he developed his

¹¹ YIVO orthography would indicate "Khane," but her name appears as "Chana" in English publications.

¹² Shikl Fishman, "Vos heyst yidish lebn?" *Yugntruf* 7:4-5 (Mar.-June 1947), 22-23; Shikl Fishman, "Di shulyugnt: ire shtrikhn un hofnungen," in *Shul-pinkes*, ed. I. Chaim Pomerantz et al. (1948), 503-15.

thesis that Yiddish had value only if it was the language of a creative Jewish community, and that its preservation in America could be achieved only through the medium of small groups of Jewishly-committed Yiddish speakers – thereby presaging two of his best-known later works, *Never Say Die!* (on Yiddish, 1981) and *Reversing Language Shift* (on endangered languages, 1991). His wife-to-be, the lifelong Yiddish teacher and activist Gella Schweid Fishman, also a contributor to *Yugntruf* (with whom he raised a Yiddish-speaking family), recalls that she had wanted to join the UCLA group, but was not yet a graduate student. During the mid-1940s, she and her future husband were directors of the youth groups associated with the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institutes in New York and Philadelphia, respectively. Still another *Yugntruf* writer, Leonard (Leybl) Kahn, later legally adopted his Yiddish name (meaning, “little lion”) and gained prominence as an editor of the journal *Afn Shvel* (On the Threshold). He also became the bibliographer of Weinreich’s writings.

The YIVO Fellow whose name is most associated with the teaching of Yiddish is Uriel Weinreich. (For those in doubt, his brother Gabriel answers authoritatively that “Uriel” is pronounced correctly in Yiddish as “oo-REE-el.”) In 1949, at the age of 23, Uriel published the groundbreaking textbook, *College Yiddish*, which has never been out of print. Three years later, in 1952, he became the first holder of the new chair in Yiddish at Columbia University. Uriel’s *Modern English–Yiddish, Yiddish–English Dictionary* was completed by his father after his death from cancer in 1967 at the age of 40. YIVO then named its summer intensive Yiddish program in his memory. Uriel’s future wife, Beatrice (Bina)¹³ Silverman, was another of the UCLA Fellows. She became a leading expert in Yiddish

¹³ YIVO orthography would indicate “Bine,” but her name appears as “Bina” in English publications.

folklore (and editor of the well-known book, *Yiddish Folktales*), serving as a research associate at YIVO for many years.

All of the YIVO Fellows were American born, with the exception of Yosl Mlotek and Uriel Weinreich. Nine were graduates of colleges in New York City: CCNY, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, and Hunter College (Fishman was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania en route to doctoral studies at Columbia). At least four, Mlotek, Fishman, Silverman, and Sylvia (Sore) Zaidberg, had already worked as teachers of Yiddish. Several of the men had served in the armed forces during World War II. One was Uriel Weinreich, who had been an officer in the American army of occupation in postwar Europe. Another was Murray (Moyshe Hertsl) Feder, now 86 and living in Delray Beach, Florida, who was honored in 2009 with the French Legion of Honor medal for his service in France in 1944.

The YIVO Fellows thus exemplified the qualities required for Weinreich's mission: They were American in outlook, committed to Yiddish, and experienced in leadership.

Weinreich at UCLA

Most of the graduate students traveled with Weinreich by train from New York. Department Chair Wayland Hand had arranged to meet Weinreich when they arrived at Union Station in Los Angeles on June 18. According to Chana Mlotek, Weinreich and Hand had established a "very warm and cordial relationship." Shikl Fishman recalls that Hand was so pleased to welcome Weinreich's group that he also helped to carry the students' luggage, surprising the more formal, European-minded Weinreich.

However, Weinreich was not reserved with his students. Fishman later wrote that Weinreich made no small-talk, but "with a group of studious young people, smiled bashfully

and literally sparkled with advice and ideas” – for term papers, positions to seek, conferences to attend, research applications, books to read.¹⁴ Not only did he have a “good rapport with, and interest in, young people,” adds Fishman today, but as a result, “he invested much time in his students that took him away from his own academic work.” Gella Fishman recalls, “After the Holocaust, it was important for Weinreich to be able to gather many young people around him,” and she notes that the YIVO students “had total devotion to Weinreich.” Murray Feder says, simply, “He was wonderful,” and on Weinreich as a teacher, adds, “He packed several years of scholarship into a few weeks of lucid and clear presentations.”

Weinreich taught two courses at UCLA. One was a graduate seminar in Yiddish Language and Linguistics (Yiddish 240), in which 14 students enrolled. The other was an upper division course in Yiddish Popular Literature and Folklore (Yiddish 146), with 35 students. All of the YIVO Fellows enrolled in both courses, as did the prior year’s Fellow, Howard (Hershl) Bloomfield. Ten additional students audited the courses and completed all of the coursework, but were not enrolled because they required credit for other courses (and summer enrollment was limited to two). Both of Weinreich’s courses met for one hour each morning, Monday through Friday, during the first summer session, June 21 to July 31, in classrooms in Royce Hall.

English was the language of instruction, but Weinreich gave frequent examples and quotations in Yiddish. According to Chana Mlotek, Weinreich “had an accent and was a little stilted in English, but was so impressive” in his personality and erudition that

¹⁴ Shikl Fishman, “Maks vaynraykh in amerike: a talmids zikhroynes,” *Di goldene keyt* 140 (1995), 9–10. See also, generally, Fishman’s “Yidishistn in amerike: maks vaynraykh der yivo-boyer un bal-hashpoe fun yunge doyres,” *Forverts* (Mar. 2, 2008).

awareness of his accent quickly faded. She reports that she recorded all of Weinreich's lectures on a SoundScriber machine (a common device of the time that inscribed plastic discs) and that the discs are currently in the YIVO archives. In content, the courses were oriented toward both general and specialized knowledge of Jewish culture. As might be expected for a mid-twentieth century course in Jewish Studies, the assigned readings for the undergraduate course included works by Buber, Gaster, and Ginsburg, and by such Yiddishists as A.A. Roback and Hayyim Schauss.¹⁵

Weinreich prepared a "List of Suggested Topics for Term Papers" that ranged from direct study of Old Yiddish texts to analysis of secondary criticism.¹⁶ Most students wrote two or more papers. Hinde Schutzman, who became a kindergarten teacher, recalls that her paper was on children and Yiddish. Shikl Fishman reports that he wrote on Yiddish proverbs. Chana Mlotek's paper was on recruit and soldier songs. Chana Mlotek also recalls that Bina Silverman wrote on *shtetl* culture, that Shikl Fishman and Yosl Mlotek prepared a joint paper on ghetto songs from Vilna and Transnistria, and that Uriel Weinreich wrote on mixed-language Yiddish folksongs. Uriel's paper was published in YIVO's annual scholarly journal, *YIVO bleter*, in 1950.¹⁷ Chana's continuing song studies resulted in an article in the following issue of *YIVO bleter* on the folklorization of a poem first published by Mikhl Gordon in 1868 and which she recorded from multiple informants in New York, commencing in 1948.¹⁸

¹⁵ YIVO archives, RG584, F601A (with gratitude for the many courtesies of YIVO Public Librarian Yeshaya Metal).

¹⁶ *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 6.

¹⁷ Uriel Weinreich, "Di forshung fun 'mishshprakhike' yidishe folkslider," *YIVO bleter* XXXIV (1950), 282–88.

¹⁸ Khane Mlotek, "A gilgl fun mikhl gordons *di bord*," *YIVO bleter* XXXV (1951), 299–311.

Not all of the YIVO Fellows were specialists in Yiddish. Murray Feder came to UCLA for the summer from Berkeley, where he was preparing his dissertation on the Middle High German epic poem, “Die Gute Frau.” He had been recommended for the UCLA Fellowship by Sol Liptzin, with whom he had studied German at CCNY. Feder reports that Weinreich “opened my eyes to the realization that such poems were known to Jewish sources” and were adapted for Jewish audiences in early Yiddish. He says that, for him, Weinreich fitted the Jews of medieval Europe into the history of that period and “enriched my own medieval studies no end.”

Outreach for Yiddish

Beyond the specifics of course content and individual students’ papers, Weinreich’s chief aim at UCLA was to demonstrate a means of countering linguistic assimilation. He had chosen perhaps the last moment at which it might have been possible to reinforce Yiddish culture internally, from within the body of Yiddish-speaking American Jews. He had selected a cadre of motivated young colleagues, who could pursue their own research interests while serving as role models to others. Whereas today, it is common that university instructors of Yiddish may themselves be non-native speakers, and a notable proportion of students may be non-Jews, in 1948, Yiddish was still the exclusive, and widely shared, language of Jews from Eastern Europe.

A survey of the students in Weinreich’s undergraduate course found that all but six were American born, that nearly all had European-born parents, and that half came from homes in which some Yiddish was spoken.¹⁹ Only one stated that she had no knowledge of

¹⁹ Mordkhe Asnis, “Di studentn,” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 6–8.

Yiddish (but hoped to remain in the class).²⁰ The receptiveness of the students to Yiddish culture was exemplified by the questionnaire answers given by two of the undergraduate women, Frances Schonberg and Hortense Sokol, who said they wanted to learn about their own background and culture, respectively.²¹

Every afternoon, the YIVO Fellows held a “group meeting” with Weinreich to plan a series of extracurricular activities intended as outreach. Their targets were, variously, the undergraduate class members, Jews on campus, the campus at large, and the broader Jewish community. Although the courses were conducted in English, both Shikl Fishman and Chana Mlotek recall that the group meetings were held in Yiddish.

The chief outreach program was unplanned. “So many students asked spontaneously whether it would be possible to have a beginning Yiddish class that it took us a while until we could organize such a class,” wrote Harry (Hershl) Gelpar, the YIVO Fellow who had studied Yiddish with Weinreich at CCNY the previous fall.²² He reported that, remarkably, 15 students came each afternoon, without credit, and without any official announcement of the class. Shikl Fishman recalls that all of the graduate students participated in teaching. The textbook consisted of mimeographed pages from Uriel’s forthcoming *College Yiddish*, itself a plank in Weinreich’s program for university instruction in Yiddish. “The students literally gobbled up the texts and we had to ask the YIVO to send more,” Gelpar stated.

As their first outreach beyond the classroom, the YIVO Fellows organized weekly group “sings” of Yiddish folksongs. These musical events were the special project of Chana

²⁰ YIVO archives, RG584, F659.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hershl Gelpar, “Mir viln kenen yidish!” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 10.

Gordon, the future song expert. Working with her was Gabriel (Gabi) Weinreich, whose future career as a physicist would focus on the acoustics of musical instruments. She later wrote that not only was it impossible to cover more than a few songs in class, but “we wanted to acquaint a broader audience of students with the treasure of Yiddish folksongs.” Announcements were made that class members should attend and bring their friends, “and not only did guests gladly come, but also their guests, and others from the university, and from outside the university.” Because the largest number knew no Yiddish, “we prepared phonetic transcriptions in Latin letters,” and Gabi would prepare an English translation of each song.²³ (Chana reports that her song sheets were then used by Weinreich in his Yiddish classes at CCNY.)

Nearly 40 songs were performed over the course of six weeks. The number attending grew from 40 to as many as 100. Chana Gordon would play the piano, with vocal accompaniment by her future husband, Yosl Mlotek (of whom she says, “He had a wonderful voice!”). Yosl reported that the “sings” attracted many Jewish students and at least one Black and one Korean, as well as other non-Jews, all of whom were inspired to join the singing.²⁴ Today, Shikl Fishman says the sing-alongs were a deliberate vehicle for targeting group identity, a form of “Yiddish rap” that “taught through songs.”

However, a program of fortifying group identity through Yiddish depended on raising the status of Yiddish itself. As early as 1945, Weinreich had popularized the adage, “A language is a dialect with an army and navy,” as a commentary on the low political status

²³ Chana Gordon, “Lomir zingen!” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 8.

²⁴ Y. Mlotek, “M’hot dem zumer gelernt idish in an universitet in kalifornye,” *Forverts* (Sept. 8, 1948), 2.

of Yiddish and its speakers in Eastern Europe.²⁵ In the nineteenth century, Yiddish had been widely disparaged by Jews as *Zhargon* (a jargon) and by non-Jews, particularly German linguists, as no more than a dialect of German.

Yiddish never acquired the status of a territory with an army or navy to raise its stature among languages, but in America the university served as Weinreich's army and navy for Yiddish. Hershl Gelpar, the YIVO Fellow who had studied with Weinreich at CCNY the previous year, wrote that students in his CCNY course "didn't even know that Yiddish is considered a language! They truly believed that Yiddish is a jargon. But," he concluded, "the fact that Yiddish is now taught as a language in an institution of higher education removed their earlier strong opinions."²⁶ He reported that beginning students taught by the YIVO Fellows at UCLA even had doubts about whether Yiddish had a grammar, but that these were "quickly dispelled by declension of the definite article."²⁷

At UCLA, Weinreich encountered a subtle bias against the status of Yiddish. The summer session catalogue had listed his two courses as "Judaeo-German (Yiddish)," but the class rosters provided for students' grades bore only the typewritten title "Judaeo-German." In these rosters, one may see today the line drawn by Weinreich in ink through the typewritten course titles and above them his handwritten correction: "Yiddish." Linguistically, the term "Judaeo-German" would have denoted that Yiddish was merely a dialect of German spoken by Jews, but Weinreich had earlier coined the term "fusion language" to indicate that Yiddish (like English) was an independent amalgam of elements

²⁵ "Der yivo un di problemem fun undzer tsayt," in Maks Vaynraykh, *Oysgeklibene shriftn*, ed., Shmuel Rozhanski (Buenos Aires: Literatur-gezelshaft baym yivo in argentine, 1974), 398; opening address at 19th annual YIVO conference, 5 January 1945, New York.

²⁶ Hershl Gelpar, "Onheybn muz men mit alef-beys," *Yugntruf* 8:2 (Nov.–Dec. 1947), 13.

²⁷ Hershl Gelpar, "Mir viln kenen yidish!" *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 10.

drawn from other “stock” languages. In the case of Yiddish, the elements were derived from Germanic, Hebraic and Aramaic, and Slavic stock languages.

An unexpected opportunity to demonstrate publicly the independent status of Yiddish was provided by an invitation from the Alpha Mu Gamma foreign language honor society at UCLA. Uriel Weinreich reported that a delegation from the society invited the YIVO Fellows to present a program in Yiddish folklore, insisting, “Yiddish will be easy for us to understand. Many of us are studying German.”²⁸ The YIVO students selected the medium of a Yiddish marionette show because Uriel had previously mounted such shows in New York. The most popular author for his prior shows had been the universally liked Sholem Aleichem. In this instance, Uriel chose a play by Sholem Aleichem notable for its many Slavisms, *Dos Groyse Gevins* (The Jackpot). The invitation printed by the society announced that on July 14, Professor Weinreich’s class would present “short talks in English on Yiddish Folklore illustrated by Folk Songs,” followed by a “Puppet Play in Yiddish.”²⁹ The *UCLA Daily Bruin* also announced a puppet play as “the main feature in a program illustrating Yiddish folklore.”³⁰ Uriel reported that 130 students attended an enthusiastically received performance, but that only the Jewish students had understood the Yiddish.³¹ According to Yosl Mlotek, more than a hundred students and professors from Alpha Mu Gamma were present and applauded at length, but “all later admitted that

²⁸ Anon. [Uriel Weinreich, presumed], “Di arbet arum di kursn,” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 12.

²⁹ YIVO archives, RG584, F583.

³⁰ July 13, 1948.

³¹ Anon. [Uriel Weinreich, presumed], “Di arbet arum di kursn,” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 12.

without the English translation, their knowledge of German would have been of little help.”³²

Advocacy for Yiddish on campus began immediately before Weinreich’s visit with a gift of Yiddish books to the UCLA Library sent by YIVO and the Chicago publisher, L.M. Stein. A university press release of June 19 announced that the library “has begun assembling a collection of books in Yiddish linguistics, literature and folklore.” Librarian Lawrence Clark Powell stated, “Los Angeles harbors one of the largest Yiddish-speaking communities in the world,” and the “library hopes to become a repository of literary and spiritual treasures recorded in the language.”³³ (In the same year of 1948, the Los Angeles Jewish Community Council created the free, public, Jewish Community Library, and immediately after Weinreich’s visit, YIVO donated several hundred Yiddish books to the new library.)

Publicity about Weinreich and the UCLA Yiddish courses was widely placed. On-campus coverage included a feature story in the *Daily Bruin* (“Weinreich, Internationally Famous Philologist, Author, Teaches Yiddish”), plus an announcement of each special event. Significant feature stories also appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, and in the local Jewish press.

The furthest outreach conducted by Weinreich and the YIVO Fellows was among the Los Angeles Jewish community at large. A welcome evening for the YIVO Fellows was held by the Los Angeles Friends of YIVO, with an audience of more than three hundred. An evening was also hosted by the Bureau of Jewish Education and a tea by the newly-founded

³² Y. Mlotek, “M’hot dem zumer gelernt idish in an universitet in kalifornye,” *Forverts* (Sept. 8, 1948), 2.

³³ “Library Assembling Yiddish Collection,” (University of California Clip Sheet, June 15, 1948), dateline: June 19, 1948 (“Release Sunday, June 20”), YIVO archives, RG 584, F 583.

University of Judaism (now American Jewish University). At each event, the YIVO students presented a folklore program. During the six weeks of UCLA courses, the “YIVO Players” performed additional programs at Jewish community centers and other organizations. Shikl Fishman recounts a marionette visit to children at a local synagogue that was delayed an hour by the heavy Los Angeles traffic (in 1948). On their arrival, they were berated by an agitated youth director until he noticed Weinreich, standing quietly embarrassed by the side of the group, and became at once apologetic and obsequious. Of greater moment, Fishman noted, was that Weinreich attended all such events “to encounter hundreds of Jewish children, to observe how they reacted to our songs and performances, and to consider anew the entire subject of how to influence, to attract, American Jewish young people.”³⁴

Concluding the summer’s events was a farewell and graduation given by the Friends of YIVO on Saturday night, July 31, at the Los Angeles Yiddish Culture Club. Once again, more than three hundred members and guests attended. The students’ program included Yiddish songs arranged and played at the piano by Chana Gordon and sung by Milton Asnis. Uriel Weinreich wrote a “narration with song” about Yiddish folksongs on love, and the marionette show was performed a final time. For the graduation exercise, several of the YIVO Fellows spoke about their plans and hopes in the field of Yiddish.³⁵

³⁴ Shikl Fishman, “Maks vaynraykh in amerike: a talmids zikhroynes,” *Di goldene keyt* 140 (1995), 10–11.

³⁵ Yitskhaki [Y. Friedland], “Finf-un-tsvantsik yor ‘yivo’ in los angeles,” *Kheshbn* 2 (Oct. 1951), 47.

Personal Outcomes

Six of the YIVO Fellows – Shikl Fishman, Chana Gordon, Leybl Kahn, Yosl Mlotek, Bina Silverman, and Uriel Weinreich – entered into lifelong prominence in the field of Yiddish.³⁶ It is undoubted that all would have done so without the UCLA summer experience, but it is possible to trace certain influences.

At the start of the summer courses, the students were asked about their prior studies and current learning objectives, and many of their questionnaire answers are found in the YIVO archives.³⁷ All of the YIVO Fellows indicated fluency in Yiddish. Many were also capable in a second or third language, generally German, French, or Spanish. Uriel Weinreich, uniquely, indicated fluency in German, French, Polish, and Russian, with some Hebrew as well.

Answers by three of the YIVO Fellows are revealing today. In response to the question about prior study of folklore, Bina Silverman wrote, “*Keynmol nit gelernt folklor*” (never studied folklore), but following the summer at UCLA, Yiddish folklore became her life’s work. In answer to a similar question about linguistics, Shikl Fishman responded (as did the others) that he had not studied Yiddish linguistics. Today, he relates that the UCLA courses drew him to the subject, but that Weinreich then advised him, “We don’t need more linguists, we need sociologists.” He thereupon became a leading figure in the field of socio-linguistics, occupying chairs in sociology and psychology, as well as linguistics. The third Fellow was Leybl Kahn, who wrote that he hoped the summer course would introduce him to “previously written sources on how to collect folklore material.” Although

³⁶ See also, “Fifty Years Ago in *Yedies*,” *News of YIVO / Yedies fun yivo* 195 (Winter 2002), 31.

³⁷ YIVO archives, RG 584, F 659.

he did not pursue a career as a folklorist (he was a city planner by profession), he became well known for field work in Yiddish folklore.

Among the YIVO Fellows who did not pursue careers in Yiddish, post-ULCA experiences varied. Murray Feder became a teacher of German, both in high school and for adults at Yeshiva University, but made no formal use of Yiddish. He reports today that he remains an enthusiast for Yiddish and has developed a talk on its origins and development, built largely on Weinreich's *History of the Yiddish Language*, that he has presented to local groups in Florida. Hinde Schutzman says that "everything Yiddish remains a passion" and that for some years after the UCLA courses she enrolled in Yiddish conversation classes in her city of Baltimore. She says she regrets that her late husband's lack of interest in Yiddish discouraged her from further advancement.

Gabi Weinreich did not become one of the YIVO Fellows because he was already committed to doctoral studies in physics at Columbia University (on his way to a professorship in physics at the University of Michigan). He had intended to study at Berkeley in the summer of 1948, but his course needs changed, and he came to UCLA a few days after the start of the term. When asked about the influence of the Yiddish courses, he says they were not exceptional in his life because "at home everyone already spoke Yiddish." As is well known, his later life took a different turn (discussed in his book, *Confessions of a Jewish Priest*), but he reports that until recent years, when travel became more difficult, he attended meetings of his Yiddish reading group in Ann Arbor each Friday. (He was also the only informant at whose request the conversation was conducted largely in Yiddish.)

A remarkable instance of Weinreich's influence was reported by one of the auditors, Justus Rosenberg, today an emeritus professor of languages and literatures at Bard College in New York. Born in the Free City of Danzig to Polish-Jewish parents, he says he rejected Yiddish in his youth as the language of the ghetto. He was a student in Paris in 1940 at the time of the Nazi occupation and became the youngest team member of Varian Fry's Emergency Rescue Committee. By 1948, he was a teaching assistant in German at UCLA, and there he discovered Weinreich's summer courses. At the time, he says he knew little of Jewish culture, but that after the Holocaust, "I wanted to find out who I am and what Yiddish culture was all about." He says the courses made him "very conscious of his Jewish identity and background," and that he has remained so to this day. He continued his Jewish studies at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and also became fluent in Yiddish. He later developed a friendship with Isaac Bashevis Singer and in 1975 taught a writing course with him at Bard, titled, "The Writer and the Expert." He taught Yiddish courses at Bard in the 1970s and '80s and a course at the New School for Social Research on "The Culture of the Shtetl." Regarding his discovery of Weinreich's summer courses, Rosenberg says today, "What luck!"

Outreach for Yiddish among Jewish youth was directed at students on all career paths. The YIVO Fellow remaining to be mentioned here, Martin (Mordkhe) Asnis, reported in *Yugntruf* after the summer courses that students of all majors had been represented and that this "is very important because it shows that not only the so-called 'professional Jews' (teachers, communal workers) were interested" in Yiddish. "Our group of YIVO Fellows

had much hoped for this. Not only Jewish teachers and researchers ought to be self-aware and educated Jews, but it is important for all Jews.”³⁸

The influence that Asnis and the other YIVO Fellows hoped the courses would have on the undergraduate students (to whom he referred as “future doctors, engineers, physicists, dentists, and painters”) can no longer be gauged without further intensive inquiries. All of the men are either deceased or had names of such Jewish ubiquity that their careers cannot be traced, and all of the women have disappeared behind their married names. Among the YIVO Fellows themselves, it may be said that the Yiddish courses succeeded in reaching students of varied careers. Hershl Gelpar became the owner of a State Farm Insurance agency, Sore Zaidberg a psychologist, and Asnis a language and communications consultant for IBM.

In 1991, Shikl Fishman published an appreciation of Weinreich that includes a brief reminiscence of the events at UCLA. His views typify those of each participant who has written or spoken about the experience. Writing in Yiddish, he says, “We were a happy group of friends because in us there converged the joy of being young, the joy of spending time together at a picture-perfect campus, and the joy of carrying out a mission for Yiddish.”³⁹

The most personal results of the UCLA courses were the three marriages of former students. Uriel and Bina Weinreich had been acquainted before the visit to California, but during the six weeks together at UCLA became a couple and were married the following year. At UCLA, Gabi Weinreich met Alisa Lourie (one of the auditors), whose family had

³⁸ Mordkhe Asnis, “Di studentn,” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 6.

³⁹ Shikl Fishman, “Maks vaynraykh in amerike: a talmids zikhroynes,” *Di goldene keyt* 140 (1995), 9.

known the Weinreichs in Europe, and who was herself the grandniece of the pioneering Yiddish linguist Alfred Landau of Vienna, and she became his first wife.

Chana and Yosl Mlotek met previously on a beach in New York, but Yosl had returned to Calgary where he was teaching Yiddish while awaiting an American visa, and they did not remain in contact. They were reunited permanently at UCLA. In New York, Chana had already been active with YIVO, and her questionnaire in the YIVO archives provides the most fully developed statement of interests of any student. When asked today whether the UCLA courses could have had any significant influence on her future, she replies, "Oh, yes, I found my husband and it changed my life." She says they acquired Yiddish-speaking friends, spoke in Yiddish to their children, and raised a family that has continued to be active in Yiddish. As a result, she says, "I have had a Yiddish life."

Academic Outcomes

Weinreich's courses at UCLA were both a laboratory and a test case for collegiate Yiddish. As a laboratory, they experimented with the practicalities of university instruction in Yiddish culture, and as a test case, they demonstrated the possibilities for its academic success. Because UCLA did not create a permanent response to Weinreich's summer courses, the threads of their influence must be traced individually.

Weinreich's UCLA visit demonstrated that non-Jewish academic allies could be found for Yiddish culture. Wayland Hand was not only the host, but also an active supporter of Weinreich's activities. Arnold Band, now emeritus professor of comparative literature at UCLA, and founding director of its Center for Jewish Studies, indicates that he was a friend and colleague of Hand's for many years and that Hand related to him a

memorable event regarding Weinreich. During a visit by Hand to YIVO in New York, thousands of books that had been looted by the Nazis from Vilna and then rescued by the American army in Germany were scheduled to arrive at a port in New Jersey. Weinreich invited Hand to accompany him (on July 1, 1947) to welcome the ship and witness YIVO's reunion with a portion of its prewar cultural treasures.

Shikl Fishman recalls that, during the UCLA courses, Hand was eager to assist with publicity that would attract young people to Yiddish. Hand urged the YIVO Fellows to produce materials partly in English, but Fishman says the group was "too young to be practical and too ideological to accept the idea." However, Hand was already conducting his own publicity campaign in English. As editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* from 1947 to 1951, he published at least five approving notices of YIVO's Yiddish activities, ranging from Bloomfield's 1947 UCLA fellowship, to Weinreich's 1948 summer folklore course ("believed to be the first course of its kind to be offered at a non-Jewish institution in America"), to the Cahan Folklore Club, as well as a substantial review by Weinreich of Ruth Rubin's, *A Treasury of Jewish Folk Songs* (1950). Hand also encouraged further work by two YIVO Fellows who remained at UCLA, and today, the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture lists a collection of Yiddish songs recorded in 1949 by Bloomfield and Gelpar under Hand's supervision.⁴⁰

The UCLA laboratory experiment also demonstrated that the instructional materials for collegiate Yiddish were ready for expanded use. Uriel Weinreich's *College Yiddish*

⁴⁰ "Howard Bloomfield and Harry Gilpar [sic], Yiddish songs sung by Adele Weinrub, Zisl Nathan, Anna Kelman, and Anita Bonden. Recorded in Los Angeles, California, by Howard Bloomfield and Henry Gilpar [sic] of UCLA under the supervision of Wayland Hand, 1949. AFS 10132-10137."

textbook, which received a “dry run” in mimeographed form at UCLA, is now in its sixth edition and twenty-second printing. Its continuing success led to the development of second-year textbooks by Mordkhe Schaechter (1986) and David Goldberg (1996), and to the re-envisioning of beginning and intermediate Yiddish textbooks by Sheva Zucker (1994, 2002).

Weinreich’s technique of co-instruction by graduate students who could share knowledge and enthusiasm with their near contemporaries elicited the outcome most desired and least expected – the request by the undergraduates for instruction in Yiddish itself. In the fall of 1947, the concept of university instruction in Yiddish had been defended by Weinreich’s student at CCNY, Hershl Gelpar. Gelpar responded to a complaint by Yiddish essayist and theater critic “A. Mukdoyni” (Aleksander Kapel) that bringing Yiddish to the university would cause the death of Yiddish as a living language. Gelpar’s response appeared in the *Yungtruf* issue prior to the one carrying the “Dad, I’ve enrolled in a Yiddish class at college” cartoon. He argued that a language need not be dead to be taught at a college and that, just as learning Spanish was tied to the opening of closer relations with South America, teaching Yiddish to the Jewish college student should be “recognized as a means of creating tighter bonds with his people, from which he is already in large measure estranged.”⁴¹

Prefiguring events soon to occur at UCLA, Gelpar declared (presumably with Weinreich’s concurrence), “Now is the time to assemble all forces to see that Yiddish in college will be a success. Now is the time for the estranged youth to return to the way of

⁴¹ Hershl Gelpar, “Onheybn muz men mit alef-beys,” *Yugntrof* 8:2 (Nov.–Dec. 1947), 14.

Yiddish, because now they are willing to be led.”⁴² Writing again in *Yugntruf*, immediately after the UCLA experiment, Gelpar stated he was certain that if universities would give credit for Yiddish language classes, there would be no shortage of takers, that at UCLA alone there would be 30 to 40 students ready to enroll. “We wanted to show the intimacy and simultaneously the deepness of our language and convince others that without Yiddish, one is a weaker, poorer Jew.”⁴³

In the same issue of *Yugntruf*, YIVO Fellow Mordkhe Asnis reported on the findings of the end-of-class survey conducted at UCLA. He reported that all of the students had said they would want to take further Yiddish courses. He declared, first, that such classes would be successful if offered permanently and, second, that there was a great deal of interest in Yiddish among Jewish youth in general and especially when presented in a suitable way. From these points, he drew a conclusion that echoes Gelpar’s pre-UCLA statement: “one must exert all efforts to see that Yiddish courses are introduced in various universities here and in the entire country because the Jewish student body is ready to receive them.”⁴⁴

The only direct academic consequence of the summer courses was the founding of the Y.L. Cahan Folklore Club at YIVO in the fall of 1948 by “a group of New York students, the majority of whom” had been YIVO Fellows at UCLA.⁴⁵ Chana and Uriel took the lead, and other participants included UCLA attendees Bina, Gabi, Leybl, Shikl, Sore, and Yosl. Named for the preeminent interwar Yiddish folklorist in America, the “club” created the only American scholarly journal in Yiddish devoted to Yiddish folklore (*Yidisher folklor*).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hershl Gelpar, “Mir viln kenen yidish!” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 11.

⁴⁴ Mordkhe Asnis, “Di studentn,” *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 8.

⁴⁵ Anon. “Vos mir zaynen oysn,” *Yidisher folklor* 1 (Jan. 1954), 2.

The *indirect* consequence of the UCLA summer courses was the impetus given to Yiddish studies in general and to Weinreich's activities in particular. By 1950, he had commenced negotiations with Columbia University and philanthropist Frank Atran for the Atran Foundation (of which Weinreich was a director) to establish a chair in Yiddish at Columbia, and for the chair to be occupied by Uriel.⁴⁶ Simultaneously, in 1951, he was offered the newly-created chair in Yiddish at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which he declined, having already established himself and his family in America. Uriel's appointment to the Atran Chair at Columbia was announced in May 1952, and Weinreich continued his own Yiddish courses at CCNY, occasionally acting as mentor to special students at Columbia. Today, nearly all of the academic programs in Yiddish at American universities trace their lineage to the students of Max and Uriel Weinreich in New York.

To suggest, as Gelpar and Asnis had done, that a network of university programs in Yiddish might arrest the linguistic assimilation that two generations of *folkshuls* and *mitlshuls* had failed to reverse would be to negate the controlling social dynamic: Yiddish-speaking Jews chose to integrate into the English-speaking mainstream more rapidly than any other immigrant group. As Fishman had written before the UCLA visit, maintaining Yiddish-ness imposed on Jewish young people the burden of "living in two worlds" at a time when "the entirety of Jewish youth have integrated, as far as they possibly can, into the zestful, stormy, attraction-filled American life."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Andrew Sunshine, "The Making of a Chair: Uriel Weinreich and the Yiddish Chair at Columbia University," in *EYDES: Evidence of Yiddish Documented in European Societies*, ed., Ulrike Kiefer et al. (2008), 305–26.

⁴⁷ Shikl Fishman, "Di shulyugnt: ire shtrikhn un hofnungen," in *Shul-pinkes*, ed. I. Chaim Pomerantz et al. (1948), 508, 504.

From the academic perspective, the YIVO Fellows who reported on the UCLA experience touched on two fundamental shifts in Yiddish pedagogy: Yiddish would be increasingly a language of choice, and universities would become the chief venue for transmitting Yiddish language and culture (apart from the separate world of ultra-Orthodox native-speakers). They recognized that Weinreich's visit to UCLA was the first comprehensive demonstration of universities' new potential in the field of Yiddish.

From the personal perspective, as reported by Gella Fishman, it was the struggle to maintain Jewish identity that drove Weinreich, after the obliteration "of all his life's goals and accomplishments in Vilna," to come to America and "begin anew with such determination, stubbornness and quiet pride." She describes his leading students, the companions of her youth, as Jews who chose, "with intellectual modernity, to go against the stream of assimilation" and to engage in a "conscious striving for continuation of the folk-creativity and lifestyle of a thousand years."⁴⁸ For the UCLA Fellows whose lives would be devoted to the cause of Yiddish, UCLA's "Yiddish moment" was the gateway between their youthful aspirations and their mature pursuits.

(See photographs on the next page.)

⁴⁸ Private correspondence with the author, April 13, 2011.



“A portion of the class of Yiddish 146 at a lecture on folklore” – front row, Moyshe Feder; 2nd row, left to right: Hinde Schutzman, Sore Zaidberg, unknown, Shikl Fishman, Yosl Mlotek, Mordkhe Asnis; 3rd row: unknown, Alisa Lourie, Hershl Gelpar, Bina Silverman, Uriel Weinreich; 4th row: unknown; 5th row, Hershl Bloomfield (?); off camera, below, Chana Mlotek working the SoundScriber machine. Photo by Leybl Kahn, *Yugntruf* 9:1 (Sept.–Oct. 1948), 7.



At UCLA – seated, left to right: Hershl Gelpar, Gabi Weinreich, Yosl Mlotek; standing: Sore Zaidberg, Chana Gordon, Hinde Schutzman, Shikl Fishman, Uriel Weinreich, Bina Silverman, Moyshe Feder, Mordkhe Asnis, Max Weinreich. Photo by Leybl Kahn, courtesy of Chana Mlotek.