

# Finding Yiddishland in America

## Chicago's Yiddish-Language Press and the Challenges of Americanization, 1918–1932

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### Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, waves of Central and Eastern European Jews fled the pogroms that ravaged their native villages and sought new homes in Chicago. Upon arriving in Chicago, these immigrants faced the immediate question of how they should build their new communities in a young nation that was radically different from those they had left behind. Should they try to reconstruct the tight-knit yet isolating community structure of Eastern European shtetls?<sup>1</sup> Should they retain the language of the Old Country (Polish,

1. Shtetls were small towns in Eastern Europe inhabited mostly by Jews, existing from the thirteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, when shtetl life in Eastern Europe was completely destroyed as a result of the Holocaust. See Yaffa Eliach, *There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998); Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Lewis Hines, *Waiting for the "Forwards" - Jewish paper - at 1 A.M.*, 1913



Russian, German, Yiddish) or seize the expanded economic and social opportunities promised by the adoption of English? Finally, and most broadly, what defined their new community, and how should it fit into the broader American society?

There was little agreement about how to answer these questions. Some believed that Jewish immigrants should maintain a distinct way of life and favored insular communities that would allow them to easily obey religious laws, such as kosher dietary restrictions. Others supported varying degrees of assimilation, and a growing number of Jews—especially in New York—aligned their efforts with other working-class immigrants in support of secular ideologies such as socialism and anarchism. Yet regardless of where they stood on questions of schooling, religious practice, socialism, or Zionism, one aspect of cultural heritage remained central to many immigrants' understanding of themselves: their *mame-loshn*, or mother tongue, Yiddish. Despite the social and economic pressures to assimilate, a significant number of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Chicago continued to choose Yiddish as a means of retaining their ties both to the past and to their local immigrant community, whether by attending shows at the Yiddish theater, sending their children to a Yiddish-language day school, or subscribing to a Yiddish newspaper. In doing so, they embodied the words of Yiddish journalist and anarchist Arne Thorne, who said in an interview near the end of his life: "Yiddish is my homeland."<sup>2</sup>

In an immigrant community that lacked a territorial homeland to call its own, language was a central element in constituting a cohesive identity. Yiddish had a particular draw—unlike Hebrew, which was then seen as a primarily religious language that would not have been used to discuss the mundane, Yiddish was the "language of the secular, the home, and

2. Claire Ehrlich, "The Lost World of Yiddish Anarchists," *Jewish Currents*, Jan. 15, 2019, [jewishcurrents.org/the-lost-world-of-yiddish-anarchists](http://jewishcurrents.org/the-lost-world-of-yiddish-anarchists).

the street."<sup>3</sup> As such, it provided Eastern European Jewish immigrants with a unique linguistic space where they could retain their ties to the Old World through language while simultaneously locating their debates squarely in the society around them. Another reason Yiddish was uniquely equipped to help immigrants navigate their new environments was because it was ever-changing, adapting to its speakers' new environments and adopting words from local vernaculars. By the early twentieth century, New York's Yiddish dialect had become a "jargon" unto itself, incorporating English words such as "typewriter," "fountain pen," and "movies" instead of their Yiddish equivalents, to the chagrin of famous Yiddish writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the use of Yiddish allowed Jewish immigrants to exist in two spaces at once—in the "Old Home" of "Yiddishland" on the one hand and in the physical and social reality of their chosen new home on the other.

It is no coincidence that Arne Thorne, the man who spoke about Yiddish as homeland, was a member of the Yiddish press. Indeed, no other public organization participated so fully in the construction of Yiddishland while also providing maps for immigrants to navigate daily life in the new country. In his book about the Yiddish press, *Bad Rabbi*, Eddy Portnoy jokes that journalism was "the national sport of Yiddishland."<sup>5</sup> The sheer number of different periodicals on Yiddish newsstands (see fig. 1) reflected the diversity of the Jewish immigrant community—from anarchist manifestos to Zionist fundraisers, satirical cartoons to religious op-eds, and even information about vegetarianism,

3. Cristina Stanciu, "Strangers in America: Yiddish Poetry at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and the Demands of Americanization," *College English* 76, no. 1 (Sept. 2013): 60.

4. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America (1943)," trans. Robert H. Wolff, *Prooftexts* 9, no.1 (Jan. 1989): 6, 9.

5. Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi and Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 2.



**Figure 1:** Yiddish, Russian, German, and English newspapers for sale in Chicago's Maxwell Street neighborhood, ca. 1925. Irving Cutler, *Jewish Chicago: A Pictorial History* (Chicago: Arcadia, 2000), 22.

Jewish gangs, local business, and new literary debuts, all of it could be found in the pages of the Yiddish press.<sup>6</sup> These newspapers provide an unparalleled historical record of Jewish life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, giving readers a glimpse into how these immigrants lived, what issues were important to them, and how their communities negotiated the threats and opportunities of assimilation.

The issue of assimilation became particularly acute after the First World War, when the United States lurched into a period of nativism and isolationism, beginning with the country's refusal to join the League of Nations. Congress adopted the first restrictions on European immigration to the United States when it passed the Johnson-Reed Act (also known as the Immigration Act of 1924), which significantly limited the number of immigrants allowed each year from Southern and Eastern Europe. The

6. *Ibid.*, 2–5.

lack of “annual, monthly, weekly infusions of Yiddish speakers” into the United States meant that the effects of assimilation were more acutely felt by the Yiddish press, as rates of assimilation in the Jewish community climbed and there were no new immigrants to replace lost readership.<sup>7</sup> Ku Klux Klan membership grew to over four million in the mid-1920s, which demonstrates the disturbing extent to which hate groups—including anti-semitic groups—had gained prominence in the United States, beginning at the turn of the century and continuing through the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> As the growing prevalence of antisemitism increased pressures to assimilate and restricted immigration limited the number of Yiddish speakers entering the country every year, the landscapes of Yiddish-speaking communities in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere began to change dramatically. Yiddish newspapers had no choice but to respond to the challenge of heightened assimilation, formulating new ideas of what the Yiddish-speaking community in America should look like.

This paper analyzes the Yiddish-language press in Chicago in the critical years of 1918–32 and argues that the press ultimately played a dual role in the lives of Eastern European Jewish immigrants: it challenged the demands of Americanization by keeping its readers connected to the broader linguistic territory of Yiddishland, while at the same time facilitating the process of immigrants' assimilation into American society through an increased focus on American topics and a slow shift towards English-language content, among other trends. My analysis focuses on two Chicago-based Yiddish-language newspapers, the *Daily Jewish Courier* and the Chicago edition of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. I argue that both of them, despite their enormous differences regarding politics,

7. Dan Libenson and Lex Rofeberg, “Tony Michels: American History of Yiddish,” *Judaism Unbound*, podcast, episode 207, Jan. 30, 2020, [www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/episode-207-tony-michels](http://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/episode-207-tony-michels).

8. Beth S. Wenger, *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 201.

religion, and what American Jewish identity should look like, performed the dual function of contesting and facilitating Americanization in the Chicago Jewish community. I look in depth at two ways in which they performed these roles: 1) in their explicit arguments about Americanization and the extent to which the American Jewish community should assimilate; and 2) in their debates about education and language, two topics that were central to both newspapers' overarching vision for the future of the American Jewish community.

## Historiography

Numerous scholars have engaged with the history of the Yiddish press over the years, many of them interested in the ways in which Jewish immigrants negotiated the process of Americanization. The first scholars to study the immigrant press were contemporaries of the newspapers' readers and columnists, and they were fascinated by the transformation in urban landscapes caused by immigration. In his landmark 1922 study, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control*, sociologist Robert Ezra Park described this historical moment and the unique role that the press played within it: "Our great cities, as we discover upon close examination, are mosaics of little language colonies, cultural enclaves, each maintaining its separate communal existence within the wider circle of the city's cosmopolitan life. . . . Each one of these little communities is certain to have some sort of co-operative or mutual aid society, very likely a church, a school, possibly a theater, but almost invariably a press."<sup>9</sup>

The Yiddish press in particular captured Park's attention. He was intrigued by the journalistic methods of Abraham Cahan, the editor in chief of the New York *Forward*. The *Forward* was the most popular and enduring of all Yiddish periodicals—indeed, it exists to this day, albeit in

9. Robert Ezra Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (New York: Harper, 1922), 7.

an exclusively online format since 2019.<sup>10</sup> What most fascinated Park about Cahan was the *Forward's* specific dialect of Yiddish. Rather than using a standardized form of Yiddish, or a common Eastern European dialect, Cahan eliminated "unnecessary" Russian, Lithuanian, and German elements, simplified the language, and incorporated the Anglicisms of New York Jews. Soon, "*Die boys mit die meidlach haben a good time*" ("The boys have a good time with the girls") was considered "excellent American Yiddish."<sup>11</sup> Cahan insisted that his staff use this Americanized Yiddish, which he argued was the language "spoken in the street, the shops, the factories, and the homes of the people it desired to reach."<sup>12</sup> The *Forward's* linguistic inventiveness proved effective; soon, the daily paper had a circulation of over 140,000.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Park argued, Cahan's choice made the *Forward* a uniquely American creation—a publication specifically aimed at helping New York's working-class immigrants organize, learn about socialism, and assimilate into American society.

Ultimately, Park argued that the immigrant press—through its Americanized topics and language—promoted assimilation in the long term, acting as an entry point into American society for newly arrived immigrants. Mordecai Soltes, Park's contemporary, agreed that the Yiddish press was an "Americanizing agency" and highlighted the ways in which the Yiddish press helped its readers navigate the maze-like complexity of the United States. For many working-class Jews in New York, Soltes observed that the Yiddish press "is practically the only source of information to which most of them have access. It guides them in the

10. "The Forward, 122-Year-Old Jewish Publication, Ends Its Print Edition," *Haaretz*, Jan. 17, 2019, [www.haaretz.com/us-news/the-forward-122-year-old-us-jewish-publication-ends-its-print-edition-1.6849712](http://www.haaretz.com/us-news/the-forward-122-year-old-us-jewish-publication-ends-its-print-edition-1.6849712).

11. H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York: Knopf, 1919), 156; also cited in Park, 81.

12. Park, 101.

13. *Ibid.*, 91.

early stages of their process of adjustment to the new and complex American environment.”<sup>14</sup> Journalist Ido Joseph Dissentshik makes a similar argument in his 1966 study of two New York Yiddish dailies, in which he contends that Yiddish newspapers instilled their readers with a uniquely American spirit, helping them to assimilate into their new society while maintaining a distinctly Jewish identity.<sup>15</sup> Current scholarly accounts of the Yiddish press—and other immigrant periodicals—continue to reflect Park’s nearly century-old arguments about the immigrant press’s assimilative function. In a 2016 article titled “Revisiting the Immigrant Press,” Andrea Hickerson and Kristin Gustafson argue that many aspects of Park’s characterization of the immigrant press remain relevant, particularly the ways in which the immigrant press aids processes of assimilation.<sup>16</sup> Prominent American Jewish scholars have echoed these arguments, especially in their analysis of Cahan’s New York *Forward*. In *The Jewish Americans*, a documentary history of American Jewry, historian Beth Wenger states simply that “under its editor Abraham Cahan, *The Jewish Daily Forward* was an Americanizing agency.”<sup>17</sup>

14. Mordecai Soltes, “The Yiddish Press—An Americanizing Agency,” *American Jewish Year Book* 26 (Sept. 29, 1924–Sept. 18, 1925): 174, [www.jstor.org/stable/23601184](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23601184). Soltes was the director of extension education in the Bureau of Jewish Education in 1924 and the director of the Jewish National Welfare Board in 1925, both in New York City. “Dr. Mordecai Soltes, Educator, Is Dead; Retired Director, Professor of Yeshiva,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1957, [www.nytimes.com/1957/06/29/archives/dr-mordecai-soltes-educator-is-dead-retired-director-professor-of.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1957/06/29/archives/dr-mordecai-soltes-educator-is-dead-retired-director-professor-of.html).

15. Ido Joseph Dissentshik, “New York’s Two Yiddish Dailies: ‘The Day Morgen Journal’ and ‘Forward’—A 1966 Study,” *Kesher*, no. 6 (1989): 45e–52e, [www.jstor.org/stable/23901054](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23901054).

16. Andrea Hickerson and Kristin L. Gustafson, “Revisiting the Immigrant Press,” *Journalism* 17, no. 8 (Nov. 2016): 956–58, [doi.org/10.1177/1464884914542742](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914542742).

17. Wenger, 155.

She gives several examples, including an amusing article in which the *Forward*’s editors tried to explain the rules of baseball to its readers.<sup>18</sup> Deborah Dash Moore similarly focuses on the New York Yiddish press in her sprawling 2017 history of the city’s Jewish community, paying special attention to the *Forward*.<sup>19</sup>

Wenger and Moore have been careful, however, to avoid Park’s tendency to generalize. While they focus most of their attention on the *Forward*, they qualify their statements about the Yiddish press in general and acknowledge the lack of consensus in the early twentieth-century Jewish community on most issues. Wenger notes the more complex dual function of the Yiddish press, stating: “The Yiddish press . . . emerged as a medium that expressed and fortified immigrant Jewish culture while helping Jews adapt to American society.”<sup>20</sup> However, beyond listing the vast array of orientations represented in the press—anarchist, conservative, Zionist, and more—Wenger does not examine much of the actual content of the Yiddish press outside of the *Forward*. Additionally, while she provides a nuanced look at the question of Americanization among the Yiddish-speaking Left and “is . . . careful to acknowledge that [they] had a more ambiguous stance toward the Americanization project”<sup>21</sup> than is often recognized, Wenger’s scope remains limited to New York City’s socialist context and does not incorporate the voices represented in other types of Yiddish publications. Jerome Chanes has a similar critique of Moore’s *Jewish New York*, arguing that while “Moore rightly

18. *Ibid.*

19. Deborah Dash Moore et al., *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 136–38.

20. Wenger, 98.

21. Daniel Soyer, review of *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage*, by Beth Wenger, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 119, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.32.2.0117](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.32.2.0117).

emphasizes the role of the socialist *Forverts*,<sup>22</sup> the regnant Yiddish newspaper in this arena ... she ignores the role and impact of another important newspaper, the *Freiheit*,<sup>23</sup> which competed with the *Forward* in political ideology and its views on Americanization.<sup>24</sup> Chanes's comment captures the most significant limitation of the existing scholarship on the Yiddish press in the United States in regards to its response to Americanization: its relatively narrow scope, with the vast majority of scholars focusing on New York City and the *Forward* in particular.<sup>25</sup>

While this paper builds upon the work of all of these scholars, contributing to the literature on the Yiddish press's role in facilitating Americanization, it will also use close readings of Chicago's newspapers to show the extent to which assimilation did *not* appear inevitable to many. It will demonstrate that even when Yiddish-language newspapers were contributing to the process of Americanization they were not always doing so willingly or knowingly, like Cahan's *Forward* in New York City. Indeed, many newspapers—conservative, socialist, and otherwise—were explicit about the ways in which they sought to be a part of Yiddishland,

22. The Yiddish name of the *Forward* newspaper.

23. *Freiheit* means freedom in Yiddish.

24. Jerome A. Chanes, review of *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People*, by Deborah Dash Moore, *American Jewish History* 103, no. 3 (July 2019): 386, doi:10.1353/ajh.2019.0041.

25. It should be noted that there are many incredibly robust studies of the Yiddish press (still mostly limited to the New York context) that focus on issues other than the question of assimilation, Americanization, and American Jewish identity. Tony Michels, one of the foremost scholars on the Yiddish press, has mostly focused on Yiddish socialists in New York, looking at the ways in which they engaged in transnational networks of revolutionary Yiddish thought and highlighting the role of the press in speaking to New York's Jewish working class. Rebecca Margolis focuses on many of the same issues that are featured in this paper, but in the Canadian context, focusing on Montreal.

whether through their ties with a transnational Yiddish community, their membership in Yiddish revolutionary movements, or their commitment to a Yiddish language education for their children. While most scholars acknowledge the deeper complexity in the Yiddish press's engagement with the issue of assimilation, little work has been done to explore it and to bring out the voices of Yiddish writers who resisted assimilation or attempted to negotiate its demands.

This paper will, therefore, fill the following gaps in the scholarship on the Yiddish press in America. First, it will focus attention on Chicago, a city with a rich Yiddish-language history that is underrepresented in scholarship. A study of Chicago's Yiddish press will complement the extensive scholarship on New York, providing examples of the ways in which Chicago's newspapers addressed Americanization, often in less explicit and more nuanced ways than Cahan's self-consciously Americanized *Forward*. In this way, this paper will build on scholarship about the Yiddish press as an Americanizing agency but will emphasize the different approaches that publications took in this process. This paper will also showcase the voices of the Yiddish writers who sought to test the limits of Americanization, demonstrating the ways in which they dwelt in Yiddishland while simultaneously creating new homes in America.

Throughout this paper, I use the terms “assimilation” and “Americanization” frequently, reflecting the ways in which both scholars and immigrants have referred to the issues at the heart of this paper. Both are intended to refer, generally speaking, to “the process through which individuals and groups of differing heritages acquire the basic habits, attitudes, and mode of life” of the United States.<sup>26</sup> However, some Yiddish immigrant writers resisted these terms by insisting that it was possible to simultaneously “Americanize”—to participate actively in American politics and society—while retaining strong cultural and personal ties

26. “Assimilation,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed Apr. 29, 2020, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilation.

to the immigrant community. In other words, these immigrants defined “Americanization” as exercising one’s citizenship rights, celebrating the Fourth of July, or watching baseball and used the term “assimilation” to indicate a more complete social, cultural, and linguistic integration into American society.

American Jewish historian Deborah Dash Moore has taken issue with the terms “assimilation” and “Americanization.” In her 2006 essay, “At Home in America?: Revisiting the Second Generation,” she critiques the ways in which contemporary American historians have continued to use terms like “assimilation” to judge the extent to which immigrants have “become American.”<sup>27</sup> This framework of understanding immigrant experiences, she claims, is far too simplistic, and moreover, it leaves second-generation immigrants in a particularly poignant position—they are at home “neither in the parental world nor in the United States,” lacking deep ties to their homeland but unable to ever fully assimilate.<sup>28</sup> Moore argues that this framework ignores the creative ways in which second-generation immigrants creatively adapted the institutions of their parents to the society around them, finding ways not to *become* American, but to “be at home in America.” Moore’s concept of being “at home” in the United States allows for a much more nuanced understanding of assimilation, making space for a wide range of experiences and degrees of assimilation. The idea of Yiddishland also fits snugly within Moore’s theory. As the first, second, and later generations of America’s Yiddish-speaking Jews searched for ways to carve out small Yiddishlands in their American communities, they participated in the institutional innovations

27. Deborah Dash Moore, “At Home in America?: Revisiting the Second Generation,” in “Immigration, Integration, Incorporation, and Transnationalism: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives,” ed. Elliot R. Barkan, John J. Bukowczyk, and Madeline Hsu, special issue, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 2/3 (Winter–Spring 2006): 160, [www.jstor.org/stable/27501693](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27501693).

28. *Ibid.*

that Moore wrote about, making the traditions of the Old World compatible with the new home.

Thus, while I will use the term “assimilation” to refer to the general process of adjusting to life in the United States, I will use the term “Americanization” to refer to Moore’s idea of immigrants becoming “at home” in America. This framework allows for a more optimistic, individually oriented understanding of the immigrant experience. Instead of casting the “Americanizing” function of the Yiddish press as a tragic flaw that contributed to its own demise, we can read the story of Americanization as the creation of a new home that exists somewhere in between the old and the new. Ultimately, this is what I will argue the Yiddish press facilitated: it allowed Chicago’s Eastern European Jews to create their own unique community in a new land—to remain a part of Yiddishland, but also to become “at home” in America.

## Chicago’s Two Yiddish Dailies

In the early twentieth century, as Yiddish-speaking Jews arrived in Chicago by the thousand, they didn’t have to go far to find a place that looked something like home. The Near West Side, near the railroad stations where immigrants arrived from the East Coast, was a “teeming, transplanted Eastern European shtetl atmosphere” inhabited almost entirely by Russian and Polish Jews.<sup>29</sup> On the bustling streets of the Maxwell Street area, as it came to be called, newly arrived immigrants found comfort in familiar Jewish institutions—kosher butchers, fruit stands, textile shops, and the like—that had been native to the Eastern European shtetl. These neighborhoods contrasted starkly with those of the established Jewish communities in the city. The Jews of Maxwell Street stood out for their more Orthodox approaches to religion, their

29. Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 58.

devotion to Yiddish, their lower socioeconomic status. By contrast, the German Jews who had arrived in the mid-nineteenth century were already partially assimilated and middle class. To some German Jewish immigrants in Chicago and elsewhere, the newly arrived Yiddish-speaking Jews were an embarrassment that potentially threatened the “enviable reputation” that German Jews had earned in the United States.<sup>30</sup> Some Russian and Polish immigrants, especially the more religiously Orthodox among them, returned the sentiment: the adoption of more liberal religious practices such as allowing men and women to sit together in the synagogue—or worse, using Sunday as the primary day of worship—was a disgrace.<sup>31</sup> The tensions between these two groups and their contrasting visions of what it meant to be Jewish in America would eventually color the pages of the Jewish press, especially for the Yiddish writers and readers who remained deeply connected to their traditions and language well into the twentieth century.

By 1910, Maxwell Street was lined with newspaper stands full of Yiddish periodicals, but the press did not take off immediately. When Eastern European Jews first arrived in Chicago in the late nineteenth century, many of them had had little exposure to secular Yiddish literature; there were few such publications in the Russian Empire at the time due to strict governmental restrictions on minority publications.<sup>32</sup> It took several years for the Yiddish-language press in the city to take off, and the 1880s were littered with failed publications that went under in a matter of years or months. However, as the immigrant population of Chicago increased, the Yiddish-language press became a central part of the city’s Jewish life, representing the voices of the newly arrived immigrants from Russia and

30. Gerald Sorin, “Mutual Contempt, Mutual Benefit: The Strained Encounter between German and Eastern European Jews in America, 1880–1920,” *American Jewish History* 81, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 35, [www.jstor.org/stable/23884361](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23884361).

31. Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago*, 59.

32. *Ibid.*, 138; Portnoy, 3–4.

Poland whose outlook and lifestyle contrasted starkly with that of the largely Americanized German Jewish and Anglo Jewish populations on the South and North Sides.<sup>33</sup> The few remaining German Jewish newspapers were religious in nature, with religious figures as their editors. Yiddish newspapers, by contrast, spanned the breadth of the ideological spectrum. Their publications were edited “by a diverse group of union leaders, printers, business owners, and journalists.”<sup>34</sup> Yiddish bound all of these individuals together, but their understandings of Yiddish—of its function in the community and of its relative importance compared to Hebrew, for example—differed greatly.

By 1920, there were two prominent competing Yiddish dailies in Chicago that make up the majority of the source material for this paper: the *Daily Jewish Courier*, which represented an Orthodox, Zionist perspective, and the Chicago edition of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a regional branch of the famous New York daily, which was socialist and secular in outlook.<sup>35</sup> While these dailies did not represent all of Jewish Chicago (many liberal and Reform newspapers could be found in English or German), they did represent two crucial opposing perspectives among Jews who remained committed to Yiddish.

The *Forward* opened its Chicago branch in 1919, but its New York counterpart was well-known in the city long before then as one of the

33. The conflicts between the two groups ranged from religious disagreements to class antipathy, with the earlier arrivals generally looking down upon the working-class Jews from Eastern Europe.

34. Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago*, 138.

35. The Chicago *Forward* seems to have been relatively independent from the New York edition, publishing a significant number of articles about the local Chicago context, which comprises the source material of this paper. However, it is unfortunately difficult to tell to what extent the Chicago *Forward* reprinted materials from the New York edition.



primary periodicals representing the Jewish working class. According to an article printed in the Chicago *Forward* in 1929, a campaign set up in the years before the *Forward* came to Chicago had rallied to open a branch in the city in order to support the labor movement.<sup>36</sup> In his history of Chicago's Jews, Irving Cutler describes the *Forward's* reputation in the city: "[It was] known for its warm, often argumentative style, which produced coverage that was frequently punctuated with razor-sharp wit and barbs."<sup>37</sup>

The Chicago *Forward* participated in processes of Americanization rather explicitly, as it had in New York; in Abraham Cahan's own words, published in the Chicago *Forward* in 1927: "The *Forward* was called into being for a double purpose: (a) To organize the Jewish workers into trade unions and disseminate the principles of Socialism among them. (b) To act as an educational agency among the immigrant Jewish masses in the broadest sense of the word, and to spread among them high ideals

36. "Editorial," *Forward*, Jan. 1, 1929, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.d1 IE, translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey, Newberry Library (hereafter CFLPS), [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_0811/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_0811/). "Organized in 1936 as a project under the Works Progress Administration of Illinois, the Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey sought to translate and classify selected news articles appearing in Chicago's foreign language press from 1861 to 1938. ... The history departments of the University of Chicago and Northwestern University provided notable aid and direction for the project, particularly through University of Chicago historian Bessie Louise Pierce, who helped direct the survey." "Descriptive Summary," Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey Records, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, accessed Oct. 22, 2021, [www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scr/c/f/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.CFLPS](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scr/c/f/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.CFLPS).

37. Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago*, 140.

of humanity."<sup>38</sup> The *Forward* sought to influence identity construction for the growing American Jewish community by encouraging its readers to embrace secularism and socialism, but it also retained a firm focus on Jewish readers through the choice of Yiddish and through news related to the state of the American Jewish immigrant community and workers. It recognized the importance of Yiddish to Jewish immigrant identity, especially as Eastern European Jews became the majority of America's Jewish population, while pushing Jews to engage with the larger community rather than isolate themselves as they had done in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. The *Forward* wanted them to engage with the world as socialists, citizens, and workers—it chose Yiddish because it saw Yiddish as the secular Jewish language, a language of the working class and a language that could speak to Jewish immigrants' hearts.

Over the years, however, the *Forward's* commitment to the Yiddish language expanded beyond the language's role as the working-class vernacular. Beginning in the 1920s and continuing into the 1930s, the *Forward* joined ranks with cultural organizations such as the Workmen's Circle, which were dedicated to preserving the Yiddish language and culture through education. The *Forward* began to promote evening classes, such as "Jewish history" and "Yiddish reading," as a means of connecting Chicago's secular Yiddish-speaking community to a broader idea of Yiddishland.<sup>39</sup> This shift was a result both of the increasing pressures of assimilation and of the *Forward's* ties to broader, transnational Yiddish socialist movements, specifically the Bundist movement. The Bundists, who had originally formed Yiddish socialist parties across

38. "By Abraham Cahan, Editor-in-Chief of *Forward*," *Forward*, May 1, 1927, subject codes: Jewish, II.b2.d1 IE, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_0820/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_0820/).

39. "[Classes of the Educational Committee of the Workmen's Circle]," *Forward*, Oct. 6, 1920, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.f, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_1508/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_1508/).

Eastern Europe, had also agitated for the right to what they called “cultural autonomy”—essentially, the ability to practice their culture and speak their language in peace. When many of them left Eastern Europe due to political turmoil, they brought a powerful ideology of identity centered on *Yiddishkayt* (“Yiddish-ness”) and *doikayt* (“hear-ness”) with them to the United States, launching a revival of “Yiddish culture” in American Jewish immigrant communities, especially those aligned with the socialist cause.<sup>40</sup> The *Forward* was deeply involved in these efforts.

The perspective of the *Daily Jewish Courier*, which branded itself as the voice of Chicago’s Orthodox community, contrasted greatly with that of the *Forward*. Despite these differences, the *Courier*, too, simultaneously encouraged Americanization in some ways while articulating a traditionally Eastern European Jewish identity in others. Established in 1887, the *Courier* was among the oldest Yiddish periodicals printed in the United States, and it was one of few Jewish newspapers in Chicago that survived from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth. Furthermore, it was the first Yiddish daily to be published—and to achieve success—outside of New York City.<sup>41</sup>

From the start, the *Courier* attracted the attention of other Jewish newspapers. In 1894, *The Occident*, an English-language newspaper that associated itself with Reform Judaism (and proudly declared itself the “first Jewish reform paper to come into existence in the world”<sup>42</sup>), took note of the *Courier* in an article discussing four prominent Jewish news-

40. Frank Wolff, “The Home that Never Was: Rethinking Space and Memory in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Jewish History,” in “Space/Time Practices,” ed. Sebastian Dorsch, special issue, *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 3 (2013): 202–3, [www.jstor.org/stable/23644532](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23644532).

41. Arthur A. Goren, “The Jewish Press in the U.S.” *Kesher*, no. 6 (1989): 13e, [www.jstor.org/stable/23901046](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23901046).

42. *The Occident*, “Jewish Publications of Chicago,” Apr. 6, 1894, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.d1, CFLPS.

papers in Chicago. Of the four, three were published in English; only the *Courier* had the distinction of being printed in Yiddish, or as *The Occident* put it, “in Hebrew characters in the Russian and Polish dialect.”<sup>43</sup> It circulated, according to *The Occident*, “among the twenty-five thousand Russian and Polish Jews of the city,”<sup>44</sup> making it the primary periodical for Chicago’s Eastern European Jewish population. Throughout the 1920s, the *Courier* was also featured, albeit rather unfavorably, in the *Chicago Forward*. In 1921 the *Forward* accused the *Courier* of lying about its circulation: while the *Courier*’s official 1921 circulation was 42,040, the *Forward* insisted that it was closer to eight thousand.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of what the true circulation numbers were, there is no doubt that the *Courier* was prominent among Chicago’s Yiddish periodicals, and that it remained so—in the minds of its supporters and detractors—for the first half of the twentieth century, as most other Yiddish newspapers failed.

The *Courier* published articles about education, international news, Chicago’s Yiddish cultural activities and various religious institutions, editorials, fiction and poetry, and advertisements. Occasionally the *Courier* even published serialized translations of lengthy European literary works, such as *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, highlighting their self-perceived role as a source of culture to Yiddish-speaking readers. Like many Yiddish newspapers, the *Courier* stood apart for the sheer variety of genres that it published, which allowed it to play an outsized role in the cultural life of Chicago’s Orthodox community.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. “[No headline],” *Forward*, May 14, 1921, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.d1, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/542397250892/](http://flps.newberry.org/#/item/542397250892/); “The Truth about the *Courier* Circulation,” *Forward*, May 15, 1922, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.d1, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/542397220574/](http://flps.newberry.org/#/item/542397220574/).

The editors were proud to call the *Courier* a “particularly” Yiddish paper. Responding to criticism that the Jewish press was “old-fashioned,” the editors explained in a 1923 editorial in English what they considered to be the defining qualities of the Yiddish press.<sup>46</sup> Other newspapers, they claimed, accused Yiddish newspapers of focusing too little on “the human side of things,” calling them dull because they “carry no social column, do not publish stories relating to crime and divorce scandals, and carry no bedroom stories and so forth.”<sup>47</sup> The *Courier*’s response was that they did not publish such stories simply because their readers would not enjoy them; their readers had different, unique tastes. Yiddish readers, they wrote, “want their newspaper to be a political, literary, social, economic, and religious world history of yesterday.”<sup>48</sup> The editors pointed out that in shaping their material to the tastes of their readers, the Yiddish press was not unique. Many foreign presses catered to the interests and needs of their particular readership. The editors concluded: “If the Yiddish daily is old-fashioned, then one might say that the French, English, or Italian dailies are also old-fashioned because they are so fundamentally different from the average American daily, yet no one claims that they are old-fashioned, because they serve the purpose of their readers and fit their taste.”<sup>49</sup> The arguments made by the *Courier*’s editors were not, in fact, true of the Yiddish press as a whole—the *Forward* certainly could not be accused of lacking articles on cruder topics such as crime, sex, and scandal.<sup>50</sup> What these assertions about the Yiddish press *do* show, however, is how the editors of the *Courier*

46. “Is the Jewish Press Old-Fashioned?” *Daily Jewish Courier*, May 27, 1923, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.d1, CFLPS, flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\_5\_0859/.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Portnoy, 79, 131.

envisioned the role of the Yiddish press in the community, and why it carried special significance for its readers. This self-image contrasts sharply with that of the socialist, “Americanized” New York *Forward*; the *Courier*, instead, catered to the tastes of Yiddish-speakers from the Old Country. It was a piece of Yiddishland in America.

While it was much more committed to the traditions and continuities of Eastern European Jewish life compared to the *Forward*, the *Courier* supported Americanization in its own way. It both emphasized Jewish news with a particular interest in Zionism and encouraged Chicago’s Jewish immigrants to take an active role in the political life of their new community. During the First World War, the *Courier* highlighted the war effort, urged Jews to buy Liberty bonds, and criticized federal anti-immigration legislation. A 1918 article asked readers to show their loyalty by participating in Fourth of July parades.<sup>51</sup> Unlike the *Forward*, the *Courier* expected its readers to retain their commitment to the Jewish faith and traditions. Yet, it did not seek isolation, either. By educating its readers about American political and social life—and by even promoting patriotism in readers—the *Courier*, too, nurtured the process of becoming “at home” in America.

Both the *Courier* and the *Forward* facilitated Americanization while advancing their unique articulations of Jewish immigrant identity in the United States and the role that Yiddish should play in constituting this identity. The *Forward* urged Jewish immigrants to become more secular and socialist, engaging with their communities politically and economically. For the *Forward*, Yiddish was largely chosen for practical reasons—it was the language of the Jewish working class that the editors hoped to reach, and it had the added benefit of being a “secular” Jewish language—not the language of the Torah, but the language of the street

51. J. Leibner, “On the Community Stage: Fourth of July Celebration,” *Daily Jewish Courier*, June 23, 1918, subject codes: Jewish, II.b3.a, CFLPS, flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\_8\_1\_1391/.

and the home. In the 1920s and early 1930s, a redefined idea of Yiddish culture became increasingly important to the *Forward's* vision of the immigrant Jewish community, as evidenced by their evolving commitment to the transnational Yiddish socialist community. The *Courier*, on the other hand, maintained a more traditional, Orthodox standpoint on Jewish identity and saw Yiddish as a central part of this identity. Yiddish was the language of the home and community, as well as a potential language for religious instruction. The *Courier* encouraged Americanization—a becoming “at home” in America—without desiring cultural assimilation; it saw its readers as individuals who lived distinctly Jewish (mostly Orthodox) lives, and many of the national and international political issues covered in the newspaper displayed these loyalties.<sup>52</sup>

## The Issue of Americanization in the Press

“Jewish life in the United States has entered a new phase,” the *Forward* announced in 1926. “With the sudden cessation of immigration and the practical disappearance of the greenhorn, the Jewish masses are rapidly becoming Americanized.”<sup>53</sup> The mid-to-late 1920s presented new challenges to Chicago’s Jewish immigrant community as mass immigration ended and as immigrants who had been living in Chicago for a few decades increasingly abandoned Yiddish. Yet the solution to these challenges was elusive, and few members of Chicago’s Yiddish-speaking community completely rejected “Americanization” or embraced isolation.

Among immigrant groups to the United States in the late nineteenth

52. Specifically, *Courier* was an active supporter of Zionism, running frequent fundraisers for Zionist causes and providing coverage on Zionist conferences in Chicago, which was then a hub for Zionist activity.

53. “Workmen’s Circle to Win Jewish Youth,” *Forward*, Feb. 7, 1926, subject codes: Jewish, III E, III G, CFLPS, flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\_9\_1\_1367/.

and early twentieth centuries, the Jews of Eastern Europe were one of the groups to show the deepest feelings of loyalty to the United States early on. Jews from the Pale of Settlement had no state to call their own in Europe and spoke a different language from surrounding nationalities, whose increasing violence and persecution had led Jewish immigrants to flee to the “Golden Land.” Many found opportunities for work and education in America that would have been impossible to achieve or even imagine in the Old Country. In the words of one columnist writing in the *Reform Advocate*:

The Jewish American, I am quite sure, experiences feelings of pride and patriotism on seeing the flag, only very much intensified. Reviled, hunted, and persecuted even to death for centuries by all the world, the Jew comes to America where he is accorded freedom, protection, and the same rights as are granted to people of other creeds. America has become the haven of refuge for our persecuted co-religionists and has granted them an equal chance to rise in the world. The flag of the United States should awaken within his bosom, feelings of love, loyalty and devotion to the flag and to the country which it represents.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, however, Chicago’s Yiddish-speaking Jews were one of the immigrant groups most concerned about maintaining their distinct identity in the face of increasing assimilation, and the pressures to assimilate were multiplying rapidly in the early 1920s, which created a sense of urgency for many in the Yiddish press. The working-class Jews who had originally settled in the shtetl-like environment of Maxwell Street on Chicago’s Near West Side were gradually entering the middle

54. Leopold Deutelbaum, “The American Flag,” *Reform Advocate*, June 13, 1931, 495, National Library of Israel, www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/refadv/1931/06/13/01.

class and moving out of this Yiddish-speaking quarter. Some of them moved to the largely Yiddish-speaking neighborhood of North Lawndale, but others relocated to less distinctly Jewish communities on the North and West Sides. Learning English brought with it incredible economic and social benefits, causing many of Chicago's Jews to abandon their *mame-loshn*, which exacerbated the blow to Yiddish newspapers' readership numbers. A more harrowing factor spurring increased Jewish assimilation was the intensification of antisemitic sentiment in the United States during the 1920s, not only among hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, but also among upper-class Americans such as Henry Ford.<sup>55</sup> In 1923, in the face of these mounting challenges, the *Courier's* editorial board reflected: "If we do not attempt to create new boundaries in the Jewish life of America, if we do not establish certain principles for our life as a whole, it is difficult to see how the American Jewry can have a future."<sup>56</sup>

The Yiddish-speaking press in Chicago responded to the increasing pressures of assimilation in two ways. The first response was to reinforce the community's commitment to old traditions and values. It emphasized connection to Yiddishland as a means of establishing continuity in the Jewish community and forming the next links in the "golden chain." This "conservative" approach was often invoked by the *Courier*, which identified with a more traditional form of Orthodox Judaism.

The second response—taken up by both the *Forward* and the *Courier* as time went on—focused on fostering a sense of common purpose that would unite the community in both present and future. The main disagreement between the *Forward* and *Courier* concerned *what* the community should organize itself around. In general, writers from the *Forward*

55. Wenger, 201.

56. "What Are the Principles? (Editorial)," *Daily Jewish Courier*, May 18, 1923, subject codes, Jewish, III.C, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_9\\_1\\_0482/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_9_1_0482/).

encouraged Jewish immigrants to let go of the old-fashioned traditions of the Old Country, particularly religious traditions, and to coalesce around a secular Jewish identity grounded in the experiences of being Jewish in America or being a part of a transnational Yiddish socialist movement (in other words, rooted in the Bundist ideals of *Yiddishkayt* and *doikayt*.) While writers from the *Courier* were less willing to cast aside tradition and saw it as critical to the future of the Jewish community, they, too, had a series of "future-minded" ideals that they hoped would unite American Jewry in the decades and centuries to come. The *Courier's* primary future-oriented ideal was Zionism, which led to increased enthusiasm for Hebrew language education among some of the *Courier's* columnists. Throughout the 1920s, columnists from both papers wrote pieces that followed a common structure: they defined the problem of assimilation and then proposed a form of community engagement—often focused on the youth—in order to rekindle the flames of connection between members of Chicago's Yiddish-speaking community.

The *Courier* wrote such an editorial in 1923, entitled "Build a Dam," which described the problem of assimilation metaphorically as a "threatening deluge" or flood.<sup>57</sup> The community seemed less and less engaged in Jewish institutions, and the youth seemed to be slowly drifting away from its Jewish roots. The *Courier* called for the construction of a "dam" to stop the outflow of individuals from the Jewish community and its traditions, caused by the unprecedented threat of assimilation.<sup>58</sup> Thankfully, this dam was already being built by a community organization, Adath B'nai Israel, a group that sought to "attract the youth to Jewish traditions; [organize] the youth on a religious and nationalistic basis; [and] ... restore the Sabbath and all the other great institutions of the

57. "Build a Dam," *Daily Jewish Courier*, Mar. 23, 1923, subject codes: Jewish, III E, II D 6, III A, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_9\\_1\\_1394/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_9_1_1394/).

58. Ibid.

Jewish religion.”<sup>59</sup> For the *Courier*, religious and cultural traditions were absolutely central to the continuation of Jewish identity as they knew it.

The *Courier* saw Zionism as a natural extension of the “dam building” in the United States. As laudable as it was to strive to preserve Jewish cultural institutions in the Diaspora, argued an English-language editorial, it would ultimately not be enough, “for the forces of assimilation are as irresistible as their operation is universal.”<sup>60</sup> In order to preserve the traditions of the Jewish community in the long term, a country and language of its own was necessary.<sup>61</sup> In addition to making this larger argument about the necessity of Zionism, the *Courier* also used Zionism as a means of bringing Chicago’s Yiddish-speaking community together. The *Courier* reported on the Zionist Congresses that took place with some frequency in Chicago, promoted Zionist youth groups, such as Young Judea Clubs, and advertised programs hosted by the Chicago Zionist Organization, such as a 1931 course on the history of Zionism.<sup>62</sup> By bringing the Chicago Yiddish community—especially its youth—together around traditional Jewish institutions and the Zionist cause, the *Courier* hoped to prevent the community from being “washed away” by the tides of assimilation.<sup>63</sup>

Although less protective of tradition than the *Courier*, the *Forward* was similarly committed to renewing the commitment of Chicago’s

59. Ibid.

60. “A Definition of Zionism (Editorial in English),” *Daily Jewish Courier*, Apr. 19, 1923, subject codes: Jewish, III A, IA 2 b, III H, CFLPS, flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\_8\_1\_0500/.

61. Ibid.

62. “Zionists Announce Interesting Course on Zionism,” *Daily Jewish Courier*, Jan. 10, 1931, subject codes: Jewish, II B 2 f, CFLPS, flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\_5\_1185/.

63. “Build a Dam,” *Daily Jewish Courier*.

Jewish community, particularly its youth, to Yiddish culture. A 1926 editorial, entitled “Workmen’s Circle to Win Jewish Youth,” begins by defining the complex processes affecting Jewish immigrants:

The Jewish masses are rapidly becoming Americanized; not assimilated, acclimatized best describes what is going on. . . . [However], we have little to fear from acclimatization in America. The American Jews will doubtless look, talk, and act differently from their Polish and Russian brethren, but only outwardly. Intrinsicly and essentially the Jew in the United States will be just as Jewish as the Polish or Russian Jew.<sup>64</sup>

By stating their indifference towards retaining the traditions and mannerisms of Eastern European Jewry, the *Forward* rejected a Yiddish identity grounded in its connection to the Old Country. Whereas an outward appearance of continuity and religiosity was important to the *Courier*’s writers, as it was for many Jews living in Eastern Europe, the *Forward* seemed to accept social assimilation, identifying Yiddish identity as something internal. The *Forward* emphasizes this further, stating that although Jews had changed their language, manners, occupations, and ideas many times in the Diaspora, “the golden chain was not broken . . . [and] they did not cease to be Jews.”<sup>65</sup>

However, the *Forward* recognized that Yiddish culture would not continue to flourish of its own accord. Using similar metaphorical language to that of the *Courier*, the *Forward* called the Yiddish-speaking community to action: “A bridge must be built to open the river of time which separates the European-born fathers from their American-born sons.”<sup>66</sup> Lest this

64. “Workmen’s Circle to Win Jewish Youth,” *Forward*.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

sound too similar to the *Courier's* calls for commitment to Eastern European religious tradition, the *Forward* makes it clear in the next sentence that they are referring to the long tradition of Yiddish secular socialism: “A technique . . . must be evolved, a way found, to unite present day American-Jewish life with the idealism of the older generation of Jewish radicals.”<sup>67</sup> The solution to this dilemma was the Workmen’s Circle, which was dedicated to keeping the Yiddish language and culture alive in the United States through educational programs and community gatherings that would create a “bridge between generations.”

These two orientations—conservative and Orthodox versus secular and socialist—are apparent in the ways in which the *Courier* and the *Forward* spoke about their commitment to the Yiddish language itself. The *Courier* usually argued that Yiddish was important specifically because it helped the children of Jewish immigrants remain connected to their parents’ culture and religious traditions. The *Forward*, on the other hand, saw Yiddish as one means of fostering cohesion among the American Jewish community in the present and future and as a means of uniting the international Yiddish socialist movement. However, many argued that the Yiddish language was not necessary to accomplish these goals, as long as Jewish youth were being educated about Yiddish culture and communities around the world. Indeed, one *Forward* columnist argued in 1931 that there was little use in trying to force the “familiar mother tongue” onto the youth; did any such thing even exist anymore, after the immigrants had left Europe? Further, the writer acknowledged that the socialist and secular educational initiatives of the Workmen’s Circle schools were probably Americanizing the children just as much as anything else, teaching them “to love the America of [Eugene] Debs and [Abraham] Lincoln—the America of idealism.”<sup>68</sup> Teaching Yiddish

67. Ibid.

68. “Jewish Education in America,” *Forward*, Mar. 14, 1931, subject codes: Jewish: II.B.2.f, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_1173/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_1173/).

was, thus, not as much about preventing Americanization but about continuing to foster the growth and beautification of the Yiddish language and culture, even within their new Americanized setting.

At the heart of these debates about politics, Yiddish, and Americanization was the question of belonging in the new home. Despite their disagreements, the *Courier* and the *Forward* both envisioned a Jewish community that was committed to Yiddish, Jewishness, and finding a place for itself within the new home—in other words, both were seeking ways to be truly “at home” in America, to feel at once connected to their heritage and to their surroundings. What the papers contested was the extent to which Yiddish was connected to Jewish religious traditions and the importance of outwardly appearing “Jewish” or “American.” For the *Courier*, being “at home” in America meant being free to participate in American politics and society while remaining firmly rooted in Jewish culture and religion, which could be accessed through Yiddish and Hebrew, respectively. The *Forward*, by contrast, encouraged its readers to become more outwardly “American,” to cast off religion and tradition, and to retain Yiddish primarily as a means of cultural autonomy and community cohesion.

## The Centrality of Education and Language in Journalists’ Conceptions of Jewish Immigrant Identity

Chicago’s Yiddish journalists wrote explicitly about assimilation only on occasion. More often, they would debate specific topics of community importance in ways that reflected their broader ideas about Americanization and the future of Chicago’s Yiddish community. They would write about intermarriage and religious practice or pen regular satirical columns that poked fun at immigrant stereotypes while providing commentary on recent happenings. Education was by far one of the most contentious and

prominent topics. Over the course of several years, columnists and lay-people alike wrote hundreds of articles about the importance of a Jewish education, the proper form of such an education, the importance of language in an immigrant's upbringing, and more.

Debates about these topics appeared in editorials and letters to the editor in the *Courier* in the early 1920s and in the *Forward* in the early 1930s. These debates provide glimpses into two distinct moments in the history of the Eastern European Jewry in Chicago. In the early 1920s, which forms the early time boundary of this paper, immigrants were still arriving in Chicago in waves (albeit in smaller numbers than before the war). Additionally, the United Kingdom's Balfour Declaration in 1917 supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The declaration had energized Zionists around the world, but especially in Chicago, which *Courier* columnist J. Loebner proclaimed was "the first place to begin organizing Jews on behalf of Zionism."<sup>69</sup> The *Courier* was an outspoken supporter of Zionism, and many of its most prominent columnists, such as Philip P. Bregstone, were known across the Midwest for their active support of Zionist causes.<sup>70</sup> The concerns expressed in the *Courier*'s education debate of 1922 reflects its historical moment. Its contributors worried about Americanization, but not to the extent that they would in later years, after immigration had nearly ceased and ever-increasing numbers of Jews were abandoning Yiddish; their immediate questions concerned how to foster support for Zionism among Chicago's Jewish youth or how to foster a deeper connection between children and their parents. In these opinions, the *Courier*'s self-description as the voice of Chicago's Orthodox community also shines through.

69. J. Loebner, "When Petty Politicians Make Statements," *Daily Jewish Courier*, June 11, 1922, subject codes: Jewish III.B.4, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_8\\_1\\_1685/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_8_1_1685/).

70. For a brief biography of Bregstone, see "Philip P. Bregstone Papers," Newberry Library, accessed Oct. 23, 2021, [mms.newberry.org/detail.asp?recordid=1709](https://mms.newberry.org/detail.asp?recordid=1709).

By contrast, in the early 1930s, concerns about assimilation were felt much more urgently. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the Yiddish press to retain its audience and relevance due to lower rates of new immigrants and the movement of existing Yiddish-speaking Jews out of the Maxwell Street area. By 1930, Chicago's Jewish community was much less divided by class and geographical location. Eastern European Jews had settled in North and West Side neighborhoods such as Albany Park, Rogers Park, Lake View, Uptown, Humboldt Park, and North Lawndale.<sup>71</sup> No longer geographically isolated along Maxwell Street, they began to assimilate into their new neighborhoods, both within the Reform communities of German Jews and the broader non-Jewish communities in Chicago. Due to the differences in the editorial staffs' conceptions of American Jewish identity, the *Forward* took a lighter approach to the situation than the *Courier* had in the twenties when the threat of assimilation was less. The *Courier* emphasized the importance of religion, language education, and Zionism to maintaining a coherent Jewish identity in the face of Americanization. In contrast, the *Forward* was less concerned about Jews becoming culturally American and leaving behind religion; it emphasized the importance of cultural activities and community organizations to help Chicago's Yiddish-speaking Jews retain ties to the Jewish community as a whole.

71. Irving Cutler, "Jews," in *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, ed. James R. Grossman, Ann Durkin Keating, and Janice L. Reiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 437, [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/671.html](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/671.html).



## The *Courier* Education Debate, 1922

On January 3, 1922, a person writing under the pen name Ger Ve-Toshav<sup>72</sup> launched a lively debate about language and educational policy in Chicago's Jewish community. His letter to the editor levelled a number of critiques at the Grenshaw Street Talmud Torah,<sup>73</sup> arguing that in order to “tear [the Jewish child] away from the abyss of assimilation and self-contempt” the school would need to reconsider its teaching methods.<sup>74</sup> Specifically, they needed to stop teaching the Pentateuch in Yiddish translation, a method which left Jewish children with “no understanding of Hebrew, [no knowledge] of our history, and ... not the slightest knowledge of our literature, either old or new.”<sup>75</sup>

To illustrate his concern, Ger Ve-Toshav described an incident that he witnessed during a visit to the Grenshaw Street Talmud Torah. The instructor, who was leading the students through a recitation exercise, would read aloud a passage of the Pentateuch, which the students repeated after him. The teacher first read in Hebrew, “and they went away from Him in peace,” and then repeated the passage in Yiddish, “*un zey*

72. This is a play on words in Hebrew: *Ger* means alien and *Toshav* means resident. According to a translator for the Foreign Language Press Survey, the nickname implies that the writer is a resident of Chicago but an outsider in the realm of Hebrew school politics.

73. A Talmud Torah is a religious school where children are taught the scriptures. These schools are meant to prepare students to continue their studies in a more serious manner at yeshiva, if they so choose. While this type of religious school would nowadays almost certainly include an emphasis on Hebrew, in early twentieth-century Chicago, many Talmud Torah schools were based on the Ashkenazic model and were taught in Yiddish.

74. Ger Ve-Toshav [pseud.], “About Old-Fashioned Schools,” *Daily Jewish Courier*, Jan. 3, 1922, subject codes: Jewish, II.B2.f, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_1462/](http://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_1462/).

75. Ibid.

*zaynen avekgegangen fun ihm in frieden.*” Upon hearing the word *frieden*, the student performing the exercise—who spoke only English with his fellow students—believed that he had heard the English word “freedom.” He repeated after the teacher, “and they went away from him in freedom.”<sup>76</sup> After the lesson, Ger Ve-Toshav confronted the student:

I asked the child what the Hebrew word *Sholem* meant. At first, he did not know what to answer, but when I told him the entire sentence, he exclaimed: “and they went away from him in freedom.” I asked him what freedom meant, and he replied, “Don’t you know? Washington fought England and won our freedom.” This is only one illustration out of many which could be used against the practice of translating Hebrew words into Yiddish to an American child.<sup>77</sup>

Ger Ve-Toshav used this anecdote to illustrate his overarching argument: without a proper Jewish education, which should include intensive training in Hebrew, an emphasis on Zionism, and extensive reading of famous Jewish literary and religious works, the American Jewish community was doomed to succumb to the “poisonous gases of assimilation and indifference” and to lose the distinctions that connected them to their past.<sup>78</sup> Although Ger Ve-Toshav was writing about education—and the specific methods in one specific religious school—his argument tapped explicitly and implicitly into larger discussions about assimilation and Americanization in the Chicago Jewish community.

N. S. Herman, an instructor at the Talmud Torah in question, responded to Ger Ve-Toshav in a column of his own six days later. Herman

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

did not dispute the point that a Jewish education was necessary to combat assimilation, nor did he dispute that it was important to inculcate Zionist sympathies in American Jewish students as a means of connecting them to a larger Jewish community. Regarding the language question, however, he strongly disagreed and launched an impassioned defense of Yiddish:

Once and for all, we must recognize the fact that as long as we, in America, have strict, Orthodox, synagogue Jews, who maintain the Jewish traditions and do not speak any other language except Yiddish; as long as the American-Jewish press—which brings us Jewish news, and everything about the Jews in which we are interested, their achievements, their ambitions—is printed in Yiddish; as long as the rabbis, preachers and speakers of our Orthodox synagogues deliver their speeches in Yiddish; as long as the parents wish their children to preserve their Judaism and not to become estranged from them; as long as parents and children strive to understand one another so that they won't feel themselves to be strangers—just so long will the Pentateuch, and only the Pentateuch, with a Yiddish translation, be taught in our Talmud Torah, which was founded and is being maintained by Orthodox Jews.<sup>79</sup>

For Herman—as well as for many of the *Courier's* writers and readers—Yiddish was seen in precisely this way: it was the language of the Old World, the language of Orthodoxy, and the language of a proper Jewish education. For Ger Ve-Toshav, however, Yiddish education was part of the problem.

79. N. S. Herman, “A Reply to Ger Ve-Toshav,” *Daily Jewish Courier*, Jan. 9, 1922, subject codes: Jewish, II.B.2.f, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_1449/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_1449/).

On January 22, 1922, the *Courier* published a second letter from Ger Ve-Toshav. He opposed Herman's argument about the importance of Yiddish to Chicago's Orthodox community by pointing out that most of Chicago's Talmud Torah schools had already switched to the *Ivrith Be'Ivrith* (Hebrew taught through Hebrew) system. Yiddish may have been the language of the parents—many of whom had themselves stopped speaking the language regularly by this point—but Hebrew was the language of the Torah, as well as Jewish literature, history, and folktales. Ger Ve-Toshav concluded by attacking the Workmen's Circle and their “pseudo-socialist comrades,” a reference meant to refer, among others, to the readership of the *Forward*. He associated Yiddish with the socialist mission of these groups, which had founded schools to “teach American children Socialism in Yiddish, so that they won't become estranged from their parents.”<sup>80</sup> Hebrew education, by contrast, retained a purely Jewish mission, untainted by socialism—to connect Jewish children to their heritage.

### The *Forward* Education Debate, 1931

Interestingly, less than a decade later, when the *Forward* launched its own op-ed debate about education, it began with this very issue: the estrangement of children from their parents. In response to a series of opinion articles from the Workmen's Circle community that had argued for the importance of teaching Jewish children Yiddish in order to bring them closer to their parents, a *Forward* columnist argued that Yiddish language education was not the answer. Instead of teaching the Yiddish language to American Jewish children—which would only serve to alienate them further by teaching them a language not even their parents continued to speak—the Workmen's Circle and American Jewish schools

80. Ger Ve-Toshav [pseud.], “Once More on the Old-Fashioned School,” *Daily Jewish Courier*, Jan. 22, 1922, subject codes: Jewish, II.B.2.f, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_5\\_1433/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_5_1433/).

needed to focus on “the nourishing of a spiritual development” that would bring parents and children together.<sup>81</sup> In other words, they needed to foster a deeper love for “Yiddish *culture*,”<sup>82</sup> which this columnist insisted could exist without Yiddish, in an entirely American context.

By eliminating Yiddish from the American Jewish schools, Jewish education could focus instead on “a complete understanding of American life” and on a Yiddish culture that would be attuned to this new way of life—a culture that would be “nearer to our present environments and conditions.”<sup>83</sup> Such a shift would be better for both the Workmen’s Circle and for the socialist movement, which many of the *Forward*’s readers found even more important than connections to Jewish tradition. For many, socialism in America was merely a new phase in Jewish life, following after the many different phases that had come before it in many different lands. For the *Forward* and the Workmen’s Circle, in contrast to the *Courier*, *Yiddishkayt* was not about maintaining ties to the Old Country as much as about maintaining a general sense of community and direction. As long as Yiddish was effective in making the Chicago Jewish community feel cohesive, then it was worth supporting. As soon as it lost its appeal, the *Forward* was more willing than the *Courier* to abandon tradition and to foster an entirely new kind of Jewish identity in English, in Chicago.

One week later, on March 14, 1931, the *Forward* published another article on the issue of Yiddish language education entitled “Jewish Education in America,” which appears to have been written by a member of the Workmen’s Circle (or by someone involved with its Yiddish educational activities). The author concedes several of the points made in the

81. “The Jewish Immigrants and Their Children,” *Forward*, Mar. 7, 1931, subject codes: Jewish, I.B.3.b, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972\\_2\\_0053/](https://flps.newberry.org/#/item/5423972_2_0053/).

82. *Ibid.* Emphasis is mine.

83. *Ibid.*

March 7 article, namely that it did not make sense to try to teach immigrant children the “language of their parents,” since immigrant parents often spoke distinct dialects that were no longer taught.<sup>84</sup> However, that did not make Yiddish language education irrelevant. Rather, advanced proficiency in Yiddish was necessary to connect young Jews with the literature of Sholom Aleichem, Sholom Asch, and others and would allow the Yiddish language to “grow and become enriched and beautified to the greatest extent.”<sup>85</sup> This was a crucial part of the secular Yiddish education that the *Forward* was increasingly committed to, and in the author’s view, would only serve to enrich and deepen students’ commitment to the secular Yiddish culture that the *Forward* was constructing.<sup>86</sup>

The *Forward* was not alone in its support for more secular Yiddish language education. Another organization that embraced the ethos of “Yiddish as homeland,” where the Yiddish language itself constituted a claim and connection to a larger identity, was the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, which ran several Yiddish-language secular schools in Chicago and New York. The schools were based on four principles: secularity, Yiddish, “everywhereness,” and child-centeredness. Their founders believed that “the first place in the curriculum should be assigned to language (Yiddish), to Yiddish literature and Jewish history. Jewish religion was considered from the cultural-historic viewpoint—the child was told about Jewish customs and beliefs.”<sup>87</sup> They emphasized the choice of the Yiddish language over all else; Yiddish was not a way to connect to the Jewish religion or to Eastern Europe, but rather a way to maintain

84. Jewish Education in America, *Forward*, Mar. 14, 1931, subject codes: Jewish, II.B.2.f, CFLPS, [flps.newberry.org/article/5423972\\_5\\_1173/](https://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_5_1173/).

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. Saul Goodman, *Our First Fifty Years: The Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute (A Historical Survey)* (New York: Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, 1972), 50.

a connection to forefathers and to the “language of the Jewish secular milieu,” which for nineteen hundred years had facilitated the flourishing of Jewish culture in the Diaspora.<sup>88</sup> In other words, the choice of Yiddish was based on its connection to some sort of unique cultural space that could only be accessed through the language; what students chose to do with the language once they learned it—in their religious practice, in political engagement, or otherwise—was less important, as long as they engaged with the language and through it, contributed to Jewish life in some way.

The Sholem Aleichem Folk Schools, like the press, contributed to Americanization and strengthened students’ sense of a unique, separate Jewish identity. It fostered a feeling of connection to the transnational Jewish community while also encouraging students to engage actively with the world around them in Chicago, whether through their support of socialist causes or through their engagement with the city’s Jewish community. Saul Goodman echoes this argument in his 1972 essay “The Path and Accomplishments of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute,” which was published in a historical survey looking at the first fifty years of the institute’s existence: “The Sholem Aleichem ideology . . . affirmed America, and it strove to ‘harmonize general American, and Jewish secular educational ingredients.’ In present terms, this implies secular Jewishness should be integrated with American culture in order that we develop as a creative, unique people in America.”<sup>89</sup> In their attempts to help their students become a “creative, unique people *in America*,”<sup>90</sup> the Sholem Aleichem schools fought against complete assimilation by promoting a specifically Jewish approach to Americanization.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

Overall, the debates surrounding education constituted a large portion of the debates around Americanization in Chicago’s Yiddish-speaking community. The various opinions that appeared in the press aligned with the general perspectives on Jewish immigrant identity to which the *Courier* and *Forward* adhered: some favored an approach that prioritized connection to tradition and Orthodox values and which valued language education first and foremost as a means by which to connect children to their traditions and (more immediately) to their parents; others preferred to experiment with new models of Jewish immigrant identity, casting off the religious traditions of the “Old Home” in favor of new (often socialist) definitions of Jewish values. The latter approach tended to value learning the Yiddish language not for a connection to the past, but for its ability to create a cohesive community in the present and future. Both, in their debates, attempted to define new ways of relating to their heritage, to the Yiddish language, and to the larger Jewish immigrant community in America.

## Conclusion

There exists a popular narrative of the history of Yiddish in the United States that focuses on the ultimate demise of the Yiddish press, viewing Yiddish periodicals as victims of American Jewish assimilation. Indeed, while the Yiddish press was remarkably resilient, outlasting most other foreign-language presses from the early twentieth century, the challenges that the Yiddish press faced throughout the 1920s only increased in the 1930s and 1940s. Due to a variety of factors that gradually led Chicago’s Jews away from Yiddish, the *Courier* ceased publication in 1944, with the Chicago edition of the *Forward* following in 1951. To many, this seemed to confirm the assertions of scholars like Robert Park, who claimed that the immigrant press was, whether willing or unwilling, doomed to take part in the process of Americanization and ultimately to cease to exist.

Yet, to view this history as one of decline would be to take a simplistic

and overly pessimistic perspective and to disregard the vibrant debates and passionate appeals that characterized the Yiddish press in the period following its golden age and preceding its decline. Yiddish writers and readers engaged with debates about community in the pages of the Yiddish press because these debates mattered—they helped the community to navigate the unique challenges of immigration to the United States while remaining committed to their communities and to one another. These newspapers guided Chicago’s Yiddish-speaking community through the process of “Americanization” while allowing them a space in which they could debate what they wanted “Americanization” to look like and continue to cultivate their ties to Yiddishland. The story of the Yiddish press in Chicago is not a story of decline; it is a story of remarkable resilience and creativity, and one that continues to this day as young people are reviving Yiddish, whether for personal or scholarly purposes. While it is true that no Yiddish periodicals exist in Chicago today, Yiddish speakers in Chicago have access to the Yiddish edition of the *Forward* online and to contemporary Yiddish podcasts, such as the Massachusetts radio program *Yiddish Voice* or the feminist Yiddish podcast *Vaybertaytsh*, that continue to engage in debates over the role of Yiddish in American Jewish identity.

The Yiddish press demonstrates the ways in which Chicago’s Yiddish-speaking immigrants were not passive spectators to the process of Americanization. Rather, they were active agents who negotiated the terms of their new home, finding creative and unique ways to combine elements of the language and culture of the Old Country with their new lives in America. In the pages of the press and beyond, Yiddish Chicago debated and ultimately invented its own ways of being “at home” in America. ○

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