

Acceptance Speech by the Recipient of the Mason Judaica Reference Book Award

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It is a great honor for me to receive the Award of the Association of Jewish Libraries, and I am very thankful. This award is unique among other Jewish literary awards. First, it is given not only for a good book, but for the best literary reference book. Second, it is not confined solely to Yiddish, Hebrew, or English works. Thirdly, it is not limited to one country.

Since the award is for a Yiddish lexicon, I would like to say a few words about Yiddish lexicography.

Zalman Reizen, the pioneer lexicographer of Yiddish literature, wrote in the foreword of his *Leksikon* (Vilno, 1929), "There is a cardinal difference between my Lexicon and similar reference books in other languages. [Their] task . . . is to give certain informative summaries about this or that writer, but not to first collect the material about them. This material is usually found in various monographs and literary histories."

As far as is known, the first regional Yiddish lexicon was published in Montreal in 1934. It was entitled *Yidishe Dikhter in Kanade* and written by Ch. M. Keizerman-Withal. This work lacks the main feature of a lexicon—a bibliography; moreover, the bibliographical portion is quite limited.

The book appears to be more like a collection of the author's essays on literary criticism. However, as a pioneering work, it can be referred to as a lexicon.

In 1980, once again, a regional Yiddish literary lexicon was published in Montreal: *Hundert Yor Yidishe un Hebreishe Literatur in Kanade*, by Hayyim Leib Fuks. Here, a rich collection of material on the history of Yiddish literature in Canada can be found. However, because Fuks was not only a lexicographer, but also a poet, the barrier between poetry and truthfulness was sometimes crossed.

In the last 10–11 years, Moscow has been the center of preparations for the publication of a new regional Yiddish literary lexicon in Soviet Russia. Since September 1975, the monthly publication *Sovetish Heymland* has listed alphabetically the names of writers for the purpose of providing "Materyaln far a Leksikon fun der

Yidisher Sovetisher Literatur." Of course, "Materyaln" is not yet a lexicon, but judging from what has appeared to date, it seems that there will be many deficiencies. Clearly, the annihilation of hundreds of Yiddish writers, among them famous scholars in Yiddish literature and linguistics, took a heavy toll.

There are no differences of opinion about the importance of regional literary histories for a general Yiddish lexicon. However, opinion does vary on what *should* comprise a general Yiddish lexicon.

The main issue is: Who is entitled to be included? What are the criteria? There is no problem with writers who are well known or even somewhat mediocre. The question is: What about the so-called "small" writers? The editors of a lexicon do not have the right to delete certain writers simply because they are "minor." If they were to do this, they would become "judges," and this is not their function. The job of a lexicographer is not to judge, but only to determine if an individual is a "writer." For a lexicographer, the author of one book qualifies for inclusion in a lexicon just as the author of ten books does. The difference between a major writer and one who has published only one or two books will be readily apparent in the completed lexicon. It will be reflected in the space required to record their bibliographies, bibliographical notes, and quotations.

Another difficult issue for the lexicographer is how to word the biographies. Ber Borochow, who was also an eminent Yiddish linguist, recommended: "A lexicon ought to register and describe, but not evaluate, neither praise nor criticize. . . ."

I basically accept Borochow's premise, but feel that quotations should be included. Quotations from prominent critics or writers are very important because they can shed light on the literary personality of the writer and enable the reader to better understand the author.

The most authentic portion of a literary lexicon is the autobiography. In the case of Yiddish lexicography, it is almost impossible to get all the needed autobiographical and bibliographical data. The greater part of the

information is obtained through "second-hand" sources. An author or editor of a Yiddish literary lexicon cannot gather information pertaining to Yiddish writers located throughout the world without outside help. Correspondents are needed on various continents to obtain autobiographies and biographies of writers in their localities.

Relying on outside sources opens up the possibility that the data received may not always be accurate. For publications which are well subsidized, the material is checked twice and sometimes even thrice. A Yiddish lexicon does not fall within this category, and the author or editor must rely on correspondents. Many mistakes, some of them quite grave, result. The following are three examples.

A few months after the publication of my "Lexicon," I received a letter from Paris from a writer listed in it as "dead." I immediately contacted him to apologize and to ask his forgiveness. I tried to add a bit of humor to my letter by stating that a Yiddish proverb says that such a mistake is a sign that he will live many more years.

It was with great trepidation that I read his response. He wrote: "Don't worry, this is not the first time that I have died in a book, this is the third time!" He said this error occurred when he was listed as "dead" in a Yiddish journal in Brazil in 1934 and also in a Yiddish journal in Israel in 1956.

The same thing happened to Reizen with the writer Shloma Skomorovsky—in one edition he was dead, in the next he was alive.

The third and most bizarre error occurred in the biography of a writer who was not born yet!

The cause of all these strange errors is the same: the author or the editor relied on a very trustworthy correspondent or co-worker, and since the information was not double checked, the mistakes were not corrected. Fortunately, similar mistakes are rare in our lexicons.

Once again, I want to thank the Association for having bestowed upon me the honor of this award.