

# HOUSES OF THE BOOK

## The Bibliothèque Medem for Yiddish Language and Literature in Paris

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### Historical Background

The Yiddish language, once spoken by two-thirds of the Jewish population in Europe, has today become a true minority idiom. In order to preserve its vestiges, a few centers have been established where the memory of Yiddish language, literature, and culture is kept alive for future generations.

In 1989, the Bibliothèque Medem in Paris, which holds the most important collection of Yiddish materials in Europe, celebrated its sixtieth anniversary. The library's roots date back to the end of the 19th century, when Jewish workers residing in the western provinces of the Russian empire—a territory today belonging to Poland, Lithuania, and the Soviet Union—set up a trade union which was popularly known as the Bund. That organization, formally created in 1897, adhered to the principle of socialism, and generally supported secular modernizing tendencies. In order to reach Jewish workers in a linguistically diverse environment, the Bund propagated the use of the Yiddish language, the idiom spoken by the vast majority of Jews. As a sociopolitical organization, the Bundists opposed political Zionism as a competitor for the hearts and minds of the Jewish people; they stood for an international Jewish proletariat steeped in a Yiddish-language tradition; and they fought for a democratic, liberal renewal of their native country. When the abortive Russian revolution of 1905 severely dashed those hopes, and when disappointment and demoralization became apparent among the Jewish populace, a widespread emigration commenced, which was further accelerated by the outbreak of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

Among the Jewish emigrants who decided to stay in Western Europe rather than journey to America, the big cities formed the main poles of attraction, where most newcomers looked for some kind of work and a cheap home, mainly in working class districts. Within the circle of Jews originating

from various countries, Yiddish was used as the *lingua franca*, as it had traditionally served as a vehicle for a vivid cosmopolitan culture. Though immigrants, the Bundists did not leave their political opinions and ideas behind when settling in their western adoptive countries, but continued to agitate for their aims. It did not take them long to put their political convictions into print, and pamphlets, books, newspapers, and journals, mainly written and published in Yiddish, made their appearance in the cities of the West. As the poorer of their companions-in-misery could not afford to purchase these publications, the practice of borrowing, which had been prevalent in villages and cities of the East, again sprang up in the West, and small collections were installed and maintained among shopkeepers and artisans.

### Founding of the Bibliothèque Medem

Since the 19th century, the city of Paris had become one of the most attractive centers for emigrants from Eastern Europe. In Paris, Jewish workers maintained the practice of lending books and periodicals, but it was not until 1929 that the idea of setting up a veritable library for that purpose originated. On the occasion of a memorial service held for the prominent Jewish journalist, Hirsh David Nomberg (1874–1927), six former members of the Bund decided to join forces and form a cultural committee, whose only task was to found a library in Paris, which was to preserve the sources of Jewish socialism as well as the heritage of the Yiddish language and its literature.

With only 450 francs as available capital—the result of a fund collection among Bundists in Paris—the six founding members decided to purchase forty volumes as the initial stock for their project. At one of the nearby flea markets, they bought a simple wooden bookcase. They then proceeded to deposit the bookcase and its tiny collection on the first floor of a well-frequented Parisian coffee-house, situated near the Place de la Bastille, which also served as a

meeting place for Jews who were eager to play a round of cards. As word of the little lending library spread among the Jewish populace of the quarter, the question of giving the collection a proper name arose. After some deliberation, the founding members decided on the name Bibliothèque Medem, in honor and in memory of Vladimir Davidovitch Medem (1879–1923), a prominent orator and journalist of the Bund.

### Growth of the Library

Over the course of the next months, the collection grew slowly but steadily, as donations arrived and new purchases were made. By way of correspondence, news of the library's existence reached former Bundists who had settled in New York, and some months later several parcels of books arrived from America. When the people who helped with the daily management of the library were persuaded by some clients to arrange reading sessions and talks on various cultural subjects, the number of users frequenting the little institution began to increase considerably. Soon the bookcase could no longer hold the growing collection, and the small room was often overcrowded during the library's hours of operation.

The librarians and their helpers, hesitant to engage in a financial adventure, subsequently decided to look for more adequate accommodations.

Eventually, negotiations with the hatters' union proved fruitful, and one day, the entire collection was loaded onto several carts and transported to the union local. But when the Depression hit France, and the general economic decline was felt by all levels of society, the once powerful hatters' union fell upon difficult times, and problems more pressing than the maintenance of a library crowded their agenda. The hatters were forced to close their local union office, and the library found itself more or less thrown out into the streets. With the help of library patrons and donations, the

librarians were able to rent a room sufficiently large to house the collection, which by then had grown to about 800 volumes.

### **War and Liberation**

When war broke out, the house in which the library was located was transformed into a canteen for jobless Jewish workers and their families, as well as for war refugees. Sometimes, provisions cramped the library room and even blocked some of the dozen wooden bookcases—a fact that proved providential when, in June 1940, the Germans marched into Paris. One day, some members of the dreaded Gestapo inspected the canteen and searched the entire house, in hope of finding something suspicious. When they looked into the room where the library was installed, they saw potato bags and vegetable crates lying about. As they were told that the solid-front bookcases also contained kitchenwares, no suspicions arose and the books remained undetected. For once, the danger to the Yiddish collection was averted, but in order not to risk future detection, the librarians unanimously agreed to have the books concealed securely. With the help of friends, among them the German wife of a Bundist comrade, that very same night the volumes were carried into the huge basement of a multi-story building, where they remained safe until the end of the war.

When France was finally liberated by Allied troops, the Jewish survivors became grievously aware of how dramatically the war and the Holocaust had decimated the once numerous Jewish populace of the French capital. With the prospect of settling in Palestine, many Jews, demoralized by the brutal harassment and the extermination of their people during the past decades in Europe, decided to emigrate. That exodus, and the proclamation of the State of Israel, further increased the doubts of those who remained in Paris, regarding the future of the Yiddish language in Europe. As mainly the older people had opted to stay, it seemed as if the use of Yiddish would come to an end with the demise of that generation.

### **The Generation of 1968 and the Yiddish Revival**

Eventually, the books of the Bibliothèque Medem were taken from their basement hideout and a temporary lending arrangement was established, but the depleted crew of library helpers was not sufficiently motivated to move the collection to adequate quarters. That state of affairs lasted

for more than two decades, and it was only in 1966 that the library was relocated to permanent quarters. Several rooms were rented not far from the Place de la Bastille, where the library still resides today. After the May unrest of 1968, a rejuvenation set in, when students rediscovered the rich cultural heritage of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. In their search for individual freedom and for participation, the students came to the library looking for the roots of a multicultural and multiethnic society, and they discovered Yiddish as the key to the language of the Diaspora.

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Yiddish thus became an alternative to Hebrew for those who searched for a Jewish identity outside of synagogues and apart from rabbinic Judaism. The Bibliothèque Medem was in a position to offer its users a fount of sources that had been saved from the brutal destruction of Jewish lives and homes throughout the European continent. There they may read documents and tales depicting the almost forgotten history of Jews in Eastern Europe of the past century. A further impetus to the increased use of the library's resources was brought about by the smashing success of the musical "Anatevka" ("Fiddler on the Roof"), which inspired American and European audiences alike. Even more profoundly felt were the intellectual shock waves generated by the Royal Swedish Academy, which in 1978 awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to Isaac Bashevis Singer. The number of library users was on the upswing again, and as they predominantly belong to the younger generation, the survival of Yiddish seems assured, at present. The library's personnel eagerly supported the rekindled interest in Yiddish by putting Yiddish language courses onto their program.

Today, the Bibliothèque Medem offers its users a collection comprising approximately 25,000 volumes, of which about 80 percent are in Yiddish and about 4,000 volumes are in French. Because its treasures are not to be found in other French institutions, the library (which is supported solely by small contributions from its patrons, or by donations) attracts doctoral students, social scientists, and historians. Film directors come to its premises in order to check details for settings and plots, and linguists seek its aid in compiling a Yiddish-French dictionary. Kiwa Vaisbrot, now 82 years old and the sole survivor of the six founding members, spends most of his days surrounded by his beloved tomes, while the bulk of the daily work is now shouldered by about a dozen voluntary helpers.

On the occasion of the library's sixtieth anniversary, the staff mounted a small exhibition of books and journals issued by French presses in Yiddish. Packed closely into just 100 square meters (1,050 square feet), the small establishment, which opens its doors three afternoons a week, has developed into a veritable center of Yiddish culture. It preserves the memory of a language that was once spoken by more than 12 million people worldwide, whereas today, over the entire globe, about two million people (and in France, only 60,000) are able to converse in that endangered language. Address: Bibliothèque Medem, 52 rue René Boulanger, F-75010 Paris, France.

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