

Leksikon fun Yidish Shraybers*
(Lexicon of Yiddish Writers),
by Berl Kagan. Brooklyn, N.Y., 1986. 812 p.

Reviewed by:

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Yiddish literature is a field of growing interest to the general public and the academic world. New translations from Yiddish appear every year. Yiddish literature in English translation is studied in many institutions of higher learning, and Yiddish courses are offered in 19 universities, according to a report in *The Book Peddler* (Spring 1986, Amherst, Massachusetts). There are many other manifestations of renewed interest in Yiddish which testify to the fact that there is an awareness of the intrinsic value of this literature as a vital part of the spiritual heritage of East European Jewry. In view of this heightened awareness and interest, the question of its accessibility becomes important. Among the recent books that attempt to facilitate the approach to Yiddish literature is the *Leksikon fun Yidish Shraybers* (Lexicon of Yiddish Writers), by Berl Kagan. The subtitle on the Yiddish title page explains that the book includes additions and corrections to the *Leksikon fun der Nayer Yidisher Literatur* as well as 5,800 pseudonyms. For the sake of brevity, the Berl Kagan book is referred to in this review as LYS, and its predecessor as LNYL.

As many of our readers know, the LNYL, known also (by its added English title page) as *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Literature*, was a collective work, edited by various hands and published in eight volumes between the years 1956–1981 by the Congress for Jewish Culture. The relationship between this set and LYS is explained in great detail in Mr. Kagan's introduction. At first, he planned his book merely as a volume of additions and corrections to LNYL (p. VIII), but in the end, the additions and corrections amounted to only 20–25% of the volume. The bulk of the book is made up of "new" biographies—a total of 665—plus 35 greatly augmented—"often almost entirely new" biographies. The author thus concludes that the book should

be considered not a supplement, but an independent literary lexicon.

Scope of the Work

According to the author, his biographical material can be divided into three groups: new entries, marked with two asterisks; completely or considerably changed and augmented entries, one asterisk; and finally, entries without any marks, indicating supplemented or corrected material only. (A reading knowledge of Yiddish is required to determine the significance of the asterisks from the preface, as there is no separate list of symbols used in the book.)

The greatest interest is aroused by the first group. How did the author achieve the stunning number of 665 "new" biographies in the period of a quarter of a century, and whom did he include in the group? The answer to these questions gives a clue to the nature and value of Kagan's book.

Some of the names included belong to such well-known and celebrated personalities as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Rokhl Oyerbach, Kadia Molodowsky, Wolf Yunin, and Khaver Paver! Their omission from LNYL was the result of their refusal to be included on grounds related to the financing of the project (in part through reparations from Germany)—an issue that was controversial at the time of its publication. When Mr. Kagan started to work on his book, most of the authors in this group were no longer living. His task was not an easy one, as the material to be covered was extensive, while written sources were almost nonexistent. Yet, he did it all by himself, with only one exception: the entry for Isaac Bashevis Singer was written by Professor Khone Shmeruk. As important as these major biographies are, they do not constitute the bulk of the book. The majority of new entries in LYS are for authors which may be grouped in the following categories:²

1. *European-born writers who were still young and beginning their careers in the early post World War II decades when the first volumes of the LNYL were published.* He-

len Burko, born in 1918, journalist and prolific fiction writer, whose first novel in book form appeared in 1955, and Yoni Fayn (Joni Fain), born in Kamenetz-Podolski in 1914, a gifted and recognized contemporary poet who published his first volume of verse in 1947 in Mexico, are in this category.

2. *Authors who started their writing careers in the middle or later years of their life and were little known for their literary activities prior to the publication of their books.* In most cases, their first, and often only, books were memoirs, accounts of their life experiences during the Holocaust, collections of poetry or essays, or even children's stories written over a stretch of many years. Dovid Shmulevski (born in 1912), who published his memoirs on the uprising in Auschwitz (Paris, 1984) and Malka Gotfrid (born in 1907), whose book of poetry appeared in 1964, may serve as examples for this category.

3. *Authors who were better known locally than internationally, at least at the beginning of their careers, or those who contributed to their specialized fields only.* Yoysef Burg, whose first two books were published in Bucharest (1939) and Czernowitz (1940), has a "new" biography. So does Manye Gotenberg, a writer on educational topics and compiler of textbooks in the years 1948–55 in her native Romania.

4. *Pre-World War II authors who were omitted from LNYL for a variety of reasons.* Shmuel Dayksel (Samuel Daixel, later Sh. Dayksel), (1886–1975), Naftoli Bukhvald (Nathaniel Buchwald), (1890–1956), and Yisroel-Ber Beylin (Israel Ber Beilin, also Bailin), (1883–1961) may serve as examples for this category. All three were listed in Zalmen Reyzen's (1927) pioneering work consulted by LNYL, and all three were affiliated with left-wing groups. It is possible that the three are representative of an entire group of left-wing writers, since the organizations and the press with which they were affiliated took a public stand in the controversial issue mentioned above. This serves to explain a number of left-wing names marked with two asterisks in Mr.

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Kagan's book, especially in the portion covering the letters *alef* through *lamed*. These correspond to the first four volumes of LNYL, which were published between 1956 and 1961. In later years, the issue lost its significance and disappeared as an ideological demarcation line.

Among the European pre-war writers included is Pelte Tsuker (p. 458), who published a novel, a collection of poetry, and several plays in Germany and France between the years 1923–72. Apparently very little is known about her, as the dates of her birth and possible death are not given.

5. *Newspaper editors, journalists, and contributors to magazines of all political groupings, including the Orthodox.* Examples from the letter *shin* include Tsirl Shteyngart, on the staff of *Forverts* since 1967; Zalmen Shloser, of *Kheshbn* (Los Angeles) since 1979; Pinkhes Shmayer, editor of *Unzer Shtime* (Paris) since 1973; and Shloyme Shamir, contributor to *Algemeiner Zhurnal* (New York) since 1972.

6. *Orthodox and Hasidic writers* were an under-represented category in the earlier publication. Among those noticed by this reviewer in Mr. Kagan's book are Menakhem Mendl (Menahem Mendl), author of several works of fiction since 1970; Yoysef Sheynberger (Joseph Scheinberger), who wrote a biography of Rabbi Joshua Loeb Diskin (Brooklyn, 1970); Meyer Shekhter-Khokhem (Mayer Schechter-Haham), who published a Hebrew-Yiddish dictionary (Tel-Aviv, 1969); and F. Shnehbolg, who compiled a reader entitled *Toyre un Khshides* (Brooklyn, 1978).

7. *Bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish writers* receive more attention from Berl Kagan than from his predecessors. Arn Yonatanzohn (1815–1868), Mordekhay Yitskhok Edelman (1850–?), Zev-Volf Sales (1894–1984), Arn Volf Rabinovitch (1853–1932), Ester Rubinshteyn (1882–1924), and a most important entry—the philosopher Yankev Klatskin (Jacob Klatzkin), known to scholars and bibliographers as a Hebrew and German writer—are the older writers in the group. Klatskin's Yiddish works, including three articles in the journal *Tsukunft* (Zukunft), are listed in LYS. The Nobel Prize-laureate for Hebrew literature, Shmuel Yoysef Agnon, is the subject of another interesting entry. Mr. Kagan lists his original works in Yiddish as well as the translations of his work from Hebrew into Yiddish.

8. *Scholarly writers who occasionally contributed to Yiddish publications, especially those published by YIVO.* Among them are Meir Halevi (d. 1972), professor of Oriental history at the Sorbonne and Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic community in Paris, and Zvi Shner, who wrote about industry and agriculture among Jews.

9. *"New" biographies of older Yiddish writers active in the first half of the 19th century* include Yitskhok Avrom Aykhl (Eichel), Ben Yitzkhok Zvi-Hirsh and Ben Meir Zvi-Hirsh, and Filip Mansh (Philip Mansch)—all listed by Zalmen Reyzen, but not in LNYL—and Yeshaye Meyer Finkelshteyn (1806–1870), whose contribution to Yiddish letters was a controversial issue discussed by Yiddish scholars.

10. *Holocaust writers* constitute a small group of "new" biographies, among them the young Yitskhok Rudashevski, whose diary was published in *Di Goldene Keyt*, 1953; N. Shternberg, mentioned by Ber Mark in his *Umgekumene Shrayber fun Getos un Lagern* (Warsaw, 1954); and a gifted poet and member of a young Lithuanian-Yiddish writers' group, Lea Rudnitski, whose work appeared in leading Yiddish literary periodicals between 1937 and 1940.

11. *Young scholars and writers who represent a second generation of Yiddish speakers, those born outside the native ground of Yiddish in Eastern Europe.* The presence of these young people in the *Lexicon*, although not great in numbers, is significant. The scholars were educated in academic centers of Yiddish studies, such as YIVO, the Hebrew University, and the Oxford Centre for Hebrew Studies in England. Professors Dan Miron and Rut Vays (Ruth Wisse), Eugene Orenshteyn (Orenstein), Khave Turnianski, Avrom Novershtern, Arye-Leyb Pilovski, Yitskhok Niborski, and Rokhl (Rachel) Ertel are among them. Leybl Botvinik and Sheva Tsuker are among young free-lancers listed. There are several others that could have been included: Benjamin Harshav,³ who, together with his wife, Barbara, was long at work on an anthology of American Yiddish poetry that has just been published by the University of California Press, and Dr. Leonard Prager, who compiled several very useful bibliographies of Yiddish periodicals. There are also librarians who contributed to the Yiddish field: Dr. Bella Weinberg, who compiled an index to Max Weinreich's *History of the Yiddish Language* (University of Chicago Press) and wrote an article on the current practices of the YIVO library (Weinberg, 1980), and Zachary Baker, who compiles annual bibliographies of Yiddish books for the *Jewish Book Annual*.

12. The last group of biographical entries marked with a double asterisk is made up of bibliographic references rather than biographical notes. They are actually *listings of one or more works whose authors remain virtually unknown*. Older writers, Soviet authors, and even Americans are among them. Dr. Leo Menaker, who wrote a book

with the promising title *Der Yidisher Doktor un Zayne Eltern* (Philadelphia, 1935), and Ann Denish, who attempted to guide Yiddish-speaking ladies in their search for beauty in *Der Veg tsu Sheynkayt* (New York, 1937, 317 p.) are interesting illustrations of this group. The practice of supplying bibliographic references rather than biographic information may be questioned; but for Berl Kagan it was not a matter of bibliographic zeal, but rather of principle. His guiding spirit was the great pioneer of Yiddish bibliography, Ber Borochof. The quotation from Borochof's writings addressed to compilers of lexicons, which is the motto of Mr. Kagan's book, states: "no name which has any relation to literature should be omitted." This idea is plausible from several points of view: (a) it may be important to create a brief entry that can stimulate further research; and (b) if done systematically, a comprehensive bibliographic record yields data for statistical analysis and sociological study of the reading public and its interests. Thus the spare data of Berl Kagan's short entries can be quite eloquent for someone who knows how to read them.

Although the augmented and amended entries constitute only 20–25% of the total, they nevertheless introduce very important information. For example, to the LNYL entry on the Soviet writer Peretz Markish were added: four items published prior to 1939 and four between 1964 and 1978, one correction of a title, one correction dealing with collation, and three new citations of works about him. There are important additions to the entry on Sholem Ash (Asch): the date of his death, three new books by him published between 1956 and 1973, one correction of a title, and seven new listings of publications about him. Omitted, probably owing to a printing error, was the book *Briv fun Sholem Ash* (Bat-Yam, 1980); it is mentioned in LYS in the entry on Mikhal Zylberg, who edited it together with M. Tsanin.

There are a few other omissions that this reviewer noticed. Two of them refer to older writers. The critical literature on A. M. Dik, a very prolific writer of the mid-nineteenth century, was considerably enriched by the doctoral dissertation of David Roskies (Brandeis University, 1974), who appended to it a bibliography on Yiddish popular literature of the nineteenth century. Another scholar, Ezra Lahad, who collaborated on the *Lexicon* with Mr. Kagan, compiled an excellent bibliography of the writings of Abraham Goldfaden, the father of the Yiddish theater. It was published as no. 4 in *Amli Studies in Music Bibliography*, 1970. In the entry on the young ghetto diarist, Yitskhok Rudashevski, mention could have been made that it was published in the English

translation of Percy Matenko by Ghetto Fighters' House in Israel in 1973. All these are, however, relatively minor omissions. For a compilation by one person, the amount of material accumulated in LYS is truly remarkable.

The user of this reference tool should be aware that there are supplementary sections to both the biographies and the pseudonym list; in other words, the volume contains four alphabetic sequences.

Appendices

A list of pseudonyms is a special bonus for the users of LYS. Reyzen and LNYL, Berl Kagan's two predecessors, did not feature such lists. The arrangement is alphabetical, with pseudonyms that appear to be real names listed in inverted order—e.g., "Khmurner, I." and not "I. Khmurner"—except for those beginning with "Dr.," which are grouped. Articles are disregarded, e.g., "Nister, der" is the entry rather than "Der Nister." This is a common sense approach that facilitates location of a name by its most important component. In such an extensive list, there are very few omissions. This reviewer noticed only the absence of "Bikherfreser," a pseudonym that Sholem Aleichem used in his *Yudishe Folksbibliothek* when compiling the first bibliography of current Yiddish books. The obvious errors are: 1) "Grin, Dovid," listed as a pseudonym, when it is in fact the real name of David Ben-Gurion. The reverse reference appears in its proper alphabetic sequence in the list of pseudonyms; 2) "Di-Nur, Yekhiel" refers us to "Katzetnik," while the "Katzetnik" entry tells us that the real name of the author is "Yekhiel Fayner." The latter is his original name, while Di-Nur is his Hebraized name. (Interestingly, the former Library of Congress heading for this author is Cetynski, Karol!) [Many bibliographers would benefit from mastery of library concepts of authority control to prevent inconsistent cross references.—Ed. (B.H.W.)]

Method of Treatment

Like the scope of biographical lexicons, the method of dealing with the subject matter was defined for Mr. Kagan by the master in the field, Ber Borochoy: "describing, but not evaluating, not praising or criticizing, everything briefly . . ." are the words Mr. Kagan quotes in the motto to his book. In his biographical entries, we usually find information on the major events in an author's life, citations of books published and titles of periodicals to which he or she contributed, translations into other languages, works written originally in other languages, and

literature about the author—the last graphically differentiated from the main body by a separate paragraph and smaller type. This makes for clarity in the arrangement of the entry.

The entries marked with one asterisk only, or no asterisk at all, should be consulted in conjunction with LNYL. The additions often include dates of the authors' death—a sad, but frequent occurrence in the generation of "graying" Yiddish writers. This information is important for two reasons: for placing an author in the proper time framework and for distinguishing writers with the same name. (The latter is especially important for catalogers!)

The principle of "descriptiveness" is generally observed by Mr. Kagan, with some exceptions for major "new" biographies. It is to his credit that he does not assume the role of literary critic himself, but very judiciously uses a selection of quotations that are most revealing and succinct in their evaluation. The conciseness of Mr. Kagan's manner of presentation is a great advantage for the reader. He does not repeat information that can be found elsewhere; he covers the ground in one volume, (which is cheaper to produce and more convenient to consult than several books). Only in a few cases does this succinctness become shorthand and obstruct clarity. For example, in the entry on "Mirkish, Peretz," the correction refers to a collation statement in LNYL. The volumes entitled *Pyesn* and *Lider* are not separate publications, the author explains, but parts of *Gezamlte Verk* (Collected Works); vol. 2 is *Poemes* (Poems), published in Minsk, 1937 and volume 6, *Pyesn*, published in Moscow, 1933. But there is no explanation as to why volume 2 was published after volume 6, and what happened to volumes 3, 4, and 5. Was it possible that volume 2 published in Minsk in 1937 was part of an edition other than that of volume 6, published in Moscow in 1933? And that volumes 3–5 did not appear at all? A word of explanation would have been helpful to the reader.

Sources

In his introduction, the author explains that most of his biographical material was supplied by the authors themselves; a smaller part was derived from sketches provided by family members or close friends. This direct access to information is a feature that gives the LYS its great value. The information obtained in this way would be irretrievably lost if not collected in time. It is also to the great credit of Mr. Kagan that he developed a network of correspondents in this country and abroad, as Yiddish writers are

widely scattered in all parts of the world (Argentina, Uruguay, Canada, France, Israel, and South Africa), and the local literary scene in these places may not have been sufficiently known by outsiders. Initials under articles indicate the source of information, if other than the author.

As important as the "live" information was, the author graciously acknowledges in addition the help of library catalogs and printed reference sources. It is to his credit that he used the sources in a knowledgeable and imaginative way, and consulted not only book compilations, but also culled information from the daily press and current periodicals. Only a person with intimate familiarity with Yiddish bibliographic sources and with the ability of a veteran journalist to cover the current press could have achieved such extensive coverage.

Conclusions

Mr. Kagan's book has extended the field of Yiddish literature in addition to facilitating access to it. Not only did he fill in the conspicuous omissions in the work of his predecessors; not only did he introduce new writers who emerged during the quarter-of-a-century since the first volume of the previous compendium was published; but he also reached out to unexplored aspects of the field and included authors to whom nobody had previously paid much attention since they were not prolific writers and not part of the literary scene. The broad scope of Mr. Kagan's book and his concise treatment allow the maximum amount of information to be presented in the economical format of a single volume. The book should be an indispensable tool in any library providing information on Yiddish literature and related areas such as the American-Jewish scene and Holocaust studies.

Notes

¹The personal names in this review are given in their best-known form or in systematic Romanization, with the Library of Congress form in parentheses, when available.

²All examples illustrating the categories were chosen at random.

³He was included in the first volume of LNYL under the pseudonym H. Binyomin, as an author of a volume of poetry, but was not yet known as a translator and student of Yiddish prosody.

(Continued on p. 34, column 3)

October 1, 1986

Dear Ms. Berger:

I read with interest your and Ms. Wachs' "Catalog Department" column in the spring issue of *Judaica Librarianship* and wish to share with you some concerns that the Library of Congress has with the idea of basing romanization on pronunciation, as expressed in conventional Yiddish spellings of forenames. I approach the subject with considerable misgiving, because I do realize that if one did not have to consider the enormous file of names we have, particularly as this file is amalgamated with others in such multi-library files as OCLC or RLIN and in various union catalogs, romanization could indeed be more responsive to the needs or preferences of a sub-set of users. I shall forge ahead, however, hoping I can say what I need to without giving offense.

Although several of our romanization tables are still grounded in pronunciation values as a determinant of roman forms, we now consider romanization tables for all languages in an atmosphere mandating that tables be as reversible as possible and that they also be as mechanical as possible, so that even people who have only a slight knowledge of the language can still cope, as is the case both with paraprofessionals in many large libraries and also with professional librarians in many theological libraries that have to deal not only with Hebraica languages, but also with other classical ones of the Greco-Roman civilization. In this context one cannot emphasize reversibility too much: each non-roman letter must have a value distinct from that of every other non-roman letter. In the case of consonants, the existing table does make some attempt in this direction: note the distinction between "h" and "kh" (although both are pronounced the same), between "t" and "t," etc. Introducing consonants in roman values when there is no non-roman counterpart (cf. "Yankev" for "Ya'akov") is similarly disturbing for reasons of non-reversibility.

These are some of the immediate thoughts we have at the Library of Congress as we consider an exception for "Yiddish" forenames, from the general point of view of romanization tables. These thoughts are particularly pertinent to the Hebraica languages since the Yiddish forms of forenames are not (a) derivable from the Hebrew letters except by cognoscenti, and (b) would not necessarily be uniform. I am thinking not only of the common names such as Moses (Moyshe, Meysheh, or Meyseh) or Abraham (Avraham, Avrom, or Avrohom), but also about the specific names listed in your column for possible change. We find a roman form of each name in one or more of their books in our collections, and in all but one of the cases find some degree of disagreement with your proposed new forms [see box].

Proposed New Form	Found Romanization in Books
Goṭlib, N. Y. (Noyeh Yitshok)	Gotlib, N. J.
Zak, Avrom, 1891-	Zak, Abraham
Tsanin, M. (Mordkhe)	Tsanin, M.
Bukhman, Yankev, 1904-	Buchman, Jakob/Jakub
Kats, Doniel	Kac, Daniel
Shkḷiár, Moyshe, 1920-	Szklar, Mosze
Bridzsher, Doyid	Bridger, David
Gris, Noyeh	Gruss, Noe
Shyarts, Shmuel	Szwarc, Szmul
Ronṭsh, Yitshok Elhonen, 1899-	Ronch, I. E.

Although you do indeed present a rather short list for change, I would assume that if the exception could be applied, it should reasonably be considered for other cases, if not now, at least in the future. Taking this wider view, I worry about such practical matters as the following:

1. Are there not some authors who write both in Hebrew and in Yiddish? It could be problematic deciding whether an author is "Yiddish" or not.
2. What about the rabbinic writers who, although writing in Hebrew, have the same, or nearly the same names as Yiddish writers? For example Yitshak Elhanan Spektor undoubtedly spoke Yiddish (and may have pronounced his name exactly as did Yitshak Elhanan Rontsh).

Abramowicz

(Continued from p. 30)

References

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Weinberg, Bella Hass, "The YIVO Library: methods and principles of cataloging publications, preparing bibliographies, and servicing library users." *YIVO-Bleter*, Jubilee volume XLVI, New York, 1980, p. 133-167. English abstract, p. 355.

Yiddish Bibliographic Data

רייזען, זלמן. לעקסיקאָן פון דער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור, פרעסע און פּילאָלאָגיע. 2טע אויסג. ווילנע, ב. קלעצקין, 1926-29. 4 בבי וויינבערג, בלה, "די ייִוואָ-ביבליאָטעק, מעטאָדן און פּרינציפּן פון קאַטאַלאָגירן פּובליקאַציעס, גרייטן ביבליאָגראַפיעס און באַדינען ביבליאָטעק-ניצערס." ייִוואָ-בלעטער, יובל-באַנד, ניו-יאָרק, 1980, זיי 133-167.

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