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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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info@skeneproject.it

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P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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DIEGO ROTMAN*

Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)

Abstract

This article deals with the dialogical relation between modern Hebrew culture and Yiddish culture as reflected in the discourse of both the Hebrew and Yiddish press about Yiddish theatre in the State of Israel between 1948 and 2003. By considering the struggle for power between Hebrew and Yiddish, I outline the establishment of Hebrew as the national language of the new state, as the local and native language, and as the language of power and knowledge. I illustrate that Hebrew's institutionalization occurred in tandem with a constant process of repression and alienation of Yiddish culture and language, as well as the repression and alienation of all the considered Diaspora cultures. If this cultural policy affected the economic conditions for the development of the Yiddish theatre in Israel, then the discourse about the Yiddish theatre in the press also affected the public reception and the public status of Yiddish theatre in Israel.

KEYWORDS: Yiddish theatre; Israel studies; Zionism; Jewish theatre

To understand the history of Yiddish theatre¹ in the State of Israel and the discourse about it, we have to consider the different factors that have directly or indirectly influenced this sphere: the cultural and linguistic policy toward Yiddish culture and language in Palestine and in the State of Israel, the intention of many Yiddish speakers to adapt themselves to the new and modern Hebrew culture and language in their new country (Mlotek 1995; Fishman 1976), and the doubts many Yiddish cultural activists had about

¹ The beginnings of professional Yiddish theatre are uncertain, but were attributed to Avrom Goldfaden who founded a professional troupe in 1876 in Iasi, Romania. There are many discussion and scholarly works regarding facts and mythology on the beginning of Yiddish theatre. It is well known that there were attempts already at the beginning of the nineteenth century to create professional Yiddish troupes in Warsaw. Yiddish theatre was transnational and started to develop not only in Eastern Europe; Yiddish troupes were also founded in Russia, Western Europe, South America, North America, South Africa, and Australia. On the history of Yiddish theatre, see Quint 2019; Auslaender 1940; Berkowitz 2008; Manger, Turkow, and Perenson 1968; Sandrow 1977; Shatzky 1930; Zylbercweig 1931-1960; and Stern 2011.

* Hebrew University of Jerusalem – diego.rotman@mail.huji.ac.il

the possibility of continuity of Yiddish culture and language in Israel, specifically after the Holocaust.

In a recently published book on the history of Yiddish in Israel, Rachel Rojanski argues that “the steps taken against Yiddish theatre during the state’s first years had almost no direct influence on its development. They lasted for only a very short time and were not effectively enforced” (2020, 101-102). In this article, I will present a very different position to Rojanski’s statement on her understanding of this specific period and field. In this article, based on a close reading of the Hebrew and Yiddish press, archival research, and interviews with major figures of the Yiddish theatre, I will argue that the cultural and linguistic policy against the Yiddish theatre did in fact deeply influence the history and development of Yiddish theatre in Israel in a crucial way. My thesis is best illustrated by the practice of and discourse about Dzigal and Shumacher, key figures of the Yiddish stage, who died in Israel as permanent residents without even attaining Israeli citizenship as the result of the cultural and linguistic policy against Yiddish in Israel. Both research projects were conducted in tandem and influenced one another, and while there are several intersecting points, they arrive at different conclusions.

1. Language. Nation. Theatre.

Language as an indication of nationality is a common phenomenon in the formation of the modern nation-state. Language – like culture, race, or religion – was, as Elie Kedourie claimed, one of the defining signs in the national identity of communities, enabling the distinction between one national group and another (1994, 49-55). The choice of the national language and the choice of the relationship to minority languages (should they be preserved or acted against) are not limited to the question of integration, but also touch on the question of the legitimacy of the national culture and of the ideology on which the political system is based, as claimed by William Safran (1992). In the early days of the *yishuv*,² language was perceived as one of the central signs in defining the speaker’s identity. If an actor or a citizen wanted to be integrated into society, into the local normative Hebrew world, where the paradigm of “the negation of the exile” dominated the culture and social life (Raz-Krakotzkin, 1994), he had to give up signs of the diaspora, first and foremost Yiddish, the Jewish language still considered a threat to the revival of Hebrew.³

² Yishuv means “settlement” and the term refers to the body of Jewish residents in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel.

³ The relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish in Palestine and in the State of Is-

Activities against Yiddish taken during the “language war” between Hebrew and Yiddish in the first decades of the 20th century were described by Yaakov Zerubavel (b. Vitkin), a leader of the Po’alei Zion Left Party (Workers of Zion) with a militant Marxist-Zionist and Yiddishist approach, and one of the founders of the political party Mapam (United Workers Party).⁴ Zerubavel describes the activities in an article entitled *We Accuse and Demand Responsibility!* as follows: “Worse than the persecutions is the systematic pogrom – psychological and ideological – carried out by the official society against the rights of the Yiddish language” (quoted in Fishman 1981, 297-311). The title of the article, a paraphrase of Emile Zola’s article on the Dreyfuss affair, and the specific rhetoric used by Zerubavel reflect the interpretation of those attacks as a planned and organized process of ethnic and cultural oppression and discrimination. The construction of the new Hebrew language and culture was to be achieved by a parallel process of deconstruction of the Yiddish language and culture as well as all other Jewish diasporic languages and cultures.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the state developed a policy of supervision and control of culture and language in an attempt to determine a new cultural order in which Hebrew was the exclusive national language of the Jewish nation. In this new order, the Yiddish theatre – partly because of its popularity – was still perceived as a danger to the nation’s cultural and linguistic character in the first years of the state. Historian and Education Minister Ben-Tsion Dinur argued that “The common language is a precondition for the very existence of our people . . . In the Hebrew language, we say *uma ve’lashon* [nation and language] and use them almost as synonyms” (quoted in Rojanski 2020, 32). The state assumed the role of defending the people and the public from Yiddish theatre that, à la Dinur’s assertion, became an antonym to the idea of nation. In August 1949, this stance took on a legal aspect: the Films and Plays Censorship Committee barred local troupes from performing in Yiddish⁵ and other languages

rael are a continuation of an inner change in the Jewish people that started with the Jewish Enlightenment movement and the process of modernization, which generated profound change in the approach to the traditional Jewish way of life. It was the time when national questions, including the status of Yiddish, became one of the central questions and topics of debate in the national political movements, reaching a climax at the Czernowitz Conference on Yiddish Culture (1908). Since the Second Aliyah (the second wave of Jewish big emigration to Palestine in the wake of pogroms in czarist Russia, 1904-1914), the movement attempting to revive the Hebrew language as the everyday language of the Jewish People in Palestine became a central cultural phenomenon. Concerning the status of Yiddish in Palestine between 1907 and 1948, see: Pilowsky 1986 and Chaver 2004.

⁴ Acronym for *Miflegat hapoalim hameuhedet* [United Workers Party].

⁵ The role of the Censorship Committee drew on the British Mandate’s Public Thea-

that were not Hebrew.⁶ In the process of othering Yiddish in Israel, permission to appear in Yiddish was given only to guest troupes and actors from abroad. “It is the first time in the history of any country,” a journalist with the pseudonym of Ts. R-N (apparently Mordkhe [Mordechai] Tsanin) sharply penned that “a citizen has fewer rights than a foreigner” (1951). Indeed, an Israeli citizen, an actor, who dared perform in Yiddish or other mother tongue was considered more foreign than a foreigner. To perform in Yiddish meant to be a lawbreaker, or quoting Berachia in the newspaper *Davar*, an agent wreaking “social, cultural, national damage” (1952).

2. The Ban on Yiddish Theatre

Shimen Dzigán (1905-1980) and Yisroel Shumacher (1908-1961), the most important comic duo of 20th century Yiddish theatre,⁷ staged their first performance as guest actors in Israel on March 16, 1950, in the Ohel-Shem Theatre in Tel Aviv. The decision to appear as guest artists, giving up their previous plan to immigrate to Israel from post-World War II Poland, was a consequence of the cultural and linguistic policy against Yiddish in Israel. This decision of more than anecdotal value: it confirms the negative influence of Israel’s cultural policy on the development of Yiddish theatre in Israel. In 1949, the pair applied in for immigrant visas⁸ and their passports

tre Ordinance of 1927 and its amendment in 1937. According to these laws, those wishing to stage a play needed a permit from a commission lacking any official or clear guidelines or criteria. See also Rojanski 2020, 104.

⁶ Performances in other languages were similarly banned. A performance by an Israeli amateur theatre that applied for a permit to perform in Bulgarian and Hebrew was denied, arguing that to perform in foreign languages is not allowed for local troupes (February-March 1951 State Archives, File Gimel-3578/54). The same argument was used against performances in German.

⁷ Shimen Dzigán and Yisroel Schumacher began their professional artistic careers as actors in the experimental Yiddish theatre Ararat, established in 1927 under the direction of the poet Moyshe Broderzon, in Łódź, Poland. After a few years, they left together for Warsaw and founded an independent satirical theatre that would play a key role in Eastern Europe’s Jewish culture. Their theatre was characterized by sharp humour, witty political satire, and extraordinary acting ability. During World War II, they continued their artistic activity in the Soviet Union, where in 1941 they were arrested on the accusation of acting against the Soviet regime. In 1947, they returned to Poland and performed there for two years, until they left for a performance tour of Europe. They first performed in Israel in 1950, and acted together until they separated in 1960. Schumacher died in 1961 and Dzigán continued to appear with his satirical theatre in Israel and abroad until 1980. On Dzigán and Shumacher, see Rotman 2021 and Efron 2012.

⁸ I recently had access to the private archive of the late Lidia Shumacher-Ophir and verified this documentation.

were stamped with the *olim hadashim* (new Jewish immigrants) stamps at the Israeli consulate in Warsaw in order to enter Israel. Nonetheless, Dzigán and Shumacher, the most popular artists of the Yiddish stage, decided to arrive in Israel as guest artists – as strangers – in order to retain their right to perform in Yiddish in Israel. Dzigán and Shumacher would move to Israel only in 1958, and live there as permanent residents for the rest of their lives.

Their first program in Israel, *Vayis'u vayahanu* [And they journeyed and pitched their tents], was an incredible success, both among audiences – the number of tickets sold broke the existing sales record in the Israeli theatre – and among theatre critics in the Hebrew and Yiddish press.⁹ Their exceptional success intensified the perception on the part of the Israeli establishment that Yiddish theatre still posed a threat to Hebrew theatre and culture: at the beginning of May 1950, they were ordered to cease performing in Yiddish in Israel.

Unexpectedly, the guest actors received outstanding support from the Hebrew press, which was completely at odds with the general attitude expressed towards other actors of the Yiddish theatre. This included none other than Azriel Carlebach, the editor of the newspaper *Maariv*, who tried to raise public awareness of the unjust Israeli cultural policy towards the guest actors:

This evening, Dzigán and Shumacher will give their last performance with the permission of the State of Israel. From tomorrow onwards, these performances will be forbidden. The reasons given are highly important and persuasive: these two people are – Jews. Even worse than that: they are Jewish refugees . . . In France and wherever else they visit in Europe, they were received with open arms by the authorities and with enthusiasm by Holocaust survivors. They thought that they were also allowed to visit their thousands of veteran theatre-goers in the State of Israel . . . since they began performing in Israel – the police were sent after them. (1950)

Carlebach concluded his critical article with sharp irony, emphasizing that the pressure exerted on the artists was intended to force them to perform in Hebrew: “The trouble for Misters Dzigán and Shumacher is not so great. It’s easy to help them. All they have to do is convert” (1950).

⁹ According to an article in *Maariv* on October 13, 1950: “The duo Dzigán and Shumacher became a big hit this season. Their takings passed the record in the history of miniature theatre in Israel. In the eighty performances given by Dzigán and Shumacher, the tickets were sold to the last one, and the theatres would have filled up had there been more performances” (M. in *Maariv* 1950). Considering the various reports in the press, in the first year in which they performed in Israel, around 400,000 theatre-goers attended their performances.

Two official reasons were given for banning their performances: their program was not submitted to the Films and Plays Censorship Committee for preview, and the same committee enacted a new restriction that allowed guest actors to appear for a total of six weeks, a retroactively calculated limit, in all likelihood created as a result of Dzigan and Shumacher's success during the first six weeks of their stay (State Archive, File Gimel 3577/12).¹⁰ Thanks to the intervention of Carlebach¹¹ and Joseph Heftman, the chairman of the Journalists' Union and one of the former editors of the Yiddish newspaper *Der Moment* in pre-war Poland as well as Dzigan and Shumacher's skills in negotiating with the authorities, the two artists successfully managed to handle the Censorship Committee (State Archive, File Gimel 3577/12; ABA, file 164-04). According to the compromise reached, the artists were granted permission (letter dated May 15, 1950, sent to the artists at the Hotel Bristol in Tel Aviv and signed by Yaakov Kisilov) to continue performing their program in Yiddish on condition that their performances include Hebrew sections amounting to at least one-third of the entire program (ABA, File 146-04; Anonymous 1950a, *Hador*). To meet this condition, Dzigan and Shumacher, in typical 'trickster' fashion, hired a female singer who sang Hebrew songs between the skits (Boyarin, 1997).¹²

As a consequence of the public pressure, the Films and Plays Censorship Committee authorized the performance of a second program by Dzigan and Shumacher in Israel, *Tate du lakhst!* [Father, you laugh!] (1950), a permission granted on the basis that this be "the last program by Dzigan and Shumacher before they leave for abroad (M.D. in *Maariv*, 1950; State Archives,

¹⁰ On March 13, 1950, the agent Ze'ev Markovitz submitted a request to the Films and Plays Censorship Committee asking for permission for Dzigan and Shumacher's performances. The duo began performing before receiving the authorization. After three performances, the first of which took place on March 16 in Tel Aviv, the second in Haifa on March 22, and the third in Jerusalem on March 23, 1950, the committee decided to prohibit the duo's performances (letter dated March 26, 1950 from the head of the committee Yaakov Kisilov to the Department for Criminal Identification and Investigation, Israeli police HQ). The head of the committee wanted to ask the police to stop the duo's performances (protocol of the meeting held on March 30, 1950). On April 9, 1950, the artists received a letter containing the longed-for permission (no. 78), which noted that, as guest artists, they were allowed to perform the program *Vayis'u vayahanu* until the end of April: "Further shows after this period will not be allowed".

¹¹ The minutes of the meeting of the Films and Plays Censorship Committee note the pressure of the press and the influence of Carlebach's article, which influenced the decision to grant the permission.

¹² A 'trickster' is, according to Daniel Boyarin, "that same folkloristic figure that exists in all the world, which represents the weak and whose wit can sometimes achieve controversial victories over the powerful" (1997, 147).

File Gimel 3577/70).¹³ The same letter informed the artists that “the committee has decided not to continue granting these artists the right given to guest artists to stage performances not in the Hebrew language”. Thus the authorities sought to stop the continued existence of the duo’s theatre as long as they attempted to stage shows in Yiddish.

During the two years in which the prohibition was in place, permits to perform in Yiddish were issued to guest artists and singers visiting Israel, including Rachel Holzer, Maurice Schwartz, Yaakov Weislitz, Veronika Bal, Dora Kalinowna, Isa Kremer, Jenny Lubitz, Lola Folman, Moyshe Osher, Chayele Grober, Dzigan and Shumacher, and Avrom-Yankev Mansdorf (Kelmovitch). They were allowed to perform only on condition they include Hebrew in their performances, at times as much as fifty percent of their shows (State Archives, File Gimel 5549-07).

The activity of the Yiddish theatre by Israeli artists declined significantly during those years. Every attempt to create a stable Yiddish theatre company was persecuted.¹⁴ For example, performing in December 1950, the Yafo profesyoneler Yidish teater [The Jaffa Professional Yiddish Theatre], founded by Joseph Lichtenberg,¹⁵ was harassed by the police, though only after the theatre succeeded in staging *Dos volge meyd*, *Der vilner mentsh*, and *Kol nidre*.¹⁶

A theatre group named after Avrom Goldfaden, founded at the end of 1950 and active until 1953, was the first local professional theatre troupe to perform in Yiddish in the State of Israel, openly defying the prohibition on acting in Yiddish. David (Dovid) Hart, Nathan (Nosen) Wulfowitz, and Isroel (Israel) Segal were members of this group, all of them new immigrants. The troupe succeeded in performing a number of shows mostly based on the classics of the Yiddish stage. The theatre did not attract much attention, nor was it hugely successful in terms of audiences. Its most important

¹³ An article entitled *Sodot shel tsenzorim* [The secrets of the censor] claims that the permission would not have been granted were the actors not on the verge of departing for performances abroad. This is also evident from the protocol of the meeting of the Council for the Review of Films and Plays that took place on October 10, 1950. Seven days later (protocol of the meeting held on October 17, 1950), the council added a revision to the decision for permission no. 78, which was mentioned above: “The council expects their second program to include a significant Hebrew section . . . the council will not grant them further rights of guest actors and will not permit them to appear in a further program in Yiddish, not even partially”.

¹⁴ It is difficult to ascertain the role of Hebrew in their programs.

¹⁵ Lichtenberg was one of the founders of the Erszter Yidisher profesyoneler teater (The First Professional Yiddish Theatre) in the survivors’ camps after World War II.

¹⁶ Eliezer Getler also produced popular Yiddish plays such *Yiddishe mame* and *Tsipke fayer* and was also called to court (Rojanski 2020, 107).

achievement lay, as Rojanski says, in creating a Yiddish repertory theatre in Israel and formally lifting the ban against Yiddish (2020, 108-21).

As a consequence of the prohibition on local artists to perform in Yiddish, the Avrom Goldfaden Theatre operated illegally and under difficult conditions, staging most of its performances in the Migdal-Or Garden in Giv'at Aliya in Jaffa, constantly enduring attempts by the police to prevent its performances by imposing fines and summoning the members to pay (N. Ch-shin 1952; Tsanin 1951). The cultural policy against Yiddish, waged only a few years after the Holocaust, was not just psychological oppression, as Rojanski states; it was also a very aggressive policy attempting to define a social paradigm or structure in which only foreigners could get permits to perform in Yiddish, though they were obligated to add Hebrew fragments as well. This policy influenced many Yiddish artists in their decision on where to settle in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust as they looked for a place to restart their careers (as evidenced in the case of Dzigán and Shumacher).

Tsanin, the legendary editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Letste Nayes*, referred to the fact that the current policy left the artists without any alternative but to perform against the law, in disreputable, primitive venues and settings (Drucker Bar-Am 2013; Rojanski 2020, 48-100). In explaining the state's tactics, Tsanin made it clear that the fines were not being given for performing in Yiddish, but for performing without permits (1951). The fines were not only symbolic; they were a clear discriminatory practice carried out by the hegemonic power. The policy affected the artists and the public emotionally, socially, and economically. The Israeli Yiddish actor was being legally punished because he was performing without a permit when it was a priori impossible to get a permit to perform in Yiddish; his mother tongue was deemed a betrayal to his new homeland (Tsanin 1951, 3). If he pretended to be part of society, part of the 'normal', he would have to erase all the signs of the diaspora, particularly his language.

The social and political pressure created by Dzigán and Shumacher's performances in Israel (the most successful Yiddish theatre in Israel ever); the pressure generated by the activism of Avrom Goldfaden Theatre (who performed in Yiddish despite the prohibitions); and petitions the theatre submitted to the High Court of Justice – all these resulted in the ban on local actors performing in Yiddish being lifted on July 18, 1951 (Rojanski 2020, 108-21). Rojanski argues that, after the restriction was repealed, Yiddish theatre failed to thrive. What Rojanski does not mention is that the theatre had already started to include Hebrew fragments in its performances, and in fact Avrom Goldfaden Yiddish Theatre became transitional en route to

becoming part of the Hebrew theatre.¹⁷ On July 20, 1951, the Films and Plays Censorship Committee announced that the prohibition to perform in Yiddish was no longer in force (State Archives, File Gimel 5549-07).¹⁸

3. From Juridical Practices to Economic and Rhetorical Oppression

Once the ban was lifted, the means of oppression and enforcing the hegemony became more sophisticated. In spite of its success in terms of popular acclaim, Yiddish theatre was ignored by the local discourse in the Hebrew press about theatre and culture until the middle of the 1960s. The ban on performing in Yiddish without a permit was replaced by an economic and cultural policy, on the one hand, and by a silent and later pejorative discourse in the Hebrew press, on the other.¹⁹

Yiddish changed its status from “a language forbidden to Israelis” – at least in the field of the theatre – to that of “a foreign language”, even though it was the only or first language of 33.3 per cent of the Jewish population (524,000) in the 1950s and 22.7 per cent of the Jewish population (446,200) in 1961 (Fishman 1991, 401). The definition of Yiddish as a foreign language was another expression of the ‘emigration policy’ towards Yiddish culture, which tried to expel this culture and language from the local cultural landscape. This policy had not only psychological connotations; it also generated economic discrimination that turned into one of the central means of cultural oppression: taxes and fines imposed on theatres performing in foreign languages, on the one hand, and the official budget policy, which rejected support for the Yiddish theatre, on the other.

According to the Yiddish press, the lack of support for the development of Yiddish theatre was an expression of the culture discrimination against Yiddish culture and one of the main reasons that a Yiddish art theatre could not develop in Israel. According to the Hebrew press, the policy was a direct and appropriate response to the quality of Yiddish theatre. The main reason, however, remained ideological. “In fact”, wrote theatre critic Boaz

¹⁷ In a letter written in April 20, 1972 to the Minister of Culture Sh. Dinaburg (later Ben-Tsion Dinur), they mention the inclusion of Hebrew as part of their performances. See State Archives, File Gimel 1091-39.

¹⁸ The prohibition to perform in German would last until 1958. There is a language hierarchy. In a protocol from a meeting of the Films and Plays Censorship Committee dated March 13, 1951, Kisilov wrote in a session: “I agree an absolute prohibition cannot be applied to Yiddish. Each one of us has a special feeling for Yiddish since childhood. A total prohibition we give to plays in German, German is not like Yiddish. We could forbid German but not Yiddish with a clear conscience. To do that would raise a very critical reaction”.

¹⁹ There were exceptions with the visits of artists from abroad.

Evron in the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, “the existence of such an institution [Yiddish theatre], would just slow down the natural and necessary transition of immigrant theatre people to the Hebrew stage” (1975, 27). There was no possibility and no reason to try to revive Yiddish culture and language in Israel, Evron said, and therefore there was no need to support the development of this culture (1975).

4. The Yiddish Theatre in the Hebrew Press

If the official cultural and economic policy towards Yiddish theatre decisively influenced the local development of the Yiddish theatre, it would be the discourse developed by the Hebrew press that would finally stigmatize the Yiddish theatre in Israel. With the exception of the references to Dzigal and Shumacher and to visits by other Yiddish ‘stars’ from abroad, the approach of the Hebrew press to the Yiddish theatre was, until the mid-1960s, characterized by a near-total silence. This was both the central means for erasing any remnants left by the Yiddish theatre in Israel and an expression of its rejection (Aloni 1984, 14; Adar 1986, 9). Yiddish theatre, which in the 1950s was expanding and growing on the streets, was rhetorically erased from the Israeli cultural map (Anonymous 1954, *Haaretz*, 1-2). Only a few remarks about Yiddish theatre are to be found, usually in the form of very harsh critiques. An example of the tone is given by Ts. Berachia who wrote:

All those Yiddish theatres which have lately sprung up like mushrooms after the rain and whose artistic values are nil – what about the damage they cause, in the name of whom? Why not restrain them? . . . The Yiddish theatre sabotages our educational system. It causes explicit damage from a cultural, social, and national point of view.
(1952)

To understand the scope of the Yiddish theatre production starting in the mid-1950s, it is necessary to look at alternate sources, especially in the Yiddish press of that time. This is what a *Yedioth Ahronoth* journalist did: in 1962, he ‘discovered’ the hidden dimension of the Yiddish theatre in the Yiddish press and shared his conclusion with his readers. He calculated that Yiddish theatre, which had eight different troupes performing 54 shows in a period of eight weeks, had an average of 500,000-600,000 people visiting it a year – a bigger audience than the Cameri and Habima theatres (Shin, 1962).

There is no doubt that Israel’s Yiddish-speaking citizens found a vital cultural expression in the Yiddish theatre they were not able to find on the Hebrew stage. When looking at the numbers, the feeling of threat is understandable: Yiddish theatre as a whole was much more successful in terms

of the audience than the Hebrew stage. It was doing great business, despite the taxes and the politics against it. The Yiddish theatre, according to a statement by a Hebrew theatre producer, could actually extend economic help to the production of performances in the Hebrew theatre (quoted in Shin, 1962).

Among the artists performing in the Yiddish theatre starting in the 1950s were Max Perlman and Gite Galina, Henri Gerro and Rosita Londner, Eni Liton, Shimen Dzigán and Yisroel Shumacher, Michael Grinshteyn, Yehudit Kronenfeld, Bebe Szpitser, Annabella, Zigmunt Turkow, Yaakov Alperin, and Yaakov Bodo (starting in the 1980s). Among the guest artists visiting from abroad to whom the press paid attention were Joseph Buloff, the Burshteyn Family, Maurice Schwartz, and Ida Kaminska.²⁰ In the few cases where the Hebrew press allowed itself to mention important actors and directors of the Yiddish theatre, it described them as actors and directors of the Jewish – not Yiddish – stage in a rhetorical expression of cultural translation. In this way, Joseph Buloff was described as “One of the great artists of the Jewish stage who earned a name for himself also in the non-Jewish American theatre” (Anonymous in *Yedioth Ahronoth* 1950b, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 4). Maurice Schwartz was treated similarly. Most of the plays were written by playwrights of the popular Yiddish theatre, others were from the classics of Yiddish art theatre, and still others were translations from European theatre, with very few translated from Hebrew.²¹

5. The Aesthetic Threat

In the 1960s, when it was no longer possible to ignore the important pres-

²⁰ Among the many plays performed in the commercial and popular Yiddish theatre, which gave in some way an indication of the popular genre of those performances are: *Der Shtroyener Held* [The Straw Hero] (1954), *Vintshn mir mazl-tov* [We Wish You Good Luck] (1957); *Yoshke zukht ha kale* [Yoshke looks for a bride] (1960); *Oy vayber vayber* [Oh, Women, Women] (1960), *Alts tsulib parnose* [Everything for subsistence] (1961), *A man af exsport* [A man for export] (1961), played by Max Perlman and Gite Galina; *Der zingendiker milner* [The Miller Singer] (1964), *Der farlibter nar* [The Fool in Love] (1966), *Mazl-Tov yidn* [Good Luck Jews] (1968), played by Henri Gerro and Rosita Londner; *Ha harts vos benkt* [A Heart Misse] (1961), *Di shikerte* [The Drunk] (1966), played by Yudis Kronenfeld; *Di koshere shikse* [The Kosher Shikse (gentile girl)] (1961) by Bebe Shpiter; *Der komediant* [The Comedian] (1954); *Eybike kale* [Eternal Bride] (1963); *Ha khasene in shtetl* [A Wedding in the Shtetl (small town)] (1963), played by the Burshteyn Family.

²¹ From the classics of Yiddish theatre were performed for example: *Yoshe kalv* by Y. Y. Singer (1960) and *Motke ganev* by Sholem Asch performed by the Maurice Schwartz Ensemble; *Tuvya the Milkman and his Seven Daughter* based on Sholem Aleichem’s novel (1961) and *Di brider Ashkenazi* based on Y. Y. Singer (1966), both performed by Joseph Buloff; *Kidush Hashem* (1960) by Sholem Asch and the Yidish folks-teater.

ence of Yiddish theatre in Israel, the Hebrew press started to develop a new type of cultural differentiation based on the principle of ‘taste’. A cultural dichotomy was created between a popular theatre of low artistic merit – associated with the Yiddish theatre – and a theatre of high artistic merit, represented in this discourse by the Hebrew theatre. Most of the plays performed on the Yiddish stage were described in the Hebrew press as being of very low quality that looked to the past and had only commercial intentions. These critiques developed a discourse that rejected the cultural value of the Yiddish language and culture, and contributed significantly to the development of the stigma of Yiddish theatre as a synonym for popular, commercial, and melodramatic theatre.²²

The negative, even apocalyptic, criticism of Yiddish theatre had a precedent in the theatre criticism of the popular, commercial Yiddish theatre in Eastern Europe, where it was known as *shund*. In those reviews, popular theatre was made with the sole purpose of entertaining the audience and it lacked any artistic pretensions. The criticism was cutting, humiliating, and went so far as to define the genre as a ‘social illness, from which the society had to be cured. The literary critic Nakhmen Mayzel called the *shund* repertoire a “death drug repertoire” (1933, 709-10); Jonas Turkow referred to it as a “*shund* epidemic” (1938, 27); and Yisroel Shtern determined it to be a “*shund* pest” (1937, 699-700).

From a formalistic point of view, the reviews and critiques written in Israel in a similar tone seemed to be a continuation of the rhetoric against the popular *shund* theatre that started in Europe. But the main difference is that the critique written in Eastern Europe was against a certain type of Yiddish theatre, whereas in Israel, it was against the Yiddish theatre as a whole. In the discourse developed by the Hebrew press, the problem was not the *shund*, but rather all of Yiddish theatre. Despite the Dzigán and Shumacher, Eni Liton, The Three Shmuliks, *Di megile* productions (see above), and the successful visits by Maurice Schwartz, Joseph Buloff, and Ida Kaminska, Yiddish theatre became a synonym for bad theatre.

Dzigán and Shumacher’s continued career wandered between Israel and the diaspora. Their extended absences were a consequence of the bad state of Yiddish theatre in Israel, the high taxes the actors were forced to pay, and the existence of a large community in the diaspora that looked forward to seeing the duo’s theatre and could also significantly increase their profits. Only in 1957, was Yiddish theatre awarded a certain discount on its high

²² There were exceptional and positive reviews about performance by Eni Liton, Dzigán and Shumacher, and other world figures of the Yiddish theatre who visited Israel.

entertainment tax, while Habima and Cameri theatres paid no taxes whatsoever.²³ In 1958, Dzigan and Shumacher decided to settle in Israel, though without becoming Israeli citizens. In 1958, in their efforts to obtain a tax reduction, Dzigan and Shumacher signed an agreement with the Pargod Theatre, managed by Eliyahu Goldenberg.²⁴ In return for adding a number of members of the troupe to their performances, the duo would receive the tax exemption that Pargod enjoyed as a Hebrew-speaking theatre (Rotman 2021).

In addition to Dzigan and Shumacher's acting talent, what fascinated most of the Hebrew theatre-goers and journalists was the duo's aptitude for decoding Israeli reality and translating it into critical, subversive political satire (Nahor, 1955; Anonymous, 1955a, *Maariv*).²⁵ In the critical rhetoric, the two were accorded the status of underground warriors. They were "the sniper artists" (Avrahami, 1955); "wielding the secret weapon" (Gelbert, 1958) whose "arrows are aimed . . . at people and organizations in the headlines (the government, the Histadrut [the nation's powerful labour union])" (Avrahami, 1955). The duo's power was poetically described by Emil Feuerstein, who also used military rhetoric: "In mere moments, they dismantle our weapons of opposition, we become their captives and they do with us as they please" (1958). Certain critics wrote against the great power of their satire, referring to its influence on a great number of spectators (Zonder, 1950).

During the 1950s, Dzigan and Shumacher succeeded in removing the negative label attached to everything called Yiddish theatre from their work, achieving a central status in theatrical reviews in the Hebrew press (and, of course, in the Yiddish press), and fighting the hostile cultural poli-

²³ A tax of between 15 and 20 per cent was imposed on theatres that did not perform in Hebrew. Thus, Dzigan reports that he received a special discount in 1968: "Because I act in Yiddish, I must pay an additional tax of 10 per cent of the price of a ticket. The Hebrew theatre does not pay this tax. And I also need to be happy and to say thank you that they don't take 20 per cent of the ticket price – as all the Yiddish theatres pay. This tax is a discriminatory tax for me" (quoted in A. L. in Davar, 1968).

²⁴ Eliyahu Goldenberg (1909–1976) was an actor, director, and announcer. At the beginning of the 1960s, Goldenberg was part of the original ensemble "the Three Shmuliks", with the actors Shmuel Rodansky and Shmulik Segal (after his death, he was replaced by Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer). The ensemble performed in Yiddish in various theatres in Israel and abroad.

²⁵ Regarding the extent to which they covered the Israel reality, an article in *Maariv* noted: "Numerous comments reflected the sensitivity of the visiting artists to the changes that have taken place in Israel since their last visit here, in the economic field (tax, the cancellation of the 'austerity' the pig war), in the cultural field ("Porgy and Bess"? . . .), and in the field of the party policy (Mapam and Sneh), elections and carnivals" (Anonymous 1955a, Hador). However other critics, like Nahor (1955), saw the references to Israel only as external clothing for duo's theatre.

cy towards Yiddish theatre in Israel (apart from the tax discrimination).

Despite their exceptionally positive reception, Dzigán and Shumacher continually found themselves facing the policy of discrimination against Yiddish theatre and the pressure of repeated demands that they perform in Hebrew. For the most part, the reviews and articles about their performances included expectations for a “Hebrew spirit in their performances”, complaints about the fact that they did not keep their promises to perform in Hebrew, and disappointment with the “insufficient amount of Hebrew in the performances” and “their zealous attachment to Yiddish” (Efrat., 1955; Ben-Meir 1959). Critics argued that Dzigán and Shumacher needed to “fulfil the duty to the language of the state in which they reside and are active”, be grateful for the credit given to them, and prove their desire to integrate into the society by immediately translating their art (Ben-Meir, 1958). According to another critic: “The great credit given to the two actors when they were still new immigrants was given conditionally . . . In the future, the State of Israel will also serve as a place of refuge for their art if this art will divest itself of the diaspora clothing and wear Hebrew uniform in sound and in style” (Nahor, 1953). Two years later, Nahor spoke out even more harshly:

Dzigán and Shumacher do not understand that the matter here is one of a national, cultural, and even economic revolution, and therefore it is impossible to allow them to perform in Tel Aviv in the same way as they once performed in Łódź and Warsaw. If they will not be with us, in the end they will be against us, and a great part of the last program was against us . . . If after four or five years of living here the two comedians do not feel obligated to appear even in one Hebrew section, this is a sign that they remain foreign and want to be strangers.
(1955)

The reception of Dzigán and Shumacher as Israeli artists thus depended, more than anything else, on their willingness to change their language. They still needed to prove their place in the national revolution, or at least relate to it in polished Hebrew.²⁶

²⁶ Dzigán and Shumacher eventually entered the canon of Israeli Hebrew in 2004, when an episode of a documentary series about Israeli humour by Anat Seltzer and Modi Bar-On (director: Avida Livni; investigative reporter: Assaf Galay) was dedicated to them. In the internal discourse of Yiddish culture, they reappeared when the Yidishpiel theatre, which was established in 1988 at the initiative of Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer with government support, devoted a show called *Di eybige Dzigán un Shumacher* [Dzigán and Shumacher Forever] to them (2004). The play was reported on in the Hebrew press. In 2013, the theatre staged a new play entitled *Dzigán un Shumacher knakn shoynt vider* [Dzigán and Shumacher Are Snapping/Resonating Again], a musical comedy by

The ambivalence towards the Israeli character of Dzigán and Shumacher and their theatre was characteristic of the approach among reviewers and politicians. It was espoused by those who wanted to adopt the talented, high-quality, popular artists as Israeli, yet at the same time found it difficult to accept a Yiddish theatre as an inseparable part of the Israeli cultural reality.

6. The Effect of the Israeli Cultural Policy on Artistic Activities in Yiddish

After the partnership with Pargod collapsed, Dzigán and Shumacher approached the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance in an attempt to receive a tax exemption. In a letter dated November 2, 1958, they declared their intentions: “To settle in Israel for real [!], despite our evident success abroad in various countries, where we succeeded not only in gaining support for ourselves but also for Israel among the diaspora” (ABA file 141-4). The letter concluded with a sophisticated argument, highlighting the political awareness of the artists and their typical behaviour vis-à-vis the authorities: “Let us just add that granting the requested exemption will make a better impression in the wide Jewish world in the diaspora and will demonstrate the democratic character of our state and its true liberal spirit, putting an end to the rumours that have spread in the diaspora regarding the discrimination and oppression of Yiddish and Yiddish speakers in Israel”. Thanks to the pressure exerted by then-Minister of Finance Levi Eshkol, the artists were granted an exemption from the stamp tax for a period of nine months.

By the end of 1959, Dzigán and Shumacher’s relationship had deteriorated badly (Anonymous 1955b, *Hador*).²⁷ Shumacher – who had not performed dramatic roles since his youthful appearances in the amateur theatre of the Hebrew gymnasium in Łódź – took a role in *Kidush hashem* by Shalom Asch, staged by the Yidish Folksteater [Yiddish people’s theatre] and directed by Yosef Sheyn (Adler, 1960). The role of the tailor in *Kidush hashem* was the last that Shumacher played on stage. He died on May 21, 1961, after an extended illness. Following Shumacher’s death and Dzigán establishing a new troupe, Dzigán published a declaration of principles according to which his new sa-

B. Michael and Ephraim Sidon, starring Yaakov Bodo and Dovele Glickman, and directed by Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer.

²⁷ As early as 1955, a disagreement between the artists was mentioned in the press: “Dzigán and Shumacher have fallen out. The two popular artists will continue to appear together and to cooperate in the artistic field but they will cease social interactions. They have stopped talking to each other”.

tirical theatre would perform in Yiddish, confront Israeli topics, reflect the daily reality in Israel, and continue to be faithful to the genre of miniature theatre, while returning to his artistic and cultural roots. Dzigan staged twenty-two new programs with his theatre. The performances included texts by many authors, classic and modern, original works in Yiddish, adaptations and translations, as well as texts and adaptations of his own.²⁸

7. *Di Megile* at the Hammam Theatre in Jaffa

By the second half of the 1960s, partly as a consequence of the Eichmann trial (1961) and its influences on the Israeli public discourse on the Holocaust and Jewish diasporic life, Israeli society developed a certain openness to dealing with ethnic Jewish diasporic cultures and languages. However, Israeli society approached these cultures and languages not as concurrent with Hebrew culture and language but rather from a nostalgic vantage point and as part of the intangible heritage of the Jewish people and Israeli culture (Shapira 2004, 69-108). In the public discourse, this new approach also forged the image of Yiddish culture and language as 'folksy', rich in jokes, colourful, and still 'low' culture.

This decade also saw the Habima and Cameri theatres again performing pieces translated from the Yiddish repertoire.²⁹ This state of affairs, followed by the influence the Six-Day War exerted on Israeli society and culture, also laid the groundwork to a rediscovery of the Sephardic Ladino culture: in 1968 the *Romancero sefaradi*, a project created by Yitzhak Navon, based on Ladino songs and liturgy collected by Yitzhak Levy, made Sephardic culture a legitimate component of Israel's intangible heritage, garnering highly positive reviews and opening central venues to Sephardic culture, such as Tel Aviv's Mann Auditorium (the home of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra). The *Romancero* was not a one-time event: it was followed by *Bustan sefaradi*, also written by Navon and directed by Yossi Milo at Habima Theatre in 1969. Nonetheless, in the cultural discourse, it was still defined as 'popular', closer to folklore than to 'high' art.

²⁸ Among the writers whose texts Dzigan presented in his programs were Sholem Aleichem, Moyshe Nudelman, Hayim Ritterman-Abir, Al. Aksteyn, Avrom Shulman, Yosef Vinitsky, Yosef Heilbum, and Efraim Kishon.

²⁹ In the Habima theatre, for example, after a long period with no performances translated from Yiddish, a new version of *Tuvia the Milkman* (1959) and *Hard to be a Jew* (1965) was staged; both based and translated by Sholem Aleichem. In 1966, it staged *Yitshik Vaytenberg* [The bird of the Ghetto], originally written in Yiddish by Hava Rozenbarg. In 1970, the theatre staged only two performances translated from the Yiddish repertoire, and in 1980 five pieces translated from Yiddish.

This, then, was the cultural atmosphere in 1965, when Shmuel Bunim, a young, promising Hebrew theatre director, who had never before worked in Yiddish theatre, approached one of the most popular theatre venues of Hebrew entertainment venues – the Hammam Theatre in Jaffa whose artistic directors were Dan Ben-Amotz and Haim Hefer, Bunim's colleagues from Batsal Yarok. He proposed that, together, they realize his dream of staging Itzik Manger's *Megile lider* in Yiddish at the Hammam with its very strong *sabra* (native-born Jewish Israeli) identity (Bunim 1994, 333).³⁰ The first attempt was made with actors of the Hebrew theatre who knew Yiddish, but it did not work well. The play, based on Manger's personal, poetic, 'folk' approach to the *purimshpiel* (amateur folk plays performed on the Feast of Purim when Jewish tradition condones theatrical performances), was finally performed by the Burshteyn Family from the Yiddish popular theatre, featuring Perele Manger, Zishe Gold, and Bruno Fink – all actors on the Yiddish stage. It became one of the most successful productions in Yiddish in Israel, with more than 300 of presentations in Israel, New York and Buenos Aires.

It is interesting to note that Manger's *Megile lider* [Songs from the Book of Esther] and *Khumesh lider* [Songs of the Pentateuch] were written as a response to a performance in Hebrew of *Yaakov and Rachel* by Krashnikov, a melodrama based on a biblical theme, performed in an adaptation translated by Avraham Shlonski (Shaked 2004, 43-62). Manger saw this Ohel Theatre performance in 1934 in Poland. In this work, he identified a clear ideological Zionist approach to Jewish history and mythology, in which the image of the Biblical Jew was imagined as a Bedouin or Palestinian peasant (then emerging as a major identity option for Jews settling in Palestine in the first decades of the *yishuv*) (Zerubavel, 2008). His *Khumesh lider* was a reaction to that interpretation and became a project of cultural re-appropriation, or perhaps a translation of the Jewish mythos and history into Ashkenazi Yiddish culture (Sadan 1984, 27-46). The *Megile lider* is a poetic work with a lot of humour, a folksy atmosphere, and *midrash*³¹ done in the tradition of the *purimshpiel*. It is a piece about Purim, about reversal,³²

³⁰ Bunim had started his career as a theatre director in 1953 in the Cameri Theatre. *Di megile* was the first piece he directed in Yiddish. Bunim knew Yiddish and saw a theatre-marionette performance of the *Khumesh lider* in Yiddish in Paris, where Manger's introduction to the performance profoundly affected him. *Di megile lider* were published in 1936 and *Khumesh lider* in 1935, both in Yiddish in Warsaw.

³¹ *Midrash* is a mode of biblical interpretation prominent in the Talmudic literature. It can be used as here, as a way to refer to modern or contemporary interpretations of biblical or Talmudic texts.

³² The Feast of Purim celebrates the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people in the Greater Persian Empire (circa 500-400 BCE) through the intervention of Queen Es-

about changing destiny. The style of the *mise en scène* at Hammam added a contemporary modern approach to folk and Yiddish culture, a sense of renewal to popular Yiddish theatre, and a surprising approach to Yiddish culture in the Hebrew theatre milieu (Stern 2011, 31-3; Burshteyn in Goldfinger 1999). “We took Yiddish and with it made a modern play”, said Bunim. “It was the only possible way of bringing popular Jewish theatre like that to the Israeli public – making theatre with classic Jewish materials put through a modern blender” (quoted in Yas, 1988).

At first, recognition of the piece as successful, outstanding theatre didn’t come from the Yiddish public or from the traditional public of the Hammam, but rather from the Hebrew press. After a month of performing for a very small audience, the Hebrew press – which had already given Manger a positive reception in his previous visits to Israel,³³ and in its first reviews saw the play as devoted to a Yiddish audience – suddenly gave *Di megile* a totally new interpretation in his review in *Maariv*:

Spicy pleasure like a glass of *yash* [a type of distilled liquor] drinking for the creators and the creation, a dizzying dance like a mitzvah dance³⁴ that dances to the heart of a bride and groom, a heartfelt delight like a Yiddish folk song whose simple words are saturated with the laughter and weeping of generations – such was the encounter we had with the Hammam Theatre and the “Megillah Songs” by the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger . . . and this poetry is a folk symphony, so simple in its expressions and so exuberant in originality with fireworks in its revelations.
(Feingold, 1965)

The new social and political conditions created an atmosphere that allowed

ther. Instead of being exterminated, the Jews take revenge on their enemies and the arch-fiend Haman – who is said to rank only after the emperor at the beginning of the story – is hanged on the same tree where he had planned to hang his Jewish arch-rival, Mordechai. The *Megile lider* is about reversal in the way anthropologist Max Gluckman defines the major paradox of rituals of status-reversals that allow the outbreak of rebellion and subversion, which may finally lead to strengthening the established social order. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his influential *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics and Rabelais and His World*, extends the definition of the term ‘carnival’ to designate all forms of symbolic reversal undertaken in the spirit of laughter. Symbolic reversal can be applied to Manger’s *Megile lider* in this sense. See Gash, 1993.

³³ Manger’s poetry was first introduced to the Hebrew reader by means of Nathan Alterman’s translations. Alterman visited Israel in 1958, 1961 and later again for the performance of *Di megile*. He was always well-received by the press, cultural figures, and politicians.

³⁴ The Mizvah dance is the Hasidic wedding custom implying that a man dances before the bride with a kerchief between them after the wedding feast. Its origin goes back to the time of the Talmud, when a myrtle branch was used instead of a kerchief.

the presentation of a Yiddish work in a Hebrew venue directed by a Hebrew director. The great success of the play was a consequence of Manger's status in Israel and the fact that it was an Israeli director in an Israeli theatre who proposed a contemporary, modernistic approach to Manger's texts – still treating Yiddish as 'folk' culture, but clearly framed on the modern Hebrew *sabra* stage and modern way of exhibiting the 'native'. For all these reasons, the production didn't necessarily attract the typical Yiddish audience, but allowed non-Yiddish speakers, and those who didn't want to expose themselves as Yiddish-lovers or as members of the Yiddish theatre audience, to access the performance in a safe place. Moreover, Manger's texts were framed by Hefer's rhymed verse in Hebrew and the songs framed by Selzer's modern approach to Jewish music. Likewise, the scenography didn't try to represent the old shtetl, but rather depicted an abstract place (Yerushalmi 2005, 333-52; Rojanski 2020, 225-49). In that sense, *Di megile* was a performance in Yiddish with Yiddish actors, but without belonging to the milieu of Yiddish theatre and not produced for the Yiddish audience. Another factor that may allow us to understand the great success could be the fact that it was a modern version of a *purimshpiel*, a unique event in the history of the Israeli theatre that defined a Yiddish theatre performance as a guest and a once-a-year acceptable phenomenon.

Di megile lider was later performed in a Hebrew version without the same success, and later in Yiddish by the Yiddishpiel Theatre in 1988, again directed again by Bunim, but using a totally different approach. This time, the performance was presented as more of a nostalgic monument to the previous version than as the revolutionary performance it was the first time (Evron, 1988a).

8. Yiddish Theatre and Dzigán's Theatre in the 1970s

Dzigán's theatre began to encounter economic difficulties in the mid-1960s due to declining ticket sales, the lack of financial support, and the taxes imposed on the theatre. Dzigán referred to these issues repeatedly, both in skits and in the media (Bar-Yosef, 1968; Shmulevitsh, 1986). Taxation led to higher ticket prices and the theatre found it difficult to stage its programs for long runs: at the beginning of the 1960s, Dzigán's shows were staged around 150 times over six months, whereas by the end of the decade no show was staged for more than three months. According to Dzigán, such a number of shows in Israel could not cover costs and he was forced to rely on his tours abroad (Na'aman, 1975; Rimon, 1967). In 1962, Dzigán was forced to reduce his troupe and the number of times each program was performed due to the number of theatre-goers and contend with significant fi-

nancial losses (Janasowicz, 1967; Sverdlin, 1967). Dzigan lost his economic independence and could no longer successfully battle the cultural policy that discriminated against him because he acted in Yiddish (Ohad, 1975).³⁵ With the help of Levi Eshkol, he succeeded, at the end of the 1960s, in receiving an exemption from the ‘spectacle tax’, and in 1978 – two years before his death at the age of 73 – then-Tel Aviv Mayor, Shlomo Lahat, granted him an exemption from the council tax (Shofti, 1978).

At the end of the 1970s, Dzigan again argued that satire had lost its influence. The change resulted from a weakening of his satire, but it also marked a shift in the status of Dzigan himself and in the status of Yiddish satire in the Israeli reality since the end of the 1960s. Dzigan expressed his despair and his lack of faith that the political parties would help find a solution for his declining personal status and that of Yiddish culture in general. Yiddish newspaper were also losing their influence (Rojanski, 2020, 250).³⁶

In the last decade of his life, Dzigan found only rhetorical rather than practical solutions for this new reality. He lost his strength, or perhaps felt that his satirical weapon had become less penetrating. The discourse about Dzigan moved between satire and tragedy. From the beginning of the 1970s, Dzigan’s public expressions began to convey a feeling of frustration, even when this was not evident in his theatre. The statement that, had he been younger, he would have converted to Christianity and left Israel reflects deep exasperation with his inability to change not only the future but also the present, for both himself and his culture.

Likewise, the lack of writers and the poor quality of the texts were major themes in reviews of Dzigan’s shows, mainly since the second show that he staged alone. The texts in Dzigan’s performances aroused contradictory reaction. Yehoshua Bar-Yosef, for example, claimed that, from an artistic perspective, some of them were schmaltzy, but they achieved cultural admiration because they evoked memories of the Jewish shtetl, triggered nostalgia, and brought Jewish culture closer to the Israeli audience (1964). Bar-Yosef thus attributed to the texts an educational, didactic, and emotional role (1964). Repetition of materials from previous programs, skits that Dzigan himself had written, and the adaptation of classic materials, mainly by Sholem Aleichem, were immediate solutions, though Dzigan recognized the impossibility of creating a real continuation of the theatre in the tradition of Ararat and renewing the theatrical language in Israel (Keisari, 1965).

³⁵ As quoted in Ohad (1975): “Poland didn’t finish me off. Russia didn’t finish me of – but here, in the State of Israel, will the full stop be written? In the last three years in Israel I haven’t covered even 50 percent of my expenses”.

³⁶ *Letste Nayes* was still being published by the Mapai political party, which brought the newspaper to Tsanin, but in the words of Rojanski “the Yiddish press, the heart of the Yiddish cultural scene had shrunken dramatically” (2020, 250).

9. Yiddish kunst teater [Yiddish Art Theatre]

The year 1975 saw an important project in the history of Yiddish theatre in Israel, in part because of the new wave of immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union from 1969 through 1971, which brought new Yiddish actors and writers to the country. The *Yidish kunst teater* [Yiddish Art Theatre] was created with official support based on a Jewish Agency initiative, and supported by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the Ministry of Education. In its own words, the theatre's goal was to make Israel a centre for Yiddish theatre, preserve the Yiddish language through the performance of classic Yiddish plays as well as translated plays from Hebrew, and attract new immigrant actors. The institution expected to give work to the new immigrants, helping them with their process of acclimation. One question raised about the idea of founding an art theatre in Yiddish in Israel was if the right artists were available and capable of developing such an enterprise. For the organizers and director Leah Porat,³⁷ this was a rhetorical question with a negative answer. Those in charge of the project looked for directors outside Israel. Dzigan harshly opposed the establishment of the *Yidish kunst teater*. He questioned the purity of the intentions behind this move, asking why they were choosing to bring artists from abroad to Israel rather than supporting those who were already active in Israel (Na'aman, 1975). In another interview, he said, "On the one hand, I welcome the fact that the Yiddish word and Yiddish cultural values have finally been remembered . . . but if the government and institutions have remembered the stepson and invested good money, why did they not bother to ensure a good play instead of a joke? Whoever wants to stage *Amkho* needs at least four real actors who were raised in the Jewish tradition" (Ohad, 1975).

The idea of founding such a repertory theatre in Yiddish was positive, but if we think about the institutions involved in this project, it is not hard to grasp that what seemed like a positive approach to Yiddish was just another step in the process of cultural translation. The *Yidish kunst teater* was an instrument in the cultural assimilation of new immigrants. There was no other reason for the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the Jewish Agency to be this project's major supporters. The intention was to give jobs to immigrant artists to help their transition to the Hebrew stage, as described in the press (Keisari, 1975).

The project was a colossal failure. We can learn about the approach to Yiddish culture by looking at the *mise en scène* style applied to their first

³⁷ Leah Porat was the director of the Yiddish *kunst-teater* as well as the director of the Art and Culture Department at the Ministry of Culture and Education.

performance. The director was Shmuel Bunim, the same director who brought a modern approach to Yiddish. He decided to begin and end all the scenes from Sholem Aleichem's play *Amkho* with a frozen image. Ben-Ami interpreted this artistic decision as a reflection of the actual states of affairs of Yiddish culture in Israel, i.e. that Yiddish was a frozen culture, a museological object (1975). To revive the Yiddish theatre, he said, it mustn't be presented as a museum, but be given a modern, contemporary approach without thinking that Yiddish theatre-goers are incapable of appreciating modernism. Ben-Ami was positive about the fact that the *Yidish kunst teater* was directed by figures from the Hebrew cultural milieu such as Leah Porat rather than by the 'last Mohicans' of Yiddish. He also saw the fact that the playbill was only in Hebrew as a good sign [!]. Like Ben-Ami, Arye Kinarti praised the fact that the first production was far from the popular style of the Yiddish theatre (1975). The performance was not a success, neither artistically nor in terms of the public. The second and last performance of *Glikl fun Hamel* was directed and performed by Ida Kaminska featuring Eni Liton, but it fared no better. Most of the critics concluded that there was no future for the Yiddish theatre, and what was even worse was that there was not even a present. This served to justify and legitimize the stance that there was no room to support a Yiddish art theatre in Israel.

Following the failure of the Yidish kunst teater and perhaps as a response to the World Conference of Yiddish and Yiddish Culture, which took place in Jerusalem in 1976, where participants expressed the necessity and willingness to found and develop a national art theatre in Yiddish, many critics felt free to be vehemently opposed to Yiddish theatre in Israel. Ze'ev Rav-Nof, a journalist in *Davar* defined the characteristics of Yiddish theatre as follows:

. . . commercial melodrama, whose basis is the shtetl, which has already disappeared . . . This material, which today is nothing more than nostalgia, becomes problematic when it is intended to be shown to the public. And not because of the low quality of the *mise en scène*, but because of the affinity of the limited Yiddish public for the modern amateur theatre.

(1976, 13)

Neve-Tsel defined Yiddish theatre as an agonizing art with the "quality of the final show of a school play, where the teacher has been ill during most of the rehearsals" (1976, 12-13). Its future, continued the journalist, was only to be "a grave between an endowed university chair and the archives of the academe." In the daily *Davar*, Brauda defined Yiddish theatre as "less than a cheap joke. 'Kitsch' would be an honourable adjective for many of these shows" (1978, 9).

In one of the longer essays on Yiddish theatre published in the 1970s, Tamar Maroz redefined Yiddish theatre using a sad, romantic image of nomadic actors, travelling the same night from one city to another to earn a living: the theatre companies without their own theatre buildings, without programs, performing shows in which the director often also plays stars as the hero (1974). Maroz wrote from an empathic and romantic place, helping the construction of a new image of the Yiddish theatre, a romantic and nostalgic image of something declining towards a poor, sad culture.

10. Yiddishpiel

Yiddishpiel – The Yiddish Theatre in Israel³⁸ was founded in Tel Aviv at the end of 1987 and it performed for the first time in January 1988. Its founder, initiator, first administrator, actor, artistic director, and most dominant figure was Shmulik Atzmon-Wircer, a well-known actor and director of the Hebrew stage.³⁹

Atzmon was born 1929 in Biłgoraj, Poland, and immigrated to Israel when he was 17 years old. He started his career in the Hebrew theatre where he attempted to prove, according to his own words in a private interview, that “he was more *sabra* than the *sabras*”. He was one of the founders and directors of the avant-garde theatre Zaviv (f. 1958), which merged with Habima Theatre in 1968. In 1972, he directed Shimen Dzigan for the first time, forming an initial relationship with the Yiddish theatre. After the death of Eliyahu Goldenberg in 1976, Atzmon joined the theatre group founded at the beginning of the 1960s by Goldenberg, Shmuel Segal, and Shmuel Rodenski, who performed Sholem Aleykehm’s *Di kleyne mentshel-ekh* (in Hebrew) with great success (in 1970, it was broadcast on Israeli television). Atzmon joined Segal and Rodenski, whereupon the group was renamed *The Three Shmuliks*.

Since its founding, and with the support of the Tel Aviv Municipality, the Haseen Municipality in Germany, and the Lerner Fund for Yiddish (later on also with the support from different public and private institutions and the Israeli Ministry of Culture), Yiddishpiel presented more than 140 pieces from the ‘classic’ Yiddish theatre, pieces translated from Hebrew and other languages, and adaptations and translations of a few classics from the Western theatre, such as *Waiting for Godot*, a translated and adapted version of Beckett’s piece written and directed by Yehoshua Sobol in 2015 (Rotman, 2008). Many Yiddish stage actors, such as Yaakov Bodo, Yaakov Halperin,

³⁸ This became the official name of the theatre since 1994.

³⁹ According to some brochures of the theatre, the idea for the theatre originated with the then-Tel Aviv Mayor, Shlomo Lahat.

Anabella, Monica Vardimon, Carol Markovitz, and Israel Becker performed in the Yiddishpiel, together with young actors from the Hebrew theatre who previously didn't know Yiddish, such as Elena Yarlova, Gera Sandler, Irma Pisko, Anat Atzmon, and Gidi Yagil who became part of the troupe.

According to its own discourse, Yiddishpiel played on their cultural subgroup to which it belonged in order to help preserve a non-hegemonic culture in Israel. The institutional role of the theatre as expressed on its website in 2002 is "to preserve the tradition of the treasures of the Yiddish culture and the Yiddish language with the knowledge that this is an important part of the literary and cultural creation of our folk" (www.yiddishpiel.co.il, accessed 2002). From this short passage, one may conclude that the institution was established not to renew the Yiddish tradition but to become a living museum for the Yiddish theatre and language. Yiddishpiel does not attempt to create new Yiddish theatre but to preserve (or even create) a canonical past. This approach has influenced the aesthetic of the theatre – an aesthetic of preservation – where the theatre has devoted itself to the preservation of a Yiddish aesthetic as understood by the theatre directors and managers. An inherent part of this process is to preserve itself, to survive (Caufman-Simchon, 2010; Shem-Tov, 2018).

Yiddishpiel has become a living memorial to the Yiddish theatre in Israel as understood by Atzmon, a role that can be largely accepted by the Israeli establishment and may be worthy of its support. But Yiddishpiel, mostly through Atzmon's public discourse in the press, has carried out a critical discourse against the Israeli cultural policy towards Yiddish in particular and diasporic cultures in general. Atzmon developed his discourse on the necessity of having a Yiddish theatre in Israel and on the local history of cultural discrimination suffered by the Yiddish theatre in Israel. On his personal bureau at the theatre offices, he keeps a framed reproduction of the letter from the Films and Plays Censorship Committee forbidding the Avrom Goldfaden Theatre to perform in Yiddish.

Yiddishpiel was founded at a time when Yiddish was no longer a cultural threat. This particular fact is referred to by Atzmon to justify the creation, development, and support of Yiddish theatre. Without diasporic cultures, Atzmon argues, there would be no Israeli culture: "There is no future without the past. . . . Without Yiddish culture, it would have been impossible to develop the theatre institution that Hanoch Levin created; all his writing was influenced by Yiddish" (quoted in Omer, 1991). The establishment of a Yiddish theatre was an urgent matter according to Atzmon. Yiddish theatre hasn't died yet, he told me in a private interview; perhaps it is only in its last throes of agony, so let's give the Yiddish theatre "a respectful death and not let it die like a dog" (Handelsatz, 1988; Manor, 1988; Pinkus, 1998).

Atzmon succeeded in his struggle to get official recognition for Yiddishpiel in particular, and for Yiddish theatre, language, and culture in general. He received economic support, important prizes, media attention, and invitations to international theatre festivals around the world. During its first 20 years of existence, Yiddishpiel was described by the Hebrew press as being at a low level, lacking artistic objectives or potential. The first production and those that followed got very negative reviews. The productions were defined as kitsch (Evron, 1988b and, 1989a; Nagid 1994); melodramatic (Evron, 1988b; Sachish, 1992; Handelzalts, 1989); naïve and amateur (Shifman, 1992; Handelzalts, 1994); nostalgic (Feingold, 1995; Nagid, 1995; Paz, 1989); with an old style (Evron, 1988b; Gilula, 1988); and other pejoratives. Sometimes the tone was very sarcastic and disrespectful towards the style, accusing the theatre of being grotesque (Bar-Yosef, 2001); out of time (Yaron, 1989); and with a very low artistic level, using very rude attributes such as *burekas* play (Evron, 1989b); primary school level (Burshteyn, 2000); or otherwise on a level of an amateur workshop. Michael Handelzalts, who was for many years the chief theatre critic at *Haaretz*, wrote very sarcastically about Yiddishpiel's first show, Sholem Aleikhem's *Shvertsu zayn a yid* [It is Hard to Be a Jew], directed by Israel Becker, which premiered on January 24, 1988: "When I left the theatre, I thought to myself that at least one good thing had come out of Zionism: it had made this type of theatre a thing of the past" (Handelzalts, 1988).

In the same article, Handelzalts described Yiddishpiel as a museological object and a historical reconstruction, rather than as art. In this sense, Yiddishpiel was seen as the continuation of the popular Yiddish commercial theatre – a theatre "from which an anti-Semite could derive pleasure" Boaz Evron wrote sarcastically (1988c). According to Handelzalts, Yiddishpiel justified the historically negative approach to Yiddish theatre in Israel (1988). "It is hard to understand," continued the reviewer, "what such a theatre has that justifies its revival" (1988). The reviews in the Hebrew press defined Yiddishpiel as a living monument not to the Yiddish art theatre that Atzmon dreamed about, but as a monument to the popular Yiddish theatre with all the negative stigma that dominated the Israel discourse.

Over time, some of the reviews became lighter and more empathetic. Specific performances got very positive reviews, like *Foygelman* [Birdman] (1991), based on a novel by Hebrew writer Aharon Meged, performed in Hebrew and Yiddish, directed by Yoram Falk. It was the first production that got positive reviews in the Hebrew press (Evron, 1991; Yaron 1991). This time, according to Handelzalts, the theatre justified its existence (1991). But these positive reviews were often exceptions, as the next productions got negative reviews again, followed by a few good reviews. Over the years, the theatre became part of the Israeli theatre landscape, though not part of

the mainstream: it is still considered to be an ethnic niche, a theatre from the Israeli sub-culture. To attract an audience, it has been forced to add sur-titles in Hebrew and Russian.

In 1996, the Israeli parliament approved the establishment of a National Authority for Yiddish Culture and a National Authority for Ladino Culture, and Atzmon was an important figure in the promotion of those laws, which would result in stable support for Yiddish culture. These institutions were finally established in 1999, and the National Authority for Yiddish Culture joined Beth Shalom Aleichem in becoming the two most important supporters of Yiddish culture in Israel. In 2011, Sassi Keshet, a singer and actor of the Hebrew stage who did not know Yiddish, became the new director of Yiddishpiel, a position he holds to this day. He has developed the theatre in a more popular direction, combining nostalgia and music in many of the programs in an attempt to win a broader audience once again. In 2012, Handelzalts still complained about the staging in Yiddish of a theatre piece of such low quality. Handelzalts referred to the repertoire and traditional Yiddish theatre. But, since the end of the 1990s, new approaches to Yiddish theatre and performance started to develop in Israel. These methods were looking for a contemporary approach to Yiddish. Some of those initiatives occurred in alternative venues such as Yung Yiddish founded by actor Mendy Cahan; other were avant-garde performances in Yiddish with Hebrew translations done by the Sala-manca Group, presented at the National Poetry Festival in Metula, the Jerusalem Film Festival, and the Israel Festival (Rotman, 2019; Stern, 2019); and, recently, Esther's Cabaret, supported by Sholem Aleichem House with new Yiddish texts written by Yaad Biran and Esther Nissim. The projects in which archive and repertoire, and past and present, are being challenged are the subject for another chapter in the history of Yiddish theatre and performance in Israel.

11. Conclusion

The analysis of the cultural and linguistic policy carried out by the State of Israel against the Yiddish theatre in the State of Israel in the studied period and its applications through different apparatuses such as the Films and Plays Censorship Committee and the taxation policies, as well as the close reading and analysis of the public discourse about the Yiddish theatre in Israel in the Hebrew and Yiddish press, demonstrate that these had a critical negative effect on the possible continuation or development of the Yiddish theatre in Israel. The effects of those policies and the negative rhetoric of the discourse, the economic oppression, and the rejection of the Yiddish theatre by theatre critics and the press impacted the public perception, af-

affected Yiddish artists economically, impelled Yiddish actors to try to find a way to the Hebrew theatre or towards new horizons. They also affected the decision of many important Yiddish artists not to immigrate to Israel, and instead prefer to work as guest artists or as permanent residents rather than as citizens. The Yiddish theatre in Israel became acceptable (only after a major struggle) more as a mean of remembering a forgotten culture than a living, creative field in the new-born state. The Yiddish theatre did not succeed in developing in Israel not only as consequence of the natural decline of the Yiddish culture and language after the Holocaust, but also as a consequence of an ideological policy that affected it directly. The Yiddish theatre was not persecuted because of its low degree of dominance, but rather because it was considered a linguistic and cultural threat, which was later translated into being an aesthetic threat. Those cultural policies were aimed at avoiding the possibility of performing an alternative idea of Jewishness that didn't fit the Hebrew Zionist ideology. Performing in Yiddish in Israel became - synonymous with performing in exile. Today, the Yiddish theatre in Israel finds itself between a museological project of remembrance and experimental, independent attempts to challenge this approach.

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