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Introduction

Modern Jewish culture speaks with many voices.

—Benjamin Harshav, 2007

Jewish life has always entailed the use of more than one language. Jews have lived within and alongside non-Jewish societies, usually as minorities, and maintained various channels of cross-cultural exchange, which often took the form of translation and adaptation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the period when the texts included in this volume of *Absinthe* begin to be published, Jewish communities were spread across the globe, and Jews lived and wrote in the languages of their respective communities as well as in Hebrew and in Jewish vernacular languages such as Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Yiddish, and Judeo-Arabic. In the late eighteenth century, with the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment movement—the Haskalah—original and translated *literary* works began to appear in Hebrew and were quickly translated into these Jewish vernaculars. Proponents of the Haskalah advocated for religious, social, and cultural reform and promoted the study of European languages as well

as modern disciplines such as literature, history, and science in addition to traditional Jewish education.

As the language of the biblical corpus, Hebrew has enjoyed a high cultural and social status, and the liturgical use of Hebrew yielded a textual corpus that constituted the Jewish canon. Well into the nineteenth century, Jewish writing in spoken languages such as Yiddish and Ladino was deeply tied to the Hebrew literary canon, which originated in the scripture and included Midrash, Talmud, and other rabbinic commentaries. However, Hebrew also served as a means of communication and a medium through which Jews could express themselves and disseminate their ideas far beyond their immediate cultural and social contexts through genres such as historical writing, biography, poetry, and fiction. Since only educated members of the community had access to Hebrew texts—primarily men of certain social classes—Hebrew scripture and liturgy had to be translated into vernacular languages spoken by the wider population. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish communal leaders begrudgingly accepted these translations into the spoken languages of the Jews, and constant reference to Hebrew sources was needed in order to preserve it and legitimize the translated texts. Jewish vernaculars were themselves amalgams, composed of non-Jewish majority languages, written in the Hebrew alphabet, and elements that gradually permeated from other co-territorial or colonial languages, such as Russian, Polish, Greek, Turkish, French, Italian, and English.¹ The languages developed by Jewish communities are inscribed with the multidirectional trajectories of Jewish migrations: Yiddish, a Germanic vernacular, testifies to the eastbound migration of Jews from Central Europe. Ladino, a Romance vernacular, originated in the Iberian Peninsula and further developed among the Sephardi Jews who were expelled from the region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, most of whom settled in the Ottoman Empire. Judeo-Arabic dialects developed among Jews living in the Arabic-speaking world and disseminated through migration to places such

¹ According to Joshua Fishman's definition, a Jewish language is one that is "phonologically, morpho-syntactically, lexico-semantically or orthographically different" from the languages of non-Jewish sociocultural networks. Fishman, "Sociology of Jewish Languages," 4.

as India and the United States. Modern Hebrew came to function as a national language for Jewish intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century and later became the language of the State of Israel. But it, too, developed through borrowing and adapting linguistic elements from Jews' spoken languages such as Russian, Yiddish, and Arabic. The specter of migration and exile that haunts the languages that Jews developed as minority communities also underlies many of the texts in this volume, evident both in their linguistic and thematic compositions.

One of the main challenges for translators of writings by Jews in these languages lies in their inherent multilingualism and multi-layered composition. This process requires not only the translator's proficiency in several interrelated languages but also her attentiveness to the tendency to render texts into fluent, transparent English. How might the translator enable the historical and cultural resonances of both the specific language, whether Yiddish, Ladino, or Judeo-Arabic, and the society and time from which it originated to be discerned in English translation? Each of the translators who contributed to this volume approached this task differently, and their introductions offer insight both into the context that they grappled with and into their translational choices.

In recent years, increasing awareness of the historical conditions of Jewish cultures described above have led many scholars to abandon national and monolingual frameworks and approach Jewish literatures as inherently multilingual, cross-cultural, and transnational. As Lital Levy and Allison Schachter note, even though Jewish literatures were circumscribed and informed by distinct polities, they often relied on diasporic, deterritorialized modes of circulation and exchange.² The mobility of ideas, texts, and people in the modern world further urges us to view Jewish literatures as interconnected diasporic formations that ceaselessly blur linguistic, political, and cultural boundaries. However, few anthologies and even fewer studies have crossed linguistic and ethnic divides, especially between what is known as Ashkenazi and Sephardi (or Mizrahi) cultural domains.

² Levy and Schachter, "Jewish Literature / World Literature"; and Levy and Schachter, "Non-Universal Global."

The impetus for this volume of *Absinthe* is to showcase the variety of languages and genres in which modern Jewish writers have expressed themselves. Rather than consider disparate Jewish languages and histories in isolation, we seek to bring them into conversation within an open-ended framework that explores Jewish multilingualism in the modern world. The selection of literary works featured in this issue of *Absinthe* cuts across distinctions between European and non-European literary traditions and between languages of metropolitan centers and minor languages. The multilingual narrative of Jewish modernity told through them, in seven languages, spans from the 1880s to the 2020s. Its wide geographical distribution ranges from Tel Aviv to São Paulo through Buenos Aires, Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Livorno, Warsaw, Prague, and Chicago. Each text and context exhibits different aspects of the Jewish encounter with the conditions of modern society, exemplifying the ways in which Jewish writing engages and negotiates different cultures and traditions.

The diversity of themes captured in the works collected here reflects the multifaceted nature of Jewish writing. These themes include social class, gender, immigration, religious traditions, love and marriage, and the act of writing itself. The earliest work included in this issue is an 1884 essay by Shalom Bekache (1848–1927), whose list of credentials—rabbi, butcher, author, publisher—speaks to the multifarious nature of Jewish modernization and the challenges it presented to Jewish authors. Born in Mumbai and educated in Palestine, Bekache spent most of his life as a colonial subject in the Maghreb, where he worked tirelessly to disseminate the ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment movement as well as preach adherence to Judaism through his Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic publications. Bekache’s biography alone attests to the impossibility of containing Jewish writing within a single national framework. His essay, translated from Judeo-Arabic by Avner Ofrath, explores the role of Jewish tradition in a modern world ruled by European colonial powers.

Other works in this volume touch on the questions that Bekache addresses, considering the viability of Jewishness as a modern form of identity in an age of Jewish assimilation and secularization. In the short story “The Meal before the Fast,” Hebrew author Uri Nissan

Gnessin (1879–1913) dramatizes the hardships experienced by Eastern European Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, as processes of emancipation and assimilation pushed young men and women to seek their place in modern European societies. Gnessin’s story follows the reverberations of this growing intergenerational divide, a rift between traditional Jewish life and the opportunities younger Jews sought in large European cities.

Questions about Jewish identity in the modern era are also exhibited in several works in this volume that thematize Jewish languages and traditions. In the 1930s, Czech author Jiří Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) published stories that take on the form and content of the Hasidic tale. Hasidism, a populist spiritual revival movement that rose in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, drew on the foundations of Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah) and emphasized the significance of joy during religious worship. Denisa Glacova, who translated a text by Langer for this issue, points out that Prague Jews had very little contact with Hasidim during Langer’s lifetime. But the author was drawn to this movement and its literary expressions, taking on the persona of the Hasidic storyteller for his Czech readers and transporting them to the life of the Jewish shtetl, a short time before its obliteration by the Nazis.

The fascination with Hasidism and other Jewish traditions is a distinctly modern phenomenon that calls attention to the multilayered nature of Jewish writing. Another approach to the utilization of the Jewish past and traditions is exhibited in the novella *La Agua de la Sota* by Viktor Levi (1865–1940), translated from Ladino by Nesi Altaras. Levi was a prolific writer and translator, especially of French fiction. The plot of *La Agua de la Sota* resembles many other popular melodramas, as it is composed of stories about love, betrayal, and lost babies believed to be dead. But it is set in biblical times, a background that allows the author to craft a world where Jews live as a sovereign people. The romanticized biblical setting reflects what scholars refer to as a “usable past.”³ Drawing on chapters in Jewish history, these literary attempts grant the Jewish experience the

³ See, e.g., Roskies, *Jewish Search for a Usable Past*; and Skolnik, *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*.

noble aesthetic form it appears to deserve. In this case, the turn to the biblical “usable past” also allowed a scathing critique of rabbinic institutions, which are represented in the novella by the lecherous high priest, and underscored the vulnerability of women in traditional Jewish society.

The modern evocation of Jewish histories and traditions is also echoed in the bilingual poetry of Argentine-born author Juan Gelman (1930–2014), translated for this issue by Arianna Afsari. The poems included in *Dibaxu*, which Gelman wrote while in exile in Europe, are written in Ladino and presented alongside a Spanish translation. Gelman’s use of Ladino and its modern counterpart, Spanish, is striking considering that he was the son of Jewish emigrants from Ukraine, whose native language was presumably Yiddish. His bilingual work attests not only to the self-conscious multilingualism of his writing but also to its reflexive nature, revealed in the author’s fascination with the notion of a Jewish language. Gelman turns to Ladino as a language that can mirror and amplify his experience of exile. He uses translation to expose the rifts and dislocations endured by the individual poet and by the Jewish language itself. In doing so, Gelman blurs linguistic and ethnic boundaries between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, as he contests the normative categories that shape our understanding of the Jewish world.

Gelman’s inventive use of a Jewish language as a marker for exile and displacement calls attention to translation as a process that marks the rupture that is inherent to migration and that often accompanies the conditions that yield multilingualism. Immigrants must move not only between geographic locations but also between languages and negotiate the different parts of their identities in the process. Such experiences of migration and mediation are reflected in the Yiddish poems of Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz (1900–1978) and Shloyme Shvarts (1907–1988), translated for this issue by Jessica Kirzane. Both poets left Eastern Europe and settled in Chicago, a locale that is underrepresented in scholarly accounts of American Jewish culture. Rendering their lives in the Midwest in the Yiddish language, their poems abound with phrases in Hebrew and bear the marks of their English-speaking environments.

The centrality of translation and the complexity of multilingualism pertaining to the immigrant experience are also reflected in the short stories of Rita Kogan (b. 1976), translated to English by Yardenne Greenspan. Kogan, who is based in Tel Aviv and writes primarily in Hebrew, was born in the Soviet Union and immigrated to Israel at age fourteen. Both “Stoneland” and “The Third Sin” relay the experiences of children—namely young girls—growing up in the Soviet Union. These coming-of-age narratives from a Russian-speaking sphere are told by Kogan in her adopted language, Hebrew, but they are marked by another language—and another culture—that persists in the immigrant’s mind. Traces of Jewish diasporic existence also reverberate in the short text by Hezy Leskly (1952–1994), an Israeli poet born to Czech-Jewish Holocaust survivors who adopts the pseudonymous persona of a fictional Czech poet. This alternative author is at the epicenter of Leskly’s enigmatic text “The Rift” (“Ha-shever”), translated from Hebrew by Adriana X. Jacobs. “The Rift” can be read as a meditation on different fractures in the author’s biography as well as his writing practice and the multiplicity of languages and cultures it draws on. The haunting sense of rupture further emerges in “Win or Lose,” the first chapter of an autobiographical novel by Yossi Sucary (b. 1959), translated from Hebrew by Maya Barzilai and Ruth Tsoffar. Through the figure of his grandmother, Emilia, who was born in Libya and survived the Holocaust before immigrating to Israel, Sucary exposes the fault lines of Israel’s “melting pot” ideology and the marginalization of Mizrahim still experienced by his generation.

The lingering multilingualism of Jewish writing is evident across the different languages and contexts that are represented in this volume. A literary account of an understudied and often forgotten chapter of Jewish history—Jewish agricultural colonies in South America—presents us with a striking example of the breadth of this phenomenon. In *Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul*, an excerpt of which was translated by Júlia Irion Martins, Brazilian author Frida Alexandr (1906–1972) recounts her childhood in a rural farming community founded by the Jewish Colonization Association. Written in Brazilian Portuguese, Alexandr’s memoir is shot through with remnants of Yiddish, the language

of her parents' generation, which is mostly used to denote roles of community members and familial relations between them. In a rare moment of care and compassion in the text, the narrator's mother refers to her by her Yiddish name, Freide, which means "joy." It is juxtaposed with the Brazilian name given to her by her brother—Alegria—a name that she discards, alongside the rest of her life as a "peasant girl."

Alexandr's *Filipson* is one of several examples of Jewish women's writing represented in this issue. Processes of modernization and acculturation precipitated the increasing visibility and participation of women in the public sphere. Issues of gender and women's role in society are raised time and again by men whose works are included in this volume, such as Shalom Bekache, Viktor Levi, Shemtov Revah, and Uri Nissan Gnessin. In the nineteenth century, more and more women joined literary and intellectual circles and published their own works, in different languages, narrating their perspectives and experiences. The earliest iteration of Jewish women's writing in this volume is Sara Familiant's 1894 story, "A Modern Bride and Groom," translated from Yiddish by Anita Norich. We know nothing about Familiant's life or other literary works, which, according to Norich, is not surprising given the paucity of scholarship dedicated to pre-twentieth-century Yiddish literature, especially that of women. Familiant's story addresses a facet of the Jewish encounter with modernity, especially the juncture of gender and class and the impact of new notions of romantic love replacing the traditional marriage institution that was based on socioeconomic considerations. This issue is also at the heart of *Refael and Miriam*, a Ladino novel published in Istanbul in 1910 and translated by Devi Mays. As in the case of Familiant, we have no information about the novel's author, Ben Yitzhak Saserdote, which was most likely a pseudonym of a woman writer. Here, too, the destabilizing impact of modern notions of gender, romantic love, and marriage is at the heart of the plot, as the young Jewish lovers contest what they see as an outdated social hierarchy and reject the instrumentalization of marriage for the preservation of wealth and status.

This collection of Jewish works centered on multilingualism allows us to highlight the enduring connections as well as the

productive gaps, disconnections, and excesses between different language pairs, such as Ladino and Spanish, Yiddish and English, Hebrew and Russian. It is difficult to categorize the authors included in this issue and their languages in national or cultural terms. The multilingual legacy of Jewish migration and diasporic life has become ubiquitous in modern Jewish writing, and it is evident in the enriching and disruptive presence of multiple languages and literary traditions in each of these texts. The title of this volume, *Translating Jewish Multilingualism*, thus refers both to the English translations of these texts and to the processes of translation, mediation, and hybridization encapsulated in the works themselves.

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