

Where Has the Yiddish Gone on International Holocaust Remembrance Day?

By Shmulik Atzmon



Image of Author, Shmulik Atzmon

During the past month two monumental events took place commemorating the **75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz Concentration Camp**– the first in Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem and the second in the Auschwitz Camp Memorial in Poland. Both events hosted many world leaders and dignitaries in addition to dozens of Holocaust survivors.

As a survivor of the Holocaust who continues his efforts to promote the revival and dissemination of the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture in Israel and abroad, I was hosted as a guest in both of these events. I sat there overcome with emotion, goosebumps shivering over my skin, not only because of the holiness of this world-wide ingathering marking this historic date but more so because of the total absence of Yiddish in both ceremonies.

Distinguished speakers ascended the stage, each one speaking in his language or in English with simultaneous translation. One language was completely absent at both events: Yiddish...the language in which the greatest Jewish authors of the 19th and 20th centuries Mendele Mocher Sforim, Shalom Alechem, I.L. Peretz, Itzhak Katzenelson, Bashavis Singer, etc.

This is the language in which Jews shouted or whispered, men, women and children, their final words at the entrance to the gas chambers, seconds before the death taps choked them: “Oy Mama, Oy Papa”, “Gevald!!”, words that were the fruits of Jewish culture for centuries. In both ceremonies, that were

broadcasted world-wide, not an echo or hint of the beauty, wit, and power of the Yiddish language, the intricacies of its wonderful humor.

I sat frozen in my seat, holding myself back from standing and verbally protesting this injustice. Only at the end of the ceremony in Auschwitz I was able to make my protest public, when the Chabad representative in Poland invited me to pray. I wrapped myself in the tallit prayer shawl and tefillin phylacteries, and recited in Yiddish **Itzhak Katzenelson's Poem of the Murdered Jewish People** .

Slowly participants from the ceremony gathered around me to create a quiet expression of solidarity for my plea not to forget and not to erase from memory the touching and heart-rending Yiddishist corpus.

Let's not forget that in the first years of the new Jewish state following World War II, there were efforts made to prevent the use of the rich and inspirational Yiddish language in Israeli culture and stages in order to make place for the revival of Hebrew.

Theatres that performed in Yiddish were forced to stop their activities and pay heavy fines, enforced by the police in accordance with regulations passed in the courts and government led by David Ben-Gurion.

Thus the curtain fell on the yearnings of the new immigrants who had just escaped the inferno and wished to cling to the remnants of destroyed works of art and collect the shattered pieces. They longed to hear the language of their parents spoken on the stages of theatre.

The situation is very different today. Throughout the world there is a renaissance of the Yiddish language. Young people learn Yiddish in universities, high schools teach Yiddish poetry and the crowning achievement has been the establishment of the Yiddishpiel Theatre 30 years ago – the first Yiddish repertoire theatre in Israel, which has performed until today 100's of Yiddish plays in full theatre houses in Israel and represented Israel in 30 international festivals world-wide.

The Institute for the Promotion of Jewish Theatre, that was established 15 years by Moti Sandak and under his direction, (of which I have served actively as

Chairman for the past 5 years), created **All About Jewish Theatre** (www.jewish-theatre.com), the On-line Museum of Jewish Theatre, which makes hundreds of Yiddish plays and play-wrights accessible to the public.

Haim Nahman Bialik is quoted: "Language is the spiritual embodiment of a nation". Albert Einstein wrote: "Supporting cultural life is a primary necessity for the Jewish nation. We would not be a nation without this ongoing activity of preserving and teaching culture". Zeev Jabotinsky wrote: " I consider Yiddish to be one of the most interesting phenomena in life....I know that for millions of Jews this is the mamalochen - their mother tongue in the deepest sense of the word."

The continued existence of the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture within the fabric of Israeli culture will ensure the continued existence of the memory of the Holocaust in the world.

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Translated from Hebrew by Marilyn Cohen.

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