

**“Dear brother! Where from are you coming?”**  
**A brief history of the**  
**Yiddish language and culture in Mexico**

*Arturo Kerbel*

*Dear brother! Where from are you coming?  
 Here in Mexico... what are you doing?  
 In this far away land, and alone,  
 Looking for joy, did you come?  
 Where immigrants make a living, so hard!  
 Well... the same happens to myself.*

These are the lines that prelude *Tzvey Emigrantn in Meksike*, 1924 (Two Emigrants in Mexico, 1924), a published poem from my great-grandfather Abraham Korbman-Chayet.<sup>1</sup>

He was born in a tiny town in Lithuania, Sesoiliai, in the surroundings of Ukmerge, also known in Yiddish as Vilkomir. Abraham Korbman-Chayet left Lithuania in 1923 when he was in his early twenties. He immigrated due to the precarious economical situation that overcame Europe in consequence of the First World War and that did not allow the young generation to foresee a fruitful future for themselves in those countries compared to what was told about a bright future in America.

My great-grandfather bought a false passport to be able to leave the country and to avoid the army service. He also bought his tickets for the transition to America.

America. As many other immigrants he imagined to see what he had been told about it: huge skyscrapers, a vast and noisy city such as New York, the Statue of Liberty.

What he came to see in reality were green mountains, dark skinned people selling bananas and the traditional *arroz con leche* (a special rice pudding). He did not arrive in New York, he arrived in Puerto de Veracruz, Mexico.

The history of the Yiddish language and culture in Mexico starts with my great-grandfather and the hundreds of other Ashkenazic immigrants who arrived in Mexico in the post-revolutionary times of the early 1920s.

1 The poem is included in his book *In Lirishn Gemit* (In Poetic Mood), first published in Mexico City in 1970.

They worked wherever they could, they struggled with the Spanish language and its Mexican speakers. They strived to improve their economical situation and in the beginning they did not even have houses or shelters for themselves; other Jews who had immigrated earlier took responsibility for these details. There was always time to worry about their Jewish brothers who arrived with a small bundle of clothes or books. There was always time to build the community life that we enjoy today. There was always time to care about Jewish education. The first Jewish day school in Mexico opened its doors for the immigrants' children in 1924: *the Colegio Israelita de México* (Yiddishe Shule in Meksike), in a humble house in downtown Mexico City. In two classrooms Yiddish, Hebrew and Zionist education were equally taught; this provided the basis of an integral Jewish identity for generations to come.

Furthermore, a *Seminar* was opened in order to educate new teachers of Yiddish, Hebrew, Jewish History and Torah, in which European instructors taught what they knew to new generations of teachers.

A little bit later, in the 40s, a group of teachers who belonged to the *Bund* or who simply started to have problems with the *Colegio Israelita de México* decided to split up and founded the *Nuevo Colegio Israelita I. L. Peretz* (Naye Yiddishe Shule I. L. Peretz/New Yiddish School I. L. Peretz). Its goal was to strengthen the teaching of Yiddish and in fact Hebrew was started to be taught until the 60s.

Later on, around the 50s, two other Jewish day schools were founded more or less simultaneously. One is the *Colegio Hebreo Tarbut* (Bet Sefer Ha'ivri Tarbut) which became – with the help of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Zionist Movement in Mexico – the basis of their philosophical education; the school prepared the new Jewish-Mexican generations to be able to make aliyah and to contribute to building the state of Israel. And the other one was the *Escuela Yavne* (Yavne Shule) which was founded by the religious wing of the Ashkenazi Community. They wanted a school where children could get a deeper knowledge about tradition and religion, where they could pray in a synagogue and study Yiddish, Hebrew and Zionism.

This is how the Mexican Ashkenazic Jewish Community started to shape itself through its institutions. The Community always brought and brings children and future generations closer to their roots, to their shared values, among them Yiddish, Hebrew, Jewish history, Torah, Zionism, Israel and a collective feeling of belonging. Thus it became a most vibrant and active Yiddish AND Jewish community.

There were two daily Yiddish newspapers: *Der Veg* (The Way) and *Di Shtime* (The Voice). In these dailies people could read in Yiddish the most important news about Mexico and the world. Also cultural activities and weddings within the Jewish Community were announced.

One could find Yiddish or Jewish theater or book fairs, students in the schools reading *Tevye der Milkhiker* (Tevye the Milkman), *Di Mishpokehe Karnovsky* (The Karnovsky Family), *Kiddush Hashem* or tales and poems by Morris Rosenfeld, Abraham Reizen or Peretz.

In private houses children were not raised with Yiddish as a mother tongue; but often Yiddish was chosen as a second language, so that others would not understand what the family was talking about.

Kindergarten children who could already speak Yiddish on a basic level continued learning to read and write in elementary school. Elementary school graduates could already speak Yiddish fluently. They could already read and write almost perfectly and they read tales and poems and understood what the writer was trying to say.

The Zionist Youth Movements such as *Hashomer Hatzair* or *Ichud Habonim* used to be frequented by children and youngsters, thus stimulating the informal Jewish education of the community.

The schools, the synagogues and other important Jewish centers, such as the *Deportivo Israelita* (Yiddisher Sport-Tzenter), owned huge and important Yiddish collections of books, libraries which were used by members of the community, teachers and students. In fact, Aaron Lansky visited Mexico in the 70s looking for Yiddish books to save and to bring to the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, USA. But he returned with just a few of them. There were Yiddish books indeed, but these books did not need to be saved from anything.

The typical *forshhtelungen* where parents and other family members were invited to see a Pesach or a Tu Bishvat show arranged by the children: a show of great quality, rich of Jewish content... in Yiddish.

At the graduations in elementary school, junior high school and high school it was considered an honour to be chosen to deliver the speech in either of the three basic languages of the Jewish education in Mexico: Spanish, Yiddish or Hebrew. There was a time when the Yiddish hymns of the schools or the *Partizaner Lid* could be sung and understood by most of the young and adult Jewish population in Mexico.

But as inhabitants of Mexico and the world, the members of the Jewish Community were not exempt from the consequences of an increasing globalization.

For the first time in approximately 80 years of Jewish education in Mexico, the school authorities were increasingly led by younger generations. Former students of the Jewish education system in Mexico felt that the teaching of English had been neglected because of the teaching of Yiddish and Hebrew. Since Hebrew was the Jewish national language, they did not agree to reduce the teaching of Hebrew. Thus the schools had to strengthen the English education without cutting back the role of Hebrew. However, the available teaching time could not be extended into the late afternoon. So the different schools, the Yiddishe, the Naye and the Yavne, each one at its own pace, decided the end of Yiddish in Mexico.

Some did it just because of a lack of interest and the increase of non-Ashkenazi population in school; others argued that there were not enough teachers (the *Seminar* was closed due to the lack of students and support from the community), Hebrew instructors could be brought from Israel, as they do nowadays, but they never undertook a serious attempt to find Yiddish teachers. Some others decided to decrease the Yiddish teaching in order to shift the school from an Ashkenazi to “Universal Jewish” profile, like other schools that were bigger and stronger.

On the other side... Why should diaspora conserve Yiddish language, culture and teaching if the newly created state of Israel itself fueled the worst challenge to Yiddish: Its rejection as a symbol of diaspora, even though Israel recognised Yiddish as an official language in the mid 90s and in spite of its renaissance nowadays in theater, NGOs, public schools and universities.

Not so many years ago, Jewish history and traditions were taught in Yiddish, now they are taught in Spanish. In the school where I used to study, some years ago the students were divided into levels, the highest one studies now Jewish History in Hebrew. The main argument was that students did not longer understand Yiddish although, in fact, when the languages were switched, students understood and spoke and wrote better in Yiddish than in Hebrew. I can not write in detail about other schools, but the fact that Yiddish classes were cut back, is an inconvenient truth. Everybody gives reasons, but apparently not the real ones.

In my school, students and parents resisted. We organized meetings and wrote letters signed by hundreds of students and parents. Teachers also resisted. A group of junior and high school students got together and persuaded the school administration to publish a young Yiddish journal, *Dos Naye Dor* (The New Generation). I was the editor in chief, and for two years fought to realize the dream. The publication was a success and it was sent to thirteen countries

such as Canada, USA, Japan, Germany (Düsseldorf), Lithuania, etc; institutions that were connected with Yiddish programs received the journal. Just one number was ever published.

Most of Mexico's Jewish schools follow the K-12 system, which means they include kindergarten and high school in the same place. In my school Yiddish instruction were canceled in the kindergarten and in high school. We demanded to take Yiddish classes, and managed to convince the school, but the program was offered only for volunteers, as an extracurricular activity, sometimes inside the school, sometimes outside, but it was always the Judaic Studies Department of the *Universidad Iberoamericana* that was in charge, a Jesuit institution.

Withdrawal of Yiddish from the communitary learning and cultural curriculum implicates a deep fracture in the roots, the keystone of the Ashkenazi Jewish Community in Mexico: In its education and value system, in the community profile and institutional configuration and in many cases even at home, as in my case.

The beginning of the extinction of the Yiddish language and culture in Mexico was just the anticipation of what was to come some years later, even outside the Ashkenazi Community: in the Sephardic, the Damascus and the Aleppo communities.

The globalization of the Jewish Community in Mexico is not necessarily positive. Most cultural activities have no quorum. Communities try to attract the Jewish population, which remains passive. Schools are starting to fail in Jewish and general education, standards and human values are declining due to economical competition between Jewish educational institutions.

Young people care more about what to wear and where to spend their time, following the example that their parents set. Zionist Youth Movements, even when they fight against this problem, have to face declining attendance... Children choose to stay at home watching TV or playing videogames. There is no serious agenda promoting encounters and events for young adults over 18, and even when the community tries to do something, the youths remain passive.

Are these problems proper or characteristic only for the Mexican Jewish Community? We all know the answer... totally negative.

Are other communities doing better? How? This is a global problem, a global problem of the Jewish people.

What is special about Mexico's Jewish Community is the potential for organizing big events. We have the people, we have the professional potential everywhere. We have dozens of youngsters and adults willing to be active for education, organizing, publishing, doing, changing.

The only thing we have to do is to bring them together. It is a difficult task, but we have many proofs that it IS possible. One positive example is the annual success of the Aviv Festival of Jewish Dance, and the Jewish Film Festival of Mexico City. No other Jewish events in the whole diaspora unite more Jews than the two given examples in Mexico.

We have more than seven Jewish day schools plus religious yeshivot or study houses. We have everything we need, we are just not using it. We are not using the time either to solve each problem, one by one; we try to solve them all together. And I am sure that there is also time for Yiddish. We do not just need to hope, we have to MAKE... before it is too late.

So I repeat:

*Dear brother! Where from are you coming?*

*Here in Mexico ... what are you doing?*