

When Speaking Yiddish Could Get You Beaten Up by Jews in Tel Aviv

‘Palestinian Yiddish,’ a new exhibit in New York, highlights the hostility shown to immigrants who refused to drop the language widely spoken by European Jews when they moved to pre-state Israel. Its opening comes at a tumultuous moment for Yiddish fans



Judy Maltz | New York
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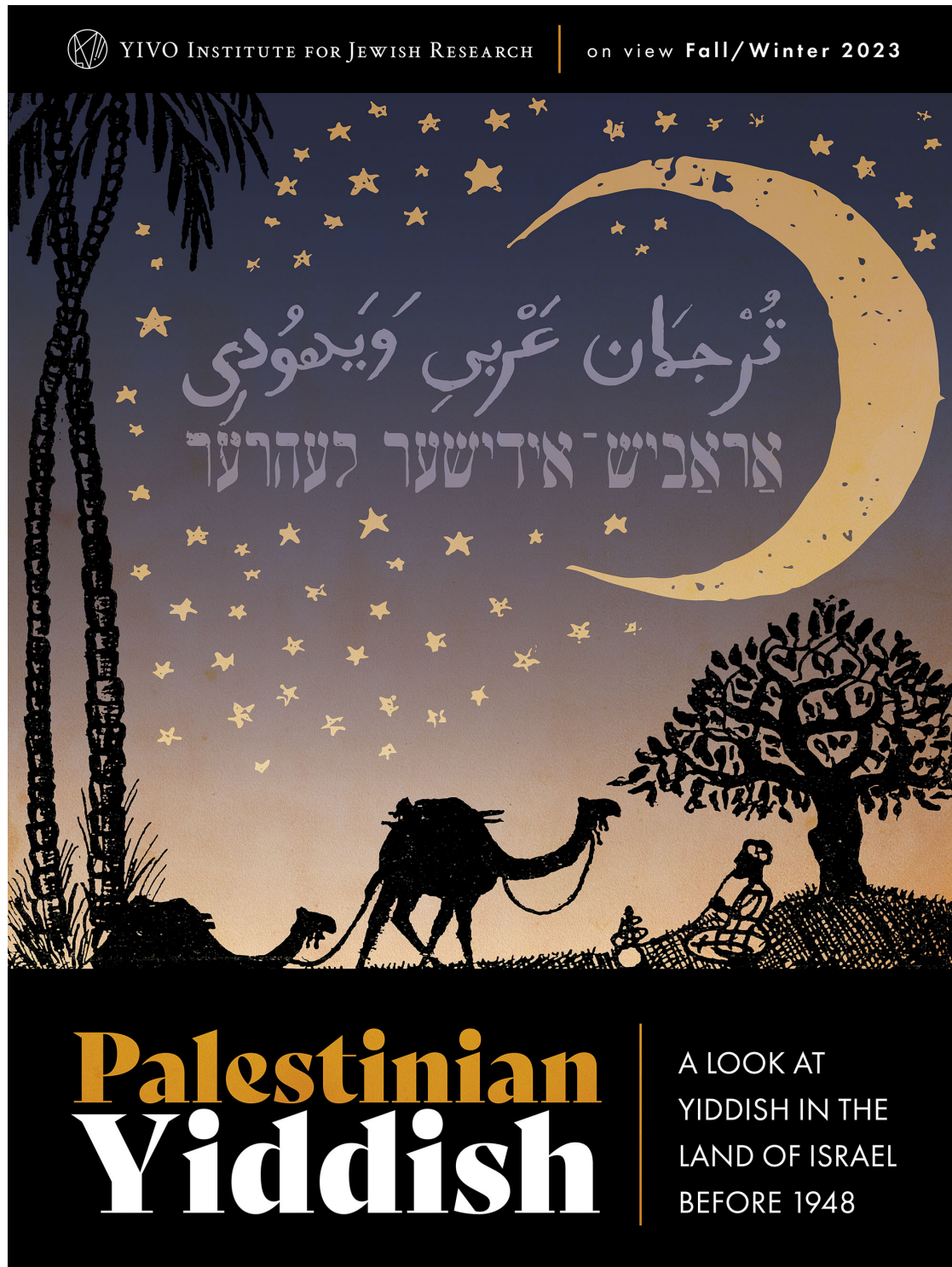
NEW YORK – The nearly 100-year-old photo features half a dozen young Jewish men all bandaged up. They appear to be victims of a pogrom.

Except, as the caption reveals, this photo was not taken in Eastern Europe. Nor were the attackers non-Jews.

In fact, these young men were beaten up in Tel Aviv by fellow Jews. Their crime? Speaking Yiddish in public.

Published in a Jewish weekly in Warsaw, this black-and-white photo, taken in 1928, is part of an exhibit that opened this week at New York’s YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, dedicated to “Palestinian Yiddish.” That is, Yiddish spoken before 1948 in the territory that encompasses the modern State of Israel.

A major focus of the exhibit is the outright hostility and disdain shown by many of the early Jewish settlers toward the Yiddish language. In creating a “new Jew” in what they called the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel), these fervent, Hebrew-speaking Zionists were determined to break away from anything that smacked of the Diaspora – first and foremost the language widely spoken by European Jews.



The exhibit poster for “Palestinian Yiddish,” at New York’s YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Credit: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

“Negating the Diaspora was a core part of the ideology of early 20th-century Zionism, and for this reason Yiddish had to be suppressed,” says YIVO academic adviser Eddy Portnoy, who curated the exhibit. “It was almost like a Jewish self-hatred.”

The exhibit, which will be on view throughout the fall, includes photographs, artifacts and documents from YIVO’s archives as well as other historical collections. Its opening coincides with a storm that erupted over an essay published in last weekend’s New York Times titled “Yiddish is Having a Moment.”

Its author, Prof. Ilan Stavans of Amherst College, marveled that “Given everything Yiddish has gone through – how it was a tool of cross-border continuity, how it was pushed to the crematories by the Nazis, how after the Shoah it thrived in some diasporas but was pushed aside in others – its sheer endurance is nothing short of miraculous.”



The “Arabic-Yiddish Teacher” was written by Getsl Zelikovitsh, a Yiddish journalist who had studied Semitics and Egyptology at the Sorbonne. It was the first text created for Yiddish-speaking students of Arabic. Credit: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

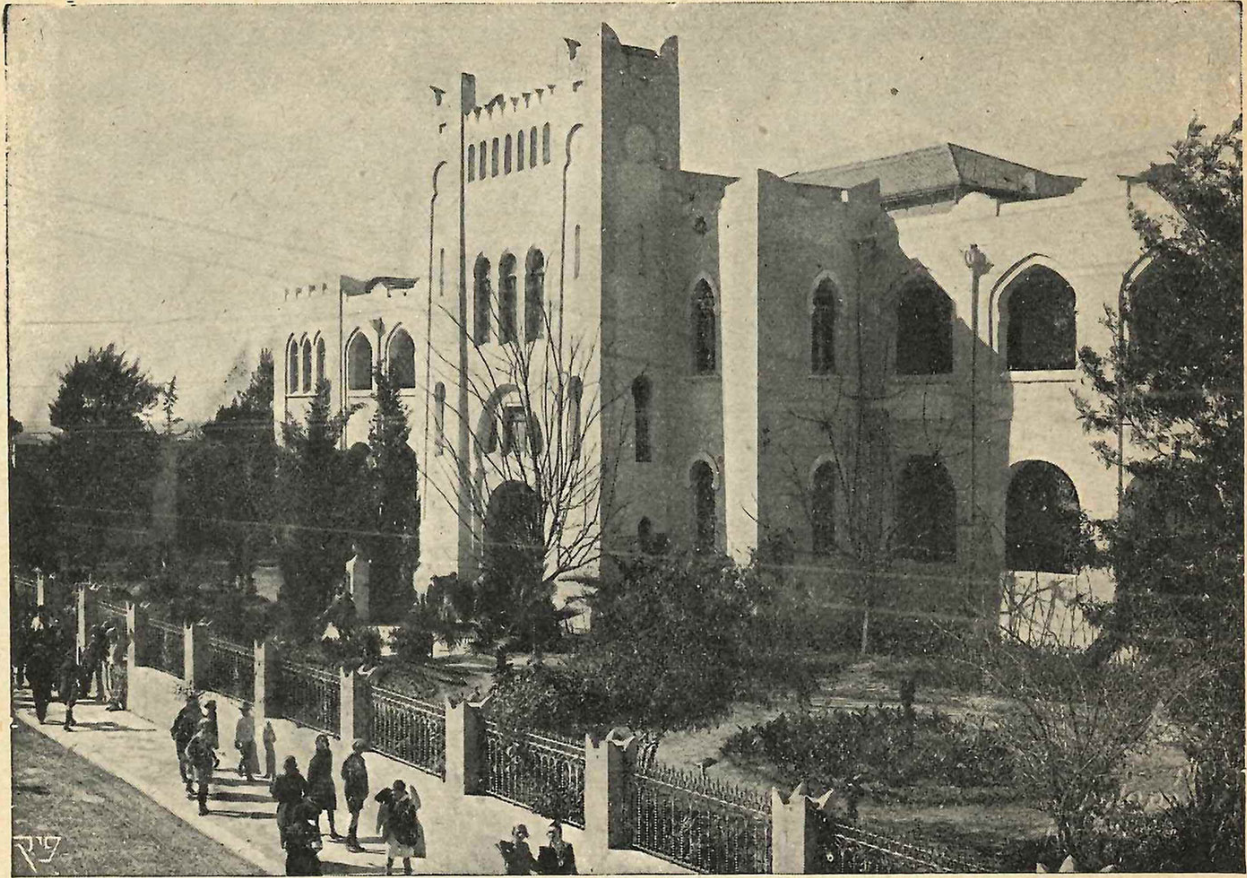
But many readers took offense at his underhanded attack on Israel in the following paragraph: “Hebrew, which officially became the national language of the State of Israel in 1948, is spoken by about nine million people around the world. For some, the language symbolizes far-right Israeli militarism.” Stavans was also criticized over his claim that ultra-Orthodox Jews who speak Yiddish “aren’t typically multilingual, as secular Yiddish speakers always were.”

On the eve of World War II, about 11 million Jews, the overwhelming majority of them in Europe, spoke Yiddish. Today, it is estimated there are only about 600,000 left – the vast majority Holocaust survivors and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

But in recent years, Yiddish has experienced a revival of sorts, the language increasingly embraced by Diaspora Jews who identify as non-Zionist or anti-Zionist and feel little connection to Israel or the Hebrew language.

Even in Israel, attitudes have changed and several local universities offer Yiddish-language programs that have become quite popular.

Such initiatives would never have been tolerated a century ago. Indeed, among the artifacts on display at the exhibit is a big yer published by a group of Hebrew language fanatics known as the Gedud Meginei Hasafa – the battalion of [Hebrew] language defenders – in response to reports that the newly established Hebrew University of Jerusalem was planning on creating a chair in Yiddish-language studies.



די העברעאישע גימנאזיע "הרצליה" אין תל-אביב.

The Gymnasia Herzliya was the first Hebrew-language high school in Tel Aviv. It was run by major Zionist ideologues and its students were indoctrinated into the language war between Hebrew and Yiddish. Credit: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

The archetypal Jewish mother

In researching his topic, Yiddish expert Portnoy says he was surprised to discover how far back the language was being spoken in cities like Jerusalem, Safed and Tiberias, if only by a tiny minority of the population.

Among his remarkable finds were fragments of several letters written in Yiddish by a woman in Jerusalem that date back to the 1560s. Sent by Rokhl Zusman to her son Moishe, who was living in Egypt, they were discovered in the Cairo Genizah – a huge collection of manuscripts documenting 1,000 years of Jewish life in the Middle East and North Africa.

In the letters, copies of which are on display, Rokhl tries to persuade her son to come back to Jerusalem and chides him for not writing her enough. “The Jewish mother in her definitely comes through in these letters,” jokes Portnoy.



"Di yidishe shtot tel aviv" (The Jewish City Tel Aviv). Keren Hayesod, Jerusalem, 1933. Credit: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, when large numbers of Yiddish speakers were making their way to then-Ottoman Palestine, Arabs far outnumbered Jews in the land and speaking Arabic became critical for a smooth landing. The exhibit includes several little dictionaries that were used at the time to teach Yiddish speakers basic Arabic – rare examples, for sure, of Arabic transliterated into Yiddish.

And just like American Yiddish includes English words and Polish Yiddish includes Polish words, the Yiddish spoken by many of the early Zionist pioneers included sprinklings of Arabic.

