

Language Rules in a Government School for Jews

In the government Jewish schools¹ [before World War I] all classes, even those in religion, were conducted in Russian, as were prayers, which a designated student recited each day both before and after lessons. The prayers began with the words *Preblagii bozhe* (Most gracious God). The children, especially those in the preparatory class, knew not a word of Russian. There was a rule that in the preparatory class (and in that class alone) one might, in an emergency, translate something into Yiddish for a child who did not understand it in Russian [...] Every effort, however difficult, was made to avoid the use of Yiddish. Moreover, the pedagogical authorities told elementary school students to refrain from speaking Yiddish among themselves outside the school as well [...]

One day two friends and I walked out of the school conversing loudly in Yiddish, our mother tongue, unaware that Gozhanski [the teacher] was walking behind us. Apparently, I was the last one he heard speaking, for Gozhanski walked straight toward me, stopped our group, and said (in Russian) in his staccato tone, “Go back to school, and report to Il’ia Isakovich [Lazarev, the school administrator] that you and your friends were speaking Yiddish outdoors.” I had no choice. My two friends and I returned to the school. But Ilia Isakovich had already gone, and there the matter ended. From a historical point of view, the fact that Jewish children in the most pro-Yiddish city in the world were forbidden to speak the language in public is noteworthy. So, too, is the fact that the enforcing agent was none other than Gozhanski, who was later one of the founders of the Bund.²

It must be said that, at the time, Yiddish was just beginning to be recognized as a cultural language. It was decidedly not the vernacular of the Jewish intelligentsia. Their commitment to Yiddish grew out of working with the masses and with members of the Bund in particular. Years later, many of Gozhanski’s former students took pleasure in reading Yiddish articles signed “LONU” (Gozhanski’s pseudonym), which appeared in various illegal publications.

Excerpted from Hirsz Abramowicz, “Samuel Gozhanski,” in *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II*, ed. Dina Abramowicz and Jeffrey Shandler, trans. Eva Zeitlin Dobkin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1999), 124-5.

¹ Schools established by the tsarist authorities to aid in the assimilation of Jews by teaching children in Russian.

² Jewish Socialist party, which promoted the development of Yiddish.