Ideology and Postvernacularity in 21st Century Yiddish Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, based on five weeks of ethnographic field work in a Yiddish classroom in Poland, I describe how Yiddish language ideologies were realized and enacted within the classroom by language learners and teachers alike. This paper connects these language ideologies and classroom practices to larger historical negotiations of the Jewish past occurring within contemporary Poland, negotiations that center around memory and space. I argue that Yiddish can be understood as an object in cultural flux, discursively framed by multiple intersecting and, at times, contradictory narratives. Focusing on Yiddish language classrooms in contemporary Poland in particular, I demonstrate how Yiddish is embedded in non-Jewish Polish narratives and historical negotiations, as well those of diaspora Jewry.

The Symbolic Weight of Yiddish

Within the international Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora, the image of the *shtetl* (traditional Jewish village) life of pre-Holocaust Europe is invoked with an almost religious reverence with such a frequency as to make it a trope. This reverence tends to center around the Yiddish language, the crown jewel of quotidian, traditional European Jewish life, emblematic of all which is viewed as lost or inaccessible to contemporary secular diaspora Jewry. Yiddish, the traditional vernacular language of European Jewry, was typically not intergenerationally transmitted within secular diaspora families after the Holocaust; as such, the majority of second and third generation diaspora Jews lack fluency and basic competence in the language (Fishman 1991). Despite this lack of fluency, Yiddish remains a symbolically-loaded cultural object that is often cited as an essential aspect of one's Jewishness, and marks one's engagement with real and imagined Jewish communities (Harshav 1999; Anderson 1983). Yiddish has not entirely disappeared from the daily lives of secular diaspora Jewry, but it instead now occupies a highly affective and indexical role rather than serving as a means of communication. This quality of the Yiddish language's contemporary symbolic mode has been termed *postvernacularity*; it is characterized by the precedence of symbolic and performative Yiddish language usage over everyday vernacular usage (Shandler 2004). Furthermore, the secular Yiddish speech community is a *metalinguistic community*, a group that experiences deep affective ties to a language regardless of the fact that many of the members lack proficiency (Kroskrity and Avineri 2014).

As the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish in the secular context becomes increasingly rare, the secular diaspora has access to fewer and fewer Yiddish communities of practice. Because of this, sites of secular Yiddish usage over the past several decades have tended to be deliberate and temporary (existing in language classrooms) or fractured and transnational (existing on the Internet). As Shandler notes, "At the beginning of the 20th century, Yiddish was rooted in an actual place - Eastern Europe, home to millions of Jews...at the end of the century...Yiddish had become the language of several imaginary worlds" (Shandler 2004, 49). These "imaginary worlds" are defined by a sort of geographical 'otherness': Peckerar has referred to Yiddish as a "non-territorial language" on the basis that "no clear Yiddophone space exists in the world that can be designated by a given cartographical colour and thus easily identified by students when they open their textbooks" (Peckerar 2011, 238). A Yiddish classroom could exist in Buenos Aires or Paris with equal possibility; a Yiddish Facebook group with 500 members located all around the globe very well might be the only accessible community of practice for some diaspora Jews. As one of a very few spaces where secular Jewry can interact with Yiddish in physical space, Yiddish language classrooms are a site where nostalgia and diaspora identity narratives are embodied, enacted and reproduced (Avineri 2014; Gonshor and Shaffir 2004). Within the past few decades, as the global Jewish diaspora's interest in Yiddish has increased, language classrooms in the form of summer seminars and university courses have appeared around the world in major diaspora cities such as New York, Tel Aviv and London, as well as in historically important Jewish cities such as Warsaw, Krakow, and Lviv, where the active contemporary Jewish community numbers little more than a few hundred (DellePergola 2015; Peckerar 2011). Shandler (2004) has introduced the term "Yiddishland" to describe the particular geographical 'otherness' of the Yiddish language classroom, characterizing it as a realm untethered from place or time that is both created by and facilitates Yiddish language use. This term is purposefully open-ended, accommodating the fractured symbolic economy of Yiddish in the 21st century.

In this paper, based on five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in a Yiddish classroom

in Poland, I describe how Yiddish language ideologies were realized and enacted by students and teachers alike. This paper connects these language ideologies and classroom practices to larger historical and memorial negotiations of the Jewish past occurring within contemporary Poland, negotiations that center around memory and space. To discuss the reenactment and restaging of the marginal Jewish-Polish past that occurred in the Fundacja Shalom language classroom, I draw upon Lehrer & Waligórska's (2013) notion of "memory work" and claim that the Yiddish classroom, as a dialogic, ephemeral, and low-stakes historical reimagining of a past that is still actively being negotiated, constitutes a form of "memory work". Throughout this paper, I view Yiddish as an object in cultural flux, discursively framed by multiple intersecting and, at times, contradictory narratives. This paper focuses on Yiddish language classrooms in contemporary Poland in particular, and considers how Yiddish is embedded in non-Jewish Polish narratives and historical negotiations as well those of diaspora Jewry. As one Yiddish teacher mentioned to me, "In Poland now, it's simply easier to learn Yiddish...most of the people who learn Yiddish are Poles". Thus, consideration of local Polish narratives about Yiddish is crucial to understanding the sociocultural reality of the Yiddish classroom in Poland.

Ideology in Yiddishland

Secular Yiddish presents a unique case for most measurements of language use and endangerment (Krauss 2007). Yiddish is a heritage language that has a strong presence in pop culture and discussions of Jewish identity, but by the end of the 21st century was rarely spoken as a vernacular outside of certain Orthodox Hasidic communities (Isaacs 1998). On this basis, the secular Yiddish speech community can be thought of as a *metalinguistic community*, a speech community defined by discourse about a language rather than use of the language. Avineri (2014, 2) identifies five defining features of a *metalinguistic community*: "1. socialization into language ideologies as a priority over socialization into language competence and use, 2. conflation of language and culture, 3.

age and corresponding knowledge as highly salient features, 4. use and discussion of the code as primarily pedagogical, and 5. use of code in specific interactional and textual contexts". These features provide a salient descriptive schema of action and ideology within the Yiddish classroom's speech community. Within heritage and endangered language speech communities in general, "ideologies and norms of usage are diverse, since community members have a range of proficiency levels in the language and practices around the language" (Kroskrity and Avineri 2014, 2). It is thus necessary to provide a notion of speech community that accommodates the heterogeneous linguistic proficiencies and usages of heritage and endangered language communities of practice.

Gumperz (1971, 114) defines a speech community as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage". Refining this concept, Duranti (1997) emphasizes that the speech community is the product of the communicative actions of its members, and can be viewed as the result of the interactions and linguistic usages of its constituent speakers. The speech community is thus built and maintained via shared linguistic usage and communicative action. This 'bottom-up' approach better accommodates the varying proficiencies of heritage speakers, which occur on a continuum and tend to evade standardized measurement (Polinsky and Kagan 2007).

Friedman (2009, 347) observes that "what unites a linguistic community is not a set of language practices, but a set of language ideologies that define what counts as legitimate language". Communicative action within a speech community is thus ideologically loaded. The speech community of the language classroom is driven and defined by language ideologies, which are coordinated between students and teachers (Friedman 2009). The practices of the language classroom are oriented towards providing students membership to an imagined community of speakers. As Pavenko & Norton (2007, 671) argue, "the process of imagining and

reimagining one's multiple memberships may influence agency, motivation, investment, and resistance". Through imagining and reimagining membership, the practices of the language classroom socialize individuals into particular sets of ideologies and objectives.

Certain pedagogical practices within the language classroom, such as error correction, are "embedded within larger social, political, and cultural systems of belief about norms of language use and expectations regarding the responsibility of novices in upholding these norms" (Friedman 2009, 348). This suggests that language classrooms are sites that facilitate an embodied experience of history and sociocultural reality, and in certain contexts, are sites where students and teachers alike "attempt to create new…memories of the past, address present-day social ills, and imagine different futures" (Lehrer and Waligórska 2013, 512). Friedman's (2009) work with Ukrainian-language classrooms in Ukraine provides a vivid example of how language can be used towards the construction of new social realities, wherein the pedagogical practices of the classroom orient students towards the achievement of a larger teleological goal, in this case, a vision of a 'pure' Ukrainian language without Russian influence. This is further evidence of the extent to which the language classroom is a site wherein students are socialized into language ideologies (Avineri 2014; Duranti 1997; Friedman 2009).

The State of Yiddish today

Yiddish is the traditional vernacular language of Ashkenazi Jewry. It has a Germanic syntactic base, with a lexicon sourced largely from Hebrew, Aramaic, and various Slavic languages. Harshav (1999, 61) notes that "Yiddish [is] a uniquely open language", and as such, it incorporates language forms from a range of local linguistic strata. Despite this large amount of borrowed European linguistic material, Yiddish is culturally and historically distinct from other European languages. The use of the Hebrew alphabet for Yiddish orthography "establishes a final boundary around any Yiddish text and separates it clearly from German and any other non-Jewish language" (Harshav 1999, 51). It is estimated that there are today 200,000 to 500,000

speakers who use Yiddish as a daily language, and one million with language ability worldwide (Benor and Cohen 2011; Shandler 2004). While the number of secular Yiddish speakers worldwide is decreasing, the number of Yiddish speakers in Orthodox Hasidic communities has been steadily increasing (DellaPergola 2015). This being said, the worldwide mother tongue of Jews today, by numbers alone, is easily English (Shandler 2004, 53).

At its peak in the early 20th century, Yiddish was an essential component of European Jewish life and indexed political ideologies that advocated for European Jewish nationalism and socialism (Benor and Cohen 2011). Yiddishism, a type of secular Jewish nationalism that emerged in 19th and 20th centuries, held as a core idea that "a vernacular could be a symbol for an emerging nation and be cultivated to turn into a fully-fledged standardized language, equipped for all modern functions" (Avineri and Verschik 2017, 456). Yiddishists (and the ideologically related Bundists) asserted the Eastern European indigenousness of Jewry, which centered around the principle of *doikeyt* ("hereness"), explicitly opposing Zionist ideology that sought to create a Jewish homeland in Israel (Harshav 1999).

The decline of the Yiddish language from its pre-World War II peak can be traced to a number of causes. There is the obvious factor of the Holocaust, which killed nearly half of Europe's Yiddish speakers, essentially dealing a fatal blow to the continuation of *shtetl* life in Eastern Europe; the explicit and violent prohibition of the Yiddish language in Israel after 1948 is another. In the decades following World War II, the Israeli government viewed speakers of Jewish diaspora languages such as Yiddish and Ladino as a political threat to the "structured, cohesive, and all-embracing Israeli culture" that Zionists sought to create in Israel (Rojanski 2004, 46). Yiddish, as a language that to this day indexes otherness of nationality, international movement, and 'rootless cosmopolitanism', was harshly discriminated against, and Israeli government campaigns advocated the public shaming of Yiddish speakers (Fishman 1991). As Shandler bluntly states, "Zionist Ashkenazim murdered their own culture with their own hands" by preventing the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish in

Israel (Shandler 2004, 11). A similar targeting of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish intelligentsia and systematic eradication of the Yiddish language occurred in the USSR during the same time period, further decimating the number of Yiddish speakers (Moskovich 1987).

Within the American diaspora context, Yiddish was not intergenerationally transmitted to the children of Jewish immigrants because it was often seen as a potential detriment to their social and economic mobility in the United States (Grenoble and Whaley 1998; Shandler 2004). Yiddish, as a language then heavily associated with immigrant poverty, was something that most Jewish immigrants and their first-generation children strove to distance themselves from (Rodriguez 2006). Furthermore, Yiddish, as the *mame loshn* (mother tongue) and as the intra-group vernacular of European Ashkenazi life, was culturally viewed as a language that one naturally and automatically acquired from being raised in a Jewish household, without requiring any explicit instruction (Harshav 1999). Considering the fact that "in the United States almost all immigrant Jewish children attended public schools and were taught exclusively in English" (Shandler 2004, 74), it is no surprise that the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish to second and third generation Jews was interrupted. In this sense, Yiddish has followed the general trajectory of immigrant languages in America, where "the first generation tends to learn only enough English to get by; the second is bilingual; and the third tends to be English-dominant if not monolingual...and by the third generation [bilingualism] is extraordinarily difficult to maintain" (Rodriguez 2006, 591). In the contemporary second and third generation context, "the acquisition of Yiddish is not undertaken as inevitably as it once was...increasingly, learning Yiddish is a deliberate practice" (Shandler 2004, 194).

This lack of intergenerational transmission of Yiddish in the secular context is closely tied to the general cultural assimilation of secular diaspora Jews in the decades since the Holocaust. Shandler (2004) and Schacter (2006) have both written on how the erosion of Jewish sociocultural distinctiveness in the United States has led to an anxiety about individual and group identity over the past several decades, manifesting as a fear about the illegibility of the Jewish past. These anxieties and nostalgias coalesce to form what Avineri (2015) terms the *nostalgia socialization* of diaspora Jews to Yiddish, a socialization into a set of affective ideologies that project reverence onto the Jewish Eastern Europe of one's grandparents, connecting them to a Yiddish-speaking quotidian Jewish reality that no longer exists. An individual's lack of Yiddish fluency or historical knowledge does not hinder the development of such nostalgia. Because of this, the imagined nostalgic *shtetl* of the diaspora tends to be partially confabulated (Shandler 2004; Avineri 2014). This nostalgia also manifests in the secular Jewish belief in the endangerment of the Yiddish language (Avineri 2014; Friedman 2016).

The Presence and Absence of Jewish Culture in Poland

Within Poland today, Jewish culture is simultaneously globally present, the subject of broad narratives that proclaim a 'Jewish revival,' and locally absent, or at best, marginal. Jewish culture in contemporary Poland recalls Fishman's remark about the contradictions inherent in the Yiddish language: that it is "a tool of the irreligious *and* of the ultraorthodox, of fostering ghettoization *and* rootless cosmopolitanism, of reflecting quintessential and inescapable Jewishness *and* of representing little more than a hedonistic differentiation from the ways of the gentiles, of being dead and dying, and of being a ubiquitous threat to higher values" (Harshav 1999, 86). For Jewish culture in 21st century Poland, the primary contradiction seems to be the Yiddish language's simultaneous presence and absence. Weiss (2003) observes that "in Krakow you can find a good kosher meal, a number of klezmer bands, Jewish cabaret, art exhibits and folk dancing. [But] the only thing you probably won't find, unless you look very hard, are Jews". Even as Poland in recent years has a become an internationally important source of academic work on Yiddish and Jewish studies, the actual living Jewish community within Poland today remains extremely small (Wodzinski 2011; DellaPergola 2015). Furthermore, while the diaspora is intensely

focused on the historic Jewish geography of Eastern Europe, within Eastern Europe Jewish history remains marginal and contested, and local Jewish geography tends to be unmarked and difficult to find (Kugelmass 1995; Meng 2015). These contradictions are readily apparent in the popular narrative of the "Jewish revival" in Poland, a narrative that has particular currency with the international Jewish diaspora, with several large news outlets reporting on it in the past several years (Smith 2007; Tzur 2013; The Times of Israel 2012). This "Jewish revival" narrative is often presented by media outlets one-dimensionally, ignoring its roots in Polish anxiety regarding post-Holocaust national identity and the secular diaspora's desire for cultural continuity, among other things (Saxonberg and Waligórska 2006).

Within Poland today, it is clear that Polish-Jewish history is still being negotiated, both institutionally and in the popular consciousness (Kugelmass, 1995; Saxonberg & Waligórska, 2006). Kugelmass (1995) describes how raising questions about Polish anti-semitism and complicity in Jewish tragedy became more mainstream after the fall of the communist regime in Poland in 1989, making in-depth and critical discussions of pre-World War II Jewish life in Poland possible where they were not before. Additionally, the gradual opening of Poland to visits from many American and Israeli Jews interested in their family's history made nostalgia for the pre-World War II Jewish Poland a popular phenomenon for Jews and non-Jewish Poles alike (Kugelmass 1995; Wodzinski 2011). Despite the mainstreaming of Jewish narratives in Poland, the huge presence of the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish tragedy remains in the international consciousness. This, along with the shift in view of Auschwitz as a site of Polish martyrdom to one of Jewish martyrdom, results in "a peculiar mix of nostalgic reminiscence about prewar Poland and a sense of deep wounds being unfairly inflicted onto Poland's national pride" that continues today (Kugelmass 1995, 281). The rise of the modern Polish-Jewish tourism industry (perhaps most notorious for its tours of death camps like Auschwitz and Dachau) is a function of this sour Polish nostalgia as much as it is the invention of American and Israeli Jews themselves. Poland often serves as "a theater prop in a Jewish pageant about national catastrophe and redemption," and is the site of various Holocaust tours for Jewish teenagers sponsored by the Israeli government for nationalistic purposes (Kugelmass 1995, 281). Polish artist Agata Siwek, among others, has engaged critically with the phenomenon of Holocaust tourism in Poland, asking "Is Auschwitz becoming no more than a must-see tourist destination?" (Jałowik 2015, 58). These questions about the role of Holocaust tourism in the diaspora and local Polish memory of Jewish Poland can be better understood in the context of the shifting qualities of engagement with Jewish history within Poland today.

Wodzinski (2011) has written about the trajectory of research on Jewish history and culture in Poland over the past hundred years in detail, charting a general trend of proliferation and institutionalization of Jewish studies research. Throughout the past several decades, the bulk of this scholarly material published has been oriented towards filling historical gaps in Jewish-Polish history. Contemporary historical work, both academic and popular, is of a markedly different character. Lehrer and Waligórska observe Polish engagement with Jewish history in the 21st century as being defined by a new degree of confrontation and an awareness that "the forces shaping national memory in public have become simultaneously more transnational and more local" (2013, 513). They observe a new genre of Polish interaction with its Jewish past, one that is 'interventional' rather than documentary, in the sense that this engagement actively strives to shift the entrenched memorial relations between Poland, Israel, and the diaspora. Terming this new genre "memory work", they add that "a key characteristic of these interventions is their attention to embodied experience, and the way they stage and invite participation in 'repertoires' of historical and cultural memory" (2013, 512). This embodied and interventional approach to history is a marked shift away from the passive memorial experience of concentration camp tourism, for example, and towards embodied sociocultural experiences such as Yiddish language courses. Thus, the popularity of Yiddish courses in Poland today can be understood in the context

of the shifting quality of engagement with Jewish-Polish history in the public and academic spheres. The Yiddish language classroom in Poland is a site where negotiations of Jewish-Polish history can occur on a transnational, yet local level. The geographical portability of Yiddishland allows a multiplicity of narratives to be embodied, and allows diaspora and local Polish histories to be restaged and opened up for dialogue (Finkin 2015).

Methodology

This study is based on five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, and Katowice, followed by two weeks of research in New York in the summer of 2016. During this time I fully participated as a student in a Yiddish language and culture course in Warsaw for three weeks, and conducted a dozen interviews with Yiddish language students, Yiddish language instructors, Jewish studies professors, and Jewish community members in order to understand the symbolic role that Yiddish holds within the international secular Jewish diaspora and the local Polish population today. I collected assorted pedagogical materials such as the course textbook, maps, and worksheets from Fundacja Shalom. I also collected various Yiddish print materials associated with the course, such as newspapers and advertisements. Finally, I gathered photos and text data from Facebook pages and the Fundacja Shalom website. Throughout this paper I consider pedagogical materials and particularly textbooks as "a product and factor of social processes" (Schallenberger 1978), and align myself with Wieki's view that "it is not possible to analyse [a textbook] isolated from such facts as the particular political, economical, social or cultural situation with which it interacts and is meant to interact." (Wieki 2009, 49). Furthermore, as an international and often ephemeral speech community with vague and shifting boundaries, discourse within and about the Yiddish language on the internet and in mass media are important contributors to the constitution of the imagined community of speakers (Spitulnik 1996; Anderson 1983).

Fundacja Shalom's Yiddish Classroom

This paper reports on findings from a study of Fundacja Shalom's international Yiddish summer seminar held in Warsaw during the summer of 2016. This course was typical of secular Yiddish language courses in that it was open to the general public and was held for a fixed amount of time, in this case for three weeks. The Fundacja Shalom classroom is located on ulica Andersa in Warsaw, in the historic Muranow neighborhood (the location of the former Jewish Warsaw Ghetto). The classroom is a short walk away from many important Jewish historical sites, and these myriad sites (e.g. the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery) are used by program organizers and tour guides in the area to give tours about the Warsaw Ghetto and pre-Holocaust *shtetl* life to students and tourists. The Fundacja Shalom Yiddish summer seminar is divided into three courses: a beginner, intermediate and advanced course, which had 11, 5, and 3 students, respectively. I attended the beginner course, having had minimal formal exposure to the Yiddish language beforehand. The beginner classroom was roughly evenly split between international diaspora Jews (from Israel, the US, Canada, and Australia), non-Jewish Polish students, and academics from a variety of disciplines, whose relation to Yiddish was on the basis of analyzing Yiddish primary sources for research purposes. The language classroom was thus a heterogeneous speech community, made up of individuals from a variety of linguistic backgrounds who held a variety of objectives for their competence in the Yiddish language.

Classes lasted for five hours every weekday, and switched between two instructors: a younger instructor from Poland with a strong academic background in Yiddish pedagogy and Jewish studies, and an older French instructor from Paris who heavily preferred to teach the course exclusively in Yiddish. Both of these instructors were Jewish, but learned Yiddish by studying as adults, and were not native speakers. The course assumed no prior knowledge of any Jewish language, and began by teaching the Yiddish alphabet, which also adorned the walls of the classroom (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Yiddish alphabet mural in the Fundacja Shalom classroom, June 2016. Photo by author.

The pedagogical style of the course was similar to that of an immersion-style classroom for a normative national language, such as French: non-Yiddish languages were used minimally, maybe for a fourth of the total class time (Peckerar 2011). The non-Yiddish languages used in the classroom (for informal discussion, clarification, etc.) shifted between French, Polish and English, depending on the shared linguistic backgrounds of the people in the classroom at a given time and the particular linguistic competences of the instructor. As a third-generation secular Jew with Polish Holocaust-survivor grandparents, my ethnographic research in Fundacja Shalom's Yiddish course was doubtlessly guided by my own *nostalgia socialization* and Yiddish language ideologies. In taking part in this course and even having my motivations for learning Yiddish included in a video advertising the course, I undoubtedly play a role in the continuation of the Yiddish language ideologies that I am documenting.

Ideology in Pedagogical Materials

Instructors of secular Yiddish courses face a unique dilemma: as the facilitators of what is in many cases the only spoken Yiddish community of practice for language learners, they must "fight against the threat of a growing unnaturalness attendant to the Yiddish language, all the while sensing the tragic irony of such a predicament for a language that had so long been specifically vernacular" (Peckerar 2011, 238). The pedagogical style of Fundacja Shalom's classroom was similar to that of other language immersion classrooms; in fact, I was explicitly told by several Yiddish teachers at Fundacja Shalom that "[they] teach Yiddish like you would any other language", and also that the course's instruction places a particular emphasis on spoken Yiddish. The course's language instruction was centered around a 171-page textbook, which included grammatical exercises, short readings, verb conjugation charts, and classroom speaking exercises which were assembled a variety of sources. Because the textbook was an assemblage from a number of sources, the assumed linguistic capabilities of the individual reading the textbook shifted every twenty pages or so, between German, French, and English. This assemblage-style textbook is consistent with Peckerar's findings regarding the lack of sufficient contemporary Yiddish pedagogical materials in general (Peckerar 2011).

Wieki (2009, 49) notes that "it is not possible to analyse [a textbook] isolated from such facts as the particular political, economic, social or cultural situation with which it interacts and is meant to interact". The textbook for Fundacja Shalom's language course is thus oriented towards the classroom's teleological goals and laden with particular Yiddish language ideologies. Figure 2, for example, is a speaking exercise in the textbook that calls for students to talk about what they like and do not like in Yiddish, ("װאָס האַסטו ליב צו טאָן" and "װאָס האַסטו נישט ליב צו טאָן" respectively) using the constructions "איך האָב ליב" and "איך האָב נישט ליב") "I like to" and "I do not like to", respectively). The activity, which is a typical speech elicitation exercise, is clearly oriented towards the *production* of novel Yiddish speech that engages with the contemporary reality of the speaker. The photo of the woman wearing headphones in the top left corner in particular indexes the production of Yiddish speech that engages with the daily 21st century reality of the speaker, allowing for the language to be briefly untethered from archives and academia. In this context, the Yiddish language becomes dialogic and embodied, and students actively engage with Yiddish linguistic material (Lehrer and Waligorska 2013).

Beyond fulfilling Fundacja Shalom's own ideological orientation towards a Yiddish that is taught "like you would any other language", this

activity appeals directly to diaspora nostalgia narratives, allowing the Yiddish language to briefly be used in the same way that diaspora Jews imagine it was used in the *shtetl*. For a variety of reasons, including the fundamentally ephemeral nature of Yiddishlands such as Fundacja Shalom, this vernacular Yiddish language usage cannot be maintained in the long term. Fundacja Shalom's course is thus a site where Yiddish can be temporarily vernacular, conveying everyday semantic detail rather than simply indexing a particular set of ideologies as secular Yiddish language use does outside of the classroom.

Figure 2: Language exercise in Fundacja Shalom textbook - "What do you like to do?" June 2016. Photo by author.

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The contents of the course textbook index ideologies beyond language use as well. Figure 3, another page from the textbook, is a page titled "דאָס מיזרדו-אייראָפעישע יידישלאַנד" ("The Eastern European Yiddishland"). This image

depicts a map of contemporary Europe with the traditional Yiddish names labelling the countries and cities. On this map, Poland is labelled "פוילן" ([p□l□n]), the traditional Yiddish name for Poland which is phonetically distinct from the Polish "Polska" or the German "Polen", directly indexing the geography of the former European Yiddishland and superimposing Jewish geography onto contemporary Polish space. This direct reference to pre-Holocaust Jewish territoriality asserts a claim to the "Eastern European indigenousness" of Ashkenazim, and recalls Yiddishist notions of Jewish nationality, particularly the principle of *doikeyt* ("hereness") (Shandler 2004; Kuznitz 2015). In this way, the pedagogical practices of the classroom orient students towards larger ideologies about Jewish space in Eastern Europe. The Fundacja Shalom classroom facilitates a restaging of historical notions of Jewish space in the local Muranow neighborhood in Warsaw and on an international scale as well.

Figure 3: Map of Jewish Eastern Europe with Yiddish place names in Fundacja Shalom textbook, June 2016. Photo by author.

Yiddish has a complex relationship to geographical particularity and notions of homeland, a relationship that "challenges conventional notions of turf defined in relation to a language (and by implication, the language's speakers) that [have] long been fundamental to concepts of nationhood" (Finkin 2015, 15; see also Anderson 1983). Finkin observes that "Yiddishland presents a dynamic view of reality" (Finkin 2015, 15), in this case a reality that allows the transnational Jewish diaspora and local Poles to collaboratively

reenact marginal historical notions of Jewish territoriality. Just as Israeli artist Yael Bartana's 'fictional' political organization *The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland* (which calls for three million Jews to return to Poland) is an act of radical political imagination, Fundacja Shalom's Yiddish classroom allows disparate individuals to reimagine and reenact the historical territoriality of local Polish space. This is particularly the case for such a historically loaded space as Warsaw's Muranow neighborhood, which Meng has described as being made of up "layers of time", containing strata of Jewish and Polish history (Meng 2015, 79). In this way, the practices of the Yiddish classroom can be understood as active and embodied memorial practice, or an example of "memory work" (Lehrer and Waligorska 2013).

Discussions of local Jewish space in Muranow occurred throughout the course. Within the first week of the program, a Fundacja Shalom program coordinator took the course participants on a tour of the former Warsaw Ghetto in Muranow, pointing out sites that were once areas central to Jewish life, many of which are now in disrepair or have become something else entirely, making it impossible to understand the significance of the site without the guidance of someone with particular geographical knowledge. A notable example of this memorial denotation was the tour guide's comment that the huge modernist-style building on the corner of ulica Tłomackie in Muranow (called the Błękitny Wieżowiec, or 'Blue Skyscraper', Figure 4), one of the tallest and most conspicuous buildings in Warsaw, stands where the Great Synagogue stood prior to its destruction in 1943 (Jewish Historical Institute 2017). In pointing out this particular "layer of time" in Warsaw, the tour guide superimposed marginal Jewish history onto contemporary non-Jewish Polish space (Meng 2015, 79). Fundacja Shalom's Yiddishland is thus simultaneously an autonomous realm that facilitates a secular Yiddish speech community and a site that temporarily shifts the linguistic and spatial reality of the Muranow neighborhood, allowing students to access older notions of Jewish territoriality in Polish space (Meng 2015; Shandler 2004).

Figure 4: Błękitny Wieżowiec, site of the former Great Synagogue. May, 2006. Photo by Wikimedia Commons.

"You Can't Do It in Full, But You Can Try"

Instructors of secular Yiddish courses, as teachers of a language with no clear community of practice or designated geographical homeland, are tasked with providing sociocultural experiences beyond the scope of language instruction. The Fundacja Shalom course, while a Yiddish language course first and foremost, included mandatory additional programming such as Jewish cooking classes or musical performances almost every day. When I asked one Yiddish teacher in the program why such an emphasis was placed on cultural programming in tandem with language courses, she explained to me that:

> The difference about learning Yiddish and learning some other language is when you're learning some other language you can usually go somewhere that the language is spoken and you can experience it…with Yiddish it's much, much harder, it's a lot of responsibility for the teacher, we have to sort of construct this… You can't do it in full, but you can try. That's why we have this cooking workshop.

Furthermore, this instructor emphasized that in their eyes, part of the responsibility of the Yiddish instructor is to make students familiar with the "smells [and] tastes" of Jewish culture and to enable an embodied experience of the Yiddish sociocultural environment, despite the fact that such an environment is increasingly difficult to find outside of Yiddish classrooms and seminars. These embodied experiences push against the "threat of a growing unnaturalness" (Peckerar 2011, 238) inherent to the instruction of a historically vernacular language in a formal classroom setting. The Jewish cooking workshop is one such example of programming aimed at providing an embodied sociocultural experience for students. Additionally, the course textbook includes several traditional Yiddish songs, including ") " בולבעס"Bulbes"), a children's song about potatoes, which were sung in classes.

Yiddish instructors are tasked not only with grammatical instruction and error correction in their classrooms, but also at facilitating and maintaining a Yiddishland, providing an embodied sociocultural realm wherein Yiddish temporarily ceases to be non-territorial. As a part of this ideological project, Fundacja Shalom's Yiddish course explicitly engaged with sites of historic local Jewish geography, such as the former Warsaw Ghetto. Access to historic sites was advertised explicitly in the description of the language program, acknowledging the value of learning the Yiddish language *in-situ*. Fundacja Shalom's website explicitly advertises physical access to "the Jewish cemetery with tombstones of Y.L. Peretz, Chone Shmeruk and others; the Jewish quarter of Praga on the right bank of the Vistula river, [and] the Warsaw ghetto" (Center for Yiddish Culture Website) as drawing points of the program, implying that they will make the student's experience more authentic and embodied. Avineri points out a "conflation of language and culture" as one of the identifying characteristics of a *metalinguistic community*: this conflation of language and culture was explicitly espoused by Fundacja Shalom Yiddish instructors, and shaped the course's pedagogical practices.

The ideology that Yiddish language pedagogy needs to be augmented by sociocultural experiences to "properly" teach students the Yiddish language is indicative of the course's aims beyond just linguistic pedagogy. The "About Us" section of the Fundacja Shalom website states "Our intention is to discuss and teach both in an attractive and modern way to offer this immense and precious heritage [of Ashkenazi culture] a better opportunity to be incorporated into the contemporary [Polish] culture" (Centrum Kultury Jidysz). The instruction of the Yiddish language and of Ashkenazi culture are both viewed here as components of the same endeavour, and furthermore, are viewed as components of the larger process of Polish-Jewish historical negotiation. In this way, the Fundacja Shalom Yiddish course is almost self-consciously an act of "memory work", as the description frames the course as a type of 'interventional' memorial practice. The instructors and the institution of Fundacja Shalom actively frame their course a site that facilitates "the creation of new opportunities—or demands—for participation, engagement, intercultural encounter, and exchange", providing a site wherein a heterogeneous speech community can collaboratively reframe marginal Jewish history (Lehrer and Waligorska 2013, 512).

Postvernacularity in the Classroom

Even while being taught the most banal grammatical details of the language, the class was reminded constantly of the deep symbolism and cultural importance of the Yiddish language. The Fundacja Shalom classroom was a site that allowed for Yiddish to be used as a vernacular, but the *postvernacular* qualities of Yiddish speech and text nevertheless remained. In line with what Shandler (2004) and Avineri (2013) have observed, the Yiddish language was being symbolically 'performed' and presented constantly throughout the course. The second day of the course featured a musical performance in Yiddish by a Canadian-Jewish singer, who not only sang entirely in Yiddish, but bantered in between the songs in Yiddish as well, knowing explicitly that a nearly a third of the audience did not hold the Yiddish competence to understand what she was saying. A similar situation occurred on the class's trip to the Jewish Historical Institute on

ulica Tłomackie, where the beginner Yiddish course was shown a room of extensive archives of historical documents and primary documents in Yiddish (Figure 5). The Yiddish students, myself included, were unable to understand the any of the text, but were nonetheless in awe of the volume of Yiddish text and the loaded cultural symbol of the handwritten Yiddish language. Friedman (2016) has observed a similar situation in his ethnography of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, describing how visitors came to observe the sheer volume of Yiddish texts even though they rarely had any relevant Yiddish competence. This relates back to Shandler's notion of postvernacularity in that the symbolic value of Yiddish precedes one's ability to understand it, and that one's lack of fluency does not hinder their proclaimed devotion to the language (Shandler 2004). It also affirms the metalinguistic qualities of Yiddish speech communities, in that secular Yiddish speech communities are constantly assessing the role and vitality of Yiddish in the present moment (Avineri 2014).

"Alternative Polish History"

Non-Jewish Polish students made up about a third of the students in the classroom. Wodzinski suggests that many Polish students, with or without a Jewish background, who study Jewish history and culture are looking "for an alternative version of Polishness" in Jewish culture, one that is rooted in Polish history yet distinct from the "xenophobic version [of Polishness] promoted by nationalistic circles that are present, often very aggressively, in Polish public space" (Wodzinski 2011, 109). About one third of the students in the beginner Yiddish classroom were Polish university students who were all involved in Yiddish or Jewish studies via academia. I sat next to one of them- a young university student from Warsaw - in class every day, and having never visited Warsaw before, I asked him where I could find good food or live music in the city. He responded by telling me that "there is no culture in Poland", and continued to explain that in his eyes, there was no worthwhile Polish art or culture in Warsaw today. I told him that I
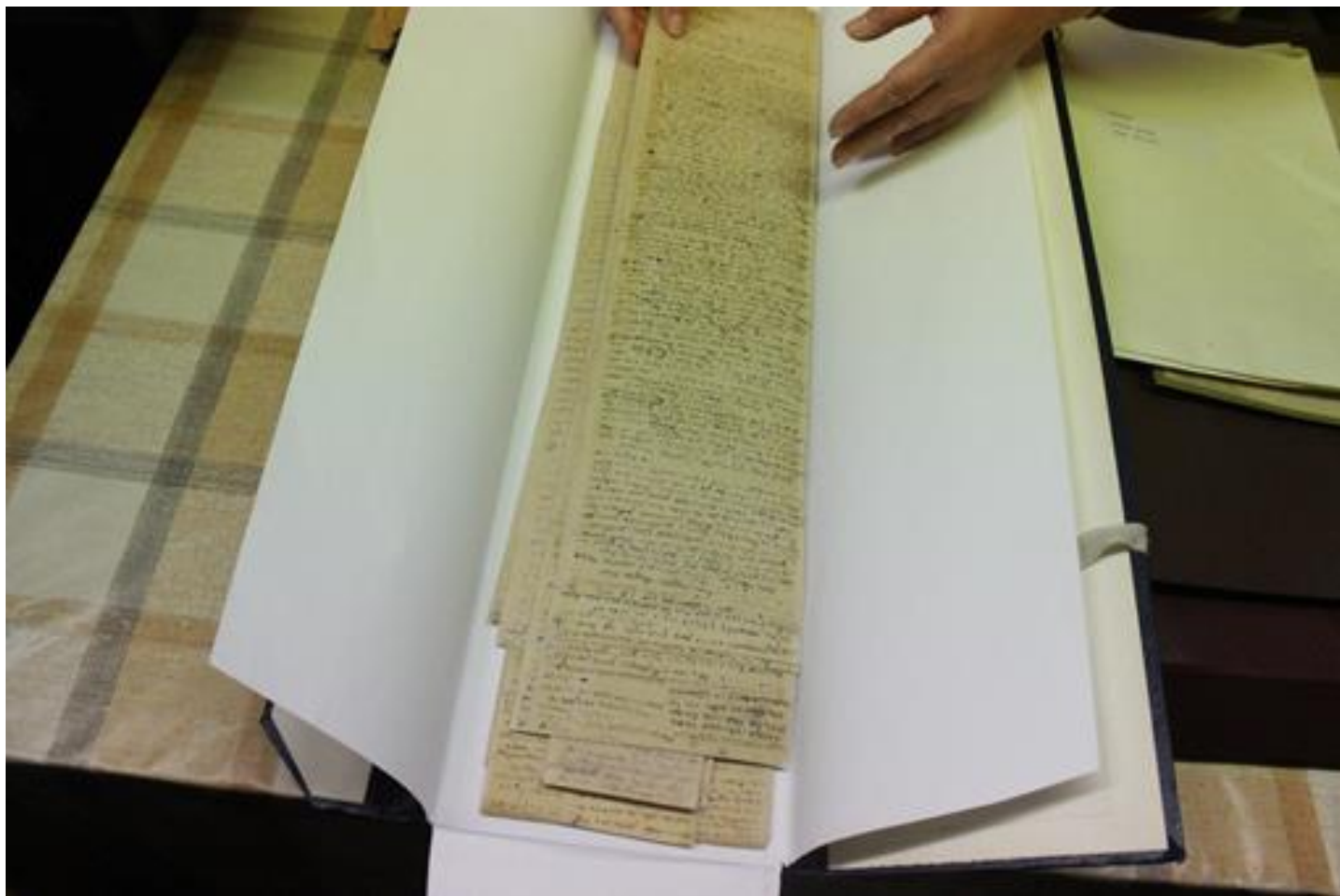

Figure 5: Yiddish documents shown to beginner students at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, July 2016. Photo by author.

was from New York, and he gladly discussed YIVO (the Institute for Jewish Research in Manhattan) and New York Jewish culture with me for ten minutes or so afterwards.

While this Polish student believes that mainstream Poland is devoid of culture, he willingly enrolled in Fundacja Shalom's Yiddish language course, a marginal and very specific endeavor. This student's actions and attitude index a belief in the virtues of Jewish culture and Yiddish relative to Polish culture, as well as a reverence for Poland's Jewish past, which is a source of 'real' culture in his eyes. The Yiddish language is enmeshed in a narrative of subverting or augmenting mainstream Polish culture, celebrated because it is marginal and symbolic of alternative Polish historical narratives. Wodzinski also suggests that the popularity of Jewish culture in Poland is due to its historical and geographical proximity, perhaps offering certain Polish students a new lens with which to view local space and a heightened awareness of the "layers of time" in Warsaw and Poland in general (Meng 2015).

Conclusions

The Yiddish language is framed by many narratives at once, and is often employed as a shorthand for the totality of the European Jewish *shtetl* life that all but ceased to exist after the Holocaust. In its contemporary *postvernacular* mode, this symbolism precedes vernacular Yiddish usage, rendering most secular Yiddish language use performative and deliberate, incapable of just describing everyday reality without also forwarding particular ideologies and nostalgias. Furthermore, the Yiddish language has a unique relationship to space and notions of national homeland, making any site of secular Yiddish language use an ephemeral Yiddophone realm, or a "Yiddishland" (Shandler 2004). In the 21st century, one of the most common secular Yiddish speech communities is that of Yiddish language classrooms, a pedagogical Yiddishland wherein the nostalgias and languages ideologies of diaspora Jewry and non-Jews alike can be realized and refigured. This paper has argued that the Fundacja Shalom Yiddish classroom, in its geographical 'otherness' and heterogeneous language classroom, contributes to ongoing historical

negotiations of Jewish history in Poland, blending seamlessly into newer paradigms of Polish engagement with its Jewish past that are defined by participation and poly-vocal discussion rather than historical documentation and passive Holocaust tourism (Kugelmass 1995; Lehrer and Waligorska 2013; Wodzinski 2011). This "memory work" seeks not only to document Jewish history but to historically 'intervene', purposefully asking difficult questions about Polish anti-semitism, diaspora tourism, and Jewish memory in Poland today. Fundacja Shalom's language classroom asserts a claim to the Polish territoriality of the Yiddish language, one that intersects with the multiple narratives regarding ancestral nostalgia and Jewish-Polish memory in which Yiddish is framed in the 21st century.

Acknowledgements

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