

PREFACE

There has developed in recent years a growing interest in Jewish subjects, particularly in the world of one's parents and grandparents. This is based upon a sincere and genuine desire to understand the values and aspirations which sustained generations of eastern European Jewry, as well as upon romantic yearnings and a nostalgia for a world which had a special warmth and charm of its own.

This work is an attempt to offer an insight into the life of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe and the New World, as it reveals itself through thousands of folk sayings. These sayings reflect the experience of millions of people over a span of many generations.

For several years I have been collecting, making notes, cataloguing, and translating from the rich lore of Yiddish folk sayings. What began as a hobby has become an obsession: to make available that great storehouse of aphorisms, maxims, pithy sayings, proverbs, and witticisms of the Yiddish-speaking world of Eastern Europe and immigrant North America. It is my hope to preserve them for this and future generations. The text is based upon my collection gathered over the years with the help of relatives, friends and acquaintances, as well as on extended reading on the subject.

The sayings are classified by subject heading in order to clarify their meanings. I did not attempt to locate original sources or to place them in specific geographical, social, or economic contexts, except as indicated by the classification system. Nor have I attempted to place them within the framework of sociological or linguistic theory, although I have given some social and historical background in the introduction.

The sayings have been gathered through oral transmission or from writings identifying them as folk material. Occasionally they have been found in the writings of such eminent authors as Sholem Aleichem, Bialik, and others, who have been known to incorporate folk material in their writings, and their inclusion here is based on that belief. Some of the sayings have their origins in the Bible, Talmud, and other sacred writings; their translation into Yiddish enabled them to be in-

corporated into daily life. The sources from which these sayings are taken are not cited, as they range over a wide area, are often attributable to more than one source, and appear in more than one variation.

Except for correcting the most obvious errors of grammar, spelling, and pronunciation, I have not tampered with the sayings. They are rendered as received. In considering the problems of translation, liberties had to be taken with the text and literal exactness sometimes had to be sacrificed for other considerations. Throughout, I have borne in mind the following:

He falsifies who renders a verse just as it looks. Talmud, Kiddushin
and

Sometimes one must translate not the lines themselves but what is written between them. Chaim Nachman Bialik

I have tried to render as faithful a translation as possible, maintaining the characteristics of the original: that is, the brevity, rhyme, playfulness, contrasts, mood, and the occasional peculiarities of speech. In specific situations, it became necessary to depart somewhat from the strictly literal because the word, phrase, or thought would have little or no meaning outside the Yiddish-speaking world.

Translating from the Yiddish offers several challenges beyond those usually associated with this type of work. Translation inevitably involves distortion; one must weigh each word or turn of phrase. In the case of Yiddish, this is further complicated by the inclusion into colloquial usage of Biblical and Talmudic words, phrases, and quotations. Maurice Samuel, in his book *In Praise of Yiddish*, discusses the way Hebrew forms a canopy over the mundane world of Yiddish. He writes: 'The fusion of the secular and sacred in Yiddish makes possible a charming transition from the jocular to the solemn and back again. Well-worn colloquialisms and dignified passages jostle popular interjections without giving or taking offense.' The problem remains a difficult one: how to bring to life that world which exists beneath the layer of words and make accessible the treasure which this culture has bequeathed us.

I wish to acknowledge with appreciation several works which were frequently consulted and were especially useful in the preparation of this text.

Most of the sayings in this book were received orally and sometimes distorted and unclear, especially the Hebrew and Slavic words and phrases. In order to arrive at greater precision and clarity of the given material, I consulted a thesaurus of the Yiddish language, *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* by Nokhem Shtutshkof. This volume enabled me to obtain correct spellings and to arrive at standard Yiddish pronunciation. In addition to being a source of many of the sayings and contributing valuable information and guidance, *Der oytser* provided hours of pleasurable exploration.

Two works by Uriel Weinreich, *Colleg Yiddish* and *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary*, were essential aids and the standard by which I was guided in questions of grammar, spelling, transliteration, and translation. *The English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary* of Aleksander Harkavy was most useful for the definitions of localisms and words popular at the time of publication (1898). *Yidishe shprikhverter un redensarten* by Ignats Bernstein, published in 1908, is the massive work on this subject. I obtained access to this volume late in my research through the assistance of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. This volume was most useful for supplementary notes and explanations of abstruse sayings. These scholarly works greatly facilitated my research and enabled me to proceed with greater accuracy and assurance than would otherwise have been the case.

The original Yiddish text is included so that both the serious student and the interested reader can fully appreciate the pungent flavour of the original. Transcription is provided as well as translation into English.

I have refrained from supplying lengthy explanatory notes to the text, not wishing to drown the sayings in a sea of explication. A glossary defining frequently used Hebrew and Yiddish terms appears on pages 263–6. The main form of explanation is provided by the headings, which were designed to clarify the meaning of the individual saying. There are exceptions to this general practise; some sayings require further elucidation as they refer to customs and practises with which the general reader may not be familiar. It is hoped that the additional notes will clarify otherwise obscure sayings.

This book was undertaken because of a dissatisfaction with the work that is currently available in English. In the process of completing this undertaking, I have been taught the truth of the maxim:

עס איז לייכטער צו זיין אַ מבקר ווי אַ מחבר.

Es iz laykhter tsu zayn a mevaker vi a mekhaber.

It is easier to be a critic than an author.

My approach to this work stems from two motivations. One is my recognition of the great void in Jewish life created by the Holocaust, which destroyed an organic Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe. To imagine that void and to appreciate what was lost is one of the aims of this volume. The other motivation for this work stems from my rejection of what the eminent historian Salo Baron has called ‘the lachrymose approach to Jewish history,’ a recitation of one misfortune after another. Baron himself has chosen to emphasize the spiritual and social richness of Jewish communal life, which was varied and dynamic in spite of the interferences and interruptions from a hostile environment. This collection, then, is my own modest contribution to the record of a positive Jewish experience.

Such a collection can never be considered complete. New material is constantly being brought to my attention. The work must, therefore, be considered unfinished. In offering the volume to the reader at this time, I am guided by the dictum:

It is not incumbent upon you to finish the work, neither are you free to desist from it.
Pirkei avot 2:21

I wish to thank the following:

My husband Aryeh, whose knowledge and understanding of Jewish learning and culture together with his inexhaustible patience encouraged me through every stage to complete this task. His grasp of the unique problems involved was especially helpful in translating the material and editing the manuscript.

My son Aaron, for his critical evaluation of the manuscript and helpful suggestions for improvement. My son Joel, for his literary and editorial suggestions, good humour and patience through countless revisions to the text.

My parents Tsvi Mayer z"l and Rivka Recht, who reviewed the work in progress and contributed their extensive knowledge of the Yiddish language and its literature, providing insight into difficult and obscure words and phrases. It is an abiding sorrow that my father was not permitted to live to see the book in print.

Ben Kayfetz for his kind assistance and advice.

Shirley Rebecca Diamond, Shoshana Disenhouse Morag, and Anne Medres Glass z"l, for their reviews and suggestions on parts of the manuscript.

Marvin Herzog, Professor of Yiddish Language and Literature, Columbia University, for providing a number of useful suggestions. Beatrice Silverman-Weinreich and Dina Abramovitz of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York for their help in locating useful material.

Dr Ron Schoeffel, editor, University of Toronto Press, for his continued support and encouragement in preparing this manuscript for publication.

Brina Rose, whose expert knowledge of Yiddish grammar and syntax helped clarify and correct the text. It was a particular pleasure to work with her, the daughter of my Yiddish teachers, the late Esther (Stere) and Moshe Menachovsky.

I extend appreciation to my relatives and friends who supplied me with many sayings and to my teachers and the Jewish community of Toronto for providing a stimulating environment in which to carry on this work.

Toronto, Ontario
30 September 1982