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מַיִן ייִדישע לערנונג

(Transliterated : Meyn Yidishe Lerning)

My Yiddish-Jewish Learning

Master's Thesis

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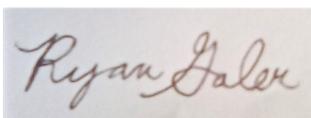
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Table of Contents

Author Declaration Form – 1

Table of Contents – 2

Acknowledgements – 3

Abstract – 4

Introduction – 5 to 6

Part I – Untangling the Knot of Patrilineality and Anti-Semitism – 7 to 12

Part II - Embracing My Jewishness – 13 to 26

A) Hey Alma – 13 to 14

B) Learning Yiddish – 15 to 17

C) Yiddish Contemporary Art – 18 to 24

D) Writing Yiddish – 25 to 26

Part III - Experiments in Yiddish Contemporary Art, or
Making A Jewish Identity of My Own – 27 to 39

A) Intro – 27 to 28

B) Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup) – 29 to 31

C) Heim-ish – 32 to 33

D) Yiddish Snow Writing – 34 to 36

E) Home – 37 to 39

Conclusion – 40

List of Images – 41 to 42

Bibliography – 43 to 44

Abstract

My Yiddish-Jewish Learning tells the story of my journey this past year of reclaiming, making sense of, embracing, and making art in relation to my Jewish identity. Wondering one day if I could call myself a Litvak led me to the much bigger questions: Am I really a Jew? If so, how? I would go from asking if I had a place in this community at all to learning more and more, until, suddenly, I found myself totally immersed in Jewishness.

I am a Patrilineal Jew, and I soon found that along with that comes my own unique experience of antisemitism. I managed to make sense of this largely thanks to the book *Jews Don't Count* by David Baddiel, which actually discusses the (lack of) place of Jews in progressive identity politics. After processing to some extent the impact these issues have had on my life, I found myself more open and able to enjoy this identity. I was especially encouraged by the Jewish feminist culture site *Hey Alma*. Soon, I also began to learn the Yiddish language.

As I became more immersed in the pluralistic / inclusive (online) Jewish world, I wanted to explore and enrich my connection to it further. I began to learn to write in Yiddish and was excited by the visual beauty of the handwritten script. Encouraged in particular by the work of Yevgeny Fiks, including his text on Yiddish Contemporary Art, I decided to try experimenting with learning to write the script through the process of making visual art. Primarily using unfamiliar media, attempting amateur translations, I slowly, patiently found 'my (creative) voice' in Yiddish. This unfolded as I moved between and navigated different connections to Estonia, Lithuania, and the US. In the end, the project of *My Yiddish-Jewish Learning* became the perfect means to explore questions of identity, home, place, memory, and family.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my supervisors for often being more open minded than myself regarding the possibilities of my own work and art in general.

I also am extremely grateful to all the writers, thinkers and artists, organizers and activists who have made this work possible. This includes those directly referenced here as well as so many others in the Jewish-Yiddish cultural landscape and community.

I could not have made this journey without those who have always been there to listen and talk through these emotionally and intellectually complex ideas and experiences. You know who you are!

Finally, thank you to my family for all your help and support these past years, and for providing a unique Jewish home to grow up in.

Introduction

At the end of 2020, I wrote an article about my experience working for the Baltic art project Roots to Routes, which was published in the online, Lithuania-based Baltic art journal Echo Gone Wrong¹. In this article, I self-identified as being 'of Litvak origin' for the first time publicly - at least, in writing, that is. I had only decided to include this in the article after a certain amount of hesitation. I was nervous for a few reasons. Being an American in Europe claiming any heritage-based identity risks feeling like a cliché, and I did not wish to appear to be making some kind of claim over a territory that I did not feel to be my own. Nevertheless, Wikipedia defines Litvaks as 'Jews with roots in the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania'². Roots are key, as today there are not many Jews still living in this region, and by numbers alone, the Litvak community is mainly a diasporic one. My Jewish father's paternal grandparents emigrated to the US from this region, as did all of his mother's family, albeit a few generations further back, so by definition, I was not only 'of Litvak origin' but a full-on Litvak.

Roots to Routes had as one of its core themes the complexities of identity in the Baltic region in relation to travel, migration, displacement and belonging. So, the question of my place in the Baltics (or, representing Baltic artists in Marseille, as part of Manifesta 13 Marseille's parallel program, Les Parallèles du Sud) was right at home, so to speak. My uncertainty, however, was linked to another problem – not at all a focus of the project – and that was antisemitism. I may have had trouble admitting it, but I was pretty anxious about outing myself as a Jew in Eastern Europe. While I didn't necessarily expect anything dangerous to come of this (in fact, I hardly expected anyone to read the piece) it had long been ingrained in me to be careful regarding this matter – both in ways said aloud and unstated, or seemingly unnecessary to state directly.

All the while, there was a part of me that felt like an imposter on another front because for as long as I can remember, fellow Jews and non-Jews alike, when confronted with my claim to being Jewish, have asked whether it is my mother or my father who is Jewish.

¹Galer, Ryan, Searching for the Baltics on a Marseille Street – Echo Gone Wrong 5 January 2021, <https://echogonewrong.com/searching-for-the-baltics-on-a-marseille-street/> (Accessed 15 February 2022).

²Lithuanian Jews – Wikipedia 9 December 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Lithuanian_Jews&oldid=1059396442 (Accessed 10 December 2021).

When I tell them it is my father, they almost always reply 'Well then, you're not really Jewish.' (Many people believe that Jewishness can only be passed down on the mother's side.) Their reply was at some point expected – otherwise, I realized, they probably would not have bothered to ask the question.

My fear of claiming such an identity came from multiple directions. In the end, though, I felt compelled to write the truth as I understood it. I believe that facing these doubts pointed me toward a more serious look at my Jewish identity.

My current Jewish journey began in earnest in the spring of 2021, as I began to find more and more of the resources I had long been lacking. Over the course of this past year I went from viewing my Jewishness as something over which I had an uncertain claim, with which not a lot could be done³ to the point of being fully immersed in something that not only belonged to me but that could go whatever direction, take whichever form I chose. I can now call myself a Jew (or Jewish, no dash between Jew and ish needed) without just about any doubts (excepting that doubt itself is considered a pretty Jewish thing). While it alone does not define me, being Jewish plays a much larger part than in the past I felt able to acknowledge. I see now that I would not be 'me' without it.

I am calling this process 'My Yiddish-Jewish⁴ Learning'⁵ (or, less clunkily, in transliterated Yiddish, 'Meyn Yidishe Larning'). It is a kind of personal research project that has become a part of my daily life – 'a practice' so to speak, somewhat seamlessly encompassing reading, writing, language-learning, translating, art-making, web-searching, television-watching, museum- and restaurant-going, cooking, travel and conversations casual and serious. Another might simply call this 'being Jewish,' but to me, it feels more like a Jewish becoming, which is central to my life and my artistic practice. It is about discovering what it means to me to be Jewish, coupled with the realization that such a process might be a core part of being Jewish itself.

³ - That is, unless I wanted to try to be 'a better Jew' or 'more Jewish' (questionable concepts that never sat well with me) with the option of 'not being a Jew at all' never even crossing my mind.

⁴ In Yiddish, the word 'Yiddish' means both Yiddish and Jewish.

⁵ Inspired by MyJewishLearning.com, an excellent resource on all things Jewish.

Part I : Untangling the Knot of Patrilineality and Antisemitism

Sometime after publishing the article in which I outed myself as a Litvak, I found myself asking the most basic question, that is : 'Am I, technically, Jewish? And if so, how?' The first question seems almost silly now, but it was really more sad – that gatekeeping, a kind of bullying within my own community, had left me feeling so unwelcome that I questioned my very claim to a place there.⁶ So, I was rather grateful when I found the Wikipedia article 'Who is a Jew?' At the top, it states that Reform and Reconstructionist Jews – as opposed to Orthodox and Conservative ones – accept Jews of both matrilineal and patrilineal descent.⁷ I do not even know any Orthodox Jews, but plenty of people I have met in life quite possibly were raised in the Conservative tradition, which is relatively mainstream. Reading further, I found that the Reform community's central governing body only passed a (controversial) resolution admitting patrilineal Jews in 1983, six years before my birth.⁸ This article provided confirmation both that this was a serious issue in the community (i.e. I was not worrying over nothing) and that not everyone bought into it. Therefore, I did not have to either.

Finding the term 'patrilineal' would also prove useful – both as a label I could embrace and a way to connect with others. Still, even if my being a patrilineal Jew might be acceptable, I 'knew' I was not raised 'all that Jewish,' so then what besides an 'accident of birth' made me so? Growing up, we celebrated holidays sometimes, but that as far as I could see was kind of where it ended. Our more observant friends invited us to Temple once. Or was it synagogue? What was even the difference!? Did I need to join one? Should I learn Hebrew, or Yiddish? I had been to Israel at the age of 18, and I knew the whole Zionism thing was not for me (though, at least, many people there were rather secular and accepting of my ancestry). Altogether, I had way more questions than answers and was not finding what, perhaps, I had hoped to in *Judaism : A Very Short Introduction*. Then one day I searched 'Jew' in the Libby app and that was when I found British Jewish writer and comedian David Baddiel's book *Jews Don't Count*.

⁶ Diving back into the debate on patrilineality now is itself rather upsetting, even after this year of immersion in the more, pluralistic, accepting parts of the (mostly, online) Jewish community.

⁷ Who Is a Jew – Wikipedia 10 February 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Who_is_a_Jew%3F&oldid=1071096733 (Accessed 13 February 2022).

⁸ Who is a Jew? Section 4.1.1 Patrilineal descent.

I was not looking for a book about modern day antisemitism. In fact, had I then done such a Google search, I probably would have been led first to Deborah E. Lipstadt's *Antisemitism : Here and Now* (2019) (fig. 1).⁹

Antisemitism: Here and Now Hardcover –
January 29, 2019
 by Deborah E. Lipstadt (Author)
 ★★★★★ 199 ratings

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Figures 1 & 2. Screenshot, D. E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism : Here and Now*, Amazon.com, 2022.

If I had found any of these other books (fig. 2), I don't think I would have wanted to read them. Even today, I find them intimidating. Baddiel's book spoke to something much more specific, which I think I desperately needed to hear, or at least be given permission to consider.

⁹D. E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* – Amazon, 2022, <https://www.amazon.com/Antisemitism-Here-Deborah-Lipstadt/dp/0805243372> (Accessed 26 April 2022)

The book's tagline reads : 'How identity politics failed one particular identity.' The description states :

Jews Don't Count is a book for people who consider themselves on the right side of history. People fighting the good fight against homophobia, disablism, transphobia and, particularly, racism. People, possibly, like you.

It is the comedian and writer David Baddiel's contention that one type of racism has been left out of this fight. [...] Baddiel argues that those who *think* of themselves as on the right side of history have often ignored the history of anti-Semitism. He outlines why and how, in a time of intensely heightened awareness of minorities, Jews don't count as a real minority: and why they should.¹⁰

Jews Don't Count allowed me to consider that I, too, had experienced anti-semitism – racism, really¹¹ – even as I had lived most of my life in relatively left-leaning, liberal places. The importance of this to my journey cannot be overstated; nor can I emphasize enough how difficult it has been for me to wrap my head around it. For, even as I write this a year or so later, as I re-read this book, I still have a deep underlying sense of guilt that I am making a big deal over nothing – that I am privileged as a white person – and, perhaps, more so as a Jew – end of story. That this racism comes not only from familiar right-wing anti-semitism but also from mainstream culture and even from the very progressive identity politics to which I subscribe; that many Jews, myself included, have internalized such anti-Jewish racism; and that, finally, we are made to feel that this is not actually a problem, or not as much as other forms of racism : these are the basic premises of Baddiel's book.

He first explains away the misconception that antisemitism is a lesser evil because it is primarily a form of religious intolerance. After suggesting that some religious intolerance could be a good thing, as organized religions themselves can be oppressive

¹⁰D. Baddiel, *Jews Don't Count*. London : TLS Books, 2021. Libby.

¹¹ I accept the belief that so-called anti-white racism cannot exist because racism (at least, as it exists in Western culture) stems from white power structures. It has been nailed into my head by many people that I am white. Therefore, it makes me incredibly nervous to claim that I am or have been a victim of racism. As I write it, it is hard for me to believe myself. The fact is, however, that antisemitism is (anti-Jewish) racism, and I am Jewish. Therefore, I, too, can be a victim of racism. While it may seem unnecessary to spell it out like this, I have to do it - for myself, but also so my reader can see how much a hold on me this has.

power-structures, he points out that again and again Jews have been persecuted for their ethnicity, too, and that the Gestapo would not have made any exception for him because he is an atheist.¹² Here, he touches on two very important points regarding Jewish identity.

First, we return to this question of ‘who is a Jew?’ Is it a religion, an ethnicity, a race, an ethno-religious group, a nation, a people, a culture, an identity, or what? The fact is the Jewish world is incredibly diverse. It is not a monolith and Jews themselves have hardly agreed on a definition. Being Jewish means very different things to different people. My favorite ‘definition’ comes from the aforementioned Wikipedia article. It is a quote from celebrated Israeli writer Amos Oz, ‘Who is a Jew? Everyone who is mad enough to call himself or herself a Jew is a Jew.’¹³ I interpret this as saying that anybody concerned or burdened with the question of whether or not they are Jewish likely can consider themselves to be so. After that, each individual is free to figure out what to make of it.

The second thing that stands out to me from Baddiel here is this familiar experience of defining oneself in relation to Nazis (or, any anti-Jewish racists) and to our history as victims of persecution. This is, perhaps, where ‘concern’ tips over into ‘burden’. What it signifies is that many Jews see their Jewishness as something that cannot be separated from antisemitism and is not a choice. While we can choose to convert to another religion, change our last names, get nose-jobs, disavow our heritage, or in any number of ways (attempt to) ‘assimilate’ into the mainstream (read : White Christian-normative) culture, in the eyes of antisemites we do not –cannot – stop being Jews.¹⁴ While I do not want to stop being a Jew – however I make sense of being one – I also understand as Baddiel and so many others do that it is also never completely up to me.

In my own version : growing up and until this journey began and even now, in my head and sometimes aloud, I have often been stuck thinking, after being told I’m ‘not really Jewish,’ or that I’m ‘only half-Jewish’ that that would not have mattered at all had I lived

¹²D. Baddiel, *Jews Don’t Count*, pp. 76-77

¹³Who is a Jew? Section 7 Other non-religious definitions.

¹⁴ Actually, I should clarify that in the eyes of White supremacists we cannot stop being Jews, whereas the antisemites on the left discussed by Baddiel in some sense seem to believe that part of Jewish privilege involves being able to stop being Jews, or at least, having an identity that can be hidden or shed as one assimilates into Whiteness.

in Europe at the time of the Holocaust.¹⁵ Often, my claim to Jewishness has been denied me by non-Jews who know very little about Jewish culture but have somewhere picked up this detail regarding patrilineal Jews and do not hesitate to remind me of it. (Sometimes I have done the job for them, trying to get ahead of the game.) I believe that this itself could be seen as a form of anti-semitism. For, it is denying me the right to a sense of belonging, while doing nothing to protect me from more virulent forms of antisemitism, including the particularly painful awareness or intergenerational trauma of our history of persecution. This act also only further stereotypes Jews, since they were not only talking about my mom not being Jewish, but also about my looking like her and not my father, while at times also mentioning my lack of traditional Jewish upbringing or beliefs.

I think that is why Baddiel's book really hit home for me. The word 'patrilineal' does not come up once. However, the (non-Jewish) people denying me my claim to being Jewish were not, as far as I know, right-wing antisemites. (If I have even a vague sense of that kind of feeling in someone, I do my utmost to hide my Jewishness, which is hardly a privilege. Fortunately, I have not had this experience too often). Instead, they were friends of mine – progressives, more or less, if before this term had come (back) into fashion. They were white, black and brown. They made antisemitic statements along the lines of 'Jews run Hollywood,' 'The Holocaust gets too much attention, what about other atrocities?' (as if it were a competition) 'Jews are rich,' or pointing to the prevalence of Jews at prestigious universities such as Brown, where I did my Bachelor's, all of which boiled down to saying some form or other of 'Jews are privileged and powerful.'

Baddiel's ideas explained to me why certain people who I thought were my allies were not necessarily reliably so. I suddenly found myself looking back and being able to see these encounters for what they were – effectively, 'microaggressions.' Usually, my friends said these things somewhat jokingly in a way that was hard to call out. Generally, I do not think that they were intending to hurt me. However, having possibly already denied me my full claim to Jewishness, they were effectively denying me the right to call these things out as antisemitic. For as Baddiel points out, the golden rule of racism and other harmful -isms

¹⁵ In fact, I recently became less clear about this as I learned of the Nazi methods of determining who is or isn't a Jew depending on the particular make up of their family, particularly involving the Nuremberg laws. Unfortunately, before I got to the bottom of it all, I was too overwhelmed and could not continue.

these days is that it is up to the victim to define what is racist, sexist, etc.¹⁶; yet, for some reason, this right is often denied to Jews, unlike most other minorities. However, if you are denied even being ‘a real Jew’ you are doubly excluded from this right.

The way these beliefs and statements made me feel was that any attempt of mine to make my Jewishness public, to become a more active member in the Jewish community, or to enjoy simply finding out that I shared this identity with a new friend (supposing they didn’t ask about my parents’ Jewishness, or not suspiciously, at least) would imply I was trying to take advantage of a privilege at the expense of anyone less privileged. In fact, such internalized antisemitism – combined with the gatekeeping around my status as a patrilineal Jew – kept me away from almost any benefit that might have come from tapping into the resources of a relatively well-organized community that has been shown throughout history that it has to be somewhat self-reliant. Such beliefs only alienated me further, disempowering me in a way that also prevented me from feeling able to take part in the very social justice projects that said progressives claimed to be fighting on behalf of.

Now I could see that, actually, antisemitism has impacted my life and still does. This was difficult to digest, and after finishing the book, I had trouble envisioning a way forward. Being given permission by Baddiel (and many others since) to say 'yes, sometimes I am a victim – this thing is not just in my head,' however, enabled me to begin to process trauma and better understand how I am situated in the world. What I did not know yet was that in working through some of these feelings and ideas I was making space for something more positive - that is, a chance to fully embrace my Jewishness. While contending with antisemitism would remain an inextricable part of this identity, I soon learned that being Jewish could involve many much more empowering thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

¹⁶ D. Baddiel, *Jews Don’t Count*, p. 115

Part II : Embracing My Jewish Identity

Hey Alma

The doubts regarding my status as a patrilineal Jew were deep seated, however. Another part of *Jews Don't Count* helped me to rethink where this put me in relation to other Jews. His deconstruction of the question of 'Are [White¹⁷] Jews white?'¹⁸ provided a parallel to my question : 'Are patrilineal Jews (actually) Jewish?' I kept on searching and soon found *Hey Alma* or *Alma*¹⁹. This culture site / online community's tagline is 'Jewish, feminist, and full of chutzpah'. Its 'About' page states :

We believe in using our platform to raise the voices of all Jews, but especially those who often don't get heard enough in the organized Jewish world, including Jews of Color, queer Jews, Jews by choice, and Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews.²⁰

While never sugar-coating the more difficult sides of being Jewish, this site provided a sudden, welcome, overdue, heavy dose of Jew-positivity in my life. And while I never found commentary on Baddiel's book there (which might have been what I was looking for in the first place) there were posts by other patrilineal Jews (another of the groups who 'don't get heard enough,' it turned out – but maybe just enough not to make the list above). They were talking about exactly what I was struggling with. I found articles with titles like 'Reclaiming My Jewish Identity as a Patrilineal Jew', which began:

¹⁷ Because there are plenty of Jews of Color who are definitely not - this he was not addressing or had not the need to. Jews of Color have plenty of their own problems within the Jewish community that in ways mirror my own as a Patrilineal Jew, but in many ways do not - as for them, the assumption that they are not Jewish comes from their appearance, while I am (possibly) assumed Jewish (no qualifiers needed) so long as I am in a Jewish space, and only once people ask about my exact heritage, upbringing, or beliefs does my Jewishness come into question. Then again, for some, my appearance (more like my blonde, blue-eyed mom) already makes my status questionable.

¹⁸ Cite page number - maybe make note about schrodingers jews...

¹⁹ Since I began writing, they have rebranded as Hey Alma, so I will use Alma / Hey Alma interchangeably.

²⁰ About Hey Alma. – Hey Alma, <https://www.heyalma.com/about-alma/> (Accessed 14 February 2022).

I have never spoken about my relationship with my Jewishness — until now. I think that's because it's never been something that I've felt ownership over. It's never felt like it belonged to me.²¹

I could not have written it better myself. Then in another article, 'I Felt Insecure In My Jewish Identity. Learning Yiddish Helped' :

Last Hanukkah, my dad gifted me the classic book 'The Joys of Yiddish.' Though it actually might have been a Christmas present — I can't remember. It wouldn't have been that odd for me to receive a book about the language of Eastern European Jews under the Christmas tree rather than next to the menorah. It would just merely reflect my family's multiple cultural influences and how my parents, an American-born Ashkenazi Jewish father and a Spanish-born Catholic-raised mother, have embraced each other's traditions and heritages. Mom makes the latkes, Dad hangs the Christmas lights.²²

This I could write today (literally – mom does make the latkes, though this year, I took charge), only needing to change 'Spanish-born' to 'American' – and go back in time and get that Yiddish book as a present (maybe next year!). However, I do not think I would have been ready to write such a paragraph a year ago. It would have been true, but I was not feeling empowered enough yet. I suppose the same applies to the first quote. Reading many such articles undoubtedly helped me get to a point when I could.

I also found a lot to relate to and learn from other relative outsiders in a community that is so diverse, complex, and old that it throws many wrenches into the works of contemporary discourses around identity. Once I realized that, at least here and in other similarly inclusive Jewish spaces, I had a place, I found room to explore not only the diversity of other Jewish identities but also just how much I could make of my own. My journey may have begun with Wikipedia or Baddiel, but *Hey Alma* is where it truly took off - not least because it led me to Duolingo Yiddish.

²¹Barnett, Gemma, Reclaiming My Jewish Identity as a Patrilineal Jew. – Hey Alma 4 February 2021, <https://www.heyalma.com/reclaiming-my-jewish-identity-as-a-patrilineal-jew/> (Accessed 12 February 2022).

²²Burack, Cristina, I Felt Insecure In My Jewish Identity. Learning Yiddish Helped. – Hey Alma 14 July 2021, <https://www.heyalma.com/i-felt-insecure-in-my-jewish-identity-learning-yiddish-helped/> (Accessed 12 February 2022).

Learning Yiddish

Throughout my life, I have been told that my ancestors spoke Yiddish. I was vaguely aware that some people, though not necessarily many, still did. I had never had the opportunity to learn it myself, however. The closest I had gotten, arguably, was when I had the chance to take a Polish course in college. Linguistically, Polish is probably not closer than German, or even Hebrew in ways.²³ In terms of what I was looking for, though, I feel that this was closest I had come to learning Yiddish.

To clarify : not long before this whole story began, I would have considered myself to be some combination of Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Russian on my dad's side, in addition to my mother's German, English, and Scottish roots. So, when I took Polish, I was considered a heritage learner, as were most of my fellow students. Most speakers of Yiddish generally spoke at least one other local language, so, it is likely some of my Jewish family spoke some Polish. Now, though, I have my doubts now about the label of heritage learner and feel my motivation to learn Polish was missing a part of the picture.

So, how exactly did I finally come to Yiddish? When I was taking part in an Erasmus+ exchange in Lithuania two years ago, I began to look into studying it for the first time. Part of my motivation for going to Lithuania, after all, was exploring my family heritage. I came across an article describing the work being undertaken to develop a Yiddish course on Duolingo, a language-learning app²⁴. While it piqued my interest, the Yiddish course was not to be released for another year. Shortly after I began reading *Alma*, sure enough, roughly a year later, I came across this article : 'The Funniest Tweets About Duolingo's New Yiddish Course' – tagline : 'It seems the entirety of Ashkenazi Jewish Twitter is brushing up on the mama loshen'²⁵.²⁶ Here are some of my favorite examples:

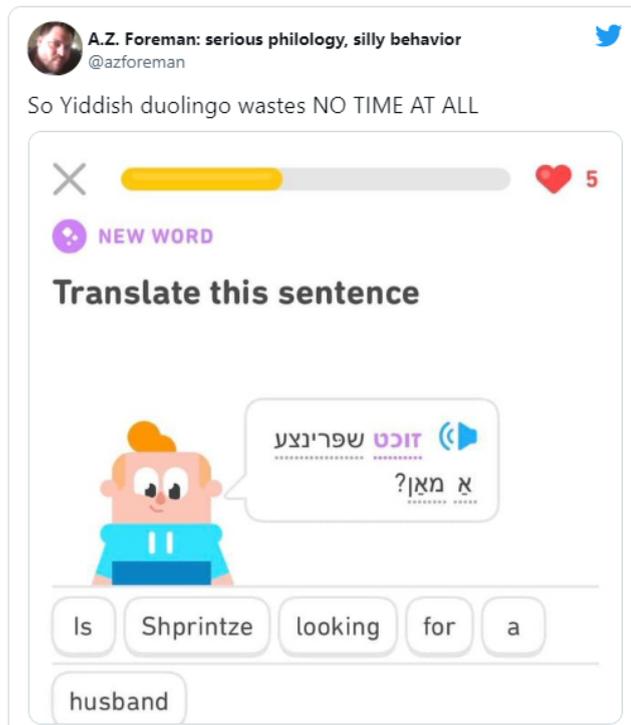
²³ Yiddish is generally categorized by linguists as a Germanic language, but there is debate, as some scholars theorize that it was originally a Slavic language. It is not evolved from Hebrew, a Semitic language, however, it takes many loan words from the so-called *loshn koydesh* (holy tongue, as Hebrew is called in Yiddish).

²⁴ Schwartz, Oscar, Hawaiian, Gaelic, Yiddish: so you want to learn an endangered language on Duolingo? – The Guardian 14 Feb 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/feb/14/hawaiian-gaelic-yiddish-learn-endangered-language-duolingo> (Accessed 10 February 2022).

²⁵ Di mame loshn, 'the mother tongue', is a Yiddish term of endearment for the language, used in opposition to Hebrew. Ashkenazi Jews are those whose ancestors are primarily from northern and eastern Europe.

²⁶ Burack, Emily, The Funniest Tweets about Duolingo's New Yiddish Course. – Hey Alma 6 April 2021, <https://www.heyalma.com/the-funniest-tweets-about-duolingos-new-yiddish-course/> (Accessed 18 April 2022).

12. Once again, did my Grandma program these sentences?!



Figures 3 & 4. Screenshots, E. Burack, The Funniest Tweets about Duolingo's New Yiddish Course, Alma, 2021

I had never tried using a language-learning app. This made me wonder if it might be worth a try – especially for Yiddish, for which there are far fewer resources. It also sounded like

a low pressure, hands-on and fun way to be more a part of the community. At first, it was quite a challenge. I had to learn the alphabet, then get used to reading from right to left. After, I had to make sense of how the course worked and why, as this reflected the complex uses and meanings of Yiddish past and present.

The course turned out to be a compromise between two variants of Yiddish known as YIVO²⁷ standard and Hasidic Yiddish. The former is a standard that was established a century ago – already itself a kind of compromise, as any language standardization project might be – and thus, it has not changed much since, except that few native speakers speaking the dialects most closely resembling this standard remain. So, today it is mostly the language of Yiddish summer camps, cultural festivals and formal language instruction. It operates largely as what scholar Jeffrey Shandler calls post-vernacular Yiddish, ‘used consciously for particular cultural, ideological and artistic ends’.²⁸ Hasidic Yiddish, on the other hand, is the vernacular of hundreds of thousands of Hasidic/haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews throughout the world. As a result of their continued use of the language, it has evolved. The not uncontroversial compromise in the design of the Duolingo course is that it uses the grammar and spelling of YIVO for those hoping to read the classics of Yiddish literature; the spoken dialect taught, meanwhile, is of the Hasidic variant, as most native speakers on the team were Hasids from New York; this way, one can also go out in the world and speak Yiddish with native speakers. Finally, the hope was that this could ‘help bridge the divide between secular society and the haredi Orthodox world.’²⁹

When I joined a course provided online by the Oxford School of Rare Jewish Languages, though, the YIVO standard was used exclusively. This was frustrating, as my pronunciation was corrected immediately and often. Again, I felt like an outsider, but I have since learned to alternate between the two variants, at times mixing them in ways I believe ‘work’ and even create something new. Thus, I have become increasingly absorbed in the contemporary world of Yiddish learning and culture.

²⁷ Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut - Yiddish Scientific Institute; today : Institute for Jewish Research

²⁸ Svigals, Alicia, Whither Queer Yiddishkayt – In Geveb 11 October 2021, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/whither-queer-yiddishkayt> (Accessed 17 April 2022).

²⁹ Friedman, Gabe, How Duolingo created a Yiddish course with a secular scholar and Hasidic Jews from Brooklyn – Jewish Telegraphic Agency 1 April 2021, <https://www.jta.org/2021/04/01/lifestyle/how-duolingo-created-a-yiddish-course-with-a-secular-scholar-and-hasidic-jews-from-brooklyn> (Accessed 23 April 2022).

Yiddish Contemporary Art

Last summer, I was introduced to the work of Yevgeniy Fiks, a Soviet-born artist based in New York, at his first solo exhibition in Estonia *Pas de Trois* at the Tallinn City Gallery, curated by Corina L. Apostol³⁰. This was the first time since learning Yiddish that I had encountered it in a non-virtual space. The mere presence both of the Yiddish language and questions of Jewish identity in the space were deeply touching. It was the first time I have encountered anything related to Jewishness in a contemporary art space in Estonia.³¹

The language was most present in a series of photographic prints depicting flora and fauna from Birobidzhan, the Jewish Autonomous Region of the U.S.S.R., for which Fiks had created names in Yiddish. I could not make out their possible significations, but looking at the images and text (in a more intricate font than I was used to reading) and trying to pronounce the words made me feel connected to the artist and this strange region. Yet, since the artist had made up these names, it complicated my relation to the language, as I was not here learning it in any traditional sense. As far as I know, Fiks has a much more advanced knowledge of Yiddish than I do. This showed me how I did not necessarily need to approach language-learning from such a rule-obeying perspective – I had much more to learn, but in art, at least, I was free to experiment with different ways of making it work.

³⁰Cur. C. L. Apostol, Yevgeniy Fiks. *Pas de Trois*. Tallinn City Gallery, Tallinn, 2021.
<https://www.kunstihoone.ee/en/programme/yevegeniy-fiks-pas-de-trois/>

³¹My only awareness of anything close to the topic in the recent past having occurred at a controversial exhibition in Tartu some years before my arrival to Estonia, which we discussed in a course during my first year at EKA and which I read about more recently - and each time found rather upsetting.



הערש

Figure 5. Yevgeny Fiks, *Flora and Fauna of the Jewish Autonomous Region*, Prints, 2012-2016, Tallinn City Gallery, Tallinn, 2021.

One day I googled 'Yiddish Contemporary Art' and the top result was Fiks' text : 'Is There a New Yiddish Contemporary Visual Art?' This article – a kind of manifesto, even – has since served as a guiding light for my project. Fiks begins by situating this movement or project in a largely post-vernacular Yiddish culture, extending from the 1970s up til today:

This phenomenon exists in parallel to and as a continuation of the surviving secular Yiddish culture that descended from pre-War culturati circles of Vilnius, Warsaw, Moscow, New York, and elsewhere.

This new Yiddish culture was created by a post-World War II generation of Jewish and non-Jewish artists and academics who (re)discovered and (re)learned the Yiddish language and employed it for cultural production — mostly music, theater, and literature — as the medium and the message. It came into maturity in the era of identity politics in the 1990s and 2000s. The avant-garde of this culture is post-modern, hybrid, progressive, humanist, and intersectional.³²

For most of this history, art linked with Yiddish has consisted primarily of those forms more naturally linked to language. However, a Yiddish visual art, he claims, has yet to emerge, or as he shows with examples, is slowly in the process of emerging (it can be found in many of his own works, too). Yiddish culture is so tied to the Yiddish language, so what does this mean, how might it work or be developed in visual art?

Is it contemporary visual art that uses the Yiddish language in some form — as text, letterforms, speech — for example, a video or sound installation or a performance art piece? To what extent and in what forms must the Yiddish language be present in an art piece to be considered Yiddish contemporary art?

I propose we consider 'Yiddish contemporary (visual) art' as any contemporary art piece — contemporary painting, works on paper, installation, photography, video, sound, performance art, new media, social practice, etc. — that are consciously produced by the artist as a project of this new Yiddish culture. This art can either directly employ the Yiddish language, form, subjects, themes of Yiddish/Eastern European Jewish culture or be situated in less straightforward relation to them. Works of Yiddish contemporary art have an intentional and knowable connection to the languages and cultures of Eastern European Jewish communities, in dialogue with languages and cultures of their neighbors and the world at large.³³

He goes on to provide examples of artists who he believes work within the realms of such a project. I was excited to recognize Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson, who had been interviewed

³²Fiks, Yevgeniy, Is There a New Yiddish Contemporary Visual Art? – Hyperallergic 5 November 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/581286/is-there-a-new-yiddish-contemporary-visual-art/>. (Accessed 14 February 2022).

³³ Y. Fiks, Is There a New Yiddish Contemporary Visual Art?

by Alma earlier in the year. Ponizovsky Bergelson creates large multicolored murals combining Yiddish, Arabic, English and German in what she calls ‘hybrid calligraphy’ inspired in part by the work of her great-grandfather David Bergelson. Though connected to her own family history, the work was also taking after a 'generation that tried to use [Yiddish] as a literary language and not as a ‘home language,’'.³⁴ And yet, it is not so far from the home, as they are painted onto residential buildings in the suburbs of Berlin. This project, including the work in the photo below (fig. 6), incorporated translations and transliterations of the poet Deborah Vogel, one of her great-grandfather’s contemporaries.

³⁴Bruncevic, Mersiha, Yiddish Poems in Arabic Script Make a Surprising Appearance in Berlin. – Hey Alma 26 May 2021, <https://www.heyalma.com/yiddish-poems-in-arabic-script-make-a-surprising-appearance-in-berlin/> (Accessed 17 April 2022).



Figure 6. Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson, *Present Figures*, Mural, Photo by Robin Pallier, Berlin, Alma, 2021

In the work discussed by Fiks (fig. 7), she engages with 20th century poet Kadya Molodowsky:

In this house-paint-on-a-wall piece, Ponizovsky-Bergelson renders Molodowsky's text in ancient Hebrew script in vibrant primary colors, a radical gesture given the standard monochromatism of post-Holocaust Jewish-themed art that addresses the destruction of the Ashkenazi civilization in Europe.

According to Ponizovskiy-Bergelson in an interview with Ekaterina Kuznetsova in *Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*: 'If we are bringing Yiddish back to life, to the present and the future, it is better to do it in color to break the stigma and to get rid of this very sad and tragic black and white picture.'³⁵

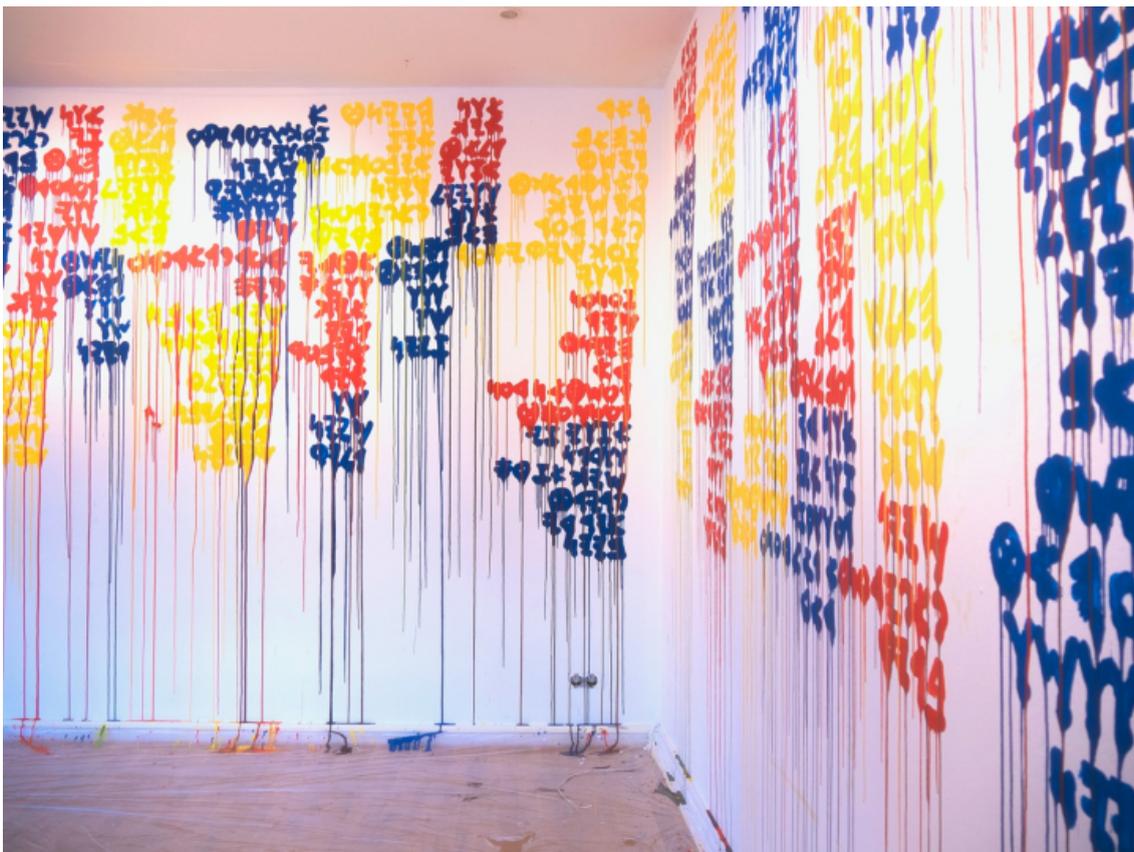


Figure 7. Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson, *My Paper Bridge*, Wall paint on wall, Berlin, photo by Arndt Beck, 2019

³⁵ Y. Fiks, Is There a New Yiddish Contemporary Visual Art?

Ponizovsky Bergelson's use of bright colors, the messiness of her visual aesthetic, her engagement with public space, her mix of languages, and her seeming lack of purist impulses in the face of an incredibly daunting history showed me just how vast, open-ended, and potentially liberating were the possibilities for Yiddish Contemporary Art. I felt that I, too, could partake in this cultural project somehow. Fiks seemed to be saying that my good intentions alone were enough to get me started.

Learning to Write in Yiddish

I had learned to read the alphabet and covered the basics of Yiddish by the end of the summer. But I understood that, in order to practice, learn more, do more, etc. it would be very helpful if I could also write in Yiddish. When I went looking for materials to teach me to write the letters properly, I found out that the print alphabet I knew was only for print and never used in hand-writing. For that, there was another, totally unfamiliar script. I came across a few standard representations of it (among a vast variety throughout history and across regions, besides the infinite differences of individual handwriting styles) and I settled on trying to learn with the help of the Yiddish Book Center (fig. 8), since their resources were quite clear and freely available online.³⁶

ב ב beys CONSONANT	פּ פּ komers alef/ as in for VOWEL	פּ פּ pasekh alef/ as in lark VOWEL	א א shtumer alef / silent SILENT
ה ה hey CONSONANT	ד ד dalek CONSONANT	ג ג giml/ as in girl CONSONANT	ב ב veys HEBREW ONLY
ײ ײ vov yud/ as in boy DIPHTHONG	װ װ tsvey vovn CONSONANT	ױ ױ melupm vov/ as in moon VOWEL	ױ ױ vov/ as in moon VOWEL
ײ ײ vud/ DIPHTHONG	ט ט tes CONSONANT	ח ח khes/ CONSONANT	ז ז zaven CONSONANT

Figure 8. Yiddish Book Center, Interactive Alef-beys Chart, 2022 – from top to bottom for each letter : print form, script form, name of the letter / pronunciation guide (one can click to hear the sound).

I had never learned to write in an alphabet other than the Latin one. So, I had not in this sense had the experience of learning to write since I was a child. Whenever I start learning to speak a new language, even as there are many rules, I always feel quite free. The funny sounds and strange words bring me unparalleled joy. Learning to write the alphabet in

³⁶ An *Alef-beys* Chart – Yiddish Book Center, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/learn-yiddish-alphabet/alef-beys-chart> (Accessed 18 April 2022)

Yiddish felt similar. I found the written Yiddish script (fig. 9) to be incredibly visually beautiful. It flowed playfully in a series of curves, hooks, and flourishes in a way that the print alphabet did not. It was even a bit like drawing, particularly the abstract doodling I have done in the margins of countless notebook since high school, when in math class we were introduced to the infinity symbol, sine curves, and the like. It felt welcoming, warm, even cozy. Of course, there were certain rules to follow here, too, to make each letter look like itself. But it felt much less rigid than the print alphabet. Furthermore, it felt free of all the connotations and assumptions that came with the written text, which I have seen my whole life, whether in Hebrew or Yiddish (they have almost the same print alphabet and script). If I had not known better, this could have been almost any (alphabetic) language - Jewish or not. Thus, to me it would become a fitting medium to explore my relationship to the Yiddish language and Jewish culture more broadly. Apart from the still new experience of reading, typing, speaking and listening to the language, learning the handwritten script presented yet another kind of fresh start, which I felt I could work with in art.

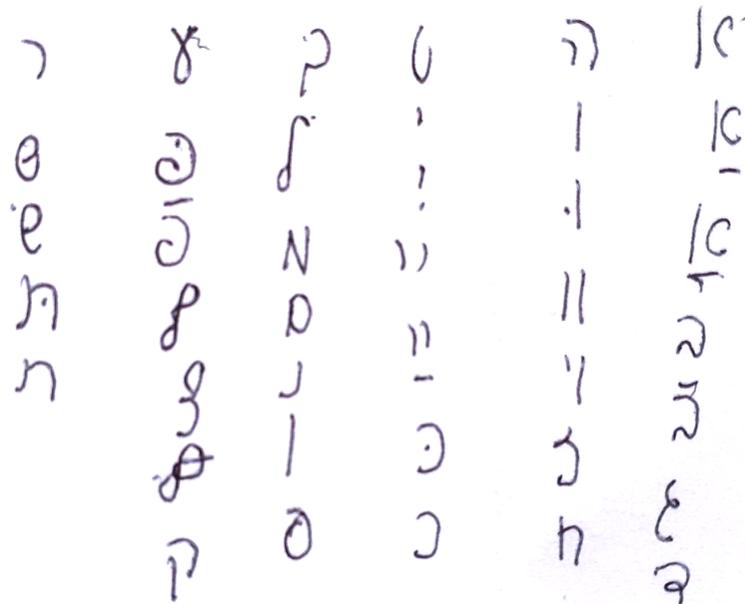


Figure 9. Ryan Galer, My first attempt at writing in Yiddish, Tallinn, September 2021

Part III : Experiments in Yiddish Contemporary Art, or Making A Jewish Identity of My Own

Thus, I embarked on my own attempt at Fiks' idea of a Yiddish Contemporary (Visual) Art. Instead of turning the experience of learning to write (again) into one of repetition and discipline, I understood that I could learn it at my own pace through making art. In the process, I might hope to express something unique involving my Yiddish-Jewish learning.

Over the following six or so months, I would experiment with a vast array of media, many of which I had never tried before or had not touched in years. These included paper cutting, clay sculpting, scratch art, embroidery, singing, as well as performance, with which I have a lot more experience. The material chosen was based largely on what was already at hand, as I tried to let the process unfold more freely than I sometimes have. I believe that this helped the work develop better than if I had chosen to work in media I knew too well.³⁷ I wanted to experiment, research, learn, and be surprised.

Eventually, the process took on a certain rhythm. I found myself starting each piece with an idea, feeling, or memory that I wanted to explore in connection with my Jewish identity. This led me to some word, phrase or sentence, which I would try my best to translate.³⁸ Once I found the right words, I had to figure out how to write them by hand. The pace was altogether quite slow, and inherent in my new approach to my Jewishness as well as to the Yiddish language was an embrace of a kind of amateurism that was serious but playful, and meant to be free of external standards and expectations as much as possible.

One discovery I made early on was that my creative engagement with Yiddish enabled me to access a highly emotional landscape of childhood and family memories to which I had never quite been able to connect in prior projects. These works felt too private, though. I

³⁷ While I worked with performance, I never initially set out to do one. They always came at the end of processes begun with less familiar media. Even then there were new elements like singing, which I had rarely done publicly, even in English, never mind in Yiddish - which I had not yet spoken in public.

³⁸ I could have found feedback through online groups or have asked my Yiddish teacher once I had one, but I did not. I do not think it was necessary - partly because at the end of the day translation may be an element, but this is not a translation project. Otherwise, opening up to external comments or criticism at this stage of the process would have run counter to the DIY nature of the project and intruded on its privateness. So, I could easily have gained one thing only to lose others. My approach to learning has also been decidedly anti-perfectionist, and the things I learned during said processes felt most important.

was faced with the problem that I did not feel comfortable sharing some of my stronger – or, at least, most raw, unforced, or unique – works. I would either have to keep these for myself or patiently work toward finding a form in which I felt comfortable sharing them.

My place of work contributed to this sense of intimacy. While I had access to a spacious shared studio, I mostly worked at home. It is fitting that Yiddish itself has been seen as a kind of 'home' language. To many, it is considered 'homey'³⁹ and is connected to ideas, memories of family, particularly (great-) grandparents, and to an ancestral homeland – largely, the lost world of shetls in Eastern Europe. Historically, it was more closely linked to the feminine domain, and one of the most widespread early texts to appear in Yiddish was the *Tsene Rene* or *Women's Bible*. This is symptomatic of strict gender roles, as women were not allowed to learn Hebrew. More recently, the Yiddish language and culture was heavily suppressed in the early years of the modern state of Israel in favor of modern Hebrew and a more macho idea of the Jew in Zionist culture, associated as Yiddish was with an idea of the Eastern European Jew as weak and victimized (a case of internalized antisemitism, in my opinion). Making Yiddish art at home was not so intentionally linked to such matters; nevertheless, my relationship with Yiddish, which I have learned only at home, has influenced my making a certain kind of work at a certain scale.

I have also learned and changed a lot through my experiences of sharing the work. Because there are so few Jews in Estonia, the Baltics, and even Europe, at least compared to the US, each of these encounters has involved a kind of coming-out-as-Jewish, which left me with a certain sense of 'othering' myself. Yet, at some point I realized that, however this made me feel, my audience did not necessarily see that my making work about Jewish identity meant that I was actually Jewish. This could have been the way I was presenting it, or just because people here in Estonia are not expecting me (or most people) to be Jewish. So, I learned I have to be clear that this is about MY identity. In the end, this only helped my work, as the word 'my' in the title is key to the thesis, which is not about Jewishness as a whole but solely my own relationship to my Jewish identity.

³⁹ There is even a particularly Yiddish word for this - Heimish - which would make its way into my work.

Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup)



Figure 10. Ryan Galer, *Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup)*, Video performance sketch, 2021, Tallinn

The video performance sketch *Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup)* made use of my first paper cut work, which was also my first attempt at making art with Yiddish. It was initially created for a chicken-themed show, though in the end I did not exhibit it there. The paper cut had the same text as the title, which in Yiddish print is : מאמעס הינדל זופ . After I finished the cutting, I liked how it looked as an object and tried wearing it like a mask. Then, I repeated the phrase in Yiddish over and over again, while rocking gently back and forth. I recorded a video of this action. The audio, however, feels too personal, so I have only shared a muted version of the piece, and I do not plan to do otherwise.

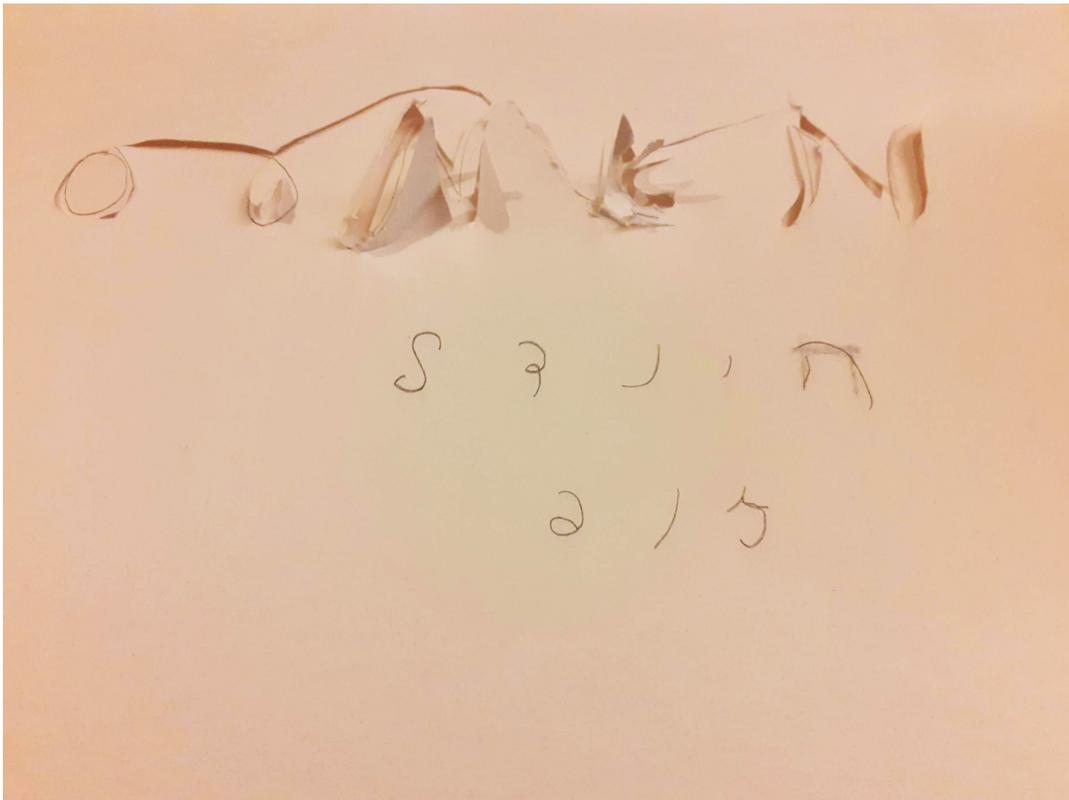


Figure 11. Ryan Galer, *Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup)*, Paper cut (in progress), 2021, Tallinn

Paper cutting is a popular folk art going back many centuries. While it is hardly unique to Jews, they made particular ritual and religious uses of the form, featuring common traditional symbols and inscriptions.⁴⁰ In researching Jewish food, I have since read in many places about 'how Jewish' chicken soup apparently is. A quick search tells me that like the art of paper cutting the practice goes back to ancient China.⁴¹ Chicken soup at this point is quite universal, and my mother is not Jewish. So, it is strange for me to suddenly find Jews talking everywhere about 'how Jewish' this dish is. In any case, this is still my favorite dish of hers. When she makes it, the whole house fills with a familiar, homey smell. It is the perfect meal to come home to after a long time away. So, the phrase 'Mom's Chicken Soup' is for me quite evocative, and altogether served as a good start in exploring questions of home, family, and identity in a pluralistic and inclusive Jewish way.

⁴⁰Shadur, Joseph, Traditional Jewish Papercuts – My Jewish Learning, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-papercutting/> (Accessed 22 April 2021).

⁴¹Guttman, Vered, A Brief History of Chicken Soup, the 'Jewish Penicillin' – Haaretz 13 September 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/food/EXT.premium.EXT-RECIPE-the-chinese-marilyn-and-golda-a-brief-history-of-chicken-soup-jewish-penicillin-1.9926040> (Accessed 24 April 2021).

But then, why am I hiding behind it here, so to speak? I think the video works in two ways: on the one hand, to the viewer it looks like I am hiding behind a strange mask. However, from my perspective, having made it, I can say that I felt softly enveloped by this paper and comforted as I repeatedly uttered the phrase it contained. The two sides resemble, perhaps, the cozy feeling of being inside during a thunderstorm that goes hand in hand with a certain fear of the world outside. I believe they symbolize well my relationship to Jewishness at the outset of this journey : it gave me a feeling of connection to my family (and not exclusively my father's side) and I felt close to certain parts of the culture, but I also had a strong feeling of shame at wanting to be more a part of it, at my lack of knowledge, and at neither fitting into it nor the wider, non-Jewish world.

There is also an important formal element here that is not strictly related to Jewish identity. I had long been struggling to find a way to present vulnerable performance work while also understanding that I needed to protect myself. Vulnerability along with a kind of confess-everything ethos had been held up as the highest form of performance by some who had a lot of influence on me in the artistic community where I began performing. While I long had my doubts and now have a more nuanced view of how performance can work, I also have felt I have parts of myself that I want to share, but have been too afraid to. In *Mames Hindl Zip*, the presentation of performance in video form, combined with the empowering decision not to share everything, showed me a path beyond this binary of hiding and revealing. I will return to this with *Home* (2022), the fourth work discussed.

Heim-ish

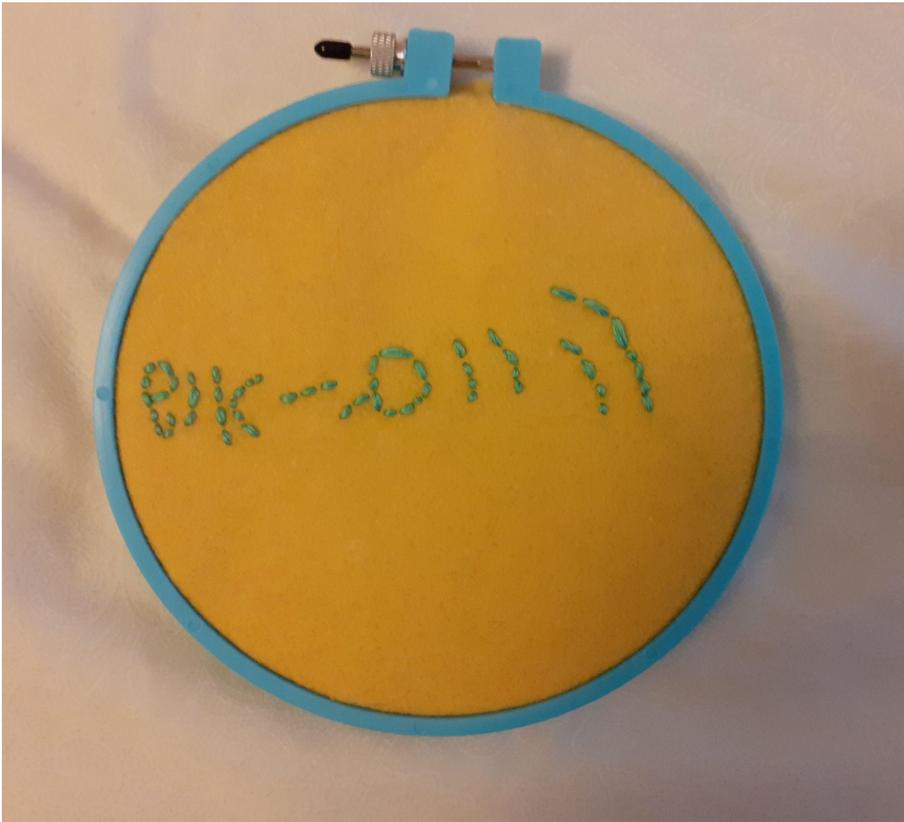


Figure 12. Ryan Galer, *Heim-ish*, Embroidery, 2021, USA

I created the embroidery piece *Heim-ish* (2021) while I was visiting my sisters, who both moved somewhat recently to Colorado, far from our home state of Massachusetts. My older sister, also an artist, taught me this technique. I was thinking about my shifting sense of being at and / or missing home with which I have been working for many years. So, I chose to start with the word home – in Yiddish, 'heim'. After that I needed time to consider what to do next. I eventually settled upon making it into 'Heimish', meaning homey. However, I could not add 'ish' to the end of 'heim' because the 'm' I had already embroidered was a 'shlos mem' or a final form 'm' used only at the end of words. I had to put a dash in the middle, so it read both 'homey' and 'home-ish'.

I have moved many times, so nesting or making myself at home is a process that's familiar to me, but it has never become routine or easy. So, I relate a lot to the Jewish experience of exile, diaspora, and the search for a homeland, which for some leads to Israel, but in my

case, has led me to Eastern Europe. This is where the object's use in its finished form comes into play. Here's a second picture of it hung up in 'my (current) home' in Tallinn:

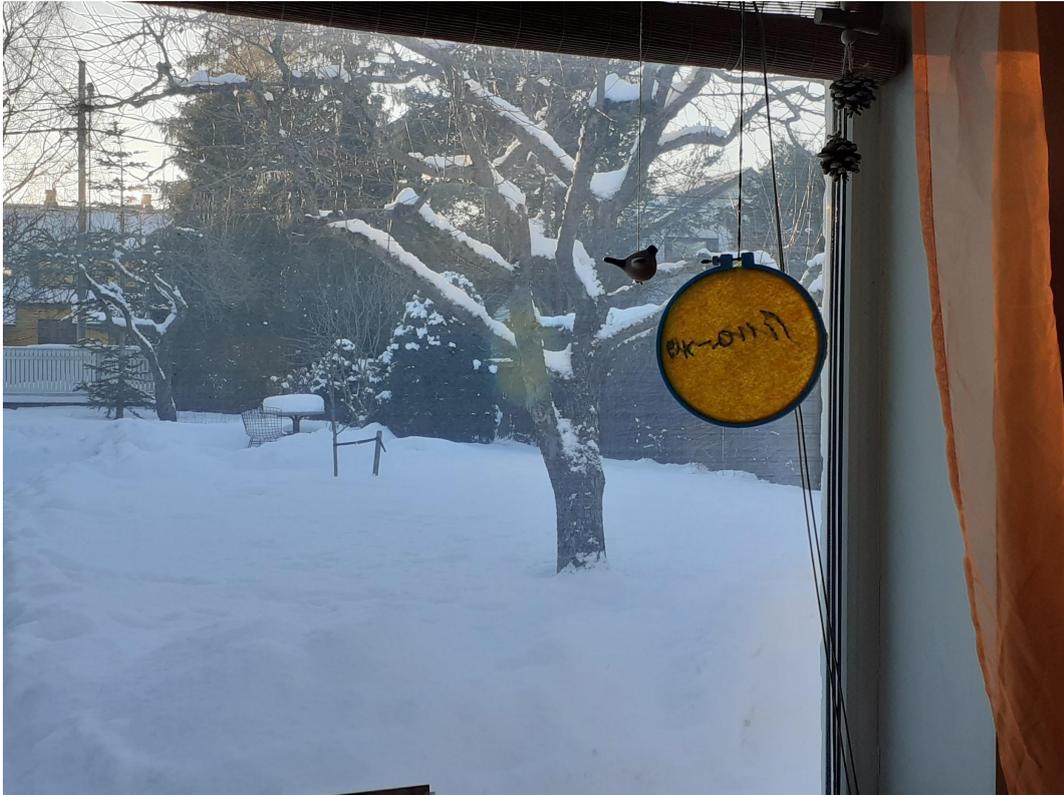


Figure 13. Ryan Galer, *Heim-ish*, Embroidery, 2021, USA, In my home in Tallinn, 2022

When reading about Jewish paper cuts, I learned about an object called a Mizrah. The word – in Yiddish and Hebrew – means East, and refers to the direction those in the western diaspora should face when praying – toward Jerusalem, that is. It is a decorative wall plaque found in Jewish homes with the word 'Mizrah', some inscription and / or images on the East wall of rooms where people pray.⁴² I am not religious; however, I thought that I could, perhaps, turn this piece into a secular mizrah. When figuring out where to put it, I thought that it would be nice if it was facing in the general direction of my place of birth / where my family is, which in many ways still feels most like home. So, now it hangs in the window, facing west and slightly south toward New England⁴³. As a decoration in this space, it indicates, both by the word and the heimishness of the homemade felt object, that this is a kind of home, while also indicating that home for me always lies elsewhere, too.

⁴² Mizrah – Wikipedia 10 January 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mizrah&oldid=1064749461> (Accessed 17 April 2021).

⁴³When a Jew lives east of Jerusalem, this object should face West. Even then, it is referred to as a Mizrah.

Yiddish Snow Writing



Figure 14. Ryan Galer, *Shabbat Shalom*, Yiddish Snow Writing, 2022, Tallinn

The series or project I am now calling 'Yiddish Snow Writing' began during a trip to Vilnius in January 2022. I was attending a workshop called 'Ghostology V' and hoping to engage with public space and memory. I was inspired especially by the heavy snowfall.

I started with a work on my bedroom windowsill in Vilnius. The privacy made me feel safe. The next morning, the text was already gone. When I went out for the day, I felt a little bolder and did a couple works in and around a public park by the art academy. Working in public space, though, always leaves me feeling like I am transgressing somehow. In this case, I feared ruining the purity of a fresh snowfall or just acting differently from other people. I even worried that someone Jewish might recognize the work as Yiddish (or Hebrew) but not understand it and assume it was antisemitic. So, I

found myself preferring to work when nobody was nearby or opting for places that felt a bit hidden. Having a sense of privacy also enabled me to enter a more interior headspace.

When I returned to Tallinn, the heavy snowfall persisted, so I continued, again starting small, making work in the privacy of my yard. Soon, I was also writing on sidewalks, platforms, and walkways, mostly in my neighborhood or near EKA. I wrote with my glove, the tip of my boots or by a kind of walk-dance. I wrote 'GJ' (the name of my monster puppet who feels quite close to my Yiddish 'personality'), 'the snow,' or 'I am here.' Even as I wrote the simplest of texts, the action of writing in Yiddish in the snow – solitarily, in public – felt like the purest form of Yiddish self-expression I had yet to find.

If in Vilnius I had been using the language in a place that it had once frequented, intending to create something along the lines of a counter-monument, in Tallinn I found myself creating work engaging with other memories both public and personal. I did one work at a playground between some new apartment buildings and a former Soviet military academy (this part, unlike others, has not been renovated). We had gone here to use the swings and play ping pong last summer, even as our landlords had informed us that in Soviet times, the area was off-limits – so for them it is not exactly a place of leisure. One day, we found that someone had graffitied a large red swastika onto a picnic table there. I was infuriated and upset. When I returned one dark, snowy winter afternoon, I went to see if maybe it had been removed. The table was covered in a thick sheet of ice, while the field was covered in a fresh layer of snow. So, I wrote across it, 'Ich vil nor shpiln,' or 'I just want to play'.



Figure 15. Ryan Galer, *'Ikh vil nor shpil' (I just want to play)*, Yiddish Snow Writing, 2022, Tallinn

I photographed some works but always felt uncomfortable with this part of the process. I realized that taking a picture was a way to contextualize, excuse, or explain away my action for others, if only in my own mind. When I tried just doing the work and walking away, I felt a sense of letting go, accepting myself and connecting to the work and space on my own terms. I even felt a kind of fundamental shift in my relationship with the city. I had never felt fully at ease in Tallinn, and thinking about antisemitism this past year, finding swastikas in my quaint neighborhood, had made me feel even less safe. Now I felt myself being in my very own way different and Jewish in public, and even a bit at home.

Around this time I found myself doing Yiddish snow writing in my dreams. I realized that not only did I know how to write the letters now, but I had a kind of deep, embodied knowledge of them - not just in my hand but in my foot and leg and really my whole body. I had thus reached the final stage in my process of learning to write the script through art.

Home



Figure 16. Ryan Galer, *Home*, video, 2022.

The broader story, however, does not quite end there. I returned to Lithuania for a third time this academic year in March, this time for a workshop called *Border as a Place*. Now, we were not to be in Vilnius and instead would be traveling to 'the borderland' near Belarus and Poland, a region where the borders have changed quite often in history. I wanted to participate because this is more or less where my Jewish family came from.

We were based at the Mizarai Practice and Recreation Center. There were three small houses in which roughly 25 of us (students and professors) lived together for an intensive week of lectures and presentations, shared meals, conversations, guided tours, and self-directed research, learning, and making. We were on the river Neman, which begins somewhere in Belarus and once served as a border between Lithuania and Belarus. It has its mouth in the Curonian Lagoon, narrowly connected to the Baltic Sea, and today forms the northern side of the border between Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Oblast of Russia.

At some point, a professor was talking about cigarette smuggling on the river between Russia and Lithuania. It made me think of people from Massachusetts, the US state where I grew up, who drive to New Hampshire to buy much cheaper cigarettes, as well as

fireworks, which are illegal in MA. Gun shops are also easier to find there. My hometown of Newburyport is only 10 minutes drive from this border, and there is a noticeable shift in culture the moment you cross it. The NH state motto reads, 'Live Free or Die.'

After giving my 'native' borderland more thought, I realized that, actually, I grew up on an even smaller, less visible border, as my childhood home rested on or at the border between the city of Newburyport and the town of West Newbury. For many years, I have been thinking about this house and my painful memories around having to leave it when my parents got divorced. Since the pandemic began, I've been trying to work with this topic. While originally I had moved to Lithuania hoping to research my family history – or, at least to learn more generally about where my family came from and engage with this – when the lockdown happened, I was stuck 'at home' in my new place in Vilnius – where I had only lived for six weeks. I started thinking back to all my past moves and other homes.

When I started learning Yiddish, I found myself accessing some part of myself that over the course of the pandemic and even before, I had started to 'get in touch with.' Making art with the language got me closer. A part of this is a certain voice. I found something resembling it some years ago working with GJ, the puppet whose name appears in my snow writing, but this voice continued to evolve and became independent from him. When I use it, I feel quite vulnerable; perhaps, I am accessing my inner child. I recorded audio discussing the snow writing in this voice, and this was the first time I put it in something I might call art. When I shared this recording with my supervisor, it was the first time I had shared this voice with anyone besides my partner.

When I was in Mizarai, I found a spot that reminded me a lot of my childhood backyard where this town border lay. I started filming, then I spoke in the voice described above, putting some of these thoughts into a story. I did not necessarily think I was making something to be shown. Like much of the works throughout this process, it felt more like a sketch – a quite personal one. At some point, though, I decided I would 'share' this video at our group exhibition in nearby Druskininkai. I displayed it on a large TV with headphones, close to a wall, creating a separate space. The work felt so intimate that it seemed better off as a one-to-one experience. I felt very nervous sharing it – the voice much more than what it was saying. Yet, not having to hear it while others did created just enough distance.

Thus, after years of struggling with questions of public vs. private and hiding vs. revealing in the context of performance art, a kind of video performance – not unlike *Mames Hindl Zip* – seemed to provide an answer. Here I was, again not showing my face, but this time sharing an intimate part of myself through my voice.

The video presents a layering of present and past, here and elsewhere, memory and landscape. It enacts a kind of projection onto the site of ideas of home formed in the past, particularly in the home I grew up in, which I believe share a lot with the feeling I described of being inside the paper mask. I think it also represents well the nature of memory, which comes from the past but only exists in the present, while also making space for a kind of forgetting. For, as I watch this video, I almost forget that I am looking at someplace in Lithuania. I imagine that the line between the two might be all the more blurry for the viewer who has never been there.⁴⁴ This forgetting might be the sort that is linked to healing. In my case, it signals that the feelings of at-homeness I have long been unable to experience in the present, stuck as they were in a tangled web of nostalgia and trauma, might have finally become available to me again. Thus, I feel I found in Mizarai an unexpected end to a long journey, even as my Yiddish-Jewish journey and even my Litvak / Lithuania journey are, perhaps, just beginning,

There is no Yiddish spoken in the video. I hardly even talk about being Jewish or my Jewish journey, only briefly mentioning why I have come to this region. However, I believe that longing, search for and making of a home expressed therein is both personal for me and universally Jewish. Still, I have found the work to be open to all viewers, and I hope it might achieve a broader kind of universality in relation to these themes of memory, identity, family and home.

⁴⁴I see now that this 'there' seems to refer to Lithuania, when originally I wrote this to mean my childhood backyard. In writing, too, past and present, here, there, and elsewhere all get easily layered and mixed up.

Conclusion

It is typical for Jews of Eastern European origin to ‘return’ to this region looking for something. Often, they do not necessarily find much. Apparently, that is the entire reason for the existence of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*. He went looking for a family history, found nothing, and instead made something up. I was always rather prepared to do this kind of thing, too. However, I never could quite manage to find a satisfying fiction.

In Vilnius, I certainly felt such an absence – even a kind of lack of markers of absence in the form of more traditional monuments. Going to this borderland, there was even less to see in that regard. Somehow, though, I found something there that I really was not looking for, or at least not expecting to find. I came looking for home in one sense and found it in quite another. Throughout the week, in this workshop, this group, this place, I felt at home in a particular way for the first time in a very long time. Somehow, all these notions of home relating to a past both personal and ancestral came together for me there.

Being Jewish now feels like a practice – connected but not limited to such questions. It is also a lived-experience and perspective that cannot fully go away when I am thinking about other, broader or less distinctly Jewish topics. Now I understand that if it did, I would be missing something valuable and integral to myself. I hope to achieve in my work a range from the specific and evidently Jewish to the all-encompassing but not necessarily visibly so. I believe my Mizarai *Home* video broadens the scope, while shining light on a particular, meaningful moment in my life as a Jew looking for home in Eastern Europe.

I feel I still have a lot of learning to do to make myself truly ‘at home’ within the Jewish community. However, I have come a long way, beginning this journey as I did neither certain I had a right to such a place, nor sure I even wanted one. Now, especially thanks to finding Baddiel’s *Jews Don’t Count* as well as my new favorite website *Hey Alma*, I have the tools to figure out what such a place might look like. At the very least, I can say that it is empowering. While I have reservations these days about calling things ‘very Jewish’ for fear of falling into stereotypes, I would venture to say that my Jewish life is or might soon be ‘very Yiddish’.

List of Images

Figures 1 & 2. Screenshots, Antisemitism : Here and Now, Amazon.com, 2022.

Figures 3 & 4. Screenshots, E. Burack, The Funniest Tweets about Duolingo's New Yiddish Course, Alma, 2021

Figure 5. Yevgeny Fiks, *Flora and Fauna of the Jewish Autonomous Region*, Prints, 2012-2016, Tallinn City Gallery, Tallinn, 2021.

Figure 6. Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson, Present Figures, Mural, Photo by Robin Pallier, Berlin, Alma, 2021

Figure 7. Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson, My Paper Bridge, Wall paint on wall, Berlin, photo by Arndt Beck, 2019

Figure 8. Yiddish Book Center, Interactive Alef-beys Chart, 2022

Figure 9. Ryan Galer, My first attempt at writing in Yiddish, Tallinn, September 2021

Figure 10. Ryan Galer, *Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup)*, Video performance sketch, 2021, Tallinn

Figure 11. Ryan Galer, *Mames Hindl Zip (Mom's Chicken Soup)*, Paper cut (in progress), 2021, Tallinn

Figure 12. Ryan Galer, *Heim-ish*, Embroidery, 2021, USA

Figure 13. Ryan Galer, *Heim-ish*, Embroidery, 2021, USA, In my home in Tallinn, 2022

Figure 14. Ryan Galer, *Shabbat Shalom*, Yiddish Snow Writing, 2022, Tallinn

Figure 15. Ryan Galer, *Ikh vil nor shpil (I just want to play)*, Yiddish Snow Writing, 2022, Tallinn

Figure 16. Ryan Galer, *Home*, video, 2022.

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