6. 9. – 4. 11. 2016

JEWISH
LANGUAGES

SINAGOGA MARIBOR

CENTER JUDOVSKE KULTURNE DEDIŠČINE SINAGOGA MARIBOR

THE EUROPEAN DAYS OF JEWISH CULTURE

JEWISH LANGUAGES

EXHIBITION CURATED BY
THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL

Wherever Jews have lived, they have spoken and/or written differently from their neighbors. In some cases, their languages have differed by a few embedded Hebrew words; in others, they speak a completely different language.

In the centuries surrounding the turn of the Common Era, Jews transitioned from Hebrew to Judeo-Aramaic and a few centuries later to Judeo-Greek. As Jews migrated from the Land of Israel and created new communities throughout the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, and throughout Arab lands, they continued to learn the local language and speak/write it in distinctly Jewish ways. A number of languages were born over the next several centuries throughout Europe and the Middle East.

Due to the shifts in local languages, migrations, and intermingling with speakers of other languages, some languages that began in ancient or medieval times disappeared centuries ago, such as Judeo-Provençal and Judeo-Slavic. Others diminished as their speakers intermingled with speakers of other languages. The late nineteenth and the twentieth century saw a seismic shift in Jewish population. Millions of Jews migrated from Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa to the Americas, Western Europe, and Palestine. Millions of Jews perished in the Nazi Holocaust. Then, in the decades following the establishment of the State of Israel, millions of Jews migrated from all of these regions — especially Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Iraq — to Israel. However, the development of Israeli Hebrew did not lead to the disappearance of the Diaspora Jewish languages. Contemporary, and especially observant Jews, continue to speak languages that include hundreds of words from textual Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as influences from Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic. These resulting varieties of English, Spanish, French, etc., could be considered new Jewish languages.

ARAMAIC

There was a time when Hebrew was both the language of daily discourse and the "holy language" of ritual and prayer. Aramaic began to replace Hebrew in daily life during the Second Temple period (530 BCE to 70 CE) and became so prevalent that the Bible itself had to be translated into Aramaic so that people could understand it.

Aramaic still plays a part in modern Jewish daily life: Religiously observant people and scholars must know Aramaic to study the Talmud, the essential Jewish legal text that is written in Aramaic. Moreover, the Mourner's Prayer (Kaddish) is recited aloud in Aramaic and marriage contracts (ketubot) are still written in Aramaic and recited aloud in Aramaic under the marriage canopy.

JUDEO-ARABIC

In Arabic-speaking world, Jews spoke different dialects of Arabic, depending on where they lived, and often borrowed words from Hebrew and Aramaic, while they wrote Arabic in Hebrew characters rather than Arabic script. Classical Arabic written with the Hebrew alphabet is also known as Judeo-Arabic.

Egyptian-born Saadia Gaon, a prominent 10th century rabbi, Jewish philosopher, and Bible scholar, was the first to use Arabic for scholarly writing and is the founder of Judeo-Arabic literature. Thanks partly to his influence Arabic took over from Aramaic as the language of Jewish scholarship, thus some of the most important books of medieval Jewish thought were written in medieval Judeo-Arabic.

LADINO

Ladino, also known as Judeo-Spanish, Judezmo, Spaniolit, and Haketia in Spanish Morocco, is a Jewish language spoken by Sephardic Jews. Ladino arose in Christian Spain as a fusion of elements from medieval varieties of Spanish and other Iberian languages, Hebrew, and Judeo-Arabic. After the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, it developed throughout the Mediterranean region. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ladino grew to include elements originating in Turkish, Greek, French, and Italian.

Traditionally written in Hebrew characters, today Ladino is written in the Latin alphabet. An estimated 160,000 people in Israel, Turkey, the Balkans, and North Africa currently speak Ladino.

YIDDISH

For centuries, Yiddish was the main and international language of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe (Ashkenazi Jewry). An amalgam of German, Hebrew, and local languages, Yiddish became a written language in the sixteenth century. It is written in Hebrew characters, but has its own grammatical structure. People called it "mama loshen," or

"mother tongue," while Hebrew and Aramaic were "holy language."
Although the Holocaust and assimilation almost wiped out spoken Yiddish, it has not disappeared. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities around the world still use it as their daily tongue, saving the holy language of Hebrew for ritual and prayer; moreover, in recent years there has been a Jewish mainstream revival of Yiddish.

MODERN HEBREW

From the second century CE, until the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language around 1880, Hebrew – the 'holy tongue' – was used exclusively as a language of ritual and prayer. Well-educated people understood written Hebrew, and prayed and studied sacred books in that language, but no one spoke Hebrew as part of their day-to-day life. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda is credited with Hebrew's revival in Israel. He immigrated to Jerusalem from Europe in 1881, greatly motivated by a spirit of renewal. Completely rejecting Jewish life outside Israel, Ben-Yehuda developed a Jewish national language to replace Yiddish, Ladino, and various regional dialects spoken by Jewish immigrants to Palestine. Thanks to him and other Hebrew grammarians, scholars, and teachers Hebrew, as an ancient language without any native speakers, has become the mother tongue of millions.

MORE JEWISH LANGUAGES

In addition to the major Jewish languages that came into being through the interaction of Jews with their non-Jewish neighbors, such as Yiddish in medieval Germany, Ladino in medieval Spain, and varieties of Judeo-Arabic in Arab countries; Jews in various other places continued this process of learning the local language and speaking/writing it in distinctly Jewish ways. Some scholars think their distinctive characteristics merit calling them Jewish languages; others prefer to see them as Jewish dialects or "Judeo" - variants. Jewish variants spoken and written in the Middle Ages but which ceased to exist afterwards, such as Judeo-French and Judeo-Catalan, and other variants, such as Judeo-Greek and varieties of Judeo-Italian, which continued to exist from the Middle Ages through modern times, were traditionally written in Hebrew letters and incorporated words of Hebrew origin. In modern times, some Jewish language variants, such as Judeo-Provençal, and Judeo-Alsatian-Lorrainian, were written in the Latin alphabet but nevertheless incorporated Hebrew words. In addition, their primary components, such as the elements of Greek origin in Judeo-Greek and those of Italian origin in Judeo-Italian, also differed somewhat from those used by non-Jewish speakers.
Whilst these Judeo-variants are no longer in common use, phrases and isolated words still continue to enrich Jewish conversations in these communities in Europe and other parts of the world.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL

Founded in Jerusalem in 1892, the National Library of Israel (NLI) has a distinct dual mandate, serving as the national library for both the State of Israel and the Jewish people worldwide. Its vast holdings contain a wealth of material in a variety of formats, telling the historical, cultural, and intellectual story of the Jewish people, the State of Israel and the Land of Israel throughout the ages.

'Gesher L'Europa' (a Bridge to Europe) is an initiative of the National Library of Israel and the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe to create opportunities for knowledge sharing and cultural exchange between the National Library of Israel and Europe.

Supported by the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe

aePJ

AEPJ

The AEPJ — European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Culture and Heritage was created in 2005, encouraged by the Council of Europe. The AEPJ's two main projects are the European Route of Jewish Heritage, one of the foremost among the Council of Europe's European Cultural Routes, comprising 16 local and thematic routes, and the European Days of Jewish Culture (EDJC), featuring about 1200 activities in more than 30 countries, attended in 2015 by more than 122.000 visitors.

SINAGOGA

CENTER JUDOVSKE KULTURNE
DEDIŠČINE SINAGOGA MARIBOR

CENTER OF JEWISH CULTURAL HERITAGE SYNAGOGUE MARIBOR

The Center of Jewish Cultural Heritage Synagogue Maribor (also known as Synagogue Maribor) is a public institution, which main mission is to study and, in particular, to present the heritage and history of local Jewry and its significance within the broader Central European realm. The Center has joined the EDJC project in 2006, while in 2010 it overtook the role of the project's national coordinator.

NLI production team: Idit Cadosh, Yoel Finkelman, Caron Sethill, Aviva Zuller

Based on the writings of Sarah Bunin Benor, Associate Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion (Los Angeles campus), creator of the Jewish Language Research Website (http://www.jewish-languages.org). Some parts of the exhibition were produced also with the kind assistance of David M. Bunis, Professor of Judezmo/Ladino and Jewish Languages, Center for Jewish Languages, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The Slovenian version of the exhibition was prepared within the project European Days of Jewish Culture 2016 in Slovenia. The producer of the Slovenian version was Center of Jewish Cultural Heritage Synagogue Maribor, as represented by acting director Marjetka Bedrač. The EDJC 2016 in Slovenia was supported by Maribor Municipality and Elektro Maribor.

The project was supported by

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