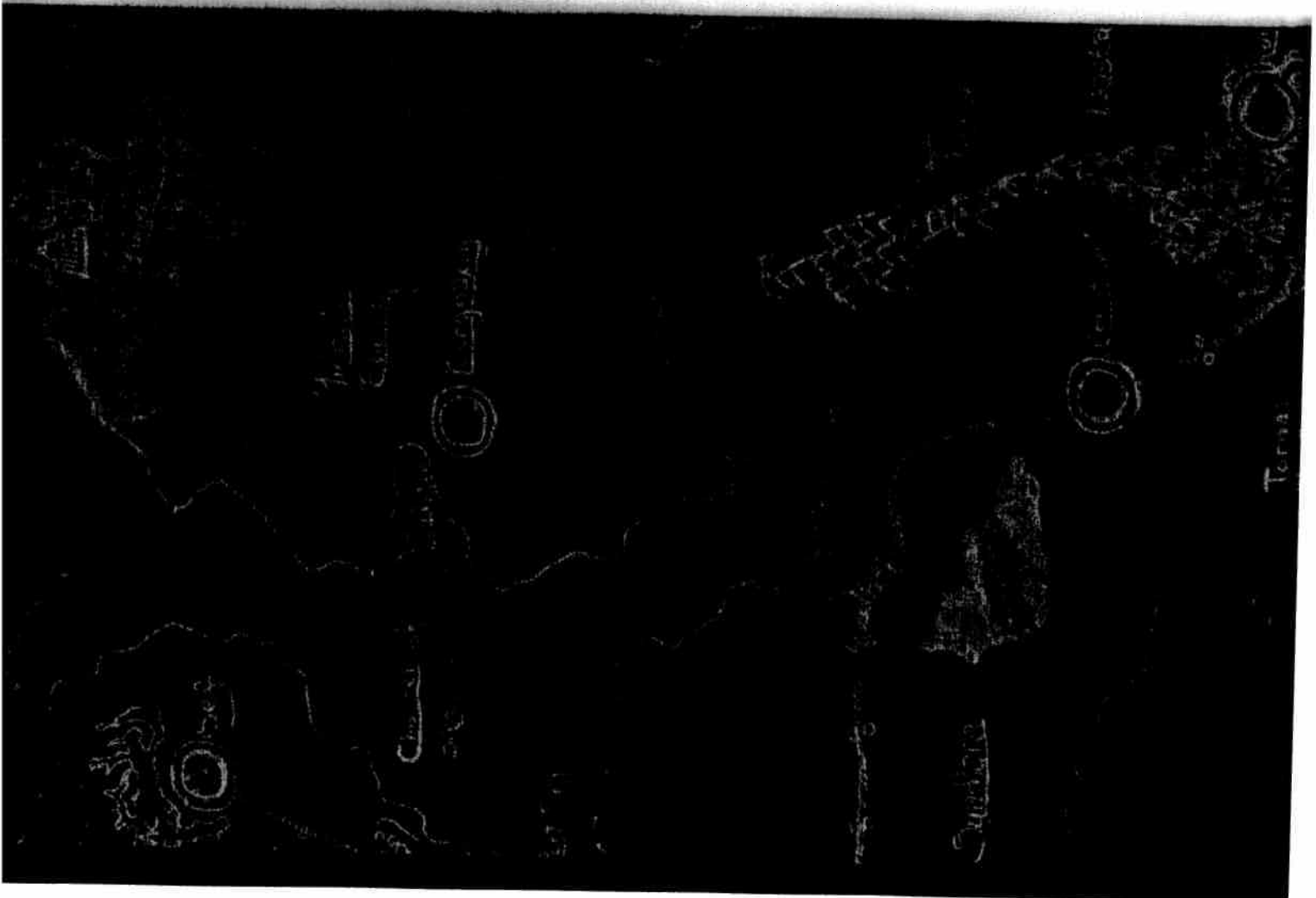


MAPS AND LEGENDS

READING AND WRITING ALONG THE BORDERLANDS

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To Ayelet

grit of experience and rank with the smell of human life, heedless of the danger to himself, eager to show his powers, to celebrate his mastery, to bring into being a little world that, like God's, is at once terribly imperfect and filled with astonishing life.

IMAGINARY HOMELANDS

1.

I WRITE FROM the place I live: in exile.

It's no big deal; certainly it can't compare to the exile endured by writers in literal flight from persecution, repression, intolerance, or war.

I write in a language of empire, the viral, burgeoning mother tongue of 350 million other people around the world. No regime or censor stands between me and the publication of my work—nothing but my own shortcomings and the invisible hand of the marketplace.

The circumstances of my life have always been comfortable, my freedoms guaranteed. I have never known anything resembling in the slightest the anti-Semitism that exiled my grandparents and great-grandparents, with no hope (and by 1945 no possibility) of return, from lands in which my ancestors had lived for a thousand years. If I want to return to the town where I grew up, all I need is a driver's license, a car, and money

for gas. I bear no marks or scars. I haven't lost anything that isn't lost by everyone.

And yet here I am—here I have always been, for as long as I can remember knowing anything about myself—feeling like a stranger.

For a long time now I've been busy, in my life and in my work, with a pair of ongoing, overarching investigations: into my heritage—rights and privileges, duties and burdens—as a Jew and as a teller of Jewish stories; and into my heritage as a lover of genre fiction. In all those years of lighting candles on Friday night and baking triangular cookies for Purim with my children and muddling through another doomed autumn trying to atone, years spent writing novels and stories about golems and the Jewish roots of American superhero comic books, Sherlock Holmes and the Holocaust, medieval Jewish freebooters, Passover Seders attended by protégés of forgotten Lovecraftian horror writers, years of writing essays, memoirs, and nervous manifestos about genre fiction or Jewishness—I failed to notice what now seems clear, namely that there was really only one investigation all along. One search, with a sole objective: a home, a world to call my own.

2.

I am an American, of course—what else?—but the America in which I feel at home is only a kind of planetarium show, sound and light, shifting images projected by an inner Zeiss against the cranial dome. Quattered in my head, a slick media organ produces and distributes to an audience of one an ongoing series of specials, features, potted histories, and theme-park rides that retail (panning slowly from left to right across still photographs

or rocketing me along in my little tram car) an ongoing saga of violence, delusion, innovation, and struggle in which heroes, eccentrics, liars, bad men, victims, bloodthirsty prophets of God—the audioanimatronic ghosts of Charles Manson, Jesse James, Satchel Paige, Robert Oppenheimer, John Brown, Harry Houdini, Kurt Cobain, the girls of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory—suffer without flagging their clockwork torments or propound their visions in THX sound. At times it's a narrative as horrific as *Blood Meridian*, but like that novel one that is unable to rid itself, ultimately, of a final underlying tinge of romance.

Maybe everybody feels the sense of blinking disorientation I feel when I exit the turnstile of my own private Americaland and confront, say, the refrigerator hum, furtive faces, and doped-phosphor light of a 7-Eleven on a sketchy corner of Telegraph Avenue at midnight, walking through the door marked to gauge my approximate height in case I decide to hold the place up. I don't know. Maybe that strangeness is a universal condition among Americans, if not in fact a prerequisite for citizenship. At any rate it is impossible to live intelligently as a member of a minority group in a nation that was founded every bit as firmly on enslavement and butchery as on ideals of liberty and brotherhood and not feel, at least every once in a while, that you can no more take for granted the continued tolerance of your existence here than you ought take the prosperity or freedom you enjoy. I guess every American Jew has a moment at which he or she feels the bottom drop out, and I would be willing to bet that for many of us it comes when we encounter some testimony to the pride, patriotism, and fierce sense of national identity—of being at home—felt by the majority of German Jews in the years running up to Nuremberg. For me that vertiginous moment came when I read, in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, about a

Jewish congregation in Augsburg that voluntarily stripped the copper roof from its synagogue and donated the metal to the German war effort during World War I. That act goes beyond any demonstration of wild, heartfelt patriotism I can imagine from even the most loyally American congregation of Jews.

Twenty years later, on *Kristallnacht*, the Augsburg synagogue was burned to its foundation.

3.

I fear that these reflections on home and belonging bring me inevitably to the question of Israel. Israel, or a place more or less coextensive with Israel as we know it, is supposed to be my home—spiritually and in physical fact. Around the time of the first Babylonian Exile the primordial engineers of Judaism began to wire a longing for Jerusalem, for the restoration of the Temple and the sovereignty of Jews over Israel, into the core circuitry of the religion. Certain venerable texts have long been interpreted as indicating not only that the land belongs to me by right but also that more than I want or am capable of wanting anything else in the world, I should want to live there. If I remain unpersuaded by these arguments, then there is the less venerable but better reasoned argument of Zionism, which even before the Holocaust lent its awful weight managed to persuade and finally convince generations of Jews, among them large numbers of my Litvak cousins, reputed to be among the most skeptical, hardheaded, and unsentimental people ever to look askance at the productions and dreams of their fellow humans. That argument, reduced to its essence, runs like this: history has proven that we will never be happy or safe, never be able to fulfill ourselves as a people, without a country of our own. It

is a European argument, as Milan Kundera has observed, first made by Europeans, calculated and calibrated with nineteenth-century European logarithms of nation and homeland. It has nothing to do with the claims advanced by those old texts inked with pain and longing on the skins of sheep, but an appeal to legendary ancestry, to the legitimizing claims made by stories of blood and soil and kings, was a crucial part of the nineteenth-century nationalist package. Nonetheless in the early days of Zionism there were vocal factions agitating for any homeland at all, anywhere—Africa, Australia, any place where nobody would mind, or notice, or care. Such a place was as imaginary in its way as the Promised Land itself, and has in fact never since been located. In any case Uganda had no hold on the imagination of the Jews. Every year for a thousand years or more, we had ended our Passover seders with the promise or threat or rueful wish or bitter jest, “Next year in Jerusalem.” But under the pall of 1948 those words sounded, to the world, like a plan.

For millions of Jews living in the United States of America in 1948 and on every Passover thereafter, those four words proved troublesome, puzzling, even a source of embarrassment. What, I used to wonder when I was a kid, did they mean? Why did we say them? Were we, in fact, going to be in Jerusalem next year? We had said the same thing last year, as I recalled, and yet here we were again around my grandparents’ table in Silver Spring, Maryland, making this empty and peculiar boast. In fact we had no intention, as I eventually realized, of packing up and moving to Israel. We were happy where we were. We were like the family that buys a summerhouse amid jubilation and great expectations, but finds it too much trouble to decamp there every year when it’s so far and the weather is so fine at home. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we thought of

Israel as our fallout shelter, to be inhabited only in the event of terrible catastrophe.

After many years, and during a time of relative peace between intifadas, I finally visited Israel, though not at Passover. I plunged deep into the history of the Jews and of my wife's family (she was born there), meeting cousins and mythical figures and old comrades-in-arms of my wife's father. My wife and I drove all over the place, from the Golan Heights to Eilat, sampling the food, viewing the cruel wonders of the desert and of the Romans, and marveling at the astonishing range of Jews on display. Like all Jews I was by nature and inclination an inveterate and passionate student of our typologies, but in Israel I felt like a lifelong birder of the austere tundra let loose in the Amazon and dazzled by its profusions. But I did not experience the stereotypical moment of endogamous rapture reported by so many Jewish visitors to Israel, the stunned encounter with a world peopled entirely by Jewish postmen, Jewish cops, Jewish cab drivers, Jewish junkies and punks, Jewish pedophiles and the Jewish prosecutors who sent them away to prisons guarded by Jewish screws. For one thing I saw Arabs everywhere, heard Arabic spoken in cafés and on the street and in the desert by Bedouins, visited vast cool mosques where pigeons wheeled high among the shadows and the arches. Every morning in Jerusalem we were awakened by the melismatic call of the muezzin. So all right, I'm perverse; it was the Arab side of Israel that I loved. Or rather I loved the imperfection of the joint between Jewish and Arab, the patches in the fabric where the reverse showed through. I loved it; but God knows I didn't feel I had come home. I love France and England too, and as with those countries I consider my culture, my history, and the language I speak every day to be vitally bound up with Israel's. When I left, I felt that I would like

to visit again, and that I would continue to take an interest, even an intense interest, in the history and the look and the weather and the fate of the place. And then I would return to the theme park in my brain.

4.

It was soon after I returned from this trip to Israel that I first encountered a little book called *Say It in Yiddish*, edited by Beatrice and Uriel Weinrich. I got it new, in 1993, but the book was originally brought out in 1958. It was part of a series: the Dover "Say It" books: *Say It in Swahili*, *Say It in Hindi*, *Say It in Serbo-Croatian*. When I first came across *Say It in Yiddish*, on a shelf in a big chain store in Orange County, California, I couldn't quite believe that it was real. There was only one copy of it, buried in the languages section at the bottom of the alphabet. It was like a book in a story by Borges, unique, inexplicable, possibly a hoax. The first thing that really struck me about it was, paradoxically, its unremarkableness, the conventional terms with which *Say It in Yiddish* advertised itself on its cover. "No other PHRASE BOOK FOR TRAVELERS," it claimed, "contains all these essential features." It boasted of "Over 1,600 up-to-date practical entries" (up-to-date!), "easy pronunciation transcription," and a "sturdy binding—pages will not fall out."

Inside, *Say It in Yiddish* delivered admirably on all the bland promises made by the cover. Virtually every eventuality, calamity, chance, or circumstance, apart from the amorous, that could possibly befall the traveler was covered, under general rubrics like "Shopping," "Barber Shop and Beauty Parlor," "Appetizers," "Difficulties," with each of the over 1,600 up-to-date practical entries numbered, from 1, "yes," to 1,611, "the

zipper," a tongue-twister *Say It in Yiddish* renders, in roman letters, as "BLITS-shleh-s'l." There were words and phrases to get the traveler through a visit to the post office to buy stamps in Yiddish, and through a visit to the doctor to take care of that "krahmpf" (1,317) after one has eaten too much of the "LEH-ber mit TSIB-eh-less" (620) served at the cheap "res-taw-RAHN" (495) just down the "EH-veh-new" (197) from one's "haw-TEL" (103).

One possible explanation of at least part of the absurd poignance of *Say It in Yiddish* presented itself: that its list of words and phrases was standard throughout the "Say It" series. Once one accepted the proposition of a modern Yiddish phrase book, Yiddish versions of such phrases as "Where can I get a social-security card?" and "Can you help me jack up the car?", taken in the context of the book's part of a uniform series, became more understandable.

But an examination of the specific examples chosen for inclusion under the various, presumably standard, rubrics revealed that the Weinreichs had indeed served as editors here, and considered their supposedly useful phrases with care, selecting, for example, to give Yiddish translations for the English names of the following foods, none of them very likely to be found under "Food" in the Swahili, Japanese, or Malay books in the series: stuffed cabbage, kreplach, blintzes, matzo, lox, corned beef, herring, kugel, tsimmiss, and schav. The fact that most of these words did not seem to require much work to get them into Yiddish suggested that *Say It in Yiddish* had been edited with a particular kind of reader in mind, the reader who was traveling, or planned to travel, to a very particular kind of place, a place where one could expect to find both "ahn OON-tehr-bahn" (subway) and "geh-FIL-teh FISH."

I could neither understand nor stop considering, stop wondering and dreaming about, the intended nature and purpose of the book. Was the original 1958 Dover edition simply the reprint of some earlier, less heartbreakingly implausible book? At what time in the history of the world had there been a place of the kind that the Weinreichs' work implied, a place where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish, but also the airline clerks, travel agents, ferry captains, and casino employees? A place where you could have rented a summer home from Yiddish speakers, gone to a Yiddish movie, gotten a finger wave from a Yiddish-speaking hairstylist, a shoeshine from a Yiddish-speaking shine boy, and then had your dental bridge repaired by a Yiddish-speaking dentist? If, as seemed likelier, the book first saw light in 1958, a full ten years after the founding of the country that turned its back once and for all on the Yiddish language, condemning it to watch the last of its native speakers die one by one in a headlong race for extinction with the twentieth century itself, then the tragic dimension of the joke loomed larger, and made the Weinreichs' intention even harder to divine. It seemed an entirely futile effort on the part of its authors, a gesture of embittered hope, of valedictory daydreaming, of a utopian impulse turned cruel and ironic.

Say It in Yiddish laid out, with numerical precision, the outlines of a world, of a fantastic land in which it would behoove you to know how to say, in Yiddish,

250. What is the flight number?
 1,372. I need something for a tourniquet.
 1,379. Here is my identification.
 254. Can I go by boat/ferry to _____?

The blank in the last of those phrases, impossible to fill in, tantalized me. Whither could I sail on that boat/ferry, in the solicitous company of Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich, and from what shore?

I dreamed of at least two possible destinations. The first one was a modern independent state very closely analogous to the State of Israel—call it the State of Yisroel—a postwar Jewish homeland created during a time of moral emergency, located presumably, but not necessarily, in Palestine; it could have been in Alaska, or in Madagascar. Here, perhaps, that minority faction of the Zionist movement who favored the establishment of Yiddish as the national language of the Jews were able to prevail over its more numerous Hebraist opponents. There would be Yiddish color commentators for soccer games, Yiddish-speaking cash machines, Yiddish tags on the collars of dogs. Public debate, private discourse, joking and lamentation, all would be conducted not in a new-old, partly artificial language like Hebrew, a prefabricated skyscraper still under construction, with only the lowermost of its stories as yet inhabited by the generations, but in a tumbledown old palace capable in the smallest of its stones (the word “*nu*”) of expressing slyness, tenderness, derision, romance, disputation, hopefulness, skepticism, sorrow, a lascivious impulse, or the confirmation of one’s worst fears.

The implications of this change on the official language of the “Jewish homeland,” a change which, depending on your view of human character and its underpinnings, was either minor or fundamental, were difficult to sort out. I couldn’t help thinking that such a nation, speaking its essentially European tongue, would, in the Middle East, stick out among its neighbors to an even greater degree than Israel does now. But would the Jews of a Mediterranean Yisroel be impugned and admired for having

the same kind of character that Israelis, rightly or wrongly, are widely taken to have, the classic sabra personality: rude, scrappy, loud, tough, secular, hardheaded, cagey, pushy? Was it living in a near-permanent state of war, or was it the Hebrew language, or something else, that had made Israeli humor so dark, so barbed, so cynical, so untranslatable? Perhaps this Yisroel, like its cognate in our own world, had the potential to seem a frightening, even a harrowing place, as the following sequence from the section on “Difficulties” seemed to imply:

109. What is the matter here?
110. What am I to do?
112. They are bothering me.
113. Go away.
114. I will call a policeman.

In an essay that I wrote and eventually published in *Civilization* magazine—and from which I am here liberally quoting—I tried to imagine one possible Yisroel: the youngest nation on the North American continent, founded in the former Alaska Territory during World War II as a resettlement zone for the Jews of Europe. (For a brief while, I had once read, the Roosevelt administration had proposed such a plan.) The resulting country would be a far different place than Israel. It would be a cold, northern land of furs, paprika, samovars, and one long, glorious day of summer. It would be absurd to speak Hebrew, that tongue of spikenard and almonds, in such a place. This Yisroel—maybe it would be called Alyeska—I imagined at the time as a kind of Jewish Sweden, social-democratic, resource rich, prosperous, organizationally and temperamentally far more akin to its immediate neighbor, Canada, than to its more freewheeling

benefactor far to the south. Perhaps, indeed, there might have been some conflict, in the years since independence, between the United States and Alyeska.

This country I thought of was in the nature of a wistful fantasyland, a toy theater with miniature sets and furnishings to arrange and rearrange, painted backdrops on which the gleaming lineaments of a snowy Jewish Onhava could be glimpsed, all its grief concealed behind the scrim, hidden in the machinery of the loft, sealed up beneath trapdoors in the floorboards. But there was another destination to which the Weinreichs beckoned, unwittingly but in all the detail that Dover's "Say It" series required: home, to the "old country." To Europe.

In this Europe the millions of Jews who were never killed would have produced grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The countryside would retain large pockets of country people whose first language was still Yiddish, and in the cities one could find many more for whom Yiddish would be the language of kitchen and family, of theater and poetry and scholarship. A surprisingly large number of these people would be my relations. I would be able to go visit them, the way Irish Americans I knew were always visiting second and third cousins in Galway or Cork, sleeping in their strange beds, eating their strange food, and looking just like them. Imagine. Perhaps one of my cousins might take me to visit the house where my father's mother was born, or to the school in Vilna that my grandfather's grandfather attended with the boy Abraham Cahan. For my relatives, though they would doubtless know at least some English, I would want to trot out a few appropriate Yiddish phrases, more than anything as a way of reestablishing the tenuous connection between us; in this world Yiddish would not be, as it is in ours, a tin can with no tin can on the other end of the string. Here, though

I would be able to get by without them, I would be glad to have the Weinreichs along. Who knows but that visiting some remote Polish backwater I might be compelled to visit a dentist to whom I would want to cry out, having found the appropriate number (1,447), "eer TOOT meer VAY!"

What would this Europe be like, I wondered, with its 25, 30, or 35 million Jews? Would they be tolerated, despised, ignored by, or merely indistinguishable from their fellow modern Europeans? What would the world be like, never having felt the need to create an Israel, that hard bit of grit in the socket that hinges Africa to Asia?

What, I wondered in the conclusion of my original essay, did it mean to originate from a place, from a world, from a culture that no longer existed, from a language that might die in my generation? What phrases would I need to know in order to speak to those millions of unborn phantoms to whom I belonged?

Just what was I supposed to do with this book?

5.

Not long after the essay on *Say It in Yiddish* was published in *Civilization*, I received a puckish email from my uncle Stan—the late Stanley Werbow, my grandmother's brother, a noted scholar of German and an American-born native speaker of Yiddish—congratulating me on having accomplished the trick, never especially difficult, of outraging Yiddishists.

The offended parties belonged to an Internet listserv called Mendele, which provides an electronic forum for a freewheeling discussion—its tone ranging from academic to informal, from humorous to dry as dust—of Yiddish and Yiddish culture, and to which my uncle Stan was himself a subscriber.

The Yiddish language evolved over the course of the thousand years following the migration of Jews into Western Europe and up to 1939, at which date its literature ranked among the glories of world heritage. About half of its approximately 11 million speakers were murdered during the Holocaust, with the rest dispersed, assimilated into other languages, or passed on, without passing on Yiddish. It continues to be spoken today as a home language by a far smaller if indeterminate number of older people and ultraorthodox Jews, and as a second language by scholars, students, and those devotees, like many of the subscribers to Mendele, who have made learning and preserving it their passionate pastime.

It turned out, when I took Uncle Stan up on his tip, that some of the Mendelyaners, as the listserv's members style themselves, were angry because of my essay, to which they had first been alerted by the following post:

Date: Mon, 23 Jun 1997

Subject: Weinreich's phrase book

I should like to alert the readers of this list to a delightfully humorous essay regarding Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich's little paperback phrase book *Say It in Yiddish* in the current (June–July 1997) issue of *Civilization* [The Magazine of The Library of Congress]. The essay is entitled "Guidebook to a Land of Ghosts" and is subtitled "A Yiddish phrase book is an absurd, poignant artifact of a country that never was." The writer, Michael Chabon, finds, in the pages of the phrase book, detailed directions—buying plane tickets, visiting the dentist, getting a finger wave from a Yiddish-speaking hairdresser

or a shoeshine from a Yiddish-speaking shineboy—in a country that never existed. The charming illustrations by Ben Katchor...

This initial post was followed two days later by:

Date: Wed, 25 Jun 1997

Subject: Weinreich's phrase book

I have to take issue with the note... regarding an article in the magazine *Civilization* about the above book. I haven't read the article (nor do I intend to, based on [the previous] review), but I find reference to Ashkenaz as "a country that never was" quite offensive and not "delightfully humorous" at all... The author of this piece should be excoriated rather than praised for this article, and placed in the same kheyrem as the rest of those who think Yiddish is dead.

To be *excoriated*, by the way, literally means "to have one's skin removed"; it's the heavy-duty version of *exfoliated*. Soon afterward, another angry Yiddishist came after me brandishing his loofa of outrage:

Listen up friend Chabon.* A number of us have gotten together and created a dictionary of chemistry, in Yiddish!! (I hope it will come out in a short time)... And who needs it...?? WE need it because it is our Yiddish

* This post is a literal translation, by its author, of the Yiddish original; in Yiddish the word *chaver* (lit., "friend"), when used as a form of address, has a number of possible shades of meaning, among them, as here, "enemy," or "dickhead."

CULTURE... for the same reason the Guide for Travelers is needed... throughout the world...

The whole *tsimmes* went on more or less in this fashion, with some Mendelyaners writing to defend what I had written, and with the argument on the other side boiling down in the end mostly to this:

Of course, no one can fault him for how he feels about the issue, but it seems to me that this feeling stems at least in part from his sharing the popular but quite inaccurate opinion that Yiddish has already entered the world of Latin, Sanskrit, and Gothic.

Of course, this misses the point completely. It is not the apparent "deadness" of its language, however accurate or inaccurate such an impression may be, that makes *Say It in Yiddish* such a wondrous, provocative, sad, and funny book. Even if Yiddish is taken to be alive and well, *Say It in Yiddish* still proposes a world that never was and might have been, and makes it all feel absurdly and beautifully ordinary. But though I wrote to the membership and tried to explain myself, I had no success in diminishing the rage of Mendelyaners such as the one who declared, finally:

The "humorous" article in *Civilization* was not funny, but ridiculous. No, an ignorant insult to the World of Yiddish. The author of that article has already apologized to B. Weinreich.

In fact I had, after the article was published, received a very unhappy letter from Mrs. Weinreich, the widow of Uriel,

who died in 1967. She viewed my essay as disrespectful and mocking not only of her late husband, who as I now learned had at his untimely death been regarded as the great young hope of Yiddish scholarship in America, but of the Yiddish language itself. And so I *had* written her to apologize, not for anything I said in the essay, but for any unintended appearance of mockery there might have been, and for having hurt her feelings. To this I received a not-at-all mollified reply to my reply.

Back in 1991, the reviewer of my first story collection in the *New York Times Book Review* criticized me for being, among a number of other things, essentially too much of a nice Jewish boy. Too polite, she lamented. Too respectful of my elders. "Mr. Chabon's parents," said the reviewer, Elizabeth Benedict, "may not appreciate my holding up Philip Roth as an example to their son, but Mr. Roth offers crucial lessons to this... young writer, who is so evidently eager to please... Don't worry so much about being nice." I supposed, at the time, that the *Times* reviewer had a point; and since then, I have encountered nothing that would persuade me otherwise, or that would enable me, however hard I might try, to be anything else. And as a nice Jewish boy, I experienced two competing reactions to this *tsimmes* over *Say It in Yiddish*, both of them typical if not definitive, to my mind, of my lamentable species.

On the one hand, I was, as I wrote to Mrs. Weinreich, deeply sorry. I had never been in hot water before because of something I wrote, and I found that I did not enjoy the sensation. As Elizabeth Benedict suggested, I wanted people to like me. And over and above every other kind of people whom I wanted to like me were nice old Jewish ladies like Beatrice Weinreich. Even stronger than my regret was my sense of embarrassment. Many of my Mendele critics had taken the time to "hock me a *tchaimik*"

about my ignorance of Yiddish and Yiddishkeit, and while I freely confessed to this ignorance, it is one thing to admit something and another to have it thrown in your face. The embarrassing fact was that I had never *heard* of Uriel Weinreich, and the reverence in which he was evidently held persuaded me that I ought to have. I *felt* my ignorance, and was ashamed.

My second typical nice-Jewish-boy reaction was—well, I'll get to that in a minute.

Some time after the tsimmes cooled, Janet Hadda, a professor of Yiddish lit at UCLA and a practicing psychoanalyst, wrote a series of articles and papers in which she tried to determine just what it was about my essay that had made some people so angry. Hadda claimed that the lovers of Yiddish were in mourning over their murdered language, and hence living in denial, a stage from which, as we all know, it is but one short step to anger. There may or may not be merit to Hadda's argument; I would prefer to leave it to the analysts and analysts to duke it out for themselves, if they care to. I was more taken by another of Hadda's claims, namely her postulating beyond questions of death and denial a kind of survival of Yiddishkeit in the imagination of my generation of American Jewish writers, in our return to Ashkenazic and Yiddish themes and subject matter, in our evocation, perhaps half-unconscious, of the deep echoes of the mother tongue of our grandparents and great-grandparents. Hadda describes us as "born into an interrupted culture" and "try[ing] to compensate for the loss."

The phenomenon of young writers turning to the culture of their parents for exploration is anything but rare. What is unusual, if not unique, about the culture of Ash-

kenaz[†] is that it can no longer be found today except in the memories of a very few survivors and *in the imaginations of artists* [italics mine].

Another phenomenon that is far from rare, of course, is that of a Jew—hell, of any human being—longing for a home that feels irretrievable yet never ceases, age after age, to beckon. Perhaps one explanation for the improbably long survival of Judaism is the fitness of one of its central images—the unending loss of Jerusalem—to our innate human talent for nostalgia, to the aetataurate delusion, our false but certain collective human memory of a Golden Age, a time when doors had no locks and a man's word was his bond and giants walked the earth. You find an expression of the same sense of irrecoverable loss in the "Intimations of Immortality," where the part of Jerusalem is played by Childhood, a structure that in Wordsworthian retrospect appears to have been built, like the Golden City, nearer somehow to the heart of the mystery of things. And this is where, for me, genre fiction comes into the picture. Because when you are talking, like Hadda, about lands that can be found only in the imagination, you are really speaking my language—my *mamalosben*.

6.

I was born the first time in Georgetown University Hospital, in 1963, and the second time ten years later, in the opening pages of "A Scandal in Bohemia." In this latter infancy the

[†] By Ashkenaz, Hadda means an actual geographical region—the lands of northern European Jewry—as much as a culture and a state of mind.

heaven that lay about *me* was the work of Conan Doyle, Ray Bradbury, Philip José Farmer, Jack Vance. Fantasy and science fiction, then horror and hard-boiled mystery; my passion and my ambition as a reader and a writer were forged in the smithy of genre fiction.

As a young man, an English major, and a regular participant in undergraduate fiction-writing workshops, I was taught—or perhaps in fairness it would be more accurate to say I learned—that science fiction was not serious fiction, that a writer of mystery novels might be loved but not revered, that if I meant to get serious about the art of fiction I might set a novel in Pittsburgh but never on Pluto. *The Long Goodbye* could be parsed by the literary critic for a class on Masculine Anxiety in the Postwar American Novel, but it was unlikely to appear on the syllabus of a general twentieth-century American literature class alongside *Abraham*, *Abraham* and the stories of Flannery O'Connor.

There were exceptions, writers whose work drew overtly on sources in genre fiction and yet was taken seriously by critics, scholars, and general readers. They had names like Pynchon, Burroughs, Vonnegut, Nabokov, and their writing was often described as “transgressive,” as if choosing a detective hero or an interplanetary setting were not merely ill-advised if you hoped to make literature but violated an outright taboo. A detective novelist or a horror writer who made claims to artistry sat in the same chair at the table of literature as did a transvestite cousin at a family Thanksgiving. He was something to be allowed for, indulged, pardoned, excused, his fabulous hat studiously ignored.

I was twenty (let’s say). I accepted this curious ethos as indisputable, and found a strong appeal in the idea of transgression. I wrote a raft of stories that cross-dressed in the clothes of genre and found sure enough that when I gave

them out to workshops, workshops tended to look away from the ostrich feather in my hat. “I don’t know anything about mysteries,” said the reader of one of my short stories, a surrealist effort featuring a gumshoe working a puzzling murder in a De Chirico city, written under the heavy influence of Chandler and Donald Barthelme. “I hate science fiction,” went another frequently offered bit of helpful criticism, “so there’s nothing I can really do to help you with this.”

When I first visited the campus of UC Irvine, where I eventually enrolled in the MFA writing program, I was ushered, with the kind of clueless goodwill that might impel you to introduce the only two Mennonites at your wedding to each other, into the company of Gregory Benford, a fine writer of extremely “hard” science fiction (*Timescape*, *Across the Sea of Suns*) and a professor in the UCIDepartment of Physics and Astronomy. I don’t remember now if Professor Benford had read any of my undergraduate work, or was only going on my description of it, but I do remember his polite and kindly bafflement.

A lonely business, transgressing. There was nothing that anybody could do for me. I laid aside the epic novel I had been planning, about a Holmesian detective investigating, on Earth and along the canals of the planet Mars, the disappearance of the great and greatly mistaken astronomer Percival Lowell, and turned instead to concentrate on this other book, a straightforward realistic narrative, equally influenced by Proust, Fitzgerald, and Philip Roth, about summertime and sexual identity in the city of Pittsburgh.

It was in this period, when I abandoned the career that was both to have culminated in and been launched by that novel about Mars, that I also turned my back on Judaism. I was learning to question everything; I guess I was trying to fit in.

Nothing about my being Jewish—about my ancestors, about their languages and histories, about the stale holiday invocations of freedom, continuity, and survival—seemed to have use or relation to the ongoing business of my life at the time. Israel had lost its heroic claim on my imagination and seemed to have become, by means I did not understand, the ally and stooge of a Disneyfied president I loathed. In the meantime my mother moved away from the town where I grew up. I married a woman who was not Jewish, and began work on what was to be my second novel. I had no home, and neither, it seemed to me, did anyone—remember that I was living, at the time, in Southern California.

For a while, still young and interested in my own pain as an object of the world's attention, I grooved along on my lostness. But after a while I got tired of feeling that way. That first marriage broke up, and the novel that was to be my second was even more doomed than the marriage. I wanted to know where I came from, to retrace my steps and see if I dropped anything along the way that might serve me, now, better than I had imagined at the time of letting it go.

I started to light candles; I met and married my present wife, the grandchild of European Jewish immigrants; I abandoned the novel and began the long wandering back to a place where I could feel at home.

I kept thinking about those Jews up there in Alaska, making their Yiddishland. And I kept thinking about genre and about the books I had always thought I was going to write. And little by little at first, and then all at once, the idea began to assemble itself: I would build myself a home in my imagination as my wife and I were making a home in the world. That idea led to the writing of my novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, set, with a kind of

rapturous apprehension, in a place where the Weinreichs' phrase book would come in very handy indeed.

It was as I made the laborious and thrilling move from reverie to fiction that I found myself driven by the second key element, to which I alluded earlier, of being a nice Jewish boy. Because if you are a nice Jewish boy, as Rav Philip Roth has conclusively proven, you are also, on some level, a *nazik*: there's a devil in you, driving you to say, and to do, and to write things that you know you must or ought not say, do, or write. Like my uncle Stan with his mischievous email, the nice Jewish boy lives in thrall, at least some of the time, to the spirit of doing things *af tselkheib*, out of spite, a kind of magical, Trickster spite that, like Coyote or Loki of the Northmen, is responsible for all destruction and all creation too.

If I could outrage a few people with one little essay—how many could I piss off with an entire *novel*?