Reviews

Yiddish Given Names: A Lexicon. By Rella Israly Cohn. Pp. xix + 405. Lanham: Maryland: Scarecrow. 2008. $165.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 0810852616

To really understand modern Jewish American names, one has to get some background information on American Jews. While some American Jews trace their roots to Spanish and Portuguese New World colonies in Colonial times, the majority are later arrivals and came from Central and Eastern Europe. The two mainstreams of Jewish descent are Sephardic (originally from Spain) and Ashkenazi (originally from the Rhineland and later Central and Eastern Europe). For many years, in Europe, Yiddish was the main spoken language of Jews who could and did use it in much of Europe and as far as Vladivostok in Asia. I have heard that one could use Yiddish better to travel across Russia and Siberia than Russian. One of my uncles told me that he was able to converse fluently in Yiddish when at a railroad station in India.

While the number of speakers of Yiddish on the eve of World War II was well over ten million, the number of speakers today has declined significantly by various estimates. While the count depends on those who speak Yiddish as a first language or as a second language, half a million speakers might be a reasonable estimate.

Why the relevance for understanding American Jewish names? The answer is that the mainstream of Ashkenazi Jews who came to North America spoke Yiddish as a first language and named their children with Yiddish names. In many cases, their descendants followed the Ashkenazi custom of naming a child after a deceased relative. So, the influence of Yiddish has been powerful in Jewish naming. One major problem in understanding Yiddish names is that there has not been a dictionary in any language that covers more than a portion of the names. Cohn's goal was to provide such a dictionary.

Now, back to *Yiddish Given Names*. It seems to me that Cohn has directed her book to two groups, (1) those with a strong linguistic background, and (2) non-specialists interested in Jewish and Yiddish given names.

For the specialist, Chapter 1 defines terms such as *hypocoristic*, *calque*, and *gloss*. The review of the literature demonstrates Cohn's background in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Russian, and other languages. Among the major authors she has drawn from (with critical evaluations) are Edward Stankiewicz, Max Weinreich, Leopold Zunz, and Benzion Kaganoff.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the development of the Yiddish language. It explains that there were four periods: Earliest 1000?–1250; Old Yiddish, 1250–1500; Middle Yiddish, 1500–1750; and Modern Yiddish, 1750– . It goes on to describe three major dialects (Northeastern, Southeastern, and Mideastern), vowel systems, and language influences (Middle High German, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and Slavic languages).

Chapter 3 describes Jewish naming customs. There is a description of the custom of memorializing a deceased relative by giving the name to a newborn child. This custom goes as far back as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Florence, Italy. Cohn also describes cases where a childless family gave an inducement to a pregnant woman to name a child after a deceased person.

Before going further, mention must be made of a custom that characterizes most Jewish names in North America and elsewhere. This custom is not known by most non-Jews, and, in fact, many Jews are not aware of it. Most Jews have a duplicate set of given, or first, names. One is the religious (or sacred) *shem hakodesh*; the other is the vernacular (or everyday colloquial) *kinnui*.

The *shem hakodesh* is the name that is used for circumcision, bar mitzvah, marriage, being called up to the *bima* (platform) in a synagogue, and burial. It is usually Hebrew. A man might use the name Morris in everyday life, but his Hebrew name would be Moses. A woman might use the name Dorothy in everyday life, but her name in Hebrew would be Dvora (Deborah).

The fourth chapter deals with description and analysis of the 256 Yiddish names in the Lexicon. If all the related names were included, the total count would be much more. Cohn sets up a classification derived from other investigators and sets up the terminology for the Lexicon. She defines the full or base name, the colloquial name, the hypocoristic, and the diminutive. There is also a presentation of variations and exceptions.

A related bit of information that might help to understand Jewish naming is to recall Jacob's blessing of his sons at his death. He compared many of them to animals, Judah to a lion, Benjamin to a wolf, Naphtali to a deer. From these comparisons, names were developed. Thus, members of the community would know that the Hebrew name for a man named Leo, Leon, or Leonard would be Yehudah (Judah). Similarly, a man named Wolf would be called up to the *bima* as Naphtali. From my own research, I estimate that 30–70 percent of all Jewish men's names are derived from those of Jacob and his sons.

The non-specialist can begin with the Lexicon, the largest part of the book. It consists of 273 pages. Usually, there is a single entry on a page. Perhaps a sample entry might give an idea of the style. Here is the one for *Aleksander* (English *Alexander*). Some of the terms and references that might not be clear are amplified at the end.

name Aleksander		**gender** m	
colloquial form Sender			
hypocoristics			
diminutives			
type, formal		**type semantic**	
gloss "defender of men," Web			
language source Grk.			
date (before 37 BCE, LZ): 1096, Sal			
shem hakodesh yes		*kinnui* (see below)	
combination Aleksander Ziskind, etc.			

Hebrew sources	E-S, ʻalexandēr, Jas: I, 70, ʻaleḵsandərōs.
Yiddish sources	St Gol, GVYS:3, 1380, Birn, Aleksander, Sender.
Russian sources	Kul: many *kinnuiim*, ten forms with Zus-, one with Zindl. and six forms with Sender; Beid.
rabbinic sources	
German sources	Zunz: 1837:9, "Even prior to the reign of Herod (37 BCE), Jews carried the following names: ... Alexander." 1837:35, "... legend knows of the promise of the High Priest Simon the Just to Alexander of Macedonia (356–323 BCE) that all Jewish priests' sons who would be born in the coming year would be named after him." Salfield: Full name, with a number of entries, Mainz, Worms 1096; Senderlin, Würzburg 1298.

Comments The reference in Zunz (see above) and those in EJ and Graetz all mention or dwell on the legendary aspect of Alexander the Great's visit. In any case, Y. Aleksander derives from a very old name; it is sometimes referred to as a "Hebrew" name, presumably because it is a *shem hakodesh*. The colloquial form is umlauted, historically deriving from Sander and (pre-modern) Senderlin. Gol has Sander, Sender, also Senderman. Gold (1994) states that Sender is EY and Sander WY. GVYS has the shortening Sender and the *kinnuiim* Ziskind, Zise, Zuse, and Lipman. See discussion of *kinnuiim* in Chapter 3 for mention of Ziskind. MTT has four, three of them with Eng. Sander or Sanders. Aron has Alexander Süsskind, 1160 (compare contemporary combination Aleksander Ziskind) and Sanders, 1266.

regional form	**English form** Alexander.

Some notes on the entry:

- gloss. Here refers to etymological meaning or the folk etymology.
- LZ = Leopold Zunz, *Namen der Juden*.
- Sal = Sigmund Salfeld, *Das Martyrologium des Nürnberger*
- *Shem hakodesh*. Sacred name or name used for religious purposes.
- *kinnui*. Colloquial name.
- Source References: E-S =Abraham Even-Shoshan, *Collection of Hebrew Personal Names in Milon Hadash*. St = Edward Stankiewicz, *The Derivational Pattern of Yiddish Personal Names*; Gol = Hyman Goldin, *Hamadrikh: the Rabbi's Guide*. GVYS = Judah A. Joffe and Mark Yudel, *Groyser Verterbukh fun der Yidisher Shprakh* (Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language). Birn = Salomo Birnbaum, *Grammatik der Jiddischen Sprache: Mit einem Wörterbuch und Lesestücken*. Kul = I. I. Kulisher, *Sbornik dlia soglasnovaniia raznovidnostei imen*. (*Collection for the "agreement" of names used by Jews in Russia.*. Beid = Alexander Beider, *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire*.
- EY = Eastern Yiddish. WY = Western Yiddish.
- MTT = Rella I. Cohen, *Patterns and Correlations in Hebrew and English Names: A Preliminary Study*.

Of course, the entries vary in style and number of entries. There is a tremendous amount of information included in the entries. Cohn has demonstrated a wide range of scholarly work in many languages to bring all this information together. In addition to the Lexicon, there are nine appendices including lists of Early Yiddish names, rare names, English names indexed to their Yiddish counterparts, and Hebrew names indexed to their Yiddish counterparts. There is also an extensive bibliography and index.

Only one major criticism might be made. There is no key to understanding how to pronounce the names. While an educated guess would be possible for many of the names, it would be nice to have an IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) spelling or a *New York Times*-BBC style of pronunciation. Perhaps someone will come along to do that.

Yiddish Given Names is recommended for linguists, onomasts, for libraries that have Judaica collections, and for genealogists interested in Jewish families and families with Jewish roots.

This volume has succeeded in achieving Cohn's goal of offering a dictionary of Yiddish names.

State University of New York, Fredonia *Professor Emeritus of Psychology*   EDWIN D. LAWSON