Yiddish is an important key to understanding Jewish identity and heritage in East-Central Europe because of the role that it played in the social, political and cultural life of its native speakers. Over the centuries, Yiddish absorbed elements from many different sources: from Hebrew, Aramaic, German, Romance and Slavic languages, and, in the past one hundred years, English. Yiddish was, until World War II, a distinct linguistic sound in the aural landscape of Polish towns and villages. Numerous Yiddish words took root in Polish: fajny (great or cool), sitwa (gang), bałagula (wagon driver, bore), belfer (teacher), cymes (a treat), ślamazara (slob), łapserdak (scoundrel), chała (challah bread), chasyd (Hasid), machlojka (dirty trick), plajta (bankruptcy), pejsy (sidelocks), rejwach (commotion), szabes (Sabbath), trefny (suspicious or illegal), melina (speakeasy), ferajna (band), paser (fence for stolen goods).

YIDDISHLAND TIMELINE
- 9th century: the beginnings of Yiddish as a language.
- 1272: the first known sentence written in Yiddish, a blessing in a prayer book dedicated to the person who carried the book to the synagogue.
- 13th to 15th centuries: the centers of Jewish settlement migrated eastward to avoid persecution, and the Yiddish language divided into two main dialects: eastern and western. Eastern Yiddish pulled away from its maternal German language and began to incorporate elements from the Slavic languages of Czech and Polish territories. When we think of Yiddish today, we have the eastern dialect in mind, a dialect that over time became a full-fledged language in its own right. It is divided into three primary dialect groups: central (or Polish), southeastern (or Ukrainian) and northeastern (or Litvak).
- 1382: the Cambridge Codex containing the first lengthier works of literature in Judeo-German or proto-Yiddish, including a transcription of the German heroic epic Dukus Horant.
- 15th century: Numerous “szabes lider” are composed. These are songs sung during Sabbath, including the famous “Got fun Avrom” sung during havdalah, the ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath.
- 1526: the song „Almechtiger Got” was written to be sung during the Pesach seder meal. The first extant copy in Yiddish was printed in Prague.
1534: the first Yiddish book Mirkeves hamishne, printed by the Helicz Brothers press in Kraków, one of the most important sites for Yiddish printing along with Prague, Venice, Frankfurt am Main and Amsterdam.

1541: Bovo-bukh printed in Isny, Germany, based on an Italian romantic poem adapted to the Yiddish language and with Jewish cultural references. It was written by the renown linguist, humanist and traveling bard, Elia Levita, also known as Eliahu Bakhur.

1544: Taytsh-Khumesh a Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch printed by Paulus Fagius in Constance, Germany.

1544: Shmuel-Bukh, deemed a national epic, printed in Augsburg, Germany. The manuscript was prepared at the request of Mr. Freidlin and served as an early model for Old Yiddish epics.

mid-16th century: Rivka Tiktiner, the first Jewish woman poet, wrote her ethical text entitled Meynekes Rivke (Rebecca’s Wet Nurse).

circa 1590: Tsene-rene, the so-called Bible for women, is printed. It is a compilation of adapted Biblical texts in Yiddish, but also contains legends, homiletic stories, medieval commentaries, parables, and anecdotes drawn from various sources. The author who compiled the texts was Jacob, son of Itzhak Ashkenazy from Janów Lubelski in Poland.

1596: the oldest extant copy of Brantshpigl (The Burning Mirror) by Mosheh ben Hanokh Altshul of Prague, a very popular ethical text in Yiddish of the type that was developing from the 16th century. Most of the moral teachings were addressed to women.

1602: the Mayse-bukh is printed in Basel, the most important collection of Ashkenazic moral stories edited by Jakub bar Abraham from Międzyrzecz in Litva. It was the model for many later editions.

1686-1687: Di Kurantin, the first periodical in Yiddish is published in Amsterdam.

1691-1719: Glikl of Hameln, born in Hamburg in 1645, author of one of the most famous memoirs in Yiddish, Zikhroynes mores (Memoirs, 1896), that provide a vibrant portrait of the author and her times.

late 18th century: western Yiddish begins to disappear due to social and linguistic processes linked to widespread assimilation in Europe. This process continues into the early 20th century.

1815: a dual-language version of a collection of tales of Sipurey mayses, in Hebrew and Yiddish, by Nahman of Bratslav, regarded in Hasidic circles as one of the most controversial of Hasidic masters and leaders.
- 1830: Shloyme Ettinger writes the comedy Serkele, considered the first outstanding dramatic text written in Yiddish.

- 1864: Sholem Yankev Abramovitsch debuts under his pen-name Mendele Moycher-Sforim. His writing is later acknowledged as being one of the classics of early modern Yiddish literature.

- 1876: Abraham (Avrom) Goldfaden and his fellow Broder singers founded the first professional Yiddish-language theatre troupe.

- 1883: the Russian tsar prohibits Yiddish-language performances throughout the Russian empire (the ban was not lifted until 1905).

- 1888: Yitskhok Leybush Peretz debuts with his ballad Monish, regarded as one of the earliest examples of modern Yiddish poetry.

- 1889: Yankev Ber Gimpel founds the first permanent Yiddish-language theatre in Lwów that performed continuously until 1939.

- 1894-1916: Sholem-Aleichem (literary pseudonym of Sholem Rabinovitz) writes a series of stories that later were published as Tevye der milkhiker (Tevye the Dairyman), whose hero was a simple milkman struggling with modernity. Tevye is one of the most famous of all Yiddish literary figures and has become a synonym for the Jews of East-Central Europe.

- 1897: the Yiddish daily Forverts is founded in New York. Its circulation in the 1920’s and ‘30s reached up to 275,000 copies a day and it became a symbol of the growing Yiddish-speaking population in the US. The paper is still in print today.


- End of the 19th century: the battle against Yiddish culture begun by representatives of Zionism who regard the renaissance of Hebrew as the road to Jewish national revival. The Yiddishism movement reacts with efforts to bolster the prestige of the Yiddish language and culture.


- 1907–1919: in New York, one of the first Jewish literary groups, Die Yunge, strives to divorce literature from political engagement and to strip Jewish poetry from its avowed obligation to speak on behalf of the entire nation.

- 1908: conference in Czernovitz (Bukovina) proclaims Yiddish to be a national Jewish language alongside Hebrew.
- 1915: Yitskhok Leybush Peretz dies in Warsaw, marking the symbolic end of the “founding fathers” era of contemporary Yiddish culture. Sholem Aleichem dies a year later; Mendele Moykher Sforim in 1917.

- 1916: the Vilner Trupe theatrical company is founded in Vilnius, establishing a new artistic level in the history of Jewish theatre.

- 1917–1920: Yiddish is recognized as an official administrative language in the Ukrainian People’s Republic.

- 1918–1920: Thanks to the Kultur-Lige (Culture League) in Ukraine, Yiddish culture sees great advances in education, literature, theatre and the arts. This model is copied throughout Yiddishland.

- 1919–1923: the expressionistic and futuristic group Yung Yidish is founded in Łódź.

- 1919: the modernist group In-Zich (Introspectivist) is founded in New York to promote introspective and intellectual poetry that strives to internalize objective reality.

- 1920: Vilner Trupe achieves great success with its staging of An-ski’s The Dybbuk, directed by Dovid Herman.

- 1920: In Moscow, the experimental GOSET (Moscow National Jewish Theatre) is founded; it cooperates with Marc Chagal and is directed by Aleksander Granovsky, and later by the great actor Solomon (Shloyme) Michoels.

- 1922: Ida Kamińska and Zygmunt Turow establish WIKT, the avant-garde Warsaw Yiddish Art Theatre.

- 1922: Perets Markish publishes his epic poem Di kupe (The Heap), a watermark in Yiddish literature, inspired by a series of pogroms directed against the Jewish community in Ukraine in 1921.

- 1921–1924: in Warsaw, the Chaliastre (The Gang) artistic group constitutes the leading Yiddish avant-garde movement in inter-war Poland.

- 1925: YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, the first Yiddish secular research center, is established with its headquarters in Vilnius.

- 1927: Kadia Mołodowska, called the „first lady of Yiddish literature,” publishes her first collection of poems entitled Froyen-lider (Songs for Women), one of the most important and dramatic Yiddish manifestos of female identity juxtaposing the traditional female model with a modern model of emancipation.
- 1927–1943: the Yung Vilne artistic and literary group is active in Vilnius and its works are regarded as full-fledged expressions of Yiddish culture dealing with mounting social and political problems in Poland in the 1930’s.
- 1929: Anna Margolin (pseud. of Roza Lebensboim) publishes in New York her volume Lider (Poems), breaking with female poetic stereotypes.
- 1929: Khane Levin, a leading figure among creative Jewish women active in revolutionary circles, publishes her feminist manifesto Di froy (Woman) as an introduction to her debut collection of poems entitled Tsushtayer (Contribution).
- 1929–1932: The Galician group Tsushtayer publishes a journal under the same name. Its outstanding contributors are Rachel Auerbach and Debora Vogel. Its main purpose is to integrate the Yiddish literary scene in Galicia and to create an intellectual alternative for the younger generation of Jews that is increasingly becoming linguistically assimilated.
- 1932–1939: the avant-garde and experimental Yung Teater (Young Theatre) in Warsaw performs under the direction of Michał Wiechert.
- 1933: Sholem Asch, a well-known Yiddish playwright and writer, controversial in Jewish circles but the most recognized Jewish literary figure in Polish circles before the Holocaust, receives the prestigious Polonia Restituta medal.
- 1934: the Soviet authorities establish a Jewish Autonomous Region with its center in Birobidzhan in the Far East territories of the USSR.
- 1935: in New York, Celia Dropkin publishes her volume In heysn vint (In the Hot Wind), regarded as a breakthrough in erotic Yiddish poetry.
- 1937: Michał Waszyński directs „Dybbuk,” considered the greatest Yiddish film in pre-war history.
- 1938: Yankev Glatstein publishes his poem „A gute nacht dir, welt” (Good Night, World), a manifesto in which he rejects European culture and returns to his Jewish roots.
- 1943: Rachel Auerbach, hiding in Warsaw on the Aryan side during WW II, writes her Yizker (Memory), in which she invokes, in the midst of the Holocaust, the age-old Jewish tradition of commemorating the memory of destroyed Jewish communities.
- 1944: Itshak Katzenelson pens „Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidiszn folk” (Poem of the Murdered Jewish People), regarded as one of the most ambitious and harrowing poetic accounts of the Holocaust.
- 1946: Abraham (Avrom) Sutzkever writes „Cu Poyln” (For Poland), an ode to parting and reckoning.

- 1946–1966: Dos poylishe yidntum is published in Buenos Aires, a 175 volume series dedicated to commemorating Yiddish culture in Poland and the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

- 1949: the Writers Union in Tel Aviv passes a motion excluding members writing in Yiddish. It also restricts the number of Yiddish words that can appear in a theatre performance, and in other literary works.


- 1949–1995: despite adverse circumstances, Di goldene keyt, (The Golden Chain) one of the most prestigious post-war literary quarterlies, is released in Israel edited by Avraham (Avrom) Sutzkever.

- 1950: The Jewish Theatre of Lower Silesia performs Goldenfad kholem (A Goldfaden Dream), directed by Jacob Rotbaum, to great acclaim not only among Jewish viewers.


- 1955: Chaim Grade, regarded as one of the greatest post-war Yiddish-language writers, publishes Der mames shabosim (My Mother's Sabbath Days).


- 1968: A national antisemitic campaign in Poland puts an end to most institutions linked with Yiddish culture. Numerous Yiddishists, including Ida Kamińska and Dawid Sfard, leading figures in the Yiddish theatrical and literary worlds, leave the country under duress.

- 1977: Avraham Sutzkever publishes his masterly Yiddish poem, Lider fun togbukh (Poems from a Diary).

- 1978: Isaac Bashevis Singer, author of, among others, Der kunstmakher fun Lublin (The Magician of Lublin), is awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Forty years earlier, he had written, “Yiddish literature is even more marginal than other genres...”

- 1993: Yiddish is placed on the UNESCO list of endangered languages.

- 21st century: numerous efforts to revitalize Yiddish, including the quarterly Toplpunkt published in Tel Aviv since 2001 that deals with literature, art and social problems; the literary journal Gilgulim in Paris since 2008; the quarterly Tsvishn is founded in 2010 in Poland to write, in Polish, about Yiddish cultural issues.
- 2012: international symposium „Yidish nokh alc un vayter“ (The Enduring Yiddish) organized by UNESCO with hundreds of writers, directors, artists and various Yiddish activists coming together to debate the future of Yiddish culture in the 21st century.

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