EDITORIAL

Now that this issue focusing on Yiddish is completed it seems obvious, at least in retrospect, that this was a relevant and important topic for a journal devoted to themes affecting Jewish life in Europe. This was not so self-evident when the idea began to emerge. An early impetus was the offering of an article some years ago by Haike Beruriah Wiegand, included here, on the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer. At the time it seemed too specialised and lacking in a context, so it was held in reserve. Another impetus was hearing a lecture on the unexpected topic of 'Yiddish Tango in Argentina' by Lloica Czackis, included in this issue, accompanied by her own excellent performances of the songs. That in turn triggered many memories of performances of Yiddish songs in Germany by excellent singers and musicians as diverse as Daniel Kempin, Shura Lipovsky, Roswitha Dasch and Katharina Muetter, the former two Jewish, the latter not, all of whom have undertaken serious research into Yiddish culture and music, and brought commitment and learning, as well as great artistry, to their work. Suddenly the obviousness of the subject became apparent.

What became clear once we started asking for possible contributions was the deep loyalty to the subject, and even a feeling of mission, of scholars in the field, far beyond mere academic curiosity, and of practitioners and performers. Whoever we approached offered not only to write but also to point us to others, whether academics, performers or creators of cultural programmes. Many referred to the unique programme at La Maison de la Culture Yiddish/Medem Bibliothèque in Paris, and we are delighted to include an overview of Yiddish in France and Francophone countries by Professor Yitskhok Niborski, who kindly checked the Yiddish transliteration of most of the articles. Together with Helen Beer and Gerben Zaagsma, the parameters of Yiddish studies, and some of the problems associated with them, are explored.

Illustrations of the sort of research that is being carried out, and its wider significance for the broader study of Jewish history and culture, can be found in the second section with articles by Shlomo Berger, Justus van de Kamp, Evita Wiecki and Ewa Geller.

The cultural outreach of Yiddish emerges in the studies covering Yiddish literature, poetry or song by Heather Valencia, Vivi Lachs, Lloica Czackis, Haike Beruriah Wiegand and Magdalene Ruta. A further dimension of the contemporary scene emerges in Shura Lipovsky's moving account of her work as a singer and teacher reaching Jewish and non-Jewish audiences through her performances, and illustrating the unexpected but far-reaching effects they can have on a sensitive audience.

It is a pure delight to be able to include a chapter of a yet unpublished novel by Larry Lefkowitz called 'Lieberman'. Here the characters and attitudes that belong to the world of Jewish literary journals in Israel, where echoes of Yiddish could still be found, come alive.

The result of this assembly of articles is to confirm the best and worst suspicions about the fate of the language today. The millions for whom it was the language of every aspect of life are tragically no more. It still remains a viable language amongst certain Orthodox Jewish circles, some traditional Jewish societies and new enthusiasts for the language. But what is lost is not merely a language or even a culture, but a significant record of the struggle of Jews wrestling with the challenges of emancipation and modernity. So the importance of Yiddish today is not just a matter of nostalgia for a pre-World War Two civilisation that has all but been destroyed, but as a reflection of the earliest attempts by Jews to find the relationship between a religious tradition and secular ideologies, movements and societies; between a relatively closed, self-contained and internally policed society and an open-ended, seemingly limitless set of opportunities for personal exploration and advancement. Moreover, it puts us back in touch with a vibrant Jewish society before the Shoah limited our perception of Jews and Judaism to the language of victimhood and survival alone. However, as so many of these articles make clear, to open these experiences and ideas to a contemporary Jewish audience, much more has to be done to enter the worlds unlocked by this unique language.

Not all the potential contributors we approached were able to produce something in time for this issue and we intend to include further articles as a significant part of the next issue. The enthusiastic response from those we approached led to the obvious idea of dedicating a parallel issue to Ladino and this is currently being undertaken.

Sadly, while editing this issue, we learned of the death of Mme Colette Kessler, a leading figure in French Liberal Judaism and an important voice in Jewish dialogue with Christianity. We include a brief 'In Memoriam'.

As usual we conclude the issue with a book review, by chance on a Yiddish topic, and poetry.

Jonathan Magonet