Uriel Weinreich: Contact Linguist, Historical Linguist, and Yiddishist Par Excellence

Isaac L. Bleaman
Co-Guest Editor; New York University, United States
ibleaman@nyu.edu

This special issue of the Journal of Jewish Languages commemorates the fiftieth yortsayt¹ of Uriel Weinreich (1926–1967), a pioneering scholar of language contact, language change, and the Yiddish language. In linguistics, Weinreich is best remembered as the author of the highly influential monograph Languages in Contact and a co-author, together with his doctoral students William Labov and Marvin I. Herzog, of the 1968 essay “Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change,” which laid the groundwork for a unified approach to diachronic and synchronic variation. In Yiddish, Weinreich is best remembered as the author of the introductory textbook College Yiddish, the compiler of the Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary, the founding editor of the Field of Yiddish, and the initiator and director of the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry.

Weinreich’s numerous and varied contributions to scholarship—including articles, monographs, and edited volumes on topics ranging from formal semantics to folklore—are especially impressive considering the brevity of his career: tragically, Weinreich died from cancer at the age of forty, only sixteen years after completing his doctoral dissertation. The enormity of the loss—not only to his family and colleagues, but also to the fields of linguistics and Yiddish studies—is difficult to comprehend without careful consideration of

¹ Yiddish, ‘anniversary of a death.’
Weinreich’s achievements and the role he played in shaping the priorities and methodologies of his disciplines.

Uriel Weinreich was born on May 23, 1926, in Vilna, Poland (today the capital of Lithuania). Known as Yerusholaim-deLite ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’ due to its long association with rabbinic scholarship, Vilna was also an important center of the Jewish Enlightenment and later became a hub for Jewish nationalist political activity. Uriel’s maternal grandfather was the celebrity doctor and community leader Tsemakh Shabad, and his father was the philologist Max Weinreich, who was instrumental in founding the YIVO–Yiddish Scientific Institute, a major research center for the study of Eastern European Jewish society and the de facto Yiddish language academy. Max Weinreich also authored the still-definitive four-volume Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh (1973), an unprecedented achievement in Yiddish historical linguistics (fully translated into English as History of the Yiddish Language in 2008).

The story of how the Weinreichs came to the United States is the stuff of legend. A renowned scholar in Vilna, Max was invited to deliver a presentation about Yiddish at the Fifth International Congress of Linguists, scheduled to take place in Brussels from August 28 to September 2, 1939. He and his wife Regina decided to bring their thirteen-year-old son Uriel to the conference, who was evidently being groomed to become a linguist. The Weinreichs were en route in Copenhagen when news broke that the Germans and Soviets had signed a pact of nonaggression. Regina returned to Vilna to take care of Uriel’s younger brother Gabriel, who had been left in the care of his grandmother, and Max and Uriel remained in Denmark. The Germans invaded Poland one week later, and the conference in Brussels was cancelled. Max secured permission to stay with Uriel in Denmark for about six months, when the YIVO’s New York office arranged for their temporary visas to the United States. The two would be reunited with Regina and Gabriel in New York, where the family resettled permanently (Weiser 2013: 237–238, 244).

The YIVO library that Max Weinreich was so instrumental in reestablishing and reinvigorating in New York now houses Uriel Weinreich’s own personal archive (RG 552). The collection contains a number of grant applications, CVs, drafts of papers read at meetings of the Linguistic Society of America, and other academic memorabilia that offer a glimpse into his intellectual development as a linguist and Yiddishist. The discussion that follows draws heavily upon these documents, especially his personal statements and correspondence with other leading linguists.

Uriel Weinreich began his undergraduate studies at City College in February 1943, but he received a scholarship that allowed him to transfer to Columbia University later that year. During his first two years of college, Weinreich also