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"All Alone, Without Money, No Language—Just Yiddish": An Immigrant’s Letters from Missouri to Galicia

by Nicholas Eshelman

In June 1891, Shimshon Gerye, a Jewish immigrant from Galicia (a region that now falls across the border of Ukraine and Poland) living in Sedalia, Missouri, received a letter from a cousin back home. The content of the letter was probably rather mundane (a request to send money, inquiries about health), but its timing was somewhat unusual: In the thirty-five years that Shimshon had been living in America, this was apparently the first he had heard from his family in Europe. What survives of the ensuing correspondence, written in Yiddish and spanning a one-year period, provides an interesting view of the situation of the immigrant and the pressures of assimilation, as well as the Yiddish language in America at the end of the nineteenth century.

The letters (eight in all) are addressed to Shimshon's cousin, sister, brother, and his brother's grandson (there is also one letter from his brother) and were written between 1891 and 1892. I was kindly given access to the letters by a descendant of their author, Robert Gerye, who believes that Shimshon was his great-great-grandfather, though family memory provides few additional facts about Shimshon's life. The letters were found in the family Bible by a relative of Gerye and were nearly discarded, only to be saved at the last minute when their existence was brought to Robert Gerye's attention. This article does not intend to be an exhaustive analysis of the correspondence from a linguistic or historical perspective; rather, it is a preliminary effort to make these materials available to specialists in Yiddish language and culture.

The middle of the nineteenth century was the era of the Jewish peddler in America. Thousands of young Jewish immigrants traveled the country, often visiting rural areas, selling a variety of goods from packs carried on their backs. Shimshon Gerye was, for a time, one such itinerant merchant. However, unlike Shimshon, the majority of these men were from German-speaking countries; the great wave of Yiddish-speaking eastern Euro-
pean Jewish immigration was not to take place until several decades later. The story Shimshon tells is typical of his fellow migrants—beginning as a peddler and eventually settling down as a small businessman—but somewhat different in that it is told in Yiddish and seen from the perspective of an eastern European, at a time when the American Jewish community was largely German in character, both culturally and linguistically.

The letters reveal that Shimshon Gery left his hometown of Janow (some thirty miles south of Temopil, in what is now Ukraine, but then was Austrian Galicia) in 1855 at the age of twenty-one. Shimshon never says exactly why he left Galicia, but one might assume it was to escape the general misery and persecution common in that region. Though conditions for Jews in eastern Galicia may not have been as bad as in other parts of the province or in areas controlled by the czar, they were certainly not good. Poverty was widespread, and tension between Jews and the region’s other ethnic groups—Poles and Ukrainians—ran high. In addition, 1854 was the year of a cholera epidemic in the region. Shimshon writes:

I was 21 years old when I traveled away; you can imagine in your thoughts my many sorrows when I had to leave everything: father, mother, brothers, sister, the whole family, and my own people; the sons of Israel, Miriam Hirschorn, and all alone, without money, no language—just Yiddish—to go out traveling in the world. But I believed everything was against me ... my hope was that God would help me.

His remark, “no language—just Yiddish,” may reflect the common feeling of inferiority that many Yiddish speakers had about their language, a feeling that, of course, persists to this day. Or he may just have been trying to say “no language other than Yiddish,” as at the time he wrote these words he probably had found little occasion to use his native language in many years. He states at one point, “I have forgotten many things about the language and customs of Janów and Galicia.”

On leaving Janow, Shimshon makes his way across Europe to London, where he has a hard time finding work because of his linguistic isolation. Eventually, however, he secures a place on the crew of a steamship for twenty dollars a month and free food, and he travels all over the Mediterranean (“many places, too many to write”) and to the Black Sea, where his ship calls in Sevastopol to deliver British troops to fight in the Crimean War. Shimshon spends a year at sea, returns to England, and then travels to Bremerhaven, where he finds passage to America, landing in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1856.

After a year in Baltimore selling dry goods (“that is what Jews do”), Shimshon moves to Sedalia, Missouri, then a small, recently founded town about one hundred miles southeast of Kansas City on the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Sedalia is perhaps best known outside of Missouri as the home of composer Scott Joplin, whose famous “Maple Leaf Rag” was named after Sedalia’s Maple Leaf Club, where Joplin played piano in the late 1890s. In Sedalia, Shimshon tries his hand at various businesses, one of which may have been a lunch stand, as indicated by an entry in a Sedalia business directory. Then in 1861, he becomes “tired of traveling,” settles down, and gets married at the age of twenty-six.

I had always loved Miriam Hirschorn with my whole heart, but I was in this world and I did not know what was going on with Miriam. I did not know what to do. I met a girl 16 years and 6 months old and I married her on the 22nd of May 1861.

His wife, whose name he never mentions, bears him twelve children, only six of whom survive infancy. (The six who did not survive were all born in a row over a twelve-year period). Shimshon will later proudly write that, at age forty-seven, his wife is “healthy and strong and weighs over 200 pounds.” During this time, Shimshon seems happy in America. He calls it “the best land in the whole world”: a land free of the military, rich land, a blessed land, all kinds of foods. Things are [indistinct] much white wheat, potatoes, apples, pears. Many ships will take things to Europe because there is too much in this land.... You will wonder at good houses, good clothes,
good streets, many trains; there are six that run from this city and 6 which run in the streets on electricity. You can see the sparks fly under the wheels.

"Free of the military" is an interesting statement, in that the Civil War began the same year as his marriage, but it may have been made in reference to the repressive use of the military back home (represented by such horrors as juvenile conscription), which, by comparison, would have made Missouri seem relatively free of a military presence. Strangely, perhaps, he never mentions the Civil War at all in the letters, even though there were several skirmishes near Sedalia in 1861 and many battles fought in Missouri, not to mention the savage guerrilla warfare on the Kansas border. But then again, he also did not have much to say about finding himself in the middle of the Crimean War years before.

Decades pass, and Shimshon seems to gradually assimilate into American society and the routines of daily life, to the extent that when he finally receives a letter from his cousin, Aaron Layzer Shpiler, it clearly comes as quite a shock. Shimshon’s first letter back to Aaron expresses his disappointment in not having heard from his family sooner and in not having found out any information about his other relatives:

All I can write in this letter is that I am Shimshon Gerye ben Itskah Leyb Gerye, the same Shimshon Gerye who had so many troubles in Janów that I left father and mother, brothers and a sister and went out into the world all alone. I heard not a word for 36 years and now when I’ve received a letter from Janów [and there] is not a single word said about my father’s family, that hits me right on the head, so I cannot write much.

Aaron also seems to have asked for money, as will Shimshon’s sister and brother in subsequent letters, and Shimshon frequently has to explain why he cannot send any, at one point offering a lengthy catalog of the cost of common goods: “Having money doesn’t count for much. 100 pounds of white flour costs 5 zloty, potatoes from 1 to 2 zloty.” But he does write that he hopes to raise enough cash to bring his European family to America.

Shimshon continues to correspond with Aaron, then with his sister and his brother’s grandson. Finally, he receives a letter from his brother Mendel, the contents of which may explain Aaron’s reticence on the subject of the family: Mendel relates how their mother died of cholera in the summer Shimshon left Janów, how their brother died six days later, and their father eight years after that. Mendel tells of how he took in their sister Tanzi and married her off, but also of losing his home to a fire and of the death of his wife, after which he was left to care for their children on his own. Mendel remarried and lived together with his second wife for twenty years, but when she died, he was left with more children and grandchildren to support, girls to
View on Ohio Street, Sedalia, Missouri. After leaving Europe, Gerye eventually settled down in Sedalia, married a local gentile woman, and raised a large family. Photograph, late 19th century. Missouri Towns and Counties, MHS Photographs and Prints.

marry off, and a lot of debt. He asks that his brother take pity on him and repeatedly states that he “has no strength.”

Shimshon writes back, but does not comment directly on what he has learned about the fate of his family (except in asking his sister in what cemetery his late relatives are buried). He tells his brother that he has turned to the Bible to help understand why he had to leave his family:

It has been 20 years that I have studied and discovered many things that have already come true based on what is written in the Tanakh. Many people don’t want to understand and don’t want to believe. I have always wondered why I was pushed out of my land of birth and from my parents, from my family. I believe it is from God. My thoughts now come from the Torah. Many of the tsaddikim had to leave their land of birth and family. In Genesis 12th chapter[…]

In the end, he is at a loss for words and tormented that he cannot send money. The last letter is to his sister:

My dear sister Tanzi Yokhit Gerye Volokh: I wrote this letter to you three months ago but I could not send it because I can not send you any money, but now I won’t wait much longer. What I wrote in the holy language your husband can read. My hope is that he will understand it. I [was] in another world. I understand the Torah. My head is full day and night with Torah. Your brother, Shimshon Gerye.

The letters contain many interesting observations about America: “The difference between Galicia and America is as big, to my mind, as a dark cellar to a beautiful day when the sun shines.” But they are more intriguing in what they don’t mention or only hint at. The Civil War and the names of Shimshon’s wife and children go unnoted, though there is much other information given about them, and the extent of Shimshon’s assimilation is only touched on obliquely. Also of interest is the fact that the letters were found in Sedalia, which raises the question of whether they were ever sent. All of these curiosities may be explained by considering exactly what Shimshon reveals about himself in these texts.

It is possible that Shimshon’s wife and children go unnamed (although he does mention his wife’s exact age and weight, the dates of the children’s births, their marital status, and that they are monolingual English speakers) because he married a gentile and gave his sons and daughters Christian names (this is also supported by a Sedalia city directory) and was uncomfortable revealing this to his European family. He does note that there were other Jews in the city (there was, in fact, a healthy Jewish community in Sedalia well into the twentieth century), so he did have the opportunity to marry within his faith, which would have made the admission even more awkward. More significant, it also appears that Shimshon converted to Christianity.
Fraker R M, city register.
Fredrick Frank, (Kruse & Fredrick)-butcher, cor 7th and Ohio sts.
Freimel & Etzbaugh, saddlery and harness, 105 East Main st.
Fuller Rev J B, pastor Baptist Church.

Galbreath George W, boots and shoes, cor Main and Ohio sts.
Gallie Rod, grocer, 215 West Main st.
Gardella & Aircola, restaurant and confectioners, Ohio bet 2d and 3d sts.
Gauss C H, lumber dealer, cor Monticello and 2d sts.
Gayhart Edward, (colored) blacksmith East Main st.
Gentry R T, county treasurer, cor 4th and Lamine sts.
Gerye S, restaurant, East Main st.
Gifford A H, Prof of music, 216 Ohio st.
Gilman S F, livery (Farnham & Gilman), cor Osage and 3d sts.
Glass James, wholesale liquor dealer, 106 East Main sts.
Golden Dennis, saloon keeper, East 3d st.

Most of the indications of a conversion come in the form of citations from the Bible, in Hebrew. He speaks of having spent much time studying the Tanakh and of having attained a new understanding of scripture, but more interestingly he quotes Isaiah 9:5-6, a passage often used as proof that Jesus was mentioned in the Tanakh by those looking to convert Jews to Christianity: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government is upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful counselor of the mighty God, of the everlasting Father, of the Prince of peace.” In addition, he speaks admiringly of his gentile neighbors: “the gentiles are the pious ones. They learn Tannakh and believe in it; they have nearly 20 houses in this city alone where they pray and preach from the Tanakh.” But of his own people he says: “Our people in Galicia are almost totally in the dark; they learn nothing of worldly things and the Torah. They don’t want to understand.”

A more ambiguous use of scripture is his citing of Numbers 12:1: “And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Kushite woman.” This passage has been subject to a variety of interpretations. One school of thought has it that the Kushite in question is Moses’s wife Zipporah, though she is not identified as a Midianite. Others, like modern-day polygamists, feel that this passage states that Moses had two wives, thus giving a biblical basis for the practice of polygamy. One could speculate, perhaps with-
out foundation, that Shimshon is alluding to his relationship with Miriam Hirshorn, presumably his hometown sweetheart, but possibly his wife, whom he mentions a number of times in the course of the letters. It seems more likely, however, that he is simply hinting at having married a gentile, and his frequent use of scripture may also have served to indicate to his family that he maintained a connection to Judaism and tradition.

Shimshon's Yiddish, which he admits is rusty, shows both the influence of English and a tendency toward dayshmerish usage (the imitation of German spelling, and even syntax, in Yiddish). The practice of trying to make written Yiddish look like German was common at the time, partly due to lack of a standard orthography (it is still seen to this day, despite the existence of an accepted standard). Shimshon's germantized Yiddish may also be the result of contact with German speakers in Sedalia (Missouri was full of them at the time, some of them Jewish), which would have provided a more direct source for German forms in his Yiddish, such as "da durch," which he uses as a German sounding, but incorrect, way of saying "consequently" and "gros kinder" a dayshmerish calque of English "grandchildren" (eynikkeh in Yiddish).

In considering the question of why the letters were found in the city in which they were written, the rough state of Shimshon's Yiddish may offer an explanation. Because he clearly had not spoken his first language with any frequency in thirty-six years, it is possible that the letters are simply drafts, allowing him to not only better organize his thoughts, but also clean up his grammar. However, it also seems likely that they simply were never posted. Shimshon may have had second thoughts about telling his Galician relatives, however obliquely, about his religious conversion or new American family. Based on the content of his brother's letter, it appears that he did not share this information: Mendel begins by congratulating Shimshon on his piety, which would not be the expected response if he knew of the content (especially the hints of a conversion) of the letters found in Sedalia.

However, it is certain that a real correspondence did take place (as the letter from his brother indicates); it is just not clear that these letters were a part of that exchange. But whether they were sent or not, these documents offer an interesting look into the conflicting emotions felt by an immigrant who chose to assimilate into American culture, as well as the difficulty of explaining that choice to his family, who did not have the experience of a country that he saw as "a beautiful day when the sun shines."

**REFERENCES**


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Author's Note: My main goal in preparing these translations and transcriptions was, as with the preceding descriptive comments, to make the letters more easily accessible to the scholarly community, not to create a rigorously precise and definitive English version of the texts.

The full translations and transcriptions, along with images of the letters, are available at http://www.easternct.edu/smithlibrary/janowlett/letters.