

On the other hand

Chaim Bermant

DID I dream it, or are they offering a course in Yiddish language and literature at Oxford? Are they exchanging quotations from Mendele at high table in Christ Church? Can one hear the buzz of *mame loshen* over sherry in Balliol, and the languorous cry of *goot geshpilt* (well played) over cricket in the Parks? Is Stencil to be elected Professor of Poetry?

Well, not quite, or, at least, not yet. The Oxford Centre for Post-graduate Hebrew Studies is to offer a month's programme in Yiddish during August, which is to say, it's a summer course, and although it is to be conducted by some of the most eminent authorities in the subject, including Professor Eugene Orenstein of McGill, David — sorry, Dovid — Katz, of University College, London, and Elinor Robinson of Columbia, no one will come away with an MA, or even a BA (Yid) Oxon, but it is a significant beginning, and welcome one.

Some may believe that the Yiddish course is to be launched to reaffirm Oxford's reputation as the home of lost causes, but Yiddish is a reclaimed cause which has outlived, and will continue to outlive, its obituarists and suppressors.

It may have gone through a hard patch, and a decade or two ago it seemed within sight of perdition, but it has bounced back not only because the Jewish people has bounced back, but because other languages found that they had need of it. Where words fail the English speaker or, more usually, the American speaker, he not infrequently resorts to Yiddish.

When Yiddish-speaking immigrants began to pour into this country a century or so ago, many observers did not even refer to their tongue as a language, but spoke of it dismissively as a "jargon" and a

jargon, according to the OED, is "a barbarous, rude or debased language or variety of speech." I am sorry to say that many of the immigrants themselves thought of it in much the same light.

The more prosperous and educated newcomers spoke Russian, Polish or German (sometimes all three) and any immigrant anxious to give his children a start in life (and which immigrant wasn't?) saw to it that they weren't burdened with Yiddish. Some children still picked it up as they might pick up the 'flu, but it wasn't encouraged, and there were even households where the very sound of Yiddish was forbidden, as if its tones might enable discarded habits and outlandish customs to insinuate their way back into family life.

And it was for much the same reasons that Ben-Gurion made a determined effort to suppress Yiddish in Israel. He regarded the language as an impediment to the creation of a progressive, forward-looking, self-assured Jewish State. He also had a good memory for old conflicts and could not forget that Yiddish was the language of the anti-Zionist rabbis and the anti-Zionist and anti-religious Bund.

The Bund was a socialist movement which hoped to perpetuate the Jewish identity through the dissemination of secular Yiddish culture, and to that end established a system of day schools, publishing houses and other cultural institutions. It was almost overwhelmed by the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath, but tens of thousands of its supporters had found their way to America and efforts have been made to revive it to this day.

But a Jewishness devoid of Judaism has no hope of continuity and it is now more or less defunct. It

has, however, been a long time dying and it has left small pockets of Yiddish speakers who have helped to keep the language alive.

Their influence in this respect, though, has not been nearly as important as that of the yeshivot, which have regarded Hebrew as too sacred for common use and have therefore resorted to Yiddish as the language of instruction. One should also acknowledge (though perhaps not in the same breath) another conservator of Yiddish — the underworld.

More than a century ago, a senior German police official, Friedrich Ave-Allerant, published a lexicon of criminal slang which contained something like 8,000 Yiddish expressions. Many of the leading characters of Damon Runyon's Broadway tales, like Itchky Ironhat, Heeby Rosenbloom, Benny the Blond Jew, and Schmaltz the Waiter, sound Yiddish even when they're talking English, and in this country one finds a wealth of Yiddish terms in the novels of the late Frank Norman, who, like Runyon, was not Jewish, but who was a criminal before he turned author.

The fact that Yiddish is now gaining academic respectability suggests that we are rather more self-assured than we were, and that an essential part of our cultural heritage which was once regarded with a certain amount of embarrassment is now cherished as an asset.

I take it that the Yiddish to be taught in Oxford is to be the Queen's Yiddish, which is to say Lithuanian Yiddish, and not the debased Galician variety (see my references to the underworld, above), and I draw some reassurance from the fact that one of the tutors, the aforementioned David Katz, calls himself Dovid and not Duvid.

The Press

Philip Kleinman

THE FALKLANDS crisis continues to dominate the British press, and rightly so, even though another, even more dangerous conflict has been raging in the Middle East. I refer, of course, to the Iran-Iraq war, which seemed as this column went to press to be reaching its climax.

For the time being, Israel has lost news value as far as Fleet Street is concerned, and even the continued clashes on the West Bank have received comparatively little attention — almost as little attention as the crimes of Argentina's military rulers before they extended their aggression to British territory.

Not that the classier kind of Fleet Street pundit has forgotten Israel even in his preoccupation with Argentina. The Guardian's Peter Jenkins, for example, in the course of railing against the dispatch of the British task force to the Falklands, declared that "technological advantage is no guarantee of moral superiority. We should have no wish to become the Israelis of Western Europe."

Less disagreeably a Guardian leader, considering possible outcomes of the struggle in the South Atlantic, made the important point that "peace and war are not necessary alternatives, as the Israelis and the Palestinians may vouchsafe. There is between them a state of half-peace and half-war..."

A front-page news story in the Sunday Times questioned the French Government statement that, though France had supplied Argentina with the Exocet missile that destroyed HMS Sheffield, she had not instructed the Argentines in the technicalities of how to fit Exocets to warplanes.

"If the Argentinians were not trained by the French before the conflict started, who *has* taught

them?" asked the paper. "There are several countries with the know-how, but the most likely is Israel."

Tribune has been in the habit of devoting a large amount of its limited space to readers' letters, in which the Israel-Palestine debate has gone on without interruption for years. George Galloway, the pro-PLO Scottish trade union leader, last month denounced Israeli actions in one such letter and denied that the PLO had ever assassinated prominent Palestinian opponents.

In a subsequent letter David Harounoff, a Tribune contributor, put him right with a list of dignitaries for whose murder the PLO itself claimed responsibility. Harounoff also recounted that he had personally seen copies of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" being distributed at Bir Zeit University by PLO supporters.

The monthly *The Middle East* devoted a whole feature by Jonathan Bloch and Andrew Weir to the "adventures of the brothers Kimche" — David, director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and Jon, the journalist. There was much less in the feature than met the eye. In particular, sneers at the implied inaccuracy of Jon Kimche's inside stories from Arab countries were totally unaccompanied by evidence.

The Financial Times published another of its long supplements on Saudi Arabia. Does anyone read them? Justin Kornberg, chairman of the Anti-Boycott Committee of the British-Israel Chamber of Commerce does. The sharp-eyed Kornberg pointed out in a letter that the supplement had disclosed that, despite American legislation against compliance with the Arab boycott of Israel, US-Saudi trade had increased substantially.

Britain, he concluded, would do well to follow the US example.