

*Sin valor comercial*, or a Worthless Yiddish Library

ווער דארף א ליד — און נאך דערצו אויף יידיש?  
Who needs a poem — and at that, in Yiddish?

- Aaron Zeitlin, “Six Lines”

On the inside covers of many Yiddish novels in this collection is a small Spanish phrase impressed in blue ink: *sin valor comercial*. “No commercial value.” The stamp speaks of a finality, not a question—these books are, without a doubt, *worthless*. To try and sell them would be financially ruinous, to see value in them—foolish. The fact that these books are stamped in the Spanish language is also no accident. Many of these books are written by Yiddish-speaking refugees to Spanish-speaking countries. Fleeing war, economic destitution, the fragmentation of their lives, it is no wonder their art is similarly deemed burdensome and without monetary interest. However, in my heart, this stamp upsets me so much because I know that it is true. Who, exactly, would buy such a book, and at that, a book in Yiddish?

It seems that I am one of those fools. But to show why I would sink so much time and love and money into something *worthless*, I need to explain the headspace one must be in to buy dozens of books in Yiddish. At the beginning of my 2<sup>nd</sup> year at the University, I felt miserable. I was living the life of a gloomy, confused 19-year-old philology student, stuck in my apartment reading without end, terrified of COVID, and during my Autumn finals week—slapped with a case of bedbugs from my upstairs neighbors. With nowhere else to go, I ran to the library. Following a sort of Jewish common law, there can be no better place when in exile.

In that same Autumn, I had just begun learning Yiddish, the language of my great-grandfather. Taking my first Yiddish course led me right to the cusp of the grandest realization in my life thus far: that there is an entire world, one my family knew for centuries, with its own systems, nerves and neuroses, a world that I can belong to, all within this new language. Immediately, I made my way to the 4<sup>th</sup> Floor stacks where the Regenstein keeps its long shelf of Yiddish books. By some cruel twist of fate, despite having been immersed in books my whole life, I had never seen one Yiddish book, let alone hundreds. An entire ecosystem of wisdom and refuge was waiting for me, perhaps ironically, in this exilic Regenstein bookshelf. There was only one problem: I could barely read a sentence. Having not much else to do, I resolved that I was going to fix that problem that day. I picked up a copy of the first Yiddish book I attempted to read, Moyshe Kulbak’s *Zelmenyaner*, and headed home.

I have built this collection not from the standpoint of value, rarity, or even beauty—my motivation always rested on the emotional impact of printed literature. More specifically, how I have been able to find an unexpected joy and safety in the Yiddish book, and how I have attempted to find that same joy through traces of others. Starting with *Zelmenyaner* and every Yiddish book I checked out subsequently, each book had a stamp, a note, or an inscription that gave clues to its past life. These clues were an unavoidable reality of amassing a worthless library, as books that no one wants to buy are always books that get donated, passed down, regifted, or forgotten. In this collection, I have done my best to show both the materiality and stubbornness of the Yiddish book in its refusal to submit to worthlessness, while also highlighting the priceless moments within these books’ paratexts that point towards their importance beyond money and consumership. If one Yiddish book could inspire me to spend my next three years developing fluency in Yiddish, devoting my life to Yiddish, even to now *teaching* Yiddish—a library would have a multiplied effect.

Addiction is too negative a word. Love is a better one. From 2020 to the present day, I began emailing the Yiddish Book Center for available books, and scouring every used bookstore in every single town I passed through—Chicago, New York, Corpus Christi, Houston, Berlin. I did not want just any Yiddish book, but instead the ones that were gathering dust on a forgotten shelf or holding an intimate inscription that no one had read for decades. This search led me to finding Yiddish books in unlikely places: a first edition of Y. L. Peretz’s *Folksstimlekhe Geshikhten*, published before the October Revolution, hidden under German translations of Russian-Jewish novels in a Munich used bookstore. Miraculously, I was even able to find a 1922 edition of an exceedingly rare and intimate portrait of Hasidic life in Eastern Europe, Yitskhok Even’s *Funem rebns hoyf*. On all these books are notes, signatures, or book plates that attest to their place and displacements in the world. Many of the books, such as the Yiddish anthologies edited by Shmuel Rozshanski in Buenos Aires, made their way into school curricula to be read by hundreds of students. For their time served in school libraries, they bear notes and stamps that read “Colegio Israelita,” or “Bialik High School.” The Yiddish edition of the Tanakh, translated by Yehoyesh, has a letter from 1946 to Albert, son of Chaim, congratulating him on his bar-mitzvah.

The Yiddish poet, Aaron Zeitlin, having lost his entire family, proclaimed in his famous Yiddish poem, “Six Lines,” that “Only the hopeless things in the world are lovely / And that which is ephemeral is all that is godly.”<sup>1</sup> These books escape money, they escape history, and I would like to do them the favor of pretending, hopelessly, that they are worth any money. So I pay for them, I find them, and I collect them. I am not so much a fool because the books and I are both in on the joke. I show my friends these books and they laugh because they see the joke, too. We call that in Yiddish “laughing through tears” — *lakhn durkh ttern*.

The future of this collection is to keep looking for the stubborn books who deny their worthlessness. Throughout these past three years, however, I have been lucky enough to add complete sets to my library, such as every novel published by my favorite Yiddish writer, Lamed Shapiro. At the same time, the real centerpiece of my library are the newer books, gifted to me recently by my mentors, who have their own inscriptions, and who I hope are picked up and read long after they leave my library.

So, I am letting you in on the joke. These books will never bring any money—they should be so lucky! —but they hold within them a continuity and an attachment to each other that I find endlessly sympathetic. Through my genealogical research, I know that my great-great uncle Benny ran a Yiddish library in his town in Poland. Even if there were more readers then, I’m sure they laughed about a “Yiddish library,” too (I mean, can you imagine such a thing?). Dedicated to Benny and everyone else who is mentioned in these books, I have built my own worthless library. It is one I hope to build and then donate, but never sell.

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, “Six Lines,” trans. Miranda Cooper, *Jewish Currents*, May 13, 2019, <https://jewishcurrents.org/six-lines>.