

Leonid Smilovitsky (Tel Aviv)

Correspondence in Yiddish between personnel in Red Army and their relatives during Soviet German war, 1941-1945¹

Statement of the problem

Letters in Yiddish represent a special phenomenon in the war correspondence. They differed from the letters in the general flow of correspondence by a number of features. The fate of the Jews who after the Nazi invasion in the summer of 1941 were put on the brink of extinction gave them an especially dramatic color. In the frontline and in the rear the Soviet Jews were experiencing anti-Semitism on the part of both the authorities and the local population.

The Jewish soldiers and officers were aware that if they were captured by the enemy, certain death would await them, and due to that they fought desperately and did not surrender. Despite that, they heard from their comrades-in-arms (non-Jewish): "You're a good soldier, though a Jew."

When organizing the evacuation, the Soviet authorities never gave preferences to the Jews using the ideas of internationalism as a cover. But the Jews who found themselves on the occupied territory were doomed. In the rear the Jews took a very active part in the strengthening of the defense and in aiding the Red Army. However, instead of words of gratitude, they heard that "all Jews are cowards who go into hiding and are afraid of fighting."

The correspondence in Yiddish reflects all these problems and gives a notion of the actual state of affairs. We get a unique opportunity to understand how was formed the personality of a Soviet patriotic Jew who cared not only about the fate of his/her relatives, the country as a whole, but also about the Jews as a people put on the brink of survival.

¹ The paper is based on a report delivered at the International Conference 'The Holocaust and the War in the USSR as a reflected in War-times letters and Diaries' on November 19-20, 2012 held by Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research in Jerusalem.

Sources

The present report is based on an analysis of several tens of letters in Yiddish written in 1941-1945 and sent from the areas of evacuation to the front and back. The letters have been collected in the course of realization of the project of the Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University named "The World War II in the Sources of Personal Provenance on the Example of the Soviet Union." They mainly came from personal archives of the Soviet-German War veterans and their heirs who now live in the Baltic countries, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, as well as in Israel, the USA, Germany and Australia and some other countries. The other part of these letters were found in Minsk, in the Belarus State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus and in the Belarus State Archive-Museum Literature and Art.

When preparing this report, the author used the books of collections of letters *Sokhrani pis'ma moi* (Keep my letters) published by the Russian Holocaust Foundation and the Blavatnik Archive Foundation in the USA, scholarly publications, and war letters published in periodicals.

The Age of Correspondents

Of fundamental importance is the age of the correspondents. The people of the older generation for whom Yiddish was their native language, while Russian was a learned one, preferred communicating in Yiddish for obvious reasons. It was easier for them to express their feelings in Yiddish, to formulate a thought, to express one's secrets.

Men and women of the younger generation knew written Yiddish far worse. The end of the Civil War, the beginning of NEP (New Economic Policy) and the transformation of the economy in the USSR destroyed the structure of the Jewish *Shtetl* and led to a decline of Yiddish. Young people went to the cities where they could find jobs and education. Their separation from the traditional way of life, antireligious propaganda, an internationalist education, and the necessity to communicate with young people of other nationalities made the young Jews to prefer the Russian language.

And yet, the prewar generation of the young Jews still possessed a good command of the spoken and written Yiddish. Yiddish remained a means of communication in the family with the parents (and especially, with the grandparents). The Soviet Jewish schools continued to function until 1938-1939, and in the territories of Western Belarus, Western Ukraine, the Baltic states and Moldova annexed by the USSR at that time, until 1941.

Fear of the Censorship

Another explanation of the appearance of letters in Yiddish was the correspondents' wish to cause difficulties for the interference of censorship. If one takes into account that during the war years, in contrast to Germany, military censorship in the Soviet Union was absolute, that consideration was a very essential one. Of course, among the military censors who checked the flow of mail to the frontline and to the rear, there were specially chosen employees who knew Yiddish. As a rule, they were girls of military age. They applied for voluntary front service, but were instead mobilized and sent to work as censors (the evidence of military censors Gita Gluskin, Berta Krymsky, Asia Dubinsky, and others.)

Ilya Moiseevich Ratner (b. 1910) wrote on August 16, 1941 to his mother in Molotov (now Perm):

Dear Mom! I am so longing to see you and to chat a little. But you sure understand how difficult it is to write knowing that a hundred of strange eyes will read this. For the time being, I work and prepare such a warm reception for the enemy that it would be better for him not to appear here at all. At the recruitment office I asked to be sent to the front, but as yet, they are not taking me².

I. M. Ratner, a graduate of the Jewish Pedagogical Seminary in Vitebsk, was not drafted into the army due to the state of his health (nearsightedness, heart disease and the enlarged thyroid). In January 1942 he died from hunger during the blockade of Leningrad³.

From the letter by Sara Lipina (b. 1912) on October 12, 1941, to her mother-in-law to Molotov (Perm):

I would like very much to share with you the successes of our dear son Mosik, who became much cuter and playful. As concerns food, he is not so choosy, and often asks for food himself, especially for a little milk. (This is probably due to the fact that now he gets it very rarely and in small amounts).

From an explanatory note by Moisey Ratner to the letter of his father, I. M. Ratner, of August 16, 1941:

² I. M. Ratner's letter from Leningrad to his wife Sara Lipina in Molotov, August 16, 1941. Translated from Yiddish by Mikhail Mirkin.

³ M. Ratner, *Der Zeide (Dedushka s opredelennym artiklem)* (Grandfather with the definite article), Jerusalem, 2008, pp. 28-29.

Mosik, it's me, Moisey Ratner. Note, how ingeniously my mother wrote in the hope that censorship would not see between the lines the information on hunger and need: As concerns food, he is not so choosy, and often asks for food himself, especially for a little milk. (This is probably due to the fact that now he gets it very rarely and in small amounts.) And they did not notice! And I remember how I wept then: "Not fed! Not fed up!"⁴

On April 24, 1942, Motya Vitebsky (b. 1922) wrote to his parents from the front:

God help you, my darlings! Today I've got some time and decided to write you a second Jewish letter. But did you receive the first one? We have walked more than ninety kilometers and now we are on the earth of the Donbass (Ukraine). The front line is not very far away, 25-30 kilometers. All of us are waiting for an order to do our job. Yesterday a commission from other detachments came to us and now they are taking people to the combatant forces. Only cripples are being placed in the hospital. All pass through the commission. But there are no reasons to worry. But as destined, so be it and I hope for the better...⁵

At the beginning of the war, Motya Vitebsky with his parents and sisters evacuated from Chernobyl (Ukraine) to Mozdok (the Caucasus) and later, to Siberia. In the fall of 1941, Motya was drafted to the Red Army and went missing in action in the summer of 1942. Of 15 letters he wrote, two were in Yiddish.

Forms of written letters

As a rule, the authors were afraid to send their letters in an open form (unsealed letters, postcards). If they could not find an envelope, they folded "triangles," which became widespread during the war. Or they made envelopes of paper (or a newspaper) on which they glued stamps. And they wrote the address only in Russian while the content of a letter was in Yiddish. According to the form of writing, the letters may be divided into the three basic groups:

1. The entire text of a letter was in Yiddish,
2. Part of a letter is in Yiddish, while the main part is in Russian,
3. A letter in Yiddish as a key to understanding the Jewish correspondence in Russian.

⁴ M. Ratner, "Blokadnye pis'ma" (Letters from the blockade), *Evreiskii kamerton* (Tel Aviv), January 25, 2007, pp. 18-19.

⁵ The author's archive. The letter by Motya Vitebsky to his parents, Shmulik and Brocha of April 24, 1942. Translated by Dmitry Yakirevich.

Problems posed by the letters

There are a few problems posed by the letters used in correspondence:

- The difference between Yiddish and Russian letters (Jews and non-Jews),
- The main questions raised in the correspondence (worries about the state of health, the process of evacuation, descriptions of taking flight on the eve of German occupation, the search for relatives, finding jobs and the struggle for survival, the drafting of the young generation into the army, education of children, etc.)

As an example, I can quote the letter written by Pavel Mikhailovich Vainstein from Kemerovo of April 10, 1942:

We arrived in Kemerovo half a year ago and found a lot of snow with the frost up to 40 degrees Celsius. Later it became warmer, the sun showed up, it began to drip from the roofs, small puddles appeared, and there was light. We took off fur coats and felt boots. However, on the next day, April 3, Siberia showed what it can do. The frost hit. We again took on fur coats and felt boots. Black clouds covered the entire Kemerovo. Once Rozalina dropped by and said that soon they would bring us the news such that we'd go hot and cold all over.

Somebody knocks at the door, and a postman comes and brings two letters, both from Krasnogorsk. One is from a hospital, and the second, from Grisha. As soon as we opened it, a commotion broke out at once. Bella grabbed Tolya and Vitya and brought them to a neighbor. Hue and cry began at home. We barely succeeded in bringing Gita and Bella to consciousness. As it was not enough that we suffered because of Misha, here you are with an addition with our sole Jewish heir Grisha. There is no Misha, no Grisha! Would it not be better that I were killed instead of him?! He had not started to live yet in order to see how his only Tolechka put on weight in such a difficult time. He is smart. Laughs. And suddenly, our Tolichka is an orphan, and what feel the parents who lived to see that?

I will never forget that when I bade our dear Grisha farewell, he took my hand and said: I go away at such a bitter time, do not cease to take care of his offspring. I promised him and assured that it would be so. One must strengthen oneself as much as possible. Our darlings! Stay connected to us...

Ida Aizenshtat from Tsfat (Israel) comments (October 19, 2012): The author of the letter, Pavel Mikhailovich Vainstein, together with his wife, Esfir Naumovna, their daughter Gita and the five-year-old grandson Tolya in September 1941 evacuated from Kharkov to Kemerovo on an invitation by their elder daughter, Bella Pavlovna

Panova, the wife of a high Soviet functionary, who then lived in Kemerovo as an evacuee. Vitya mentioned in the letter is her son.

Misha, the Vainsteins' son, was mobilized to build defense structures in the vicinity of Kharkov, and died under unknown circumstances.

Grisha (G. E. Aizenshtat), born in 1911, was the husband of Gita, the author's daughter, their only Jewish son-in-law (the other daughter married a Russian). He served in Krasnogorsk, the Moscow region, in an engineering battalion. In March 1942 he was mortally wounded in a mine explosion and died in a hospital. Besides the death notification, the Aizenshtats received a letter from a nurse who wrote about his death. She apparently also wrote to the widow, as follows from the letter.

The Reasons for Writing in Yiddish

A study of the letters collected at the Diaspora Research Center of Tel Aviv University makes it possible to make the following conclusions. The Jewish servicemen in the Red Army gave preference to Yiddish over Russian in the cases when it was necessary:

- To communicate confidential information, which was impossible in Russian: the location of the correspondent (the definite and an approximate one), his military profession, concrete activities, state of health, salary, provisions, food rations, the moral climate at his place of service, relations with comrades-in-arms.
- Life in the evacuation, living conditions, the search for relatives, family news.
- Descriptions of extraordinary events in the life of relatives (notifications of death at the front, the reaction of relatives), information about the Nazi massacres of Jews in the occupied territories.
- An especially tense emotional state.

Bentsion Zusevich Vatashsky (b. 1900), a native of the town of Kaushany (Moldova) wrote to his wife Keila in Kazakhstan:

The situation at the front is not very good, but I believe that with God's help, we will not be forced to run anywhere. If we leave, I don't know what to do. Take care of the children, and of yourself. Don't economize, drink milk with them...I kiss all of you many thousand times, I kiss the paper which your golden hands will keep⁶.

⁶ The author's archive. The letter from Bentsion Zusevich Vatashski to his wife Keila of March 25, 1943. Translated from Yiddish by Mikhail Mirkin.

The Vatashsky family was evacuated first from Moldova to Stalingrad, and when the frontline approached, to Kazakhstan, where they lived until 1944 and then left for Beltsy (Moldova). Bentsion went missing in action in 1943 near Stalingrad. The relatives' search brought about no results. Twenty letters in Yiddish is the sole memory of him that has remained.

M. G. Tsypin wrote from Novosibirsk to Leningrad on January 22, 1944:

What will I write to you. For the time being, no great news. When we strangle Hitler, it will be a good news. As concerns the town of Mstislavl, we heard that when the German came, he gathered all the Jews and sent them to the Troitsky hill, where he shot all of them. In our family 40% of people are lacking. We hope that by Hitler, they will settle all accounts!⁷

Letters from the "labor front"

In 1942-1943 the authorities conducted several mobilization campaigns to recruit workforce for industry among the citizens of the USSR and foreign nationals who found themselves on its territory (Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Germans, Romanians, Czechs, Finns, etc.). Among them were thousands of Jews. During that period a total of more than 400,000 people were mobilized. 220,000 of them were sent to work in the NKVD system, and 180,000, for work in other ministries⁸. The living conditions of the mobilized people (food rations, living quarters, freedom of movement and communication with the outside world) little differed from those in prison.

In their letters in Yiddish, the Jews told their relatives and friends about the forced labor conditions of work and complained about bad provisions. At the same time, they staunchly withstood the hardships and saw their solution in the victorious outcome of the war.

Khone Goldshmit wrote to his wife Lea in Kazakhstan:

April 5, 1942

I am writing this letter and don't know what to do, because I am thinking only of you days and nights. And I am afraid to get mad because of those thoughts. I am not completely healthy, because of hard work. I dug trenches and later in a tailor shop. Now the work there has come to an end and I'm afraid that I again will be sent to dig earth or break rocks...

I have received your 80 rubles, but it is a pity that you snatch them from the family.

⁷ The author's archive. The letter in Yiddish from M.G. Tsypin to his nephew M.B. Tsypin of January 22, 1944.

⁸ GULAG (Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei [Main labor camps administration]). 1917-1960. Comp. By A.I.Kokurin, N.V. Petrov, Moscow 2000, p. 281.

You should better have bought something for children or yourself. The next time you better send me not money, but a small parcel. The main things are tobacco and cigarettes. If one has it, then there is money. People now all are nervous. One has to survive this war and all will be good. Your letters are my only joy.

May 28, 1942

You write that the situation with food is very difficult and the children want to eat. You have got a vegetable plot and now it will be easier. Our battalion was disbanded and all of us have been made laborers. Now we are not considered Red Army soldiers, but free citizens. But we became tied to the factory and we cannot go anywhere, they do not give us documents, and one cannot leave without permission. Now one has to glue a stamp on an envelope. I work at the same place and will get salary in cash. For the time being, the money suffices only to buy food. I hope that I will earn more and then will be able to send something home, in order that you can buy something for children.

December 31, 1943

Every day we hear the news on the radio and one feels so good, when our forces beat the Hitler gangs. Let us hope that soon the German beast will be beaten and we will all be together⁹.

The preservation of letters

After the death of hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews during the war years, a considerable part of their correspondence was irretrievably lost. There were no people to read the letters in Yiddish, and therefore, they seemed to be of no value, if they were not kept in families as autographs of the loved one. Most of donors who handed over the Yiddish letters of their relatives to the Diaspora Center for keeping do not know their contents.

Part of letters brought from the evacuation were destroyed with the beginning of the campaign against the cosmopolites, the dissolution of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, "The Doctors' Plot", and the alleged exposure of the "cosmopolites."

Izidor Lyast, Professor of Tel Aviv University, in 1953 a four-year student of the physics and mathematics faculty of Gorky University, remembers:

My father was arrested in mid-March of 1953, when Stalin was no more, but a terrible antisemitic campaign of "The Doctors' Plot" was continuing. Fearing search, I decided

⁹ The author's archive. Khone Goldshmit letters were handed over by Yakha Surikova from Halberstadt on June 1, 2012. In 1941, Goldshmit's family was evacuated from Aluksne (Marienburg) to Kazakhstan.

to get rid of dangerous papers and books and I kindle a large Russian stove in the kitchen. I recall the last Monya's poem with the words "day and night I am nibbled by longing for my sweet Palestine...where one may sing in Jewish language, and where they do not throw stones at us." I tear the pages with the poem and send them to fire. After that, I go to the attic. There I find my uncle Benya's letters from Palestine (the correspondence of 1943-48) and some other letters, now I cannot recall whose and also throw them into the stove. And looking at a paper on the floor I become literally frozen with fear. This is an envelope of a letter from the "Joint," the American Jewish organization that sent us a couple of parcels during the war. It is the same "Joint" that was behind the "crimes committed" by the accused in the case of "The Doctors' Plot." In the attic also are piles of my father's books in Yiddish, normal Soviet books. But their authors were arrested as early as 1948 (we did not then know that they were already shot), so I burn them too. We calmed down only on April 4, when it was announced that the case of doctors was closed and on April 15, my father, looking old and exhausted was freed¹⁰.

Translation Features

Translations from Yiddish present great difficulties, especially for researchers for whom it is a non-native language. First of all the only easily read texts in Yiddish are those written calligraphically, since the written letters differ only in small details. All the letters could be classified into several categories:

1. "Sticks": Aleph, Hei, Vav (*In Hebrew – Vav. But I will use the Yiddish and Ashkenazi transcription*), Lamed, Nun, Nun sofit.
2. "Hooks": Beiz (Heb. Beth), Giml, Zain, Tet, Reish.
3. "Dots": Yud.
4. All other letters: each has its own face, it is more difficult to mix them up, than the above categories. As to the three first categories the letters in each are rather similar and it is difficult to tell one from the other. Tsipin in some letters writes "Yud" not as a dot, but as a "stick" positioned above.

One should take into account that some letters are read differently. So, for instance, Aleph could be read both as "A" and as "O." A single "Yud" is uniquely "I" and the doubled "Yud" could be read as "J", as "Ay" and as "Ey." The letter „Vav" can be read as "U" or "Oy", while the doubled "Vav" is uniquely "V." The vowels are read using the "dots" (nekudot) put under the line, so to read an illegible handwriting in Yiddish is a difficult task. Many letters do not have punctuation marks, and there are

¹⁰ I. Lyast's letter from Tel Aviv, June 12, 2012.

even no dots at the end of a sentence. Since Yiddish has no capitals, sometimes it is difficult to understand where one sentence ends and another begins.

The letters are often full of mistakes (or their orthography does not corresponds to that adopted by us). Some authors wrote the articles inseparably from a word, while the prefixes, on the contrary, separately from the root. As an illustration I may quote the word "Novosibirsk." It begins with 7 "stick" ech similar to the other! And only later one begins to see that the first stick is "Nun," two next, Aleph, another two, the doubled "Vav," and again two another Aleph¹¹

Conclusion

Letters in Yiddish written during the war years 1941-1945 are a non-researched body of documents on the history of Soviet Jewry. They are rare documents of the epoch, which may complement the general picture of the history of the Second World War.

The correspondence in Yiddish distinguishes itself by its confidential character, personal emotions, and ethnic color. It has far less bombastic patriotic slogans, aimed at strange eyes, it has far more items and particulars of everyday life. One has the impression that people with a command of written Yiddish allowed themselves more sincerity and in a sense, relaxed. At the same time, the letters in Yiddish emphasized their authors' national identity and gave a more personal character to correspondence. They were intended to support their relatives and loved ones, comrades and friends at the moment of great hardship.

For a long time, the letters in Yiddish as a specific body of sources were undeservedly forgotten and fell from scope of interest of researchers. The first and foremost factor in that was a general prohibition of the Jewish theme that existed for the entire postwar period of Soviet history. The survived letters in Yiddish were safely hidden by the owners or heirs from the strangers' eyes out of fear of being accused of the Jewish nationalism. On the other hand, the researchers themselves had neither wish, nor means to decipher Yiddish messages.

At present, it is time to correct this injustice. We begin to understand that the private correspondence of the war period belongs to history and demands a respectful and honest attitude. The absence of the knowledge of Yiddish in researchers themselves cannot be an obstacle for collecting, keeping, translating and studying the letters themselves.

¹¹ The author expresses his gratitude to Moissey Ratner from Jerusalem, who rendered selfless assistance in translating Yiddish letters by Moissey Tsypin from Novosibirsk.

Correspondence in Yiddish between personnel in Red Army and their relatives during Soviet German war, 1941-1945

Letters in Yiddish represent a special phenomenon in the war correspondence. They differed from the letters in the general flow of correspondence by a number of features. The fate of the Jews who after the Nazi invasion in the summer of 1941 were put on the brink of extinction gave them an especially dramatic color. In the frontline and in the rear the Soviet Jews were experiencing anti-Semitism on the part of both the authorities and the local population.

The correspondence in Yiddish reflects all these problems and gives a notion of the actual state of affairs. The article is based on several tens of letters in Yiddish written in 1941-1945 and sent from the areas of evacuation to the front and back.