

Preface and Acknowledgments

“A hun vos kreyt un a goy vos shmuest yidish—zoln zayn kapore far mir” (A hen that crows, and a non-Jew who speaks Yiddish, they should be my atonement)¹; in this Yiddish saying, the speaker summons two figures from the world of the inconceivable to serve as his atonement. And to him, apparently, a *goy* who speaks the Jewish language is just as preposterous as a hen that crows like a rooster. But perhaps surprisingly, non-Jews did speak Yiddish, probably from the earliest stages of the existence of this language. And at least from the beginning of the sixteenth century, we also have written evidence for Christians reading, writing, and investigating the Yiddish language and literature.

This book explores the unlikely phenomenon of “Christian Yiddishism,” namely the Christian engagement with the Yiddish language and literature during the early modern period. In this context of early modern Christian preoccupation with Yiddish, the term “Yiddishists,” which I will use, does not designate admirers or supporters of the Yiddish language, as was sometimes the case in later periods. The Christian authors in this story were persons who took interest in the Jewish language, studied it, and wrote about it for various reasons and motivations, some pragmatic and utilitarian but others nevertheless confrontational or even sinister.

By investigating this unique phenomenon, hardly known in modern historical research, the book aims to contribute to our understanding of Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in early modern Europe, specifically in the German-speaking world. In recent years, growing attention has been given to the complex system of Christian perceptions of the Jew as the archetypal “Other” of early modern Europe. Some of the most interesting aspects of this topic, which still merit investigation,

are the diverse and complicated ways in which the Christians of that period understood, defined, and constructed the Jew's "Otherness." Of no less importance are the various motivations that underlay Christian representations of Jewish Otherness, the factors and circumstances that influenced and shaped them, and the functions these representations served in intra-Christian debates.

In addition to its contribution to the field of Christian-Jewish relations in early modern Europe, this book also seeks to illuminate various themes in the field of social and cultural history of language, including the role of language in shaping and defining group identities, images of languages and linguistic stereotypes, language and national consciousness, linguistic domination and social control, and attitudes of majorities toward linguistic minorities. Highly relevant also to our present-day experience, these issues are especially interesting within the scope of the early modern period, with the shifting sands of its complicated and constantly changing linguistic and national landscape. From the mid-fifteenth century, the gradual transition from a dominantly monolingual Latin culture to a multilingual one based on the various European vernaculars brought the linguistic diversity in Europe to the attention of contemporaries. This development evoked a wide spectrum of responses among scholars of the time, who engaged in evaluations and comparisons of the various languages, and debated the question of language and its place in culture and society.

Our story on Christians and Yiddish in early modern Europe starts in 1514, with the publication of the first known Christian treatise on the language,² and spans the next two and a half centuries. In order to present the genre of early modern Christian literature on Yiddish in its full spectrum of richness and diversity, the book draws on a wide array of primary sources in German, Latin, Hebrew, and Yiddish, ranging from the scholarly to the popular, and from the theological to the secular. Addressing a broad spectrum of topics and using an interdisciplinary approach, including cultural, theological, and sociolinguistic themes, I hope the book will be of interest to anyone engaged in the fields of early modern European history, Jewish history, social and cultural history of language, Jewish-Christian relations, German studies, and Yiddish studies.

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