

Esperanto and Modern Hebrew –“Artificial” Languages that Came to Life

by Norman Berdichevsky (February 2014)

The originator of the international language Esperanto, Dr. Lazar Ludwig Zamenhof, was a Jew whose knowledge of Hebrew undoubtedly played a role in the successful development of the only devised language to make the transition from a desk project to a living tongue. Although the Esperanto vocabulary is largely derived from the Romance, Germanic and Slavic families, it is likely that Zamenhof's profound knowledge of Hebrew contributed to the logical structure of what most linguists will agree is the easiest language to learn.

Zamenhof and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the pioneer figure in the movement to modernize the Hebrew language so that it could function as the literary and national language of culture, the arts and sciences and modern statecraft of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland, as well as make it once again a spoken vernacular, were contemporaries and the similarities of their lives and careers are nothing short of amazing. The monumental achievements of these two provide inspiring examples of devotion to learning, prophetic vision and identification with Jewish heritage and destiny. The parallels between them are uncanny, almost as if each one was the other's alter-ego.

They were born within one year of each other (1858-9) and grew up in similar homes, infused with the "Litvak" (Lithuanian-Jewish) atmosphere of the Haskala (Enlightenment) movement, in which respect for secular learning was esteemed equally with Jewish tradition. Zamenhof's home town, Byalystock, lies 250 miles from Luzhki in the Vitebsk region in what is today's Belarus where Ben-Yehuda (originally Pearlman) was born.

Both sought a career in medicine, one which Zamenhof achieved and went on to become a respected eye specialist with an international reputation and true to the noblest traditions of the profession often treated the poor without charge. Both made enormous professional, material and physical sacrifices to advance the cause of their languages, despite their opponents' derisive claims that they were "eccentrics" or "fanatics," to the ultimate success of witnessing living communities of Hebrew and Esperanto.

The physical appearance of them both, marked by a frail build, modest demeanor, neatly trimmed

beard, horned-rimmed pince-nez eyeglasses, was exaggeratedly bookish. Finally, both men had unusually devoted wives who gave unstintingly of their love and devotion, thereby enabling them to persist in their task against abuse and petty jealousies.

To appreciate fully Zamenhof's life-work and achievement, one should study his background, upbringing, character, and motivations. Several biographies have appeared, all written for an Esperanto-reading audience. In all but one of these biographies, (*Hebreo el la Geto – de Cionismo al Hilelismo*, 1976, eldonejo ludoviko, Japanese Esperanto Assn.), Zamenhof's Jewish motivation is omitted or considerably underplayed. Yet it was just that which was the very source of his success, where hundreds of professional linguists working full-time and with often generous financial support and technical assistance managed to produce only paper projects (among these being Volapük, Ido, Latino sine Flexione, Basic English, Occidental, Novial, and Interlingua; See NER Dec. 2007 [Israel: World Center for Three Great Faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Bahaism](#) (May 2011).

The solution he advocated was a radical reform of Judaism stripped of ritual and the doctrine of the “Chosen People.” The new reformed faith would follow the pure monotheism of Moses and the ethical commands of the prophets in the liberal spirit of the great rabbi, Hillel. Hillelism rested on a belief in the Supreme Being and in obeying the voice of one's conscience. It would slowly win adherents among Jews who would simultaneously strive to create a national existence in a common territory and through the medium of a common language, Esperanto being Zamenhof's choice. His ideas met with little response among the Jewish masses and were ignored by the Orthodox who had already pronounced a *Herem* (excommunication) against Ben-Yehuda for what they conceived as an audacious and blasphemous attempt to use Hebrew for purely secular purposes.

Zamenhof achieved a major breakthrough as the result of an international congress in France in 1905 and the support he received from such intellectual giants as Tolstoy. He received the Order of the Legion of Honor from the French government, the first of many such awards which brought him recognition and made Esperanto a serious cultural force by 1914.

This international recognition made him even more ultra-cautious about his Jewish identity. The lack of Jewish response to Hillelism was a disappointment. He expanded his ideas into a program for a universalist-deist faith which he renamed Homaranism (“Mankindism”). In essence it was the old Enlightenment maxim of “a Jew at Home, a man abroad”; be a Russian, Frenchman or Englishman, at home, be a Christian, Moslem or Jew in your own house of worship, but find a common neutral language and ethical-religious meeting ground elsewhere through Esperanto and Homaranism.

Zamenhof died in 1917. His daughter, Lidja, was an accomplished Esperantist who eventually embraced Bahai'ism, the religious faith which most closely resembles Homaranism, yet she perished as a Jew along with the rest of the Zamenhof family in the Holocaust. A book on her life is appropriately dedicated to the "memory of thousands of Jewish Esperantists, friends, and co-workers murdered by the Nazis." In 1932, she visited Palestine where she was more impressed by the aesthetic beauty of the Baha'i shrines than in the pioneering efforts of the Zionist settlers. During a visit to the United States in 1937, she wrote to friends about the possibility of initiating a special course for the Negroes of Harlem to "widen their horizons and lift them out of the narrow spiritual confines of their ghetto."

For several generations, sceptics of "Modern Hebrew" and Esperanto argued against them as a betrayal of a normal "living tongue" in favor of a "constructed," "artificial" language, and both Zamenhof and Ben-Yehuda were called creators of a "Frankenstein" language that was not really anyone's mother tongue and unable to draw upon the wealth of folklore, a historic prior literature and cultural creativity. Both defied the critics and in spite of active persecution by oppressive regimes, succeeded in creating lasting achievements – the foundation of the modern culture of the State of Israel and a vast and creative international society.

(For a thorough comparison of the grammar, and new word formation techniques of both languages, see my forthcoming book.... *Modern Hebrew, The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language*. (Due Spring 2014, McFarland Publishing ISBN 978-0-7864-9492-7.)

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