The Cockney Yiddish Podcast – Episode 5 transcript
Translated from Yiddish to English

Vivi: Hello and welcome to our podcast Cockney-Yiddish. Usually, the episodes are in English, but this one will be in Yiddish. You can listen to the other six episodes with the same name Cockney Yiddish wherever you find your podcasts. And you can find and download all the texts of the stories and songs in Yiddish and English on the Cockney Yiddish website www. Cockneyyiddish.org.

Today we will look at how Yiddish language and culture became intertwined with the English language and British culture. This is an old story of immigration: Jews travelling around the world to find a country that would become a secure home without antisemitism and with the opportunity to earn a living. And they brought their Eastern European Yiddish language culture with them.

From the 1880s, when many Jewish immigrants were fleeing Eastern Europe for America, a significant number arrived in England and, in particular, London. There was quite a large community of over 100,000 immigrant Jews in the East End of London. In England there was already a wealthier English speaking community and they wanted the new povert-stricken immigrants to acculturate to British norms as quickly as possible. The immigrants also wanted that, but not to lose their culture in the process . The immigrants became experts at speaking two or more languages and switching between different cultures.

Our guest today is Sima Beeri, one of the most popular Yiddish teachers in London and a very good friend. So Sima I think that turning cultural somersaults and moving between languages is not new for you.

Sima: No. Hello. It is indeed not new for me. I have moved across many countries and had to learn many new languages. It is exactly what you're saying, and is very moving for me, just as it was for the old immigrants that came both here and to America.

Vivi: Can you tell us a little about your own experience of two languages as a child, and later learning another, and another?

Sima: Those that don't know me, I come from Lithuania. I was born in Kovno (Kaunas) and when I was 12 we moved to Israel, and there for the first time I came across a new language with a new culture. But a 12 year old Sima thought that she'd come to Israel and because I knew Yiddish from home, I'd also feel at home in Israel. But I found quite another thing, that in Israel people did not want to speak Yiddish at all – not speak, not hear, not have an awareness of Yiddish.

Vivi: But before you say a bit more about that, what was the situation in Lithuania with languages? What did you speak?

Sima: At that time, Lithuania was Soviet. At home we only spoke Yiddish. My parents were some of the people that wanted their children to know Yiddish. So everyone at home only spoke Yiddish. But being Kovno, Lithuania, outside the home we spoke Lithuanian, so Lithuanian is my second language. I began learning Lithuanian in school, but because it was the USSR the second language in school, was Russian, so that was my third language. And when I arrived in Israel I had to start learning Hebrew. And this was the greatest shock of my life, because at home, I read Yiddish and I thought that that was a language that was simply another language that people spoke, so when I came to Israel I discovered that many of the words that I spoke in Yiddish and knew as Yiddish words

were Hebrew words. And that was a real shock for me. It was the first time that I'd come across words that come from classical Hebrew and I finally began to understand what the significance of those words were.

Vivi: That's very interesting, so you hadn't known that there was a new modern Hebrew because the Hebrew words in yiddish are classical Hebrew.

Sima: Yes, I think that at the time it became mixed up and people abroad[in Israel] spoke Hebrew constantly, but the words that we knew were classical Hebrew words. But they weren't all old words, that was also mixed up, because for me they were all simply Yiddish words. And because I didn't write in Yiddish at that time, I didn't see the difference between written language and spoken language.

Vivi: So I have a question for you about spoken language. Because you had so many languages, did you mix them up, or use a word from one language in another language?

Sima: Of course, that's what everyone who knows more than one language does, often using a word that suits the conversation best or best expresses what you want to say. At home as a child, we spoke more than these three languages. My parents spoke 6 languages and my sister also spoke a few languages and so around us when people came to visit everyone spoke in the language which was comfortable for them and everyone knew all the languages. It was simply an interesting thing that around a table when we had a meal or a discussion everyone spoke in their own language: one in Russian, another in Yiddish, another in Lithuanian, however they thought.

Vivi: But also, did you use specific words in one language when you couldn't find that word in another language, or if the experience or the exact meaning of that word is a little different, and it's easier to use a word in another language?

Sima: I think that firstly, people didn't think so much that a language should be a pure language. When you speak, the speaking happens without thinking, but when you speak about a particular theme and there's a specific word or you don't know the word or it's a specific vocabulary that the person is not familiar with, Let's say tailoring or computers today, you use the words in the language in which you learned that trade.

Vivi: So Sima, when you came to England, did you use English as a part of other languages?

Sima: Firstly, when I came to England, I didn't know any English and I had to learn English. That is, for me, I didn't know how to put in English words, I simply didn't know the language well enough. Later and today I certainly use the words that best suit. You have in your mind, you remember, that you want to discuss. Often it's a concept with just one word or a concept that comes from a particular language, and so you use the word that fits in most closely.

Vivi: Great, we'll look at this a bit more later. Thank you Sima. The themes of language and culture in a new country, in this case, England, comes up in many texts about London. Today, we will hear parts of a story by Katie Brown with the title *Christmas Presents*. Katie Brown was a very popular *feuilletonist* in London, that is a writer of comic sketches that were published in the newspapers. This story, *Christmas Presents* was published in the *Di tsayt* (The Jewish Times) in December 1949 – but there's also a similar version published in 1934. So, because it is published at two different times, we can see that the themes were still relevant.

It's a story that I read from time to time in workshops because it humorously describes the cultural tension and fear that immigrants felt that they might lose their old culture. It contains many of the themes that make up this whole series of 7 podcasts. This year, I read the story to the Yiddish group of the Holocaust Survivors Centre in North London. Before I read the story to them, the group tried to read the title [The title *Christmas Presents* was written in Yiddish letters].

Vivi: What's written here? Who can read Yiddish? What's the title?

Yiddish group participants: Kiktes… krik… kik… kriktes… a krik…

Vivi: The title is krismes prezents [laughter]

Yiddish group: I can't see that.

Vivi: Krismes prezents [laughter] they are Yiddish words [laughter].

Participant: Very Yiddish

Vivi [reading the story]: I don't know what it's like in other Jewish homes, but in ours I find it so stressful every year when the holy festival of *krismes* comes round. My children simply drive me crazy, constantly making plans for how to celebrate it. First, they give me an ultimatum: that I have to buy each of them a *krismes prezent* [laughter] if I don't want the festival to be ruined, because without *prezents*, *krismes* isn't *krismes*. And second, we have to celebrate by having a party with a green tree and red lights, just like decent, respectable

Participant: People

Vivi: [reading] Jews [laughter].

Participant: Not with a turkey.

Vivi: [reading the story] While I don't like the idea of celebrating *krismes*—it was never done in my parents' home or anywhere in my family—I never say anything as long as they celebrate it at their friends' houses where they were invited. Today, however, my Rachel begged me to throw a *krismes* party for her at home. [laughter]. She said that every year she goes to her friends', but this year, she wants to invite her friends here. I complained and protested about our cramped flat, and our lack of money in these hard times, but it didn't help. Indeed, nothing

Participant: Helped [laughter]

Vivi [reading] helped, and I had to submit to the ultimatum. From then on I didn't have a moment's peace. My head was constantly spinning, thinking about how to organize it all, the *prezents* and the party, because a promise is a promise. A few days earlier I'd noticed a large poster on a wall in Whitechapel announcing the good tidings that, at this place on a certain day, there'd be a Hanukkah bazaar where people could find bargains, with the *profits* [using the english word in the story] going to an important cause.

Participant: That's a Yiddish word, profit?

Vivi: Aha, she uses a few words in English within her Yiddish yeah? [Reading] On the evening of the Hanukkah charity bazaar, I took my mischievous Davy by the hand and

went off to buy *krismes prezents*.

[Back in the studio]

Vivi: You can hear the enthusiastic reactions of the group with comments and laughter, and a few of them had even lived in the East End of London. After the opening, the story tells of how the main character and her son Davy bought clothes in the bazaar- a pair of shoes for the daughter, a shirt for the husband, a pair of trousers for Davy and a coat for the mother herself. But when she got home she found that the clothes were either torn, the shoes were both for the same foot, and everything was damaged. So Sima, will you read the end of the story.

Sima: Of course. [reading] When my old man came home, my problems really began in earnest. He looked at the *krismes prezents* I'd spent so much on, was furious, and decided that there was no way we were going to have a *krismes* party, and not only that, but we were going to have a Hanukkah party instead. I was delighted and asked him when Hanukkah was. He said he didn't know. I said, How come you're a Jew and you know when *krismes* is but not when it's Hanukkah? He replied that *krismes* came every year on the same day on the calendar, but Hanukkah doesn't, and he promised to ask the *shammes* of the synagogue.

So it was decided that this year we'd celebrate Hanukkah, and *krismes* would be left to the *goyim*. But when he asked the *shammes* when Hanukkah was, the *shammes* looked at him as if he was crazy, laughed heartily, and said that "Hanukkah was two weeks ago."

Vivi: Thank you Sima, and we will hear more from Sima in a minute. But first, Sima and I were at a Yiddish weekend in 2024 organised by the Yiddish Café Trust, a charity with the aim of creating a broad community of Yiddish speakers and Yiddish students in Great Britain. This year, more than 60 participants from around the world discussed, chatted and ate together. In one of the sessions we also discussed Katie Brown's story with many interesting experiences around the Christmas Hanukkah mash-up.

[The following recordings were from the Yiddish weekend]

Joseph: When I was a young child we had a Christmas tree at home but at the top of the tree, we didn't have a Christmas angel, but a star of David [laughter]. It's true.

Pam: I remember in school the christian children had lovely Christmas presents, clothes, shoes, boots, but we Jewish kids weren't jealous because we thought we were from a higher level. So we weren't jealous.

Justin: I understand but for me there is a tension. I don't like Christmas because it's a capitalist festival.

Tamara: In my family we always celebrated Hanukkah each year, but also Christmas with our Italian Catholic friends. And something that I just noticed a few years ago is that we always celebrated Christmas with them but they never celebrated Hanukkah with us.

Jake: Yes, I think that the tension between the Jewish and secular calendar is also a question of who says what time is? Is it Christmas that falls on a different day each year or is it Hanukkah on a different day each year. It's a question of perspective. But really, the people in the story had no Jewish calendar and no secular calendar [laughter].

[Back in the studio]

Vivi: So Sima, what do you think of this cultural mix, and did you do anything at Christmas at home?

Sima: At home we celebrated the Jewish festivals not the non-Jewish festivals. Our neighbours were Lithuanian and we had very good relations with them, they were like a second family to us. And when they celebrated their festivals, they would invite us, and when we celebrated ours, we'd invite them. They were such good neighbours, they even learned over time to speak Yiddish and even learned to cook my mother's dishes. This is one of the things that is very moving to me because a few years ago I visited Lithuania and my neighbours, that is the second generation of them, had prepared my mother's gefilte fish and my mother's tzimmes and another few special dishes.

Vivi: And were they good?

Sima: Wonderful. And they looked like and had exactly the same taste as my mother's. But coming back to what we did – another thing, my neighbour who was really like a second mother to me and you understand that she was Christian, would take me to church with her and she used to say that two gods are better than one god.

Vivi: [laughs] Why not?

Sima: [laughs] Why not? Doesn't do any harm.

Vivi: Sima, in the story we just read, the parents feel strongly about Jewish culture but didn't know what or when it was. Hanukkah was more like an abstract concept than a real thing. What do you think?

Sima: I don't completely agree with that because I don't think they had such a strong feeling for the Jewish festivals. We see in the story, that when it comes to Christmas, the husband said of course he knows the date of Christmas because it's in the secular calendar but he had no idea when the Jewish festival of Hanukkah is. So much so that he didn't even know that it had ended a few weeks earlier.

Vivi: You are listening to a special episode of the Cockney Yiddish podcast with me, Vivi Lachs and my guest Sima Beeri – it's part of a series of podcasts looking at the history and culture of the East End of London through Yiddish stories and songs, and their resonance today. This episode is special because the other episodes are in British English. But even in this episode we have English words – the words that were spoken by the Yiddish-speaking East End Jews. Katie Brown describes how they spoke, and she uses the English words 'Christmas presents', 'party', 'profit', 'evening dress', and others. And this brings us to our Cockney Yiddish phrase of the week.

Regular listeners will know that each podcast has a Cockney Yiddish phrase of the week. Our phrase today is – I'm not going to say – but it was often used in London – and we can hear it in a streetsong from the 1950s. A few years ago, my mother's neighbour, the late Raymond Kalman sung this song to me:
'Mayn heym in ventvort strit' (My Home in Wentworth Street).

[From archive recording. Raymond singing]

Mayn heym in Ventvort strit dort iz mir zeyer git mi shtey oyf in der fri un mi trink a kapati.	My home in Wentworth Street It's really good for me there I get up in the morning And drink a cup of tea.
Di luft iz zeyer frish fun di farshtunkene fish keyner fregt undz nisht farvos mir haltn tsi der noz.	The air is very fresh From the stinking fish Nobody asks us why We're holding our noses
Dort shteyt Yidl mit zayn fidl un shpilt a melody. Es iz mir git, es iz mir git in mayn heym in Wentwort strit.	There stands Yidl with his fiddle And plays a melody It's good for me, it's good for me In my home in Wentworth Street.

Vivi: So what is the phrase?

Sima: A cup of tea

Vivi: It was so often used, every reception for a guest was called in England a *kapati*. Even the Whitechapel poet Avrom Nokhem Stencl, who almost never spoke a word of English, called his memoirs of London, 'My First *kapati* in Whitechapel'. Sima, why do you think that *these* words are in English?

Sima: Because in England, in my mind, a cup of tea is not simply a glass of tea, it is something wider and lovelier, and when people meet up for a cup of tea, they meet for a chat, they meet to discuss important or not so important things. It represents so much more than just sitting down with a glass of tea.

Vivi: Ah yes, I think you're right. In other songs we also have a lot of English words. I'll give you an example from a song 'Dem nayem hashiveynu nazad' (The New Take-me-back). It's about the pressure of life in London in around 1900. Listen to the lyric:

Vivi (sings)

Git a blik in der *leyn* vet ir dortn zen file mentshn shteyn aropgelozt dem kop tsvishn zey indermit oyfn *korner golstn strit* shteyt a griner yid un kikt oyf a *dzhob*	Look down the *Lane*, you'll see there Many people standing with slumped heads Amongst them, on the *corner* of *Goulston Street* Stands a new immigrant Jew looking for a *job*.

So we have a lot of English words here: lane, street, corner, why corner? Why them?

Sima: I don't know if I can give all the answers, but people use words that are familiar to them, and what represents what they want to say. So the word 'lane' in England has a specific significance, and as long as everybody understands what the meaning of the word 'lane' is, they use that word. But often... I've done research in newspapers and often, if you look at notices in the papers, for example, if you want to find a flat, it's often written 'kumt arayn, s'iz tsvey *rumes*', (come in, there are two *rooms*) and so on. Of course we have the words in Yiddish, but it fits because they live in England, in London.

Vivi: So that's interesting, and also it's not only the words but it's how the words are

constructed, so another example from the same song:

Vivi (sings)

A yokl hot bald derkent az a griner dort gayt hot oysgetsoygn zayne hent un *bavelkomt* im mit a *fayt*	A yokel soon saw that a new immigrant is walking past there Stretched out his hands and *welcomed* him with a *fight*.

Sima: Yes, they make them Yiddishy.

Vivi: Yes.

Sima: Yes, just like recently, everything happens on zoom, so you say [in Yiddish] *zoomele*, and it makes it more Yiddishy [both laugh].

Vivi: Can you think of another example?

Sima: In our story that we read from Katie Brown, the title is *krismes prezents*. Why does she use the word *krismes* and not the Yiddish word *nitl*? It's also interesting. I think that she wanted to include specifically what she felt in her life in London in England. And this may be the reason that she chose to use other English words when we know we have Yiddish words for them and you've given some examples of those in the text.

Vivi: Yes, and about the word *krismes,* I think they might not have used the word *nitl* so often in England because in the air you heard 'Christmas, Christmas, Christmas'.

Sima: Of course. It's one of the things that we adopt as people. We live in a circle where we hear words that everyone knows and we simply use the words we hear.

Vivi: When we discussed this phenomenon at the Yiddish weekend, one person who was raised in the Hasidic community said:

[Recording from the Yiddish weekend]

H: Of course, yes, we use English words. Most speakers definitely know that's it's an English word, but it's become a part of the [says in English] "vocabulary" [laughter]. "Vocabulary" is not a word we usually use [laughter]. Everyone's very comfortable with the [English] words and everyone knows which words you can use in Yiddish and which not. For example, "supper" no-one usually uses the word *nakhtmol*, they say "supper". And there are lots of other words. And there are also differences in other Hasidic communities. So the London community will use specific English words and the American community will use different English words. The American community would say "crossing" the street. But we'd say *aribergeyn* the street. So there are differences in other communities.

Vivi: But also the other way round. Barry describes:

[Recording from the Yiddish weekend]

Barry: An opposite phenomenon, Jews born in England, who speak English, use Yiddish words for some things. My mother, for example, only spoke English – she heard a lot of Yiddish from her mother and father but she didn't speak any Yiddish. We never had a conversation in Yiddish, But certain things she only said in Yiddish. In our home a *shisl*

[bowl] was always *a shisl*. "Barry give me the *shisl* in the kitchen". Often words to do with food and food preparation. A *fendl*. She always spoke about a *fendl*. I can't remember the first time I heard the word saucepan. So it's a phenomenon that works in both directions.

[Back inthe studio]

Sima: I must say that for us at home it was exactly the same thing because, for example, when you say in English 'a fridge' yeah? In Yiddish there isn't a word for such an object. So we adopted the words we had in other languages. So for example, for me the only word I knew was the Russian word 'Chaladilnik' and at home people always said: "put this into the chaladilnik, take this out of the chaladilnik" and so on. And we didn't use the word *ayskastn* [Yiddish for fridge] because it's an old fashioned word for a box that you put ice in, and people did that way before the Second world War. And that is not the same thing as a chaladilnik.

Vivi: Yes, these things also weren't exactly the same in different countries.

Sima: No, because later when we were in Israel, people called it a *fidgidaire* because in Hebrew they didn't have a word yet for such a thing. Now, they have a word in Hebrew, which is *mekarer* but earlier they simply used the name of the firm like in English they use the word 'hoover'.

Vivi: [laughs] Yes, in biblical times they had no *ayskastn*!

Sima: [laughs] Absolutely not.

Vivi: So let's hear another comment from the Yiddish weekend. The opportunities for mixing languages is very interesting. Let's finally hear from Motl.

Motl: In my family like in many other families, when my parents were young children, Yiddish was a language that was spoken when the parents didn't want the children to understand. But for me, it's more interesting because when I speak Yiddish to my girlfriend, my parents can't understand us [laughter].

Vivi: So Sima, we're finishing in a few minutes, have you any other comments on what we've heard today?

Sima: Firstly, thank you for inviting me here today. It's been a pleasure to be part of your podcast.

Vivi: For me too.

Sima: It is really a very interesting theme, and I'm always happy to discuss Yiddish and Yiddish words and words that come into Yiddish from other languages. And words that we Yiddish speakers put into other languages. That is the mixture. It is simply a mixing of lives.

Vivi: Yes, thank you, thank you Sima. The Yiddish language always contained words from languages in the countries where Yiddish-speaking Jews lived. And in London, the immigrants used very specific words that were a part of British culture. Its eems to me that the language itself reflects the cultural entanglement. And – about acculturation, what's more British than a cup of tea and Christmas presents.

And that's all folks – thanks for listening to our Cockney Yiddish podcast with me Vivi Lachs and my guest Sima Beeri. And a special thank you to the organisers and participants of the Yiddish weekend and the Holocaust Survivers Centre Yiddish group.

We have another six episodes in English with me and Nadia Valman. You can find us on most podcast platforms and also through our website cockneyyiddish.org where you can find more information and download all the songs and texts in Yiddish and English.

This podcast is produced by Natalie Steed of Rhubarb Rhubarb for Queen Mary University, and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The theme music is from Klezmer Klub's CD Whitechapel, mayn vaytshepl. Thank you for listening.