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Rotwelsch, Hebrew Loanwords in Rotwelsch (or Gaunersprache, i.e., German for 'language of swindlers') is the term used for the argot employed by crooks, thieves, and vagabonds in the German-speaking portions of central Europe, with its home in southwestern Germany especially. The latter portion of the term, Welsch, suggests any foreign and unintelligible speech (as a comparison, note Yiddish Wellisch 'Italian'); while the former portion of the term, Rot derives either from Rotwelsch Rot 'beggar' (perhaps ultimately from German rot 'red' ≥ 'false, faithless'), German Rotte 'gang, band', or Middle Dutch rot 'foul, dirty' (see further Girtler 2010:21–22). This sociolect originated in the Middle Ages (the term Rotwelsch [sic] is first attested about 1250), though the most abundant sources for the cant derive from lexicons and word lists from the early modern period through the 19th century. Among the most important sources is the Rotwelsch vocabulary that appears in Liber Vagatorum (1510), a work which also provides key insights into the lifestyle and customs of the vagabonds, including their tricks and strategies (cf. Jütte 1988:106).

While the base of Rotwelsch is German(ic), its lexis includes an exceedingly high percentage of Hebraisms, derived either from Hebrew directly (with typical Ashkenazi pronunciation) or via the intermediary of (Western) Yiddish. According to one estimate, fully twenty-two percent of the Rotwelsch lexis revealed in the aforementioned Liber Vagatorum derives from Hebrew (Jütte 1987:136). The presence of so many Hebraisms reflects the fact that Jews were involved in the relevant livelihoods. Officially excluded from the guilds and civic enterprises during the Middle Ages and beyond, Jews resorted to such occupations as hucksters, itinerant merchants, conveyers of movable goods, and the like (and were often joined in these endeavors by the 'gypsies', whose Sinti-Romani dialect thus also contributes heavily to the Rotwelsch lexicon). As typically happens, such business ventures frequently entailed less-than-honest, if not illegal and fraudulent, deals that required a secret language or coded argot. In such fashion, one can understand how numerous Hebraisms entered Rotwelsch, even when spoken by non-Jews who partnered with Jews in these deceitful and criminal activities.
Rotwelsch was used into the 20th century and still survives to some extent as an element of folklore in the villages of Schopfloch and Schillingsfürst (both situated in the Franconian part of Bavaria). The language may also be heard as an entertainment component from showmen at popular fairs. In addition, occasional words entered various local dialects (Siewert 2003:45–61; → Germanic Languages, Hebrew Loanwords in).

As intimated above, the number of Hebrew elements in the Rotwelsch vocabulary is truly staggering. What follows is merely a sampling. In the examples listed, if the Rotwelsch term connotes the same as its Hebrew derivation, then the gloss for the latter is not presented. Only in cases where the semantic connection is less obvious, or if the part of speech is different (e.g., Rotwelsch verb derived from Hebrew adjective), is a gloss included for the Hebrew source as well. In all instances, the spelling of the Rotwelsch lexemes is taken from the head words listed in Wolf’s (1956) standard dictionary (though spelling is highly variable, naturally). The transcription of the Hebrew terms is a simplified version of the Masoretic realization; the Ashkenazi pronunciation, which yielded the Rotwelsch form, would have been different, e.g., הַמָּכָה was realized as [s].

Many basic Rotwelsch verbs derive from Hebrew: acheln ‘to eat’ (cf. הָאכַל); assern ‘to prohibit’ (cf. אָסַר ‘prohibited’); dibbern ‘to speak’ (דָּבַר); halchen ‘to go’ (כָּלֵחַ); nassenen ‘to give’ (כָּלָשׁ); afsern ‘to die’ (כָּלָשׁ); mifttern ‘to pass away’; pattern ‘to allow, permit’ (מְפַרְדוּ); posseln ‘to cook’ (כָּלָשׁ); schasjenen ‘to drink’ (כָּלָשׁ); schauren ‘to sing’ (כָּלָשׁ); schaffen ‘to sit, lie’ (כָּלָשׁ); tohren ‘to do, work, go’, most likely through contamination with southern German schaffen ‘to work’ [cf. standard German Geschäfft ‘business’]; schmaien ‘to hear, understand’ (כָּלָשׁ). Occasionally such verbs receive German prefixes to form a new word with a nuanced meaning, e.g., verschmaien ‘to examine, interrogate’ (cf. German verbören with the same connotation).

Not surprisingly, words relevant to the work of the hucksters and swindlers occur in good number: Beged ‘garment’ (כָּלָשׁ בֶּגֶד); chelkenen ‘to divide’ (כָּלָשׁ בֶּלֶקֶנ); Gammewan ‘chief’ (כָּלָשׁ גָּמָו); Jerid ‘fair, market, exhibition’ (כָּלָשׁ יְרִד); Kesef ‘silver’ (כָּלָשׁ קְסֶפ); Kies ‘money’ (כָּלָשׁ קִיס podkaet); Kippe ‘box, coff’ (כָּלָשׁ קִפָּפ); Macker ‘acquaintance, partner, fellow swindler’ (כָּלָשׁ מָקְקֶר ‘acquaintance’); Macing ‘camp’ (כָּלָשׁ מַנְכֶה ‘camp’); Malbush ‘clothing’ (כָּלָשׁ מַלוּבּ); Mammon ‘wealth’ (כָּלָשׁ מָמָו); Malmun ‘money’ (כָּלָשׁ מַלוּפ); Melsa ‘to betray’ (כָּלָשׁ מְלָס ‘to betray’); Merkof ‘wagon’ (כָּלָשׁ מֶרֶקְו); Mesia ‘find, good buy’ (כָּלָשׁ מֶסָּי ‘find’); Schachern ‘to conduct business’ (כָּלָשׁ סָחַר ‘business’).

But even the basic vocabulary of ordinary items includes words of Hebrew origin (some of these, of course, may relate to the business ventures as well): Bais ‘house’ (כָּלָשׁ בַּיָּה); Egel ‘calf’ (כָּלָשׁ אֶגֶל); Jaar ‘forest’ (כָּלָשׁ יָדֶר); Jafin ‘wine’ (כָּלָשׁ יָיִין); Kelef ‘dog’ (כָּלָשׁ כֶּלֶב); Kesi ‘silver’ (כָּלָשׁ קְסֶפ); Lekn ‘to pass by’ (כָּלָשׁ לְקַנ ‘to pass by’); Lechem ‘bread’ (כָּלָשׁ לְכֵה ‘bread’); Lechern ‘to find, good buy’ (כָּלָשׁ לְכֵה ‘find, good buy’); Merkof ‘wagon’ (כָּלָשׁ מֶרֶקְו); Neks ‘feather’ (כָּלָשׁ נְקֵס); Pored ‘to pass by’ (כָּלָשׁ פָּרְדוּ); Pora ‘to pass by’ (כָּלָשׁ פוֹרָד); Saam ‘gift’ (כָּלָשׁ מַעַשׁ ‘gift’); Sackin ‘knife’ (כָּלָשׁ סַכִּין); Schachern ‘to drink’ (כָּלָשׁ שַׁחַר ‘to drink’); Schemer ‘sun’ (כָּלָשׁ שֶׁמֶשׁ ‘sun’); Schocher ‘coffee’ (כָּלָשׁ שֲכֹר ‘coffee’); Sabor ‘black’ [see below for the color term]; Tschappen ‘apple’ (כָּלָשׁ תְּחַפֲּנ); Tanner ‘oven’ (כָּלָשׁ תָּנַנ). Similarity with certain body parts, e.g., Ammo ‘middle finger’ (כָּלָשׁ אַמַּא); Enaim ‘eyes’ (כָּלָשׁ עֵינָי); Joda ‘hand’ (כָּלָשׁ יָד); Patzuf ‘face’ (כָּלָשׁ פַּרְעֹשׁ ‘face, profile’); Ponim ‘face’ (כָּלָשׁ פִּנָּי ‘face’); Rosch ‘head’ (כָּלָשׁ רַעָשׁ); Schen ‘tooth’ (כָּלָשׁ שֶׂנ); suchen ‘to find’ (כָּלָשׁ שֹׁכְנ). An interesting usage is Nuchi ‘mouth, face’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ נוֹקָה ‘one who is positioned before or opposite’).

And likewise for family relations, e.g., Aches ‘brother’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ אַכְס); Achaß ‘sister’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ אַחַס); Agot ‘son’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ אוֹגָט); Bar ‘son’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ בַּר [originally Aramaic]); Bajf ‘daughter’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ בַּי). In the same general semantic field, note also Gewer ‘man’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ גֵיֵר); Mischpach ‘family’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ מִשְׁפָּחָה). Special attention should be given to Nekef with a wide range of meanings: ‘hole, gap’, ‘prison’, ‘dame, woman’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ נֶקֶף ‘female’).

Other items include: afilu ‘even’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ אָפִּלְו); Aschre ‘good [n], blessedness’ (כָּלֲעִשׁ אָשְׁר). © 2013 Koninklijke Brill NV ISBN 978-90-04-17642-3
A creative use of the letters of the alphabet is seen in lametaleph ‘no’, comprised of the names of the two letters that spell the Hebrew word: אל לו ‘no’, namely, ל/ ℃ lamed and ℃/ ℃ alep.

A special feature of Rotwelsch is its innovative use of word combinations to create new lexemes. These include the following: Baldower ‘spy, scout’ < בָּדַל bdal ‘master’ + דָּבָר dabar ‘word, matter’; Ballmischpet ‘examining mag-

A special feature of Rotwelsch is its innovative use of word combinations to create new lexemes. These include the following: Baldower ‘spy, scout’ < בָּדַל bdal ‘master’ + דָּבָר dabar ‘word, matter’; Ballmischpet ‘examining mag-
which appears only once in the Mishna, for example). Similarly, words such as נוכה nokah ‘one who is positioned before or opposite’, whence נuche ‘mouth, face’ (see above), and שיבוש šibbuš ‘mistake’ (the root on which this noun is based also occurs only once in the Mishna), whence שיבבשכシュפוח ‘mistake’ (again, see above), require quite an advanced knowledge of Hebrew texts and sources.

References

Russia
This entry treats Jewish and Christian use of Hebrew in areas of Eurasia loosely and sometimes anachronistically termed ‘Russian’ due to the modern expansion of political boundaries. As throughout the world, Jews in Russia utilized Hebrew for prayer, study, and correspondence, while also adopting local languages. Medieval translations from Hebrew to Slavic influenced Russian Orthodox Christians and arguably the heretical ‘Judaizers’. Monks compiled Hebrew-Russian glossaries. In modern times, the renaissance of Hebrew emanated largely from within the Russian Empire.

1. From Antiquity to 1772
Beginning in the late centuries B.C.E., Jews settled along the southern fringes of the future Russian Empire. Ancient Jewish communities existed throughout the northern Black and Azov Sea coastal territories, including Crimea and the Caucasus, and extended beyond the Caspian Sea along the Silk Road (present-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Linguistic reality in this region reflected Jewish life to the south: Black Sea Jews from Greek poleis communicated primarily in Greek; those living farther east communicated in dialects of Persian (including Hebrew-influenced ‘hybrid’ languages, such as Juhuri or Judeo-Tat and Bukhori or Judeo-Persian) (Cohn-Sherbok 1996:56, 63, 67, 69; Altshuler 2002:17; Barnavi et al. 2002:29, 57, 118). Yet one also finds evidence of Hebrew usage. In Chersonesus Taurica (southwestern Crimea), inscriptions bear witness to the presence of Jews or Jewish-Christians with a knowledge of Hebrew ca. 2nd–4th centuries C.E. Ancient gravestones with Jewish symbols (menorah, shofar, lulav, etrog) have been discovered in the Crimean and Taman peninsulas and in Georgia; several include Hebrew epitaphs (Garkavi 1865; Dubnow 1916:1.13–18; Brook 2006:88–90; Shapira 2010a:13–16, 33 n. 1, 34 n. 7). Part of the inscription on an ancient sarcophagus found near Merv reads: יוסט בר יאגוב ‘Joseph son of Jacob’. The Old Georgian Bible appears to have been edited with reference to a Hebrew text; arguably some portions may have been translated directly from Hebrew. Loan words also entered from Hebrew into classical Armenian (Shapira 2010c; Lerner 2010) (→ Armenian, Hebrew Loanwords in).

In the 8th–10th centuries, the Khazar khaganate dominated most of the northern Black and Caspian Sea region (Gilbert 1993:24–25; Cohn-Sherbok 1996:75, 92). Its Turkic ruling class and an indeterminate subset of the population converted to Judaism; immigrants fleeing Christian persecution in Byzantium further supplemented the region’s pre-existent Jewish communities. Khazaria nonetheless remained ethnically and religiously quite diverse: its legal system included Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and pagan judges in a set proportion (Dubnow 1916:1.19–29; Noonan 2001). Golb (2005:483) has noted: “The only internal (written) sources concerning the Khazars…are texts preserved in Hebrew”. This is currently true with the exception of a few Turkic runes within Hebrew documents and some coins with Arabic inscriptions. The most famous of the Hebrew sources is the 10th-century