Life of Chaim

Zofia Janina Borysiewicz

Abstract. This paper explores the history and revival of the Chaim typeface, a Hebrew type design created in the early 20th century by Jan Lewitt. Describes Chaim's journey from its origins in Poland to its prominence in Israel, reflects the evolution of Hebrew typography and its impact on cultural identity. The study also introduces Aviva, a modern Latin-script typeface inspired by Chaim, designed to address the need for multi-script typography. By merging (info Chaim Aviva font) historical context with contemporary design practices, the paper sheds light on the challenges and responsibilities of creating typefaces that transcend cultural boundaries, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between design and linguistic heritage.

You may ask yourself, who is Chaim? Wasn't it supposed to be a text about type design?
Yes, but before I tell you about the font Chaim, I wanted you to know that it's also a common Jewish name that means "life." You will see why this fact is important.

Many documents got lost during the Second World War, so we do not know where and how Chaim was born. The story is full of assumptions rather than certainties. There is a discussion among researchers about who exactly was responsible for bringing Chaim to the world. Was it Pesach Ir-Shay or Jan Levitt[1]?

1. Chaim

According to documents from the patent office in Warsaw, Chaim was born on March 18th, 1929 (Szydłowska and Misiak, 2015). It was registered by Idźkowski & Company Type Foundry. Its father was Jan Lewitt—a young, self-taught graphic designer who was born in Częstochowa in 1907 (Mrowczyk, 2016, Chapter "Levitt and Him") and died

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Zofia Janina Borysiewicz
Independent researcher, Warsaw/Prague.
E-mail: zofia.janina@gmail.com

1. Also known as Le Witt and Lewitt.

FIGURE 1. Source: https://polona.pl/item/wiadomosci-urzedu-patentowego-r-6-z-4-30-kwietnia-1929,NjY1OTU3NjM/17/

in London in 1991. During 1925-1926, he traveled across Europe, and in 1928, he spent some time in Palestine. Probably then, after returning to Warsaw (in 1928) while being an employee of a newspaper published in Yiddish, he saw the need to develop a new Hebrew typeface.

I share the opinion of Messner (2015−2023), who thinks that Chaim was initially meant for Yiddish, not Hebrew. Back then, Yiddish was a common spoken and written language of the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora. They used it in everyday communication, as well as in Poland. Another argument favoring this opinion is that the project did not include nikud. At the same time, biblical Hebrew was a sacred language—used mainly in holy books and religious services. Only later modern Hebrew was used by supporters of the Zionist movement. In the late 19th to early 20th century, secular Jew Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was working on a revival of the Hebrew language that could be used in the modern era by modern Jews in their new country. However, both languages (Yiddish and Hebrew) share the same Hebrew script.

Objects of design sometimes live different lives than intended by their creators. Just like kids, typefaces live their own lives. While be-

FIGURE 2. Specimen of typefaces by Idźkowski I Sk-a Type Foundry from archives of Dom Słów—Izba Drukarstwa in Lublin

Chaim ściągły

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FIGURE 3. From the private archive of the author

ing widely used in Europe, Chaim bold acquired an unmatched set of
digits. As Simon Prais writes in "Design considerations affecting the si-
multaneous use of Latin and Hebrew typography," it happened without
Levitt knowing of it (Prais, 1985, p. 44). The numbers were probably
from a different typeface. Which exactly, we don't know. The numbers
in bold weight are rounded and are designed in a different style than the
letters. It is quite a mismatch, but on the other hand, it is also a part of
Chaim's history. In this unintended form, it has been used until now.

After the great success of bold weight, there was a need for something
more condensed to reduce the print cost. As an answer to this need,
Chaim's condensed brother was presented to the public in 1936. The
numbers in that one fit better with the style of letters.

In the 1930s, after being wildly used in Europe, Chaim became
hugely successful in Palestine (later the State of Israel) and held its posi-
tion until new digital typefaces were introduced. Nowadays, the digital
versions of Chaim are still in use. We still see Chaim in newspaper head-
lines, especially when something very important happens. Other than
this, it appears on old buildings, parking lots, backyards, and signs in
the neighborhoods that represent cultural heritage. However, the users
do not treat it with respect.

Look at this paradox: A common death notice is one of the few things
that keep Chaim alive. And it looks almost like a sign of the death of the
font itself. But Chaim got its second chance, as we will see later.

2.   Aviva

But let's leave him for now and look at Aviva, the font I designed while
working on my graduation project. I wanted to design a font for Latin

FIGURE 4. From the private archive of the author

script that wouldn't be based on Latin design conventions. I intended
to shed light on the story of Chaim—my starting point for Latin—that
encourages new generations of designers to use it again in their projects
in different ways.

For an outsider, it might seem that the number of existing fonts is
overwhelming. Indeed, it is true, but only for the Latin script. But when
it comes to Hebrew, Arabic, or Cyrillic, not to mention the other scripts,
the range of available fonts is nothing close to Latin.

The situation is even worse when it comes to multi-script typeface
families. There is a real need for typographers to develop those. One of
the goals of my project was to answer that need. So why did I design
another font for Latin?

I did it because my native language—Polish—is based on the Latin
script. As a native user, I wanted to reverse the logic and reimagine the
common practice of designing other scripts to look similar to Latin. So I
ask myself: what if Latin-based languages were in the minority? Could I
design for Latin script but have for example, Hebrew script conventions
as a starting point?

The differences are notable.

FIGURE 5. From the private archive of the author

1. Hebrew direction is from right to left, and Latin is the opposite.
2. Latin has a lot of curves, sometimes rounded edges.
3. Hebrew has only one case of letter, while Latin has two.
4. In the case of Chaim, glyphs are constructed rather than reflecting the calligraphic or cursive way of writing.

I digitalized my version of Chaim and added a new set of digits to the bold weight. I thought Aviva should be a perfect live companion for Chaim.

While designing Aviva, I followed Hebrew and Chaim characteristics and made it peruse only in uppercase and without any curves. Moreover, in some cases, I even copied glyphs from Hebrew to Latin, which I know is not a traditional approach.

Therefore, I merged them into one multi-script type family. Just like the original Chaim, at the beginning, Aviva also has only two weights— bold and condensed, but later I made it Variable and added four more weights.

Aviva is modern and edgy, and its design makes conventional Latin letters look bold and fresh, just like her name, which means "spring." In her company, Chaim seems lighter and more relevant.

During the process, I also used my anthropological experience. My first degree was in cultural anthropology. I spent almost half a year in

Figure 6. From the private archive of the author

Haifa. All of this helped me to understand better where, when, and by whom Chaim is used nowadays.

I often think about the responsibility that comes with the privilege of being a designer.

I also know that it's impossible to control everything. At some point, especially while designing a typeface, it is essential to finish and let our projects live their own lives.

Chaim is a very good example. Jan Levitt was trying to reflect the period in time rather than follow certain aesthetics, for example, the Latin script. With his project, he answered a need for a modern typeface for Yiddish. And he couldn't predict that his avant-garde project will be one of the most popular typefaces in Israel, which did not exist back then.

This reminds me of a quote by one of the greatest singers and songwriters, Nina Simone, who said: "The artist's duty is to reflect the times." I think it's true, also or maybe especially in the design field. Nowadays, we can see that some cultures and languages are not represented enough, while others are omnipresent. This imbalance was something that I wanted to point out with my project.

FIGURE 7. From the private archive of the author

Chaim & Aviva is, at the same time, the revival and multi-script project as well as the reflection of the current situation.

At this point, I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the project. Special thanks go to my patient supervisors, Viktoriya Grabowska and Agata Szydłowska. Also, this project wouldn't be possible without the research findings of Marian Misiak, Ianek Yontef, Ada Wardi, Philipp Messner, and Simon Prais, as well as the help and support of Borys Kosmynka, Shani Avni, Liron Lavi Turkenich.

Since my graduation (in 2019), together with Nika Langosz, I have improved Chaim & Aviva. Thanks to the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, it is available for free for personal and commercial use.[2]

I am happy that Chaim's second life has already started, and I hope that more is waiting for him and Aviva shortly. For sure, that's only the beginning of their new life together.

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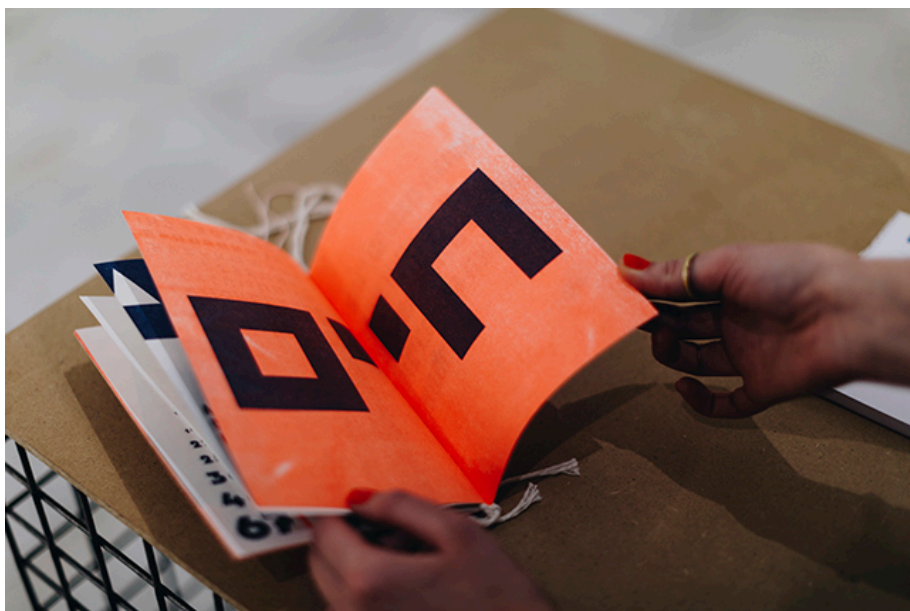
FIGURE 9. From the private archive of the author

FIGURE 10

FIGURE 11

FIGURE 12

Figure 13

Figure 14