3 - International Auxiliary Languages

Video 02:14

In the 19th century, Europe changed from a collection of kingdoms and principalities to a group of nation states, with matching **national languages**. They were often compiled from different regional languages, and then standardized and taught in schools. **Finnish** and **Czech** are examples.

New oppressions and problems occurred. In the northeast of Europe, the borders of Russia, Latvia, Poland, Ukraine and Germany were shifting regularly, and so did the required national languages. The large number of **Yiddish** speakers did not see their language acknowledged within any state system.

Lejzer Zamenhof lived the experience of linguistic oppression in his native Poland. It led him to believe that humanity would be served by a mixture of languages, equally understandable to all.

Zamenhof was not a linguist but an ideologue. In 1887 he published the book “Lingvo Internacia”, meaning ‘international language’ in his new language. It consisted of 16 grammatical rules, 917 roots of vocabulary, and a statement of intent. His project became better known as **Esperanto**.

There were other auxiliary language projects in this time, like **Volapük** and **Ido**. But the unique thing about Zamenhof was, that he never claimed ownership over his language, neither did he want to improve or change it. Esperanto was about usage, not about language per-se.

Esperanto became a movement with a community and – I would argue – a culture. Over time, it developed not into a universal language but into a particular language of a particular speech community. The biggest such community that ever existed, with over one million speakers still today.