

The Yiddish Speaking Community in New York City

by Itzek Gottesman

For the Jews of America, the Yiddish language represents the most tangible connection to an Eastern European heritage, a legacy which some have retained and enhanced, many have forgotten, and others are reclaiming. With the mass immigration of Jews from Poland, Russia, Rumania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia that began in the 1880s and continued into the 1920s, the Yiddish language took root in the United States as the vernacular for millions of Jews. In addition to these older settlers, a new wave of Yiddish-speakers immigrated in the 1940s and '50s, Holocaust survivors of the Second World War. Most of these immigrants first settled in the large urban centers of the United States—New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. Nearly all adult Jews in America have had first-hand contact with Yiddish: through a parent, grandparent, neighbor, or storekeeper.

In the past hundred years Yiddish language and culture have permeated mainstream American culture. Examples include words like *nosh* and *shlep*; foods such as bagels and lox, hot pastrami, and knishes; musicals and films such as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Yentl*; humorists like the Marx Brothers and Woody Allen; and translations of literary works such as those of Nobel prize-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer.

New York City has the largest concentration of Yiddish speakers in the country; more than half a million claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue according to the 1970 U.S. Census. But it is difficult to speak of New York's Yiddish speakers as one unified community. In fact, several dynamic communities of Yiddish speakers are there today.

In the Orthodox Hasidic neighborhoods of Borough Park and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, Yiddish is spoken in homes, shops, streets, and in special separate schools for boys and girls. Shop signs are in Yiddish and two weekly newspapers, *Der algemeiner zhurnal* and *Der yid*, have large readerships. The production of Yiddish textbooks, children's literature, and recordings is rapidly expanding. On the joyous holiday Purim, Hasidim perform Yiddish folk plays, a tradition that goes back hundreds of years.

Although Brooklyn's Hasidic neighborhoods constitute the fastest growing population of Yiddish speakers, the Hasidim have little contact with the secular cultural community of creative artists and *kultur-tuers*, Yiddish cultural activists.

One of the mainstays of secular Yiddish life is *Der forverts/ The Jewish Forward*, a weekly newspaper that celebrates its 90th anniversary this year. A progressive weekly, *Morgn Freiheit*, has been

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The New Westside Yiddish School. Photo by Vivian Fenster Ehrlich



publishing since the 1920s. Radio station WEVD (the call letters are the initials of labor leader Eugene Victor Debs) is owned by *The Jewish Forward* and broadcasts Yiddish song and music, commentaries on the Talmud, and provides a forum for groups like the Jewish Labor Bund, a Socialist-Yiddishist organization. Several hundred *Landsmanshaften*, Jewish Mutual Aid societies, are active in New York, sponsoring theater benefits and cultural evenings.

Yiddish literature written on American soil has a rich and unique history among immigrant literatures. In addition to the newspapers mentioned above, a monthly literary journal *Di zukunft* publishes works by many contemporary New York Yiddish writers. These writers of poetry and prose are an active community that organizes frequent literary gatherings. *Yugntruf*—Youth for Yiddish, a national student group—has founded a Yiddish Writers' Circle that meets monthly. Another cultural institution with a longstanding history is the Yiddish Theater that produced three major productions this season.

New York City is a major center for Yiddish higher education and scholarly research. The *Yidisher visnschaftlekher institut* (known in English as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), the world's leading Yiddish research facility, was originally based in pre-War Poland with collections on the language, history, and folklore of Eastern European Jews. Although most of its irreplaceable archives were destroyed by the Nazis, YIVO, now in Manhattan, flourishes as a resource for researchers. Columbia University offers a doctorate in Yiddish through its Linguistics Department and has trained Yiddish teachers across the country. Furthermore, hundreds of students have studied Yiddish at Columbia, YIVO, YMHAs and YMWAs (Young Men's/Women's Hebrew Associations), and other locations throughout New York City. Many students had no knowledge of Yiddish before attending classes: they were motivated by a need to find their "roots" and reclaim their heritage.

Many Jewish immigrants of the early decades, although non-observant by the Orthodox religious standards, strongly identified themselves as Jews. Yiddish language and culture were central to this identification. Dozens of *yidishe folksbuln* (Jewish folk schools)



were established for their children to attend after regular school hours. These schools served as an alternative to established Hebrew schools. Much of the neighborhood's Yiddish cultural life revolved around the *folksbul*.

A vivid sense of how the Yiddish language fits into community life can be gained by considering one example—perhaps not typical, but illustrative. It is the neighborhood where I grew up, a community in the northern Bronx known to its residents as Bainbridgivke, after the main street of Bainbridge Avenue.

Bainbridgivke residents include Tsunye Rymer from the Ukraine, who once owned a neighborhood dry-cleaning store but is known to the community as a reciter of Sholem Aleichem stories. Joshua Fishman, a noted sociolinguist, and his wife Gella Fishman, a Yiddish pedagogue, were both born in America. My parents come from the Bukovina, an area now divided between the U.S.S.R. and Romania. My mother Beyle is a Yiddish poet who also sings at social functions. My father Yoyné, a medical doctor, provides health services in Yiddish to many community residents. Moyshe Nussbaum was a fiddler in his Polish town, but made his living as a barber in New York until his retirement. Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter, a professor in Columbia University's Yiddish program, is preparing a compendium of Yiddish plant names that will include more than 6,000 entries.

On the corner is the Sholem Aleichem Folk Shul 21, once part of a school system named for the great Yiddish writer. Classes began in the '30s and continued through the '70s. During these years generations of students were exposed to Yiddish language and



Masqueraders during Purim, a holiday when children portray characters and incidents from the Megillah, in the Hassidic community of Williamsburg, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Photo by Irving I. Herzberg

Kosher ice cream parlor in the Hassidic community of Williamsburg, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Photo by Irving I. Herzberg

Board members in front of the Sholem Aleichem Cultural Center. Photo by Itzek Gottesman

Suggested reading

Fishman, Gelle. "Bainbridgivke." *Yugntruf: A Yiddish Student Quarterly* 53 (December 1982):8-12. [In Yiddish]

Fishman, Joshua A., ed. *Never Say Die: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*. Contributions to the Sociology of Language, no. 30. The Hague: Mouton, 1981.

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Poll, Solomon. *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg*. New York: The Free Press, 1962.

Rischin, Moses. *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.



literature, Jewish history and traditions. The Shul was widely known and respected. Some families, my own included, moved to this community so that their children could attend the Shul and grow up speaking Yiddish. Now those children have grown up and moved away but still speak Yiddish to each other and their own children.

The Shul has been turned into the Sholem Aleichem Kultur-Tsenter, a cultural center for adults whose members meet for weekly *leyenkrayzn* (reading circles), host a monthly lecture series, show Yiddish films, and use the Tsenter's lending library. Members meet informally at each other's homes for coffee, cake, and singing.

Around the corner from the Tsenter is one of the four Orthodox synagogues in the area. Young congregants include several doctors from nearby Montefiore and North Central Hospitals who speak Yiddish with many of their Jewish patients. Down the road is the "Amalgamated," a cooperative housing project built by the Amalgamated Garment Workers of America. Many Yiddish writers and cultural leaders live here and meet in their own Tsenter. Their children attend a Yiddish school sponsored by the Workman's Circle, a fraternal organization that runs the largest secular Yiddish school system in the nation.

Recently, I was walking down Bainbridge Avenue and ran into a young man I had met once at YIVO. A painter in his thirties, he is the child of Holocaust survivors and speaks fluent Yiddish. He had recently acted in a Yiddish theater production. While we stood talking, a Yiddish actor in his sixties, himself a performer in another of this season's productions, walked by. I introduced them. The older actor had been looking for young talent for his troupe's future productions. Soon, phone numbers were exchanged, and another intergenerational link was made in New York's Yiddish community on a street corner in the north Bronx.