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A Yiddish Revival, With New York Leading the Way

By [Sewell Chan](#)

The question was bound to come up at some point: *Vifl fun aykh do redn yidish?* (How many of you here speak Yiddish?) About half of the audience raised their hands – some after a moment’s hesitation.

The audience had gathered Tuesday evening in the basement auditorium at the [Museum of the City of New York](#) for a [panel discussion](#), “Yiddish Is Alive and Well and Living in New York,” that traced the language’s rich history and future prospects.

In the 20th century alone, Yiddish, once a thriving language spoken by millions of Eastern European Jews, became something of an endangered tongue, its legacy maintained by scattered communities in North America and the Soviet Union. Now Yiddish is undergoing what many see as a revival.

[Jeffrey Shandler](#), associate professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers University and author of “[Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture](#)” (University of California Press, 2005), moderated the panel, which was presented as part of an [exhibition](#), “The Jewish Daily Forward: Embracing an Immigrant Community.”

Acknowledging Yiddish’s “very long and often very fraught past,” Dr. Shandler began by saying, “We often measure the state of a language and culture against the past, especially the period immediately before World War II, when Yiddish is the most widely spoken of any Jewish language in history and is the center of a vernacular culture of unprecedented scope in the Jewish experience.”

He encouraged the speakers to “focus on what contemporary culture is more so than what it isn’t.”

The first was [Adrienne Cooper](#), a Yiddish singer who directs external affairs at the [Workmen’s Circle](#), a mutual-aid society that promotes Jewish culture.

Ms. Cooper, a mezzo-soprano, comes from a family of performers. “I was literate and understood my mother’s songs well before I spoke Yiddish, which is when I was in graduate school,” she said.

The Workmen’s Circle, whose mission is secular, invests heavily in Yiddish teaching resources, like college textbooks and songbooks. “There are family learning communities

that are primarily organized to teach children, but also to teach and engage the parents using the family heritage of Ashkenazi Jews — this personal, received history, rooted in the language, as the emotional hook to their using Yiddish for their Jewish literacy,” she said.

Ms. Cooper also noted that the [American Jewish World Service](#) ran a program to help revive Yiddish language and culture in [Russia](#), acknowledging that there were Russian Jews who had no intention of ever moving to Israel, the United States or elsewhere.

“The way to support them is not to make them into Lubavitcher Hasidim, is not to make them Zionists, but to look at the culture that was indigenous there and help repair that thread of Yiddish culture,” she said.

Over the last decade, Americans with an interest in Yiddish — many of them descendants of Russian immigrants — have traveled to Russia to “repair that break” in culture, she said. “People became fluent in Yiddish very quickly, new Yiddish creators began to write songs,” she said. “There was a cultural courage and ownership that actually took a lot longer to develop among klezmer revivalists in the States. This was a super-heated kiln, and it happened much faster in R than it did here.”

Ms. Cooper, who recorded [“Ghetto Tango,”](#) an album of wartime cabaret music, with the pianist Zalmen Mlotek, described her love of Yiddish eloquently:

I’ve heard the language since birth. It’s a language that bites back. It’s tender and folksy and intelligent and ironic and rooted historically in a territory. That resonates with me because of family history and experience, but I also am a big believer that Jewishness flourishes in books, in exile, in the tradition of not being — I don’t know exactly how to describe it — but in the condition of being unsettled.

Next to speak was Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, a scholar and editor at [The Yiddish Forward](#), a weekly that has experienced a revival in recent years. (Its English-language counterpart, [The Jewish Daily Forward](#), is also published weekly.)

Dr. Gottesman, who holds a doctorate in Yiddish folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, runs a record label, [Yiddishland Records](#), and is the host of a Saturday night radio show on [WMCA-AM \(570\)](#).

“It’s a Christian station that turns Jewish Saturday night,” he explained, eliciting some laughs.

“Reaction to the radio show is much larger in terms of feedback — a lot of people obviously can understand Yiddish and enjoy Yiddish music, which is part of the show, than can actually read it,” he said.

Dr. Gottesman described the special work environment at The Forward. “We speak Yiddish the whole day,” he said, “We don’t speak English. Which is one of the reasons I work there, because I’m actually able to make a living speaking Yiddish all day.”

His colleagues include the newspaper’s editor, Boris Sandler, a Russian-born essayist and journalist. Dr. Gottesman’s cousin Rukhl Schaechter, who grew up near him (their families both lived in Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx), is the news editor. Other employees include a Russian Jew who became Hasidic and the occasional graduate student from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

“We realize people are not going to read Yiddish Forward for the news, although we try to find Jewish news that people won’t read in The New York Times,” Dr. Gottesman said. “But when we do news articles, you can often hear us arguing about, How do you say “global warming” in Yiddish, or any technical terms? We just throw them out in the air and see what finds a consensus.”

(By all accounts, *globale onvaremung* is the best translation of [global warming](#).)

Dr. Gottesman, the author of “Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland” (Wayne State University Press, 2003), said he left academia because he wanted to be “one of the people actually contributing to Yiddish culture from the inside.”

The final speaker was [Michael Wex](#), author of “[Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods](#)” (2005) and “[Just Say Nu: Yiddish for Every Occasion \(When English Just Won’t Do\)](#),” published this month. (See William Grimes’s [review](#) today of the new book.)

“I think I’m actually the comic relief for this kind of thing,” Mr. Wex said, explaining that grew up in the small town of Lethbridge, Alberta, in western Canada — a town, he noted, with a sizable Mormon population and “also the only area of Canada that featured the Ku Klux Klan.”

The peak of Jewish migration to Canada occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, about 30 to 40 years later than the height of Jewish settlement in the United States. That fact, combined with the postwar immigration of Holocaust survivors, meant that Lethbridge was a town “where every adult Jew was a fluent Yiddish speaker.”

Mr. Wex said his own family was very religious, “which was atypical for the place and the time.” Most of the Jews in the community were *yidn fun a gants yor* (Jews from a whole year) — an idiom for regular, ordinary people, not particularly religious or political.

Mr. Wex recalled the Yiddish he heard as a young child in the ’50s and ’60s, when his grandfather’s friends would occasionally depart from the “fairly respectable” Yiddish of interwar Warsaw for coarser local dialects.

“So I got this exposure to a kind of Yiddish that was even then not necessarily the norm,” said Mr. Wex, who lives in Toronto. “And also to this very odd, rather skewed old-man humor, where these men were not just old, but knew they could get away with damn near anything and would basically do it with the drop of a yarmulke. These were the things that nobody liked — the kind of stuff we were supposed to be, if not ashamed of — this was what the high culture was supposed to have displaced.”

Mr. Wex, who was trained in Old English philology before he devoted himself to writing about Yiddish, added:

When I began to get seriously interested in Yiddish, I found there were many people who were doing first-rate work on the sort of high culture or officially recognized folk culture, particularly with respect to music — which has always been strongly represented in Yiddish. One of the things I found wasn’t getting the attention it deserved was the sort of demotic aspect of Yiddish.

Mr. Wex said he became fascinated by the common or ordinary (the Yiddish word is *prost*) language used in bantering.

“A lot of stuff that looks like plain jokes or bad language is actually very, very deeply rooted in Ashkenazi Jewish history and religious practice,” he said, adding that his goal was to “go way, way back in folklore and shine a light not just on what you’re actually saying, but the process, the vicissitudes, through which the language and culture have developed.”

In a noteworthy moment, Mr. Wex mentioned, by way of example, a Yiddish admonition that translates loosely as “Go defecate on the sea.” (The precise verb is not printable here — in Yiddish or English.) Mr. Wex explained:

When you stop to think about what this expression is really saying — and then you remember that Yiddish-speaking Jews lived, for years always surrounded by another population which believed that the main guy in their religion actually was able to balance on water while walking — you get a whole new way of looking at this.

Mr. Wex said he questioned the notion of revitalizing Yiddish because “it didn’t need revitalization.”

“What it needed,” he continued, “was simply people willing to put themselves forward and assume the burden of doing something about it.”

Dr. Shandler began the question-and-answer session by asking what was being lost with the gradual passing of the generation that spoke Yiddish in prewar Eastern Europe.

“All of us sometimes are stymied by certain words or phrases,” Dr. Gottesman replied. “We’re lacking sometimes.”

Ms. Cooper said: “For me it’s an absolutely terrifying moment. The passing of the older generation gives new meaning to the idea of *golus* — exile, or more generally insecurity. “There is no home to go back to,” she said. “There is no secular native environment in which to hear the culture continuously. It’s a challenging and quite frightening moment.”

Mr. Wex said that with the death in February of [Mordkhe Schaechter](#), a noted Yiddish linguist (and Dr. Gottesman’s uncle), “we lost the last significant Yiddish linguist who grew up in a Yiddish-speaking world.”

Mr. Wex raised a broader challenge. Yiddish is alive and well in insular, ultra-Orthodox Hasidic communities, but the challenge is — “in the absence of the kind of exclusionary antisemitism that prevailed in Europe and became particularly virulent between the two world wars — to give people who aren’t faced with that a reason to speak this language. To try and give them a sense that they have something to express, for which English is simply insufficient.”

Dr. Gottesman suggested that there was any number of reasons modern secular Jews might learn Yiddish: an identification with an oppressed people, political idealism or a desire to learn more about the world described by [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#).

The panelists also noted a remarkable surge in interest in Yiddish among gentiles.

Ms. Cooper recalled going to the apartment of a Protestant minister in Chemnitz, Germany, for a Yiddish festival, and encountering young Germans — fluent in Yiddish — who questioned her about the subtle distinction between *nisht* and *nit*, two words for “not.”

The audience members asked some questions of their own. One woman complained that more Yiddish was not spoken during the panel.

Mr. Wex, whose books have done much to popularize Yiddish, emphasized its cultural and humorous dimensions. “Yiddish is a fantastic way to say no to everything around you, and in a culture where saying no is ever more difficult and fraught with consequences, Yiddish is often there as a great big finger to absolutely everything,” he said. The contributions of Yiddish to music, movies and popular culture have galvanized an awareness that Yiddish may yet be able to fill gaps in mainstream culture, he said.

Mr. Wex was asked in Yiddish whether he was Lithuanian or Galician, a reference to a historic rivalry between Jews from different regions of [czarist Russia](#) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (areas that are part of modern-day Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine). Mr. Wex replied, without skipping a beat, “*Yakh bin a poylisher, nisht ken litvak un nisht, got zol ophitn, ken galitsyaner.*” (“I am a Polish Jew, not a Lithuanian or, God forbid, a Galician.”)

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