

Keeping Yiddish Alive, One Article at a Time

RUTGERS TODAY

Rutgers grad Jordan Kutzik is the modern culture reporter for legendary newspaper, 'The Forward'

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By Fredda Sacharow



Jordan Kutzik works for the Yiddish version of *The Forward*, shown here in its online incarnation.

'Fifteen years ago, *The Forward's* readers were mostly Holocaust survivors, but there's more of a mixture today, especially among those who read us online.' – Jordan Kutzik

Pundits have long predicted that Yiddish, with its roots in 10th-century central Europe, would go extinct any day now. Jordan Kutzik, who immerses himself in the venerated tongue eight hours a day, five days a week, is making a living proving them wrong.

Not only does the 25-year-old Rutgers graduate speak the language fluently and hold lively Yiddish conversations with a widening circle of friends, but he also writes articles on modern culture – yes, in Yiddish – for *The Forward*, a legendary newspaper that traditionally served immigrants on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Kutzik, who graduated from Rutgers in 2011 with a double major in Jewish studies and Spanish translation, will be the first to acknowledge he's something of an anomaly among his peers – and among Americans in general, only 180,000 of whom reported speaking Yiddish at home in the 2000 census.

The Philadelphia-area native can't tell you what originally attracted him to the language Jewish immigrants have long called the *mamma loshen*: mother tongue. Certainly his house was steeped in Jewish tradition. But there was something more . . .

Photo: Courtesy of Jordan Kutzik
Jordan Kutzik

“There were a lot of Yiddish books in the house when I was growing up – we inherited some, and my dad bought others at yard sales. I knew a lot of Yiddish songs as well, but I didn’t know what they meant,” recalls Kutzik, who decided at 15 that he wanted to learn the language of his forebears, and he wanted to do so formally.

He found classes at the local Jewish Community Center sponsored by Gratz College, a college for Jewish studies. He was, Kutzik says wryly, the only student in the class under the age of 50.

By the time he got to Rutgers, he was way beyond the intro-level Yiddish classes. Instead, he studied independently with Jeffrey Shandler, a modern Jewish culture scholar who also specializes in Yiddish in the [Department of Jewish Studies](#). He also enrolled in a Jewish literature class in the School of Arts and Sciences in which he read class assignments in Yiddish.



With several other undergraduates, Kutzik founded a small club on campus for Yiddish speakers; participants discussed movies and current events and held parties at holiday times, all the while chatting in a language long written off as obsolete.

After graduation, he served a stint as a senior fellow at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., a nonprofit which safeguards the legacy of 1,000 years of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. The job found him editing, cataloging and distributing audio books and cultural programming in Yiddish from the Jewish Public Library in Montreal.

Reporting on Modern Culture

Now the Brooklyn resident is working for the [Yiddish edition of *The Forward*](#), something of a legend in the world of publishing.

Launched in 1897 in New York City as a Yiddish-language daily, the newspaper expanded into a leading metropolitan voice with a nationwide circulation of more than 275,000. But readership plummeted after immigration rules limited the number of new immigrants coming into the country; by 1962 circulation was under 60,000, and by 1983, the paper had been downsized to a weekly.

Today, the reconstituted paper publishes both an English edition and a Yiddish edition (*The Forverts*): two entities with separate editorial and production staffs. The Yiddish version, circulation about 2,000, appears biweekly in print form, with two or three new articles posted online every day.

“I cover cultural events, Jewish things happening in New York as well as Yiddish events around the country,” Kutzik says. A recent story described a program at the Yiddish Book Center geared toward exposing young people to different aspects of Jewish life; another featured an interview with the director of a new Yiddish film coming out of Canada.

Others topics have been a bit more ... eclectic, he says, including an analysis of how the visual images of German concentration camps in the 1940s might have influenced the creation of zombies as a political statement in the 1960s, and a look at this year’s confluence of Hanukkah and Thanksgiving and how neither the Pilgrims nor the Maccabees would be considered politically correct today.

“We’re making an effort to reach out to younger readers,” Kutzik says, noting that until recently, the bulk of the paper’s audience has skewed on the older side. A new generation of readers, among them members of New York’s large Chasidic communities, is helping to bring down the age of the average subscriber.

“Fifteen years ago *The Forward’s* readers were mostly Holocaust survivors, but there’s more of a mixture today, especially among those who read us online,” he says. A Facebook presence and frequent appearances on other social media sites are also contributing to the trend.

As for those predictions of the imminent demise of his beloved Yiddish? Kutzik isn’t buying. “I think it will become more popular because of the new communities embracing it.”

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