

Yiddish Program Aims to Get Beyond Schmoozing

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Jewish day schools would seem like a natural place to teach Yiddish, the *mama loshen*, or mother tongue, spoken by 75% of the world's Jews before the Holocaust. But schools that teach both Jewish studies and mainstream academic subjects have been more likely to offer French or Spanish in addition to Hebrew than Yiddish.

This fall, however, the famously evocative, 1,000-year-old language will be taught at three Jewish day schools in Los Angeles, a rare addition to the standard curriculum in use across the country.

"To go to Jewish day schools and discuss teaching Yiddish and see them excited — it's a sea change," said Aaron Paley, founder and co-chairman of Yiddishkayt Los Angeles, which is administering the program.

The three-year pilot program is being developed with a \$130,000 grant from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation. If administrators deem the effort a success, it will be offered to additional schools throughout the country, Paley said.

Yiddish, the language that added *chutzpah* and *klutz* to the vernacular, is based on medieval German, written in Hebrew characters and read from right to left like Hebrew. It was spoken by millions of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe until the Holocaust and by immigrant Jews wherever they settled. It was the language of Jewish social activists, writers, singers, actors, artists and entrepreneurs in towns and cities throughout the Western world.

"It was," said Bruce Powell, head of New Community Jewish High School in West Hills, "almost the Esperanto of the Jewish world, the language everybody spoke no matter where you went."

Powell's nondenominational Jewish school in the San Fernando Valley is one of the three that will add Yiddish in the fall. The others are Shalhevet School, an alternative Orthodox school on Fairfax Avenue near Olympic Boulevard, and Sinai Akiba Academy, a Conservative Jewish day school in West Los Angeles.

Paley said the beginning course will be offered to fifth- and ninth-graders, with a more advanced class added each of the next three years.

In the past, local children could study Yiddish and Yiddish culture in after-school and weekend programs run by Jewish organizations such as Workmen's Circle and cooperatives of parents, many of them nonobservant Jews and on the political left. Most of these programs have withered away, said Paley, 47, who as a child in the 1960s attended a vibrant, "profoundly cultural" Yiddish program on Saturdays in the San Fernando Valley.

Anna Fishman Gonshor, who teaches Yiddish language and culture at McGill University in Montreal, said she knows of only a handful of Jewish day schools in the United States that offer Yiddish on a regular basis, all on the East Coast. The language is also taught at Jewish day schools in Canada, Mexico, Australia and Israel, said Gonshor, an advisor to the new program.

Screenwriter-turned-historian Dan Opatoshu, 57, of Sherman Oaks, had the idea for the Yiddish program. Born into a prominent Yiddish-speaking family, he is the grandson of Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu and son of actor David Opatoshu, who began his career in Yiddish theater and later played Jewish underground leader Akiva ben Canaan in the 1960 film epic "Exodus."

As a child, Opatoshu said, he readily understood both English and the Yiddish spoken by the artists who frequented his grandfather's New York salon. Opatoshu, who is Spielberg's brother-in-law, studied Yiddish in order to read original source material on the Jewish labor movement while a graduate student at UCLA.

How spoken Yiddish became endangered is a complex tragedy, according to Opatoshu and others. Hitler had millions of Yiddish speakers killed and destroyed the Yiddish-speaking communities that once dotted Eastern Europe. But Yiddish had also begun to vanish in the U.S. as more and more Yiddish speakers, and especially their children, were assimilated into mainstream American culture.

"You didn't want to be a greenhorn forever," said Gonshor, using the dismissive term for a newcomer favored by early Jewish immigrants to the United States. As a result, most new immigrants sent their children to public schools, where everyone learned English. Children of Yiddish-speaking parents might understand the language, but the grandchildren rarely did.

The establishment of Hebrew as the official language of the new state of Israel after World War II also hastened the decline of Yiddish, as nationalists actively discouraged its use.

However, much of the extensive literature written in Yiddish has been saved, in the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., the YIVO

Institute for Jewish Research in New York City and elsewhere. But, Opatoshu said material that survives "will be for naught if nobody can access it, nobody has the language."

"A language is a template, a map into a culture," said Opatoshu, and when Jews began to lose their Yiddish, they also began to lose the text and texture of a thousand years of Jewish life.

In most Jewish day schools, he said, today's students are fascinated by their roots and their history but are taught a "strangely truncated history" that jumps from the Bible to the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel.

Once Opatoshu realized how valuable a Yiddish school curriculum would be, he approached Spielberg, who urged him to apply for a grant from the Righteous Persons Foundation.

The creators call the program "*take* Yiddish." A bilingual pun, it means "*really* Yiddish," Paley said.

Opatoshu, Paley and a dozen education professionals, Yiddish specialists and others committed to revitalizing the language met recently at the National Yiddish Book Center to discuss curriculum. The program's first and only teacher, Hannah Pollin, 23, is now racing the clock to create instructional materials for pre-college students.

Pollin helped launch the first undergraduate Yiddish major at Columbia University and was one of the first to graduate from the program. She recently returned from Lithuania, where as a Fulbright fellow she conducted in-depth interviews with more than 60 Yiddish-speakers.

In what she affectionately calls "Yiddishland," she often found that Yiddish was the only language she shared with those around her: "It was the first time in my life I used Yiddish as a true means of communication."

Although there are respected college-level textbooks, Pollin said, "There's no curriculum for students who are beginning Yiddish in middle and high school."

Younger students have different pedagogical needs, said Pollin, who grew up in Riverside. Many have not learned other foreign languages, and most will want to speak Yiddish as well as read it. She said she wants the new teaching materials to be lively, thoughtful, compelling and hip, as well as effective.

"The materials have to look good," she said, "because for young people now, if things don't look good, they're just not interested."

Pollin is currently mining the Amherst repository for material to adapt: "Right now, I'm looking through all these children's magazines and textbooks, in Yiddish, from the 1940s and '50s." Among the discoveries she hopes will captivate teenage Angelinos — a cartoon series from the 1940s that she describes as a Yiddish "Calvin and Hobbes."

Pollin will teach at all three local schools. Hoping to make authentic cultural artifacts part of the educational experience, she has asked for at least half a classroom at each school that she can decorate with posters advertising the shows of Yiddish theater icon Molly Picon and the like.

Paley admitted that he sees *take* Yiddish as part of a grand plan, one in which Yiddish is reinvigorated by older people with new opportunities to speak a newly popular language and by younger speakers who find their own creative uses for it.

Paley remembers when it was hard to find fellow Yiddish speakers to practice with. Now, thanks to the Internet, he said, "There is always the possibility for interaction on what people like to refer to as the Yiddish street." Paley hopes the project will eventually produce its own website.

Shana Gutovich, 16, who will be a junior at Shalhevet School, considered learning Chinese or Spanish but is eager to take Yiddish instead. Her grandparents speak it and have Yiddish books in their library that Shana wants to read.

"I feel like it's a very cultured language," said Shana, who also sees it as part of her legacy as a Jew: "I feel Yiddish, like Hebrew, unites us." By learning the language spoken by so many silenced voices, she said, "I ... feel like I would be bringing back that history, what we lost."

David Ackerman, director of school services for the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles, said, "I think the kids will think it's cool." And he suspects that thrilled older relatives "will be very reinforcing."

Powell predicted that New Community students would embrace Yiddish as a route into their own culture.

"You own it," he said, as if speaking to students. "It's your inheritance." Not to speak Yiddish would be "like having a million dollars in the bank and not knowing the name of the bank or the account number."

Yiddish will give students access to a thousand years of their own past, he said: "They'll have the keys to part of the kingdom."

