

If You Build It, They Will Come—The Birth of A Yiddish Club

by Sonia Pressman Fuentes

My Yiddish Background

I can't remember what mix of languages my parents spoke in our home when I was growing up. I know they spoke Yiddish--not as many parents spoke Yiddish, only at times when they didn't want their children to know what they were talking about--*they spoke Yiddish*.

It was their *mameloshn* (mother tongue). But I'm sure they also spoke English and some German since my parents had lived in Germany for over 20 years.

From the time we came to the U.S. in 1934, I always spoke to my parents and brother in English. As a result, to this very day, I have an excellent understanding of Yiddish but can barely speak it.

I grew up in the Catskill Mountains of New York State where my parents ran, first, a *kokhaleyn* (rooming house) in Woodridge, and, later, a 25-bungalow colony in Monticello. The Catskills were, of course, known as the Borscht Belt, where many Jewish comedians got their start.

The Catskills are about 100 miles from New York City, and we frequently drove into the city to attend the Second Avenue Theater and enjoy the comedy of entertainers like Menasha Skulnick, singers like Miriam Kressyn, and composers like Sholem Secunda.

I would look around the theater during these performances and everyone seemed to be in their sixties, seventies, and eighties while I was in my early teens. Now, were I to go, I would fit right in.

In July 1990, I spent a wonderful month at Queen Mary and Westfield College in London's East End studying Yiddish at a program run by Devra Kay, who had gotten her Ph.D. at Oxford University's Yiddish program run by Professor Dovid Katz. (The Oxford program is now located in Vilnius, Lithuania.)

Yiddish Speakers

Reports of the number of current Yiddish speakers vary significantly. The web site of the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University states:

"It is estimated that there are about a quarter million Yiddish speakers in the

United States, about the same number in Israel, and another 100,000 or so in the rest of the world. That's a lot less than the peak number of Yiddish speakers—11,000,000—on the eve of the Holocaust."

Paradoxically, as Emanuel Goldsmith, a Queens College professor, has pointed out, "As Yiddish has declined as the language of Jews in America more Yiddish terms have been absorbed into English." I have noticed in recent years that newspapers like the *Washington Post* don't even bother translating Yiddish words when they use them any more.

Be that as it may, I love Yiddish and it is a significant subset of my passion for Judaism. Like every language, Yiddish has unique words and idioms that cannot be translated into any other language. It represents the Jewish way of looking at the world.

International Association of Yiddish Clubs

In the years that I lived in the Washington, D.C., area, I was a member of the group, Yiddish of Greater Washington, an organization that belongs to the International Association of Yiddish Clubs (IAYC), which has annual conferences in different cities.

I attended a number of the IAYC conferences and was one of the speakers at the tenth conference in Teaneck, New Jersey, last year and the eleventh conference in Cleveland, Ohio, this year. I also had a booth and was a vendor for the sale of my memoir, *Eat First—You Don't Know What They'll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*.

Philip "Fishl" Kutner, who was one of IAYC's founders, is on its board and is responsible for site selection, programming, entertainment, and vendors at the conferences. Although he is legally blind, Fishl is also the editor and publisher of *Der Bay*, a newsletter with news of interest to Yiddishists around the world, and the webmaster of its online version.

At this year's IAYC conference at the Cleveland Marriott East Hotel, dining with us at my luncheon table was Professor Yoshiji "Yoshi" Hirose, who is in the English Department of the Notre Dame Seishin University in Okayama, Japan. Professor Hirose, who has a diploma in Jewish Studies from the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, is

an expert on Jewish-American literature, translated one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's books into Japanese, and is the founder and president of the Jewish Literary Society of Japan. He spoke to me in Yiddish; I responded in English.

Vivian Felsen, a Toronto, Canada, translator and visual artist, met Yoshi when she visited Japan and was responsible for his attendance at the Cleveland conference and for his being one of the speakers.

During her own talk she told us that there's another Japanese professor with an interest in Judaism who had left Japan, moved to Israel, teaches Hebrew Linguistics at a college or university there, and converted to Judaism.

Yiddish Vinkl

When I started coming to Sarasota as a snowbird in 1994, I was delighted to learn that there was a Yiddish Vinkl that met monthly at the Jewish Community Center, and I attended whenever I could. Initially, the course was taught by Fred Ellin. Then Lin (Linette) "Leah" Schlossman joined him as a co-teacher. When Fred died, Lin took over the class. She also led the Yiddish Tish (Table), a group that met monthly at various restaurants in Sarasota and spoke Yiddish.

On October 31, 2006, I moved from the Washington, DC, area to Sarasota full-time. That December, I was saddened when Lin, who had cared for her sick husband for the last few years, died, only a few months after his death. Thereafter, the Leyenkreis, a group that met weekly to read Yiddish poetry and literature, which Lin also led, continued under the leadership of two of its members, Natalie Forman and Bina Nadler; the Yiddish Vinkl and the Yiddish Tish did not. I decided to see if I could restart the Yiddish Vinkl.

Fun with Yiddish

I discussed this with Fishl, who encouraged me, but my main problem was I did not have a teacher. Some years ago, I had spoken at the Yiddish Vinkl in St. Petersburg and I now called Phil London, my contact there, to see if there was someone at that Vinkl who could come to Sarasota to lead a monthly course here; he told me that the Yiddish Vinkl in St. Petersburg no longer existed.

I was able to start putting together a list of people who might be interested in attending a program on Yiddish if I could put one together. One of the people I contacted, Delores Lustig, volunteered to help me--and was a great help thereafter. Sim

Lesser, co-president of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (CHJ) in Sarasota, to which I belong, gave me an assist by having a sign-up sheet at CHJ's September 8, 2007, Meet and Greet program. But I still had no teacher.

And then lightning struck. At a Women's Equity Day luncheon in Bradenton, Florida, on August 18, I was sitting at the table of my friend, Gini Hyman, who introduced me to another woman at the table, Orna Nissan. Orna is an Israeli who'd recently joined the staff of the Jewish Federation as outreach coordinator and has a background in Jewish education. In chatting with Orna, I told her of my efforts with regard to a new Yiddish Vinkl, and she suggested I contact Betty Silberman, who has taught Yiddish. I'd met Betty some years ago through a mutual friend, but I knew her only as an entertainer and singer.

I contacted Betty, who graciously and generously agreed to lead the course. We are so fortunate to have found her. She is an effervescent young woman, a singer, actress, and a highly qualified and experienced teacher of Yiddish.

Delores suggested a new name for our group--Fun with Yiddish. Then, Betty, Delores, and I began to contact synagogues, temples, libraries, and various organizations in our search for a room in which the group might meet. Betty hit pay dirt when she contacted Howard Tevlowitz, executive director of the Jewish Federation. He offered us the use of the Desenberg Room at the Federation for our meetings.

Fishl immediately made Fun with Yiddish a member of IAYC and sent us a packet of helpful informational material.

And so we are to begin. Betty will be teaching elementary Yiddish--vocabulary, phrases, diction, and grammar. The class, which will also cover light poetry, songs, and music, will be interactive.

Our program will begin at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 9, and meet thereafter every second Sunday of the month. Proficiency in Yiddish is not required for attendance--just an interest in Yiddish.

The program will generally end at 11:30 a.m. but on December 9, we will continue with a discussion from 11:30 a.m. to noon.

Anyone in the Sarasota-Manatee, Florida, area interested in attending should contact me at spfuentes@comcast.net or phone 941-379-6215.

© 2007 by Sonia Pressman Fuentes