

Yiddish**L.A. Gets a Touch Of (Yiddish) Class**

By NATHANIEL POPPER

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When students show up at the New Community Jewish High School, in West Hills, Calif., next fall, they'll receive more than the usual lab equipment and volumes of Shakespeare. They'll be given Yiddish textbooks.

Thanks to Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, the nondenominational high school will begin offering Yiddish as part of its curriculum, as will one other school in nearby Los Angeles: the Orthodox day school Shalhevet.

Decades ago, America had a thriving network of after-school Yiddish *shuln*, where children could tap into the hundreds of years of Eastern European Jewish history recorded in Yiddish. But those programs have withered away almost entirely, and with them the ability for a new generation to access the vast array of Yiddish newspapers and books in libraries and in archives. Yiddish was once the language of three-quarters of world Jewry, but the wealth of Yiddish literature and cultural artifacts is incomprehensible to a younger generation of Jews who never learned the language.

Although certain Hasidic yeshivas still use Yiddish as their colloquial language in many areas, Yiddish language experts told the Forward that there are only two other non-Hasidic day schools in the United States that offer any Yiddish instruction — one in Washington, D.C., and one in New York City — and neither has a curriculum as methodical as the courses planned for Los Angeles.

"The idea that Los Angeles is coming up with is absolutely new for the U.S. in terms of day school education," said Anna Gonshor, the coordinator of Yiddish studies at McGill University.

The program in Los Angeles is a pilot; if all goes well, the directors plan to take their work and syllabi to the rest of the country in three years, with the hope that Yiddish-language courses will become a staple at Jewish day schools.

"This is something that ought not to be lost to our children," said Bruce Powell, the head of school at the New Community Jewish High School. "We own it. It's ours. Why don't we study it and celebrate it?"

To launch the pilot program, an introductory Yiddish class will be offered twice a week this fall to high school students at Powell's school, and the middle school students at Shalhevet.

The plan is to begin with fifth and ninth graders and add one middle school grade and one high school grade each year so that by the pilot program's end, Yiddish instruction will be offered every year after elementary school.

The cultural organization Yiddishkayt Los Angeles, which coordinates Yiddish activities around the city, is currently sorting through applications from around the country to find the one teacher who will be running the classes at both schools, with the hope that a second teacher will be added for year two. The organization received \$130,000 from the Righteous Persons Foundation to fund the teacher and the three-year pilot program.

The idea for the project came from Dan Opatoshu, a former screenwriter who has been reborn in middle age as a Jewish historian and cultural activist. His grandfather was the great Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu, and Dan's father began his acting career in the Yiddish theaters of New York before moving on to Broadway and Hollywood movies. Dan Opatoshu learned to speak Yiddish from his grandparents, but there was nowhere to study the language as a child, so it had mostly faded from his mind by the time he was an adult.

Opatoshu followed a rather winding route back to the language that made his grandfather famous. After dropping out of college, he wrote screenplays for movies such as "Get Crazy," but he lost interest in the industry during his 40s and went back to college to work toward a doctorate. At first he studied the history of the American South, but he found himself drawn to the history of Jewish migration and to the culture of New York's Lower East Side.

"I could feel it," Opatoshu said. "I knew what those cafes were like, and what the tenements felt like on hot summer nights in New York."

He took introductory Yiddish at the University of California, Los Angeles, and dove into the sprawling body of Yiddish literature — reading his grandfather's novels and stories in the original language for the first time. But, he said, it slowly dawned on him that "without there being a pool of people who might go into the field, it will preclude any further research ever being done — of the entire Jewish experience of hundreds of years."

Opatoshu happens to be the brother-in-law of Steven Spielberg, and after talking it over with Spielberg, Opatoshu submitted a proposal to the Righteous Persons Foundation with the directors at Yiddishkayt Los Angeles.

Yiddishkayt Los Angeles then found a nondenominational school and an Orthodox school to start the process of bringing Yiddish into the Jewish mainstream.

"I didn't think I would see the day when I would go to an Orthodox school and have everyone really excited about the idea of teaching Yiddish," said Aaron Paley, founder of Yiddishkayt Los Angeles. Paley has overseen the planning.

Jewish day schools generally offer Hebrew in addition to whatever elective foreign language a student chooses. Opatoshu said this traditional day school education gives "a truncated version of Jewish history that goes from the Bible and jumps right to the Holocaust and then Israel. The thousand years of history in Eastern Europe are missing."

Paley is trying to make sure the spread of this language does not stop in Los Angeles. In

April he is convening a team of Yiddish-language experts at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., to discuss how to construct a curriculum that can be used across the country.

As for Powell, he thinks it will take some time for students to be drawn to studying the language. But he also thinks that once a few take the chance, it will spread quickly.

"When the first group come out and they're speaking some Yiddish to each other, and it becomes their secret language, and they're cracking jokes," Powell said, "it will become a peer standard."

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