

High school Yiddish program celebrates life, not loss

Jane Ulman Los Angeles

“**V**OS HOSTU GETON dem sof-vokh?” On a recent Monday morning, teacher Hannah Pollin stands at the front of her classroom, quizzing her students on their weekend activities.

“*Ikh bin geforn tsu ... zen dem akvarium ... in Long Beach,*” Oded Rosenblum, 18, responds hesitantly, searching for words as he tells the class about his trip to the Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific.

“*An akvrarium mit fish un vaser?*” Pollin asks.

“*Yo, mit groyse ... un kleyne fish,*” he answers.

The conversation is ordinary, about going to the aquarium and seeing big and little fish. But the circumstances are extraordinary.

These five American-born students and their teacher are conversing in authentic and idiomatic Yiddish, a language spoken, according to the National Yiddish Book Center (<http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/+6>) by 75 percent of the world’s Jews before being dismissed and partially outlawed by Israel when it selected Hebrew as its national language and becoming largely moribund. In the past few decades, Yiddish has been largely kept alive by the ultra-Orthodox pockets where it is still spoken, and the various attempts to keep it from dying out altogether.

These students are part of one of those attempts. They are in their second year of Yiddish at New Community Jewish High School, a nondenominational day school in West Hills, California, which offers what is apparently the only for-credit high school Yiddish program in the United States, even meeting the University of California’s standards of credits for admissions.

These students all grew up speaking English, including Oded Rosenbaum whose parents are Israeli but who was born in the United States. They have elected to study Yiddish for a variety of reasons. Some remember their grandparents speaking the language. Others see this as a way to connect with their Ashkenazi roots.

Lererin Hannah, or Teacher Hannah, as she is called, has a similar story. Twenty-five

years old, she was raised in a non-Yiddish speaking, religiously affiliated Reform Jewish family in Riverside, California, and then Amherst, Massachusetts. First introduced to Yiddish through a high school summer job at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, she began studying the language seriously as a freshman at Columbia University and speaks fluently.

But it was her summer at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, in Vilnius, Lithuania, between her sophomore and junior years of college, which cinched her love of the language and motivated her to become one of the first undergraduate Yiddish majors at Columbia University, where she graduated in 2004.

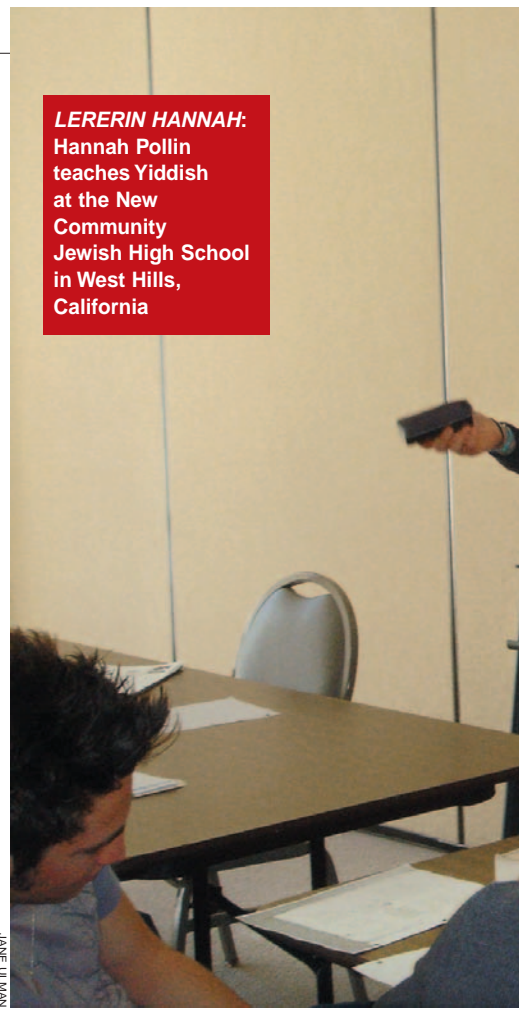
Highly energetic, she holds the class’s attention the full hour, presenting an array of mini-lessons — a discussion; a grammar les-

What’s ‘T-shirt’ in Yiddish?

son, such as explaining the difference between the formal you, *ir*, which is also the plural, and the informal, *du*; and reading a poem, letter or story. Plus, she regularly plays Yiddish songs on CDs, inviting the students to listen to artists such as Hershl Hartman and Sabell Bender.

Pollin calls the students by their Yiddish names — Pesia, Roskeh, and Fishel, among others — and gently admonishes them. “*Bloyz af yidish*” (Speak only in Yiddish), she says. Other times, she pleads, “*Ikh farshtey nit keyn english*” (I don’t understand English). And she peppers her sentences with frequent compliments, “*zeyer fayn*” or “*zeyer sheyn*” (very good, very nice).

What’s happening in this classroom? Is this a frivolous and falsely sentimental attempt to connect the students with their Jewish roots? A manifestation of the neo-chic attraction to Yiddish that has enticed people to don T-shirts that announce “*shayna punim*” (beautiful face) or “*nisht gefidel!*” (no big deal) and to buy copies of “Yiddish with



LERERIN HANNAH: Hannah Pollin teaches Yiddish at the New Community Jewish High School in West Hills, California

Dick and Jane” or Dr. Seuss’s “*Di Kats der Payats*” (“The Cat in the Hat”)?

By no means, according to Pollin. “We have fun, but this is serious study,” she states emphatically.

The program is in its second year, funded by a three-year \$130,000 grant from Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation. It began in fall 2005 with 10 Yiddish I students. This year, five are continuing in Yiddish II (the others graduated, with one exception), and six more are enrolled in this year’s Yiddish I class.

It is the brainchild of Aaron Paley and Dan Opatoshu, founder and board member, respectively, of Yiddishkayt Los Angeles, a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 to preserve and transmit Yiddish language and culture. Opatoshu, 59, the grandson of Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu and son of actor David Opatoshu, who began his career in Yiddish theater before moving to Hollywood, abandoned a screenwriting career to study history. Drawn to the social justice movements of immigrant Jews around the turn of the 20th century, he began his own study of Yiddish to access nec-



essary original source materials and is currently pursuing a PhD at UCLA.

The paucity of trained Yiddish teachers was immediately apparent to him. “Without the Yiddish language and people who can teach it, a thousand years of Jewish history will be lost,” he says. Opatoshu voiced that realization to his brother-in-law, Steven Spielberg, who directed him to the Righteous Persons Foundation. Opatoshu and Paley then hired Pollin.

In the U.S., Yiddish has long been taught at the college level, though the number of programs has been and still is small. But Paley and Opatoshu introduced Yiddish into high school, as a for-credit, elective language class because they think it’s important to get students interested at a younger age.

Pollin primarily focuses on Yiddish-language skills in her classes, but she also teaches the students *about* Yiddish, incorporating the study of history and culture to give the language context. “When you have a story of the Jewish people that goes from Tanakh (Bible) to [the pre-state militia] Palmah, I feel there’s something false about it,” she says.

MANY OF THE STUDENTS ARE attracted to Yiddish because their grandparents or other family members spoke it. “I’m into genealogy,” Rebecca Stanley, 17, explains. For Oded Rosenblum, Yiddish affords an opportunity to talk to his survivor grandparents about the Holocaust. Previously, they’ve been reluctant, but he’s hoping conversing in their native Yiddish will make them more receptive.

Two of Pollin’s students participated in Yiddish summer programs. Zack Sher, 18, currently in Yiddish II, attended the Vilnius Yiddish Institute for four weeks. The experience, which also included speaking only Yiddish with the family with whom he lived, was “incredible and life-changing.” He is committed to continuing his study. A former student, Ari Tuvia, 18, currently a freshman at the University of California at Davis, served as one of 18 interns at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, studying Yiddish language and culture and also sorting and cataloging books in the warehouse.

But the opportunities for advanced study are limited. There are only about 13 Yiddish

programs at North American universities, according to Dr. Paul Glasser of YIVO’s Institute for Jewish Research, a resource center dedicated to the culture and history of Ashkenazi Jewry, originally founded in Vilna, Poland, in 1925. (The acronym, YIVO, stands for Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut or Yiddish Scientific Institute.) And while exact figures are unavailable, Glasser believes combined enrollment consists of merely “dozens of students.”

There is also a paucity of appropriate teaching material on the high school level. For her students, Pollin has developed many of her own teaching materials, as the existing textbooks she found were aimed at either elementary students in the ultra-Orthodox schools, where Yiddish is the language of everyday life or college-age students. High school students, she notes, have specific pedagogical needs, including requiring more clarity and motivation than she had anticipated.

For each level, Pollin created five themed units, incorporating authentic and original materials, such as visuals and excerpts from Yungvarg, a popular magazine for young people published in New York from 1937 to 1951, as well as contemporary materials — dialogues with characters that she has created as well as grammar and vocabulary lessons — that are lively, varied and fun. She also supplements with almost daily worksheets.

Additionally, Pollin arranges field trips. Last year students visited the Jewish Home for the Aging in nearby Reseda, where they interviewed residents in their native Yiddish.

Ari Tuvia recalls interviewing a Holocaust survivor. “It was really amazing to get her firsthand experience in Yiddish,” he says, knowing that was the language she spoke at the time.

This year Pollin accompanied the students to a technical rehearsal of “On Second Avenue,” the popular musical revue tracing the history of Yiddish theater in America. It was presented by the New York City-based Folksbiene, America’s longest-running and only surviving Yiddish theater company, making its debut in Los Angeles. While waiting for the performance, delayed three hours while the stage crew checked lighting and equipment, veteran actor Mike Burstyn, who began his acting career at age 7 while on the road with his late parents, Yiddish stage stars Pessahke Burstein and Lillian Lux, regaled the students with behind-the-scenes tales of Yiddish theater.

Back in class, Yiddish I student Danielle

Holmes, 16, acknowledges the value of such trips, and what Pollin is doing. “We’re saving Yiddish culture through you,” she says.

New Community Jewish High School has been receptive to the Yiddish class from the beginning, albeit initially, headmaster Bruce Powell openly admits, because it was free the first year, during which the grant from the Righteous Persons Foundation covered the cost of everything, including Pollin’s salary, teaching materials, and so forth.

Powell says he was also influenced by the school’s arts director Benny Ferdman, a native Yiddish speaker and Jewish artist, who convinced him when the school opened in 2002 that Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, while commemorating the 6 million who died, should be more a celebration of the 1,000 years of European Jewish culture that preceded it.

Before then, for Powell, as for most heads of Jewish schools who primarily think about teaching Hebrew, Yiddish was simply off his radar. Now he is so committed to offering Yiddish as part of the school’s academic curriculum that he is willing to financially support it. “Yiddish is a Jewish language, the same as Hebrew; I have become profoundly convinced of that,” he admits. And so next year, the salary for the school’s Yiddish teacher will be part of the school’s budget.

But he knows it’s a greater challenge to build a case for Yiddish than for Hebrew. Outside of the ultra-Orthodox communities, there is no “Yiddishland” or Yiddish-speaking country, and the language, once international, no longer carries the immediate usefulness that Spanish and even American Sign Language now possess. Plus, Powell has a more immediate problem: finding a teacher to replace Pollin who is getting married this summer and moving to Israel, where she will return to university studies and research,

Pollin, however, will continue to be involved with Yiddish; her fiancé, Assaf Galay, heads Ashkenazim, an organization for people in their 20s who want to preserve the culture and language of Eastern European Jews, and her future father-in-law, Daniel Galay, a musician and composer, is volunteer chairman of Leyvik House, a center for Yiddish language, literature and culture in Tel Aviv. Additionally, as part of third-year of the Righteous Persons Foundation grant,

Pollin will devote time to evaluating the two years of teaching and collating all her lesson plans and educational materials so that the program can be replicated.

But her experience in Los Angeles has convinced her that Yiddish belongs in high school. And she’s not alone. Across the country, the Gann Academy — The New Jewish High School of Greater Boston, a pluralistic day school of over 300 students in Waltham, Massachusetts, began offering a Yiddish elective class this past December. On a much smaller scale than the California program, it was funded by a \$2,000 grant from the Aaron and Sonia Fishman Foundation for Yiddish Culture in New York. But with only five stu-



COMMITTED TO YIDDISH:
Student Zack Sher

dents meeting in a once-a-week 45-minute elective class, progress is limited to simple conversations, games such as Bingo and selected readings. Yiddish teacher Lillian Leavitt, 57, says, “My goal is to interest them in continuing since there’s only so much they can learn.”

Leavitt would like to see Yiddish offered as a full academic class. That is also the goal of the informal, Boston-based Yiddish in the Schools Committee, which championed the class. The group is also trying to convince a local Jewish middle school to offer Yiddish, according to member Jon Kraft.

“Our hope is that we can come upon a critical mass of students who are able to learn Yiddish to the point where we can maintain the cultural threads from generation to generation,” says Kraft.

Is that even possible? “It’s the \$64,000 question,” says Dr. David Fishman, professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and chairman of the Fishman Foundation. He himself is guardedly optimistic. “The worst has already happened,” he says.

He is the son of sociolinguist Dr. Joshua A. Fishman, professor emeritus of Stanford and New York Universities, who says that today the number of Yiddish-speakers has dwindled to about 1.85 million worldwide, including about 800,000 in the United States. Most are older, people whose mother tongue is Yiddish, and about half a million are members of ultra-Orthodox communities, who still use Yiddish as their language of daily use.

Still, while no one has the full picture in terms of any kind of Yiddish resurgence, whether serious or casual, Fishman sees several positive signs that Yiddish today is being sustained by younger people. At the New York office of the Yiddish Forverts, the

Yiddish-language newspaper that has been published without interruption since 1897, for example, Leizer Burko, 29, sets type and assists the editor. Not a native speaker, he learned the language in classes and through reading. He is one of four full-time staffers, all relatively young, on the Yiddish edition of the paper that also includes *The Forward*, the independent English-language newspaper.

Additionally Yugntruf (“Call to Youth”), an international organization for young adults learning and speaking Yiddish, founded in 1964, sponsors an annual *Yidish-vokh* (Yiddish Week) in August in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts. And perhaps the biggest indication of Yiddish’s more prominent place in the world is the growth of the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, that, to date, has collected more than 1.5 million Yiddish books and is about to embark on a \$6 million expansion project, doubling its size to accommodate an educational center primarily for younger people, according to founder Aaron Lansky.

For Lansky, the question isn’t what’s causing the revival in Yiddish but rather what’s taken so long. “After all, if people want to know who they are, they have to know where they came from.”

Pollin agrees. No matter how far her students eventually progress in their study of Yiddish, whether they become expert speakers and writers or whether they maintain a more casual connection, she believes Yiddish will remain a powerful influence in their lives.

“My goal is to make Yiddish a part of a Jewish person’s identity,” she says.

Shoyrn tsayt. It’s time. ●