

[Articles](#) > [Los Angeles Magazine](#) > [Oct, 2002](#) > [Article](#) > [Print friendly](#)**Alive and gone: there's the Yiddishkayt Festival, and then there's Yiddish L.A., still dying after all these years - Society**

Alan Rifkin

YOU DON'T IMMEDIATELY associate California sci-fi with the subject of Yiddish culture, but maybe it's time. The book that comes sacrilegiously to mind is George Stewart's 1949 survivalist fantasy *Earth Abides*, in which a small group of Americans, passed over by a viral holocaust, travel rutted highways to scavenge canned goods, intermittently offering its stories to a new generation. What survivor's guilt will grip the offspring--as youth wanes and parents are lost, will they be haunted into honoring every nostalgic misery they've renounced?--is a matter for another story, a ghost story: the kind that maybe only Yiddish, the decimated, impossibly lingering mother tongue of history's exiles, the Jews of Europe, rightly tells. But you can imagine a few periodic gatherings of the elders. A scratchy Victrola; toasts raised over plastic tablecloths in a former union hall or someplace else at once utopian and blighted.

A setting not unlike the book-lined upstairs room on 3rd Street near La Cienega where the Los Angeles Yiddish Culture Club, which was founded in 1926, still meets on alternate Saturday nights. And if any article of decorum has lapsed among L.A.'s last generation to practice Yiddish, it's hard to know which. The president, Lilke Majzner, a survivor of seven Nazi camps, is 80 years old, a woodcut of compassionate vigor, her forearms tilting upward to hug the lectern. Her bright-pitched Yiddish sails over the room like magical birdseed, the only English aside being to profess hope that a stray visitor will be interested to learn it.

"Do I know Lilke?" says Leon Stabinsky, a soft-spoken, curatorial-looking man in his sixties. "She was my teacher in Belgium, when I was a boy, just out of the camps." Stabinsky spent his career in aerospace, in the Valley ... az men lebt, derlebt men (if you live, you live to see everything).

"How did the two of you manage to reconnect in L.A.?"

"Oh, you know, word of mouth. You meet someone who knows somebody else."

Sixty or 70 regulars, down from a hundred just a few years ago, sit at three long tables, the women with suits and pins, the men with eyeglass cases projecting from sport coat pockets.

"So who do you know here?" a newcomer asks Malke Shaw, 76, whose eyes react with the bland surprise of an analyst. "I know everyone," she says.

Actor Yankev Lewin assumes the stage for a reading of author Sholem Aleichem, and he doesn't read the dialogue so much as display it--he alternately haggles and pleads, empty-handed, for understanding. On the subject of a disappointingly meek son-in-law, he recites a microscopic term that sounds like all consonants. (At her table Malke Shaw whispers translation: "The boy's sneeze comes out with a kvitsh!") Lewin swells to his universal ending: "I have nakhes fun kinder"--pleasure from children--"more joy than the wealthiest person alive!"

Virtually all the regulars here are old, first-generation European emigres or their children. For anyone who grew up Jewish, and many who did not, they can conjure memories of a once-thriving political and literary community: socialists, Spanish civil war volunteers, writers and thinkers (portraits on the walls include Isaac Peretz, Yankev Glatshteyn, and Lamed Shapiro, an Angeleno whose short stories are now taught at Harvard), idealists even if Heaven is a lie. "You have to understand, most of the people here, in fact all of the people here, do not believe in a Supreme Creator," asserts Malke Shaw. "We believe in the goodness of man." Which seems all the more astounding in the face of the Holocaust: Try fathoming a progressivism that remained progressive while shunned by socialist movements the world over.

"Well," Rosalie Mark rises up, cheeky and leonine, with misty eyes, quavering voice, "I don't ask people whether they do, but I do believe in God, and I work very hard at it. A lot of tremendous things have happened to me that were miracles." Specifically, God had rescued her from the throes of manic depression, which sent her to Alaska and places even weirder, a diaspora all her own. Today; at 63, she lives in a Culver City trailer park.

"Why did you start coming to the culture club?"

"Because when I walked in here eight months ago, I felt I'd come home. These people know something about how to be happy with just an apartment, or without a vacation. They know how to survive."

The musicians have arrived, a piano-and-fiddle duo from Russia. The violinist stabs his bow into the heart of a quirky Yiddish folk dance,

exquisitely minor toned, while everyone strikes their tabletops in victorious sorrow. Tears have filled Rosalie Mark's eyes.

IT SEEMS DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE that in Los Angeles, Yiddish thrived a generation ago. Until 1969, a Yiddish radio show broadcast from the Miracle Mile. There used to be a steam bath, a shvitz, in Jewish Boyle Heights ... there used to be a Jewish Boyle Heights. A version of *The Jazz Singer* was filmed there. The Fairfax area--a neighborhood still Talmudic enough about Jewish law that handbills promote a lecture called "Return Options for the Thief"--was home until the 1970s to a bureau of Forverts, the national Yiddish Socialist newspaper. Today a few solitary souls roam like pigeons.

Still, the language won't quite vanish, which is why Jewish intellectuals debate like, okay, Jewish intellectuals over whether Yiddishkayt, the secular culture of the European diaspora, is dead (proving it's not), or angrily deny that it's even dying, which proves that it is, if only in an immortal sort of way ("With the Jews," the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer liked to say on the subject of Yiddish mortality, "between dying and dead is a long time.") A near hit list of modern Jewish writers--from Philip Roth to Cynthia Ozick--has been haunted by the ghost of Yiddishkayt, with less than total appreciation for the favor. In novelist Michael Chabon's hands an obscure Yiddish phrase book--a garage-sale find replete with useful expressions for, say, purchasing airline tickets--spawned an anguished essay for the magazine *Civilization*. Chabon first fantasized a thriving Yiddishland, then concluded by throwing up his hands: "Just what am I supposed to do with this book?" That poignant treason--the mere suggestion that Yiddish had spoken its last--touched off an orgy of condemnation on the online Yiddish bulletin board Mendele. The story goes that Chabon learned of his infamy in the typical way: from his mother, who'd been phoned by an uncle.

Based on sheer numbers, the language does seem doomed. Many who could have preserved Yiddish in the home, after Nazis killed three-fourths of its European speakers, chose consciously to bury its associations instead. Hebrew Zionists in the new state of Israel dispatched Yiddish in a bloody crusade.

But there's another, more tempting view: The gene of Yiddish sentiment may simply have skipped a generation, or possibly is renewed by grief itself. "For our parents," says Stephen Sass, president of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California, "Yiddish was something to be rid of. For us, it's something to reclaim." Klezmer music has enjoyed a widespread revival since the late 1970s. In 1980, Aaron Lansky created the National Yiddish Book Center, which in 1997 established an \$8 million complex in Amherst, Massachusetts. The California Institute for Yiddish Language and Culture has found a home on the UCLA campus (UCLA had a professor of Yiddish even before Brandeis did), and by the mid '90s, dozens of Yiddish language classes and clubs were being formed across the city.

Enter the revivalist/festival planner. Aaron Paley a native of Van Nuys who attended secular Yiddish kindershule and mittelschule in the '70s, had the idea in 1994 to stage a daylong celebration of Yiddish art and culture. Organizers expected a few hundred people to attend; 6,000 showed up.

Paley's vision was twofold: to re-create Yiddish life in a vibrant, not mournful, atmosphere and to show that Yiddish could provide a foundation of ideas and creativity that new artists could draw on. (The 2000 festival brochure called Yiddish "the jazz of language, a jam session of culture.") The largest festival of its kind in the country, this October's weeklong edition will include theater, film at the Skirball Cultural Center, cabaret music ("Songs of the Kitchen"), and klezmer. Paley's nonprofit organization, Yiddishkayt L.A., which has an annual budget of \$200,000 and a staff of two, is also attempting to put a young face on Yiddish culture through events like klezmer Sunday brunches at the Knitting Factory and a variety of Yiddish mixers ("And we certainly won't be calling them that," cracks one of his younger assistants).

Paley is part of a small world of players, two or three generations removed from the shtetl, every one of whom knows everyone else, who have been preserving Yiddish culture in Los Angeles. One is Simon Rutberg, owner of Hatikvah Music, on Fairfax, which claims to have the world's largest selection of Yiddish music. Another is Eric Gordon, director of the Workmen's Circle, on Robertson, which helped found the City of Hope hospital and which recently held an event commemorating the Yiddish literary martyrs of Stalinist Russia.

But in the Yiddish spirit of self-questioning, not all revivalists are consoled by such lite support. "I suspect," wrote UCLA professor of Yiddish Janet Hadda in an essay that sympathized with Michael Chabon, "that the current enthusiasm for klezmer stems partly from a longing for a past that is simple and freylekh, albeit sometimes in a minor key Ditto for the Yiddish-flavored festivals that celebrate food, paper-cutting, and wedding re-creations."

The author of critical studies of both Isaac Bashevis Singer and poet Yankev Glatshteyn, Hadda is also a psychoanalyst. Those who say Yiddish is thriving are in that stage of grief known as denial, Hadda has charged; she herself inhabits "that changeable space between second- and third-stage mourning"--anger and bargaining. "We really believed, when I was in graduate school, that we would save the language, if only we talked about the power of--Yiddish and not the Holocaust. Ultimately, I had to drop that. But it was my dream."

Hadda, in her mid fifties, is slight, with gold curls and a voice that barely rises above a hush, and in both speaking and writing she shares with the writer Joan Didion that capacity for turning disclosure into an intellectual strength. "I'm not ready to say Yiddish is dead, and I won't," she

says. "But it's one thing to go to a festival, another to spend years immersed in a language and culture. What's sad to me is that the diminution of knowledge is such that people newly exposed to Yiddish can imagine themselves experts. They don't know all they've missed. The people who taught me are dying, and the ones coming up after me are just a handful. In this country; among academics, I know every one of them, and many beyond. There may be some graduate students I haven't met yet. But eventually I will."

It is the measure of cultural resignation that the older speakers of Yiddish object only occasionally to the dilution of what they love. "It's time we conducted our meetings in Yiddish," Lilke Majzner once announced to the board of Yiddishkayt L.A., on which she sits.

Susan Lerner, the organization's board cochair, admits, "None of us here is fluent. But if a new generation is going to advance Yiddishkayt, this is how it is."

BY NOW, MOST YIDDISH PRESERVATIONISTS would settle for simply not being overlooked. That is the hope of Encino resident Shirley Fair, whose parents, the Yiddish-theater lexicographer Zalmen Zylberweig and his wife, Yiddish actress Celia Silver, hosted L.A.'s own daily Yiddish Radio Hour from 1949 to 1969 from their garage. National Public Radio's recent series on the golden age of Yiddish radio ignored the show's legacy of reel-to-reel tapes, despite repeated letters from Mrs. Fair, so they sit in a box on the family wet bar. The show's call-letter chimes reside, via some kind of microcosm of Jewish assimilation, in the office of Fair's son, Ron, who is the president of A&M Records ... Just what, Michael Chabon might ask, is he supposed to do with these chimes? What are we supposed to do with this culture of eternal exile, a thousand years of finding beauty in all the wrong dispossessed places, the flower in a garden of cosmic grief? "Half of life in me is dead," wrote Yankev Glatshteyn. "Living in me is half of death."

Or another Yiddish poet, Sarah Betsky: "Zest demn foygl, vos flit / Ikh badarf nor zayn fli, un dayn tsar far mayn lid" ("See the bird that flies / I need only his flight and your woe, my song to devise")--a sentiment to which God Himself would succumb.

In at least one modern-day fantasy, He does. It's a Yiddish novel titled *The Dreamer* from Manhattan, by Yankev Belek, not science fiction exactly, but close enough. "It's very controversial now in Israel, as you'll hear why," says Joseph Soski, a regular at the Yiddish Culture Club, as he leaves. Soski is ebullient, with busy eyebrows, a man who would pester just to help. So here goes: An American Nazi hunter gets stranded in a torrent, finds shelter in a Catholic cloister, and drifts to sleep beneath a mounting of the Crucifixion. Toward morning, in a vision or a dream, Jesus climbs down from the cross and speaks--apologizes, actually, for centuries of horror committed in his name. Then and there he renounces his Kingdom. No longer am I God, says the Messiah, only a man, a Jew, a Yid. Soski doesn't tell what happens next, but you wonder if this isn't the irresistible hope of Yiddish history laid bare, the dream of return for which the only language that never wielded earthly power was fashioned: not that the Jews would return to their grief-stricken God but that God would return like the prodigal to them--walk in their shoes, tend to the world, be seduced by Yiddishkayt, fall and yet live.

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