

3GNY Yiddish Event: (Re)discover Yiddish

November 29, 2005

We (re)discovered its...

...background

- Originating in Germany in the 10th century, it became a modified version of medieval German that included elements of Laaz, biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew, and Aramaic; borrowed words from the countries in which the Jews lived. Yiddish, along with the Jews who spoke it, spread east across Europe (due to expulsions, other hardships and new opportunities).
- Through folk tales, legends, and religious homilies, Yiddish literature had existed for hundreds of years. However, in the early 19th century, for the first time, it became a means of expressing and describing the vibrant internal life that had developed in the ghettos and shtetls of Eastern Europe. Music, religious and cultural scholarship and a vibrant Yiddish press began to flourish as well.
- For most East European Jews, while the native country's language was needed in the outside world and Hebrew was used by men for Talmudic study, Yiddish was pivotal in shaping Jewish home life. Here is where its humor, warmth, and stinging irony were instilled.
- Millions of Yiddish-speaking Jews were lost in the Shoah. Despite this, Yiddish enjoys a resurgence today. Attention from non-Jewish academia, and its frequently random and humorous mentions in American music, books, TV and film aside, Yiddish is still spoken and treasured by two main populations: ultra-Orthodox Jews and of course, survivors – their children and us.

...place in American culture

- Laverne & Shirley, in the show's opening credits, did in fact belt out "**Schlemiel, Schlimazel**" for no apparent reason
- "**Farbisseneh**" – as in Frau Farbisseneh, Dr. Evil's cohort in the Austin Powers movies – means bitter or sour-faced.
- Lovable movie ogre **Shrek** is Yiddish for fright. (Actually borrowed from medieval German, and the phrase 'Oh Schreck!' is used in German speaking countries today; movie adapted from the picture book, "Shrek," whose author was William Steig, the son of Polish-Jewish immigrants.)
- We offered examples of Yiddish we've heard used all the time in America, such as: Oy Vey, Shtick, Shpeel, Shlep, Klutz, Nosh, Bubeleh, Chutzpah, Shmooze and Shmaltzy (Shmaltz: literally chicken fat; especially with the "y" at the end, nowadays used to describe sentimentality overdone; think: clichéd Hollywood agent describing a script).

...place in our lives

- We shared some of the Yiddish made familiar to us from our families, like: **punim** (face), **shana punim** (pretty face, *f.*), **shvitz** (sweat), **nachas** (joy, gratification, especially from your children), **mishuggah** (crazy), **shmata** (rag, literally, or in reference to clothing), **chozzerai** (literally pig slop; more familiar when mom used it to describe the bag of Doritos we ate before dinner), **keppie** (head), **a bissel** (a little), **kvell** (to burst with pride from loved ones), **shmutz** (dirt, filth), **shtup** (literally "to push," but used colloquially to refer to sex), **tsuris** (troubles, heartache), **plotz** (to explode from excitement or anticipation.), **mensch** (good person, stand-up guy)
- Of note, a few phrases some of us heard as kids: **Hock mier en chinik** (literally "bang on the tea kettle"; pointless yammering; beating a dead horse; a few of us said we heard it as something different growing up, like "hock me to China"). **Gay kock afn yam** (go take a – you know what – in the ocean; obviously not nice, but often said sarcastically.) **Tuchas ofn tish** (literally, ass on the table; sort of like "put your money where your mouth is" or "put up or shut up.")

We briefly discussed its future

- Before WWII, Yiddish was spoken by more than 11 million people. It's estimated that 1/10 that many speak it today.
- We discussed whether the next generations would know Yiddish only through its emergence in American culture. Does this water it down? Is this necessarily a bad thing?
- Can't it continue its renaissance in mainstream American culture and remain the language of the Jews? We didn't come to any conclusions.