

As far as Yiv is aware, there are some 50 Yiddish theater organizations and institutions around the country. In addition, Yiddish is taught in several 40 state schools and a similar number of independent run, for-profit schools.

Among the most veteran of the Yiddish organizations is the Yiddish Writers Association, headquartered at Bet LeYeviv in Tel Aviv. Most of the members are aged over 65, although some younger writers – most of them immigrants who have arrived during the last decade – have begun to surface.

NAV intends to make Bet LeYeviv the repository of the National Yiddish Library.

Copies of nearly all Yiddish publications which found their way to this country can be found at the National Library on the Sufa campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Givat Ram, but they are not on display.

One place Yiddish books can be seen in abundance is a short bus ride away from the National Library at Yung Yiddish, a non-profit organization set up by Belgian immigrant Mendy Cahán, 77, who began collecting Yiddish books from estates of the deceased in 1991, the year in which Yung Yiddish was founded.

The son of a Viennese pianist, Cahán had an intensive yeshiva education in his native Antwerp, which incited in him a love for all things Jewish. Though no longer observant, he has not relinquished his passion for Judaism, and some of the young people who come to Yung Yiddish cabinet nights at the organization's basement headquarters in Jerusalem's Rotsens neighborhood, get their first taste of Yiddishkeit from the beautiful hasidic notes he utters from the songs he sings, or from the way he explains Jewish festivals. His Hanukka service this year was informative, meaningful and joyous.

Cahán is an ornate student, a teacher, a translator and an entertainer.

He began collecting books when studying Yiddish literature at the Hebrew University. He now has more than 25,000 and has run out of storage space.

Cahán lives and breathes Yiddish. In addition to the Yiddish cabinet nights, literary events and Jewish festivals he hosts at Yung Yiddish, he performs around the country and abroad. He has taught at Yiddish seminars in the US, Europe and the former Soviet Union, and has organized and participated in Yiddish language and culture conferences in different countries.

Audiences at Yung Yiddish are an amazing social mosaic. They range in age from 19 to 90. Some barely know a word of Yiddish. Some know several Yiddish songs which they learned as children, but can't speak the language. Others, who grew up with Yiddish-speaking parents, understand it very well but can't converse in it. Some are familiar with Yiddish literature in translation and want to hear the original and possibly learn to read it themselves.

Among the regular or university students, young men from nearby yeshivas, people who are newly religious, folk singers, and retirees, show mother tongues are Hebrew, Russian, Polish and English.

The multilingual Cahán translates poems and sings for the audience, gliding easily from language to language – a sentence in French, another in Hebrew, back to Yiddish, a few words in English – all accompanied by artistically expressive movements. Cahán manages to teach and entertain simultaneously.

Stars of the Yiddish entertainment circuit are frequent

## Yung YiDish founder Mendy Cahán: 'Yiddish' fulfills a religious urge in secularists.'

For Russian immigrants, who had no previous contact with Jewish identity, Yiddish became part of their Jewish connection, he says.

As for others, they are promoting that ethnic language of their parents and grandparents and are learning to converse.

Cahán is optimistic that Yiddish will become a bridge between secular and religious. Even the Reform movement these days seems to have a yen for Yiddish, he points out.

As much as Yiddish is enjoying wider popularity than ever before, there is a much more serious approach to Yiddish in the Diaspora, says Cahán, citing, in particular, the annual summer courses in Vilna, the fourth of which will be held this coming August.

For most of the people who come to the Vilna courses, he says, "Yiddish is not just a fling."

Last year there were 70 people from 14 countries. Close to 20 percent were non-Jewish academics who are engaged in Jewish studies and who believe that in order to gain a better understanding of Jews whose day-to-day language was Yiddish, they have to know the language themselves.

theater, literature songs and dance and Jewish cooking. Afternoon programs will be dedicated to the history of Jews in Alsace and their traditions. There will be opportunities to visit locales connected with Jewish life in Alsace. There will also be films, concerts and theatrical productions.

• Fourth Annual Vilnius (Vilna) Program in Yiddish: August 1-29. The East European Jewish Heritage Project, in cooperation with the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Vilnius, Lithuania (and several other organizations) sponsors this program, featuring four levels of Yiddish (from beginner to advanced) and the most prominent scholars of Yiddish language and literature.

The academic component, directed by Brooklyn-born David Katz, founder of the Oxford University Yiddish program, comprises three hours of intensive instruction each morning, daily written homework and a final examination or term project. North American students may be able to transfer credits to their university transcripts. The cultural component, directed by Mendy Cahán, includes performances by East European Yiddish singers and musicians, premiere screenings of film footage, talks by leaders of Jewish cultural life in Lithuania, walking tours of the Old City and the old Jewish Quarter, visit to the Jewish Co-Library Exhibition, and a photographic exhibition.

More details on these and other programs and institutions can be found at: <http://www.cs.columbia.edu/~naphali/yiddishprograms.html>



Mendy Cahán (standing) teaches and entertains audiences of all ages and backgrounds at Yung Yiddish.

## ARUM DER WELDT

A few examples of upcoming events:

- Women's Yiddish Works Conference in Los Angeles, February 24-25, hosted by Yiddishkayn, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California's Center for Feminist Research.
- S. Ansky conference, March 18-19, "Between Two Worlds: S. Ansky at the Turn of the Century, an International Conference" will take place at Stanford University. Sponsored by Jewish Studies and jointly organized by faculty in Hebrew and Slavic Languages and Literatures, the conference, which is free and open to the public, will address the writings and the legacy of Sholom-Zelig Rapoport/Szymon Anskiwicz. Anskiwicz, Ansk's ethnographic, popular and writer in Russian and Yiddish who is best known for his play *The Dybbuk*.
- A Yiddish course for advanced students at the University of Toronto, March 26-30. This course, led by Dr. Genady Estraikh, Dr. Michael Krautik and Helger Nash, will deal with the key group of Yiddish writers in general and David Bergelson in particular. Dr. Natan's novel *Der Arakel-Mascher*, Ansk's ethnographic, popular and writer in Russian and Yiddish who is best known for his play *The Dybbuk*.
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and the directions in which it can be channeled. Generally optimistic, he says that "there is constant interest and it is confident that it will keep on going."

Aside from its language value per se, Yiddish literature affords a glimpse of Jewish life in a Europe that is no more. Speaking recently at Yuka's Jerusalem Center for Social Concerns, Professor Gershon Winer, the straitened head of the Yiddish department at Bar-Ilan University, reviewing the work of the great Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz, described him as an atheist or free thinker. "Yet his writings are pervaded with religious values and become sources of inspiration."



The multilingual, Belgian-born Mendy Cahán translates poems and songs for Yung Yiddish audiences, gliding from one language to another.

Before Peretz came along, recalled Winer, perceptions of basidism and hasidism were generally negative. "Peretz's discovery of the hidden light of basidism provoked that of the 'Haber' or other great thinkers of the era. "He was the first in his penetrating understanding of basidism."

Nonetheless, Peretz refused to set foot in a synagogue. "The artist is not always influenced by his art," commented Winer.

For all that, he and a galaxy of other Yiddish writers left a legacy which is being discovered by new generations of Jews who are curious about their heritage and who want to explore it in the language in which it was recorded.

Yiddish dying?

Certainly not. Whoever thinks it is should look for a sec-

## Jerusalem's New Yiddishists

A recent Yiddish conversation group in Jerusalem, 11 people of diverse ages and religious backgrounds sat in a circle and nodded warmly as they listened to a visiting speaker from Japan, relate to Yiddish, his experience of observing and interviewing beggars – *schvartzer* – in Mea She'arim.

"Sounds like a Sholem Aleichem story," many agreed and smiled.

Menachem Akai, who is working toward a Ph.D. in anthropology, came to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he explained, after finding himself drawn to Jewish and Eastern European cultures.

The rest of the group, organized independently by Hebrew University graduate students, were less anxious to discuss their attachment to the language and their understanding of the growing number of them.

"Why not ask biologists why they study biology?" one woman said sternly.

Others joined in: "What right does anyone have to say there is a Yiddish revival, as if the language were dead... We can't draw conclusions from the fact that most of the Yiddish students are Ashkenazim... People act like it is peculiar to speak Yiddish."

"Yiddish is not exotic," said Dr. Avram Nirenshvitz, who has taught for 25 years at the Hebrew University's Yiddish Department. "It is a legitimate field so there is no reason to ask who studies it or why." Yet, Israel's relationship with Yiddish

has been a strained one. When the Hebrew University first proposed launching a Yiddish department in 1927, two years after the university was founded, the community was up in arms. Hebrew-language proponents fought the plan ferociously, arguing that Yiddish could endanger Hebrew, which was still struggling to be adopted as the common tongue among immigrant Jews, who spoke some 80 languages. The opposition was, and the proposal was buried – even though an American benefactor offered to fund the first chair in Yiddish studies. The idea for the nation's first Yiddish department stayed buried for two decades.

It wasn't until the Holocaust that people here became concerned about the loss of Jewish culture, said Nirenshvitz: "At the Zionism Congress in 1949 in Switzerland, Zionist ideologues realized that Israel had to take responsibility for the variety of Jewish cultures that had been lost. The congress proposed the creation of a Yiddish studies for the university – and this time it was passed." In 1951, Hebrew University's first Yiddish department was thus created.

Selecting Prof. Dov Sadlan – a well-known scholar in Jewish history, literature and folklore – as the first chair allowed him to visit, said Nirenshvitz: "Yiddish is not a part of a parasitic or Jewish culture," he said. Today, the university remains the only one in the country with an independent Yiddish department.

THE STUDY of Yiddish did not catch on. For the first decade, the department attracted fewer than 10 students a year. A real growth spurt didn't start until the mid-1980s.

Sadlan suffers from abandonment and forgetting all things from the exile, said one student, who asked not to be identified.

"In the Fifties and Sixties, children didn't like the discussion of *gnats*," said graduate student Kalman Nodaria, explaining that Zionism taught people to bury their books on their cultural heritage and be committed only to Hebrew and the Israeli experience.

"Now, we [students] are like the newly religious. We are looking for our roots. In fact, Yiddish literature speaks more to our needs than modern Hebrew."

Many of the Ashkenazi students feel they were denied their own culture, said Hanan Ben-Dor, who teaches graduate and undergraduate Yiddish. "We watch the Sephardim have their annual Matzeiva Festival, while as a 1,000-year-old culture of Yiddish comes to a bitter end. Now some are interested again in this rich culture – and it's not just a heritage culture."

But maybe it is not really a Yiddish revival, suggested Nurit Oshanan, a retired teacher who studies Yiddish. "Maybe it is a revival of distinct cultures in general – when the dominant culture [Hebrew] feels secure enough to allow other cultures to live."

Today, some 80 students take Yiddish language and culture classes at the Hebrew University, some choosing Yiddish from a

He attributes the growing interest in Yiddish and things Jewish in Lithuania, Poland and Germany to a desire "to fill the vacuum of missing Jews. It's interesting. Suddenly we're not there any more and they want to preserve our heritage." As for Jews who are rediscovering Yiddish, "it fulfills a religious urge in secularists."

Bookish-born Professor David Katz, who is the academic director of the Vilnius Program in Yiddish, is professor of Yiddish language, literature and culture and director of the Center for Studies in Culture at Vilnius University. He was the founder of the highly acclaimed Yiddish program at Oxford.

Jerusalem resident Bernice Wigler, a former New Yorker who attended that program in the summer of 1995, declares nostalgically: "That summer was probably the most exciting of my life."

A teacher of English composition at Tuoro College and a volunteer guide at the Israel Museum, Wigler went to Oxford and chose to take the Yiddish course because she was alone and thought she would feel less alien in such a milieu.

It was a decision she will never regret.

One of her lecturers was the legendary Professor Chone Shmeruk, who the following year received the Israel Prize for Yiddish. Shmeruk was an expert on Isaac Bashevis Singer. As Wigler recalls it: "You could feel his admiration, adoration and love for Singer. I was in love with Shmeruk. We all were."

## YOU SHOULD BE LIKE AN ONION

Whenever someone tells a Yiddish joke in translation, it is usually accompanied by an apology that it would sound better in Yiddish.

There are expressions in Yiddish which defy translation; even the best translation could not convey the essence of the word, the phrase or the sentence.

There's a certain elusive meaning behind the words themselves.

Here are just a few samples:

*Zolt vachin a rol, min top in der erd.* (You should grow like an onion, with your head in the ground.)

*Ar zolt die amos felle uile zorn, hie der mecher oshleher an der luter antevaher an yer zolt zikh kein meir nishn trogn.* (May all your teeth fall out except the top right and the bottom left – and they should never grow.)

*Zolt zorn a lamp.* *Zolt hangen bei ag, zolt hernehen bei nachn an in der frist nigropin.* (You should be like a lamp. You should hang by day, burn by night, and extinguish by the morning.)

— G.F.C.

Wigler's fellow students included faculty members from universities in Krakow, Berlin and Massachusetts, a fact which bears out Cahán's contention that Yiddish is taken more seriously by Diaspora schools.

Aside from language and literature, the course included community singing in Yiddish, and a Yiddish production of *My Fair Lady*, retitled *Der Shein Medele*, written by the class and the teacher. There were also Yiddish movies and a tour of the East End of London, which was once a bastion of the language.

"I recommend it to everyone," enthuses Wigler. The Vilnius program offers even more than the Oxford program, and its location, of course, conjures up memories of when Vilnius was the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

On the local front, there are ample opportunities for people who want to study Yiddish, to do so outside of a university framework.

"We have 180 people studying Yiddish," says Avram Nirenshvitz, the director of Bet Sholem Aleichem in Tel Aviv. "They're reading Yiddish literature in the original," he adds proudly.

Beit Sholem Aleichem, which hosts several lecture halls and a proper theater auditorium, also stages concerts, plays and cultural events and is dedicated to training the younger generation of Yiddish speakers and teachers.

Nirenshvitz, who is also a lecturer in the Hebrew University's Yiddish department, is active on the international Yiddish scene and is heavily involved in organizing international conferences to debate the future of Yiddish