

MENDY CAHAN has a flair for transforming industrial holes-in-the-wall into the enchanted realms of Yiddishland. Yung Yiddish, the organization he founded in the early nineties and has operated on a shoestring budget ever since, has two current homes: one in a concrete basement, on a sooty street in north-western Jerusalem, and the other tucked away in an abandoned

by
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Y YIDDISH



corner of the Tel Aviv bus station. Open either door and you are transported, with the help of a few well-placed props – dark blue curtains, Persian rugs, a harlequin mask, candlelight, a vase of peacock feathers – into a midnight cabaret, where Yiddish lives on in song and dance amidst the rumble and the Hebrew of modern Israel.

It is impossible not to notice the books – volumes and volumes of Yiddish prose, poetry, and periodicals, many of them still transitioning from cardboard boxes to organized shelves. Cahan, who was born into a Yiddish-speaking family in Antwerp, began his cultural activism in Israel as a zamler for the National Yiddish Book Center. But when it came time to ship what he had salvaged to the United States, he had second thoughts. If the books went to America, “no memory would remain here in Israel.” He parted ways with the Book Center, on friendly terms, and ever since, the library he assem-

SH ON ISRAELI STREETS



bled has served as the portable foundation stone of his enterprises. “The books still have things to do here in Israel,” he says. “We need Yiddish books here to have an effect, when the people are ready. And they’re getting ready now.”

His comments hint at the complicated history of Yiddish in the Jewish state. Though the overwhelming majority of Zionist pioneers were Ashkenazi, the prevailing ideology favored Hebrew over *mama-loshn*, as a purer, more universal Jewish language through which to forge a bold new identity. Yiddish was almost entirely banished from the public sphere, subjected to official repression and even to bouts of vigilante harassment. It persisted as a shadow culture, spoken within the ultraorthodox world and as the natural tongue of refugees who arrived after the Holocaust.

With the waning of the last generation of native speakers, the perception of Yiddish as the remnant of an ignoble Diaspora existence is only gradually giving way to a more positive view. A 1996 Knesset law created the National Authority for Yiddish Culture, charged with funding and encouraging Yiddish activity throughout the country. Recently, a small but notable number of Israelis have begun studying Yiddish at Sholem Aleichem House in Tel Aviv, in the Yiddish departments of Hebrew University and Bar-Ilan, and even as an elective at the Pelech Girls’ High School in Jerusalem. A summer institute, co-run by Cahan and professors Avraham Novershtern and Hana Wirth-Nesher, will be held this year, for the second time, at Tel Aviv University.

Cahan views this surge with a mixture of understanding and concern. It is partly, he thinks, a manifestation of middle-aged nostalgia. “I have things today that I didn’t have fifteen years ago,” he says, “people in their fifties, coming to me with letters. Suddenly their parents passed away, and now they want to know.” It may also point to a subtle maturation taking place within Israeli society itself, a furtive willingness to explore aspects of Jewish identity previously considered incompatible with the Zionist dream. He recognizes, however, that the revival is taking place too late to benefit from contact with a full-blooded

Yiddish reality. In the seventies and eighties, he says, Yiddish culture in Israel was “rich, but introverted, disconnected from the public sphere. Now the connection is a little bit better, but the standard of knowledge is worse.”

Yung Yiddish is his answer to this challenge, “an organic space, to tap into the living *nakhes* of Yiddish.” The books are the basis for exhibitions – whether on translations of Baudelaire or the compilation of the Yiddish Encyclopedia – intended to increase the public’s admiration for the sophistication and range of Yiddish culture. Around them, Cahan offers concerts and performances, often held in conjunction with Jewish holidays.

Standing under the spotlight of his improvised stage, dressed in a tuxedo jacket, satin vest, and tall black yarmulka, he sings and serves as the master of ceremonies for a stable of talented vocalists and musicians whose offerings range from standards to the avant-garde. The audience, mostly gray-haired but including a handful of younger students and even an occasional Hasid, packs into the reclaimed space, sits on rows of wooden folding chairs, and is always offered its fill of shnaps and salted fish.

“I just want to have this little, meaningful space,” Cahan says. “If Yiddish is to survive, it needs to live.” He hopes to take advantage of the current “momentum” to bring what he can of the fullness of Yiddish heritage into dialogue with the complicated psyche of contemporary Israel.

He is not the only one.

DURING THE 2001 ELECTION for prime minister, posters appeared on the streets of Jerusalem suggesting an alternative to both Ehud Barak and Bibi Netanyahu. They bore the picture of a legendary writer, and below it the caption: “On February 6: Sholem Aleichem!” The images acted like an inkblot test, with passersby reading their own meaning into the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitch, which in literal Hebrew can mean “peace be upon you,” or even “goodbye.” Some found the statement objectionable and tore the posters down. A few members of the older generation were overheard remarking, “If only Sholem Aleichem were a candidate!”

This alternate campaign was the work of SalaManca, a Jerusalem-based contemporary art collective consisting of partners Lea Mauas and Diego Rotman, both emigrants from Argentina in their early thirties. Whatever the political overtones, the power of their guerrilla exhibition lay in the insertion of an ambiguous Yiddish image into the tense Israeli present, the viewer being forced to react to a spectacle both familiar and incongruous.

Mauas and Rotman arrived in Israel in 1995 within a month of each other and met soon after. Both had studied

theater in Buenos Aires and were eager to explore new creative possibilities.

“I had a Zionist education,” says Mauas, explaining her reasons for *aliyah*, “and also, my brothers were here. I was studying psychology, and I wanted to make a change to doing more theater. So I decided to do everything all at once.”

They formed SalaManca in 2000, the title a Spanish pun, the name of a city that can also translate roughly as “amputated audience.” It was a phrase that had occurred to Rotman the year before, while playing to a less-than-full house at a cultural center in Jerusalem. In addition to their plastic and visual art, early efforts featured Mauas acting under Rotman’s direction in experimental theater pieces. Their interests soon developed toward a high-tech style of performance art, mixing video and film with live speech and movement. In one recent performance, they stood in front of matching laptop computers set on podiums on either end of the stage and recited a prepared text while projecting a sequence of words, images, and sounds onto the large screen that hung between them.

Culture, politics, and especially language are recurring themes in their work, says Mauas, particularly the concept of “translation, in the linguistic sense, but also on a social level. And playing in the gaps in between.”

“Our Yiddish works,” she adds, “are very connected to this.”

Mauas heard her grandmother speaking Yiddish while growing up, but had no particular interest in the language till she met Rotman. After coursework in Israel and abroad, she found herself drawn to the high literary modernism she discovered in writers like Peretz Markish and Avraham Sutzkever.

“People don’t really know them in Israel,” she says. “They tend to think of Yiddish as something insubstantial, of the past. They know the popular songs better. It’s also a political issue, because Yiddish, like so many Diaspora cultures, was suppressed.”

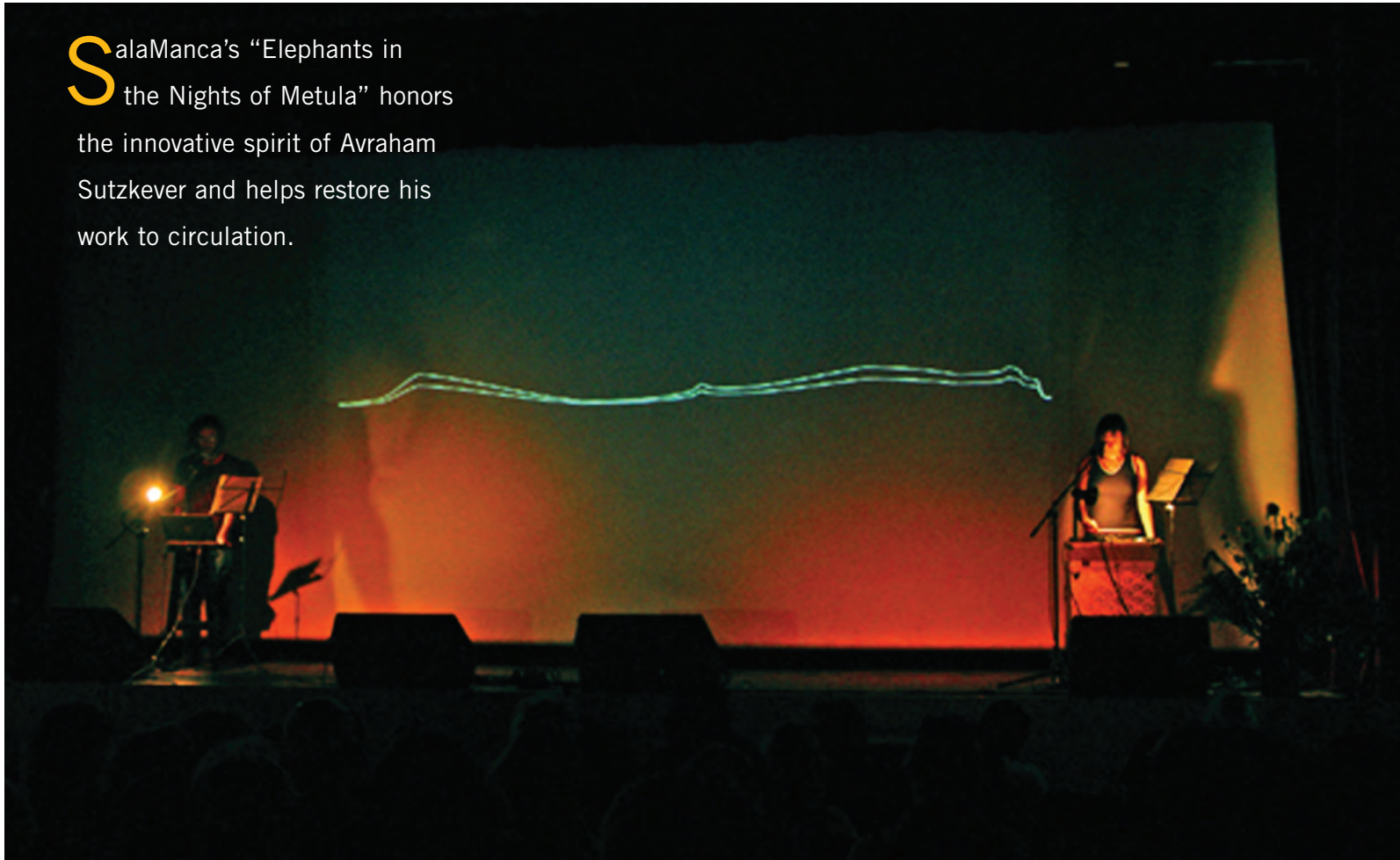
SalaManca has challenged Israeli expectations in works such as “Albatross 200X Oder 200X Albatross,” which transposed the works of Sutzkever, Markish, and others into its own high-tech idiom and also featured original Yiddish text composed by Mauas and Rotman. “Elephants in the Nights of Metula,” based on Sutzkever’s poetry, played games with orthography, spelling Hebrew words as if they were Yiddish, and again thrusting the audience into the gap between the strange and the familiar. It was a technique that, in the words of scholar Jeffery Shandler, explored “the implications of rethinking the possibilities of Jewish language(s) in relation to Jewish notions of place.”

“They’re not used to seeing works like ours,” says Mauas, acknowledging that she and Rotman do not offer the standard fare that older Yiddish speakers may be expecting. She believes, however, that through their experimental interpretations of modernist Yiddish poetry, they are helping to restore it to circulation, while honoring the innovative spirit of the writers they admire.

In fact, in preparing for “Elephants in the Nights of Metula,” Mauas and Rotman paid several visits to Sutzkever himself, the last living giant of Yiddish poetry, who currently resides in a nursing home outside of Tel Aviv.

EVERY WEDNESDAY NIGHT, a *leyenkrayz* meets in the Jerusalem apartment of Eliezer Niborski and Miriam Trinh to read aloud from Yiddish literature. One of the group’s founders, Danny Birnbaum, also worked last summer as a consultant on an Israeli film about two Hagganah soldiers from Lodz, who still spoke in the old world vernacular. “It was a drag for them,” he says of the actors, “having to learn the Yiddish.” After a difficult take, one of them turned to him and asked, in grumpy Hebrew, “How was that? What do you say from the heights of Yiddish?” It struck Birnbaum that in contemporary Israel, Yiddish and Hebrew had switched places.

SalaManca’s “Elephants in the Nights of Metula” honors the innovative spirit of Avraham Sutzkever and helps restore his work to circulation.



“It was very moving,” says Mauas, describing the meetings, “very, very moving. First of all, just how he speaks. When he tells you about his life, he speaks in poetry. He makes you feel elevated.”

Sutzkever’s daughter, who had arranged the contact, was present one day when her father was reciting his poetry from memory.

“She said: ‘How nice it is that you remember. Your memory is so good,’” recalls Mauas. “And he said: ‘My memory is always good for the people that I love.’”

Hebrew, once *loshn-koydesh*, had become the street language, and Yiddish, *zshargon*, the tongue to be invoked with accuracy and reverence. “Like it was classical Latin,” he laughs.

The hosts, Niborski and Trinh, recently wrote an article about raising their children in Yiddish. It appeared in *Davka: Yiddishland and Its Culture*, a new biennial Hebrew magazine devoted to Yiddish and the Eastern European Jewish experience. The magazine is a production of Sholem Aleichem House, the Tel Aviv archives and research center devoted to the legacy of Sholem Aleichem and the perpetuation of the

Yiddish literary tradition, where hundreds of adults study Yiddish every week. *Davka's* editorial board includes the center's director Avraham Novershtern, historian David Assaf, author Haim Be'er, and literary critic Avner Holzman.

Two issues have been produced to date, focusing respectively on "journeys" and "childhood," their colorful pages presenting scholarly articles, reviews, memoirs, recipes, translated poetry and prose, an interview with singer Chava Alberstein, and, especially, reflections on the influence of Yiddish upon the Israeli experience. The assistant editor, Hannah Amit, attends the Jerusalem *leyenkrayz* regularly.

Davka's editor-in-chief is Benjamin Majersdorf, known as Benny Mer, a 35-year-old sabra who is also a published novelist, a translator, and a contributing cultural editor to the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*. Majersdorf never learned Yiddish formally. Rather, he "discovered" that he already knew it, having absorbed the language while growing up around his grandmother. In addition to his other endeavors, he is working on a dissertation with Novershtern and Chava Turnianski at Hebrew University in a department founded in the early fifties, even as Yiddish was being closed out of other public arenas.

"The real innovation in Israel was placing Yiddish in academia, making it a high culture," says Majersdorf, reflecting on the place allowed for Yiddish in the early days of the State. "That was never considered a problem."

Professor Assaf, the head of the department of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University, came up with the idea for *Davka* precisely as a means of fomenting interest outside the ivory tower. "At long last," says Majersdorf, "he thought that just as there's a Hebrew magazine about cars, about food, there should be one about Yiddish – something like *Pakn Treger*."

He concedes, however, that interest in the magazine has so far been limited. Most of the couple of thousand printed copies, he suspects, have been bought by Sholem Aleichem House students, the majority of them members of the nostalgia generation, who may understand Yiddish without being able to speak it. The same middle-aged demographic has formed the bulk of the audience at the concert events *Davka* has organized, rather than the hip Tel Aviv crowd Majersdorf was expecting.

"I don't want to denigrate this group," he says. "I consider myself a member of it. But I want more young people to be reading."

Majersdorf feels that *Davka's* full potential will be realized when it gains some independence from Sholem Aleichem House. He hopes to see it transcend the small circle of enthusiasts and enter into a broader conversation with Israeli society, infusing Yiddish material into the larger culture.

"I want Yiddish to be more present in Israel," he says. "I

want to see some synthesis of Hebrew and Yiddish culture. I see myself at a crossroads, between Yiddish and Hebrew, the Diaspora and Israel. I really feel a part of the Diaspora. I see its importance. I would like it to have more expression in Israel."

He has been surprised by the degree of resistance he experiences, even in these more receptive times. Attitudes forged in the early days of the State, associations of Yiddish with a weak Jewish past, linger on, even among the younger generation. Mainstream media outlets have paid increased attention to Yiddish recently, perceiving a bona fide trend, but they tend to treat it as a novelty rather than a social force.

"Many of those who speak about the revival of Yiddish," jokes Majersdorf, "are afraid it may actually happen."

He hopes that *Davka* will act as a corrective, in part by demonstrating how Yiddish has been instrumental in shaping Israeli identity.

The name of the magazine itself is a deliberate illustration of this point.

"*Davka*" in the ancient Aramaic of the Talmud, means "precisely" or "just so." But in ubiquitous Israeli slang, it means, roughly, "that's the way it's gotta be." The transition from one meaning to the other is the gift of unacknowledged centuries of spoken Yiddish.

ON A RECENT FRIDAY AFTERNOON, the Association of Yiddish Writers and Journalists in Israel gathered in the conference room of Leyvick House, its Tel Aviv headquarters, to celebrate the publication of a new Yiddish book. The author of the moment was Aharon Shapiro, who came to Israel in 1956 after losing much of his family in the Holocaust, and who only began to write after retirement. Shapiro sat impassively at the head of the table as his colleagues, including the poet Rivka Basman-Cohen and Yitzkhak Luden, editor of the Workmen's Circle paper *Lebns fragen*, praised his vivid evocation of the past and debated the merits of his pessimistic tone. When it was Shapiro's turn to speak, he expressed ambivalence about having worked so hard on a book so few will read, his second collection of stories to be published, in modest numbers, by the Leyvick House Press. At one point, he referred to them as "my two orphans."

"Aharon," said a smiling woman, when he was through, "here is my wish for you: may you have many more orphans!"

Shapiro's *Avek mitn vint* (*Flew with the Wind*) is a collection of short stories and memoirs about childhood in the shtetl, the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the immigrant experience in Israel, accompanied by a novella called *The Anthropologist*. It is the eighth book issued in the past year by the Leyvick House Press, which, according to the center's director, Daniel Galay, is the most active Yiddish press in Israel.



The first two issues of *Davka: Yiddishland and Its Culture*.



“It is an important part of what we do,” he says. “We are a house for Yiddish writers. New Yiddish writers.”

Galay himself is a poet and dramatist as well as an accomplished pianist and composer. He has been a cultural activist in Israel since making *aliyah* from Argentina in the mid-sixties. As leaders of Hemshekh Dor Ohavei Yiddish, a lobbying group, he and his wife, Hannah, were instrumental in securing the landmark Knesset legislation in 1996.

When Galay took control of Leyvick House five years later, he recognized that it was a proud organization in a state of prolonged decline. The elegant building had been inaugurated in 1970 in a ceremony attended by Golda Meir, Tel Aviv mayor Yehoshua Rabinovitch, Sutzkever, and the center’s legendary former director Mordechai Tsanin. As the home of the Writers Association, which was founded in 1928, it was “an important address in the Yiddish world.” Beginning in the eighties, however, it became difficult to maintain the regular schedule of events.

“People were growing weaker,” says Galay, “the writers as well as the public. Activity was always centered around an active Yiddish-speaking public, and by the late nineties that had ended.”

Galay has responded by broadening the program in order to appeal to a wider audience. Jazz, klezmer, and classical music concerts now appear on the schedule alongside the more traditional offerings, and talks in Hebrew are now permitted. A children’s play space, Kindervelt, opened in the basement last Purim. Galay is also interested in strengthening ties with residents of the central Tel Aviv neighborhood in which Leyvick House is located, in an attempt to

break down stereotypes about the language.

“We want them to come here,” he says, “and discover Yiddish with new eyes.”

Galay’s attempts at revitalization have been enhanced of late by the activities of his son Assaf, a 29-year-old television journalist and the head of a new organization called Tnuah L’zehut Ashkenazit – The Movement for Ashkenazi Identity. Founded in a Tel Aviv cafe in 2003, the Ashkenazi Movement is based on the premise that Israel is in need of an ethnicity reclamation project. After close to sixty years of a state based in part on the repudiation of the Diaspora, the argument goes, something is missing.

“In the past there was a need to connect to the land, to place,” says Assaf Galay. “Today there is a need to connect to time, to Jewish history. To bring it into the culture of the State. To say that it belongs to us.”

“Ashkenaz,” he adds, “is good for Israel.”

He is not proposing a fracturing of society along ethnic lines. In fact, the Ashkenazi Movement is co-sponsoring a series of workshops with a parallel group of young Mizrahim, or eastern Jews, on the subject of cultural heritage and identity. A recent meeting, held in the same Leyvick House conference room as Aharon Shapiro’s book launch, explored the tradition of Sephardic *piyutim*, or liturgical songs. Galay believes that each group should be encouraged to celebrate its own traditions, to restore them to the significance they held prior to the encounter with the early Zionist melting pot. In the case of the Ashkenazim, he says, this means a revival of Yiddish.

Last February 21, UNESCO’s “International Mother Language Day,” volunteers working in conjunction with Leyvick House and The Movement for Ashkenazi Identity took to the streets of Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem. Wearing white t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan “I love Yiddish,” they coached willing pedestrians through the pronunciation of the basic sentence: “*Ikh ken redn Yidish, undzer muter-shprakh*” – “I can speak Yiddish, our mother language.” Reactions varied from bemused to bewildered to irritated to intrigued. Yiddish, after all these years, had escaped from the basement, the conference room, and the ivory tower, and returned to the streets of Israel. **PT**

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