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Straddling two worlds

By Carla Remondini

Mendy Cahan rolls and lights a cigarette, then turns his face to Venice Beach's oceanfront and takes a first draw. Shrunken within his black winter coat, he is distressingly different from all the pictures that accompany his publicity material: His luminous complexion has turned into a pallor, his eyes have widened into two large blue pools, and his beautiful dark curls are now a disorderly jumble on his head, and mercilessly whitened.

He is at the tail end of a four-day stay in Los Angeles, where as a singer, dancer and lecturer he has performed before a university audience and for the L.A. Yiddish Culture Club, on the theme of the Yiddish wedding. In a short while, he will head off to New York briefly, where he will have time for a single appearance, before heading back to Israel. Perhaps it the jet lag is taking its toll.

Or maybe his exhaustion is the price of having schlepped last summer, at age 44 and with a limited number of volunteers, 30,000 Yiddish books, to the new home of his cultural center, in Tel Aviv's central bus station. Or maybe his good looks and charm have been eroded by the more than 15 years he has had to struggle without respite to raise money to keep open the original venue of "YUNG YiDiSH," which he established in an unfinished basement in the Romema industrial zone in Jerusalem, to serve as the venue for a vast range of Yiddish events, from concerts and cabarets to lectures and language courses.

Cahan's ventures in Israel always seem to begin within spaces bordered by stark walls, that were originally intended for quite different purposes - in Jerusalem a storage place, in Tel Aviv an unused parking bay for buses. They are intolerably desolate, like the oblivion into which the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Central and Eastern Europe sank during the Holocaust, and later, for those who survived, during the process of assimilation that the State of Israel demanded. The books he gathers traveling around the country usually belong to the genre of secular Yiddish literature, whose outpouring lasted from between the second half of the 19th century to World War II. More than existing today to be read - a function they would hard-pressed to serve, considering that they have not been cataloged - they envelop public, performers and lecturers like an invisible human presence, which stretches from those who owned the books, read them, and carried them

from place to place, down to those who wrote them. For Cahan, the books are like people, and he is helping to bring them back to life.

"There is something in Yiddish that has impregnated it with the spirit of the Talmud, something that does not let it rest, that refuses to become petrified," he says. The inescapable conclusion that follows is that Yiddish, to remain faithful to itself, cannot be preserved, but must be endlessly reawakened. Cahan resembles the literature he collects, which is essentially a work of mediation between tradition and modernity. In the words of I.L. Peretz (1852-1915), one of the most influential Yiddish writers, the aim was, "Leave the ghetto, see the world - yes, but with Jewish eyes." Yiddish fiction was committed to spreading the European ideas of individual freedom and rational judgment to mostly rural Jewish masses, while using the language and making reference to the biblical or mystical culture in which they were steeped. The visceral bond that resulted between the Yiddish writers and their readers had roots in the authors' social engagement and mostly working-class backgrounds, which made of Yiddish literature an invention by the people and for the people.

Like his omnipresent books, Mendy Cahan - as he likes his first name to suggest - is involved in mending cultural and generational gaps. "There are all kinds of people," he says about the audience who attends his events, "those who are the old ones who know Yiddish ... ; there are people who can be completely professionals, who lived their lives fully in all kinds of other languages and so, even though they have Yiddish, they don't think it's so important - until actually you awaken it, and then they become emotional about it.

"And then there're the younger, who don't even know it yet, but who would actually be ready to embark on a quest if they only knew how to ... My wish is to merge all these different quests, to reconnect the old and the young, and not break the chain of transmission."

Vishnitz Hasidim

Born and raised in Antwerp, Belgium, where French and Flemish (a variant of Dutch) are the official languages, Cahan grew up speaking Yiddish, in a family that was part of the community of the Vishnitz Hasidim there, who, like many of the city's other Jews, are involved in the diamond industry. His parents, who came from the regions of the Carpathian Mountains and Transylvania, between Romania and Hungary, had survived the Holocaust, resettling in Antwerp and joining up with Vishnitz only after the war.

"I felt that I was living in a close community, too close for me. I was envious of those who were free, and I thought everyone

was more free than me," he remembers candidly of this period. "The non-Jews always seemed to me freer - the people whom I saw on television and in movies - they seemed free to love and laugh and so on. I felt that I had already the kind of my life set out in front of me and it was a very frustrating and sad thing for me. I couldn't bear it."

His mother's room, with its library of novels, art volumes and other secular books, became his favorite refuge, where he developed his lifelong attraction to French literature and philosophy. "French seemed to have many masters of thought. It was the language of freedom - of liberte, egalite, and of love," he says, heightening the pitch of his voice with every word. "We had many French books at home. My mother spoke French, read French. If there was my father's bookcase, which was Talmudic and midrashic, there was also my mother's bookcase with all those French books. So, these two worlds, I wanted to understand them."

"When I was 14," recalls Cahan, who four years earlier had already begun to question the credibility of the Creation story, "I understood or thought somehow that to survive or continue in this predicament of being in the community and feeling outside of it, I would have to lead two lives, a double life. On the outside I was trying to keep to a certain set of rules in accordance with what was expected of me, more or less, but inside there was an inner life, a secret life. I would not talk with other people about the books that I read, the thoughts that I believed ... It was a completely private quest."

In search of a resolution to his predicament, at 18 he moved to Israel to study at a yeshiva, but after a year his situation had become so untenable that for the first time, he admitted to his family that in his heart he had abandoned Orthodoxy, hoping to finally achieve break out of a demanding way of life. "In truth, it [my confession] did not change much, because the modus vivendi they recommended for such a situation was, 'Okay, you believe what you believe, maybe it is a question of youth ... don't make an issue out of it, and keep on with things as they are.'" Cahan says his family did not push him away, but basically instructed him to keep his doubts to himself.

Despite this stalemate, he went on to study French and comparative literature, then philosophy, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a place, he recalls, "where people are not brought down by dogmatic thinking." Academic life introduced him to a new form of disappointment, because its methodical logic mismatched his artistic temperament. But more important, the further he became immersed in Western thought the more the Hasidic world of his roots seemed wiser and more appealing. "There was a time when it became clear that if I stepped completely out of one world, I was feeling disconnected from the energy between them."

Re-embracing his native tongue through modern Yiddish literature and theater solved his long-standing conflict, by allowing him to preserve fully intact his need to be wrapped in the past but at the same time to absorb the present. "It was exhilarating, at first extremely so. It was like a rediscovery of intimacy," he tells of that period. "Yiddish offered both the pleasure of being heymish [at home] and exotic at once."

It was a breakthrough, though, that did not yield much relief. Once he began championing Yiddish, his chivalric struggle to keep it alive came up against the sensibility of a country that since the turn of the century had been using coercive means to try and eradicate the language of exile. Frustrated with the approach of local institutions (including those that dealt with Yiddish) in his efforts to find a home for his book collection, in 1991 he joined forces with Aaron Lansky, the founder and director of the National Yiddish Book Center, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Lansky put Cahan in charge of the Center's Israel office, assigned the task of rescuing endangered volumes and then shipping them to the U.S. repository, which to date has gathered more than 1.5 million books. Keeping the most prized items in his own hands, Cahan was able - once the office closed, for budgetary reasons, after 18 months - to build use it as the base around which he organized an avant-garde performance center that has as its goal the bridging of some of the divisions that run through Israeli society, and Jewry in general.

The rekindling of Yiddish's flame is only one expression of the revival of Jewish culture that has emerged throughout the Western world since the 1970s, a sociological phenomenon of return to one's cultural roots that has had parallels among many other ethnic groups. It stems from what has been called the "third- generation syndrome," which has grown out of different contexts in the United States, Europe and Israel (which have endured, respectively, secularization and assimilation to the idea of an homogenizing melting pot; the erasure of Jews and Jewish culture with the Holocaust and the communist regimes; and the exaltation of Hebrew), but all having in common the reappropriation of a learning that immediately prior generations sought to repress. While this phenomenon of reemphasizing one's own Jewishness mostly affects young Jews in North America and Israel, in Europe - where Jews comprise a tiny and rather low-key minority - the interest in things Jewish is predominantly a non-Jewish phenomenon.

Bale kulturniks

"The Yiddish revival is a political statement that Jews are still alive and are more comfortable in their skin," says Yale Strom, a well-known klezmer musician, author and filmmaker, now artist-in-residence at San Diego State University, in California, who searched for an authentic Jewish experience after being

raised in a secular socialist household.

"It is driven by the bale kulturniks, [a reference to the Yiddish term for] those Jews who in a sense repent and are coming back to the culture," he continues, triumphantly including himself, his wife Elizabeth Schwartz (herself a noted Yiddish singer), and young daughter in a home that is newly traditional in the cultural sense.

Within this economy of the Yiddish revival, Mendy Cahan is an eccentric. Unlike the bale kulturniks who have adopted Yiddish, striving to become proficient in a language and mindset that are more or less extraneous to their upbringing, Cahan personifies modern Yiddish, wearing it naturally. His life replicates in a nutshell the process of modernization that affected an entire people and produced that powerful amalgam of Hasidic themes and cosmopolitan disenchantment that is Yiddish literature. He seeks to transform the crushing burden of tradition into an uplifting quest, an operation he carries out with an unsatisfied longing for perfection that keeps his conversation from taking on a self-congratulatory vein. There is a profoundly Hasidic quality to this psychological trait, as if, while discarding the physical attributes of the Hasidim and their code of behavior, he has retained their spiritual ones.

More interestingly, the re-actualization by Hasidim of the past in their daily lives seems to have been transformed by Cahan, who has a brilliant flair for so convincingly recreating lost worlds. It is a talent he has also splashed on places that still have about them the air of vanished European Jewry. In a picture taken in the Old Town of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, a Jew dressed like Charles Baudelaire walks nonchalantly down the street, his black silhouette in sharp contrast to the subdued hues of the decrepit walls around him.

This photograph captures Cahan at the time of the foundation of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, the first academic organization devoted to Yiddish in Eastern Europe since the Holocaust. Developed in 2001 out of the summer Yiddish program initiated by former Oxford professor Dovid Katz at Vilnius University in 1998, it draws students from all over the world who come to experience the language and its culture in a city that boasted one of the most learned Jewish communities in Europe. Decimated by Nazis and Lithuanians during the early 1940s, its battered remnants were repressed during the Soviet regime that ruled until Lithuania's independence in 1990.

"In 1998, I could still smell the Holocaust in the streets," Cahan says of the first time he arrived in Vilnius to teach Yiddish at Katz's invitation. "You feel the devastation, the destruction, and you want to do something about it, and you see the people who lived there. You take them all together, energies meet." His countless hours of work and personal expenditure of money contributed to the expansion of the

institute's course into a full-year academic program, which is housed in a former printing factory at Vilnius University. This accomplishment represented also a triumph in his personal evolution: A child of Hasidism, he had pleased the Litvaks (the Lithuanian Jews), whose rationalistic approach to Judaism had made them for centuries the center of opposition to Hasidism's emotional appeal.

But his ouster from leadership at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute has since tarnished that moment of glory, though he remains one of the honorary directors. "The university wanted to beautify itself with it [the institute]. Now, they don't want me to meddle with it," he explains with his peculiar balance of idealism and realism, arguing that the institute was brandished as a highly democratic accomplishment by an establishment eager to show its new adherence to European standards after decades of minorities' oppression. (Sources within the institute say that Cahan got fired because he couldn't balance the budget.)

"I burn and I burn but I cannot be burnt," sings Cahan in "Vayter" (Go On), a song he recorded with the band Der Yiddish Express, with lyrics adapted from poems by I.L Peretz and H. Leyvik. The song seems to speak about both Cahan and Yiddish in a single breath: "I lift myself up and go on and on."

In the bright light of the early afternoon, he lowers his eyes to his fingers, which are wrapped around another cigarette, indifferent to the palm trees, whose branches are being blown gently by the ocean breeze, as well as to the general opulence and tranquillity of American suburban life. A palpable tension envelops him, baring an unmistakable Israeli vein that runs counter to life lived on purely materialistic terms. There is a sense of otherworldliness in this secular Jew.

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