

My Experience in Yiddish Immersion

By Deirdre (Davia) Brown

The very first day of class, Professor Margolis handed out a questionnaire to each student, asking them, among other questions, to write specific, tangible goals for the class. Mine were a major challenge to me: to learn two new songs to perform, to be able to read a newspaper article in Yiddish, and to be able to write a simple letter.

WHY would anyone, in this day and age, sign up to learn Yiddish language and culture? Especially a non-Jew?

Over the six weeks I spent learning Yiddish at the University of Ottawa, I must have heard this question fifty times. I was asked by Jews and non-Jews alike, and twice by radio interviewers. My answer became fairly rote: I am a classical singer with a penchant for cabaret and torch songs, and I had found a few in Yiddish that seemed to suit my temperament and performance tastes, but I couldn't really understand the words. It was a logical step to learn the language, and my attempts to pursue my interest in an adult-education environment hadn't been very successful: I needed the sense of immersion, and when the opportunity presented itself, I grabbed it.

And yet, mine was only one of many stories. Each person in the class was there for a different reason, some of them deeply personal, some of them professional. Only half of the fourteen students were Jewish, and even the Jews had vastly different reasons for pursuing this exercise in collective madness: This one, a professor of Welsh and Gaelic, has an affinity for endangered languages in general; that one's mother teaches Yiddish; those two bar-mitzvah age boys will be heading to a camp this summer where Yiddish will be the common language; over there, that one wants simply to connect with her uncle, a survivor; the biochemistry graduate student over there was just curious,

showed up on the first day and got hooked.

Many have also asked what it was like: answer? Rough. We worked **hard**: three hours of lectures each weekday morning, two or three afternoon "enrichment" activities per week, and easily three hours of homework a day. It was exhausting, yet exhilarating. We bonded as a class, not only studying together, but communicating over the web using the University's Virtual Campus, watching films together, seeing lectures, and once even dancing together. You bond quickly as a group when there is so much expected of you.

Professor Margolis' attitude is that Yiddish is a living language, and this affects every aspect of her teaching. She speaks as much as she can in Yiddish: by the third week, she was speaking more than 50% of the time in Yiddish, and we as a class all understood. In the fifth week of classes, another Yiddish teacher came into the class to speak. At the end of her time, she too expressed amazement at how obvious it was that we had, as a group, understood her. In addition to several film screenings, we were lucky enough to be able to see two theatre productions in Yiddish, one in Montreal and one in Ottawa. Conversation, music and culture infused our lessons; Professor Margolis pushed us every day to speak to one another, even if we were still shaky on sentence structure or conjugation. Every day we learned a new song, usually in keeping with the theme of the day's lesson. Professor Margolis would sometimes lecture on Yiddish language and culture, and in this way gave us background on this rich heritage, deepening our understanding of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Professor Margolis also gave us frequent quizzes. Almost every day, a new quiz was handed to us. This meant the pressure was on all the time: no slacking, no missing class, no letting your homework slide for a night, no! To do that would mean failing a quiz, and nobody wanted that to happen. It's hard to describe the culture, the atmosphere that sprang up in that class. There was a feeling of camaraderie, that the only way to get through this enormous challenge was to strive, both as a group and individ-

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ually, and to do otherwise was to let everyone down. Professor Margolis certainly had a hand in this, but I like to think that we did, too, as a class. We fostered that culture of striving, and we helped and encouraged each other whenever we could.

THE culmination of our hard weeks of work was our final project: we were to do something creative in Yiddish, or about Yiddish—that was the only requirement. To our collective astonishment, by the fifth week we realized that writing in Yiddish creatively was not out of our reach. We began to put in extra hours beyond our homework, trying to create something new in a “dying” language.

The final day of classes, students presented their projects to each other. There were plays performed, poems and children’s stories translated, songs sung, moving reports given, even a cookbook and comic book! This language which had been foreign to all our ears six weeks earlier had become alive to us, alive enough to write in. In some ways, this realization was more

important than the final project itself, though of course we were proud of what we had created.

It was an extraordinary experience, and I am grateful to have been there. I can appreciate the unique challenges associated with creating a virtual immersion environment in a language that is rarely spoken outside of Orthodox circles, but it was a worthwhile endeavour. We emerged from our experience with an actual working knowledge of the language. I’m not saying that anyone is going to go out now and write the Great Canadian Yiddish novel, but that questionnaire from the first day? I can do everything I set out to do, and that’s a measurable, and considerable, achievement. ♦

The intensive Yiddish program will be offered again this spring from May 1 through June 13, 2008. All students, university and non-university, are welcome to register. For more information, visit the homepage of University of Ottawa’s Vered Jewish Canadian Studies Program at www.canada.uottawa.ca/en/vered.htm.

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