

## YIDDISH AND ME

Vos ken ich zugn fun Yidish? What can I say about Yiddish? That it was my first language. That my mother loved Yiddish, not only because it was HER language but because, over the years, she had become an avid reader of Yiddish books, poems, journals and newspapers, and that she loved the Yiddish theatre. That when I was five or six I refused to speak Yiddish, in essence, turning it off. And that for the last 50 years I have been trying to relearn it, without much success.

To start at the beginning: Yiddish was the first language I heard and spoke. My mother made up rhymes in Yiddish when I was a baby. “Vu iz Yankele?” “Where is little Jacob?” The fact that I remember that is in itself remarkable. I remember little else of my earliest years. I suspect that my refusal to speak Yiddish when I started public school must have hurt my mother, but she would have wanted me to do well in school, and if speaking English was the price she had to pay, well, so be it.

An observation: When I was growing up, the language was not called “Yiddish.” It was “Jewish.” You would ask someone if he spoke Jewish, which was the English word for Yiddish. Yiddish is the Yiddish word for Yiddish, and I remember it being pronounced “Eedish.” It is nice that it has become accepted into English (along with a number of other Yiddish words.) You don’t ask someone if he speaks Espanol or Italiano.

When I was about eight years old, my mother sent me to the Arbeter Ring Shule, around the corner on Beck Street. (Another observation: Then, the Workmen’s Circle called itself the Arbeiter Ring; I have no idea when or why arbeiter became arbeter.) I learned the “aleph bais,” and how to read and write “Yiddish”. However, instead of continuing for the second year, my mother took me out of the shule and sent me to the Fox Street Shul’s Hebrew School. Despite her love of Yiddish, she had decided that I should get a traditional Hebrew school education and have a Bar Mitzvah. To my mother’s pleasant surprise, our Hebrew School teacher taught us Yiddish on Sundays. When we learned the Fir Kashes (the four questions) for the Passover Seder, he taught us how to say it in Yiddish as well as Hebrew, taking for granted that all our parents spoke Yiddish. After my Bar Mitzvah, I returned to the Shule, but again, for only a year.

As a teen-ager, I was caught up in a subtle tug-of-war with my mother. She continued to speak to me in Yiddish and English. She read the Yiddish newspaper The Day (Der Tog), and insisted that I read the front page English language column written by Dr. Samuel Margoshes. Occasionally, my mother asked me to read it to her, but I fulfilled my responsibility by reading it to myself. My mother preferred The Day to The Forward which she felt wrote down to its readers. However, she listened to the Forward Hour “religiously” at 11 am Sunday morning, on WEVD 1330 on your radio dial, and made me listen to “The Grammeister” the high point and finale of each program. She loved Zvee Scooler’s ability to review the news of the week in rhyme. I didn’t object because his rhymes were clever, and we agreed politically. Over the years, I unconsciously absorbed his sign-off and would say it with him as he would close: Un ich bin ayer getraister, Zvee Hirsh Yoseph ben Reb Yankef Mendle Haleivy Scooler, der Forvetschn Grammesister.

My mother loved the Yiddish theatre and I believe she went to Second Avenue frequently before she was married and for some years after. I doubt that my father shared her interest in the theatre. But much of her theatre-going ended after my father died. She admired Maurice Schwartz and his Yiddish Art Theatre and when I was about 15 or 16 she insisted that I accompany her to one of his plays. It was a Sunday afternoon. I felt awkward and out of place. My knowledge of Yiddish was slipping away, and if I understood 50% of the dialogue, it was a lot.

As teen-agers, my friends and I would never have thought of speaking Yiddish with each other, but we knew the language and enjoyed the jokes of the Borsht circuit comedians with Yiddish punch lines, and the songs of the Barry Sisters and the Barton Brothers, like "Joe and Paul" and parodies by Mickey Katz. A new language emerged which Leo Rosten called "Yinglish." Our speech was sprinkled with Yiddish words.

It was the 1940's. World War II, the Holocaust, Six Million Jews murdered, two-thirds of the world's Yiddish-speaking population. Before the war, my mother corresponded with her brother in Vaslui Romania, and her sister in Paris, by dictating to me in Yiddish. I would write as best I could in Yiddish script. I didn't worry about spelling. I wrote it as it sounded. My uncle and aunt were able to read what I wrote and when we received their letters, I would decipher them as best I could. The correspondence ended during the war, but thankfully, both my uncle in Romania and my aunt in Paris survived (though they lost members of their families) and the Yiddish letters resumed.

And Yiddish showed up in my world in places I didn't expect. When I went to work for the ILGWU in 1950, there was still a substantial number of members who spoke Yiddish, and "Gerechtikeit" the Yiddish language version of "Justice" the union's newspaper, was still being published. Meetings were no longer conducted in Yiddish, but it was clear to everyone that the union was founded by Yiddish speaking workers, there was still a substantial number of Jewish garment workers, and Yiddish was the first language of the union's top officers like Dubinsky, Stulberg, Zimmerman, and Gingold.

Coincidence: In the 1930s, Isidore Sorkin, was the manager of my mother's local, Local 9, the cloak finishers. In the late '40s, he was the manager of Local 38, the custom tailors and alteration workers, the local I worked for as an organizer from 1951 to 1954. Our offices were on the third floor of the WEVD Building, 117 West 46<sup>th</sup> Street. The office of Folkways Records, founded by Moses Asch, son of the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch., was on the same floor. I bought my first Yiddish folk records from Folkways. There was also a small WEVD recording studio on the floor, and every week Zvee Scooler would record Sholem Aleichem stories in the glass windowed studio. I could not hear him, but I was absolutely fascinated watching him as he read the stories in Yiddish, with gestures, his whole being absorbed in the act of reading.

In 1956, I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee. Knowledge of Yiddish was not required, but as in the punchline of an old Jewish joke: It couldn't hurt. Though my work was primarily with non-Jewish labor leaders and civil rights organizations, the JLC

leadership was Yiddish-speaking, and I was required to attend the meetings of its governing body, the Office Committee. They were held in the headquarters of the Workmen's Circle which was in the Forward Building on East Broadway. The Office Committee was made up of the officers of the Forward Association, the Workmen's Circle, the ILGWU, and a few of the other "Jewish" unions and the Jewish Labor Bund. The meetings were in Yiddish, and I would try to sit near Will Stern, a Workmen's Circle staffer to ask him what was being said, when I couldn't make it out.

It was taken for granted that even if you didn't speak Yiddish, you understood it. I kept thinking I should understand, and I usually got the gist of what was being said. I finally realized that my knowledge of Yiddish was "kitchen Yiddish." I had no abstract vocabulary. I knew how to say knife, fork, come, go, hot, cold. But to discuss political concepts, forget it. Nor did I know grammar, or sentence structure.

The dining room (called the Es Tzimmer) in the basement of our building at 25 East 78<sup>th</sup> Street was a gathering place for many Yiddish writers, artists and intellectuals. We also housed the Congress for Jewish Culture, and the Jewish Labor Bund. Opposite my office was the office of Dr. Josef Kissman, the Editor of our Yiddish journal "Faktn un Meinign" Facts and Opinions. The staffs of the other Jewish agencies with whom I came in contact all assumed that since I work at the JLC I must know Yiddish, so I became the authority. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. If anyone wanted to know how to say something in Yiddish, I was asked. I may have known one out of three words—batting .333; not bad.

I have written about this elsewhere: In 1949-50 my mother had heard about home recording machines, and asked me to buy her one. I researched the matter and learned that there were two kinds on the market: Tape recorders and wire recorders. I thought wire was more durable, so I bought that. And my mother began "telling her story." In Yiddish. Her recordings were "conversations with her mother." She would talk about her life, about what was going on in the world, occasionally about her early years. I paid very little attention to them. It fulfilled a need for her. In the years after she died, I realized I had something very important—my mother's story—but the wire recorder became outmoded, so I put the wire recordings on tape, so they can be played on a tape recorder. When I finally sat down to listen to them, I realized I had a difficult time understanding them. Thinking it might be the quality of the recording, I arranged for them to be re-recorded. It didn't help. I still can't decipher them, nor can others who are native Yiddish speakers. I will keep trying.

Soon after I went to work for the JLC, I joined the Workmen's Circle, and when in 1965, we moved to Washington, I transferred my affiliation to the Washington branch. Most of the members were American born but knew Yiddish, and there were informal Yiddish conversations with which I felt comfortable. I was particularly amused by one member who was from the mid-west and who had only recently learned Yiddish. He had an excellent vocabulary, insisted on speaking Yiddish, but was unable to pronounce the Yiddish letters: R (raish) and Kh (khes). My heart went out to him. You can't speak

Yiddish without a rolled raish or a guttural khes. (There are technical terms for these sounds, but I don't know them. I only know how to make them.)

My older daughter Carol was 10 years old when we moved to Washington and I wanted her to have a Jewish education. We found the equivalent of a Workmen's Circle Shule—the Chaim Weizmann Shule-- in Silver Spring, and I happily enrolled Carol there. Classes were twice a week. After a few years, my son Lewis joined her, but Sylvia had enough of the Wednesday chauffeuring, and Carol packed it in. Lewis switched to the Tifereth Israel Hebrew School which didn't require driving and Martha subsequently joined him. None of the kids learned Yiddish. The fact is they learned very little Hebrew.

During the years in Washington, knowing Yiddish was like a secret handshake. There was a substantial Jewish community and I became involved with the Jewish Community Relations Council, but those of us who knew Yiddish had a special relationship.. At the Civil Rights Commission, there were many other Jewish staff members, but there was very little Yiddish spoken.

In 1979, I was appointed director of the New England region of the Civil Rights Commission, moved to Boston, joined the Boston branch of the Workmen's Circle, met Fran Morrill, married, and we had a son, David. We bought a house in Brookline, sent David to Schechter, a Jewish Day School, when he was five, and to the Workmen's Circle Shule when he was six. When he told us he wasn't learning anything in the Shule, we took him out. I took adult Yiddish classes, became active in the Workmen's Circle, supported Aaron Lansky as he created the National Yiddish Book Center, (Fran and I invited him to address the Schechter parents hoping to encourage Schechter to include Yiddish in its curriculum (nechtige tog!), and when David was 15, he accompanied me to Vaslui Romania and to Kishinev Moldova on a trip to see my parents' birthplace. It was an exciting and wonderful adventure. We saw unforgettable sights, but wherever we went, the people we met did not speak English, and we didn't speak Romanian or Russian. However, when we met Romanian or Moldovan Jews, I asked if they spoke Yiddish, and miraculously, we were able to communicate, despite my limited Yiddish.

I didn't realize how this experience impacted David. He decided that he would learn Yiddish. He took Yiddish at Columbia, and graduated as one of only two Yiddish majors. He built on his knowledge of Yiddish as an intern at the National Yiddish Book Center; as a summer student of Yiddish in Vilna and in the YIVO Yiddish program in New York. David has a much better command of Yiddish than I ever had. He speaks, reads and writes Yiddish beautifully, and is currently attending the University of Michigan studying for a Doctorate in American Jewish History, and his knowledge of Yiddish gives him access to writings unavailable to non-Yiddish readers. (The writings that my mother used to read.) In addition, it turns out that Yiddish is hip, and that there are groups of young people on campuses across the country that get together to speak Yiddish. In fact, a lot of hip Jewish kids are speaking Yiddish among themselves so their

parents won't understand. And I am still struggling. But learning (or relearning) a language at 80 is not easy.