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On Campus

Teaching Yiddish Gets Modern Spin at Rutgers

Professor, students give ancient language a modern spin

By Fredda Sacharow



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Lecturer Eddie Portnoy, standing, plays a Yiddish word game with Ryan Richstein, who says the class has helped him connect to his roots.

Three times each week, a handful of Rutgers students come to play their part in keeping alive a language that was supposed to have become extinct generations ago, but stubbornly refuses to die.

Ryan Richstein of Colonia, a senior in the School of Arts and Sciences majoring in cell biology and neurology, signed up for Yiddish because he'd like to chat with his grandparents in the language they feel most at home in.

"In the class, we explore Yiddish culture to a great extent. Part of the reason I'm taking it is to find out more about and to connect with my family's Eastern European heritage," Richstein says. "Learning Yiddish is giving me a special connection to my roots."

A fusion language structurally based in medieval German combined with Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic, and Romance components, Yiddish was long the primary language of Ashkenazi Jews, natives of Eastern and Central Europe. Over the years, many of its words have become embedded in American culture: bagel, chutzpah, klutz, lox, and nosh among them.

Edward Portnoy, who has taught "Elementary Modern Yiddish" in Rutgers' Department of Jewish Studies since 2008, says the course has a small but consistent following, students who are roughly 10 centuries younger – give or take a decade – than the language they're studying.

Clearly, no one is sitting *shiva* for what's familiarly known as *mama loshen*, the Mother Tongue.

"It continues to *shlep* along," Portnoy says of the language he learned as a child at his grandmother's



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Senior Alexandra Hausner, who is also a professional singer, recorded Yiddish songs for her grandmother's 86th birthday.

knee. He became so intrigued that he went on to teach himself to read and write Yiddish, and then to earn his master's degree in Yiddish from Columbia University before receiving a doctorate in modern Jewish.

Before the Holocaust and the twin 20th century phenomena of assimilation and acculturation, more than 10 million people spoke Yiddish. Nowadays, the figure is to fewer than 1 million, many of them residents of fervently observant communities in Israel and New York, Portnoy notes.

Portnoy uses a variety of tools to convey his enthusiasm. One day it might be the traditional Yiddish folk song *Tumbalalaika*, rendered in ultra-contemporary heavy metal, another day a lively game of Yiddish Boggle or round of Taboo, also in Yiddish versions.

Most students enroll to learn more about their heritage; others have enrolled because they've become newly religious, or because they're fascinated with linguistics in general.

Like Richstein, Alexandra Hausner, a senior in the School of Communication and Information who is also a professional singer, enrolled in the course to get a better feel for her heritage.

"This summer, I recorded Yiddish songs for my grandmother's 86th birthday: *Of'n Pripichik* and *Rozenkes mit Mandlen*," the Fair Lawn resident says, citing two Yiddish classics. "She cried, jumped up and down, and then she did the 'Grandma thing' – she asked me for more."

On a recent Thursday – the course meets Mondays and Wednesdays as well – six students took turns reading brief essays they had written about their weekend plans. Amidst the guttural Germanic words, the phrases "Rutgers Stadium" and "football game" stood out like a BLT at a kosher deli.

Richstein gets a kick out of what he sees as the unique sense of humor Yiddish encompasses. It's a humor, often self-deprecating and wry, born of harsh conditions Jews sometimes faced in their host countries.

Portnoy, who possesses the unique ability to touch-type in Yiddish, says he values the opportunity to speak the language with colleagues and former fellow graduate students with whom he's kept in touch. He and his Israeli-born wife occasionally use small Yiddish phrases and songs with their children at home.

Far from rolling over and playing dead, Yiddish continues to add new words to keep abreast of technology and changing mores, the Detroit native says. The past few years have seen the inclusion of *blitzpost*, *vebzeitl*, and *haymblatt*, for example. That would be email, website, and homepage.