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A New Context For Yiddish

Academics trying out a holistic approach

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Yiddish is the "mama loshen" to most Jews, the "mother tongue" spoken by generations of parents and grandparents. To David Roskies, Yiddish is also the language of his schooldays: the "lehrer loshen," or teacher language.



learn Yiddish as a "professorial language."

Raised in the 1950s in Montreal, Roskies attended one of a dozen secular schools where Yiddish was the language of instruction for much of the curriculum, from reading and grammar to Bible and history. Today, says Roskies, a professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, most students



"In an academic setting, Yiddish is compartmentalized according to discipline: linguistics, literature, folklore, cultural studies," Roskies told *The Jewish Week*. The academic study of Yiddish serves the purpose of scholarly inquiry, he says. But as a result, it lacks the sense of cultural "wholeness" and communal warmth that marked Yiddish-language studies of his youth.

Roskies and a handful of fellow academics are working to reconstruct the social, religious and intellectual contexts within which Yiddish culture once thrived. For three of the past four summers, these professors have invited a select group of advanced students to an intensive, graduate-level seminar conducted entirely in Yiddish. "This is really Yiddish finishing school," Roskies says.

The seminar does not attempt to foster Jewish life or to cultivate popular aspects of contemporary Yiddish culture, organizers say.

"Our goal is to train scholars, not just knowledgeable Jews in the Jewish community," says Eugene Orenstein, a professor of Jewish studies at McGill University in Montreal. While the graduate students have demonstrated their dedication to the study of Yiddish, and their admiration for Yiddish culture as bilingual and multi-ethnic, nearly a quarter of this year's class is not Jewish.

So far some 100 students have attended the advanced seminar, first held four years ago at the Sholem Aleichem House in Tel Aviv. This year, 27 students from as far as Argentina and Finland gathered at JTS for courses on the theme of "Yiddish in New York City" since 1880.

Roskies together with David Fishman of JTS, Rakhmiel Peltz of Drexel University in Philadelphia, Ruth Wisse of Harvard, Orenstein and Avrom Noweszttern of Hebrew University in Jerusalem gave lectures in literature, history, ethnography, intellectual life, the labor movement and tools for scholarly research. They also indicated areas in need of in-depth study using Yiddish-language sources, such as the history of the Jewish labor movement or the cultural role of the Jewish press.

"We tried to give as many varied perspectives of Yiddish culture in New York as we could in order to recreate a sense of wholeness," Roskies explains. "In many ways, we teachers were in the same situation as our Yiddish teachers decades and decades ago."

Roskies and his colleagues belong to the last generation of secular Jews to have been raised "as part of a matrix of school and street," in Yiddish-speaking neighborhoods and a Yiddish secular school system, he says. "We went into this profession because we had that as our foundation."

The previous generation of teachers had come from Eastern European communities where "Yiddish was everything," Roskies says. They created a pedagogical philosophy called "integrale Yiddishkeit," or integrated Yiddish, in which the language carried the lessons of ethical values, behavior and national ideals.