

OPEN FORUM

By ISIDORE HAIBLUM

The Yiddish bookstore I frequent is on the fourth floor of a five-story building devoted to Yiddish culture, on East 78th Street in New York City. It is called CYCO, which stands for Central Yiddish Culture Organization. When I go up there recently in search of my favorite Yiddish magazine, *di goldene keyt*, I find the proprietor seated at his desk in a mellow, book-lined room deep in conversation with a short, black-haired man of medium build somewhere in his mid-fifties—a stranger to me. In Yiddish I ask if *di goldene keyt* has yet arrived. This is a sorry point. *Di goldene keyt*, the most famous and prestigious of all modern-day Yiddish journals—a combination of *The New Yorker*, *Commentary*, and *The New York Review of Books*—is published in Israel and shipped to us by boat, one that takes at least six weeks and sometimes eight to arrive. *Goldene keyt* means golden chain, and this short man—the total stranger—turns to me and says in

rapid-fire Yiddish that if I'm looking for golden chains I've certainly come to the wrong place; if, however, I mean the magazine, that's another story. I reply in equal haste that it's obvious I've fallen into the hands of *yiddin*. Immediately a heated discussion ensues, lasting for over half an hour, about Yiddish literature and language. A typical meeting has taken place between strangers—from different parts of the globe—who happen to speak Yiddish. It is magic of a sort, but no longer startles me: this is the real golden chain, reaching out across national boundaries, stretching back through time itself, spanning a thousand years of Jew-

in our home. I am the victim of a conspiracy: my parents know English perfectly; my father speaks Polish, my mother Russian; books in four languages abound in our Brooklyn flat, but my parents are determined to teach me Yiddish. Yiddish, they claim, is the national language of the Jewish people. Even the *Forvertz*—the world's largest Yiddish daily—isn't saying that. The *Forvertz*, in those days, sees no future for Yiddish at all. Abe Cahan, its esteemed editor, frequently goes on the stump for *Americanization*. My parents disagree. (Nowadays, Isaac Bashevis Singer still incurs the wrath of Yiddish leaders by pointing out how few of them actually

opinions on the matter one way or the other. I am busy learning English under the boardwalk. I pick it up effortlessly, my playmates making nonpareil instructors. (This, too, was part of my parents' scheme.) In listening to the radio, I add new words to my expanding English vocabulary. *The Lone Ranger*, *Jack Benny*, *Fred Allen*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Captain Midnight*, are all part of my American cultural heritage. *Valse Triste* by Sibelius is a standard of the concert repertoire, but for me it will always be the introduction to *I Love A Mystery*.

I graduate to grade school and the comic books. Grade school I take in stride, but the comics win my eternal allegiance. *Superman*, *Batman and Robin*, *Captain Marvel*, *The Human Torch* broaden my understanding of the bard's tongue. *Bam! Whack! Smack! Splat!* and *Kazow!!!* become standards in my verbal repertoire. The movies enlarge it. Bogart, Raft, Robinson and Cagney become my instant heroes and I emulate—with fondness and accuracy—their display of linguistic fireworks. My stickball pals all agree that I've come up with a set of winners.

In short, my upbringing on the American side is the same as anyone else's despite the fears of our neighbors. But at the same time I am still growing up Yiddish.

“Growing Up Yiddish”: A Personal Memoir

Open Forum is designed to serve as a vehicle for the free and open expression of ideas and opinions on issues affecting Jewish life, both in the American and world community. Its basic principle supports the right and seeks to provide the opportunity for topics of concern to a democratic and vital community to be aired publicly in the interest of stimulating responsible discussion and debate, even if those views differ with those of the editors of this publication or WAO as an organization.

The Yiddish stage becomes my second home, my parents being inveterate, incorrigible theater-goers. Morris Schwartz bedazzles Yiddish audiences—and me—with his Stanislavsky derring-do; Manache Skulnik steps through the curtain one night between acts to ask if the audience hasn't grown tired of him; when a chorus of NO's thunders back, he proceeds to hold up the show for twenty minutes, dancing, singing and telling jokes. Molly Picon does headstands, somersaults, singing her heart out, and brings the house down. Aaron Lebidof draws cheering ovations with the aplomb of a magician pulling rabbits from his top hat.

Poetry enters my life. Yiddish poets have always been addicted to the recital stage. I am there to watch them strut and declaim. The Thespian-visaged spellbinder A. Lutzky, holding forth like a Yiddish John Barrymore. Jacob Glatstein, storming the citadel of muse like a one-man battalion. Mani Leib, the Mozart of Yiddish phrase-spinners, crooning his words, magic to enraptured aficionados.

Music seems always to be present in our Brooklyn flat, where the Yiddish folk song shares a glittering spotlight with Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky. (Bach is given his due in the Air for G String.) A succession of mischievous tykes, moonstruck maidens

and Hasidic rabbis caper through our living room in these songs and lodge themselves permanently in my heart.

On to the Stage

I take it all for granted, don't give it a second thought. I become an entertainer myself. With blond, shoulder-length curls, short pants and a huge green bow tie that reaches to my waist, I sing Yiddish songs and tell funny stories for ladies' clubs. The ladies love it, but I find it less than enchanting. A director from the Yiddish stage attends one of my performances and wants me to turn professional. My mother draws the line: it wouldn't be healthy.

As I grow older, I attend Yiddish summer camps, where counselors and stray parents applaud my Yiddish finesse. This teaches me that Yiddish has some value in the world. Years go by before I learn its measure.

At City College I major in English. Dr. Max Weinreich, founder of YIVO, the most acclaimed Yiddish linguist of his generation, master of twelve languages, teaches Yiddish literature; I enroll. The works of Mendeleyev, Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem and I. L. Peretz unfold for me. I discover Sholem Asch and Isaac Bashevis Singer in the original. They are doozies. I set aside a shelf in my

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home library of world literature for Yiddish volumes, adding a few each month; soon I buy an entire bookcase. That year I take up Homer, Tacitus, Chaucer, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Chekhov's short stories; I also read Abraham Reisen, I. J. Singer, Moshe Leib Halpern, and Dr. Hayim Zhitlowsky. The best of *both* worlds? It's really one world, I see, but—for me—far richer



THE AUTHOR (with his mother) in the days before he spoke ANY language.

and more complete than ever before.

Recently I attend a discussion. A learned professor—a Yiddishist—holds forth, assuring his audience that American Jewish Youth will one day abandon the alien English culture, revert to Yiddish. The learned professor is mistaken of course. No such upheaval is even remotely in the works. Hailing from Poland, the professor is unaware of *The Lone Ranger*, *Superman*, and *Humphrey Bogart*, has no inkling of what American culture is all about, how nifty it can be. But something is amiss with American-Jewish youth: a sense of tradition and cultural achievement is lacking; somehow they have mislaid their heritage.

I offer them my golden chain, the one that veers back through time and encircles the globe; it is called *Yiddish Culture*. With it a man knows where he's been, can occasionally guess where he's going and—most certainly—knows who he is. When, on his journey, he encounters a brother, he can usually identify him as such. And as he passes the *classics* of other peoples, he can respectfully, doffing his hat, browse and borrow—feeling neither shame nor envy—secure that he has something pretty good to offer in return.

That's why, after all, the chain is golden.

ISIDORE HAIBLUM, a frequent contributor, has mastered English well enough by now to be the author of five novels. The latest, *Interworld*, was published in May by Dell.