

S O A P B O X

A World of Yiddish, Lost

Williamsburg Today Echoes Eras Past, but the Difference Is Vast

By ISIDORE HAIBLUM

I WAS born in Brooklyn in the mid-1930's when horse-and-wagon peddlers still roamed the streets, their carts piled high with fruits and vegetables, old clothing or junk metal. Uniformed sanitation men wielding long-handled brooms cleaned up after the horses. El trains rumbled overhead while trolley cars clanged below.

In those days I spoke only Yiddish. Between them, my parents knew four languages perfectly: English, Yiddish, Russian and Polish. But during my early childhood not an English word crossed their lips in my presence. Both my parents were Yiddishists who believed, with millions of other Jews, that the Jewish people were a nation — not merely, as some would have it, a religion — and that all Jews should speak Yiddish. In their Brooklyn, everybody did.

Sixty years later, the streets of Brooklyn are much changed. But when I walk in Williamsburg and stop and close my eyes, I can still imagine that I have journeyed back in time to my youth. I hear voices of all ages, of both genders, happily chatting away in Yiddish. But what I see when I open my eyes are bearded men in hats and dark suits, married women wearing wigs, boys with long earlocks. I am not in the Yiddish land of my parents but in the land of the Hasidim. There is a vast difference.

Back then, Yiddish culture flourished. Millions of people bought Yiddish newspapers and journals and the 1,000 Yiddish books being published around the world each year were all available to us. In New York alone, there were 12 full-time Yiddish theaters.

My parents and I were addicted to the Yiddish stage, and I still remember the amazing bond of intimacy

between audience and performers. One night Menashe Skulnik, the great sad-sack comedian, stepped through the curtains to regale the audience during a set change.

After five minutes, standing droop-shouldered and forlorn behind the footlights, he asked in a quivering voice, "Are you tired of Menashe yet?" As with one voice, the audience roared back, "No, Menashe! No! No!" And the bantam-sized comic proceeded to hold up the show for another 20 minutes, dancing, singing, telling jokes. I never once



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doubted that this was *our* theater, my theater.

I was taken to Yiddish poetry readings, Yiddish movies, Yiddish lectures on topics like how I might improve mankind, my health, my education. Yiddish radio sang in our living room, Yiddish arguments heated up at our dining room table as guests debated the merits of competing ideologies.

I was at home in the land of Yiddish, and I thought it would never end. But assimilation here, and the destruction of European Jewry, most of whom were Yiddish speakers, finished off the culture as I knew it.

Professional Yiddish scholars and teachers can be found today in colleges throughout the country, and many of their students hope to enter

the same field. I wish them all well, but they number in the hundreds, not the thousands. Their Yiddish is mostly confined to the classroom, and there is virtually no ongoing culture to sustain them.

The Yiddish daily press has folded — only two weeklies still publish in New York. Fewer than a hundred Yiddish books are printed worldwide these days, and many of them are reprints. No Yiddish theater exists full-time in the city, and Yiddish feature films are no longer made. Yiddish lectures, once so ubiquitous, are now a rarity.

The irony is that, while the Yiddish culture dwindles, the Yiddish language is thriving in New York, among the Hasidim.

It is as if the Amish were the sole surviving English speakers. The likes of Shakespeare, Mark Twain or James Joyce would surely be shunned. For the Amish consider secular culture frivolous at best, if not downright wicked. As do the Hasidim, whatever their sect. So secular Yiddish books are not read by Hasidim, and 100 years of modern Yiddish literature, including Isaac Bashevis Singer in the original, go by the boards.

And, of course, the Hasidim always considered the Yiddish theater to be the most frivolous aspect of the secular Yiddish culture.

My parents and their friends, adhering to the Yiddish tradition of humanism, were ardently concerned with this world. Hasidim have their eyes fixed on the world to come. They speak Yiddish because their ancestors did. And because it creates a barrier to American culture, which they fear may seduce their young.

There are Hasidic textbooks for the classroom, story books for children, religious newspapers — all of them in Yiddish. The language lives on in the community, which is vast. But the Yiddish world that I loved, that was aboil with artistic and social ferment, that world is truly gone. And I, for one, feel the poorer because of it.

Isidore Haiblum is a novelist whose books have been translated into six languages, but not Yiddish.