

Yiddish Hoedown In An Old Folk Shule

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By Jonathan Mark May 30, 2018, 9:04 am



The scene at the Sholem Aleichem Cultural Center in the Norwood section of the Bronx during Klezfest 2015. Courtesy of Itzik Gottesman

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Like the klor-vays tsigle, the restless white goat from the Yiddish lullaby, the Jews of New York have gone a-wandering from their old neighborhoods. In the Norwood section of the Bronx, the once-grand shuls stand hollow, and the immigrants are more likely to be Bengali than from Berditchev. Nevertheless, the pintele Yid, the seemingly inextinguishable ember of Yiddishkeit, burns on in



the small two-story Sholem Aleichem Cultural Center at 3301 Bainbridge Ave. Once a Sholem Aleichem Folk Shule, an after-hours Yiddish school (shule in Yiddish), it is now a place for Yiddish lectures, music, or conversation, with a clientele commuting from the Amalgamated apartments near Van Cortlandt Park, or from Riverdale via the Bx10, whose route curls through the borough like the Vistula through Poland.

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Itzik Gottesman, co-president of the center, remembers his parents moving to Bainbridge in 1964, and one of the reasons they moved “was that there was a folk shule,” the Sholem Aleichem Folk Shule 21 (there once were dozens of Sholem Aleichem Folk Shules around the country), “with a good reputation, right across the street.”

Under the auspices of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, the shule met five afternoons per week, emphasizing Yiddish language and culture rather than “social justice” or politics (as did most other Yiddishist schools) or religion, though it was not anti-religious. Chumish (the Torah), intrinsic to the folk culture, was taught, but in Yiddish, and their Yiddishist summer camp, Camp Boiberik (named after a fictional town in Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories) was not religious but served kosher food. It was a time, as late as the 1960s, when Yiddish music was still heard over the radio on WEVD, “the station that speaks your language,” and when Yiddish newspapers were still sold at every candy store newsstand, alongside the Daily Mirror and the Journal-American.

Gottesman, who has a doctorate in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, and is now a professor of Yiddish language and Jewish folklore at the University of Texas in Austin, tells us by phone, “I went every afternoon [to the Folk Shule] from 3:30-5:30,” with “around 25 kids.” Aside from the Sholem Aleichem schools, there were numerous Yiddishist afternoon schools in New York midway through the 20th century, run by the Farband (Labor-Zionist, teaching Hebrew along with Yiddish); the Workmen’s Circle (emphasizing “socialism,” when that was popular, and now “social and economic justice”); and the International Workers Order, a Jewish communist group that disbanded in the wake of the “red scare,” the schools becoming independent. David Braun, the center’s co-president, along with Gottesman, went to a Workmen’s Circle school, and later taught in one of the independent IWO schools. The Workmen’s Circle is the only one of those groups still operating a summer camp or Sunday schools, no longer in Yiddish — seven in the metropolitan area.

According to Braun, “The Sholom Aleichem Institute was the least political, and the most (inclusive) culturally,” but its Folk Shules and Camp Boiberik disbanded in the 1970s. “We, in the Bronx, continued,” until Shule 21 no longer was viable, with no Yiddish-speaking children in the neighborhood. The school morphed into a cultural center, a place for Yiddish lectures, music and conversation, and a Yiddish library. After all, there were many Yiddish-speaking intellectuals still in the neighborhood, even if their kids were no longer school-age.

According to the 2011 UJA-Federation population study, 18,000 Jews live in the northeast Bronx (five adjacent zip codes including Norwood's 10467). However, the study found that most Jews in the area had "weak or tenuous ties to the Jewish community and Jewish life," with a large population identifying as biracial or non-white, rather than a European-rooted population more associated with Yiddish language and cultural traditions.

"There was an older generation of Yiddish speakers in the neighborhood," says Gottesman. "Bainbridge Avenue was known as Bainbridgivka, like Anatevka. My father (Jonas) was a doctor and my mother, Bella, was a Yiddish poet and songwriter." She grew up in Czernowitz, the same Romanian town as did the great Yiddish poet Itzik Manger, and home to the first international conference on Yiddish in 1908. Bella's brother, Mordkhe Schaechter, a Yiddish professor at Columbia University, and his family, moved next door to the Gottesmans in 1966. Joshua Fishman's family, also prominent Yiddishists, lived on Bainbridge, as well. They're all deceased now, but, "They were all important people in the Yiddish cultural world," says Gottesman. "We grew up speaking Yiddish."

In time, Braun became a research assistant to Schaechter, before going on to his own career in Yiddish academia.

"We've been here since the 1930s, first in a rented space, then in this building since 1949," says Braun. The two-story wooden shule, refurbished with brick in 1961, is now all paid for, and the center's modest expenses are covered by renting the classrooms on the top floor to nearby Montefiore Hospital. "The auditorium was really all we needed," says Gottesman. The auditorium, a long rectangular room with a stage, seats 115, with a Yiddish library on the building's ground floor.

Braun says that other venues feature Yiddish or klezmer programming but the Sholem Aleichem Center is the only place where all of the events and lectures are entirely in Yiddish. "The center has a mailing list of 250, with many more getting our e-mails," says Gottesman.

He teaches Yiddish and Jewish Folklore at the University of Texas in Austin, but summers in the Catskills, and keeps his parent's home on Bainbridge (his mother passed away in 2014, his father in 1996), sometimes renting out rooms to students of Yiddish, a family tradition. The story goes that a Yiddish poet once came to Mrs. Gottesman's home to stay overnight, having heard it was the Hotel Gottesman. The center's Yiddish conversation group (usually between a half-dozen and a dozen participants) still meets every Monday afternoon around the living room table, just as that table was the place to go for a lively Yiddish conversation when Bella Gottesman was alive. The weekly get-togethers, open to the public, says Braun, are a place where one can be "entirely immersive in Yiddish, and say whatever is on your mind. It is the language of sitting at a table with seltzer and rugelach."

Once a month, on Sundays, there is both a cultural or historical lecture as well as a musical presentation — all in Yiddish — in the center's auditorium. Even when in Austin, Gottesman, 61, helps arrange the programs.

After the shule became a center, says Gottesman, "my father was president. He'd introduce

the speakers, and he was a learned man, so he'd mix in the [biblical] parsha of the week with his introduction. In the Folk Shule, we were Yiddish centered but we weren't anti-Torah, anti-Hebrew or anti-Zionist. On Fridays, after class, we'd have an Oyneg Shabbos, with Kiddush and Yiddish songs and poetry. I grew up with the place. Today we get a good mix, some older people, some young Yiddishists in their 20s and 30s, and some Orthodox, too, even chasidim, sometimes. For events like the June 3 Klezfest, what Braun calls "our annual hoedown," everyone in the audience, he says, even little children, "are kicking up their feet."

"I'm a folklorist," says Gottesman. "My work was especially with the older [Yiddish speakers], recording their songs, their stories. I have a blog, 'Yiddish Song of The Week,' where I post my field recordings, and other people's field recordings, from older Yiddish singers." Speaking by telephone from his summer place in the Catskills woods, Gottesman says, "The number of Yiddish speakers is actually increasing in the United States." As in Europe, he just sees and hears Jews, not distinguishing between Orthodox or secular, and both groups show up at the center. "Right now," says Gottesman, "I'm in Monticello, and the chasidim are coming for the summer. They have a half-dozen kids or more. You go to Home Depot, Walmart, you hear Yiddish everywhere. They're all speaking Yiddish."

Even growing up in New Jersey, Braun, 48, heard of the Sholem Aleichem Cultural Center, "and I knew that this was the address for Yiddish public events."

It still is.

The June 3 Sholem Aleichem Klezfest, on Sunday, June 3, features actress and singer Joanne Borts; Jordan Hirsch & the New York Klezmer Ensemble; Tsibele, "New Traditional Klezmer from Brooklyn"; and Steven Weintraub, "Jewish Dance Master"; it will be followed by an open klezmer jam and dance. The event is presented in partnership with the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts. The center is located at 3301 Bainbridge Ave. For more information: 917-930-0295.