

Turning down a spritz of Yiddish to the tots

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Fun with Yiddish for Toddlers is living proof that a 1,000-year-old language is far from dead. It's part of a renewal of interest in a rich cultural tradition, writes **STACEY STEIN**

Teacher Ana Berman is singing Yiddish classics such as *A Yingele*, *A Meydele* and *Eyns Un Tsvey* as Eli beats on a toy drum, Elky dances around the room, Elías shakes maracas and his twin sister, Sonia, keeps running away.

They're the future generation of Yiddish speakers, and their average age is 2½.

Welcome to *Kind un keyt*: Fun with Yiddish for Toddlers, a recent program aiming to teach Yiddish to kids as young as 19 months.

On a chilly Friday morning, the children — with parents or grandparents in tow — gathered at the Toronto Jewish Library in North York, where they learned Yiddish songs, words and poems while playing on toy instruments and generally running amok.

"There's been a revival of interest in Yiddish," says Ms. Berman, whose first language is Yiddish. "I think it's because we're realizing that the people who spoke Yiddish are dying out and if we don't catch the language, we're going to lose it."

Elky Iczkovitz, 4, is one of the children in the program whose parents don't speak any Yiddish. Clad in a pink dress and pink socks with little hearts, Elky shakes a tambourine and dances around the room as grandmother Fran Augenblick looks on.

Ms. Augenblick, who knows a few Yiddish words, says it's Elky's great-grandparents who provided the inspiration to bring her granddaughter to the program.

"Both sides are Holocaust survivors. It's a language that died and we want to continue it," she says. "I'm taking her rather than her parents because I feel it's important."

An amalgam of German, Hebrew, Slavic and Romance languages, Yiddish originated in the 10th or 11th century and by the 20th century was spoken by an estimated 90 per cent of world Jewry. At its peak, there were about 12 million Yiddish speakers, and words such as *schlep*, *nosh* and *chutzpah* have worked their way into the modern English vernacular. But the language has been facing extinction since the Holocaust obliterated a majority of the world's Yiddish speakers.

Today, fewer than one million people are fluent in the language, though lately there has been a surge



FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Elías Manevich, Sonia's twin, is part of the next generation of Yiddish learners at the Toronto Jewish Library.

of renewed interest in Yiddish and the rich culture associated with it. The Fun With Yiddish For Toddlers program is living proof that this 1,000-year-old language is far from dead.

"I know it's not widely spoken, but I don't think that necessarily defines what makes a language useful," says Tamara Blitz-Miller, whose 19-month-old twins also participated in a pilot program for the class that took place late last year.

"It's useful if it links you back to who you are and where you came from." At home, Ms. Blitz-Miller teaches her children Yiddish words and plays Yiddish music.

The winter session wrapped up on March 2 and the plan is for it to be an ongoing program. Organizers are looking to start a new session in the fall, giving them some time to raise awareness in the Jewish community.

The program is the brainchild of Anna Shternshis, a professor of Yiddish language and literature at the University of Toronto, who wanted her two young children to start learning the language.

"It's important to me that future generations feel that Yiddish is an important part of their heritage," Prof. Shternshis says. "I also thought that if my kids and other

kids learn some Yiddish songs, sing to their grandparents and great-grandparents, it would help the link of generations."

These sentiments are echoed by Ms. Blitz-Miller.

"I want my children to know their culture, to have some knowledge of their background and the importance of Yiddish," she says.

She also takes her children to the biennial Ashkenaz Festival, which celebrates Yiddish culture. That's one of many Yiddish events in the city; according to Prof. Shternshis, there is a Yiddish event in Toronto at least every two weeks.

There are groups such as Friends of Yiddish, which started in 1983 with 10 members and has since swelled to a membership of about 200, and there are Yiddish lectures, musical events and theatre productions.

The Free Times Café on College Street has a weekly Jewish brunch where patrons can enjoy klezmer music, and the downtown eatery also hosts a group called "the Yiddish vinkle" that meets monthly for lunch and a presentation on Yiddish culture given by one of the group's members.

On the academic front, there are Yiddish studies programs at U of T and York University. Yiddish is also part of the curriculum at Bialik He-

brew Day School, beginning in Grade 3. "Toronto is one of the few places in the world, except for New York maybe, which has such vibrant Yiddish secular life," Prof. Shternshis says. She adds that the growing downtown Jewish community has played an important role in the city's interest in Yiddish culture.

Yiddish also seems to be attracting many gay Jews who may feel alienated from the religious aspect of Judaism.

"Yiddish culture is for people who don't belong to traditional Judaism. And you can be both Jewish and gay and express your identity in a meaningful way through Yiddish," Prof. Shternshis says.

Back in the Yiddish-for-toddlers class, Berman is teaching the children the Yiddish words for boy — *yingele* — and girl — *meydele*, and then it's on to colouring in a picture of a squirrel.

"Look at the beautiful *veverkes* we have here," coos Ms. Berman, using the Yiddish word for squirrel. She then teaches the children the names of colours in Yiddish.

"I think this is the best time to learn," Ms. Berman says.

"There's no accent and the younger you start, they pick up things very quickly."

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