

Yiddish –Vokh

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I don't remember exactly how it got started, but for the past few years I have been attending Yiddish-Vokh. What is Yiddish-Vokh, you may ask. It means Yiddish Week, and for a seven day period in late August, at a site in Copake, New York, it is Yiddish culture-- in workshops, lectures and talks, film, song -- and especially Yiddish language, 24 hours a day. "Really?" asked my friend. "Yiddish all the time?" "Yes," I replied. "If you want to admire the flowers or the landscape, you must say it in Yiddish. If you are playing softball, then it's balls and strikes, safe or out in Yiddish." Before I could go on, my friend interrupted. "Right, and if you're ordering a ham sandwich, it has to be in Yiddish."

My friend's joke had a basis in the anti-clerical strain which was certainly salient among many of the Jewish immigrants at the turn of the last century. At the turn of this century, however, if Yiddish-Vokh is any guide, the reality is far different. The campsite is strictly kosher, with an Orthodox mashgiach on the premises. As for prayer, there are two minyanim from which to choose: Orthodox or Egalitarian-Conservative. (I can just hear my friend interjecting that the arrangement is perfect: within earshot is the minyan one would never set foot in). It is clear that the Yiddishists are far more understanding and accepting of the role of religion in Jewish life than they have been in the past.

So I found myself, at last year's Yiddish-Vokh, listening to a talk given by Malke, woman who had spent approximately half of her life in Cuba. How this came to be is an interesting story in itself. Malke's mother had tired of shtetl life in Poland, and expressed the desire to emigrate, in the early 1920's. Astonishingly, her parents gave their consent, and Malke's mother arrived in Cuba, a young woman, alone, in 1924. She soon married, and Malke was born some years later. Malke ultimately married a man who emigrated from Poland to Cuba after the Second World War, and she and her husband stayed in Cuba until 1960, when Castro's rise to power resulted in the large scale emigration of the Cuban Jewish community to the United States (with Florida and New York being the choice of many). Malke spoke of the background, history, composition, and structure of the Cuban Jewish community. One of her friends became Minister of Health in Castro's cabinet. Malke was thus very knowledgeable about the relationship between Jews and the Cuban community and government, and how Jews were integrated into Cuban society. All in all, I found this talk interesting, as it dealt with a Jewish community not often discussed.

Several days and many cultural activities later, I sat down for Friday night dinner with someone I did not know. Hirsch soon disclosed that he worked for YIVO, (Yiddisher Wissenschaftlicher Institut, the Institute for Jewish Research), formerly of Vilna, for many years on East 86th Street and Fifth Avenue, and currently on West 16th Street in downtown Manhattan. As Yiddish-Vokhniks often do, I asked him how he came to Yiddish. He replied that he did not speak Yiddish as a child, as his parents did not speak it at home. Indeed, his accent, or rather, lack of it, bespoke a person who learned Yiddish in college and university as an adult. There were many like Hirsch there, whose Yiddish was very good: it was grammatical, idiomatic, readily understandable, and fluent. Like the English of TV broadcasters, it was "standard pronunciation." without tell-tale accents which had distinct regional derivations (as is the case with Litvaks, Galitzianers, Russians, etc.) as my Yiddish does.

I should say in addition that Hirsch was not only good at Yiddish; he was excellent. (Although I didn't know it at the time, he would be later be giving a talk on how, Henry Higgins-like, one could discern the country of origin, or perhaps region of the country of origin of Yiddish speakers by their accents. He also applied this skill to Yiddish song and writing, pointing up key words which were giveaways to the artist's antecedents, communal and geographical). I realized quickly that I was sitting next to a Yiddish professional; this guy was a crackerjack.

It was Hirsch's turn to ask me about my Yiddish roots. I told him I was a native speaker. "Where did your parents come from?, " he wanted to know. " From Poland." He already knew that, but asked further. "Where in Poland?"

"A small shtetl right on the pre-war border between Poland and the Soviet Union."

"What was the name of the shtetl?"

"Skalat." I wondered why it was of such interest.

He registered all this information, thought for brief moment and said, " Wait a minute, please, I think we have someone here with a connection to that area." He left the table and was back within three minutes with Malke, who had given the lecture on Cuba. I was a bit bewildered, as I did not immediately recall any connection between my parents' home town and Latin America.

Since he had made introductions, however, and Malke was already sitting next to me, we began to talk. The connection appeared almost immediately. The man Malke had married, the Polish post-war emigre, came from Skalat. Indeed, as an adolescent, or a very young man, he had spent time with my parents during the war. They were in the forests, trying to avoid capture by the Germans and their local henchmen. I remember my father referring to the young lad with the high-pitched voice – a "fine soprano," he called it – who had the same surname as Malke's married name. He would sing songs which kept people's spirits up during that dark period. And how did I know it was the same person? Because Malke confirmed that her husband loved to sing, and sang every day until the day he died. In addition, Malke let me know she had actually visited my father, at his work in textiles on the Lower East Side, when she came to New York in 1960. She remembered him, as she was visiting her cousin who owned the business, when she and her husband came north... Would I like a genealogy? Her son would email me one. How about an English translation of the account of the destruction of Skalat? (I already had a copy of the Yiddish original, written in a very scholarly way; the translation would make it easier to understand). Her friend would mail me one. We exchanged emails, and good wishes...

I have already made arrangements to be at this year's Yiddish-Vokh. While I understand the extraordinary nature of last year's encounter, part of me wonders what these guys are going to do for an encore...