



ידיעות פֿון שיקאגא ייִדן

NEWS FROM CHICAGO YIVO

Chicago YIVO Spring 2011 Documentary Film Screening

“**MAMADRAMA: The Jewish Mother in Cinema**”

*Written & Directed by Monique Schwarz
(Australia, 2001, 73 minutes, color)*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23

**Chicago Public Library
Harold Washington Library Center
400 South State Street
Cindy Pritzker Auditorium**

6:30 p.m.

Admission Free & Open to the Public

.....
Quote from filmmaker
Monique Schwarz,
posted on the National
Center for Jewish Film
(NCJF) website:
“The Jewish mothers
that I know and love are
sexy, smart, and strong,
but I have never seen
this mother in Holly-
wood movies, and I set
out to find out why.”
.....

Jewish mothers are the most easily maligned image of Jewish women found in movies and television today. You know who they are: the caricature of the overbearing, emasculating, long suffering mother ever-ready with mountains of food. Australian director Monique Schwarz takes a funny, penetrating look at how the loving and affectionate portrayals in early Yiddish and Hollywood silent movies developed into the Jewish Mother of modern Hollywood and, conversely, the more flesh and blood characterizations in contemporary Israeli cinema.

This screening is in celebration of SWAN Day. The acronym “SWAN” stands for “Support Women Artists Now!” International SWAN Day is a collaboration between WomenArts (the Fund for Women Artists) and WITASWAN (Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now).

2011 Summer Festival to Build on Success of 2010

Festival *forzitsern* Frieda Landau and film curator Tzivi Huttner brought capacity crowds to our public library venues with their programming in 2010.

Highlights: Dr. Jan Schwarz offered a fascinating lecture on “Love and Sex in Yiddish Literature,” with excerpts from the prose of I.B. Singer and the poetry of Mani Leib and Celia Dropkin. The Gypsy Rhythm Project offered klezmer and related Roma melodies. A fine documentary film about Righteous Gentile Irena Sendler was screened for audiences in downtown Chicago and suburban Skokie. Anette Isaacs offered a moving slide lecture on Holocaust memorials in Berlin.

Our regular roster of talented musicians—Sima Miller, Alex Koffman, and Gerald Rizzer; Stewart Figa and Ilya Levinson; Bibi Marcell; Chicago Klezmer Ensemble; and Duo Controverso—presented delightful programs. Our popular lecturers—Professors Jeffry Mallow and Irwin Weil; Rabbi Barry Schechter; and “Fiddler” devotee Tzivi Huttner—offered humorous and erudite talks.

Planning is underway for our 2011 Summer Festival of Yiddish Culture.

Leana Jelen

My Weinreich Summer



The author holding her young friend Itsik.

Leana Jelen was the recipient of the Chicago YIVO Society stipend for study at the Summer 2010 Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language, Literature & Culture in New York City.

A native of Chicago's West Rogers Park neighborhood, Leana attended Solomon Schechter School for her K-8 education and Ida Crown Jewish Academy for high school. She graduated from the University of Rochester with a BA in American Sign Language and Psychology and has begun her graduate studies in the Masters' Program in Sign Language Interpretation at Gallaudet University.

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I am unlike any young Yiddish speaker I know. No, my family is not Hassidic or Bundist, and no, I did not choose to learn the language out of scholarly fervor or as a political statement, nor am I the offspring of such scholars. Yiddish happened naturally to my parents as children of Holocaust survivors, and they just wanted it to happen naturally to me, too.

When, after meeting someone new, and he or she discovers that I grew up speaking Yiddish, I can almost certainly predict the following:

- Those who have never heard of Yiddish at all do not react much; they simply find it impressive that I am an early bilingual.
- Those whose only exposure to Yiddish is with elderly nursing home residents give me a variant of, "How quaint that you speak a dying language."
- Those whose parents spoke Yiddish to one another as the "secret language," but used only English with the children in order to Americanize the new generation, tell me how envious they are that my parents actively included me in the language, and proceed to tell me the details of their linguistic childhood.
- Those who know *a bisl* Yiddish from their grandmother will mispronounce a phrase for me. More often than not it is either gibberish or a variant of *gey kakn afn yam*.

As I never encountered peers who spoke Yiddish, my parents began bringing me to Yiddish Vokh, the Yugntruf Youth for Yiddish annual week-long Yiddish immersion retreat, where for the first time, I encountered hundreds of Yiddish speakers: There were those who came directly from pre-Holocaust Europe, bringing along the language of their upbringing; there were those who were

passionately ideologically and academically invested in the advancement of Yiddish language, culture, and scholarship; there were the children of these ideologues whose parents were adult learners of Yiddish, and then there were the exceptions: the offspring of the Zucker, Schaechter, and Mlotek greats, whose parents were both native Yiddish speakers AND passionate ideologues—and then there was me.

My grandparents came to America and France after the Holocaust, and spoke Yiddish to their children out of necessity: they simply did not speak the language of the country well enough to use it at home. My parents decided to pass Yiddish on to me, not because they were academically passionate about the language—sure, despite their claims to the contrary they are probably Yiddishists—but in our family the language was disconnected from academia. Yiddish was just how we went about our day. Playing, eating, traveling, and fighting happened in Yiddish (most of the time) without any political agenda. My parents simply wanted to give to me what was given to them.

Then, at the age of 48, my mother decided that she needed to improve her own Yiddish in order to be a better linguistic model for her six-year-old-daughter. She packed a suitcase, left me at home with my father for a month and a half, and went to New York City to study at the YIVO Summer program, then associated with Columbia University.

Because any early attempts to formally tutor me in Yiddish were cast aside in favor of playdates and French toast making, I knew that if I had any interest in sharing my linguistic experience with my future children, I, too, would need to improve my skills, and the quickest way to accomplish this was through six weeks

of intensive summer study. (I guess I always knew that eventually I would be doing the YIVO Summer program.) Perhaps out of habit, having grown up fighting my mother's insistence that I communicate with her in Yiddish, and perhaps out of a childish desire to simply acquire the knowledge I wanted rather than work for it, I vehemently resisted lengthy biographical information about writers, lectures about the evolution of the use of humor in Yiddish literature, and lengthy technical accounts by Max Weinreich about the history of the Yiddish language. I believed that all I wanted from the program was to improve my grammar and my reading and writing skills.

I entered the program thinking myself disconnected from and disinterested in Yiddish literature—I would have much preferred to discuss subjects of general interest USING Yiddish. To my surprise, as I forced myself to step outside my comfort zone and read a Sholem Aleichem book, I found myself charmed by Motel Peysi's antics, and was able to tap into my passion for psychology as I scribbled my weekly analysis of the underlying motives driving his apathy at his father's death or his ironic delight in being favored by the community as a "pitiful" orphan.

Yiddish poetry, too, became an unexpected interest of mine. Itsik Manger's "*Af Der Statsiye Kolomey*" (At the Kolomey Station) was one of the most beautiful poems I'd ever read. In it, Manger deviates from traditional narratives describing living persons' pain at the loss of a loved one, to depict, instead, the deceased eagerly awaiting their kin. I was shown Manger's grandparents standing at the heavenly train station, clutching a

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My Weinreich Summer

Continued from page 3

bouquet of flowers and anxiously waiting for their grandson, whom they have never met. It is not a stretch to imagine why the poem struck a chord with me—I only knew one of my grandparents. Certainly, like Manger’s imagined characters, my own grandparents would swell with pride at my academic achievements and give my mother reasons to *kvell* and brag.

Even my unique academic interests found a place in the program. In a conversation class exercise I seized the opportunity to give a short presentation on sign languages around the world. Through an exercise in expressing my professional interests, I was again forced outside my comfort zone, this time to talk about familiar topics in an unfamiliar way. Consequently my comfort with formal Yiddish improved.

I wanted to learn how to correctly use *di*, *der*, *dos*, and *dem* (the four forms of “the” in Yiddish). After six weeks of patient explanation and gentle correction by Gosha Zaremba, Sheva

Zucker, Hershel Glasser, and Marc Caplan, I can now proudly produce and (mostly) understand a chart that lists nominative, accusative, and dative cases; and



understand how masculine, feminine, and neuter words change depending on where in the sentence they are being used.

In order to begin this process, I must first identify what gender a word is. Here, too, I have been given the tools necessary to solve this puzzle: clues within words that can lead me to the correct gender as well as a Weinreich dictionary full of words with their appropriate genders indicated. I have become friends with the formal “you” and now feel confident in my ability to respectfully express my thoughts and feelings.

Even my love for theater was an unexpected avenue for Yiddish development. In Khayim Wolfe’s weekly theater class (which turned out to be much more serious than I had expected), I again found myself in a familiar setting—with a twist. For the first time, I read and compared scripts, worked through blocking, negotiated directorial input, memorized

lines, and at the program’s graduation ceremony, loudly projected the hysterical neuroticism of Sadie, a naïve hospital patient. (See photograph.)

I entered the program stubborn and closed-minded. Now, months

later, freed from the stress and high demands of my summer, I am able to see that in spite of myself I’ve become excited about and proud of my Yiddish! ●

THE URIEL WEINREICH PROGRAM IN YIDDISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE & CULTURE:

*Details about the 2011 Summer Program will be available soon.
Inquiries about a Chicago YIVO stipend are welcome.*

Alex Giller

My Leyenkrayz Afternoon



Alex Giller is from Des Moines, Iowa. He graduated from DePaul University this past June.

As a DePaul senior, I was required to take a capstone course.

(“The capstone experience is designed to emphasize the relationship between the ideas and perspectives in your major field and those in the courses and experiences of the Liberal Studies Program.”—*DePaul University website*.)

I had a double major—Sociology and Spanish—but I only had to take a capstone course from one major. I chose my modern language major. Throughout the course we discussed all sorts of languages and their current statuses in the U.S. We had to write a final paper for this class based on interviews and research.

While I pondered writing about the Spanish language in Chicago, I realized that writing about Yiddish would be unique and informative for me and the class. My professor at DePaul was also eager for me to research this subject.

In my research on Yiddish in Chicago, one of the websites I stumbled upon was the YIVO Institute. I learned that they have a Yiddish literature reading circle twice a month at a public library in West Rogers Park. So I made a few calls, wrote a few e-mails, and before I knew it, I was on my way up there to observe and talk with Yiddish speakers.

Yiddish is a language I know little about. I know my grandparents spoke it as children, and I know that at home we use common Yiddish slang in our daily conversation. Unfortunately, with my grandparents no longer living, I am not able to talk to them about this language they grew up speaking.

When I arrived at the Northtown Library for the *leyenkrayz*, I helped set up the room along with Alan Todres, who leads the discussion. He happily introduced me to the members of the group as they came in. I observed the discussion and listened to the Yiddish literature being read. I use and have heard Yiddish words and phrases spoken before, but I am not sure I have ever heard full sentences.

After the reading ended, I got my chance to talk with many of the members. I initially asked them two questions. The first was: Why did/is Yiddish disappear/disappearing in Europe and the United States? The two main answers I received from the *leyenkrayz* and other research I conducted were: the Shoah in Europe, which destroyed what had been the center of the Yiddish-speaking world, and assimilation in the United States.

There was much discussion of assimilation in my DePaul capstone course. The push to speak English in the U.S. was not just on Yiddish speakers, but on most non-English-speaking immigrants.

My second question to the *leyenkrayz* was: Why has there been a return by many people to learn this language and about this language, when it is not a “Holy Language” like Hebrew? I received many answers and

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My Leyenkrayz Afternoon

Continued from page 5

much information about the current status of Yiddish worldwide. I learned that Yiddish is an important aspect of Ashkenazi Judaism and that Yiddish literature and theater were and are important components of this language.

I learned a great deal from my observance at the Chicago YIVO *Leyenkrayz* and I am greatly appreciative of those members who helped me in my research. I wish I knew how to speak this language and regret that I cannot discuss this with my grandparents who did speak it.

My professor and the students in my class were interested when I gave my presentation, especially when I listed about 30 common Yiddish words that they knew, but had no idea from what language they came. I have a desire to one day learn Yiddish, but even if I do not or cannot, I hope the resurgence of interest in Yiddish will spark a return to this beautiful and culturally rich language. ●

Chicago YIVO Leyenkrayz Reading List Since January '09

Chicago YIVO Executive Board member Marilyn Golden asked that this list of past selections be published for the benefit of potential participants. Good idea, Marilyn!

Gimpel Tam *I.B. Singer*

Der Khilef *Mendele Moykher Seferim*

A Shtub Mit Zibn Fenster *Kadya Molodovsky*

Dos Koyler Gesl *Sholem Ash*

Dreyfus in Kasrilifke *Sholem Aleykhem*

Vos Hot Pasirt Mitn Altn *Yoyne Rozenfeld*

Der Ziveg *Y.L. Peretz*

A Tate Mit Bonim *Yitskhok-Meyer Vaysenberg*

Munye der Foygl Hendler *Moyshe Kulbak*

Der Letster Veg *Rokhl Korn*

Dos Eybiker Khupe Kleyd *Yoysef Opatoshu*

Tikn Khotsos *Yoysef Opatoshu*

Mayn Krieg Mit Hersh Raseyner *Khayim Grade*

A Mayse Mit a Henglaykhter

Nakhman Bratslaver

Di Nodl *I.B. Singer*

Hodl *Sholem Aleykhem*

In A Fargrebter Shtot *Dovid Bergelson*

Leyenkrayz Coordinator Alan Todres provides a digital text of the selected reading via e-mail to members before the scheduled meetings. Thank you, Alan!

Chicago YIVO Leyenkrayz Meets Twice Monthly

Second and Fourth Monday at 1:30 p.m

Northtown Branch, Chicago Public Library, Meeting Room

6435 North California Avenue

The text to be read is sent as a digital attachment to those getting the e-mail invitation. If you don't have access to a computer and printer, please ask a *leyenkrayz* member who gets the e-mail invitation to print a copy for you.

CJE SeniorLife Yiddish Club meets every Monday 10:00–11:15 a.m. at the Bernard Horwich JCC, 3003 West Touhy Avenue, Chicago. The group leader is the respected Yiddishist and teacher, Dyna Wise. Participants are at all levels of skill and fluency in speaking and reading Yiddish. Everyone is welcome! For further information call (773) 508-1079 or e-mail LaurenCrawford@cje.net.



Stewart Figa (left) and his father Leon.

**Fall 2010 Yiddish-English Program
Full House for Stewart Figa**

Chicago YIVO audience favorite Stewart Figa—vocalist, actor, and cantor at West Suburban Temple Har Zion—presented an audio-visual program, “Yiddish Lessons, or What I Learned in Life and in the Yiddish Theatre,” to a capacity crowd in the Goodman Auditorium of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, Skokie, on Sunday, October 10. He was accompanied by two talented colleagues, Ilya Levinson, piano, and Don Stille, accordion.

Figa’s program held Yiddish songs, Weimar-era German cabaret songs by Jewish composers, and an Irving Berlin Jewish themed English language comedy number. Figa interspersed the musical selections with an historical narrative and projected photo images of the Figa family and artists of the Yiddish theatre.

Special guests were introduced from the audience: Stewart’s parents, Leon and Sarah. Leon Figa, who recently celebrated his 90th birthday, was a member of a partisan brigade during World War II, and Stewart’s program included moving songs commemorating the *partizaner*.

Thanks to the ILHMEC for expertly and graciously hosting this event. ●

*The Society gratefully acknowledges
the generosity of the sponsors of
the Stewart Figa program
Oct. 10, 2010*

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*In memory of
Morris & David Morowitz*

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Malwina Berger
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**2010:
 The Year
 in Review**
**2011:
 Yiddish-English
 Activities
 Ahead**

Chicago YIVO Spring 2011 Yiddish-English Program

AVRAHAM NOVERSHTERN

*Professor of Yiddish Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
 will present a talk in Yiddish*

„דאָ ווױנט דאָס ײִדישע פֿאָלק: דער ײִדישער שרײַבער אין ניו יאָרק״

followed by a lecture in English

**“HERE LIVES THE JEWISH PEOPLE:
 THE YIDDISH WRITER IN NEW YORK”**

*Temple Beth Israel
 3601 West Dempster Street, Skokie*

SUNDAY, MARCH 6

Yiddish Talk at 1:30 p.m. — English Lecture at 2:00 p.m.

Social Hour with Kosher Refreshments to follow.

Ample Parking in the Temple lot.

Admission \$5.00



A Generous Gift The Chicago YIVO Society greatly appreciates the grant from Northwest Suburban Jewish Congregation in the amount of \$2,500.00, honoring the memory of Doris Smolen, a member of the Congregation and a past president of the Sisterhood. We will also honor her memory as a longtime active member of Chicago YIVO. We are saddened by the closing of the Congregation, which has been in the forefront of support for Jewish causes.