

JUDAISM

EDITED BY MEIR PERSOFF

Spearheading a Yiddish revival

THIS SUNDAY'S day of Yiddish culture in London, which comes as part of the South Bank Festival, will be enthusiastically welcomed by many. Today, any celebration of Yiddish is something to be proud of, though it hasn't always been like that.

To many Jews trying to become anglicised, "that beastly Yiddish" (as a Zangwill character called it) was an embarrassment. Zionists, struggling to promote Hebrew as the national tongue, would scorn the *mameloshen* as ephemeral jargon. Ahad Ha'am, less hostile to Yiddish than some, wrote in 1911: "Can anybody doubt that Yiddish will be forgotten in two or three generations?"

For its detractors, Yiddish was a *shmatter* language, a patchwork of borrowings that reeked of exile and ghetto, while the fine old coat of Hebrew lay wasting in a trunk in the attic.

Against this historical prejudice, talk of a Yiddish revival seems far-fetched. But something is happening.

As well as the South Bank event, preparations are under way for a Yiddish film festival at the National Film Theatre and a Yiddish theatre exhibition at the National Theatre next year. Both, planned independently (the latter by the Museum of the Jewish East End), will now be tied into a Jewish East End festival being organised by the Tower Hamlets Environment Trust.

Festivals themselves cannot, however, ensure that Yiddish culture continues, says Dr David Katz, Wolf Corob fellow in Yiddish language and literature at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew Studies. Only the commitment needed to "master the language and pass it on" will do that.

For the fifth successive August, Katz is heavily involved as a tutor on the month-long Oxford summer Yiddish programme which he

founded. It is a Yiddish ulpan, attracting people of all ages, of all backgrounds, "from bricklayers to professors," Jewish, non-Jewish, religious, non-religious, and from many countries. Besides morning study of the language at four levels, there is a cultural programme of films, songs and talks.

Katz isn't the only Yiddishist at the Oxford Centre. Making up a trio often to be seen fraternising in Yiddish in a little Italian cafe are Dov-Ber Kerler, a Muscovite Israeli, who was Oxford's first doctoral student in Yiddish, and Chris Hutton, who stumbled upon the language via an Israeli poetry evening in Oxford. Hutton is shortly leaving to take up a Yiddish post at the University of Texas.

The academics see their study not as "Sanskritism" — the exhumation of a dead language — but as a contribution to a living culture. They want to see Yiddish provided with the intellectual resources to enable its transmission, through teachers and books. A draft of Katz's new Yiddish grammar, the first at university level to be published in English for 40 years, is being tried out on elementary students on this year's summer course.

One person who graduated from the summer programme is Esther Held, an active Yiddish teacher at several adult classes in London.

Mrs Held is especially pleased that one Yiddish class this year was conducted on United Synagogue premises — in Stanmore. Her pupils, around 20 or so regulars, included "some people who have never learned Yiddish, but heard it at home. Some who have had no contact with it at all, others who spoke it once, but now want to relearn it."

Perhaps her most significant work is at the Beis Yaakov Girls' School in Golders Green, where for the past two years she has been teaching Yiddish formally to the

first four forms. She wants to see Yiddish taught properly — with correct grammar. Many of the young Orthodox pick up the language casually, but that is not enough for her. When they speak, "they tend to mix in too much English."

Among the vibrant Yiddish-speaking community in Stamford Hill, Samuel Hiley, a New Zealander who picked up Yiddish at yeshiva, has spotted a need "to set down guidelines in Yiddish grammar and spelling." He is on the way to producing a textbook for schools, where for many children Yiddish will be a first and flourishing language.

What began as a "simple grammar" has grown to include a hundred-page introduction, with maps and illustrations to explain the history of Yiddish. When the book is published, it will, says David Katz, be a "major accomplishment." Hiley is also planning a vocabulary book and dictionary.

Some attempt is being made to interest mainstream Anglo-Jewish organisations in Yiddish. Last year, a Council for the Promotion of Yiddish was set up, led by Dr Shneier Levenberg, head of the Jewish Agency in Britain, and Ben Helfgott, chairman of the 45 Aid Society. A veteran Zionist who mixed in circles which "believed Yiddish dead," Levenberg is an example of an historic change of heart. Helfgott learnt Yiddish after Hebrew.

Dr Katz thinks it a pity that no mainstream Jewish day school offers Yiddish. The British resistance to languages other than English and an already crowded curriculum are formidable obstacles. If a Yiddish "O"-level could be established, Mrs Held thinks, that may make the language a more attractive proposition for schools and parents.

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