Yiddish Studies Program Thrives at Columbia After More than Fifty Years

BY JASON HOLLANDER

Two weeks after the end of World War II, Miriam Hoffman—then nine-years-old—fled Siberia with her parents and went to a displaced persons camp in Germany run by the American army. The children she met there all spoke different languages—Polish, Hungarian, Russian, German—and many grew frustrated at being unable to share their experiences of horror and endurance. The overwhelming desire to trade stories and make friends inspired the children to find some way to communicate.

“Suddenly, one day, we all began speaking in Yiddish and it made us feel so free,” says Hoffman, the University’s linguistics assistant professor of Yiddish Language, Literature and Cultures and director of Yiddish programs, who notes that even though many knew little of the tongue, most picked it up almost immediately.

The language Hoffman discovered in that camp came out of necessity, but soon became her passion. Arriving in New York City four years later, she enrolled in a Yiddish-speaking middle school in Manhattan and was enchanted by the rich Yiddish culture and history she was taught. She found the wealth of drama, literature and music more fulfilling than the “Coca-cola and blue jeans” culture her friends were preoccupied with. She went on to study at Jewish day schools and later received an M.A. in Yiddish Studies from Columbia.

More than 50 years later, Hoffman maintains such a love for Yiddish that she admits, “I dance into the classroom, I don’t walk in.” And Columbia students certainly respond to her style. Not only are all three levels of her language classes consistently filled, but the students enrolled are more diverse than ever.

They come searching for something,” says Hoffman of the reform Jews, orthodox Jews, non-religious Jews, grandchild of Holocaust survivors, and many non-Jews she has taught in recent years. “They find a very warm atmosphere like family. And they find that the language is flexible, full of wit, full of wisdom, full of poetry, full of music—it sings.”

Hoffman, along with Jeremy Dauber, Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature and Cultures and director of Yiddish programs, make up the small staff that is working to educate a new generation of students. Mark Anderson, chair of the Department of Germanic Languages, notes that there has been a steady, significant increase in enrollment in Columbia’s Yiddish language and literature classes over the past few years. Dauber believes Columbia’s program has undergone a true re-invigoration and is about to enter a “new, revitalized stage.”

Started in 1952, the Yiddish Studies program at Columbia was originally located within the University’s linguistics department. When linguistics was dissolved in the late 1980s, the program was relocated under the umbrella of the Department of Germanic Languages, which broadened the scope of the subjects being taught focusing mostly on the Yiddish language to offer a more comprehensive study of Yiddish history and culture as well. Today, Columbia’s program is considered one of the most vibrant and thorough in the world.

Thanks to the efforts of Dauber and Hoffman, undergraduate students are now earning degrees pursuing independent studies in Yiddish and there is optimism that a new major for Yiddish Studies will be created in the department within a few years. At the graduate level, students can earn a master’s and doctorate in Yiddish Studies through an ever-growing cross-section of disciplines. The program is also monitored and nurtured by an independent committee headed by Michael Wisse, a professor of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian.

The Yiddish language grew out of the migrations of Jews from southern France and Italy who were invited to the Rhineland by Charlemagne in the 9th Century with the hope that they would help spur economic growth. Over the next century or so, these Jews crossed the Rhine River and rapidly developed the region’s trade, adopted various medieval Germanic dialects and came to mix them with the original Romance and Hebrew/Aramaic languages they had spoken. The new language, Yiddish, used the same characters as Hebrew and was also written from right to left.

Over the centuries, an assortment of words from other European languages made their way into the eclectic vocabulary that evolved into Yiddish, a middle class modern Yiddish. By 1911, Yiddish was spoken by an estimated 11 million people in Eastern Europe and the United States and New York City was home to several daily newspapers written in the language. The Holocaust and years of assimilation that Yiddish cultures has wiped out the majority of speakers, but a recent wave of interest in the Jewish and religious studies has seen the numbers of students taking classes in Yiddish rising again.

“My students have a sort of Jewish background and they are like Jews in the rising of deepening that,” says Dauber. “Students are using Yiddish as a way of coming to some connection with their Jewish identity.” But Dauber, who studied Yiddish literature at Harvard under Ruth Wisse and then at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, also wants to show students that the language offers some of history’s greatest written works. He is intent on teaching students to “hold Yiddish literature up to the same standards as if they were studying English and French literature” and insists that the works be approached without any preconceptions.

The stories, Dauber notes, often paint a more complex picture than some might assume if they had only read or seen the film version of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

“Some think everybody was poor but always happy,” says Dauber, noting that life in Yiddish communities was often undermined by vicious attacks and, sometimes, the destruction of entire villages. “Much of Yiddish literature is shot with uncertainty, laced with the precarious circumstances many Jews dealt with.”

Dauber is also using other subjects to help contextualize the spectrum of Yiddish study, teaching comparative classes like “Yiddish and Russian Literature” and “Humor in Jewish Literature,” which explores the entire history of Jewish humor from the Bible through Seinfeld. This is done in an effort to broaden the appeal of Yiddish courses to students. A large portion of students who take one Yiddish class return to the program to pursue others.

“Very few Yiddish programs in the world have the history and resources that Columbia does,” says Anderson, noting the importance of Columbia’s New York City location. In fact, Anderson hopes to help further develop and expand the program in the next decade. However, he notes that without additional funding from donors, it will be nearly impossible to increase the faculty and course offerings. Until then, Dauber and Hoffman continue to keep the millennia-old tradition alive at Columbia. Because of fears generated by those who labeled it a dying language in the past few decades, Yiddish has actually gotten more attention in recent years and Dauber says it is “unquestionable” that there are more Yiddish materials available to the public now than there were the early 1990s.

Hoffman, a life-long optimist, also believes that Yiddish will endure regardless of declining numbers of the language’s speakers. “The language is too strong, too much alive,” says Hoffman. “It just refuses to die, like its people.”