

Yiddish is music to Bialik teacher's ears

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, GAZETTE EDUCATION REPORTER JUNE 11, 2011



Lorna Smith accompanies her choir at Bialik-JPPS, on Kildaire Rd., in Côte St. Luc. She has taught Yiddish for 29 years and has been awarded the Elaine Wisenthal Milech Award for Professional Excellence and Leadership in Education.

Photograph by: Robert J. Galbraith, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Yiddish has been called a dying language. But mention that to Lorna Smith and she starts talking about renewed interest in what was once the lingua franca of an estimated 11 million Jews just before the Second World War.

“There is such a resurgence,” said Smith, who teaches Yiddish at Bialik High School in Côte St. Luc.

“I’m not telling you that it’s going to be a living language – an everyday spoken language – although the very religious people do speak it all the time.

“But they’re teaching it everywhere, in academia,” Smith said, rhyming off the names of several universities.

For the past 29 years, Smith has been teaching Yiddish at Bialik, a private Jewish day school, where it’s a compulsory course throughout high school. She also teaches an adult Yiddish class at the Jewish Public Library and has two students who aren’t Jewish. “You have to hear them speak. Like really, it’s amazing.”

Her passion for the subject seems undiminished by the passage of time. "It's such a rich language – so expressive," Smith said.

Her parents, immigrants from Poland and Russia, spoke to her in Yiddish when she was growing up although Smith always answered them in English. But she also learned Yiddish at school.

As a teacher, Smith has encountered "some, not too many" high school students who are resistant to learning it. Some Sephardic students, for example, will say "what do I need it for?," said Smith, noting the traditional language for Sephardic Jews was Ladino not Yiddish.

"But then once they go through it – it's not a difficult language to learn – and they really, really like it."

She has taught students not only the language but where it comes from, its history throughout the Holocaust, how it survived and is still being kept alive, said Mikey Sheiner, a Grade 10 student at Bialik.

"She's passionate about keeping it alive and keeping it more than just a means of communication but for its Jewish roots," Sheiner said.

"She makes Yiddish fun," said Benjamin Libman, 16. "And she makes it exciting for us."

Making it fun is what Smith says she tries to do. That can mean having students learn the language through games like hangman or Yiddish bingo.

They also do grammar and literature, learning about writers such as Sholem Aleichem whose short stories were the basis for the Fiddler on the Roof musical.

Music is also part of the equation.

On Friday, Smith played a few songs on piano as her Yiddish choir students sang along.

Because Smith loves teaching Yiddish so much the students see it and pick it up from her "by osmosis," said Hanna Eliashiv, head of Judaic studies at Bialik.

Smith, who declined to give her age, teaches part time and has no plans to stop. She was recently honoured by her school with a teaching award.

If a student questions the relevancy of Yiddish, what does Smith say?

"It's part of your Jewish heritage," she said, adding that the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust were mostly Yiddish speakers because they came from Eastern Europe.

Yiddish also has a rich literature and history, she said.

And finally: "You should know about who you are."

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