

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Schlepping to Camp to Keep Yiddish Alive

‘It’s like an extended family,’ one camper says of participants who range all ages

By

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Aug. 29, 2018 6:35 p.m. ET

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/schlepping-to-camp-to-keep-yiddish-alive-1535582112>

Just as at many summer camps, there are cabins, a lake and campfire singalongs. The main draw to Yiddishland, however, is the language.

There is bingo in Yiddish, klezmer music, and yoga called “stretch and kvetch.” The annual weeklong retreat, held earlier this month, draws a small but growing group of devotees to Hopewell Junction, N.Y., about 70 miles north of New York City.

For many, learning Yiddish offers a nostalgic link to Jewish roots and grandparents from Eastern Europe who spoke it every day. For some, it unlocks the mysterious vocabulary often used by older relatives who didn’t want children to understand. For more advanced students, the retreat gives access to Yiddish literature in its original form.

“My great grandparents spoke Yiddish, and this is keeping their memory alive,” said Sarah Segal, a 16-year-old who has come to the camp with her family for a decade. “Speaking it makes me feel closer to them.”

Ranging from a baby to a 93-year-old, 155 campers shared cabins at the Camp Kinder Ring site next to Sylvan Lake. Not everyone was Jewish. About half were over 65 years old, happy to schmooze at breakfast over bagels and whitefish before a day full of classes, music and theater. While adults studied, children played outside, learning songs like “Kop, Akslen, Kni un Fis” (“Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes”).

Formally called “Trip to Yiddishland,” it has more than doubled its enrollment since it was founded 11 years ago by the Workmen’s Circle, a secular organization that seeks to bolster progressive Jewish identity through social activism and language classes. It sponsors a range of events to attract families, including a Hanukkah festival called Latkepalooza!, which stars a staffer dressed up like a giant blue dreidel.

The group even runs a course called Yiddish for Dogs, where owners learn commands, like “zits” for “sit” and “tsurik” for fetch. Fans say their pets take orders more seriously when delivered in unfamiliar, hard-hitting sounds. The next class will be Sept. 30 in Central Park.

Lovers of the language have seen a surge of interest. This summer’s [Yiddish version of the musical “Fiddler on the Roof”](#) at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan has been a hit. So has an online comedy series called “Yidlife Crisis.”

Once the everyday language of Central and East European Jews, Yiddish emerged in the 10th century in Germany and includes German, Hebrew and Slavic elements. The number of speakers has dropped dramatically since World War II, when millions were killed during the Holocaust.

Researchers estimate between 600,000 to three million people world-wide speak Yiddish now, according to Agnieszka Legutko, a Yiddish expert at Columbia University. It is still spoken as a first language in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities.

Ms. Legutko says Yiddish lessons have become more popular lately, with online courses giving them a boost. “It’s the authentic Ashkenazi Jewish culture and heritage,” she said. “For people who don’t identify as Jewish through religion or Zionism, it’s the perfect alternative.”

Aviva Ray, who escorted her 93-year-old mother to Yiddishland, skipped the language classes. As she sat in the shade finishing a crossword puzzle, she recalled being one of the few Jews in her elementary school in a New Jersey suburb. “It was very hard to be different,” she said. “As a kid you don’t appreciate the culture.”

Golda Shore, 89, said she came up from West Palm Beach every year for camp. She loves that nobody is glued to their cellphones in the dining hall. “It’s like an extended family,” she said, “and a wonderful feeling of community that’s lacking in the world.”

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