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No Need to Kvetch, Yiddish Lives On in Catskills



David Goldman for The New York Times

Sophie Creutz, left, and Rachel Vigour join in a klezmer dance at KlezKamp, an immersion course in all things Yiddish that draws hundreds to a hotel in the Catskills every December.

By JOSEPH BERGER
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KERHONKSON, N.Y. — In a chilled and snow-shrouded Catskills landscape, hundreds of people get together every December to try to breathe some warmth into a dying culture.

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David Goldman for The New York Times

Eve Jochowitz and others in a klezmer dance in the lobby.

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For almost a week at a hotel here, organizers immerse the group, which calls itself KlezKamp, in Yiddish and the folkways of the Eastern Europeans who spoke that language until Hitler extinguished their communities. Classes are offered in Yiddish conversation, humor and literature; in klezmer — the sometimes plaintive, sometimes mischievous folk [music](#) that has experienced an astonishing comeback — and in the snaking, coiling, hand-clapping dances animated by those melodies.

To some the enterprise could seem pointlessly nostalgic, since Yiddish is flourishing only among the Hasidim, for whom it is the lingua franca, and virtually vanishing elsewhere with the passing of Jews who came to the United States from Poland and Russia before and after World War II.

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Elaine Hoffman Watts, center, a third generation klezmer musician who plays drums.

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Books for sale about Yiddish culture, including "Born to Kvetch" by Michael Wex, a teacher at the camp.

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David Goldman for The New York Times

A teacher at the camp; Peter Teitelbaum, from Ottawa, indulging in couch clarinet.

But a visitor last December to the hotel, the Hudson Valley Resort and [Spa](#), formerly the schmaltzy classic the Granit, would hardly use moribund to describe the goings-on. (This year's KlezKamp runs from Dec. 26-31.) Yiddish, as a cherished expression goes, still tickles the participants' hearts.

Not only were the evening music and dance programs a tribute to vigorous life, but those who took part in the courses — more than 50 were offered, with six sessions apiece — also seemed to revel in the chance to reacquaint themselves with the unmatched expressions they had heard from their bubbes (grandmothers) and zaydes (grandfathers) and the dance steps they had not done since a cousin's bar mitzvah long ago.

Words tossed about during the week included not just those like kvetch and kibitz, which have entered American idiom, but also fresher candidates like shreklekh (terrible or frightening), naches (prideful joy), farblondget (mixed up) and luftmensch (an impractical person with no apparent income).

Henry Sapoznik, a Ukrainian cantor's son who helped found KlezKamp in 1984, calls it a "Yiddish Brigadoon," a gathering, like the Scottish village in that 1947 musical, that comes to life once in a long while after a lengthy snooze. His co-founder, Adrienne Cooper, calls it "a flying shtetl." But both say that over 25 years the thousands who have taken part have knitted together into a group that

stays in touch year round.

"If I were to say to you we're attempting to reactivate Yiddish culture in its full form, I'd be kidding you," Mr. Sapoznik said. "But what we're doing here is creating a parallel universe, our own free-standing reality."

Those who attend — and they include families and singles, children and octogenarians — hail mostly from the [East](#) Coast, but some come from much farther afield, like Germany, Denmark, England, Russia and the Netherlands. Mr. Sapoznik estimated that 15 to 20 percent of participants were not Jewish. About half are musicians hankering to hone skills with human artifacts like Pete Sokolow, 69, who as a professional musician in the fading klezmer days of the 1950s played piano with legends like the four Epstein brothers and Dave Tarras.

Still others engage in [anthropology](#), interviewing a handful of old-timers about the children's games they played, the curses they uttered ("You should grow like an onion with your head in the ground!") or homespun remedies (urinate on a cut finger and wrap it in a spider web). In one class Susan Leviton introduced a lesser-known song about a mother grieving for her daughter, killed in the Triangle Waist Company factory fire of 1911, who is "wearing shrouds instead of a wedding dress."

The dance teacher, Steve Weintraub, 55, of Oak [Park](#), Ill., has interviewed aging immigrant dancers and studied grainy films. At KlezKamp classes and parties he has re-enacted the flashtanz — performed with a bottle on the head, to entertain a bride and groom — the merry freylekhs and the sher, an 18th-century square dance.

Everyone seems on a mission to recapture and resurrect, but the work is not just about mining the past. The musicians, for example, are inventing new melodies with a klezmer lilt but flavored with jazz, rock and even salsa.

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On the first evening after dinner, Alan Sisselman, 56, a biologist from Buffalo, leaned back on a lobby sofa and played a sweetly fluttering tune on clarinet. He was joined by Jordan Abraham, 39, on accordion, and Rick Black, 57, on soprano saxophone — both play for a Canadian group called Touch of Klez — as well as two young violinists, Abigale Reisman, 22, of Manhattan, and Keryn Kleiman, 19, of New City, N.Y. Sophie Kreutz, 21, a student at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., piped in on another clarinet, and Zack Mayer, 20, of Manhattan, harmonized on baritone saxophone. Before long 12 people were embellishing Mr. Sisselman’s melody in a full-blown jam session.

KlezKamp has been around long enough that some younger adults have spent part of almost every year of their lives there. Sarah Gordon, 30, a Brooklyn teacher, started coming at 6 because her mother, Ms. Cooper, was an organizer, and she is now teaching newcomers to sing in a language they may never have used before.

Elaine Hoffman Watts, 77, a third-generation klezmer musician who plays drums, was attending with her daughter, Susan, 43, a trumpeter, and her grandson, Douglas Siegel, 15, a trombonist, making a line of five generations. “It never died in my house,” she said of klezmer.

David Ferleger, a 61-year-old Philadelphia lawyer, has come here for four years with his twins, Anat and Avram, now 10. He worked to rekindle the Yiddish he grew up with as a child of Holocaust survivors while giving his kids the run of a resort hotel with an indoor pool and a game room.

“I could study Yiddish in New York,” he said. “Here I can study Yiddish and have the kids happy as well.”

Despite recent operations on both hips, Claire Salant, 82, of Old Bethpage on Long Island, sashayed and spun to klezmer for almost an hour on the first evening. She came to KlezKamp five years ago to take intermediate Yiddish and soon was fluent enough to teach the language at her synagogue.

“I grew up speaking Yiddish, but had not spoken it for 60 years because, like good Americans, my Austro-Hungarian parents went to night school to learn English,” she said with a shrug of regret.

The resurgence of klezmer gives everyone a sliver of hope. Mr. Sapoznik recalled that when he started a band called Kapelye in the 1970s, there were a handful of bands. Now he estimates that there are 1,000 around the world — with names like the Klemzatics, a band with an album titled “Jews With Horns.”

As in a university, some teachers are particular draws. Michael Wex, a Canadian author and philologist, taught one group about the derivation of the term *bubbe mayse* — literally “a grandmother’s fable” but an expression used for any implausible tale. It was, he revealed, based on a 16th-century chivalric story about a Christian knight named Bovo who improbably marries a princess under a *chupah* — a Jewish wedding canopy — and arranges a circumcision for twin sons. Over time, few Jews were familiar with Bovo, so the expression morphed into something said by a *bubbe*.

Mr. Wex took pride that he drew much of his book “Born to Kvetch” from lectures that he gave at KlezKamp.

“I got more things than most people out of coming here,” he said. “I got an entire career.”