

Solange De Santis

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Yiddish Book Center Expands Arts Programs

By Solange De Santis

Amherst, Mass.

On a recent sunny Sunday, "Levine, the Flying Jew" briefly took up residence at the Yiddish Book Center, courtesy of an irreverent musical trio called Hank Sapoznik and the Youngers of Zion.

The afternoon concert came at the end of a summer that saw the cultural center, marking its 25th anniversary, expand its arts offerings in a bid to "open up the books," director of programming Nora Gerard said in an interview.

The Youngers, whose name takes a glancing blow at a famously anti-Semitic document called the Protocol of the Elders of Zion, swung easily from mournful Yiddish ballads to zippy wedding dance tunes to comic story songs. Levine, Sapoznik explained, was the first trans-Atlantic airplane passenger, two weeks after Lindbergh made the first solo flight in 1927.

About 70 people attended, including Joan Paul, 67, who divides her time between Wilmington, Vt. and Teaneck, N.J., where she is learning Yiddish in an adult class at Temple Emeth. "It's my first time here. I've been wanting to come for years," she said, echoing one of Gerard's ambitions for the arts program.

"A lot of people came who had never been here before, which was my goal. Some said they had never heard of a group or a person before. We averaged 50 to 60 people for each program," Gerard said, noting that the center's theater seats about 100.

When Gerard, who also works Saturdays and Sundays in New York City as director of weekend news at CBS Television, arrived at the book center three years ago, programming leaned more toward the scholarly, with author readings, lectures and films every other Sunday. She was the first programming director with a production background and this past summer, the center burst with activity.

Called Paper Bridge, the arts festival presented events four days a week, with Sunday seeing such family programs as silent films featuring Jewish comedian Max Davidson; Mondays reserved for music, such as the Ribs and Brisket Revue, which explored links between Yiddish music and African-American scat singing; Tuesdays for drama and Wednesdays for film. The Wednesday lineup also included a pre-film book discussion.

As it has progressed, the book center has enlarged its mandate, from rescuing hundreds of thousands of Yiddish books from the garbage in order to preserve a major aspect of Jewish culture, to developing and spreading knowledge of that culture. "Twenty-five years ago, it was about rescuing the books. We still rescue books all the time, but the numbers are not as great as they were 25 years ago," noted Gerard.

When Aaron Lansky, founder and director of the center, began saving Yiddish books, it was estimated there were 70,000 in existence. The tally now stands at 1.5 million that the center has collected, many of which have been sold to libraries, universities and interested readers. The rarest have been scanned and digitally stored and can be reprinted on demand. With 30,000 members and 10,000 visitors per year, the center, located on the grounds of Hampshire College, has become an international cultural institution.

Its books, antique posters and arts performances celebrate a culture of humor, of family, of intellectual inquiry and dedication to God against a poignant background of persecution, from the Spanish expulsion to Russian pogroms to the Nazi Holocaust.

"It survived and it is surviving, because of the heart of the people, because of their perseverance," said Paul, who recalled growing up in the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights and running down to the newsstand to get the Yiddish newspaper, the *Forverts* (Forward), for her *bubbe* (grandmother.)

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Michael and Sue Katz, of Amherst, brought Michael's mother, Rose, 92, who lives in Manhattan, to the Youngers of Zion concert. Growing up in the Bronx, she said, "my parents spoke Yiddish in the house. I have loads of Yiddish records from my mother."

However, to paraphrase an old ad campaign from Levy's rye bread, you don't have to be Jewish to enjoy Yiddish culture. The performance programming also illustrates universal themes expressed by Yiddish artists, noted Gerard. One of the films screened was *Tevye*, a 1939 Yiddish-language dramatization of Sholem Aleichem's story about a Russian dairy farmer, which was given further fame when it was made into a musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, in 1964.

Its themes of inter-generational conflict, of a struggle between tradition and modern life, of questioning God's plan for humankind – all are universal, Gerard said. "Many people don't see *Fiddler on the Roof* as a Jewish story. You can be Irish or Ugandan and understand it," she said.

Another audience member at the Youngers concert, Marie Mannino, of West Springfield, commenting that the music has "such feeling," added that she thought the book center could do more with its ten-acre grounds, currently featuring a writers' memorial garden and an apple orchard.

Gerard plans to do just that. On Sunday, Oct. 2, the book center will collaborate for the first time with several synagogues and Jewish organizations in Amherst, Springfield, Greenfield and other towns to present an outdoor day-long festival celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

Performers will include singers Sruli & Lisa and klezmer-rock band Golem, along with storytelling, dance, food, New Year's card-making and lessons in blowing the traditional *shofar*, or ram's horn.

At the end of September, Gerard said she and the center's staff will evaluate the arts programming for next year, continuing to explore Yiddish as a "living, breathing culture" that explores "what life's journey is all about."

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