

And now for something completely different:



Ester Klimitz aims to bring Yiddish to young Jews



The UJA Federation Committee for Yiddish holds various events, including an annual concert, to promote Yiddish culture.

By **RITA POLIAKOV**
Staff Reporter

Ester Klimitz always loved Yiddish. As a child, it was her link to her parent's past. As a teenager, it was a comfort in a foreign world. And now, at 29 years old, it's a way for Klimitz, the co-ordinator of the UJA Federation Committee for Yiddish, to keep a culture alive.

"It's our ancestors' language. I consider myself very lucky that I speak Hebrew and Yiddish," said Klimitz, who became the co-ordinator of the committee about half a year ago.

"It's not common these days for a younger person to speak and understand [Yiddish]. I'm not delusional. Eventually [the language] won't be around at all... but the culture, and everything Yiddish has given us outside the language, will never die."

Klmitz originally learned Yiddish from her grandmother and parents, who were from Russia and Lithuania.

She started learning the language formally at Bialik Hebrew Day School in Grade 8, when she immigrated to Canada from Israel. In high school, she attended the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, where Yiddish wasn't offered. Undeterred, Klmitz, along with two other students, found a night course through the Toronto District School Board.

"It was difficult to go [after school] from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. There was homework and what not," she said, adding that it was worth the effort.

For Klmitz, both Hebrew and Yiddish were more than just languages. They were comforts – something familiar in a strange new society.

"A big part of going to Bialik was the real sadness that came over me when the realization came that I wasn't living in Israel. I was ripped apart from my school, my friends, and moved to a country that was extremely different," she said. "I clung to what was familiar to me. Bialik was

the beginning of that. Hebrew was something I knew, I understood... it felt good to be around Jewish kids that understood Hebrew."

But learning Yiddish was about clinging to her past, said Klmitz.

"With Yiddish, I really love the language. We call Yiddish *mamaloshen*, your mother tongue... It's just a part of my history, of my culture," she said, adding that she taught Yiddish through the Toronto District School Board when she was 16.

"The culture is part of what makes us connected [to other] Jews. If you were Jewish in a *shtetl* in Ukraine and you, for some reason, had to leave, if you spoke Yiddish, [Jewish communities] immediately knew everything about you."

After Klmitz finished high school, she attended the University of Toronto, where she earned a minor in Jewish studies. At the university, Klmitz took as many Yiddish courses as she could.

"I really enjoyed... reading stories in Yiddish... They teach you so much about Jewish humour," she said, adding that she also learned about the Jewish culture in the Holocaust through her Yiddish-language courses.

For her thesis in one of her classes, Klmitz interviewed an elderly couple who had survived the Holocaust.

"Honestly, they started crying. They talked about how [Yiddish] kept them close to each other and the other people they were with," she said. "To the older generation, [Yiddish] was a way of life. Unfortunately, those generations are passing away."

Through her Yiddish studies and personal experiences, Klmitz realized that the language meant different things to different generations.

"For [the older generation] the connection was their home back in Europe. To the younger generation, if we teach them about it accordingly, [they'll] learn about the connection of the language to all the other aspects of Judaism," she said.

When interviewing for the position of co-ordinator of the committee, Klmitz was worried her Yiddish wouldn't be up to par. She quickly learned that she was wrong.

"When I was interviewed for the job, I was brushing up on Yiddish. I walked in and started speaking and they go, 'We don't understand, we don't speak Yiddish,'" she said. "There are a few members of the committee who aren't as fluent as I am in Yiddish, they're just passionate about [Yiddish] culture and art."

The committee is a centre point for Yiddish

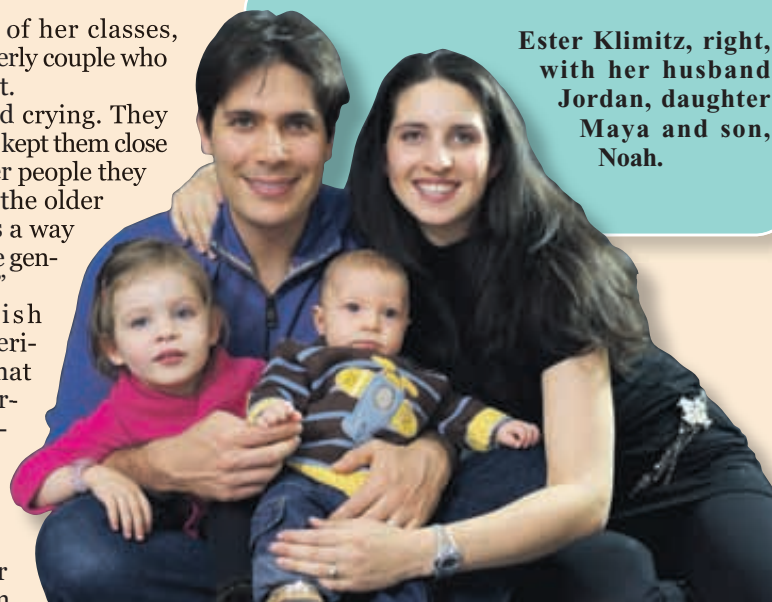
activities in Toronto's Jewish community. Members organize conversation classes, reading circles, an annual summer concert and Sunday morning children's classes. While it has tried in the past, the organization has a hard time involving youth in many of their events. Klmitz is working to change this.

"It's a difficult thing to do. The committee doesn't have young people on it. I found it a very difficult thing to accomplish," she said of youth programming, adding that most Yiddish committee members are over 50. "It seems like they've given up because they've tried for so long and it hasn't worked."

Through her position on the committee, Klmitz is determined to connect younger Jews with the Yiddish language, as well as its stories, theatre, music and culture.

"I've just come on and that's one of my goals, to try something different from a younger point of view," she said, adding that this involves Yiddish events that are mostly in English to slowly integrate youths into the culture.

According to Klmitz, many parents don't



Ester Klimitz, right, with her husband Jordan, daughter Maya and son, Noah.

teach their children Yiddish because they feel that Hebrew is a more relevant language and that kids can't learn more than two languages.

Klmitz disagrees. Her daughter, who's three, already knows Hebrew and Yiddish.

"Kids are just sponges," she said. "My daughter can learn seven languages at a time if she wanted to."

If your organization or synagogue is planning an event related to Yiddish, the Yiddish committee can be contacted at eklmitz@ujafed.org.