What is the future of Yiddish?

Picture a secular, global, urban hipster: that’s the face of the new Yiddish

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Tim Morris is a balding, smoky-eyed, 58-year-old Irishman who’s worn a kilt instead of pants every day for the last 12 years. One would not expect him to speak fluent Yiddish. And yet, his love of the language traces back to his childhood years in Toronto, growing up during the 1960s and ’70s with Jewish friends who showed him Yiddish schoolbooks and chatted giddily about their Yiddish classes.

“It all seemed like a fascinating and interesting language,” he recalls. “It seemed to be deeply rooted in Toronto’s history.”

But it would be decades later, after witnessing his son’s university graduation, that Morris decided to enrol at the University of Toronto’s medieval studies department, returning to academia for the first time since dropping out of college to work full time at age 17. Once he saw Yiddish as a course offering, he jumped at the chance to scratch his decades-old itch, earning scholarship awards for top marks in his Yiddish classes three years in a row. He now spends his free time translating old Yiddish texts and tutoring other students, while pursuing his PhD.

But isn’t his fondness of Yiddish a bit weird, given that he isn’t Jewish?

“I don’t feel I’m an intruder,” he says. “I like to think, and I’ve always felt, that the treasures of secular Yiddish culture – the works of Sholem Aleichem and Mendele Mocher Sforim and others – are part of an international, global human heritage…. It was a gift that Jewish people gave to the whole world.”

Despite what you may think, Morris is actually a good representation of the future of Yiddish: secular, urban, global, bookish, hipster. This is not the Yiddish of payot and textbooks, but of podcasts and online journals; a little less klezmer, a little more pop culture.

Morris is one of an estimated 600,000 fluent Yiddish speakers worldwide, according to a report from the department of Jewish studies at Rutgers University – a far cry from the 11 million who spoke it at the dawn of the Holocaust. In Canada alone, the number of people who say that Yiddish is their mother tongue has simply died off.

The language’s geographic centres have since shifted from eastern Europe to North America, clustering around major Jewish urban areas such as Toronto, Montreal and New York. And therein lies the secret: a seeming result of that westward trend has been the language’s artistic renaissance, dovetailing with the Internet revolution and millennials’ sweeping fascination with any aesthetic deemed offbeat and vintage.

This summer has seen an explosion of Yiddish culture bursting into the mainstream. The New Yorker recently published a deep dive into Yiddish Glory: The Lost Songs of World War II, a collection of once-lost Yiddish songs written during the Holocaust, which were found and revived by Yiddish professor and CJN columnist Anna Shternshis. On Aug. 28, a live performance of those songs will open Toronto’s Ashkenaz Festival, one of the world’s predominant showcases of Yiddish and klezmer music.

In New York, the Museum of Jewish Heritage extended its popular Yiddish adaptation of Fiddler on the Roof until October. “For those who grew up around Yiddish, its use here will likely strike a deep emotional chord,” wrote Jesse Green in a review of the play in the New York Times. “For me, it’s not just the fusillade of familiar words and phrases: meshugga, geklempt, zay gezunt. It is the sound of my own grandparents and all they lost in leaving their Anatevkes.”

In Canada, Montreal’s Yiddish arts scene, which includes the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre (one of the few functioning Yiddish theatres still in existence), is the birthplace of Yidlife Crisis, a Yiddish web series about two kvetching friends. The series grew popular enough that the creators were able to nab cameos from Jewish stars like Howie Mandel and Mayim Bialik, paving the way for a third season that started filming this month.

“We were trying to imagine what conversational Yiddish would be like today – for secular Jews – if it had not been wiped out by the Holocaust,” co-creator Eli Batalion told The CJN in 2014, when the series premiered. That casual vibe is what makes Yidlife Crisis unique in the Yiddish art world: while the klezmer and theatre scenes are quietly growing, one still doesn’t hear too many people speaking Yiddish conversationally, other than in some Hasidic communities.