

MONDAY 06.07.04

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TROPICAL LIFE

PEOPLE

Six years ago,
civil rights attorney
David Weintraub
found a new cause:
Saving the
Yiddish
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The Hispanic
Theatre Festival
opens with
'El hombre
inmaculado'

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יידן רעדן.

DAVID
LOVES
YIDDISH

PLUMB, MOVIE LISTINGS, TV, PUZZLES & COMICS

PRESERVING the mother tongue



JARED LAZARUS/HERALD STAFF

PASS IT ON: David Weintraub and his wife, Liz, read to their son, Jonah, from *The Little House*, a Yiddish book.

David Weintraub left law to help bring back his bubbe's beloved Yiddish

COVER STORY

BY DONNA GEHRKE-WHITE
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So there David Weintraub was — trying to fit 50 people into a Miami Beach gallery for a night of Yiddish poetry, music and art. (He had wondered whether anyone would show up.)

The event — which included Holocaust survivors passionately reciting poetry while listeners bobbed — proved to be a turning point for Weintraub. Six years ago, he quit as a civil rights attorney to focus full-time on promoting the *mama-loshn*, the mother tongue.

Today, many credit the South Miami attorney, who turns 46 on Tuesday, with helping stoke the resurgence of Yiddish, a 1,000-year-old language and culture that is a smattering of Hebrew, Aramaic, German, Slavic and the Romance languages.

As executive director of the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture in Pinecrest, Weintraub has developed Yiddish classes online at www.yiddishculture.org, attracting students from as far as Norway and Australia. He's also scheduled local lectures, art exhibits and helped bring to the stage an opera written in a Nazi concentration camp.

"It's just remarkable that ... what is a one-person operation can be so productive and energetic," marvels Nathan Katz, chairman of the religious-studies department at Florida International University.

"Everyone saw the Yiddish language and culture was dying," adds Haim Shaked, director of the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies at the University of Miami.

LIBRARY, GALLERY

This fall, the center will open a Yiddish library and move its art gallery from Coral Gables to Temple Bet Shira, 7500 SW 120th St. in Pinecrest.

Weintraub is working on the center's next major exhibit, *A Tropical Yiddishland Called South Beach*, which will depict how the Yiddish culture took root in South Beach. It is scheduled to open in the spring of 2006 in Miami Beach. Next on the nationwide tour: West Palm Beach, New York and Los Angeles.

The exhibit will take people back to South Beach, when Yiddish vaudeville, theater and folk singing were thriving, especially in the 1940s.

This might have become a lost chapter in local history, had Weintraub not tracked down old pictures, newspaper clippings and posters.

"If we didn't have him and his foundation none of this would be going on," Katz says.

Weintraub also is editing Yiddish authors and writing his own books. His children's book about birds moving to a new land, *Sereena's Secret*, written in both Yiddish and English, will come out this fall. Despite his schedule, Weintraub still fits in some legal cases — "It helps pay the bills" — while he and his wife, Liz, raise their 16-month-old son, Jonah Benjamin.

Weintraub credits his interest in Yiddish to his parents and grandparents.

His late bubbe, Anna, would regale the family with how as a teenager she once cracked the head of a marauding Russian soldier who burst into her family's home during a pogrom. "She defended her home by attacking this Russian soldier with a chair," Weintraub says, laughing.

When she and her husband Sam couldn't get into America — Congress had limited the number of immigrants in the 1920s — they sailed to Argentina. Weintraub's father, Bernard, was born in Buenos Aires.

Weintraub's grandparents immigrated to the States during the Depression.

As a child, Weintraub was immersed in their Yiddish. "My grandmother sang Yiddish songs and recited Yiddish poetry," he says. On Saturdays, he went to *shule*, a secular school to learn how to read, write and speak Yiddish.

As a teen, he stopped attending services and didn't think about Yiddish for years. He plowed through college and law school and began his career as a civil-rights lawyer.

But as his grandparents aged, he noticed how the country was losing its Yiddish roots.

"There was a whole heritage rapidly disappearing," says Weintraub.

He was recruited by the late Yiddish poet Teitelboim — for whom the center is named — to start a Yiddish cultural center. She died in 1992, a year before the center began its programs.

Five years later, the center got its first office space and Weintraub resigned in 1998 as director of the Volunteer Lawyers' Project for federal courts in South Florida.

ARTS FESTIVAL

One of his highlights at the Yiddish cultural center: Creating *Creative Defiance and the Holocaust*, an arts festival that celebrated Yiddish artists, poets and writers who defied the Nazis in spreading the culture — including an opera written in a concentration camp. The opera, *The Emperor of Atlantis*, was a joint project between the center and FIU.

The Holocaust plays a pivotal role in the decline of Yiddish culture.

"Practically half the Yiddish-speaking population disappeared because of the war," said Avi Hoffman, executive director of the National Center for Jewish Cultural Arts in Coral Springs.

The number of Yiddish speakers plummeted from a pre-World War II high of about 11 million worldwide to two million today, some estimate.

Weintraub disputes that number, pointing to vibrant Yiddish communities in Australia, Canada, Argentina, Mexico and the United States.

"Yiddish has grown in popularity so much that there is actually a Yiddish-Japanese book that's just been published and Yiddish is being taught in Tokyo," he adds.

But he concedes that in recent decades Yiddish has been overshadowed by Hebrew, which is Israel's main language.

Weintraub, however, wants to make sure Yiddish lives on. "It can't be lost," he says.

So he pores over musty newspaper clippings about long-closed radio stations, Yiddish comedy shows and photos of bubbes and zaydes gossiping on Ocean Drive. Money, though, remains tight.

"Like many small nonprofits, the current economic climate and the loss of foundation support has caused us some serious problems," he says.

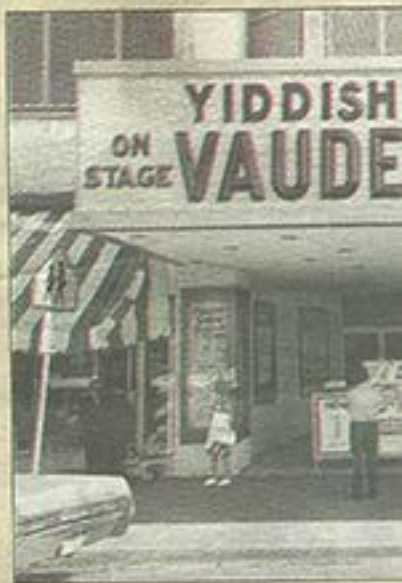
So he has added another job: Fundraising.

Not a problem, Weintraub says.

"He's working as hard as he can," says an admiring Hoffman.



MEMORABILIA: Yiddish books and performances, from David Weintraub.



BACK IN THE DAY: The marquee at Temple Bet Shira, which stood at 1235 Washington Ave. in Miami Beach.

YIDDISH EVENTS

The Dora Teitelboim Yiddish Cultural Center has online classes in Yiddish. You can register or check for updates at www.yiddishculture.org.

Here are some upcoming events at the center, now housed at Temple Bet Shira, 7500 SW 120 St., Pinecrest:

- **Yiddish classes** beginning in October after High Holy Days at the temple.

- **KlezFest Miami**: Weeklong event beginning Oct. 11, which includes concerts, lectures and student programs. Runs in conjunction with

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JARED LAZARUS/HERALD STAFF

MEMORABILIA: Yiddish books and posters for Yiddish performances, from David Weintraub's collection.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID GODLIS

BACK IN THE DAY: The marquee at the old Cinema Theatre in Miami Beach, which stood at 1235 Washington Ave., circa 1974.

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University of Miami's Festival Miami.

- **The Undying Legacy: The Jewish World of I.B. Singer** starting Nov. 7 at Miami Beach Public Library and throughout the month. It will include storytelling and movies.

- **Storytelling by David Weintraub:** He will read from his new children's book, "Sereena's Secret," throughout November and December.

Meanwhile, Weintraub is looking for any artifacts for the center's upcoming exhibit, "A Tropical Yiddishland Called South Beach." Call him at 305-774-9244.