

# Famous Yiddish newspaper relaunches website

NEW YORK, USA: It'll be computer scrolling, not ancient scrolls, for Jewish culture lovers when the world's most famous Yiddish newspaper relaunches its website on Monday (4 February) in a bid to stave off extinction.

*Forverts*, founded in 1897 when Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe were pouring into America, has been shrinking relentlessly in recent decades as new generations of immigrant families abandon their ancestral language.

But now the newspaper, which also appears in English as *The Forward*, will be reborn for the 21st century with a website targeting what the New York-based institution believes is an untapped younger and a more international audience.

Publisher Sam Norich said *Forverts* has dropped from peak circulation of 250,000 a day in the 1920s, when it was one of the most widely read newspapers in the United States, to just 2,000 in a weekly edition. Now the print publication will be cut to once a fortnight, while the currently barebones website will be transformed with news, blogs and podcasts from correspondents as far apart as Jerusalem, Buenos Aires and Moscow.

"We're really putting our focus on the website as our main product, and the print will be a focus on the best of the website, rather than the website being a by-product of print," Norich told *AFP*. Before the state of Israel was created after World War II, Yiddish was the main language for the masses of Jews living in Europe, while Hebrew was confined to sacred use.

But Yiddish began vanishing once Hebrew was resurrected in Israel and immigrants in America started to switch over to English. The last big influx of Yiddish speakers to the United States were Holocaust survivors after the Second World War. Now they too are increasingly rare, and Norich warns that Yiddish is now "dying language."

But the Internet gives *Forverts* -- whose writers have included 1978 Nobel literature laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky and 1986 Nobel peace prize winner Elie Wiesel -- a chance for "significant growth."

He says the main hope for the website lies with children of Holocaust survivors "who grew up in Yiddish-speaking homes but never had any formal training," Norich said. "For them, there'll be videos and podcasts with English subtitles, as well as pop-up translation tools on text articles," he said.

Norich said there's also growing interest in Yiddish culture at universities. And a third potential source of readers, he believes, is the booming ultra-Orthodox population in Israel and the United States. Ironically, while Hasidic Jews are the only significant group to retain Yiddish as a daily language, their strict religious rules ban them from reading secular newspapers like *Forverts*, Norich said.

However the Internet allows for more discreet reading opportunities and a way of "seeing the wider world that they're just

not going to get" otherwise. Aaron Lansky, who founded the National Yiddish Book Centre three decades ago in Massachusetts, calls *Forverts* "truly the iconic Yiddish newspaper."

He says that, despite the decline of the traditional Yiddish demographic base, interest from people attracted by the culture is rising. "The world is really changing very quickly right now. It's not just in the United States, but all over the world. There's a growing understanding of a large, diverse and multicultural world," he said in a phone interview while visiting Tel Aviv.

When Lansky started his own project to collect and save Yiddish texts, people asked him who would read the books. But he's had remarkable success, with 400,000 downloads of the 12,000 books he's posted online. "*Forverts* should be able to tap a similar vein," he said.

"Many of these readers are young people, so I think the *Forverts* is very smart to target that population," Lansky said. Going online isn't "an act of desperation at all, but an act of faith."

According to Mendy Cahan, founder of *Yung Yiddish*, a Yiddish cultural association, the language, saw a spurt of 19th and 20th century literary output, and is now enjoying a revival in Israel.

"Now the younger generation is tapping back into this reserve and trying to rediscover it," he said.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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