

Translating America

On teaching English to Russian Jews

This article touches at first on the experiences of a Canadian student, at university in New York, teaching English to recent Jewish immigrants from Russia. It was the sort of class, over forty years on, in which the irrepressible Hyman Kaplan had once won immortality in the pages of Leo Rosten's classic stories. But in this realistic and sensitive account, Goldie Morgentaler unobtrusively weaves in another theme than her students' problems with the language: we find ourselves led by sympathy into a sort of observation room, attending with her the often painful birth into a free society of adult men and women who have spent their lives in mental caves, assigned to them at the base of a mountainous, all-encompassing government.

NYANA - the acronym stands for New York Association for New Americans - was one of the American institutions charged with providing relief for the Russian Jews whom the Kremlin allowed to emigrate in large numbers between 1970 and 1981. The original destination of all these emigrants was Israel, but once out of Russia many of them applied instead for permission to settle in the United States, Canada or Australia. NYANA was one of the agencies charged with providing counseling, job placement, housing and instruction in English for those who chose to settle in New York City. Faced with a larger influx of immigrants than it had foreseen, the agency put up advertisements on university bulletin boards around the city, requesting volunteers to teach English.

I was at the time something of an immigrant myself, a Canadian citizen attending an American university, who felt not entirely at home and not entirely a stranger in New York City. Unlike my future students, I had no language barrier to overcome, nor were the ways and customs of this huge

democracy alien to me. Bank loans, the competition for jobs, university tuition and apartment hunting were all as familiar to me as they would be foreign and disconcerting to the new immigrants. Nevertheless, I felt myself enough of a stranger in a strange land to think that I might be of some service to those who were bound to feel stranger still, and I applied for the job.

I had had no previous experience teaching and my knowledge of Russian was limited to a very few words, the remains of one semester of instruction two years earlier. I was taken to observe one class and allowed to take over from the teacher for a half hour. The students regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion - or so it seemed to me - and I was therefore surprised to get a call from the director the next day, asking if I would agree to take over the intermediate conversation class two afternoons a week.

The designation "intermediate" meant that the students had already mastered the rudiments of English grammar and vocabulary and were ready to put their knowledge to work in conversation. It was nonetheless a misnomer, since there was no such thing as an "advanced" class; in practice, all the term meant was that the students were not rank beginners. Otherwise, the level of proficiency was very uneven.

All the immigrants who came under NYANA's jurisdiction were required to take at least one English class. This included even those who were already fluent in the language, such as one woman who had been an English teacher in Kiev and who spoke flawlessly. Unfortunately, one class was as much English instruction as some of her less accomplished classmates ever got. NYANA's goal with regard to the Russian Jews was to help them to become self-sufficient in as short a time as possible. Towards this end, it concentrated primarily on job placement. The function of the English classes was, thus, strictly utilitarian - to acquaint the immigrant with enough English to enable him to get and keep a job. The men, in general, could be expected to come to class only so long as they remained unemployed. Once a job was found for them, they disappeared into the work force, regardless of their mastery of English. Those who had special skills were the easiest to place and they seldom came to more than one lesson. One such man, a violin maker, apologized for the fact that he would not be returning by remarking that while his English was not good, it did not really matter, because violins do not speak English.

Before every class, I would stop by the director's office to pick up a set of mimeographed sheets which contained grammar drills and a list of questions to promote discussion. These were the basic teaching materials and I could supplement them as I saw fit. As it happened, I rarely had an opportunity to move much beyond these drills and questions, since progress at NYANA was an elusive commodity. The first half hour of every class was spent learning the names of the new students

and trying to quickly ascertain how much English they already knew. Planning classes with an eye to building on what had already been taught was futile. For every student who had attended a previous lesson, there was one as yet unschooled. The class was in a constant state of flux, rather like a street-car, with some people climbing aboard to ride for a few stops, just as others were disembarking. With the exception of a small group of middle-aged women, who for various reasons were not being hurried out into the job market, I never got to know any of my students well enough to pinpoint a problem or rejoice in an improvement. My initial reaction was to try to cram as much as possible into the two hours available to me, but this now-or-never approach ended by confusing everybody, and I abandoned it in favour of a more relaxed pace, trusting to the fact that English was in the air all around them, to fill in the gaps in my students' knowledge.

To these frustrations was added another: the director of the English classes at NYANA was a Polish Jew, who had himself been an immigrant after the Second World War. He was fluent in five languages, including Russian and, of course, English. In general, I held him in great esteem, but on the subject of the English language we did not quite see eye to eye. Like many East Europeans, he was extremely conscious of correct speech, an attitude which when applied to English precluded, according to him, all contractions. Contractions, he insisted, were best left to the student to pick up on his own; they should not be taught. I could not agree with this; it seemed to me a total misapprehension of the way in which English functions in that it unfairly relegated contractions to the domain of slang. Moreover, "is not" differs enough from "isn't" in both spelling and pronunciation as to require some explanation, and English speakers are so much more likely to prefer the contraction to the full form, that not to teach it amounted, in my opinion, to a misrepresentation of the language.

I never won this argument, nor did I win another, similar battle over the use of overly-refined expressions. Students at NYANA were routinely urged to say, "I misspoke myself", when what they meant was, "I made a mistake." "I misspoke myself" is certainly elegant; it is so elegant that it is seldom said. This, it seemed to me, was the sort of language which might fruitfully be left to students to pick up on their own. The tug-of-war with the director over what to teach ended in a compromise: I did not teach contractions, but nobody misspoke themselves in my class. Rather, they all made mistakes.

Like the director, the students at NYANA were obsessed with speaking correctly. Many of them attributed all their problems in adjusting to America to the fact that they did not speak English well. Jews in the Soviet Union are often stigmatized for speaking Russian with an accent, and some of my students worried that the same would happen in the United States. This was especially true of the women, who repeatedly

voiced the fear that people would laugh at them for the way they spoke English. As one woman put it, "I am forty years old and I speak in English like a baby." As a group, the women were far shyer than the men and much less outspoken. They tended to worry more about getting the grammar and syntax right and would often work out the correct form of what they wanted to say on a piece of paper, before speaking it aloud. Because they were hesitant to talk unless reasonably certain of being right, they made fewer mistakes than the men; but my own feeling was that those who threw caution to the winds and let the grammatical chips fall where they might, profited more from the lessons. These, after all, were conversation classes, and the point was to talk first and be corrected after.

The aspects of English which seemed to give my students the most trouble were the uses of gender and the lack of polite forms of address. Some of the students were uncertain, for example, whether the English "you" was respectful enough to use when addressing a teacher. Despite my assurance that it was, they tried to avoid it, so that "you said" often became "you, the teacher, said..." or, even more confusing, "the teacher said...", which always left me wondering which teacher was being referred to.

Even more common was the confusion between masculine and feminine pronouns. "He" and "she" were often used interchangeably and without regard for the actual sex of the person referred to. I was asked one day whether it was true that in English all animals are referred to as "it". I answered that while it was not incorrect to refer to an animal as "it", it was more usual, where the sex was known, to use the appropriate pronoun. To my surprise, this answer was greeted with consternation and disbelief. After some discussion, it occurred to me that the problem sprang from the sexlessness of English nouns. Where Russian designates all objects, animate and inanimate, as masculine, feminine or neuter, English designates them as nothing at all, leaving the Russian-speaker to assume that they are all neuter. It follows, therefore, that animals are also neuter and should be referred to as "it". "This is why English is so difficult for us," one man complained, "because there is no sense." I could only reply that sense is often merely a matter of one's point of view.

Whenever a student was stuck for a word, he would lapse into Russian and I would be forced to remind him that I did not speak the language. This was usually greeted with an indulgent smile, which I interpreted as compassion for my ignorance. It was quite a shock to discover that the real reason for the smile was disbelief. My statement was understood to be a pedagogical ruse to get the students to speak English during class. I was made aware of this when I was "tricked" during a break. A man came up to me and said, in Russian, "You really speak Russian very well, but you pretend not to." I understood him well enough not to require a translation, and answered in English that, while I knew a few Russian words, I really did not

speak the language. He broke into a grin, and I realized that the answer presupposed the question to have been correctly understood, which in turn proved his point.

This was but one example of a general tendency among these new Americans not to take too much on faith. I got a similar message when a discussion on education in Russia turned into a symposium on cheating. Everyone, it seemed, had a story to tell on how they had cheated during the high school matriculation exams, with the men complaining that the women had it easier, since they could write the answers on their thighs and then slip up the hems of their skirts when they needed to read them. I suppose the surprise showed on my face, because I was immediately asked if I had never cheated in school. I had, of course, but not very often and not very seriously. "Are you a genius?" someone asked, and then added, "In Russia, we must cheat. Everybody cheats." "Even geniuses," another voice put in.

This tendency to be suspicious of others, especially of those in authority, showed itself most forcefully in the immigrants' attitude towards NYANA. NYANA is a private agency, funded by the United Jewish Appeal. Because private agencies do not exist in the Soviet Union, some of the immigrants suspected NYANA of being an instrument of the American government. There was, consequently, widespread distrust and dislike of the counsellors, who were the organization's most obvious representatives. I was often asked, for instance, if the American government required the immigrant to take whatever apartment the NYANA counsellor found for him, or if it was possible for him to choose one on his own. If the apartment was in Brooklyn, how did one get permission to move to Manhattan?

The English teachers were warned in advance not to pay any attention to complaints about counsellors, but this was not always possible; sometimes students brought their dissatisfactions into class with them. One young man held a Russian newspaper in front of his face for the first forty minutes of the lesson. He then lowered it long enough to deliver himself of the observation that it was "high time for a break." I was so impressed with this phrasing, that although it was really much too early for a break, I acceded to the request. When class resumed, I tried to get the young man to speak again and discovered that he barely knew enough English to put a sentence together. Nor was he interested in learning more. He was required to take English lessons and physically he was present, but that was as much concession to NYANA as he cared to make. All he really wanted to do was read his paper and take his break. To make certain of the latter, he had memorized his one English sentence, without realizing that it was too polished not to attract attention, or to allow its speaker to sink back into anonymity behind his newspaper.

Another student, a young woman, really did speak English well. She had been living with an American family since her

arrival in New York and by the time she appeared in my class, she was fluent. Despite this, I could not seem to get her promoted. After every class, I would go to the director and suggest that she be relieved of the obligation of attending, since she was bored and had begun to make a nuisance of herself by chattering. Still, she kept coming to class. It turned out that neither her counsellor, nor the director himself believed that she spoke as well as I claimed, for the very good reason that to spite them both she had been pretending that she could neither speak nor understand a word. It was only in class that she gave vent, in the most emphatic and colloquial English, to feeling "sick and tired" of NYANA, jobs, counsellors and New York City.

If teaching at NYANA had its frustrations, they paled beside the opportunity it afforded of meeting these former denizens of another world. To those who had lived all their lives under communism, mastering a foreign language was only one of the difficulties presented by America. While they learned about democracy, I, as their teacher, learned to appreciate many things that I had previously taken for granted. Traveling, for one. The ability to move around the country at will and without permission amazed them, and it amazed me that they were amazed. The sheer abundance of everything caused problems I would never have imagined. I was occasionally asked, for instance, which radio station I listened to or television channel I watched, as if by endorsing one I might eliminate for them the need to choose, as well as the danger of choosing wrongly.

The mechanics of daily life caused innumerable problems for people who were used to having such essentials as jobs, housing, education and health care provided for them by the state. The large number of things which required individual initiative, not to mention individual financing, from universities to businesses, often threatened to overwhelm them and led to the complaint that in America, "everything is money." Bank loans, mortgages, credit cards were all aspects of this brave new world that bewildered and astonished them. Jobs, especially for professionals, were a constant source of frustration. Certain categories of profession, such as engineer or economist, were not exactly equivalent in the two countries. What the Russians called an engineer was often no more than a construction foreman in the U.S. Doctors, of whom a large number were women, presented a particular problem. They were considered unqualified by American standards and the licensing examinations, which they were required to take in order to practise in the United States, involved intensive preparation, as well as the acquisition of a specialized vocabulary. Needless to say, many were discouraged from even trying to prepare for these.

In addition, there was a clash of attitudes between the new arrivals and those who received them. The immigrants, many of whom had waged lengthy and difficult battles with

Soviet authorities over exit visas and then spent traumatic months as stateless persons in Rome, awaiting word from the U.S. government on their applications for admission, often arrived with the feeling that after so much hardship life should now be easy. Finding things more complicated than they had anticipated, some reacted with anger and resentment.

At the same time, they were often confronted with the American assumption that those "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" owe the United States a special debt of gratitude, which they should be constantly expressing. I once overheard a counsellor ask an immigrant: "How happy are you to be in America?", as if anything less than complete contentment was inconceivable. This attitude made it difficult for the immigrant to make any complaint to the counsellor without risking an accusation of ingratitude, and it contributed to the tension between the two groups.

The vast majority of these Russian Jews were far from ungrateful. On the contrary, it was their sense of gratitude, however mixed with bewilderment, that made teaching them such an emotional experience. It was the opportunity to watch and share in their dawning perception that in America they were no longer tolerated guests at someone else's table, but full citizens of a society in which they shared equal rights with all other citizens. In America, they could be Jews without anxiety or apology; they need no longer shun the synagogue for fear of informers, or hesitate to send their children to Jewish schools for fear of repercussions. These are not small things and they were not appreciated in a small way, but habits of mind do not change over-night.

On my last day of teaching at NYANA, I had a class made up entirely of women. This coincidence did not go unnoticed, and no sooner had someone remarked on it, than an air of informality settled on the class. They all talked, even those women who had been with me for weeks without opening their mouths. They told jokes, laughed at each other's attempted puns and corrected each other's mistakes. They were doing so well, that I could not resist going to the director during the break and urging him to come in and listen. I wanted to show off these students of mine. He told me that he had, in any case, planned on coming in, since he had a possible replacement for me, who would be observing the class. This last fact, unfortunately, failed to make enough of an impression on me and I neglected to warn the class that when the director came in, he would not be alone.

When the director entered, he was followed by a middle-aged woman, who took a seat behind me, so that I immediately forgot that she was there. The director began to ask questions of each woman in turn. To my great astonishment and chagrin, not one of them answered correctly in English. They would start well enough, falter and retreat into Russian. These women, who not an hour earlier had been kidding each other in English, suddenly seemed incapable of

uttering a syllable. I could not understand it.

It was not until the director left the room, followed by the visitor, that I was given a clue as to what had happened. "Did that lady like us?" someone immediately asked. "Is she an inspector?" It did not quickly occur to me whom they were talking about. Then, too late, I explained who the lady was. Of course, they did not believe me. "She looks like an inspector," they insisted, and I thought back to the day when I had observed this intermediate class and felt the anxious curiosity of the students as they strained to figure out who I was and whether I wished them well or ill. Fear is not something that dies with a change of country.

Two years after I left NYANA, I was sitting in a car, which was stopped at a red light on Sixth Avenue. Another car pulled up alongside and suddenly burst into a frenzy of horn-blowing and window-thumping. I turned in the direction of the commotion and saw a carful of my former students from NYANA, all frantically waving their hands and shouting "Teacher. teacher." "I speak English good now," a woman's voice called out from the car's interior. "Well...You speak English well," someone corrected her. The light changed and still honking and shouting "Teacher.", they screeched off, leaving all the other cars far behind them.

It was not really I who taught them to speak English either good or well. America did that. And it was not I who taught them to speed away from a red light the instant it turned green. America did that too. But for the first few months of their arrival, I had served as one of America's representatives and obviously they had not forgotten. Nor, for that matter, have I.

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