REYNA: When my dad overheard that we snuck in some English words, he had this little jingle that he would sing and sometimes play on the piano. Khirek tsvay yidn daled yid shin. And that, that spells out Yiddish, yidish, as a reminder that, that we should conduct ourselves in Yiddish with each other.

SARAH: This is Heritage Words, a podcast about the words we've inherited from our ancestors and the meaning they bring to our lives. Heritage Words is produced by the HUC Jewish Language Project, which raises awareness about Jewish ancestral diversity through the lens of language. I'm your host, Sarah Bunin Benor. Today we have two guests, Reyna Schaechter and Isaac Bleaman. Reyna Schaechter grew up speaking Yiddish in New York and has performed across the globe in the Yiddish sister act, Di Shekhter-Tekhter.

CLIP: "Yidl mitn fidl" performed by Di Shekhter-Tekhter (2017)

SARAH: She attended Yale University, where she studied the history of the Polish Jewish community immediately after the Holocaust using Yiddish language archival materials in Warsaw. Isaac L. Bleaman is an Associate Professor of Linguistics and the Herman P. and Sophia Taubman Professor of Jewish Studies at UC Berkeley. His research focuses on the sociolinguistics of contemporary Yiddish, and he's currently developing the Corpus of Spoken Yiddish in Europe, highly recommended. You can find it at yiddishcorpus.org. It's a digital archive of transcribed Holocaust testimonies from the Shoah Foundation, and it's really helpful for research and for teaching. Isaac received his PhD in Linguistics from NYU and his Master's in Yiddish Studies from Oxford. He has taught Yiddish at the YIVO Summer Program, the Workers Circle, and the Yiddish Farm. Reyna and Isaac, welcome to Heritage Words.

REYNA: Thank you.

ISAAC: Thanks for having us.

SARAH: This is unusual because usually if we have two guests, they're in different places, but obviously you are a married couple, and you are coming to us right now from Berkeley, California. Un haynt veln mir redn nor yidish. Farvos? Vayl Reyne un Isaac hobn a yidish redndike mishpokhe. Gut?

REYNA: Gut.

ISAAC: Dos hob ikh nisht farshtanen, ober yo. Farvos nisht?

SARAH: No, I'm just kidding. Well, what I said was today we're going to speak only Yiddish because Reyna and Isaac have a Yiddish-speaking family, but we will actually speak in English because I want to make sure that our listeners will understand. So let's start with Reyna. Why don't you just tell us about your language use growing up? Who did you speak English and Yiddish to?

REYNA: Yeah, so I was raised in a bilingual household where my father, Binyumen Schaechter, spoke with me and my siblings exclusively in Yiddish and expected us to speak among ourselves in Yiddish. And with our mother, we all spoke English. She understands everything, but is more comfortable expressing herself in English. And so what I mentioned with the siblings, when my dad overheard that we snuck in some English words, he had this little jingle that he would sing and sometimes play on the piano. Khirek tsvay yidn daled yid shin. And that spells out Yiddish, yidish, as a reminder that we should conduct ourselves in Yiddish with each other. So yeah, but it was a bilingual household.

ISAAC: And it speaks in the family.

REYNA: Yes. And of course, yeah. My dad grew up in a Yiddishist household. He and all of his sisters spoke Yiddish to their parents and vice versa. And so I have 13 Yiddish-speaking cousins who I speak to exclusively in Yiddish through my dad's side.

SARAH: Wow. And then what about your siblings now? Did your dad's jingle work? Did you switch to Yiddish full-time with them?

REYNA: We did, yeah. It was something we were proud of and none of us ever rebelled. I've heard of other families where the parent that tried to raise the kid in Yiddish really tried to get the kid to respond, but the kid would always respond in English. That was never an issue in our family. I think we were just so immersed in extended family and in Yiddish cultural activities in New York growing up that there was no reason to rebel. It was something that we were proud of and proud to carry on.

SARAH: So it seems like you had a community built in with your siblings, your cousins, your aunts and uncles. Did you have other people around that also spoke that weren't related to you?

REYNA: Yeah, so every summer we attended something called the Yidish-Vokh, which is actually, it translates to Yiddish Week. It's an annual retreat where Isaac and I actually met when I was older. So not a child, but through that community, I had friends around my age who were not related to me who spoke Yiddish. And so we would see each other every year, but on special occasions throughout the year, we would get together because we were not all based in New York.

SARAH: Yeah. Okay, so Isaac, what about you? How did you get interested in Yiddish?

ISAAC: Yeah, so I come from a very different background, linguistically at least, in the sense that my family was sort of a traditional story. I have four grandparents who were Yiddish heritage speakers, three born in the US and one born in Europe, but came when she was a teenager right at the beginning of World War II. But the language was lost in my family, like it was in many other Ashkenazi Jewish families in the United States. And I had some awareness of Yiddish in the background, that it was in my family, but it wasn't something that I was spoken to at all as a kid. I played the violin as a kid, and I grew up listening to klezmer music. And so there were

albums that I had in rotation that I would listen to often that had Yiddish songs. And when the time came for me to decide after my bar mitzvah whether I wanted to continue doing Hebrew school or do something else, I opted actually to continue with Hebrew school. And I went to LA Hebrew High; I grew up in the LA area. And that meant two or three times a week. And on Sundays, they had an elective, very, very intro-level Yiddish class that I took a few times. I was probably 14 or 15 when I started learning Yiddish. And I really got hooked, which I know is an experience that's shared by a lot of young Yiddishists. You get that first taste, and then you're kind of obsessed with it. And so I wound up studying Yiddish intensively. When I was 17, I went to the Yiddish summer program in Vilna in Lithuania. That was my first really intensive exposure. And so by the time I was applying to college, I knew that I wanted to go somewhere that offered Yiddish classes. And so I wound up at Stanford, where I took, I think, two years of Yiddish. And I was either the only student or one of two or three students, depending on the quarter. And I stuck with it. And so, as you mentioned in my bio, I continued with Yiddish after college; I did a master's in Yiddish. And I did my research at NYU in linguistics on Yiddish in the New York area, comparing Yiddishists of people kind of like Reyna and her, and her family, native Yiddish-speaking Jews in the New York area to Hasidic Jews.

SARAH: So your story is pretty similar to mine. I also got interested in Yiddish through klezmer music, through playing violin. And I studied Yiddish—well, I started a bit later. I started studying it in college and got interested in Yiddish studies, did some summer programs and then went on to do some research on Yiddish, but also on Jewish English: Yiddish influenced English, Hebrew influenced English. But you and I took different paths in that you are now raising your children in Yiddish, and I'm just raising mine in Jewish English. So what do you think sparked that interest in you, Isaac, in not just learning Yiddish, learning about Yiddish, but also transmitting it intergenerationally?

ISAAC: I would say meeting Reyna played a huge role in that. But it was really my first—the first time that I attended the Yidish-Vokh, which was right after college, actually first did the Middlebury Russian school that same summer. So I was in the mindset of not using English that summer. So I went to the Russian school for, I think, two months, and then I went to the Yidish-Vokh for the first time. And that was the first time I'd ever met young people who spoke Yiddish, kind of at all beyond just Yiddish classrooms and doing internships at the Yiddish Book Center, but actual people for whom Yiddish was a kind of a normalized part of their life, I would say. And I met Reyna at my first Yidish-Vokh. And you know, over the next year, when I was in Oxford, we kept in touch; we were kind of Yiddish pen pals from a distance. And then we started dating the next year. And I just got into that circle. So it was really being exposed to a community of people who were using it that inspired me to go down that path of making it a part of my daily life.

SARAH: Wow. And Reyna, did you know that you wanted to find a partner who also spoke Yiddish?

REYNA: I knew at the very least that I wanted to find a partner who was supportive of me speaking Yiddish to my kids. And it's definitely a bonus if they can also speak the language and

we can have a monolingual Yiddish household. But it was not a prerequisite. You know, I have cousins, and even my brother married someone who didn't speak Yiddish and ended up taking a class or two, but is not speaking Yiddish to their kids. So anyway, we don't discriminate against non-Yiddish speakers, so long as they let us do our thing.

ISAAC: I should mention that the first time I went to the Yidish-Vokh, I went on a scholarship that was the Binyumen Schaechter Foundation Scholarship, which is not Reyna's father, but his grandfather. And they support people who are usually attending Yidish-Vokh for the very first time, but people have some kind of a background in it academically.

SARAH: Wow, that's beautiful. And so Reyna, tell us a little bit more about why your family maintained Yiddish when most other immigrant families did not.

REYNA: Yeah, so I think it starts with Binyumen Schaechter, my great-grandfather, after whom my father is named. He was a very dedicated Yiddishist in a society where German was widely spoken, and he was just very committed to his kids and then his wife sort of maintaining Yiddish as their primary language and innovating the language and keeping it alive. And so my elter zeyde, my great-grandfather, Binyumen Schaechter, he was sent to Siberia and killed in Siberia in, I want to say, the 1930s, late 1930s, maybe early 40s. His absence was just kind of the inspiration for his kids and family to carry on his legacy. And so—so I'd say Yiddish is just such an important part of what he left behind and what my grandfather, Mordkhe Schaechter, carried on when he came to America. He was the Yiddish teacher of all Yiddish teachers. He taught at Columbia and in YIVO summer programs. And he actually founded the Yidish-Vokh, my grandfather, Mordkhe Schaechter, founded the Yidish-Vokh, which is the Yiddish retreat that I attended growing up where Isaac and I met. And so it was just like, such an important part of the family, and assimilation wasn't really an option. And we assimilated in other ways. I'd say that, you know, religiously I was raised sort of aligned with the Conservative Jewish movement, but Yiddish was kind of the language that carried through all the generations. And so on my mom's side, Yiddish was lost intergenerationally, but it was continuous through my dad's lineage.

SARAH: So when did Mordkhe Schaechter come to the US?

ISAAC: He got his PhD at the University of Vienna in linguistics. So after that.

REYNA: Yeah, I want to say early 1950s.

SARAH: Where was he during the Holocaust?

REYNA: He was in Europe. I should probably know more about the history there, but they were kind of escaping borders, you know, he and his family, they were never sent to concentration camps or, you know, they were, I'd say, largely in areas where they were able to avoid kind of the worst of what we hear about the Holocaust.

SARAH: How many siblings did he have?

REYNA: He had one sister, Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman, and in the 1940s they were both in Europe with their mother.

SARAH: And would you say they consider themselves Holocaust survivors?

REYNA: Yes. Yeah, I think that they had an experience of Europe during that time. And one thing that is maybe somewhat noteworthy is, my grandfather always felt more bitterness toward the Stalin regime rather than Hitler's regime, because that's the reason that he lost his father, that his father was sent to Siberia. So, I mean, it's hard to compare evil—evil with evil, but I know that he viewed Stalin as the worst of the evils.

SARAH: Yeah. So let's turn now to your nuclear family. What is it like to raise a child in Yiddish in a predominantly English-speaking environment?

REYNA: It takes effort. And, you know, I think, like, as we were planning for Lina, our elder daughter's arrival, we didn't buy a bunch of English children's books. We were looking for all of the Yiddish materials we could find. Even as we were decorating the nursery, we tried to avoid English alphabet. You know, we bought a rug with numbers on it instead of English letters. And so we were very conscious of sourcing kind of children's stuff that didn't give sort of primacy to English.

SARAH: And how old is Lina now?

REYNA: She is two years, eight months.

SARAH: All right. At the time we were recording this in July. And so I understand she has some knowledge of the Yiddish alphabet already.

REYNA: Yes, she knows—

ISAAC: Yeah. So we both speak Yiddish with her. I will say one decision that I guess was made relatively early on my part was, so I—as I mentioned, I didn't grow up speaking Yiddish. I was exposed to kind of standard classroom Yiddish. And the pronunciation, the phonology, is different from Reyna's family dialect. I think we were dating for over, like, 10 years by the time we—this whole nuclear family thing happened where, you know, I've been exposed to the family dialect for quite a bit, but I still feel more comfortable expressing myself in standard Yiddish. And so we actually use two different dialects with Lina, and she code-switches between them when she's addressing each of us. So, yeah, I have a video when she's very young, younger than one, where she's saying gut with me and git—meaning good—with Reyna. But she continued—she's continued to do that over the years and picking up on all of these exceptions. Just last night, I don't know where she got this from, but she was singing a song that Reyna's dad wrote a jingle to, just the days of the week. And she made an unusual hypercorrection

where she said zuntik, montik, dunstik instead of dinstik for Tuesday, which is, I guess maybe she thought that was Reyna's word for it, and I must say dunstik instead of dinstik. And then she said shaybis for Shabbos, which I thought was very unusual. But Reyna has—Reyna's family regional dialect has a rule that most of the ‘ay’ diphthongs become ‘ah’. So she maybe thought that Shabbos for me would be shaybis or something, but that was kind of funny. But for the most part, it's quite accurate.

SARAH: I love that. I love that. And I remember when I was in grad school, one of my professors, I was studying linguistics at Stanford, I guess a little bit before you were an undergrad there. And one of my professors said something like any linguist who is a parent gets into language acquisition when their kid is little. And in your case, it's actually very relevant to your research. Are you going to do any research on your daughter's speech?

ISAAC: I haven't planned to. I would have to really sit down and think about it if I were to design a study and submit it to the IRB to get ethics approval from Berkeley. But I definitely have a lot of video that I've taken that I've consented to. So I probably have enough data that I could analyze. But yeah, her language is really exploding, and it's really great to see. Yeah, so Reyna mentioned some of the material kind of things, like getting a playlist together and buying Yiddish kids' books and decorating Lina's room and all of that. I think we're fortunate—so I gave a talk this past year for the language revitalization working group in my department on campus. And there are a lot of parallels between language revitalization, mostly in North American indigenous contexts, and the kinds of daily challenges you would face when revitalizing any other language where you're kind of isolated from a community of speakers. But we're also quite fortunate in that we're—we’re not innovating, we don't need to innovate everything. So there are Yiddish kids' books, and there are CDs that came out when Reyna was a kid from other families kind of like hers. So there is media that Lina can consume. There are other types of challenges that are just related to being kind of isolated from other speakers. Like, we go to a synagogue regularly. I think at some level Lina's probably intuiting this idea that Jewishness is expressed in English, at least in the community, but then at home it's in Yiddish. And so that might present challenges as she gets older. I'm not sure what that'll look like, but it's something that I've been thinking about.

SARAH: And how do people react at the synagogue or elsewhere when they learn that you're speaking Yiddish with your daughter?

ISAAC: They probably find it curious, I would say, I mean, some people find it admirable. I think probably more people find it curious. I haven't received much negative response from people. Like, why not Hebrew? I haven't really felt that at all.

SARAH: And Reyna, what opportunities are there for her to speak Yiddish with other people besides the two of you? You mentioned your cousins and some of their kids, I guess, speaking Yiddish, do they interact with them?

REYNA: Yeah. Locally, there isn't that much going on for children that are Yiddish-speaking, but we spend a lot of time in the New York area. We go to the Yidish-Vokh every year, except for

this year, because I'm expecting—we're expecting another child about a week before the Yidish-Vokh starts. But my brother has two kids now who are around Lina's age, and they, to the extent that they speak to each other, it's in Yiddish, but will increasingly be so as they develop verbally. And yeah, all of my, I mean, I mentioned 13 Yiddish-speaking cousins; some subset of those are Haredi, live in Israel, so we interact with them less, but for the most part, the rest of them are in New York and tri-state area. So we do get together when we're in town, and it's always nice to have other kids, roughly Lina's age, that she can hear speak Yiddish. We don't interact much with the Hasidic community. I mean, Isaac, through his research, does interface with them, but—but not in a way that would really benefit Lina as a child being raised in Yiddish.

ISAAC: One thing that I'll add is, so she will grow up with kids her age who go to the Yidish-Vokh, but it's only once a year for a single week. This past year in December, I reached out to—there's a WhatsApp group for families that are raising their kids in Yiddish, ages zero to five. And I reached out to the parents in that group, and I asked if anybody wanted to participate in a yearbook. So I put together a PDF at the start of this calendar year, in January '26, with a page for each kid that submitted—or their parents submitted information for them. So we have this color book that's just on the shelf among Lina's Yiddish kids' books, and we read it sometimes before bed. It's just a profile of young kids around Lina's age and a little bit older who speak Yiddish. And so when it comes time to go to the Yidish-Vokh in August, it won't be like these are total strangers. She's gotten to know what their favorite foods are and what their favorite colors are and what they look like. There are pictures in it. So just a way that I thought it might be a little, I don't know, a little way to keep her connected to other Yiddish-speaking kids, even though we don't live near any of them.

SARAH: That's a great idea. Do you ever think about doing some kind of online play group?

ISAAC: We haven't yet. I think she's a little young for that much screen exposure, but yeah.

REYNA: We do FaceTime my family quite regularly. So she's seeing Yiddish and familiar faces and other kids regularly.

SARAH: Yeah. So Reyna, where in Europe was your family from? Actually, both of you.

REYNA: Yeah. So my—my dad's mom was born in Brooklyn, but her parents were from Holoskov and Orynyn, which were in modern-day Ukraine. So she spoke a Southeastern Yiddish, which actually my grandfather also spoke a version of, but slightly different dialects. And my dad's dad was European born. So born in Tshernovits, which at the time was Romania, today is considered the Ukraine. And so their dialects, I'd say, were largely similar, but there were certain differences of, you know, I'm going outside, my grandmother would say ikh gey aroys in droysn and my grandfather would say ikh gey aros in drosn, and so there are certain, I'd say vowels that shifted. And ultimately my dad and his siblings spoke some combination of those two Southeastern Yiddish dialects and passed those on to me and my siblings, my cousins.

ISAAC: Yeah, and there are also some remnants in Reyna's family dialect of a feature of some parts of Southeastern Yiddish called totemome-lushn, which literally means parents' language, but totemome is just a mnemonic for the vowel change from tatamame, which is a standard and kind of a pan-Yiddish way to say father-mother, and they pronounce it totemome. And so there are words like voser meaning water instead of vaser. And do you say olt?

REYNA: Olt.

ISAAC: Olt instead of alt meaning old. So there are some words that still have that feature, but for the most part, that's not a major—that hasn't really been retained. And I think it's because of the mixing in the family.

SARAH: But I'm also surprised that you said geyn and not gayn. Is that because Ukraine is sort of in between the Litvish and the Hungarian Unterland areas where they would say gayn?

ISAAC: So the three major Eastern European Yiddish dialects—Northeastern Yiddish, which is called Litvish, Lithuanian Yiddish, and Central Yiddish, which is also called Polish Yiddish or part of it is Galicia, and Southeastern Yiddish, they can be distinguished based mostly on vowels. And so there's a mnemonic that's often used in Yiddish dialectology to distinguish these three dialects, which is the phrase koyfn fleysh. Koyfn fleysh means to buy meat. And so in Northeastern Yiddish, they would say keyfn fleysh or keyfn fleys depending on the speaker, but with the 'ey' vowel for keyfn, to buy. And Polish Yiddish would be koyfn flaysh, with the 'ay' in flaysh. And then Southeastern Yiddish, which is kind of all of the dialects that Reyna's mentioning are from that general area, is koyfn fleysh. That's one of the major differences between Polish Yiddish and South Ukrainian Romanian Yiddish, is the ey-ay distinction in fleysh and gayn.

SARAH: And Isaac, your standard Yiddish dialect would say koyfn fleysh, right? Because it's more similar to the Lithuanian, except for that vowel of the oy instead of ey.

ISAAC: Yeah, exactly.

SARAH: Isaac, tell us where your family is from.

ISAAC: My family is from all over Europe. Part of my family is from what was the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, and actually not too far from Tshernovits on my mom's dad's side. My mom's mom was from a town called Kalush, which is today in Ukraine. But they consider themselves to be Polish Jews. And she also spent time in Germany and grew up partly in Germany. And then on my dad's side, it's a mix of Northeastern Poland and Belarus. So really, dialectally quite diverse. If I were to revitalize one dialect for the family based on an ancestral one, I'm not sure which one I would pick. My grandmother, who passed away most recently in 20—so I don't have any living grandparents—but she passed away in 2014 on my dad's side, my dad's mom. We actually went to Poland together when she was near the end of her life. But she was healthy enough to go to Poland. And we visited some of the places where her family

was from. And I know now, having worked on this corpus, that it was a transitional dialect. I have a recording of somebody from that town in my corpus, but it would be kind of difficult for me to come up with a systematic picture of what that dialect looked like. And so the easiest thing for me is just to speak my standard academic Yiddish.

SARAH: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. And is there any kind of stigma in the Yiddishist community against using standard Yiddish? Or the opposite, like a stigma against people who are trying to revitalize an ancestral dialect that they hadn't previously spoken?

ISAAC: I would say in recent years, I don't know if you have a different thought on this, but in recent years, I've definitely perceived more of a stigma towards what people think of as being standard Yiddish, or sometimes they call it YIVO Yiddish. It's the Yiddish that's associated with this organization, YIVO, that was the de facto Yiddish language academy for many, many years. I was recently on a dissertation committee—Emma Breslow from the University of Hawaii wrote about this in one of her chapters on how people perceive different dialects in this community. And so there is a bit of a stigma towards YIVO Yiddish. Basically, the idea is that it was fabricated at one point; it doesn't reflect how anybody would speak Yiddish authentically. I think the—particularly the association of that with YIVO is a little bit of a red herring in the sense that YIVO doesn't actually—it's a Yiddish organization—doesn't actually hold any power in a real sense. And so it's a little bit just like iconoclastic. Also, the YIVO doesn't currently engage in any language planning at all. They used to, you know, publish Yiddish language journals and reference books and dictionaries and textbooks that were more standard. But they don't do much of that anymore. They're mostly an archival and educational organization. And so I think the association is a little bit outdated, and a little bit misguided, is my own view. But there are families that are raising their kids in Yiddish, in standard Yiddish. And so the assertion that there are no native speakers of that is also not true.

REYNA: I'd say that the greater stigma that I perceive in the Yiddishist community is against Hasidic Yiddish and I'd say that's largely driven by the like acquisition of many Anglicisms, or, you know, the word air conditioner in Hasidic Yiddish is, like, er kondishen. And Yiddishists came up with another made-up word for it, luftkilung. And so the—I guess, creeping in of English is frowned upon by Yiddishists, as well as the loss of certain grammatical constructs of, like, di-der-dus. A lot of Hasidim say de, which, ironically, I also said that a lot growing up, because, with English all around me, it's hard to remember. And now I'm very conscious of trying to use the right article in raising Lina, because I want her to learn the correct grammar. But those, I'd say, are probably the two components of Yiddishist stigma against Hasidim.

ISAAC: Which I also think is changing a lot. I think there's much more, not just tolerance, but a lot more interest in Hasidic Yiddish, both on the part of academics, but also just everyday people who are in the Yiddishist scene, bringing in Hasidim into the community and trying to learn from them. And yeah, it's a very rapidly shifting landscape of language attitudes.

SARAH: Yeah, and I've noticed that over the last two decades, I'd say, more and more interaction between Yiddishists and Hasidim, partly spurred by people leaving the Hasidic

community and participating in film and theater. Like there was that film called Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish.

ISAAC: Reyna was in that one.

SARAH: You were in it?

REYNA: I'm in the opening scene. I make a brief appearance.

ISAAC: Juliet's sister, I think.

REYNA: Yes.

SARAH: Oh, okay. How did that come about, that gig?

REYNA: I actually auditioned for the role of Juliet, but was a teenager. And there was, unbeknownst to me, there was a nude scene that the director was not comfortable casting me in, so—and I would not have been comfortable taking on. So ultimately, I think the director and writer, she wanted me to be involved in some way. And so she wrote in this very small role of Juliet's sister. But I am—if you only watch two minutes of the film, you will see me. And I'm assuming you have some lines in Yiddish?

REYNA: Yes, yes. The whole movie is not in Yiddish, but my scene was, like, me interacting with Juliet exclusively in Yiddish.

SARAH: And so that movie was about a woman, I think, getting a master's in Yiddish studies, maybe, and her master's thesis was a translation of Romeo and Juliet into Yiddish. And I think instead of the Montagues and the Capulets, it was the Satmar and Lubavitchers or something like that. Did I remember that correctly?

REYNA: Yes, it was something like that. It's been a while, so I'd have to rewatch it.

SARAH: The reason I'm bringing that up is because I feel like that is an example of increasing interactions between non-Hasidic Yiddishists and Hasidic Yiddish speakers. I don't think they would necessarily call themselves Yiddishists. And Isaac, in your dissertation, I was also on your dissertation committee, and I like that you were on Emma Breslow's dissertation committee. Emma is now a member of the Jewish Language Project staff. She'll be running our Heirloom program, which is actually relevant to what you were talking about before about language revitalization, because our language advocacy program is about language reclamation and revitalization, we connect people who want to learn an endangered Jewish language with native speakers. And that's the mentor-learner track. And then the language advocacy track is where we provide the infrastructure for volunteers who want to advocate on behalf of a particular endangered Jewish language. And we are actually not including Yiddish in our list of endangered languages, because it is alive and well in Hasidic communities. This is relevant to

your dissertation, because you compare Yiddishists and Hasidic Yiddish speakers in their language and also how they understand themselves and talk about themselves. So tell us a little bit more about that research.

ISAAC: Oh, sure. Yeah. So this was fieldwork that I conducted at NYU. But fieldwork is kind of a funny concept, because I just took the subway or got a Zipcar and went to Monsey. So it was local fieldwork. But I connected with Yiddishists through the Yidish-Vokh community, so people who went to Yidish-Vokh and were living in New York or grew up in New York. That was one group. And then the other group were Hasidim that I met—the men I connected with online through a Hasidic discussion forum called Kave Shtiebel, which unfortunately doesn't exist anymore. But I met a lot of men through that group. And then I met women through the men that I met through this website and also just connections that I had elsewhere in the community. And so I conducted sociolinguistic interviews, which are basically just long conversations where you talk to somebody about relatively mundane topics and you get the recording of them speaking, and then you analyze little features of their language quantitatively. And so I did a comparison of a grammatical feature and a phonetic feature across these two communities to see whether they were diverging from each other in real time. And I found some evidence for that, which is interesting, again, because these are groups of Yiddish speakers who are dedicated ideologically to speaking the very same language. They're in contact with the same majority language, New York English, but they don't talk to each other very much. And so, similar to how dialects might emerge across a mountain range or across a river or a political boundary, you have kind of two, in more subtle ways, but two different types of Yiddish that are emerging in real time in New York. Now, they also come from different European dialects, so it's a very complicated and messy picture. But that was my first exposure in a serious way to Hasidic Yiddish and to Hasidic people, which turned out to be very important for me personally.

SARAH: Do you think of Hasidic Yiddish as a revitalization success story?

ISAAC: I would say so, yes. And my colleague and a former postdoc, Chaya Nove, she's a Hasidic Yiddish speaker and works on Hasidic Yiddish. She has also argued that you might think of, especially in Satmar, the dedication to Yiddish as a kind of a form of Yiddishism in the sense that not all Jewish families that came and joined the Hasidic community and settled down in, let's say, in Williamsburg after the war—not all of those were committed to Yiddish in their personal lives, especially the women—not all of them were Yiddish speakers, many of them spoke Hungarian, but the community decided that Yiddish is a language that we're going to be maintaining and we're not necessarily going to maintain Hungarian going forward. And so they made this decision that this is what we're going to be committing ourselves to and propping up in our schools and in the Hasidic press. And so I do think the kind of simplistic understanding of ‘most American Jews lost Yiddish’ who were descendants from Ashkenazi Jews lost Yiddish, and the Hasidim maintained it, I think is quite complicated. I think there's a lot of advocacy on the part of Hasidic leadership to make sure that Yiddish would be maintained in that community in ways that are not super dissimilar to what happened among the smaller number of Yiddishists.

SARAH: And Reyna, in your family, when you hear about people saying Yiddish is endangered and when you hear people talking about how all Yiddish used today outside the Hasidic community is post-vernacular, what do you think?

REYNA: I guess I don't hear that so often. Like I think that the people that I surround myself by are generally committed to language continuity and actively trying to counter this narrative of Yiddish as dying. I'd say, like, statistically, the proliferation of the Hasidic community is an easy, like, data point to point to and say actually there's, it's not dying, but I mean if you just consider the Yiddishist community without the influence of the Hasidic community, it does take a lot of effort to keep the language going and to modernize it and and to raise a family in it. So I think it's something that we're kind of mindful of, but also we know that it’s not endangered based on the numbers.

SARAH: Well, in Jeffrey Shandler’s book, Adventures in Yiddishland, where he talks about the concept of post-vernacularity, he actually analyzes Yidish-Vokh as an example of post-vernacularity. And I think there can be different approaches to that. His argument is that yes, they're speaking in Yiddish, but the fact that they're speaking in Yiddish is significant, and it is out of the ordinary. They go there, and they're speaking Yiddish, but in most of their lives, even if at home they're speaking Yiddish, in the rest of their lives they're probably not. So what do you think about that?

REYNA: Yeah, I mean, in some sense it's true. We're living in—there's no Yiddish homeland. We have to, like, very actively create and curate these Yiddish-speaking communities, my grandfather had this saying, beser a shlekht yidish vi a git english. So that if you're around people who speak Yiddish, even if they don't speak it well, of course you should try to speak to them in Yiddish. And so I'd say I definitely try to live by that principle, which not all Yiddishists do. I mean, I've been among Yiddishists that, outside of the Yidish-Vokh, they text me in English, but I at least make the conscious effort to respond in Yiddish or use the Yiddish keyboard on my phone that Isaac just released. So yes, I mean I think that there's truth to it, but there's also kind of active work to counter that narrative.

SARAH: Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, so let's talk about Isaac's Yiddish keyboard and other things that you've created that make life easier for people who are trying to live in Yiddish.

ISAAC: Sure, yeah, I've been involved—so immediately after my PhD, I worked for a year at, and this is something that might go off in the background, but I worked at Amazon Alexa. She might hear and chime in.

SARAH: Wait, your Amazon Alexa doesn't speak Yiddish?

ISAAC: No, she doesn't.

SARAH: Not yet, not yet.

ISAAC: Yeah, so that's actually an interesting thing. So we have a monolingual Yiddish household. However, when Lina wants to turn off the lights, she has to speak in English because it's connected to our device, who only responds in English. So it is, an interesting, you know—is that going to make her feel like, you know, modern technology is something that you can only really interface with in the majority language, English? Time will tell, but I have kind of a technical background in addition to a linguistic one, and so over the years, I've been involved in different types of practical projects, but also research related to the development of language technology for Yiddish, and so most recently, I presented a project to develop an automatic transcription program for Yiddish, and it's trained on, on a particular dialect of Northeastern Yiddish, but transcribing Yiddish speech automatically. I was also involved in another project that worked the other way, of reading Yiddish text out loud, and so with some collaborators from Scotland, we created a program that can read Yiddish text out loud in two different dialects in three different voices, and what I've been spending most of my time doing over the last several years has been developing this corpus of conversational Yiddish that's sourced from Holocaust survivor testimonies. So these are essentially Yiddish-language conversations. Obviously, they're about the Holocaust. It's a very heavy topic, but it's a fantastic—so the USC Shoah Foundation collected Holocaust survivor testimonies all around the world, over 55,000 of them—multi-hour interviews with Holocaust survivors. The majority of those are in large, well-supported languages like English and German and Hebrew and Russian and Spanish. There's a small number that are in Yiddish, and so I obtained a license from the Shoah Foundation to have these transcribed and to put them online on the Yiddish Corpus website, and so you can go onto that website, yiddishcorpus.org, and you can browse the testimonies by the birthplace of the survivor, we have a map page that also shows you—you can actually select a date in the 20th century and find where the political boundaries fell on that particular date. So if you're interested in Romanian Yiddish, what Romania means really depends on the year that you're talking about, but you can actually see how the borders shifted over time, and there's also a feature where you can see the geographic distribution of particular words. So if you want to see where Yiddish speakers said nit for not or where they said nisht, you can visualize that on a map very, very quickly just by searching through the corpus, typing in the words, and then the website will search through the corpus in the background.

SARAH: Wow, so the tools that you're creating are not just for people who want to use Yiddish as an everyday language, but also for researchers and teachers to research and teach about the different dialects.

ISAAC: Yeah, so the corpus is being developed with a grant from the National Science Foundation, and so I guess the primary pitch that I made to the National Science Foundation was that it would be a research tool. However, the particular grant I got, the career grant, also has an educational component, and so part of that is using this resource for teaching, and so there's a section of the website that I've called Glosses. So the Glosses are kind of accessible articles with linguistic insights that are gleaned from the corpus. Some of them are written by me, some of them are written by my transcribers, but exploring interesting things about Yiddish based on the testimonies that are in the corpus, and so I have a few articles out now that introduce topics related to Yiddish pronunciation that are taught in every Yiddish textbook.

They're supposed to be standard Yiddish and also pan-dialectal Yiddish features, but that students often struggle with, and so I try to explain in thoroughly but in relatively straightforward terms what these features are, and then they're illustrated within the article by short excerpts from the videos, and so in some cases it's helpful to just be able to hear what the survivor's saying; in some cases it's helpful to see what they're doing with their lips. So, you know, in the word hobn, which means to have, it's spelled with a nun at the end; it's spelled with an n, but it's pronounced with an m due to a phonological rule of assimilation. But you can actually see in the video that their lips are closed when they say hobn, and so that supports this idea that it truly is pronounced as an m, as a syllabic m, and it's great that you have this multimedia resource that you can directly tie into educational content.

SARAH: Yeah, and at the Jewish Language Project we are doing similar things with other Jewish languages, including those of Iran, where there's very little documentation, and so we have prioritized video over just audio recordings for that reason. So we're almost out of time, but I want to make sure there's time for show and tell. So I think you've brought some things with you that you want to share that are relevant to raising a family in Yiddish.

REYNA: Yeah, we'll start with this pile. I mentioned in my family that my grandfather was a linguist and very committed—Mordkhe Schaechter—to modernizing the language and making sure that there was a Yiddish word for air conditioner that sounded like Yiddish and not like a borrowing from English. And so this dictionary, the Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary, was based on the research of my grandfather, but ultimately edited by my aunt Gitl and Hershl Glasser, who's another prominent Yiddish scholar, basically—anytime there's an English word that we don't know how to say in Yiddish that we're using— would want to use with Lina or with others, we consult this resource. And so it only goes in the English-to-Yiddish direction, but is very good if you want to avoid kind of an English borrowing and keep it pure.

ISAAC: Yeah, I usually am using this dictionary on my phone, because there's a website for the dictionary, and so, you know, I sometimes got self-conscious, like, are other parents seeing me look at my phone while I'm at the playground with Lina, simply because I'm looking up the word for—anyway, I know—I know these words by now, but I'm looking up the word for slide or something like that, not texting or, you know, on TikTok.

SARAH: Yeah. Yeah. What else?

REYNA: So this is actually, I think, encompassed in the Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary, but this is a dictionary that's just dedicated to pregnancy, childbirth, and early childhood, or Trogn, Hobn, un Friike Kinder-Yorn, and is useful for us now, as—as we're—you know, I'm pregnant, and Lina is still in her early childhood years. So, before the comprehensive one was produced, this one was maybe a little more helpful.

ISAAC: Yeah, how to say bib, how to say pump, all of the things you might need in the very first years of the kid's life.

REYNA: And my great aunt, Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman, was a poet, songwriter, singer, and this is a collection of her original Yiddish children's songs that also, Fli Mayn Flishlang is the name of it, and this also comes with a, you know, we have a playlist with all of these songs performed by various Yiddish singers that is among Lina's favorite recordings to listen to.

SARAH: And what does that title mean?

REYNA: It means Fly My Kite, Fli Mayn Flishlang. That's just the name of one of the songs, but it has, you know, topics. It has Yontif Lider, holiday songs for a lot of the major and minor Jewish holidays. It has songs about trains and about trees and just, you name it.

ISAAC: And on this pile, I brought just some of the kids' books that we read with Lina. This one, we actually haven't started yet. I think it's a little bit more advanced, but Tsi Kenstu Pipi Langshhtrimp? So, this is a translation of Pippi Longstocking into Yiddish that was published in Sweden. There's a publisher in Sweden, Olniansky Tekst, that is one of the major publishers of Yiddish kids' books now, and they often publish translations. This translation was made by one of Reyna's cousins, Arele Schaechter Viswanath, who also translated Harry Potter into Yiddish. So, that's one of the ones we have here. And then, I have some older translations, like Di Kats Der Payats, The Cat in the Hat, which came out, I think, in the early 2000s, translated by Sholem Berger, who's a Yiddish poet and a medical doctor also, yeah, 2003. And then, in addition to the Yiddish kids' books that we've purchased over the past few years and a little bit before Lina was born, just to show you what else we do, because we often receive books as gifts and people temporarily forget that we don't read Yiddish books at home.

REYNA: We don't read English—

ISAAC: Or Spanish—sorry, English books at home.

REYNA: English children's books.

ISAAC: Sorry if I'm misspeaking. Or Spanish, for that matter. So, here are two titles that I received as gifts. This is a Mo Willems book. It happens to be in Spanish, but that's not important here. And Are You My Mother? by P.D. Eastman. So, this book was translated unofficially by a Yiddish linguist, Shimon Noyberg, who raised his daughters in Yiddish, and he has a little YouTube channel where he reads some of his just personal translations of kids' books out loud. And so, I just wrote down his translation into the book itself. And so, I do read the book left to right, but each page is read right to left. And then, this book is another one that I translated on the spot. And so, in some cases, I will print out the Yiddish translation with a label maker that was recommended to us by another Yiddish speaker in the community. Or in other cases, I'll just write in the book in pencil. But, yeah, Lina has lots and lots of kids' books in Yiddish, as many as I could obtain. And we also have a large number of Hasidic kids' books. The content's a little bit different. The spelling is a little bit different. But we have, I don't know, a few dozen of those also.

SARAH: Amazing. Wow. And we're going to end with a brief clip of Lina, age two and eight months—is that right?—speaking Yiddish.

LINA AND ISAAC: [speaking Yiddish]

SARAH: All right. Thank you so much, Reyna and Isaac, for sharing your stories and for all the great work that you're doing to keep Yiddish alive and to make the world a better place.

ISAAC: Thanks for having us.

REYNA: Thank you.

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