

THE VIEW FROM HERE

Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends of the Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures,

After months of varying degrees of isolation and social distancing, it's easy to forget that we were having an excellent year until three weeks before the end of the winter term. Among our faculty, Anna Shternshis led the field with a Guggenheim Fellowship and a President's Impact Award, Christine Lehleiter won a Humboldt Research Fellowship, and Willi Goetschel was distinguished with the 2020 Moses Mendelssohn Prize. Erol Boran walked away with the Canadian Association for University Teachers of German's Innovate German Award and collaborated with Hang-Sun Kim on a successful application to the International Student Experience Fund for an innovative project to support third-language learning in our classes. John Zilcosky saw the publication of *The Allure of Sports in Western Culture*, which he co-edited with Marlo Burks. Our students, too, excelled in customary fashion, winning research awards, presenting at conferences, participating in internships at schools in Toronto and organizations abroad, collaborating on faculty research endeavors, and pursuing their own thesis work. A highlight on the graduate level this year was a well-attended, student-led interdisciplinary conference, 'Deviance | Am Rande seiner selbst,' which offered a scholarly platform for presenters from Canada and abroad.

We can also boast of real successes during the height of the pandemic this summer. Although travel restrictions derailed our plans to send the next crop of iPRAKTIKUM interns to Germany, Student Placement Coordinator Helena Juenger secured virtual placements for four students, who are currently working for cutting-edge startups in Berlin and Freiburg in the areas of social innovation, urban mobility, and sustainability. One of our interns is researching the impact of COVID-19 on urban cycling policy in German and abroad. How cool is that! Thanks to the efforts of interim Language Coordinator Stefana Gargova and an intrepid group of graduate student instructors, our online summer German courses have gotten us off to a fantastic start for the fall. Enrolments were higher than ever, and we learned important lessons for teaching German online.

It has been a busy and demanding summer for many of us. Administrators and departmental officers have been working hard to anticipate and prepare for the various scenarios that may await in 2020-21, graduate students have been contending with poor access to research materials and difficulties finding summer work, and faculty have been learning to work with new digital teaching tools in preparation for online instruction. All the while, many of us have been attending to vulnerable friends and family members, volunteering in the community, home-schooling our children, and trying to stay connected to loved ones we cannot visit.

We bid farewell to three colleagues this year. Mike Hager, founder of our Business German program and author of important works in the field, is retiring. We wish him all the best for this new phase of life. Nicola Vöhringer completed her term as DAAD Visiting Professor and will be pursuing new opportunities in Germany. Her tireless work for our students made a real difference. There was also a change in our financial office this year; Dale Gebhardt, after years of providing us with expert support, has moved to the Department of French full-time. Our new financial officer, Nina Duras, has hit the ground running and comes to us with experience from the School of Cities and Geography. Welcome, Nina!

I would like to thank everyone for their extraordinary efforts to prepare for the coming year. I would like to recognize in particular our officers and administrators, who have been keeping us up and running under highly challenging conditions: Gayle Grisdale, Helena Juenger, and Nina Duras in the undergraduate, graduate, and financial offices; Associate Chairs Erol Boran (Undergraduate) and Christine Lehleiter (Graduate); and Language Coordinators Hang-Sun Kim (fall) and Stefana Gargova (winter). I am very pleased to welcome back this year Angelica Fenner to the role of associate chair graduate and extend my thanks to Christine Lehleiter, who served a one-year term in that role. I am very pleased that Hang-Sun Kim has agreed to serve as acting associate chair undergraduate and that we will be able to count on Stefana Gargova's expert language coordinating again in 2020-21.

Stefan Soldovieri

Chair of Germanic Languages & Literatures, Associate Professor of German

Newsletter 2020/21

[Undergraduate Report](#)

[Graduate Program Update](#)

[Undergraduate Profile](#)

[Graduate Research Profile](#)

[Yiddish Program Update](#)

[Summer Film Seminar](#)

[Faculty Profile](#)

[Graduate Conference](#)

[DAAD Workshop](#)

[iPRAKTIKUM](#)

[Donor Profile](#)



Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures
University of Toronto
50 St. Joseph Street, 3rd floor, Odette Hall
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3L5

www.german.utoronto.ca
german@chass.utoronto.ca
Tel: 416-926-2324

The Day the World Became Fantastic and Fantasy Literature Much More Real

by Professor Erol Boran, Associate Chair, Undergraduate

Our job as literature instructors has not become easier over the years. In this age of Facebook and Twitter, I have noticed that attention spans have shortened and that we can no longer take it for granted that students come equipped to decipher complex literary texts. This unfortunate trend also manifests itself in lower enrolment numbers in literature courses. And yet, today it is more essential than ever to learn to read critically, to be able to distinguish between fact and fake (news) and to develop one's own informed opinion.

Considering the circumstances, I was thrilled to see nearly 30 students register for my *Literature in Translation* course this past winter semester. Apparently, the catchy subtitle — “Monsters, Murderers and Magic” — had broad appeal. Together, my students and I enthusiastically confronted vampires, *Schlemihls* and *Doppelgänger*, uncanny *Sandmänner*, satanic millers and über-life-sized cockroaches. And then, like a phantom out of the dark, “Corona” hit us.

I remember the last classroom session a month before the end of the semester — none of us had an inkling that it would be the last time we would meet in person. Fear of the pandemic spread so fast that a sense of unreality crept into our lives and covered us like a furry blanket. On the subway ride to class I had time to reflect, and while trying to keep my distance from other passengers (who in my mind started looking more and more like Kafkaesque creatures) I decided to invite Corona into our classroom:

Corona as the space where reality and fantasy merge, where the fantastic becomes all-too real and where we start having rather ‘fantastic’ reactions. Corona as a ‘foreign sickness’ (Trump) that sets in motion a gigantic othering process using a rhetoric of fear and exaggeration. Corona as a kind of zombie epidemic that vampire-like invades our home and causes us to fear and to shut off the world. First foreigners

become suspicious, next neighbours, soon even family members. Finally, Corona becomes the total isolation of the self...

As this snapshot of our class session reveals, it was the liveliest discussion of the semester. We reflected on how reading fantastic literature could help us understand what was happening before our very eyes, how the media reports on it and people react to it.

More than half of my students chose to write their final papers on the connection between fantasy and reality in times of Corona. One student started her essay with the phrase, “My name is Covid-19,” and proceeded to explain how fantastic literature “allows us to anthropomorphise with a view to understand, in a human context, why viruses do what they do.” And another student wrote:

“Infectious diseases have long been a major theme in literature. In particular, they have been villainized and embodied as the dangerous Other in the genre of the fantastic. ... According to Tzvetan Todorov, fantastic literature emphasizes the unsettling hesitation between the real and the imagined, the familiar and the unfamiliar. Thus, infectious diseases are where reality and fantasy meet, where the uncanny monsters become all too real.”

I love when this happens: when I, as an instructor, can simply lean back and admire my students’ thoughts and reflections. It reminds me that literature still serves an important function today, that it can be taught and appreciated and that it can make a difference. The conclusion of my course — and of the surreal winter semester — was the moment fantastic literature came alive, and my students and I shared the understanding that fiction can not only carry us away from reality but also shed light on it.

Supporting Graduate Students

by Professor Christine Lehleiter, Associate Chair, Graduate Studies

As in past years, several of our doctoral students have secured merit-based scholarship awards, including John Evjen with an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and Eli Jany and Miriam Borden, the SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship-Doctoral for doctoral studies with a Yiddish concentration. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic also brought disruptions to research and deferral of diverse ambitions: a stay at an archive in Germany cancelled, a planned visit to a research site in the U.S. now in question, participation at an international conference moved online, and access to workspace and materials in the library limited until further notice. It goes without saying that the impact of the pandemic on graduate student research, teaching, and wellbeing in our unit is substantial. While not all the problems that we are facing in this context can be solved by financial means, the University and the School of Graduate Studies have put in place a number of support tools designed to mitigate the challenges graduate students are facing.

Immediately at the beginning of the crisis, an emergency fund was established for students to cover the most urgent needs. The focus has now shifted to mid- and long-term planning, with funds made available for areas such as tuition relief and program completion needs. Financial support and a solid research and teaching infrastructure are vital for the success of our graduate program. All the same, the current crisis has also confirmed once again that people, and human to human interactions, are at the core of what we do. In this context, I would like to thank everybody for their support in my year as Associate Chair, Graduate, but a particular thank you goes to Helena Juenger for her deep knowledge and friendly professionalism, and to Angelica Fenner whose comprehensive insight into the position has been an incredible help in the last year. I am excited and grateful that Angelica Fenner has agreed to serve again in this role in the coming year.



Undergraduate Profile: Bridging Literary Studies and Neuroscience

by India James-Licher

I came to the University of Toronto to pursue a specialist degree in Neuroscience and return to the city in which I was born. My interest in human experience and its relationship to language motivated me to study all things related to the mind and the complex processes that enable certain behaviours and thoughts. After one semester, however, I was itching to read a thought-provoking book and engage in fruitful discussions, as I had done in my literature classes back home in Switzerland. Upon first enrolling in Professor Christine Lehleiter's course on Romanticism, we were given a quick in-class task: to produce an ink blot and write a short piece in German about what we read in the image. Apart from the enticing readings and bonding discussions, exercises like these brought creativity into the classroom and allowed me to self-reflect.

I quickly realized that my German courses — in literature, culture and philosophy — posed a vital counterbalance to first-year life-science courses. It also allowed me to maintain my Swiss-German identity while embracing my Jamaican-Canadian heritage. Upon learning the social-scientific approach to explaining language and thought, I soon developed my own writing style and interests within the field, encompassing post-colonial theories and hyphenated German identities.

In my final year, I undertook two independent studies, both on identity politics.

The first focused on Black German history, which then sparked my interest to start another that entailed writing a screen play about a fictional young Swiss man who happens to be Black. With the great support of supervising faculty, Professors Willi Goetschel and Angelica Fenner, these projects have opened the door to attending conferences and, perhaps most importantly, to further understanding facets of human experience, language, and thought that complement my neuroscience studies. I am forever thankful that the German Department afforded me so much pleasure in reading and writing and taught me how to bridge the sciences and humanities — a lesson I hope to sustain throughout my career.



Graduate Profile: Towards a Genealogy of Gullibility in German Literature and Thought

by Rita Laszlo

I'm a curious creature, and if it's important for me to think about something then I think about it, and that, in itself, is a privilege. I share this attitude with Ágnes Heller, a philosopher and social theorist at The New School for Social Research. Her words of wisdom and effrontery have profoundly influenced my academic endeavors. She got me thinking about gullibility in 2013, when I encountered her essay, *Elmékedések a hiszékenységről*, a precious gem among her lesser known writings. In 2017 I translated this from the Hungarian as *Reflections on Gullibility* for the critical theoretical journal *Telos*, which remains one of my proudest accomplishments. It was around this time that I felt compelled to question what gullibility is and whether as a desire to know, it might be a style of reasoning, as opposed to simple stupidity or naïveté. My honours thesis, many term papers, and both my M.A. and Ph.D. applications philosophized gullibility. Since achieving candidacy, I have given two public lectures (in Toronto and Vancouver), and taught an upper level undergraduate German class on this topic at U of T.

Critical theory, and literary and philosophical thought are often regarded as approaches to critically understanding the mind,

judgment, perception, thinking, truth and reason. However, the question of gullibility, in German *Leichtgläubigkeit*, does not appear a topic exclusive to philosophical and literary discourses. To subject gullibility to its historical emergence

and critically investigate the conditions of its possibility, I have begun my inquiry with a close reading of Heinrich von Kleist's "Über das Marionettentheater" from 1810. Kleist is known for his anti-idealistic positions and critical attitude toward dominant philosophies. Here, he suggests that affect (emotional response) is equally compelling to intellect (rational response) when it comes to reasoning, thus Kleist's work in particular supports my hypothesis.



A Sheynem Dank to all Yiddish Students!

by Dr. Sasha Hoffman

All innovations to our program that are worthy of note this year are attributable to the hard work of our students. In first year Yiddish, we were able to use *In eynem*, a new textbook being piloted by the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. Miriam Borden, a PhD candidate in the department, participated in pedagogical workshops at the centre and launched the textbook in our program last fall. When I took over the continuing class in the winter semester, I was immediately impressed with students' confidence of expression and comprehension. *In eynem* is the first Yiddish textbook to implement a communicative approach. Since we often have a variety of levels in one classroom, including auditors who still recall some Yiddish from childhood, this approach works very well to empower each student to contribute according to their abilities and to learn from one another.

In second-year Yiddish, we more firmly established "iPraktikum: Yiddish in the City." Tianna Voort, an MA student in History and Judaic Studies, has been assisting in Grades 3 and 4 at Bialik, the only school in Toronto which provides secular Yiddish instruction. The Bialik Yiddish curriculum is currently in its second year of redevelopment, incorporating culture, history, music and literature, with an emphasis on local community history. Tianna's weekly commitment this term was greatly appreciated by the school. It gives me great joy to see both



Miriam and Tianna becoming rooted in Yiddish education.

Finally, as the university cancelled in-person classes beginning March 16, most students barely skipped a beat in their course participation. While online learning and teaching pales in comparison to gathering in one space – singing together being a particularly painful challenge! – it was certainly better than nothing. For me personally, learning and teaching Yiddish is, as it has always been, a stabilizing and comforting activity. I am deeply grateful to all the students for a great year.

Biz bald!

Summer Film Seminar Posthuman Intimacies

by Professor Angelica Fenner

This summer seminar for advanced graduate students, postdocs, and faculty was coordinated by Dr. Angelica Fenner, associate professor in German and Cinema Studies, and hosted at the Munk School for Global Affairs and Public Policy, July 31 to August 4, 2019. Fourteen participants from U of T, the University of Waterloo, the University of Florida, the Free University of Berlin and Bremen University read and debated pre-circulated readings and shared research in progress on cross-species entanglements in European cinema. Under rubrics such as "The Human Animal," "Cross-Species Kinship," and "Posthuman Worldmaking," the seminar explored the symbiosis between human and other animals, and possibilities for moving beyond exploitation, dependency, or humanistic anthropomorphism toward more complex understandings of subjectivity, sentience, and vital matter.

Bearing in mind the contingencies film and video technologies exert on such an investigation, we also explored the performative potentials accorded sentient beings whose agency before the camera takes place on differing terms



than those of consenting humans.

Community audiences gathered for six curated screenings and ensuing discussion, including with two Ontario productions: Su Rynard's documentary *The Messengers*, on climate change's devastating impact on bird migration, and Alison Reid's wildly popular *The Woman Who Loved Giraffes*, about zoologist Anne Innis Dagg. We closed the week with a garden party that included an instructive bee keeping session with local apiarist Joseph Curry. The seminar would not have been possible without several units and centres, whose support ensured participants were nourished on sustainably source and ecologically presented meals and our visiting filmmakers were equitably reimbursed for their time and creative talent. We extend our gratitude to Germanic Languages & Literature, the Cinema Studies Institute, the Joint Initiative in German & European Studies, and the Waterloo Center for German Studies.



Shivhei Shternshis

A Year of Accolades for Professor Anna Shternshis

by Miriam Borden

"It's been a good year for Yiddish," says Professor Anna Shternshis, laughing. Between the extended Broadway run of the new Yiddish version of the stage musical *Fiddler on the Roof* and Professor Shternshis' own recent award-winning project *Yiddish Glory: The Lost Songs of World War II*, she's not wrong.

Yiddish Glory is an album of WWII-era Yiddish songs built upon Professor Shternshis' research at the Verdansky National Library of Ukraine in the early 2000s, when she discovered a cache of unknown, unpublished Yiddish songs collected by ethnomusicologist Moisei Beregovsky, a victim of Stalin's postwar antisemitic purges. Professor Shternshis revived the songs, finding partners to turn the songs into a full-length album and touring *Yiddish Glory* as a lecture-concert with a group of extraordinary performers (including Toronto-based jazz singer Sophie Milman). The album recovers forgotten songs written by Jews living out the war in the Soviet Union. Penned by Red Army soldiers, widows, children, and ordinary people, the songs are defiant, moving, elegiac, uplifting, comedic—first-person accounts conveying the human capacity to respond to tragedy, loss, and suffering, but also to rebuild. The album received widespread acclaim from the academy to the red carpet, even garnering a Grammy nomination last year in the World Music category.

The *Yiddish Glory* shows were elaborate productions performed before live audiences in theatres and concert halls. Shternshis says working with these audiences — the kind that expect to be entertained, not educated — forced her to rethink her mode of delivery. "The first thing I learned was brevity: there is no luxury in a ten-minute-long talk." Learning how to *briefly* tell a story in full, without losing its poignancy or sophistication, was one of the most interesting challenges Shternshis encountered. Rather than diminishing the depth of the research or bypassing the academic nuances that make good, rigorous, scholarship, Shternshis found in this format an opportunity to share those nuances with a new kind of audience. Working with the entertainment industry also helped her think differently about her research. "In some ways, the skill of telling a story from the beginning to the very sophisticated end is something we all strive for...This

forced me to ask extra questions: what is the significance of this research, and how can I tell the story in a way that does it justice?"

As an oral historian and chronicler of community experience in her books *Soviet and Kosher* (2006) and *When Sonia Met Boris* (2017), Professor Shternshis redefines what it means for scholars to engage with communities. In 2019, Professor Shternshis was appointed Special Advisor to the Dean on Community Engagement, a role in which she will assist in evaluating opportunities for partnerships, increasing the University's profile in the community, and enriching opportunities for students and faculty, especially related to experiential learning and innovative scholarship.

These links between traditional scholarship, community engagement, and public education correspond to Professor Shternshis' broader perspective on the humanities at a time when the university is increasingly challenged to prove its continued relevance. The "good year" currently enjoyed by Yiddish is further evidence of the importance of these vital connections within and beyond the university. In fact, Professor Shternshis says that the growing momentum behind Yiddish studies owes much to these relationships. More and more scholars in diaspora studies, minority studies, Holocaust studies, and beyond are finding that Yiddish holds the answers to many of the questions raised by their research. Paired with what Professor Shternshis acknowledges as an exceptional relationship between the wider community and Yiddish studies—as well as the field of Jewish Studies generally—Yiddish scholarship and Yiddish culture are on the rise.

Professor Shternshis has been recognized for her work both at home and abroad. Here at U of T she recently received the President's Impact Award, and in April 2020, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Rarely do scholars so seamlessly leave their marks on multiple worlds. As Professor Shternshis forges new paths in her scholarship, she reveals the possibilities of thoughtful approaches, innovative collaboration, and fearless research.

Graduate Conference Builds Community, Awareness, and Understanding

by André Flicker

Our second annual graduate conference, “Deviance | Am Rande seiner selbst,” took place September 28 and 29, 2019 at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. This year’s theme gained momentum from our previous gathering in spring 2018, when we deemed it important to stand up for our ideas and regularly organize such meetings to raise public awareness about injustices of all kinds. We drew inspiration from Celan’s words on the value of communication and exchange: “Das Gedicht heute behauptet sich am Rande seiner selbst; es ruft und holt sich, um bestehen zu können, unausgesetzt aus seinem Schon-nicht-mehr in sein Immer-noch zurück. Das Gedicht ist einsam. Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu.”

We welcomed graduate students from disciplines such as philosophy, literature and cinema studies and hailing from universities across Ontario, Quebec and Germany, to staff three panels respectively titled “Conceptualizing Deviance,” “Practicing Deviance,” and “Visualizing Deviance.” The variety and quality of the presentations, the lively and productive discussions, and sustained attendance throughout the weekend demonstrated once again that our graduate community is thriving and eager to work together, herein reflecting the conference theme that no one is left “am Rande.” We hope the bridges built in the past two years will remain strong and are excited for the next gathering.

Many thanks to Professor Christine Lehleiter for her insightful workshop on “Interdisciplinary Research.” We also thank the generous sponsors who made this conference possible: the Joint Initiative in German and European Studies (JIGES), the Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures, and the University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union (UTGSU).



5th Annual DAAD German Language Teaching and Learning Workshop

by Professor Hang-Sun Kim

German language programs form the backbone of German studies in North American universities, since it is through language courses that we attract potential majors and minors in the field. In most German departments, graduate students play a key role as instructors in the language program. Thanks to the continued support of the DAAD, we held our Fifth Annual German Language Teaching and Learning Workshop, a one-and-a-half-day professional development conference on the theory and practice of second language pedagogy, which brought together graduate students and language specialists from McGill and Queen's University, University of Waterloo and Toronto, and University of California, Los Angeles. The thematic focus of this gathering, “Kreatives Unterrichten,” was approached from several different angles: Dr. Sun-Young Kim (McGill) presented a hands-on workshop on facilitating partner and group activities. Prof. Emma Betz (Waterloo) together with Kira Bühl and Erica Sawyers introduced participants to the concept of “interactional competence” and offered guidance on how to translate findings from research on interaction practices into teaching targets for the language classroom. Marje Zschiesche-Stock (Goethe-Institut) offered an energetic workshop on the creative use of games to promote language learning. Prof. David Kim (UCLA) illustrated how an open-source interactive visualization and exploration platform for constructing and analyzing complex networks can be integrated into upper-year undergraduate German courses to promote multimodal literacy. Finally, Prof. Monika Holzschuh (Queens) introduced us to indigenous impulses for a holistic approach to teaching and learning. This event provided an excellent opportunity for us to discuss our common challenges and to gain fresh and creative ideas for our German language teaching practices.





A Doner Profile: Hitting the Books, Fulfilling a Dream

by Andrew Himel

One of my biggest dreams as an adult was to go back to school and study. Of this, though of not much else, I was certain. At 55 (there's a reason they call it Freedom-55), I found the chance to gracefully exit my business career and embark on my academic journey, or more colloquially, got my behind out of the office chair and into the classroom. Emboldened by the encouragement of several mentors, including Professor Anna Shternshis, I applied to — and was thankfully accepted into — the master's program of the Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures.

From the start, the staff were open to my pursuit, helpful and encouraging. Classes and my new life as a graduate student began in September 2017. I originally studied Microbiology at U of T in the early 1980s and received an MBA from Harvard in 1989. My interest in German history and culture stemmed from living there (in Hamburg and Berlin) for nearly 13 years after business school. Upon returning to school, I found academic life intense, demanding and very rewarding. At social events beyond the university, my former business peers viewed me as a bit of a curiosity, and very many

were openly envious. Studying humanities was new to me. It was not like getting back on a bicycle. The massive amount of reading and the long term papers were something awesome and novel to me. Needless to say, I made it through, and I tell people that's both the good news and the bad news: good, because I completed my degree; and bad, because it's over!

I come from a culture and tradition of giving back and showing gratitude. In that spirit, I wanted to give something back to this wonderful department that enabled me to fulfill my dream. When I heard that the departmental lounge on the third floor of Odette Hall was being renovated to include a kitchenette, it resonated with me. It's a place where people meet, eat and relax. It was an easy decision to offer to support the project. I'm grateful to the staff and students I got to know. Each and every person has an interesting story to share, and it's an honour to be able to weave my own story into that tapestry.

Vielen Dank!

Teaching Yiddish with iPRAKTIKUM

by Tianna Voort

Through the iPRAKTIKUM Yiddish in the City program, I had the opportunity to work at Bialik Hebrew Day School teaching Yiddish. I was placed with Ester Klimitz, an exceptionally talented and gifted Yiddish teacher. Together we taught five Yiddish classes to grades 3 and 4 students.

It was so wonderful to see young children who were enthusiastic about learning the language. Not only did kids learn how to have basic conversations in Yiddish, they also learned about the culture that surrounds the Yiddish language. We taught classes about Yiddish in Toronto and the history of the language. I think this is something so special about Yiddish; it is not only a language, but also a part of culture.

For the first few classes, I observed Etty's teaching methods. As someone who was new to learning Yiddish, it was interesting to see the differences in how Yiddish is taught to younger students versus adults. After I felt more comfortable with the class material, Etty let me teach several classes on my own. For me, this was one of the most significant opportunities to practice my Yiddish. By teaching a class, I was able to solidify the basics of the language for myself in a more concrete way. My placement at Bialik became not only a way to teach the children, I also learned many valuable skills myself. I believe that my work at Bialik was one of the most significant contributions



to the growth of my own Yiddish skills this year.

I am so grateful to Bialik for allowing me to observe the Yiddish classes and to Ester Klimitz for being a wonderful mentor and teacher as I observed and engaged with her classes.



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