

Remarks by U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO David Killion

November 12, 2012

Ambassador Barkan, President Hofmann, President Dahan, my dear friend, Dan Mariaschin, Mr. Zyss, Madame Ores, Colleagues, friends of UNESCO, Good morning !

Let's talk about Yiddish. Amazing things happen in Yiddish! I read a story in the New York Times just last week about a young man known as the "Lox Sherpa" – a Nepalese immigrant who used to climb Mount Everest for a living, and who now works at a delicatessen in Manhattan called "Russ and Daughters."

The owner of the deli says Mr. Sherpa – his real name - speaks Yiddish with his customers, asking, "Boychik, what do you want?"

Who could imagine that a young man from the mountains of Nepal would end up slicing lox so thin you can read a newspaper through it while asking customers if they want a "bissel" of cream cheese or just a light "schmear" on their bagels!...Only in New York...Only in America!...Only in Yiddish!

Ladies and gentlemen, I am so honored to be here with you this morning for the opening of this Symposium on the "Permanence of Yiddish." Language is the verbal expression of culture that sustains cultural identity and transmits a community's heritage from one generation to another.

It is both the expression of our thoughts and our values. Yiddish is a remarkable language that represents a remarkable culture. It is a global celebration of Jewish culture and history in the form of a living language.

UNESCO's support of this event is very important, and the United States is equally proud to join with the Delegation of Israel, B'nai B'rith, and the many other supporters and partners in making this symposium a reality.

The United States has a vibrant and active Jewish community, and Yiddish is an important element of that community. In the 19th century, Yiddish played a central role in forging bonds between Jewish immigrants of different backgrounds.

Still today, for nearly 200,000 Americans, Yiddish is the daily language spoken in their homes. Yiddish-language newspapers are published both in print and online.

Meanwhile, a number of major universities, including John Hopkins and Emory University in Atlanta, are teaching Yiddish to a new generation of students eager to tap into the amazing cultural heritage this language represents.

But the influence of Yiddish in the United States is felt way beyond the community of Yiddish speakers, and Yiddish words have become a part of every American's vocabulary.

It is very appropriate for this symposium to be hosted in conjunction with B'nai B'rith here at UNESCO House.

UNESCO has been at the forefront of important work, including promoting respect for language and culture, Holocaust remembrance education, countering Holocaust deniers, and in sharing the

terrible lessons of the Nazi genocide so that other groups may learn and, hopefully, avoid the same fate both today and tomorrow.

The values that B'nai B'rith promotes, since its inception 170 years ago, are shared by UNESCO. B'nai B'rith has been an important NGO partner of this organization since the early 1960's, and has, from its start, been focused on advancing human rights, combating anti-Semitism and developing and protecting Jewish identity, culture, and heritage.

Today, UNESCO is celebrating Israeli and Jewish culture in hosting these two days of discovery and discussion about the rich Yiddish language. UNESCO's work in protecting culture and heritage ranges from maternal languages to World Heritage sites.

As many of you may know, seven of UNESCO's World Heritage sites are located in Israel, including the Carmel Caves, which were just inscribed on the World Heritage List last July in St. Petersburg. This also is a celebration of Jewish culture and history.

However, in order for language and heritage to be protected, culture must not be politicized. The United States has worked consistently with Israel and friends to block attempts to subvert UNESCO's mission and use the agency as a vehicle to delegitimize Israel through politicized resolutions on the Middle East.

We applaud the strong stand against politicized resolutions at UNESCO's Executive Board last month by countries such as Russia, China, and Brazil, who joined with the U.S. to block passage of five such resolutions.

I can promise you that, just as we will continue to work to integrate programs and events like this one today in support of Yiddish, celebrating Jewish identity and heritage, the United States will also work on the political side of things at the United Nations and here at UNESCO to protect our shared values and interests.

In closing, let me once again congratulate UNESCO for hosting this wonderful symposium on a language that has endured, flourished, and helped sustain Jewish heritage and build bridges from Jerusalem to Minsk to Nepal to New York's Lower East Side. Thank you.

<http://unesco.usmission.gov/yiddish-symposium.html>