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## MRBlog | DISPATCHES. From Belarus ... With Love – By David Shneer

[📅 October 19, 2015 \(https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/mrblog-dispatches-from-belarus-with-love-by-david-shneer/\)](https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/mrblog-dispatches-from-belarus-with-love-by-david-shneer/) [👤 \(\)](#)

By David Shneer

In the 1920s, passengers arriving to Minsk, the capital of the new Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, would gaze up at the sign welcoming them to the bustling city. That sign reflected the cosmopolitanism of the city as the word “Minsk” appeared in not one, not two, not even three languages, but all four of the Communist republic’s official languages. One of those was Yiddish. It is through this language that Helix, a project of [Yiddishkayt LA \(http://yiddishkayt.org/\)](http://yiddishkayt.org/), explores multiethnic eastern Europe.

The 25-person cadre of students, artists, and scholars that made up the 2015 cohort of Helix travelled eastern Europe in a mega-bus with seating for an entire village that pulled up to a Belarusian cooking school for the day’s final event. The teacher laid out potatoes and instructed us to grate all of them, easily numbering twenty, and she meant by hand. “Machine grating ruins the flavor,” she admonished those of us imagining stress injuries from repetitive motion.

Grated potatoes were then mixed with salt, garlic, and onions, also hand grated, flattened into a very particular shape that resembled a pancake, and then we fried them in clarified butter. As the room filled with that oh-so-recognizable smell of frying potato pancakes, she beamed with joy and proclaimed to the Helix group, “You have just prepared Belarus’s national dish, [draniki](#). Congratulations.” As we looked proudly at our draniki, many of us were actually thinking that we now had a new recipe for latkes, the “authentic Jewish national dish.” That first day introduced the core goal of Helix: bringing a non-national approach to culture using Yiddish in its “native habitat” of eastern Europe as its lens.

Yiddish is the thousand-year-old fusion vernacular of European Jews with Germanic, Hebraic, Aramaic, and Slavic roots. As its speakers move from one place to another, the language adopts and adapts itself to local conditions. As one scholar of Yiddish commenting on its adaptive, boundary-less properties once said, “every word in Polish is also a Yiddish word.”

By using the fusion language of Yiddish as the lens for bringing the past alive, Helix creates an alternate model of a present not bound by national borders or cultures that define the contemporary map. Those potato pancakes, Belarus’ and Ashkenazi Jews’ pride and joy, were only one small example of the cultural fusion and cosmopolitanism, or what folklorists call oikotypification, that once defined eastern Europe. Helix’s premise is that the boundaries between people, groups, ideologies, and religions that we assume to be natural and assumed were in fact constructed by people...and can therefore be de-constructed, or perhaps even destroyed, by a later group of people.

Helix animates the past by giving its participants a huge amount of material — three binders full, in fact — that include literature, aphorisms, songs, critical essays, and other materials that helped us reflect on eastern Europe and the Jewish presence there. In addition to these many materials, there were three small songbooks, painstakingly and lovingly prepared by Helix staff: one for Yiddish songs, one for Belarusian songs, and one titled, “Songs of the Bund.” Like a standard study trip, participants were asked to read and discuss much of the material, but Helix made the [use of music](#) a primary way of bringing the past into the present.

Helix participants sang Yiddish, and on occasion Belarusian, songs everywhere — on the bus to pass the time, but also in town squares, at holy wells, from forts perched over cities, at other places of historical importance, and most poignantly, in cemeteries. Inevitably, public singing raises curiosity among passersby and others.

Our bus pulled up to the School of the Arts in Lyozna, the birthplace of both the visual artist Marc Chagall and Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad Lubavitch Hasidism. We got out searching for any sign that on the site of the school was once Chagall's home. Finding no trace, we decided to sing instead. Our voices rose to a fevered pitch, as people stuck their heads out of windows wondering what they were hearing. Perhaps they were wondering why a group of scraggly-clad young foreigners (using a broad definition of “young” that stretches into the 50s) from God knows where were singing at all, in public, in Belarus, a country where the wrong kind of public singing can get one arrested. Maybe they heard a melody quite familiar to them but using unfamiliar lyrics. This wouldn't be surprising since what we were singing was based on a famous Belarusian song. Curiosity led two women from the arts school to investigate the situation.

The options running through my head of what could happen in that encounter were not good — from contacting the local police to stop these provocateurs who had arrived in town to a less aggressive request to stop singing. (That only happened once, in Vilnius, when Helix was singing at a building where the Jewish Workers' Union or Bund was founded, which also happened to be across the street from a courthouse. They thought we were protesting, and protestors have to be more than 100 feet from the entrance.)

Instead, the women — one of them the headmaster of the school, the other a member of the Lyozna city council — invited us to bring our music onto the school's stage along with the their own master choral students. Local students and American travelers sang together — in Yiddish first, then in Belarusian. As we performed one of the Belarusian songs we prepared in anticipation of our journey, I had an epiphany in understanding the whole reason for our presence in these places.

Helix was not just about giving the students, artists, and instructors a learning experience that will transform them. It was that, of course. But it was also about engaging local populations through our words, songs, and actions and encouraging them to think about their multicultural past in a non-nationalistic way.

Helix participants had signed up for an experience that would question the very idea of the naturalness of nations by focusing on a language and culture that never had a nation-state. But those listening to our music or engaging with us in other ways did not volunteer for that experience. They were unwitting participants in the Helix project. With their Belarusian, Lithuanian, Latvian or other contemporary national identities, every person was invited into Helix to consider what a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural past might have looked like and how they can have that past inform their own personal present.

In Uzda, a town about an hour southwest of Minsk, an unidentified gentleman wearing menacing fatigues observed the Helix group's hunt for the historic mikveh from across the street. After our tour guide approached him and discovered that he was not part of the Belarus secret service but was instead the town's historian, she invited him to get on the Helix bus and show us his “Jewish Uzda.”

He ended up taking us to two local cemeteries — one Jewish, the other Tatar. In the Jewish cemetery, he passionately recounted the details about the local Jews' mass murder during World War II. At the Tatar cemetery, he pointed out a grave of a Muslim Tatar and Ashkenazi Jewish couple lovingly buried together. We were always touched by these intimate encounters, where we saw how important it was for locals to demonstrate their post-Soviet cosmopolitanism by talking about its violent end at the hands of the occupying Germans during World War II. (In Latvia and Lithuania, locals often presented the Soviets also as criminals, but not in Belarus, which still maintains deep ties to Russia.)

Hearing him speak about the Holocaust in his hometown reminded Helix that as much as we were focused on a cosmopolitan past, we were also traveling through bloodlands. In fact, most Americans who go to eastern Europe search for these ghosts of a long lost Jewish past. The local town historian thought that hearing those stories was what we wanted to hear.

But Helix never let the Holocaust and the attempted erasure of that cosmopolitan world be the last word heard. As a form of exchange, after hearing a local person's story about World War II, we would weep with them and then we would sing a Yiddish song or read a Yiddish poem from before the war, always in the original Yiddish, so that they could hear the presence of the Jewish past in these regions.

I reflected on how Helix contrasted with projects like March of the Living or Birthright Israel. The former sends Jewish high school students to eastern Europe to tour extermination camps for one week and then to Israel for a second week so participants move “from darkness to light,” “from past to present,” “from powerlessness to power.”

Birthright brings Jews from around the world age 18 to 26 to Israel for free on Jewish identity-building tours. That project encourages Jews (non-Jews are not allowed to participate) to celebrate their connection to the land. It also encourages them to have their Jewishness inspire them to make choices in their lives that will result in a Jewish future. (This is often cynically boiled down to marrying a Jew and having Jewish children.) For March of the Living and Birthright, the fact of a Jewish future, or more precisely a future with Jews, is the mission of these programs. Free or highly subsidized travel is simply the means for achieving that end.

On one occasion, I found us doing something similar. March of the Living has made one of its signature rituals — a slow walk related to a place of Jewish death, singing as a group. In our case, the group had asked its oversized tour bus to stop in the Lithuanian town of Zarasai as we went searching for the local cemetery. It was gray and raining, as it was for much of the time we were there. Locals directed us to a small, quaint island connected to the edge of town by a land bridge.

The bus stopped, we disembarked, wound our way down a stunningly beautiful path by a lake as we said good morning to several locals going about their daily routines. And then, we came upon the Zarasai Jewish cemetery. While there, we examined graves and discussed the language used on gravestones, as Helix often did. Then, as always, we read a Yiddish poem.

As we walked back from the cemetery across the land bridge, we felt moved to sing the Yiddish song *My Resting Place* (My resting place), a turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century radical critique of capitalism, whose title echoes the site of a cemetery. As we walked in the rain singing a highly depressing song about how capitalism turns the workplace into one’s final resting place, I had my most visceral response to the question about what made Helix different.

Unlike March of the Living, we did not carry Israeli flags. Helix waves no flags and resists the idea of nation-states defining “us” and “them.” We sang in Yiddish, not in Hebrew, thereby choosing a language *and also one that has never had a state attached to it the way modern Hebrew and its songs do.* These are not trivial differences, but instead reveal a non-national approach to Jewish culture.

The sounds of Helix were always an invitation to those listening to participate, to find their place in the Jewish culture we were bringing. Helix uses Yiddish culture as a way of breaking down boundaries rather than building them up, of inviting others into Jewish culture (the group itself had Jews and non-Jews from three different countries as participants), rather than just reminding them of an anti-Semitic past, and of encouraging everyone in the region to see Yiddish as theirs. It is a radically hopeful, some might say naïve and often maligned, vision of the future, one in which borders and boundaries can be crossed with nothing more than a song.

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