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Dr. One-Who-Hopes

The ophthalmologist who invented Esperanto

BY SUZANNE SNIDER

On Wednesday evenings, Tom Eccardt pulls his bike up to the curb at Park Avenue and 21st street, takes off his helmet, and enters a small deli called Emma's Dilemma. Inside, he peels off his jacket like Clark Kent, exposing a bright green tee shirt emblazoned with one word, one mission: ESPERANTO. A substitute high school teacher by day, Eccardt has been offering free classes in Esperanto—a 120-year-old language devised to do nothing less than unite everyone in the world—for 17 years. Eccardt first began studying Esperanto in 1987 at the Stuyvesant Adult Center, in the old Stuyvesant High School on 15th Street. 1987 marked the 100-year anniversary of Esperanto and he thought it was time to learn the language. On this particular evening, Eccardt works with two students at a table overlooking a pizza counter and the deli's long hot buffet. A few homeless visitors are slumped over neighboring tables while upright customers try to untangle what sounds to the untrained (or unsuspecting) ear like mangled Spanish.

When people think of Esperanto—if they think of it at all—they most likely place the language with other short-lived "democratizing" movements, like Hands Across America: another failed and fleeting utopian vision. Esperanto last made some semblance of a public appearance—if you can call it that—in *Incubus*, a 1968 sci-fi movie starring William Shatner, filmed entirely in Esperanto, and responsible for another group of fans who prize the language purely for its cult status as, basically, a joke (a common complaint among Esperantists: Shatner's pronunciation was entirely incorrect).

Participants in the Fourth Hebrew Congress, Vienna, 1913

But as Eccardt and its other adherents will tell you, the language is more than a joke. Or at least it started out that way 118 years ago, when Ludovic Zahmenhof first conceived of it. Born in 1859 to a middle-class Bialystock family, Zahmenhof created his earliest version of Esperanto while still in high school. Though the Zahmenhof family moved to Warsaw in 1873, the political and cultural conflicts of Bialystock inspired Zahmenhof's pursuit of an international language.

In 1878 Zahmenhof completed his first draft of what would become Esperanto, though he hardly needed the language to speak to his countrymen. In addition to studying Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Yiddish, and English, Zahmenhoff spoke Polish, German, and French. The goal? To connect people in his region of Russia who spoke four different languages—German, Polish, Yiddish, and Russian, and by extension to create regional—and eventually worldwide—communication and peace. Zahmenhof's father promptly burned his son's draft, out of a fears both large (that Zahmenhof would anger Tsarist authorities, who counted on a divided nation) and small (that Esperanto would distract Zahmenhof from his medical studies and, if published, characterize him as a flake).

There's something a bit ironic about the last considering Zahmenhof inherited his interest in linguistics from his father—who taught languages at state schools and was (unusually for a Jew) a favorite of Russian authorities—if not his religious views. While his father was firmly rooted in the *Haskalah*—a movement likened to a sort of Jewish Enlightenment, with bits of Positivism thrown in the mix—which stressed secularism, especially in the realm of education, Zahmenhof, from a young age, believed unwaveringly in the importance of God, a conviction that eventually led him to Zionism. As a student in Moscow in the 1870s and 1880s he helped found some of the city's nascent Zionist groups. But while his religious feelings never changed, he ultimately grew skeptical of nationalism in general—in 1914, he wrote and published a statement against it—and Jewish nationalism in particular. In the battle of interests—Zionism versus Esperanto; nationalism versus universalism—Esperanto and universalism won.

Nine years after his father destroyed the draft, Zahmenhof—by this point a doctor with a busy practice in prosperous Warsaw neighborhood—reconstituted a second, more evolved version of the language, a curious amalgamation of the romance languages, spoken entirely in troches, without exceptions, and with a grammar contained almost entirely in sixteen rules.

Shortly thereafter, he met his future wife, Klara Zilbernik, and found supporters in her and father. The couple married in 1887, and Klara's father helped finance the publication of an Esperanto primer, under the title *Unua Libra* ("first book"). Zahmenhof published the text under the pseudonym Dr Esperanto, which translates roughly into "Dr. One-Who-Hopes." Zamenhof's father, meanwhile, had come round to his son's way of thinking, or at least decided the project was harmless. He did his part to push the publication past the censors.

Esperanto Congress, Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, 1905

But Esperanto already had several obstacles to overcome: In addition to the sheer challenge of converting people to the cause—a linguistic bridge between contending ethnic groups—and teaching people the language, Esperanto had to compete with another invented auxiliary language (aux-lang for short) called Volapuk, introduced in 1880 by Johannes Schleyer, a Catholic priest from Konstanz, Germany, who claimed that God had instructed him in a dream to invent a universal language. In the 1890s Volapuk was immensely popular, with several clubs and periodicals, especially in German-speaking countries, and later in France. Today, there are an estimated 20 Volapuk speakers in the world.

Esperanto's simplicity eventually won out. By the turn of the century, Neutral Moresnet—a sliver of land once wedged between Belgium and the Netherlands—was considering becoming an Esperanto state. In July 1905, 688 people showed up for the inaugural 1905 Esperanto Congress in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. There, Zahmenhof made clear that he was pushing more than a language:

> And now for the first time the dream of thousands of years begins to be realized. In this small French seaside town I have met men from the most varied countries and nations, and they meet each other not as deaf-mutes, but they understand one another and speak to one another as brothers, as members of one nation.

The language has always had its share of champions, including a great number of writers, some of them more illustrious than others. Leo Tolstoy supposedly learned the language in 1888, in as little as a month. Scottish poet William Auld—nominated for a Nobel Prize in literature seven years in a row—took up writing verse in Esperanto. The photographer Sebastian Salgado knows Esperanto, and so does the author Umberto Eco. Jules Verne is often quoted as having said, "The key for a common language, lost in the Tower of Babel, can only be found in the use of Esperanto."

No one knows the exact number of people who speak Esperanto today, but approximations range from 100,000 to three million—Sidney Culbert, a professor of psychology at University of Washington, did what some consider the most comprehensive survey and came up with 1.6 million—and it's estimated that there exist 1,000 native Esperanto speakers whose parents taught them Esperanto as a first language. Esperanto societies, clubs and classes abound throughout the United States and numerous other countries. Eccardt is the former president of the New York Esperanto club, and now serves as vice-president. In addition to monthly meetings, the New York Esperanto group—about 60 people strong—has formal talks in Esperanto as well as an annual picnic in Central Park, tables at flea markets and at the now-defunct New York is Book Country fair. In the fall, Esperantists in the Northeastern region often gather at Lake George for a retreat that lasts several days.

PAGE 1 2 NEXT: In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler pegs Esperanto as the diabolical tool by which Jews might enslave other races.

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FROM THE FILTER

Idol Worship
Robert Klose's visit to the Warsaw neighborhood where **Isaac Bashevis Singer** once lived is akin to a religious experience. As he stands "on ground which had been hallowed by Singer's pen," Klose reflects that "the spirit of the place goes on if it can give birth to even **one messenger**."
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All Dolled Up
Bratz: The Movie (produced by **Avi Arad** and Paula Abdul) brings the freakish dolls to life—including Hispanic Jewish teen Yasmin. The original doll was **named after** toy company CEO Isaac Larian's daughter; in the film, Yasmin's grandmother is played by Lainie Kazan, "saddled with corny lines like, 'Hola! **Who's your Bubbie**?'"
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With a Twist
In Moscow, parties thrown by Project Rabinovich draw hundreds of young Jews to posh nightclubs for drinking, dancing, and casual matchmaking. Organizer Ilya Kiselev tells the *Jerusalem Post* he wants to "unite the Jewish people" in a **secular setting**.
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Groundbreaking
A new museum being built in Warsaw will look at "the history of Jewish **life in Poland** in Poland that flourished for 1,000 years before it was destroyed."
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Original Originals
Before the fight over which **Ray-invoking pizza** came first, a similar battle raged on Second Avenue. Daniel Bell's Uncle Hymie, who the author says invented egg creams, boasted "the Original" after a rival set out to poach his customers. The pretender put up a sign for "Hymie's Egg Cream," which "amounted to throwing **down a gauntlet**."
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