

Guardian of Yiddish culture dies

[Far-reaching legacy of theatre-founder Dora Wasserman lives on in Montreal](#)

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MONTREAL -- If there were murmurs of **oy vey** on the streets of Montreal yesterday, the lament was understandable: Dora Wasserman, maven of Montreal theatre and champion of the Yiddish language, had passed away.

Ms. Wasserman's raw willpower helped keep alive a language whose death notice had been signed more than once. She believed Yiddish was all about survival, and it drove her to stage plays in the Displaced Persons camps of Europe, and later to found the only resident Yiddish theatre in North America.

She died in Montreal on Monday, aged 84.

Yiddish expressions may have infiltrated the English language, and one of them, *chutzpah*, would have applied well to Ms. Wasserman's gifts. She drew sell-out crowds in Montreal with entire amateur theatre productions spoken in a 1,000-year-old language drawn mainly from German.

Ms. Wasserman also built bridges with French Quebec by staging the Yiddish version of *Les Belles Soeurs*, the masterpiece by the province's best-known playwright, Michel Tremblay.

Her motivation over the years was simple: "The love of Yiddish culture."

"My mother always said it was more important to have your culture than to put food on the table," her daughter, Ella, said in an interview yesterday. "We had torn shoes and black bread with butter for lunch, but she said it was more important to feed your soul and your cultural needs."

It was no coincidence that Montreal had sustained Ms. Wasserman's passion. Yiddish was the first minority language widely used in Montreal, as Jews began settling in the city at the turn of the last century. Montreal today has the world's third-largest community of Holocaust survivors, some of whom speak Yiddish. It is also the only place on the continent where major Jewish day schools churn out children who have

been taught English, French, Hebrew and Yiddish.

Montreal is home to half of the 20,000 Canadians whose mother tongue is Yiddish . More surprisingly, there are 1,200 English-speakers under the age of 25 in Montreal who also speak Yiddish, according to the 2001 census. Some see this as a legacy of Ms. Wasserman, who taught drama to children after arriving as a refugee in Montreal in 1950.

Morton Weinfeld, the chair in Canadian Ethnic Studies at McGill University, said robust Jewish culture was able to take root in Montreal partly because of the distinct nature of Quebec.

"People say that Jews in Montreal are the Third Solitude," said Prof. Weinfeld, author of a recent book on Canadian Jews. "They were able to find their own space between the English and French, and there wasn't a clear-cut need to assimilate as much as in Toronto."

Dora Wasserman was born in Ukraine in 1920 and studied acting at the Moscow Yiddish Art Theatre. At the outbreak of the war, she fled to Kazakhstan and performed with the State Theatre. She came to Canada in 1950 with her husband and two daughters, Ella and Bryna, and refused to believe that assimilation would obliterate the language she loved. To some, Yiddish was the language of the past. Ms. Wasserman insisted it was "about surviving, and memories, and choices and families."

"Language is part of your blood, it makes you who you are. It cannot die," she once said.

Weakened by a stroke eight years ago, Ms. Wasserman continued to attend rehearsals run by her daughter, Bryna. Recipient of the Order of Canada and Order of Quebec, Ms. Wasserman died in hospital three weeks after the death of her husband of 60 years, Sam.



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