

Merivale students produce a Yiddish primer

BY SHEILA HURTIG ROBERTSON
FOR CHES

Irving Osterer, an accomplished graphic designer and applied design teacher, quietly understates the significance of a project he led with the 22 students of his 2018-2019 senior graphic design class at Merivale High School.

“I’ve always had fun pushing the envelope and to be able to do a Jewish project is really, really nice,” he said simply.

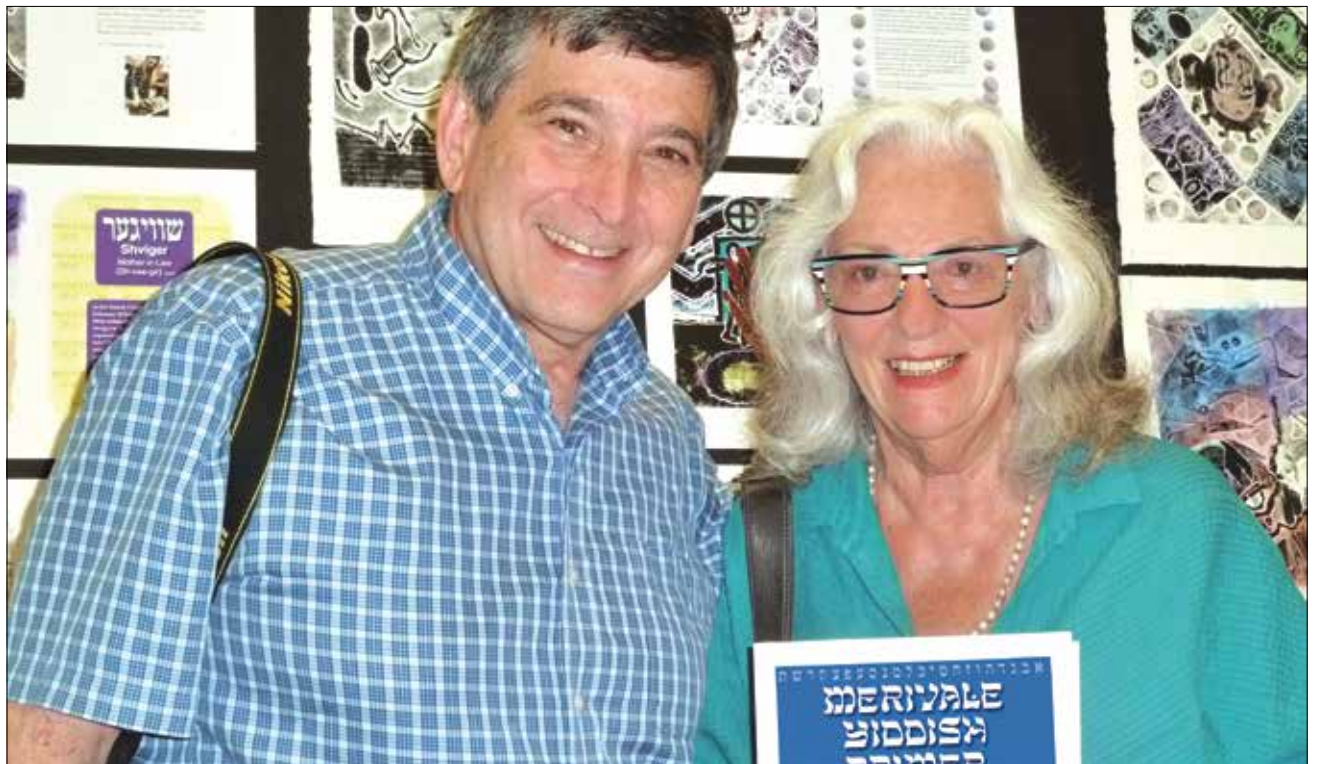
A unique publication, the *Merivale Yiddish Primer* grew out of Osterer’s infectious passion for the Yiddish language, for Jewish history, and for Jewish culture. It also reflects his upbringing by Yiddish-speaking parents and grandparents, seven years at Hillel Academy, and his in-laws, who spoke only Yiddish to each other.

To expand his knowledge, Osterer studied German at Carleton University. That, combined with his working knowledge of Hebrew, instilled a deep appreciation for Yiddish literature and culture, which had declined dramatically as a result of the Holocaust. Of the six million Jews who lost their lives, 85 per cent were Yiddish speakers. The decline accelerated after 1945 through assimilation and immigration to Israel although nowadays this trend is reversing.

Osterer, aware of the efforts being made to revive Yiddish, wanted to be part of it. After 38 years of teaching, retirement is not far off and so it was timely to realize his long-held desire to create a Yiddish primer.

“I am always looking for projects that will give my students a competitive advantage when they apply for design programs and I’ve made it a point to assign one project that combines a graphic solution with text in a language other than English,” he says. “The *Merivale Yiddish Primer* is an extension of that thinking. I want to foster pride and raise awareness. I think it makes the students stronger Canadians and encourages a belief in inclusion.”

Osterer explains that accessing the internet facilitated the primer’s development. He created an extensive lexicon of Yiddish words, expressions, and idioms – “gelt,” “gey gezunterheyt,” “schvitz,” and “fresser,” for example – that could easily be illustrated. To his surprise, some students recognized certain words, not realizing they are Yiddish.



Merivale High School applied design teacher Irving Osterer with Sheila Hurtig Robertson holding a copy of the Merivale Yiddish Primer, at the Merivale Art Show, June 7.

“Yiddish has crept into the vernacular because of the efforts to keep it alive,” he said, adding that the most recognized word was “tuchus,” apparently used regularly by rap artists and on talk shows.

He assigned each student a Yiddish word to illustrate. They created collograph plates that were inked and printed and learned to use the Quark Xpress glyph palette to access the characters in the Yiddish font. They were also given a short lesson on how Yiddish is read from right to left and were provided a sample page with the correct Yiddish spelling for their chosen word. Once completed, the illustrations were scanned, retouched, and imported into the layout. Then the students searched the internet for anecdotes to complement their illustrations.

“It was a very practical exercise because, as I told the students, if you’re going to make a living as a graphic

designer, you will likely have to deal with languages other than your own,” said Osterer, who has worked on design projects in Hebrew, Arabic, German, and Russian.

“Prior to this project, I had never heard of Yiddish,” said student Parker Stewart. “However, I have heard Yiddish words and phrases my whole life. Words like ‘klutz,’ ‘schpiel,’ ‘schlep’ and ‘schmooze’ are so prominent that it is weird Yiddish is not more known. I chose *hak mir nit kein chinek* (don’t knock a teakettle) as my expression because I think it’s hilarious. I wish we had a phrase like that in English.”

Recognition of the importance of Osterer’s dedication to diversity and inclusion reaches beyond Merivale High School.

“He is truly a testimony to what good teachers can accomplish,” said Mina Cohn, director of the Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship (CHES), which has often benefitted from his creativity. “Viewing the illustrations on display at the school’s annual art show was so moving that we have invited Irv to display the artwork at the CHES’ Second Generation Symposium to take place on November 17 at Kehillat Beth Israel.”

Osterer is gratified that his students “have come away with a really good learning experience. We have to do more of this; it’s not a task that ends. And every student who contributed to the *Merivale Yiddish Primer* will show it to at least two other people. As they grow older and travel, they will hear more Yiddish expressions, and it will strike an important chord.”

Wishing you a
very healthy and happy
Rosh Hashanah!



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Shana Tova!



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Warm wishes to you and
your family for a happy
Rosh Hashanah

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