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Yehuda Miklaf: You'd have to be pretty weird not to be welcomed by fellow speakers

**As the community of Esperanto speakers prepares to mark the 150th anniversary of its author's birth, the BBC's Dina Newman looks at the continuing appeal of this language designed to foster harmony and coexistence - even in a troubled part of the world.**

"Let's say you go to a little village in the south of France," says Israeli Yehuda Miklaf. "You ask: Does anyone here speak English? And they say: Henri does. So you go and say to Henri: Hi, I speak English. And Henri says: That's nice.

"Then you ask: Who here speaks Esperanto? They say: Pierre does. So you come up to Pierre and say: Hi, I speak Esperanto. Pierre says: Have you had lunch? It really is like this."

There are currently believed to be about one million people around the world who speak Esperanto, devised in the 1880s by Dr Ludwig Lazar Zamenhof (1859-1917) whose 150th birthday is being marked this month by an International Esperanto Congress in his birthplace, Bialystok, Poland.

Language is identity, and Esperanto speakers have a strong sense of community, based on tolerance and equality.

"You'd have to be pretty weird not to be accepted in an Esperanto club," says Mr Miklaf who belongs to a group of speakers in Tel Aviv.

Some argue that this tradition of tolerance goes back to the original values of its founder.

"If I wasn't a Jew from a ghetto, the idea of uniting humanity would either have never occurred to me, or it would have never taken such a firm hold of me throughout my life", wrote Zamenhof in 1905.

A resident of Warsaw, Zamenhof was alarmed at the growing wave of anti-Semitism throughout the Russian empire.

At first he was drawn to Zionism, the movement to resettle Jews in their own state in what was then Palestine - but then he turned against the idea.

"However attractive this dream seems..., the future Palestine would be very different from the idyllic Palestine of the past," he wrote in 1901.

"Jews will be living there as if on a volcano... conflicts and persecutions there will not stop until the Jews are expelled from there once again".

He suggested Esperanto as a neutral international second language, which would allow the Jews and other minority groups to retain their own cultural and linguistic identity and avoid both persecution and pressure to assimilate.

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Zamenhof became an enthusiastic Zionist, but then left the movement

Zamenhof's book *Dr Esperanto* (meaning *Dr Hopeful*) offered a simple grammar and a vocabulary of 900 words derived from Romanesque, Germanic and Slavic languages.

Through a system of suffixes and prefixes it had a built-in ability to generate new words.

"Everyone who has learnt Esperanto knows the joy of using this flexible and witty language", says Esther Schor of Princeton University, who is writing a book on the history of Esperanto.

Zamenhof believed that his language was so simple that even an uneducated person could learn it in a week. This assessment was probably optimistic. But today most speakers would agree that a couple of months is sufficient to become fluent.

Prof Schor compares Zamenhof's project to the revival of Hebrew which now serves as a common language to Jews who come to Israel from all over the world.

She also notes that Zamenhof spoke fluent Yiddish, which has a compilation of Hebrew, German and Russian words.

In fact, Zamenhof loved Yiddish and once attempted to reform it in order to make it "a cultivated language of Europe", but later abandoned the project and went back to the idea of a neutral language to unite humanity.

These days, Esperanto has gone far beyond being a purely Jewish, or minority, project.

Amina (not her real name), a young Jordanian woman from a conservative Muslim family in Amman, learnt Esperanto in secret so she could communicate with people in the outside world.

"It is hard to be different in our culture, she says. Sometimes I feel I don't belong here. Esperanto became a kind of family for me, a nation, if you like.

"I cannot travel abroad by myself, so I can hardly meet my Esperanto friends. But I can write to people on internet," she says.

#### Strained history

Through Esperanto, Amina has made friends in Israel. But mostly, contacts between Jewish and Arab Esperanto speakers today are limited, though it has not always been so.



Israeli Esperantists meet regularly in Tel Aviv

Back in 1924, the Esperanto club in Tel Aviv had both Jewish and Arab members.

One of the Arabs was called Arafat, and some modern members like to speculate whether he was a relation of Palestine Liberation Organisation chief Yasser Arafat.

Always keen to garner recognition from the outside world, the PLO issued a leaflet in Esperanto in the 1970s.

Before the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948-49, Esperanto speakers from Egypt and Palestine maintained regular links.

But after the creation of Israel contacts between Esperanto speaking Jews and Arabs in the Middle East came to a halt.

Today, very few Israeli Arabs learn Esperanto. Doron Modan has researched the history of Arab-Jewish Esperanto links and is now

#### ESPERANTO POETRY

##### *La Lingvo de Espero*

Ligighas mia vers' al lingvo Esperanto  
Se ghi ekzistos plu - do restos mia  
spur';  
Se mortos ghi - do mortos mia kanto.  
Sed nun mi versu. Jughu la futur'.

##### *The Language of Hope*

My poems come together in Esperanto  
language.  
If it continues to exist - so my trace  
will survive.  
If it dies - so my song will die with it.  
But for now, I shall write. Let the  
future judge.

**By Mikhail Gishpling (Russian)**

inspired, as he puts it, to realise Esperanto's full potential.

"If we start a course for Jews and Arabs together, in a mixed environment, maybe in Jaffa or in Haifa, it can succeed. I can see it very clearly in my mind".

"We always have a right to dream. When I hear that Esperanto will never become an international language, I say - how do you know? Are you going to be around for the next 200 years?"

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