
japanese future technology L.L. Zamenhof And The Shadow People | The New Republic - Esther Schor

Posted by amik...@aol.com - 2010/01/07 18:28

[Click here: L.L. Zamenhof And The Shadow People | The New Republic](http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/ll-zamenhof-and-the-shadow-...) (<http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/ll-zamenhof-and-the-shadow-...>) Starting at midnight on December 15, 2009, the Google logo was draped in a green flag. Perhaps you thought it was the Palestinian or the Saudi flag; perhaps this unsettled you enough to mouse it. If you did, you'd have learned that the flag celebrated the one hundred and fiftieth birthday of Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, the founder of Esperanto. And if you clicked on it, you'd have helped make "L.L. Zamenhof" the third most often-searched term on Google that day. None of this was happenstance. It was the work of an Israeli Esperantist named Yosi Shemer, who sends two hundred twenty-five people a weekly Jewish-joke-in-Esperanto (with all Hebrew or Yiddish terms glossed in Esperanto). Though he modestly credits the idea to "some European Esperantist," it was Yosi who began the campaign last September, entreating Esperantists worldwide to lobby Google—in English—for a doodle. And enough of them did to conjure a bright green flag on Google's homepage in 33 different languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Google calls this a "global" doodle, and of the last 59 to appear on its various home pages, only Zamenhof, the invention of the bar code, and water on the moon received this honor. News travels fast in Esperantoland and soon Esperantists who were already lifting glasses to honor Zamenhof, lifted them a bit higher. To Esperantists, the man who created the language-movement is a household god, a patron saint. As for non-Esperantists who are aware of Zamenhof, he's too unthreatening nowadays to be derided as a quixotic dreamer. Most regard him with mild condescension as a MittelEuropean, Jewish Geppetto, hammering together his little toy language in the hope that it might someday become real. But inside this Geppetto was not only the dream of a new language, but also of something far stranger and unimagined: a new people altogether, and neither the Jews nor the Esperantists were the people he envisioned. Project by project, credo by credo, member by member, he tried to build a new people, a Geppetto with the audacity of Frankenstein. He was born in Bialystok, Poland (then, Greater Lithuania) in 1859, the son of the czar's Jewish censor for Hebrew and Yiddish books. A slight, bespectacled man, Zamenhof had piercing, faintly Asiatic eyes that seemed out of place in his implausibly bulbous head. Nearing 30, his boxy beard still black, he could have passed for a younger, less self-important, brother of Sigmund Freud. He was an oculist by profession but, at one time or another, he'd been many other things: an early Zionist, a journalist, a modernizer of Yiddish, a general practitioner, a lecturer, a poet, a translator, a religious reformer, and an amateur language-engineer, with a knack for getting the bugs out. "I was taught," he wrote, "that all men were brothers, and, meanwhile, in the street, in the square, everything at every step made me feel that men did not exist, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews and so on." He was determined to bring "men" into being with his 1887 Lingvo Internacia, published under the pseudonym "Doctor Esperanto" (the hopeful one). At the back of the 44-page Russian-language pamphlet were coupons; the signatory was to promise to learn the international language provided ten million other people promised likewise. Two years later, Zamenhof had received only 1,000 promises. But by then the language, already going by his pseudonym, Esperanto, had been adopted by the "World Language Club" of Nuremberg, an Esperanto-language journal had been launched, and the introductory pamphlet—the Unua Libro (First Book)—had been translated into a dozen different languages. The rest, as they say, is history. From a mere 16 grammatical rules and 900-odd roots, Esperanto has endured, grown, and flourished into a living, world language with a sophisticated original literature. People make love and have toothaches in it; children are born into it. And it is alive and well on the Internet, where it is used to teach, inform, debate, entertain, gossip, persuade, and argue with other Esperantists about everything from advocacy to ... well, Zamenhof. He seemed to be the right man at the right time. Between 1866, when the transatlantic cable was finally up and running, and 1896, when Marconi patented the radio, the future promised new networks of communication about education, culture, science, and technology. Glimpsed just over the hills, the century that would beget the atom bomb appeared to have a distinctly human face, and it was speaking incessantly. With new conversations forging new bonds, relations among diverse peoples and nations were sure to benefit. Zamenhof intended Esperanto to jump-start such conversations. It was easy and cheap to learn—"the labor of a few hours," as he put it—and equally accessible to workers and intellectuals. But though quick to be learned, it was slow to gain momentum and impotent to make money. The late 1890s found Zamenhof trying to start a medical career, raise a family, and secure his beloved language; he was itinerant and impoverished, at times despairing. By 1901, having staked his wife's dowry, his family's well-being, and his meager earnings on Esperanto, he became convinced that to survive, Esperanto would have to become the hereditary language of a people. Which people? The answer, to this modern, Russian-speaking Jew, was obvious; he would offer it to the Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia, exhorting them to give up their tribal identity and become an enlightened, ethical community. He put their situation starkly: "The Jewish people, for a long time now haven't existed. ... The expression 'the Jewish people,' which according to traditional custom is used by us and our persecutors, is only a consequence of an illusion ... a deep-rooted metaphor, similar to the way in which we say about a portrait of a person, customarily, 'there is that person,' nevertheless this person is already long dead and in the portrait remains only its shadow." Tethered to dead ancestors yet religiously unmoored, these Russified Jews had become a "shadow people." There was an alternative: a plan for a reformed Judaism that Zamenhof called Hillelismo (Hillelism). In a lengthy, Russian-language tract, he presented Hillelism as a new, purified, theosophical Judaism with an emphasis on ethics. At times, he sounds like the Apostle Paul entreating the Corinthians to abandon the literal observance of the laws of Moses and interpret according to the spirit. But into the legal vacuum created when the laws of torah were abandoned, Zamenhof beckoned a rule drawn from within the Judaic religion. His point in naming the "purified" Judaism after a pivotal first century BCE rabbi was to overgo, in one bold gesture, both Moses and Jesus, who had based his golden rule on Hillel's famous admonition, "Do not do unto others what is hateful to you." While Zamenhof disparaged the separatism

of what he called Jewish “ self-exile,” he wanted to do more than transform Jews into individuals of conscience; he wanted to rebuild the Jews as a people. In fact, there is a deeply conservative strain to Zamenhof’s Hillelism, in which cultural traditions serve as moral cement. The Hillelists, he imagined, would retain what Edmund Burke called a “moral wardrobe” of their cultural inheritance. All traditions that could possibly be purged of tribalism and chauvinism were to be conserved: the Bible, the sabbath, the festivals, etc. Thus, with Hillelism recognizably and culturally Jewish, it would in time attract unworldly, traditionally educated, Jews into the fold and eventually, others who sought a “ pure theosophical” faith.” Though the Hillelists of the future would be multicultural and multireligious, Zamenhof nonetheless imagined those Hillelists as a people. Thus he arrived at a conundrum. How could a group of human beings with varied national origins possibly attain—and sustain—the bonds of peoplehood? This is not a question that federated states—or multinationals such as the United Nations or the European Union—need to ponder. But those of us who are citizens of multicultural nations such as the United States, know that our “peoplehood ” has a checkered history. Our knee-jerk, civics-class habit of equating American peoplehood with diversity is a recent development. In fact, attempts to define Americans as a “people” coincide with our most egregious episodes of racism, nativism, exclusionism, and anti-immigration legislation. For Zamenhof, the answer to this conundrum lay squarely in the arena of language. Wearing the mantle of Johann Gottfried Herder, who argued that language is the essence of the volk, Zamenhof identified language as the sine qua non of peoplehood. The fragility of Jewish identity, he argued, lay chiefly in the fact that the Jews lacked their own language. He noted that he’d at one time backed the Hebrew revival piloted by his contemporary, Eliezer Ben Yehuda (though I haven’t found evidence for this); he had also spent three years developing a modern, rationalized Yiddish using Latin characters. But by 1901, he had changed his mind on both counts. Hebrew, he felt, was “cadaverous,” and Yiddish, a “jargon.” Only with a neutral, artificial language—an Esperanto that Hillelist Jews would remake, eventually, in their own image—could the Jewish people justify their peoplehood to themselves and the modern world. But the Jews of the Russian empire spurned

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Posted by Ros' Haruo - 2010/01/07 18:28

An interesting read. My reaction is generally positive, but I am disturbed by multiple distortions and several errors of fact. I also dislike the all too common journalistic tone of God explaining to the masses. The author tells us Zamenhof's motivations, intentions, and private thoughts, at multiple times in his life, reporting reasons for his priorities and decisions with deific authority. It's a powerful literary device, but inherently inaccurate and misleading, even when we have some of his writings to illuminate his thinking. I wish the author would choose a little less drama and absolutism, and a little more care and perspective in these essays. Derek

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I agree. I also found the piercing, faintly Asiatic eyes a bit much, along with the juxtapositioning of Geppetto and Frankenstein. The younger, less self-important, brother of Freud, that I can buy. But yes, an interesting, polemical take on our household god, our patron saint. It'll be interesting to see what sort of book about Esperanto Ms. Schor is writing. Haruo

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