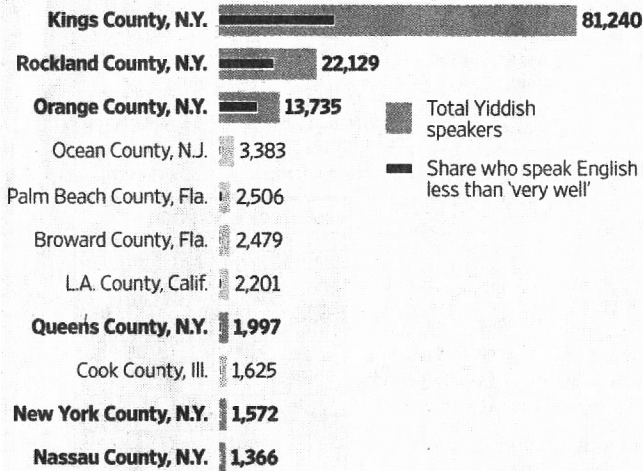


# Speaking of Yiddish, Court Needs Translators

## Local Lingo

More than three-quarters of the Yiddish speakers in the U.S. live in the New York region.

Top 10 U.S. counties, by estimated Yiddish-speaking population



Source: Census Bureau's 2008-2012 American Community Survey

The Wall Street Journal

BY HILARY POTKEWITZ

The buildup to the mistrial in New York state Sen. Malcolm Smith's bribery case wasn't just courtroom drama. It became a whole *megillah*.

U.S. District Judge Kenneth Karas had ordered prosecutors to turn over 93 hours of a cooperating government witness's telephone conversations to defense attorneys because the recordings might help the defense. But complicating matters, 20% of those conversations were in Yiddish.

Though the New York region is home to more than 75% of the nation's 159,000 Yiddish speakers, according to U.S. Census data, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York has but a single interpreter on call.

That is down from five in 2009, according to Edward Friedland, the district executive

for the court, which handles Manhattan, the Bronx and several counties north.

After the judge's order, prosecutors scrambled to assemble a full team of Yiddish translators over the June 15-16 weekend to create transcripts of the calls for defense attorneys. The mistrial came last week.

Usually, there isn't much day-to-day demand in the federal courts for Yiddish speakers, said Ruth Kohn, who is the Southern District's sole on-call speaker of the language.

The Southern District hasn't used a Yiddish interpreter in more than three years, according to court records.

"You cannot devote yourself only to Yiddish hoping you'll get a call," said Ms. Kohn, who also interprets for Hebrew and Polish.

This month, those calls started coming. Defense attorneys also sought out interpreters

in Mr. Smith's case. The Yiddish interpreters working in New York's federal courts are contractors, not full-time employees, and typically do work for other agencies and clients.

Ms. Kohn was contacted by Mr. Smith's defense attorney, Gerald Shargel, as well as the U.S. attorney's office, the State Department's Office of Language Services and several private agencies, all seeking her services in the case. Mr. Shargel reached her first, so she is doing the work for him, she said.

"I'm not going to blithely accept what [prosecutors] give me," Mr. Shargel said. "I'm looking for clues along the way, and if there's anything that interests us even remotely, we'll have our own interpreter translate it."

Translator Rita Ratson said she was contacted by four interpreting agencies for the case. "I feel like a superstar," said Ms.

Ratson, who is also the director of the Yiddish program at Gratz College in Pennsylvania.

The U.S. District Court for Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island is down to three on-call Yiddish interpreters after one died and another retired, according to Court Clerk Doug Palmer.

The New York State Unified Court System has one full-time interpreter who speaks Yiddish and Hebrew, and four on-call Yiddish interpreters. The court used a Yiddish translator 37 times in the first half of this year and 83 times in all of 2013, according to David Bookstaver, the system's director of communications.

Rockland County family court had the greatest need for the interpreters, he said, followed by Brooklyn family and supreme courts.

In Mr. Smith's case, "a number of translators we reached out to said the speech wasn't comprehensible to them," said Agata Baczyk, founder of Legal

Interpreters LLC.

The recordings involve members of the ultra-Orthodox Satmar sect, a group that tends to refer to as "Hasidic Yiddish." It is a speech pattern laced with religious references and Aramaic phrases, explained Prof. Joel Berkowitz, director of the Sam & Helen Stahl Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

An interpreter who was an Orthodox Jew might have had a better chance understanding the recordings, Mr. Berkowitz said. But the bulk of the translation happened over the weekend, and Orthodox Jews observe the Sabbath.

In Mr. Smith's case, defense attorneys said they needed weeks to analyze the transcripts of the recordings, and too many jurors said they couldn't serve through the delay in the trial. On June 17, the judge declared a mistrial. Mr. Smith, a Democrat, will have another trial beginning in January.