

A communal language no one understands:

By JOCK HATFIELD
Of the Emerald

A citizen had to be proficient in Russian, Polish, German and Yiddish to get through the day in the town where Ludwik Lazar Zamenhof grew up. A person without a quadrilingual knowledge of adjectives wasn't safe in the streets. Zamenhof decided to create a language from scratch, a communal language without drugged syntax, cultural peculiarities or moody spelling. He intended it to bridge the cultural gaps not only in Bialystock, Poland, but around the world.

Zamenhof's language, Esperanto, never quite caught on. Ever since its creation in the 1870s, linguists have predicted its popularity, authors have bolstered it with original works and translators have injected it with Russian, Polish, German, Japanese and English classics.

In the early 1900s books were published with the following testament ready for readers to clip out and send in: "I, the undersigned, promise to learn the international language proposed by Dr. Esperanto (Zamenhof's pen name) if it is shown that 10 million people have publicly made the same promise."

Esperantists formed international organizations, to promote the idea of world peace. After each world war, the language was discussed as a step away from nationalistic thought. But somewhere along the line, the artificial language failed, and 80 years after its birth, Esperanto remains a tongue without a mouth.

"It was a good idea but it didn't work," says Eugene resident Wilbur Harrison, who first learned Esperanto in high school when the language was gaining popularity in the 1920s. "It's

been 80 years now since Zamenhof started promoting it," he says, "and it still hasn't been accepted. It hasn't been given a chance."

Today Esperanto isn't dead, but it has settled into the passive state.

"I don't expect Esperanto to become a big force for the next generation or two," admits another Esperanto speaker, Carlton Karrol, professor of French at Oregon State University. "But Esperanto is very much alive."

The number of Esperanto speakers has diminished by 20 million over the last 40 years. It now has only one million speakers, several hundred million less than most languages.

The main problem for those wishing to speak Esperanto is not learning the language, but finding someone else who understands it.

Were it not for Esperanto clubs, which publish lists of members, Esperanto speakers would have

to advertise in the classifieds to talk.

Esperanto speakers defend the usefulness of the language anyway.

"Eighty years for a language to grow isn't long," says Doris Connor, whose husband was president of the North American Esperanto Association before he died.

Connor donated her collection of Esperanto literature to the University library in 1973.

Esperanto's last political advance came in 1954 when UNESCO recognized it as an admirable organization. Since then, universal languages have gone out of style. But if a universal language does come into vogue, the Esperantists feel theirs will be the language chosen.

"No nation will ever allow another nation's language to become an international language," Connor explains. "Esperanto has no roots, so it will be a natural choice."

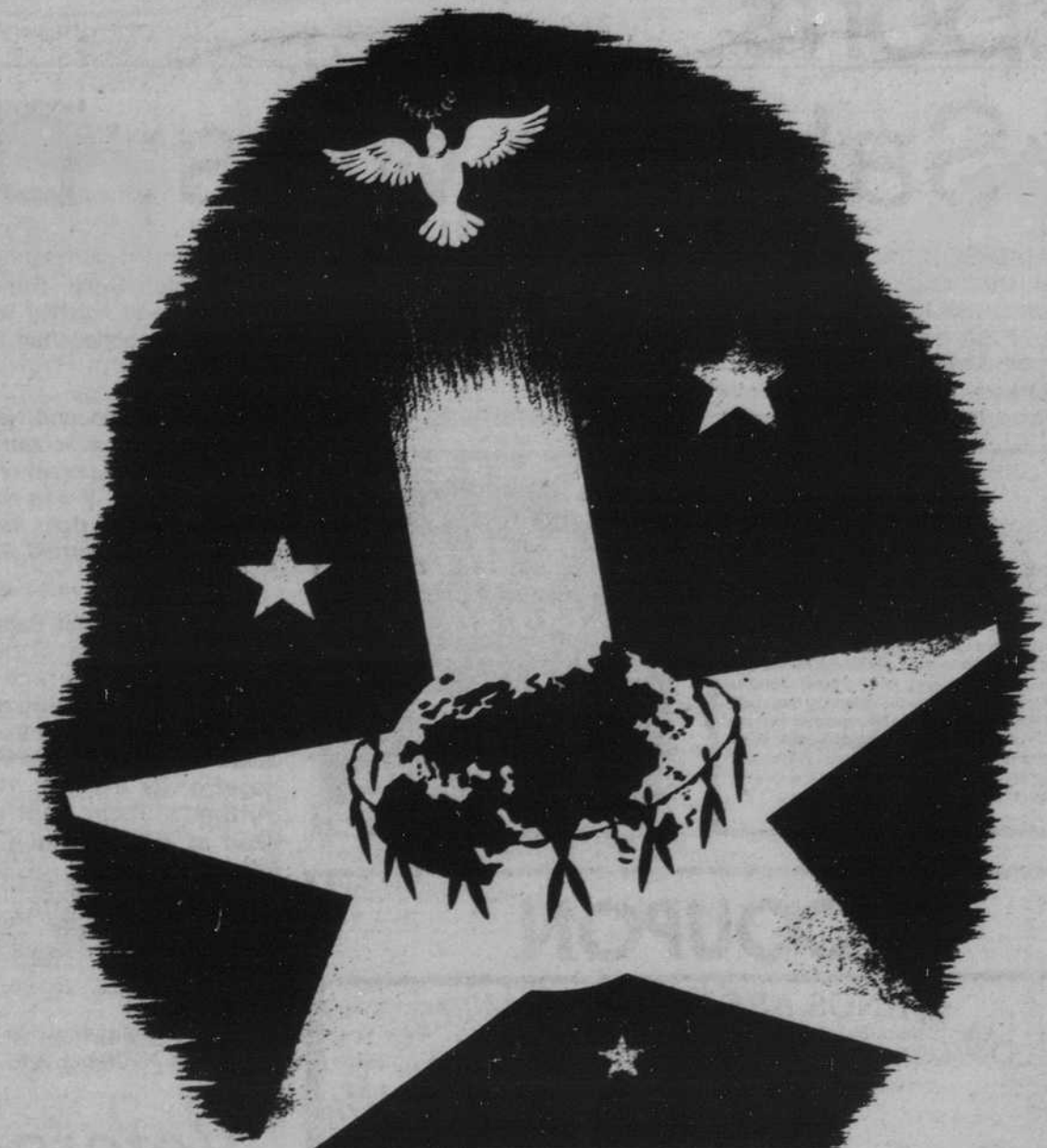
Esperanto has other advantages, particularly for the beginner. Because Esperanto is an artificial language, all speakers are equally incompetent, and no ethnic group can snicker at another's Esperanto accent. The vowel sounds are standardized, spelling is phonetic, and Zamenhof used Latin roots for his words, making it easy to pick up.

Most nationalities should recognize parts of their own language in Esperanto, like pieces of yesterday's breakfast cereal stuck to the bottom of today's soup. Speakers in some countries can recognize more than 50 percent of the language on first reading.

"It's an easy language," Connor says. "You can learn to read it in an hour, and a year of Esperanto study would be equivalent to two or three years of French, Spanish or German."

Esperanto for the beginner is a linguistic double

ESPERANTO



Book of Genesis according to Esperanto

1 EN la komenco Dio kreis la ĉielon kaj la teron. 2 Kaj la tero estis senforma kaj dezerta, kaj mallumo estis super la abismo; kaj la spirito de Dio ŝvebis super la akvo. 3 Kaj Dio diris: Estu lumo; kaj fariĝis lumo. 4 Kaj Dio vidis la lumon, ke ĝi estas bona; kaj Dio apartigis la lumon de la mallumo. 5 Kaj Dio nomis la lumon Tago, kaj la mallumon Li nomis Nokto. Kaj estis vespero, kaj estis mateno, unu tago.

6 Kaj Dio diris: Estu firmaĵo inter la akvo, kaj ĝi apartigu akvon de akvo. 7 Kaj Dio kreis la firmaĵon, kaj apartigis la akvon, kiu estas sub la firmaĵo, de la akvo, kiu estas super la firmaĵo; kaj fariĝis tiel. 8 Kaj Dio nomis la firmaĵon Ĉielo. Kaj estis vespero, kaj estis mateno, la dua tago.

9 Kaj Dio diris: Kolektigu la akvo de sub la ĉielo en unu lokon, kaj aperu la sekajo; kaj fariĝis tiel. 10 Kaj Dio nomis la sekajon Tero,

kaj la kolektiĝojn de la akvo Li nomis Maroj. Kaj Dio vidis, ke ĝi estas bona. 11 Kaj Dio diris: Kreskigu la tero verdajn, herbon, kiu naskas semon, fruktarbojn, kiu donas laŭ sia speco frukton, kies semo estas en ĝi mem, sur la tero; kaj fariĝis tiel. 12 Kaj la tero elkreskigis verdajn, herbon, kiu naskas semon laŭ sia speco, kaj arbojn, kiu donas frukton, kies semo estas en ĝi mem laŭ sia speco. Kaj Dio vidis, ke ĝi estas bona. 13 Kaj

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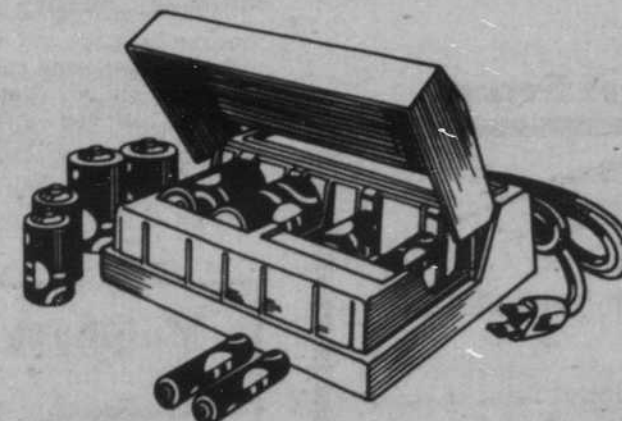


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