

# YIDDISH GUIDE TO MIKE NICHOLS 1931-2014

by  
*Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe*



*Syosset, New York*

Mike Nichols, master of stage, film, and TV, has passed away. He is survived by his wife, Diane Sawyer, three children, and four grandchildren. He lived in Manhattan and Martha's Vineyard. Shown below is a Yiddish Guide to this Tony-, Oscar-, Emmy-winning director.

“nomen” (name)

Nichols was born Michael Igorevitch Peschkowsky in Berlin.

Anglicizing part of his name - Nicolaiyevitch - he became Paul Nichols.

“tate” (father)

His father was a Jewish doctor from Russia who fled to America to escape the Nazis in 1938. His father died when Mike was 9 years old--a catastrophe he later described as the “defining event of my life.”

“mazldik” (lucky)

“rede” (speech)

Nichols said, “When we were leaving for the boat, everybody stopped. Cars pulled over. Hitler was making a speech [on loudspeakers], and we all had to listen. I’m incredibly lucky, and getting on that boat was my first piece of luck because two weeks later, the next boat to America was turned away.”

He continued: “Nothing about coming here felt traumatic. It just felt like an adventure. But Buck Henry [who wrote the screenplay for *The Graduate*] was in my school, and the way he described it, I was an outsider in every possible way.”

“amerike” (America)

“kush” (kiss)

“kushn” (to kiss)

Michael knew two sentences in English when he came to America:

“I do not speak English” and “Please don’t kiss me.”

“glentsndik” (magnificent)

Nichols wrote about how when he was 15, he saw “A Streetcar Named Desire.” “It was the most astounding thing of my life. I had never seen anything like it. There were two intermissions, but we never got up or spoke. We were just stunned. To this day, I remember it was the most poetic thing I ever saw. It was magnificent and very upsetting and exciting. It was so true, real and shocking.”

“heym” (home)

Nichols was raised in New York, a 1930 refugee with his family from Hitler’s Germany.

“paruk” (wig)

“hor” (hair)

“bremen” (eyebrows)

Michael’s sense of being a stranger (“fremder”) in a strange land was aggravated by the loss of his hair at age 4, the result of a reaction to a whooping cough medicine. He wore wigs and false eyebrows the rest of his life.

“tuml” (noise)

[on coming to New York as a child] Nichols said, “American society to me and my brothers was thrilling because, first of all, the food made noise. We were so excited about Rice Krispies and Coca-Cola. We had only silent food in our country, and we loved listening to our lunch and breakfast.”

“ganeydn” (paradise)

“I never had a friend from the time I came to this country until I got to the University of Chicago,” said Nichols. (He described the university as “paradise.”)

“ershter” (first)

The first time Mr. Nichols stepped behind the camera, in 1966, it was to direct Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in an adaptation of “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolfe?” (This film was nominated for 13 Academy Awards, including best director. Though he didn’t win, the film won five.)

“tsveyter” (second)

“aktyor” (actor)

Nichols won an Oscar for his second film, “The Graduate” (1967). The film made a star of the unknown actor, Dustin Hoffman.

“arbet” (work)

His iconic works: *The Graduate*, *Working Girl*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Closer*, *Charlie Wilson's Iconic War*, *Annie*, *Spamalot*, *The Birdcage*, and *Angels in America*.

“komish” (funny)

“oylem” (audience)

“kishn” (pillow)

Nichols directed “*The Odd Couple*.” He said, “There were real discoveries. Sometimes we didn’t even know things were funny. Walter Matthau says: ‘You leave me little notes on my pillow. Told you 158 times I can’t stand little notes on my pillow. We’re all out of Corn Flakes. F.U.’ It took Nichols three hours to figure out F.U. was Felix Ungar.” The audience laughed so hard, Nichols had to sit down and read the *New York Post*.

“komiker” (comic/jester)

Mike Nichols and Elaine May did comic dialogues of classic human moments like a space scientist telephoning his mother

Their “*Mother and Son*” routine: Everyone has a mother and with that comes a varying degree of guilt trips. Here, Nichols and May run through a bit about how mms and their working sons just don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things. “Someday, honey, you’ll get married. And you’ll have children of your own. And honey, when you do, I only pray, they make you suffer the way you’re making me,” May says, much to his dismay.

“*The \$65 Funeral*” routine: Nichols and May tackle the shady funeral (“*di levaye*”) business, which upsells the “caskets” and “hearses” that are shockingly not included in the advertised price.

Telephone (“*telefon*”) routine: Everyone hates calling customer service and back in the day, you got to talk to actual people. Nicholas and May expertly predicted decades of frustration we continue to suffer through.

[on developing an act with Elaine May], Nichols said, “We were winging it, making up as it went along. It never crossed our minds that it had any value beyond the moment. We were stunned when we got to New York. Never for a moment did we consider that we would do this for a living. It was just a handy way to make some money until we grew up.”

“tsebrekhn” (to breakup)

When Elaine May and Michael split up, he told *The New York Times* magazine [1984], “I didn’t know what I was. I was the leftover half of something.”

“shreklekh” (awful)

Nichols fired Mandy Patinkin during the making of “Heartburn.” He said, “I loved Mandy then, and I love him now. It was awful to have to replace him, but on film I couldn’t see the chemistry I wanted. I don’t know how many days it was, but to save the damn thing, I had to move fast to get Jack [Nicholson]. Mandy was, of course, devastated, and I’ve felt awful about it all my life.”

“lign” (lie)

[on Elizabeth Taylor] Nichols said, “There are three things I never saw Elizabeth Taylor do: Tell a lie; be unkind to anyone; and be on time.”

“tsore” (trouble)

[on Stanley Kubrick] Nichols said, “In the end, I think he began to have trouble, because if you can’t leave home, you lose track of reality, and I think that happened to him. Still, he made great movies and he was a completely gifted director. If you look at ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’, you suddenly realize: My God, there’s nobody in this movie!”

[on Jack Nicholson] Nichols said, “Jack is the sort of guy who takes parts others have turned down, might turn down, and explodes them into something nobody could have conceived of. All his brilliance of character and gesture is consumed and made invisible by the expanse of his nature.”

“shmutsik” (dirty)

[on his experience judging a limerick contest] Nichols said, “It was easy. We just threw out the dirty limericks and gave the prize to the one that was left.”

“oyferzikhtik” (jealous)

“Being with an insanely jealous person is like being with a dead mammoth.”  
Nichols quote

“mentsh” (human being)

“Anne Bancroft was a great actress, and as a human being, wife, mother (and friend), she was unique.”  
Nichols quote

“Nit”/“Nisht” (No.)

Theater legend Tyrone Guthrie wanted Nichols to play Hamlet. He said, “I can’t--I don’t have the voice, and I don’t know Shakespeare.” He said, “Don’t you think you can pretty much do everything?” Nichols said “No!”

“oyfhern” (to quit)

Nichols quit after three days on *The Sopranos*. He said, "It was a good part--I was her shrink, not his--but I was 'acting.' I told David Chase, "Forgive me, I'm the wrong Jew."

"bet" (bed)

Nichols said, "I think maybe my subject is the relationships between men and women, centered around a bed."

"derklern" (to explain)

"It's not a film-maker's job to explain his technique, but to tell his story the best way he can."

Nichols quote

"more-shkhoyre" (depression/sadness)

"simptom" (symptom)

Prior to meeting Sawyer, Nichols had been going through a black depression and addiction to the sedative Halcion, which a friend calls "just a symptom of what was going on underneath."

"zelbstmord" (suicide)

In Chicago, Mr. Nichols began his many years of therapy. He suffered depression, and in the 1980s, he considered suicide.

"emes" (truth)

Natalie Portman, one of Nichols' favorites, said, "He [Nichols] has an eye and an ear and a heart for the truth. He'll tell you something that suddenly seems obvious but that you'd never have come up with yourself, which is probably the definition of genius."

"ayzkrem" (ice cream)

"narish" (dumb)

"When I was 17, for my first job, I worked at the midtown Howard Johnson's. A customer asked me what our ice-cream flavor of the week was, which was a dumb question, because there was a menu showing that it was maple. So I told him that it was chicken. The customer laughed, but the manager fired me immediately. They were bastards there."

"derklerung" (explanation)

Meryl Streep said of Mike: "No explanation of our world could be complete and no account or image of it so rich, if we didn't have you."

"ferd" (horse)

Nichols had a lifelong passion for Arabian horses.

“treyst” (comfort)

Tom Stoppard said, “He [Nichols] is a giver. He’s good at comfort and joy. He’s good at improving the shining hour and brightening the dark one, and, of course, he’s superlative fun...To me he is the best of America.”

“khasene” (marriage)

“borves” (barefoot)

Marriages were Nichols’ main vehicle. He examined marriages in “Barefoot in the Park,” “Heartburn,” and “Virginia Woolf.”

“farkoyfer” (salesman)

Nichols said, “It (Death of a Salesman) was too good. Making it, I had too good a time.”

“khaver” (friend)

“soyne” (enemy)

Nichols had Five Rules for Filmmaking. Number 5: “Friends may come and go but enemies will certainly become studio heads.”

“fliplats” (airport)

“held” (hero)

“ferter” (fourth)

Nichols met ABC News anchor, Diane Sawyer, in 1986 in a Paris airport lounge. Sawyer was hiding in the lounge because she hadn’t done her hair or something. As they waited for a Concord flight to New York, he approached Sawyer and told her that she was his hero. She responded by saying he was HER HERO. In 1998, Sawyer became Nichols’ fourth wife. Nichols said, “I had loved other women before, but not like this.” They were married for 26 years.

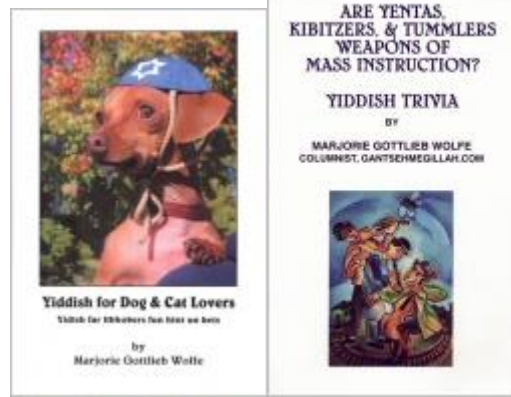
“bale-bos (master/one in authority)

“klas” (class)

At his death, Mr. Nichols had at least one project on his plate. He was the director, executive producer of “Master Class,” which was to star Ms. Streep.

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Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of  
two books:



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tumblers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish Trivia." To order a copy, go to her website: [MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com](http://MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com)

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