
The Yiddish Library Development Program

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Within the next few years, some eighteen to twenty academic libraries may acquire significant collections of materials in Yiddish to begin or to augment their collections in support of coursework and research in Judaic studies. The volumes in the collections come fully cataloged, with bibliographic information available in OCLC's online union catalog, and the titles may be custom-selected to suit the institution's needs. These libraries will be the beneficiaries of a unique and salutary endeavor operating out of an old schoolhouse in Amherst, Massachusetts. With the rich cultural and professional resources available in the western Massachusetts region known as the Pioneer Valley, the evolution of the National Yiddish Book Center and the Yiddish Library Development Program is not surprising, but is still very gratifying.

Yiddish as a language and as the vehicle of popular culture, literature, performing arts and political thought, is a remarkable phenomenon. Once the everyday language of the majority of east European Jews, its impending doom was signaled by the destruction of these communities in the course of World War II. While it was and is the language of Jewish people, it is not the language of their religious life—that language has always been Hebrew. While the people who emigrated from Yiddish-speaking communities naturally adopted the languages of their new homelands, the state of Israel established the Hebrew language as its everyday tongue, modernizing it and educating Israeli citizens in the use of Hebrew.

Exceptions such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, who continued to write in Yiddish, were rare. Newspaper publishing in general, theater, indeed the entire cultural setting for Yiddish seemed to be vanishing as the surviving Yiddish-speaking communities of immigrants in the U.S., Israel, and post-World War II Europe, were dying out or growing old. A language in use for about 1,000 years would be extinct. But the fabulous invalid proves to be as wiry and tenacious as some of the colorful characters created in Yiddish literature.

Many elements have come together to sustain the Yiddish language and culture: the interest of contemporary students in the world of the recent past; a recognition of the richness of the contents of the Yiddish language and culture; the sheer volume of written materials which were produced in Yiddish

beginning in the last half of the 19th century, and the refusal of many people to abandon Yiddish altogether, to name a few.

Aaron Lansky's project

Aaron Lansky was a young graduate student at McGill University in 1979 pursuing studies in Jewish history and literature. Finding needed materials in Yiddish was next to impossible, so he resorted to going door-to-door in Montreal's Jewish neighborhoods asking for books. He found them; and he also found that many were being discarded since the owners did not realize that anyone else valued them. Returning to Amherst, Massachusetts, where he had earned his undergraduate degree at Hampshire College, Lansky conceived of a center for the exchange of Yiddish materials, saving them from destruction and disuse, and making them available to people who wanted to use them. Lansky's sense of mission, enthusiasm, and rational approach to salvaging these materials was infectious, and with modest financial support and volunteer effort, the National Yiddish Book Center was established in 1980 to gather, preserve and distribute printed materials in Yiddish to libraries, collectors, scholars, students and cultural organizations. Now with a staff of twelve full-time people, and Lansky as executive director, the NYBC is a non-profit organization dedicated to no less than the preservation and revitalization of Yiddish culture.

The role of libraries

From the beginning, Lansky and his co-workers realized the importance of libraries in making these materials widely available again. Courses in the Yiddish language, Jewish history, east European studies, the Holocaust and other related fields were being offered on college and university campuses and in neighborhood centers. Younger generations of Jews were seeking to piece together their culture and ancestry, while older generations recognized with some pride the value of their culture and the need to preserve and transmit it. Libraries are logical choices as outlets for these materials.

Lansky consulted with Jewish writers, scholars, teachers, and librarians, particularly in the Amherst area. From librarians he and his col-



Yiddish volumes await researchers at the National Yiddish Book Center.

leagues sought advice on organizing the materials and capturing the important bibliographical information which would be needed to make the collections accessible. Even he did not anticipate the volume of materials, or the variety, which the Center would collect, but he and the people he worked with had the foresight to organize the collection from the start.

Why a Yiddish collection?

What does a Yiddish collection contain and why is the fact that the materials are in Yiddish important? Materials in Yiddish cover an amazing range of the life of the mind—poetry, fiction, history, political theory, commentary on current events, science, sociology, the fine arts, even yoga. Beginning around 1860, Yiddish became the vehicle for many writers and playwrights, and the commonality of the Yiddish language enabled intellectual life to move across national borders and spread even to the new world.

Since East European Jews were ostracized and isolated from the communities around them, their culture developed intensively; almost everyone was literate, and voracious readers were commonplace.

Another interesting aspect of Yiddish literature is its contemporaneous settings. The dates and places of publication preserve a slice of thinking, preoccupation, or popularity of particular issues, theories, fashions, or controversies. Many popular authors were translated into Yiddish, providing us with a picture of trends and fads in popular reading. In addition, Yiddish publications contain a

healthy contribution from women writers.

The Yiddish language is based in German, augmented by words and terms from the Slavic languages and Hebrew. It has been described as a language with a shrug in its shoulder, a language of wry irony, a language rich in nuance and expression. (I once heard the Yiddish actor Joseph Buloff recite twenty-three separate Yiddish words for “thief.”) The very existence of such a variety of materials in this vernacular, everyday language is an intellectual phenomenon itself to be studied, while specific subject areas and genres in Yiddish collections provide rich resources for social and bibliographic study and research.

“The funky phase of...rounding up books.”

Aaron Lansky described the fifth anniversary of the Center in 1985 this way: “This is the end of the funky phase of being out there rounding up books. Now the emphasis will be on getting them back into use.” As the Center began collecting the materials, brief annotations were created and recorded on a microcomputer database for later use. Over 600,000 volumes have been collected; over 15,000 have already been distributed to libraries and individuals. About a thousand volumes arrive each week. Full cataloging cannot keep up with all the new acquisitions but the Center now publishes listings of available materials in its *Yiddish Book News*, starting with Volume 1, no.1, 1986. Also available to members of the Center is *The Book Peddler: Newsletter of the National Yiddish Book Center*, which describes the activities of the Center and highlights particular parts of the collection.

The Yiddish Library Development Program

The intentions of the Center to distribute appropriately and efficiently the fruits of its collecting are now being actively carried out. In February 1986, Devorah Sperling joined the staff of the Center as librarian and director of the newly-launched Yiddish Library Development Program. Devorah holds her master's degree in library and information science from Drexel, a bachelor's in anthropology and Near Eastern studies from Indiana University, and a master's in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, and has done research in Israel, as well as at the Institute for the Study of Human Issues in Philadelphia. She came to the Center after two years as a Hebraica cataloger at Dropsie College.

Sperling brings the values and skills of scholar and librarian to the Center. Her work at the Center has two major directions: as librarian in a highly specialized and complex field with inadequate bibliographic tools, and as liaison between the Center and academic libraries which plan to establish or augment Yiddish collections. *The Book Peddler* (no.8, Winter 1987) describes Sperling as a "librarian's librarian"; she prepares the cataloging for the collection—both corrected information for older records in the OCLC union catalog, and original cataloging for which no records can be found. The corrections are forwarded to Shimeon Brisman, Judaica bibliographer at UCLA; he proofreads them and forwards them to OCLC for enhancement of the database. New records are entered on the OCLC union catalog at the libraries at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Hartford, which have received the first two collections of materials from the YLDP. All the cataloging records are carefully transliterated, conform to AACR2 cataloging rules, and are in MARC format. (Aaron Lansky has said he knew the Center needed a librarian, but he wasn't at first sure why. This is why.) By this painstaking cataloging Sperling is accomplishing not only bibliographic control of the specific collections going to the libraries, but also providing a permanent resource accessible to the entire library community. Sperling relies on many available resources—the Library at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Judaica experts at the Library of Congress, the LC guidelines for Romanization, as well as other Judaica librarians and researchers. She has been able to tap the rich pool of library expertise in the Five College area as well.*

For the Yiddish Library Development Program, two types of collections have been established. The Basic Collection, which is designed to support un-

*The libraries, special collections, librarians and faculties of Amherst, Hampshire, Mt. Holyoke, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts.

dergraduate programs in Jewish studies, consisting of about 500 volumes, and the Comprehensive Collection, comprising 1,000 volumes including the Basic Collection and additional selections in the coverage areas. Included are reference works, texts in history, biography, ethnography, social theory and other nonfiction areas, as well as literature and criticism. The Comprehensive Collection is also strengthened by primary sources on the Holocaust, including memoirs. Libraries may select titles from the special bibliographies prepared by the Center: *Yiddish Literature: A Basic University Collection* and *Yiddish Literature: A Comprehensive University Collection*. Sperling estimates that by the end of 1987 complete cataloging for all the titles in the standard Basic and Comprehensive Collections will be available on the OCLC system.

As director of the program, Sperling works with collection development librarians at a variety of institutions to define institution-specific needs, acquisitions, the feasibility of microfilming projects, and the creation of specialized bibliographies. Individual scholars and catalogers also turn to her for help in tracking down obscure bibliographic items or citations. This is often fugitive literature: standardized or universal bibliographic tools, for the most part, do not exist. Devorah Sperling has a column, "Yiddish Library News," in *The Book Peddler*, in which she reports on the progress of the YLDP and the cataloging.

Not just books

The NYBC has been acquiring other "orphans" related to the Yiddish book. The Center houses sheet music, sound recordings, pamphlets, magazines, posters, photographs, and more, all of which are in need of additional bibliographic description and control before they can be made useful. The full-time staff, many volunteers, and interns all participate in the various activities of the Center, which include classes, seminars, translation and oral history projects, multimedia programs, documentary films and publishing. A network of over 200 collectors (or "zamlers" in Yiddish) around the U.S. and Canada, forage for, salvage, and send in materials to the Center. And the Center, supported by its over 8,000 members and donors, carefully takes them in, sorts them, preserves them and tries to find good homes for them.

The YLDP and the NYBC are located at Old East Street School in Amherst, Massachusetts, with warehouse facilities in Holyoke, Massachusetts. The phone number is (413) 256-1241. Recognizing the central role of libraries, certain materials are being made available only to library collections and not to individual collectors. But there happens to be some overstock in a few areas—anyone care to peruse a Yiddish translation of the collected works of Guy de Maupassant, or a sex manual in Yiddish? Just ask.