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Yiddishkeit: Statement for the Edward Newton Student Library Prize

Jews refer to Yiddish as the *mamaloshen*, or the mother language. It was traditionally the secular language of the home spoken by women in Diaspora communities, while men at the study house spoke Hebrew, the holy language. Yiddish is a language without a country, and has never been spoken by any government or king; and sadly, as my grandparents' generation passes, fewer and fewer people are learning it at home. Its rich literary tradition was often looked down on by the western Jewish intelligentsia as sentimental and folkloric, even backwards. University programs are just now beginning to reclaim the language as a legitimate object of study.

My collection of Yiddish poetry, plays, and books related to Yiddish culture is an attempt to preserve the great literary legacy of a dying language, both in translation and in the original. My books encompass the "high" and the "low" ends of the spectrum of Yiddish popular culture, including work from Nobel Prize-winning Isaac Bashevis Singer to the cartoonist Ben Katchor, contemporary darling of the Yiddish press. Also represented are anthologies of the folktales I grew up with, from stories meant to be read to children to Buber's challenging and koan-like Hasidic riddles. Art and photography books illustrate the visual culture of Yiddish-speakers from the steppes to the Lower East Side.

My Yiddish Holy Grail is an original copy of the Yiddish version of *Hamlet*, which was famously given a "happy ending." I have come across references to the Yiddish *Hamlet* in various books and through my grandmother's stories of the Yiddish theatres on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, but I have never seen a copy of it, nor do I know what the ending is.

Collection of 31 Books on Yiddish Culture and Literature *Anna Elena Torres*

Aleichem, S. (With drawings by Ben Shahn). Inside Kasrilevke. New York: Schocken. 1965.

Written as travelogue, Inside Kasrilevke is the tale of a traveler returning to his birthplace. Aleichem's imaginary city of Kasrilevke is populated with all the usual suspects of village life. Both a folktale and a satire of life in the *shtetl*, written by the grandfather of Yiddish literature.

Aleichem, S. Tevye's Daughters. New York: Crown Publishers. 1959.

These stories of a beleaguered Jewish man and his irrepressible daughters contributed to the mythologizing of the idea of the *shtetl*. Aleichem's canonical, if sentimental, stories inspired the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, for better or worse. With an endearingly kitschy cover design.

Ansky, Solomon. The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds. [*Der dibek* in Yiddish, first printing 1912.] London: Regnery Publishing, 1988.

One of the most enduring of Yiddish stories, The Dybbuk has had many incarnations. Ansky was a Jewish ethnographer who traveled through the Russian countryside, collecting folktales and *bubbe maysey* (old wives' tales). He was particularly taken with the theme of the dybbuk, an (often male) malignant spirit that possesses the body of a (usually female) innocent person, speaking through that person's mouth until exorcized through incantations and blowing of the *shofar* (ram's horn). Ansky added a twist to the classic dybbuk plot, turning it into a supernatural love story between a living girl and her dead fiancé. Though it received mixed reviews from the Jewish intelligentsia for its folkloric flavor, it was immediately translated into Russian and Hebrew by the poet Bialik and performed widely throughout the 1920s. There are German, Polish, Ukrainian, Swedish, Bulgarian, and French versions; movie adaptations made from here to Tel Aviv; and most recently, the excellent klezmer outfit The Klezmatics has turned it into an opera, with libretto by Tony Kushner.

Asch, S. Kiddush Ha-Shem and Sabbatai Zevi: An Epic and A Tragedy. New York and Philadelphia: Meridian Books and The Jewish Publication Society of America. 1959.

Between 1663 and 1665, the “false messiah” Sabbatai Zevi led millions of Jews from across Europe and Northern Africa to Jerusalem, where he promised to usher in the messianic age. Instead, he was captured by the Persian sultan and forced to choose between death and conversion. He chose apostasy in 1666. His displaced followers, however, were left in a painful position: some converted as well and remained in Persia; some returned to their villages, where they were ostracized; and a last group formed a new mystical and messianic sect, which survives in very small numbers to this day. Asch’s play includes a remarkable scene where, in grief after the apostasy, Jews bury themselves up to their heads on a hillside and wail lamentations.

Ausubel, N. & M. A Treasury of Jewish Poetry. New York: Crown Publishers. 1957.

Features poetry from the age of the Tanakh to the present, organized by theme. Most comprehensive book on the subject I’ve seen. Many of the poems feminize ritual elements, as the poets address themselves to the bride of *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) and sometimes even “Mama Diaspora” herself. The evolution of Jewish poetry mirrors the development of a Jewish diaspora theology, which ascribes mystical significance to the condition of displacement and understands G-d, as well as the Jewish people, to be living in exile from this world.

Buber, M. Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters. New York: Schocken Books. 1961. (Trans. by Olga Marx).

Hasidic tales are dense, existential, and mystical, and spin worlds where every human action sends reverberations through the spiritual dimension. Wise men grapple with the foolishness of the world; villages are drawn into marriage scandals; students are transformed into animals... Many of these stories came down through the oral tradition from the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples. Kafka’s stories are rooted in this tradition, not modernist or avant-garde styles, though he is now taught outside of his own context and alongside European and surrealist writers. Despite their magical elements, Hasidic tales should not be taken as “Surrealist” – their subject is not the subconscious, but the spiritual dimensions of reality.

Chagall, Marc. Chagall. New York: Taschen, 2003.

Marc Chagall’s fantastical paintings and Sholem Aleichem’s short stories together were largely responsible for creating an iconography of the shtetl. Chagall depicted, in rhapsodic colors, the characters of folktales: enormous red birds perched atop

leaning buildings, anthropomorphic barnyard animals, venerable rabbis with infinite beards, lovers floating above towns on *Shabbat*.

Grade, C. Rabbis & Wives. New York: Vintage Press. 1983.

A fine novel that once belonged to my grandfather by Grade, a Yiddish writer from Vilna, Lithuania. Grade was a favorite of contemporary Jewish critics and was championed by Elie Wiesel, especially appreciated for the lack of romanticization in his imagery. Grade also wrote a memoir of the Holocaust and several novels that were successful in the 1980s.

Gross, Milt (with line drawings by author). Nize Baby. New York: Donan Co., 1926.

The plum of my collection is this first edition from 1926. Extraordinarily, it is written entirely in the phonetic speech and slang of Yiddish-speakers. At a time when immigrants were encouraged to lose their accents and assimilate, *Nize Baby's* exuberant jive celebrated and justified Yiddish culture, much the way Zora Neal Hurston's novels recorded black speech true to its sound. On the page, Gross' style would be incomprehensible to anyone without a working understanding of Yiddish vernacular and syntax, and even I have to read it aloud to myself.

Howe, I. World of Our Fathers. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1976.

Howe's book details the history of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to New York in the 1880s and the communities they built. He focuses on the stories of individual luminaries, also including photographs of the Yiddish theatres, settlement houses, and union halls and squalid sweatshops of the Lower East Side. He discusses American Jewish novelists, New York intellectuals, suburban life, the Holocaust, and Israel, devoting the last two chapters to Jewish achievements. "The life of the east European Jews was anything but an idyll. Given the pressures from without and a slow stagnation within, this world was bound to contain large portions of the ignorant, provincial, and even corrupt. One of the motivating forces behind the communal and political movements that sprang up during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as well as of the Yiddish poetry and fiction written at the same time, was a desire to stir the blood of a society that had gone sluggish, to cleanse the life of a people that had suffered too long from isolation, poverty, and violence" (p8).

Howe, I., and Greenberg, E., Eds. A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry. New York: Schocken Books. 1976.

Though the great lions of Yiddish literature had passed by World War II, Howe's anthology of Yiddish poetry is especially strong on including work from contemporary Yiddish poets. He puts his collection in context with a long foreword.

Howe, I., and Greenberg, E. Eds. (With drawings by Ben Shahn). A Treasury of Yiddish Stories. New York: Schocken Books. 1973.

Howe's goal with these three books was to preserve and canonize the best Yiddish literature and make it available to a wide audience. Howe was also a critic and novelist in his own right, whose feud with Philip Roth was well covered in the Jewish press and represented a split between the classical, well-mannered 'old guard' and the more explicit 'new guard.' His efforts to shape public opinion of Jewish culture led him to edit the liberal-socialist magazine *Dissent*. I recently discovered a website with free recordings of many of the stories read aloud, in Yiddish.

Howe, I., and Greenberg, E. Eds. Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries. New York: Schocken Books. 1975.

Continues Howe's work in collecting documents related to Yiddish history. Especially strong on material related to the labor movements of the early 20th Century.

Katchor, Ben. Julius Knipl, Real-Estate Photographer/Beauty Supply District. New York: Random House, 2000.

Ben Katchor evokes entire urban worlds through detailing a tiny piece of New York: an object found on the street, an architectural anomaly, the pet peeves of a civil servant, cafeteria society (as opposed to café society). Like Roman Vishniac's photographs, his drawings capture the whole range of life in a vanished world, not the Russian ghettos but those on the Lower East Side. His black ink drawings are full of exaggerated city angles and looming urban landscapes. Many of these cartoon panels appeared first in the *Forward (Der Forverts)*, the Yiddish-language newspaper published in the Bronx, NY.

Katchor, Ben. Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay, with Julius Katchor, Real Estate Photographer. Penguin Books, USA: 1991.

Autographed with a cartoon self-portrait by my hero Ben Katchor, when he taught a master class at Swarthmore this fall. Cheap Novelties follows the adventures of Julius Knipl through old New York, and each page is devoted to one found object and its stories of Yiddish New York. At

Katchor's show in the Jewish Museum, he documented an entirely invented social movement and created its propaganda and memorabilia. Many museum-goers were fooled. He also recently wrote the libretto for a Marxist opera and designed its scenery.

Kayser, S.S., & Schoenberger, G., Eds. Jewish Ceremonial Art. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America. 1959.

Well-illustrated book depicting the history and artistry of ritual objects and art. Like contemporary Muslims, religious Jews do not create "graven images" or representations of human bodies; the metal-working and crafts, therefore, reflect an emphasis on geometric patterns and visual rhythms, in the absence of pictures of people.

Landis, J.C., Trans. The Great Jewish Plays. New York: Avon Books. 1974.

Collects works performed in the Yiddish theatres of New York, as well as plays originally written in Russian. Shows the breadth of Jewish playwrighting and social criticism, but also its common roots in traditional stories and fascination with the ecstatic and the occult. Includes Ansky's Golem.

Liptzin, S. Ed. & Trans. Stories from Peretz. New York: Hebrew Publishing Co. 1947.

Peretz was a major Yiddish writer who, although he preferred scientific rationalism to Hasidic fervor, always treated his subjects with compassion and maintained his respect for the beliefs of his ancestors. These collected works of Isaac Lieb Peretz are now sadly out of print.

Neugroschel, J. The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe. New York: Perigree/Putnam & Sons. 1982.

The whole panorama of *shtetl* life, from the Middle Ages to the 20th Century. Many of the documents were translated for the first time. The anthology includes the greats as well as the revealing obscurities. I was especially delighted by its political satire. Found in a used book store, apparently first used by the first owner as a text book.

Novak, W., & Waldoks, M., Eds. The Big Book of Jewish Humor. New York: Harper Perennial. 1990.

Where my rabbi got his jokes. The editors trace the history of Jewish humor through all genres: from Freud's joke book and his essay on their relation to the subconscious; to Holocaust revenge fantasies; to Philip

Roth, a category unto himself. Though there is a total of one joke about sex, an entire chapter is devoted to the subject of the Jewish mother-in-law.

Ozick, Cynthia. The Puttermesser Papers. New York: Vintage, 1998.

Ozick brilliantly adapts the golem story to contemporary, gritty New York. A middle-aged woman escapes her dismal civil service job in a building beside the Brooklyn Bridge when she discovers the form of a female golem and accidentally brings her to life. Over the course of the novel, the heroine Ruth has many adventures worthy of a Hasidic tale, including a golem-led campaign to become mayor of New York and a visit to the modernized Garden of Eden.

Rosten, Leo. The Joys of Yiddish!. New York: McGraw Hill. 1968.

Leo Rosten's near-dictionary The Joys of Yiddish! is an unusual work, in that it defines each new word, not in the context of a sentence, but with a joke explicating the full connotations of the word. Leo Rosten is also the author of the Hyman Kaplan stories, which detail the travails of Yiddish-speaking immigrants as they struggle to learn English. All of the stories are set in the classroom of a beleaguered English teacher, and each one ends with a shameless bilingual pun. My mother, who taught English to Russian immigrants, often assigned the Kaplan stories to her students, who identified strongly with the protagonist and appreciated Rosten's dissection of both English and Yiddish.

Samuel, Maurice. Prince of the Ghetto. New York and Philadelphia: Meridian Books and The Jewish Publication Society of America. 1959.

Samuel devoted himself to documenting the many facets of *shtetl* life, in a similar vein as Aleichem – though Samuel's word-play could jump from the style of medieval Talmudic exegesis to mimicking the voices of merchants in the street. Samuel was interested in all aspects of Yiddish culture and critiqued the other great writers of his circle – including Aleichem.

Shahn, B. The Shape of Content. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1957.

In which Shahn sets down his theories of art. Though influenced by Mexican muralists, Chagall's fanciful village imagery, and Communist criticisms of American society, his work and his writing voice is clearly his own. He favors the blunt and direct, and believes in the ability of art to elevate and dignify the working class. Shahn was also a photographer,

and based many of his paintings of street life on photographs he took of his native New York.

Shahn, B. Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn. Princeton, N.J., and New York, N.Y.: Princeton University Press and The Jewish Museum, 1998.

Shahn was trained as a lithographer, which is evident in his fascination with distinctive line and typesetting. Most of his work is political commentary of some sort, and he was commissioned to produce murals for New York City streets as well as jails. His most famous work is *Death of Sacco and Vanzetti*, a painting which depicts the two executed anarchists lying in their coffins, juxtaposed beside the judges of their case, who are posed with faces set in expressions of false piety.

Singer, I.B. A Day of Pleasure. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 1986.

This is first book I read by Singer as a child, and his stories have remained vivid throughout my life. Coming from a family of rabbis, he describes growing up in the divided world of Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, where boys lived completely separated from girls, who lived apart from the adult male world of study, and in turn from the women's sphere of the kosher kitchen. I remember two of Singer's tales particularly intensely. In one, a boy is sent into a daydream after passing a little girl on the sidewalk, wondering whether one day she will be his wife; in another, a boy is discovered in the House of Study by his father, trying to create a mystical animal through a kind of magic.

Singer, I.B. Woodblock illustrations by Antonio Frasconi. Yentl the Yeshiva Boy. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1962.

Yentl is the story of a Jewish orphan girl who wants to elude her duty as a housewife and become a Talmud scholar. She adopts male dress, which is forbidden by Jewish law, and becomes a learned student, continuing to perpetrate her gender deception until after her marriage. After she is discovered to be female, her marriage is annulled and her study-mate realizes that he has been in love with her all along. I admit that I have yet to see *Yentl* as interpreted by Barbara Streisand, but I was always impressed that she does not sell out in the end and marry a man. Instead she demands to be accepted as a scholar on her own terms, and so moves to a new town where she once again enters the male world of Torah study. *Yentl* has become a cultural icon, and when I worked at the Jewish Museum in New York, a huge Warhol-esque screen-print of the cross-dressing heroine hung in pride of place over my boss' desk.

Schwartz, H. (Ed.) Elijah's Violin & Other Jewish Fairy Tales. New York: Harper & Row/Harper Colophon Books. 1985.

I grew up hearing these stories at bed-time. The stories were populated with maidens in various forms of captivity; demons or princes possessed by *dybbuks* who had no shadow; noble musicians who played a mysterious instrument called an *ud*; a couple who dwelled inside a magic mountain; rabbis whose supernatural powers allowed them to discuss Torah with the birds of the forest; and underwater palaces that only drowned sailors could reach. Hell, or *gehenna*, was depicted as a fiery subterranean world just under Jerusalem, the gates of which the damned could see but were forbidden to enter – a condition that seems almost a parody of Diaspora.

Vishniac, Roman. A Vanished World. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986 [reprint].

Roman Vishniac shot thousands of haunting photographs on the streets of Eastern Europe in the years leading up to the Holocaust. His pictures are reminiscent of more well-known artists such as Cartier-Bresson, but populated with long-bearded men at study, ethereal and hearty women walking down cobble-stone streets, large-eyed *yeshiva* children. Looking at his brilliant and compassionate portrayals of Jews, the reader is aware that she is seeing the record of a destroyed world.

Weinreich, B. Silverman, Ed. Wolf, L. (Trans.). Yiddish Folktales. New York: Schocken Books, in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. 1997.

A new collection. The most startling of the stories is what appears to be a Jewish riff on the Jack and the Beanstalk tales. Illustrated with child-like line drawings and featuring an academic foreword.

Zangwill, I. Ghetto Comedies. New York: The MacMillan Company. 1907.

The ghetto of the title is the Jewish quarter in London. Published as part of Zangwill's 14-volume series; the other volumes were billed as Ghetto Tragedies. My grandfather, whose book this once was, only purchased the comedies – though admittedly, for Zangwill, the line between comedy and tragedy was fine.

Zangwill, I. The King of Schnorrers. Mineola, New York: Dover Publishing Co. 1965.

The archetypal master *schnorrer* (beggar) is an artist of manipulation, calling upon the guilt of his subject, the injustice of society, and the fire of his own self-righteousness in the pursuit of a donation. By social contract, however, the 'donation' must be given without insult to the beggar – and so he is often brought home to dine as an equal with his patron's family. In Zangwill's *King of Schnorrers*, the trickster-like *schnorrer* character must outwit a series of rich would-be patrons to secure the fine dinners he feels he so abundantly deserves. In a famous scene, he fools a prospective son-in-law into believing that he owns a large property in Jerusalem where he is to be buried – when in fact, all he possesses is a jar of dirt from the Holy Land.