

EYDES and Contemporary Fieldwork in Yiddish Ethnography and Dialectology



Appendix 1: The IUYEP and some other related projects

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In the past decade Yiddish language and culture has begun to see a surprising revival. Around the world large segments of the rapidly growing Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish population continue to use Yiddish as their vernacular; the academic study of Yiddish is proliferating at universities and academic institutions; and festivals of Yiddish culture, public lectures, Yiddish music, and klezmer groups regularly celebrate a heritage that may yet be recovered.¹ Yet on its native soil, the Yiddish language and associated culture are on the verge of disappearance. For most of the twentieth century, the historical heartland of East European Jewish civilization was inaccessible to Western observers. Scholars and the general public assumed that in the aftermath of the Holocaust and Sovietization, the last traces of Jewish life and language in the region had already been destroyed. However, since the opening of the former Soviet Union and the establishment of independent states in Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, scholars have begun to find significant remnants of this civilization.² In addition to researching at a distance or from pre-existing literature, it is now possible to capture first-hand memories of the last surviving generation of native Yiddish-speakers in Eastern Europe.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, researchers have begun to comb local archives for genealogical records;³ Hasidic pilgrims have streamed into the region to pay homage to holy graves; community activists have begun to restore the faded facades of synagogues and with them the life of local Jewish communities; and tourists now sporadically trickle into the “Old Country” in search of their roots. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Jews from the region have been fleeing in search of better lives in Israel, America, and Germany. Yet no attempt has been made to record the memories, culture, and language of those who remain. Given the age of the remnant population, in a few years this living resource of Yiddish in its original habitat will be lost forever.

¹ See Joshua A. Fishman, “Stock-Taking: Where Are We Now,” pp. 291-349 in his *Yiddish: Turning to Life* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1991); Leonard Jay Greenspoon, ed., *Yiddish Language and Culture Then and Now* (Omaha, 1998); Dov-Ber Kerler, ed., *Politics of Yiddish, Studies in Language, Literature and Society* [= *Winter Studies in Yiddish*, vol. 4], (Walnut Creek—London—New Delhi, 1998); Jeffrey Shandler, “Imagining Yiddishland” *History and Memory* 15: 1 (Spring/Summer 2003), 123-149; “Reading Sholem Aleichem from Left to Right”, *YIVO Annual*, vol. 20, 1991; and “Beyond the Mother Tongue: Learning the Meaning of Yiddish in America,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 6 (Spring/Summer 2000), 97–123; Mark Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move, Exploring the Klezmer World*, (New York, 2000); Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: the Unfinished Story of Yiddish*, (Basic Books, New York 2004).

² See Dovid Katz, *Back to the Old Country: A Decade of Expeditions to the Last Shtetl Jews* (London, forthcoming); *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Baltos Lankos: Vilnius, 2004); and the documentary film *End of the Road. The Last Shtetl Jews in Belarus* (Vilnius 1999). See also Benjamin Lukin and Boris Khaimovich, *100 evreiskikh mestecek Ukrainy, istoricheskii putevoditel', vypusk 1, Podolia*, (Jerusalem—St Petersburg, 1997); and Benjamin Lukin, Boris Khaimovich, and Alla Sokolova, *100 evreiskikh mestecek Ukrainy, istoricheskii putevoditel', vypusk 2, Podolia*, St. Petersburg, 2000).

³ See, for example, Miriam Weiner, *Jewish Roots in Poland: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories* (Secaucus, 1997); Miriam Weiner, *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories* (Secaucus, 1999); David A. Chapin and Ben Weinstock. *The Road From Letichev* (2 vols., San Jose, 2000).

The short window of opportunity between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the passing away of the generation born in the 1910s to 1930s is about to close. We now have the unique opportunity to interview people whose lives span the entire era of the Soviet empire and most importantly, who witnessed events of the twentieth-century from a single geographic vantage point. Given the catastrophic losses of the Jewish population during the Holocaust and the considerable emigrations that followed it, the population group that remained in their native region is truly exceptional and adds a significant element to the history of Yiddish language and culture. If testimonies are not taken now, this gap in our historical knowledge will become insurmountable.

The Soviet government in the late 1930s liquidated Yiddish education and Jewish culture in the region. Millions of Yiddish-speakers were murdered by the Nazis and their allies in the following decade. As Jews reconstructed their lives in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Yiddish language and culture were largely left by the wayside. The younger generation has virtually no knowledge of pre-war Yiddish culture. The last Yiddish-speakers of Ukraine are now in their seventies, eighties, and nineties. The documentation of this living generation is therefore of great urgency.

The vast majority of American Jews trace their roots to Eastern Europe. Although many retain emotional and cultural links to the culture, the language—except for a handful of words and popular expressions—is largely lost among them. At the same time, East European Jewish culture and Yiddish language is surviving among many Hasidic groups around the world, and in academic circles, where Yiddish is becoming a popular topic for specialized research as well as undergraduate curricula.

Related Projects

The first and most celebrated ethnographic expedition into the heart of the Pale of Jewish Settlement was that conducted in 1912-1914 by S. An-sky under the auspices of the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society. An-sky's expedition focused on the regions of Kiev, Volhynia, Podolia, and parts of Galicia, the same regions the IUYEP is now rediscovering. An-sky's expedition was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I, but he remained in Galicia during the war, reorienting his efforts from ethnography to relief. Although parts of his collection did not survive the two world wars and communism, the testimonies, artifacts, and songs he collected remain important resources to this day and serve as sources of inspiration for both artistic creativity and academic scholarship.⁴ For example, since the late 1980s a group of then aspiring Russian academics, including Valeriy Dymshits, Benjamin Lukin, Alla Sokolova, and Boris Khaimovich, have set out to trace An-sky's expeditions, documenting material culture, archives, architecture, and remaining local communities.⁵ Despite their great respect for Yiddish and Jewish culture, they themselves did not use Yiddish language materials or research Yiddish

⁴ See, for instance, Mariël Beukers and Renée Waale, eds., *Tracing An-sky, Jewish Collections from the State Ethnographic Museum in St Petersburg* (Amsterdam, 1992). Vaslii Rakitin and Andrei Sarabianov, eds., *The Jewish Artistic Heritage, An Album* (Moscow, 1994); Rivka Gonen, ed., *Back to the Shtetl: An-sky and the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, 1912-1914, From the Collections of the State Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg/ Bechazara laayara: Ans-ki vehamishlakhat haetnografit hayehudit, 1912-1914*, (Jerusalem, 1994); A. Kantsedikas and I. Serheyeva, *The Jewish Artistic Heritage Album by Semyon An-sky* (Moscow, 2001); and Avrom Rekhman *Yidishe etnografye un folklor, zikhroynes fun an etnografisher ekspeditsye ongefirt fun Sh. Z. Ans-ky*, (Buenos Aires, 1958).

⁵ Benjamin Lukin and Boris Khaimovich, *100 evreiskikh mestecek Ukrainy, istoricheskii putevoditel', vypusk 1, Podolia*, (Jerusalem—St Petersburg, 1997); and Benjamin Lukin, Boris Khaimovich, and Alla Sokolova, *100 evreiskikh mestecek Ukrainy, istoricheskii putevoditel', vypusk 2, Podolia*, (St. Petersburg, 2000); Boris Khaimovich and Valery Dymshitz, "Beekvot An-ski, 1988-1993" [= In Ans-ky's footsteps, 1988-1993], pp. 121-132 in Rivka Gonen, ed., *Back to the Shtetl: An-sky and the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, 1912-1914*, (Jerusalem, 1994).

language and culture itself. The superbly researched and annotated guidebooks they compiled, though, have been instrumental for more focused expeditions to the region.

The IUYEP was immediately inspired by the Vilnius Yiddish Institute's Expeditions to the Last Shtetl Jews, led by Professor Dovid Katz. Since the early 1990s, Dovid Katz has been conducting audio and later videotaped interviews with the last Yiddish speakers of historical Jewish Lita (contemporary Lithuania, Belarus, and adjacent regions in Poland). During the October 2001 conference, "Beyond the Shtetl: Yiddish Language and Culture in 20th Century Eastern Europe," held at Indiana University, the idea of expanding this research into Ukraine was discussed. Professor Katz agreed to serve as a consultant for the project and to accompany the expedition on a pilot project to Ukraine. The IUYEP was subsequently established in close collaboration and consultation with the Vilnius Yiddish Institute's project. While the two projects are separate organizations, a principal agreement was reached whereby the Vilnius Yiddish Institute would provide Indiana University with copies of the approximately 1000 interviews they have collected over the past decade in return for copies of all tapes made by IUYEP. Professor Katz accompanied the first pilot expedition and joined the second expedition for ten days. The two projects are also sharing questionnaires and research materials, and are working together to unify and coordinate analysis of different regions.

Aside from the Vilnius Institute's Last Shtetl Jews project, the IUYEP is the only oral history and documentation project of its scope to be conducted entirely in the Yiddish language. Our work builds upon both scholarly and non-scholarly projects undertaken by colleagues around the world, many of whom we have been collaborating with to varying degrees.

Several oral history projects have been conducted in part in the same communities with the goal of collecting Holocaust testimonials. The Steven Spielberg Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Department, and the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies have collected testimonials from Holocaust survivors in Ukraine and elsewhere.⁶ Dr. Iulii Sternberg, who coordinates interviews for the Spielberg Foundation in Lvov (Ukraine), has been a helpful source of informants for our project, as have other regional representatives in Ukraine. These oral history projects have created an integral database on Holocaust testimonials. The IUYEP supplements these collections by preserving memories of the culture that was lost, rather than focusing on the process of destruction itself.

Other projects have focused on contemporary Jewish life in the region. The sociological survey work currently underway at the University of Michigan to interview Jews in the Former Soviet Union, particularly Russia and Ukraine, about contemporary Jewish life and identity also focuses in part on the same population and time periods. The University of Michigan project provides valuable context on post-war Jewish life in the region and the current state of the communities we study.⁷ In addition, a number of smaller-scale anthropological and oral history projects have been conducted as doctoral dissertations that focus on Ukrainian and Russian Jews.⁸ We have benefited from extensive contact with these researchers.

The IUYEP is also distinguished among these projects in that it targets exclusively those who have remained on their native soil rather than émigrés. While it is very important to interview and record Yiddish speakers who have moved to Western countries, native Yiddish speech in its original milieu has dialectological value and ethnographic immediacy that cannot be fully recreated abroad. Interviewing subjects in their own homes and their native milieus also stimulates the unmediated flow of memory and allows the viewer to observe the physical

⁶ For the Steven Spielberg Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation see www.vhf.org. For the Fortunoff Archive see www.library.yale.edu/testimonies. For the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum see www.ushmm.org/research/collections.

⁷ For more on this project see Valeriy Chervyakov, Zvi Gitelman, and Vladimir Shapiro, "E Pluribus Unum? Post-Soviet Jewish Identities and Their Implications for Communal Reconstruction" in Zvi Gitelman with Musya Glants and Marshall I. Goldman, eds., *Jewish Life After the USSR* (Bloomington, 2003), 61-75.

⁸ See, for instance, Anna Shternshis, "Soviet and kosher: Soviet Jewish cultural identity, 1917-41", D.Phil., Oxford University, 2001; and Rebecca Golbert, 2001 "Constructing self: Ukrainian Jewish youth in the making," D. Phil., Oxford University, 2001.

environment in which their narrative takes place. For example, the footage we have already obtained of the last Yiddish speaker of the former Galician Jewish center of Zholkva showing on camera the sites of the former synagogue, cemetery, Jewish streets, and Jewish stores cannot be replicated in a studio abroad or a Brooklyn apartment.

Other projects are currently underway to collect and digitize pre-existing Yiddish collections. The National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst Massachusetts has been collecting and digitizing Yiddish books from around the world, and the Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive collects and digitizes pre-existing Yiddish musical and voice recordings.⁹ The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry, which recorded Yiddish interviews with Jewish émigrés in America and Israel in the 1960s, is being digitized, catalogued, and transcribed by the German-based EYDES (Evidence of Yiddish Documented in European Societies).¹⁰ The Indiana University Yiddish Ethnographic Project expands on the Atlas by interviewing subjects *in situ* from various regions including many which could not be covered in the Atlas and it plans to closely collaborate with the EYDES project in the near future. All of these collections will serve as important contributions to Yiddish studies and signify the growing awareness of the Yiddish cultural heritage. Whereas these collections focus on preserving and further disseminating existing materials, the Indiana University Yiddish Ethnographic Project collects and creates new Yiddish resources that would otherwise disappear with the demise of the last generation of native Yiddish-speakers in the region.

The number of projects currently underway to record and preserve the last remnants of both the Yiddish language and the culture of East European Jewry stands as a testament to the importance with which both the general public and the scholarly community regard this work. While much of the linguistic material and living memory has already been lost in the region during the last three decades, our recent expeditions to Ukraine, coupled with more than a decade of expeditions led by Professor Dovid Katz in the northeast, show that there is still a wealth of valuable and otherwise irretrievable linguistic data and cultural material that could not be fully recovered from afar in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, in the heyday of the Cold War, “the study of a culture from a distance” was the only possible type of research of Eastern European subjects.¹¹ However, today a great deal of material can still be videotaped and recorded *in situ*. In addition to the so-called “envelopes of sound”¹² a treasure house of “sound and moving images of memory and testimony” of Yiddish language, folklore, oral history and East European Jewish cultural heritage can and should be captured and preserved for future generations of students, scholars, and educators.

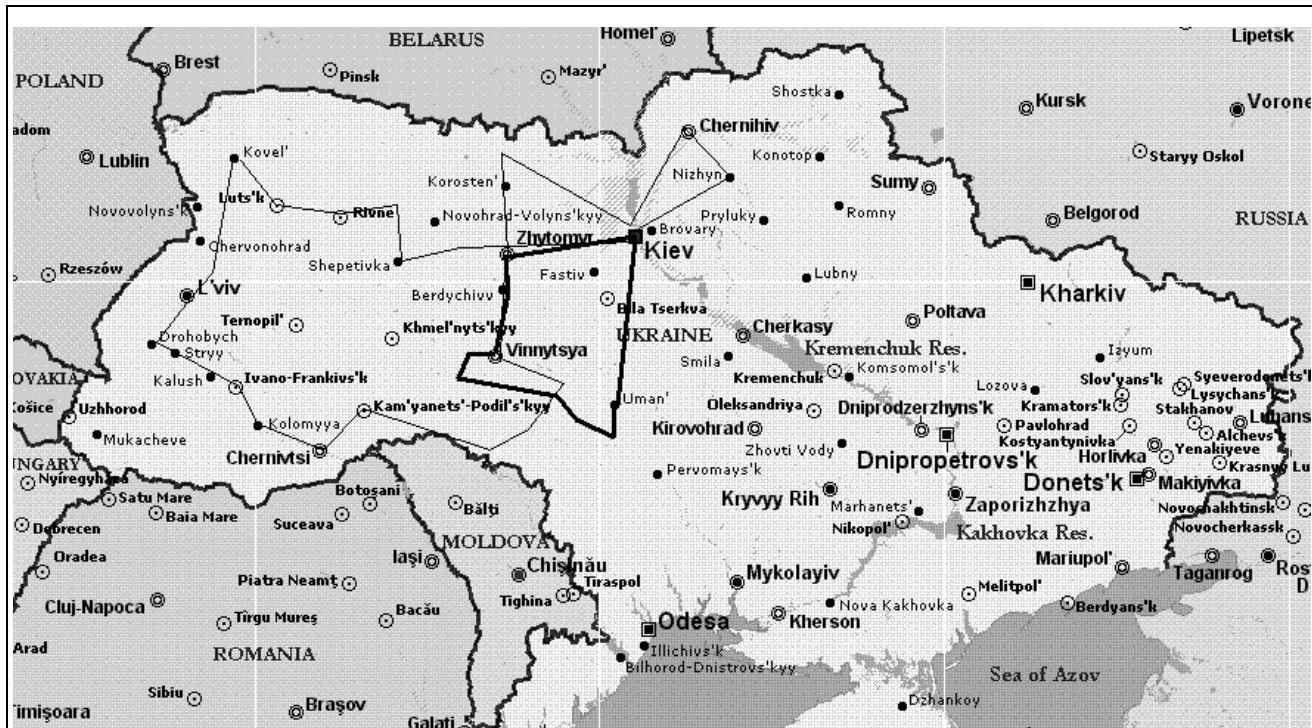
Appendix 2: The First Two IUYEP Expeditions in Contemporary Ukraine

⁹ For the National Yiddish Book Center see www.yiddishbookcenter.org. For the Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive see <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~djsa/>

¹⁰ For details on the project, Evidence of Yiddish Documented in European Societies, see www.eydes.org; for more information on the Language and Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry see fn. 15 below.

¹¹ Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux, eds., *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Chicago, 1953); Uriel Weinreich, "Culture Geography at a Distance: Some Problems in the Study of East European Jewry," pp. 27-39, W.L. Chafe, ed., *Symposium on Language and Culture* (Seattle, 1962).

¹² Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, (2nd ed. New York, 1991).



Previous IUYEP Expeditions 2002-2003

I. Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Berdychiv, Vinnytsya, Zhmerynka, Sharhorod, Bratslav, Tulchyn, Shpikiv, Gaysin, Bershad, Teplik, Uman

II. Kyiv, Polonnoe, Shepetivka, Iziaslav, Slavuta, Rivne, Lutsk, Kovel, Zholkva, Lviv, Drohobych, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kolomyia, Chernivtsi, Kamyanyets'-Podil's'kyi, Mogilev-Podols'kyi, Tomashpil, Tulchin, Vinnytsya, Berdychiv, Zhytomyr, Ovruch, Korosten, Nizhyn, Chernihiv

Total informants interviewed: 111



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