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EYDES and Contemporary Fieldwork in Yiddish Ethnography and Dialectology

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge faced by every documentation project aimed at capturing the disappearing varieties of culture and language is its collections' forward-looking preservation and provision of effective accessibility for general educational, scholarly and even artistic needs and endeavors of future generations. This challenge is both facilitated by novel technologies and mass communication means as well as made more problematic by the fast changing modes and standards of preservation technology of audio and video materials. It is this crucial stage of structuring a successful archive (in the broad sense of the word) that turns the erstwhile documentation project into a valuable or invaluable resource.

The EYDES project is dedicated to achieve maximal preservation of the immense resources of LCAAJ and to ensure its accessibility and usability to scholars, educators, and students of various disciplines in the Humanities. Its application of the most advanced methods and standards is quite well known and its general contribution to the fostering of tolerance in contemporary Europe seems to be obvious.

Like any other project of this scope and nature EYDES will continue to face many obstacles and challenges. However its remarkable accomplishments have already paved the way for new and future undertakings to effectively process and preserve the sights and sounds of Yiddish language and culture, of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage and its fast disappearing living memory, of a once major European ethnic minority language with a remarkable geographic span and cultural as well as communicative vitality. The civic, educational, and humanistic value of the EYDES project will no doubt be much discussed at the forthcoming Berlin Colloquium. Likewise, much will be learned about its new, efficient and perhaps also creative solutions regarding methodological principles of resource organization and dissemination.

EYDES is already co-operating with our sister project, the Last Shtetl Jews (LSJ), created and headed by Professor Dovid Katz at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute and Vilnius University. In 2002 the Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University launched in close cooperation with Professor Katz's project the Indiana University Yiddish Ethnographic Project (the IUYEP) and after two expeditions to contemporary Ukraine it is planning to organize another four intensive expeditions to continue collecting video recorded interviews with the last survivors of the prewar-born generation of native Yiddish speakers *in situ*.

At this stage both projects, the LSJ and IUYEP, are still immersed in the hustle and bustle of straightforward collecting and capturing of the fast disappearing but still available "live samples" of native Yiddish dialects in Eastern Europe. Given its utmost urgency this undertaking is analogous to "rescue archeology," but the subjects of "rescue dialectology and ethnography," that is the last surviving elderly informants, are infinitely more fragile and rapidly declining. On the other hand, the more complex nature of digital

video documentation also raises new technical challenges for its secure preservation and viable dissemination.

Both the Vilna and the Bloomington projects, while primarily preoccupied with the actual collection of still surviving evidence of Yiddish inside Eastern Europe today, are also keenly aware of their future tasks and are eager to learn from the vast experience and achievements of EYDES. A fruitful cooperation between all three – Western Europe, Eastern Europe and North America – will surely be of immense value for the meaningful and creative preservation of the Ashkenazi Jewish civilization in the new millennium. International cooperation of this kind has both great practical as well as symbolic value.

EYDES is located in Germany where Yiddish originated and kept evolving over many centuries, the Vilnius Yiddish Institute is in the former spiritual capital of East European Jewry where modern Yiddish culture came into its own, and the IUYEP is in the USA where the largest Jewish population lives constantly seeking to define and redefine its Jewish identity and where Yiddish actually continues to be a vibrant and essential language of small but growing Hasidic communities.