

**Title of presentation as announced in Program Book:** “*Exploring Yiddish Culture through Stories and Folklore,*” by Esther Hexter.

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**Description:**

This session will examine the growing interest in the development of Yiddish culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, the United States and Israel, from its base in folklore to short stories and beyond. We will explore Jewish life and challenges of entering the modern world as revealed by a variety of classical Yiddish authors and newly translated Yiddish women writers. Topics include researching, selecting materials suitable for high school, adult and college audiences, using a range of approaches to involve learners, as well as examining a variety of formats. Bibliography including story and poetry collections, literary criticism, selected historical works providing context and web sites with stories, authors and other resources will be distributed.

**Association of Jewish Libraries 43<sup>rd</sup> Convention – June 2008**

**Exploring Yiddish Culture through Stories and Folklore**

by Esther Cohen Hexter

Development of Yiddish Culture

Though Yiddish language and its culture date back one thousand years, the real growth of Yiddish culture began in the nineteenth century. The earliest Yiddish writing included collections of prayers for women (*tkhine*), a Yiddish Bible (*Tsene u’rene*), the memoir by Gleuckel of Hameln [which contained some folklore and stories], a few stories and books, including the *Bove Bukh*, 1541 [a Jewish adaptation of tales of knights and chivalry]. Yiddish commentaries on classical Jewish sources like Bible were produced slightly later. [See: Joachim Neugroschel, *No Star Too Beautiful: Yiddish Stories is from 1382 to the Present*]

The creation of a “modern” Yiddish literary culture came out of the Jewish Enlightenment [*Haskalah* – Hebrew or *Haskoleh* – Yiddish] as it moved from Germany where it started to Eastern Europe in the mid to late nineteenth century. Proponents of *Haskoleh* known as *Maskilim* (enlightened ones) were part of a cultural “revolution” which gave birth to modern Zionism, Jewish socialism or the Bund, to “modern” Hebrew and Yiddish literature; and religious movements of Reform, Conservative, neo Orthodoxy and Mussar. The development and expansion of Chasidism predated this era in mid late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Cultural tensions in Eastern Europe were often between the Zionist / Hebrew and the Bundist or Socialist / Yiddish groups or followers.

From 1850's until World War II brought it to an abrupt halt, a new Yiddish literary tradition was born and developed to serve the needs of millions of Jews living in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, the Americas (chiefly U.S. and Canada) and even Israel. Early Yiddish writers, like Sholem Jacob Abramovitch, who used his pen name Mendele Mokher Sforim (Mendele the Book Seller) when writing in Yiddish, literally created a Yiddish literary tradition over night. He was joined by the other two early giants of Yiddish writing, Sholem Aleichem [Sholem Rabinovich] and I.L. Peretz. They all originally wrote in Hebrew as well as Yiddish. See "My Soul Desired Yiddish" an autobiographical excerpt by Mendele Mokher Sforim, to explore the challenges of creating a "modern" literary language and why he chose to write in Yiddish. [*The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, ed., p. 326.]

These early Yiddish writers were followed by many writers representing the entire Yiddish speaking world: Eastern Europe mostly in towns and cities in Poland, Soviet Russia, the U.S. and even Israel. They explored both the world of small town life and city life in major centers like Warsaw and Vilna; and themes of facing the challenges of modernity at every phase. Essayists, poets and writers of fiction exhorted their readers to seek new solutions for the age old "Jewish problem" of meeting challenges of anti-Semitism, how to communicate with God and live according to God's teachings / *Mitzvot* (commandments), new religious movements and ideas, rapidly changing modern world and political movements [nationalism, socialism, communism, etc.]. Most writers were men, but we are now rediscovering Yiddish women writers too. No discussion on modern Yiddish culture would be complete without mentioning Isaac Bashevis Singer who won a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978. Even after moving to the United States from his native Poland he continued to write in Yiddish, assisting in translating his works once his English permitted it. He even gave his Nobel speech in Yiddish. The following is an excerpt:

*The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language - a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews. The truth is that what the great religions preached, the Yiddish-speaking people of the ghettos practiced day in and day out. They were the people of The Book in the truest sense of the word. They knew of no greater joy than the study of man and human relations, which they called Torah, Talmud, Mussar, Cabala. The ghetto was not only a place of refuge for a persecuted minority but a great experiment in peace, in self-discipline and in humanism. As such it still exists and refuses to give up in spite of all the brutality that surrounds it.*

[*Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, Editor-in-Charge Tore Frängsmyr, Editor Sture Allén, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 1993]

While this session / paper is chiefly concerned with Yiddish short stories, development of modern Yiddish culture also included novels, poetry, plays, collections of folklore, newspapers and music [vocal including popular songs, Yiddish musicals for the stage and also Yiddish lieder; and instrumental / Klezmer]. Yiddish writing also included essays, literary criticism, journals, newspapers, history and scholarly works; plus translations of works of western and

Russian literature into Yiddish – thus bringing modern European culture to the Jews of Eastern Europe.

### Challenges of Translation

Translating the culture of Yiddish to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers first requires translating of the actual works. Whether we are talking about prose, short story or poetry the challenges are all similar. The job of any translator working from original works is always daunting; for all languages have idiomatic expressions and no two languages say everything exactly the same way. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg capture the challenges this way:

*“Translating from Yiddish is difficult because Yiddish literature, especially in its ‘classical’ phrase, carries a weight of historical associations and cultural assumptions that is likely to be missed or misunderstood by a reader not familiar with the Yiddish tradition.”*

[*Treasure of Yiddish Poetry*, 1969, pg. 61]

While this quote comes from an introduction to Yiddish poetry it holds for prose as well. The challenge of translation goes deeper because the modern reader often does not have depth of knowledge of what the larger world of Yiddish culture referred to as *Yiddishkeit*. Howe and Greenberg, Maurice Samuel and others make similar points. The Yiddish speaking world of Eastern Europe had a thousand year old tradition. The common person, who may not have been learned in Torah and Talmud, was surrounded by quotes, references which found their way into everyday use as guide points for daily living. These included daily prayers, holidays, life cycle events; in other words rituals for observing and living Jewish life. While some of it was written, much of it was oral. Strangely one might say this tradition of Yiddish culture was “enriched” by being insulated from outside influences; for Jews in Eastern Europe, especially in small towns, rarely communicated on more than the simple level of the market place with non-Jews. In this relative isolation from outside influences, Jews often lived at least partly in the world of classical Jewish texts. So readers of the newly developing 19<sup>th</sup> century “modern” Yiddish writing had to know the context of language used. One example is of course Sholem Aleichem’s most well known character, Tevye the Dairyman who is famous for his misquoting biblical and Talmudic texts. 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Jews are further challenged by knowing about him largely through *Fiddler on the Roof*, the famous musical based on the original Aleichem stories; not even on translations of the original stories.

There has been a resurgence of interest in coming to understand the world of Yiddish culture including reading the stories, poems, written folklore, plays and novels of its many writers. Starting in the 1980’s and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have seen an explosion of Yiddish language and culture programs at universities worldwide; and at adult study groups. Many have students studying Yiddish so they can read works in the original. Beyond this scores of other colleges and universities have classes in Yiddish literature in translation. This has created another problem. Difficulties in translation aside, a limited number of works have been translated into English.

Before even attempting to try this daunting task of translation, there were relatively few copies of Yiddish works in libraries and stores, available to borrow or purchase. Enter Aaron Lansky, and a group of volunteers, who have responded to this lack of actual Yiddish books by rescuing

almost 1.5 million Yiddish books, often from dumpsters where they had been placed when their owners had died. This amazing feat, begun in 1980 when Lansky, a young graduate student, decided to rescue abandoned Yiddish books, has become the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. The center has distributed sets of Yiddish books to colleges and universities libraries and sold to students studying Yiddish. This task has been eased by the digitalization of Yiddish books project at National Yiddish Book Center. Each book, often printed on poor quality paper, is slowly being copied page by page and stored on a vast “digital library” where they are available for printing on demand. See [www.yiddishbookcenter.org](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org) or read *Outwitting History: The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books*, by Lansky.

New works are being discovered, especially works by women Yiddish writers, which are slowly being re-discovered and translated into English. This task has been started by Yiddish reading circles in Canada where some of the members first have had to learn to read Yiddish. When I began my study of Yiddish stories in English translation hardly any of the works by women were included in anthologies. [See: Frieda Forman et al, *Found Treasures*, 1994; Sandra Bark, *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars*, 2003; and Rhea Tregebov, *Arguing with the Storm*, 2008.] Poetry by a few women poets, largely written in the United States in early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, was included in some larger collections. [See Howe and Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, 1969]

### Selecting Material

I have chosen the short story genre to permit readers and groups to encounter a larger variety of writers and styles. The attached bibliography contains selected collections of stories and other types of Yiddish literature in translation, plus works of literary criticism and history. A few works on folklore are included because many Yiddish stories are based on folklore. Most are suitable for high school, adult education and college audiences. The criticism and history works are suggested for teachers and group leaders. Selected Online resources to major sites are included as a starting reference point.

## **Exploring Yiddish Culture through Stories and Folklore - Bibliography**

by Esther Cohen Hexter

Examine growing interest in development of Yiddish culture in nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, United States, former Soviet Union and Israel, from its base in folklore to short stories and beyond. Explore Jewish life and challenges of entering modern world as revealed by classical Yiddish authors and newly translated Yiddish women writers. Presentation includes: how to research topic and select materials for high school, adult and college audiences. Bibliography of story, folklore and poetry collections, literary criticism and web sites will be distributed.

Note: see author names for books and story collections translated into English: e.g., Mendele Mokher Sforim [Sholem Jacob Abramovitch], Sholem Aleichem [Sholem Rabinovich], I.L. Peretz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sholem Asch, Dovid Bergelson, S. Ansky and more.

### Short Stories and Folklore:

Bark, Sandra, editor, *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories: An Anthology*, Warner Books, Inc.: 2003  
Stories by women or about women, many in English translation for first time. Introduction & author bios.

Butwin, Julius and Frances, translators, *Favorite Tales of Sholom Aleichem*, Avenel Books: New York, 1983.  
Previously published in separate volumes as: *The Old Country: Collected Stories of Sholom Aleichem* and *Tevye's Daughters*. With Introduction by translators who specialized in Sholom Aleichem.

Forman, Frieda, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe, editors, *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, Second Story Press: Toronto, 1994. Outstanding introduction by Irena Klepfisz.  
First translated collection of stories by women; provides variety of views into Yiddish world in Eastern Europe, Palestine/Israel and North America. With editors' notes, bios, glossary, photos and bibliography.

Gilman, Phoebe, *Something from Nothing: adapted from a Jewish Folktale*, Scholastic, Inc. by arrangement with North Winds Press: New York, 1992.  
Children's version of folktale, which was also a folksong. Interesting introduction to topic.

Halkin, Hillel, translator and wrote introduction, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, by Sholem Aleichem, Schocken Books: New York, 1987.  
New translation brings together the tales of Tevye and all of his daughters in English for first time.

Howe, Irving and Eliezer Greenberg, *Ashes Out of Hope: Fiction by Soviet-Yiddish Writers*, Schocken Books: New York: 1977  
Introductory essay on Soviet-Yiddish writers, stories by David Bergelson, Moshe Kulbak and Der Nister.

Howe, Irving and Eliezer Greenberg, editors, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Schocken Books: New York, 1973. [various editions]  
Includes extensive introduction with historical framework and development of Yiddish literary tradition. Outstanding variety of writers and stories, with selection of folk tales and proverbs.

Neugroschel, Joachim, editor and translator, *No Star Too Beautiful: Yiddish Stories from 1382 to the Present*, W.W. Norton and Company: New York, 2002.  
Organized historically; beginning in medieval era. Contains a few women writers.  
Tregebov, Rhea, editor, *Arguing with the Storm: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, Sumach Press: Canada, 2008. Introduction by Katherine Hellerstein.  
Recently rediscovered and newly translated stories written by Yiddish women writers from 1890's - 1970's; exploring and contrasting Jewish life in Europe with life in North America.

Weinreich, Beatrice Silverman, editor, *Yiddish Folktales*, Leonard Wolf translator, Schocken Books: New York, 1988.  
200 tales collected in 1920's and 1930's by ethnographers in small towns and villages of Eastern Europe. Includes names of tellers and locations and dates where collected.

Weinstein, Miriam, *Prophets & Dreamers: A Selection of Great Yiddish Literature*, Steerforth Press: South Royalton, Vermont, 2002.  
An introduction to Yiddish literary history and culture. Includes selected stories, a few poems and folksongs.

#### Literary Criticism and Historical Overview:

Lansky, Aaron, *Outwitting History: The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill; Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2004.

Growing understanding of the world of Yiddish culture, discovered from native speakers who give Lansky treasured Yiddish books to save; and his efforts to pass tradition along at his National Yiddish Book Center.

Madison, Charles, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers*, Schocken Books: New York, 1971  
This early standard contains critical commentaries, plot summaries and historical analysis of Yiddish writers from Eastern Europe, to America, Soviet Union and Israel. Excellent reference.

Mendele Moykher Sforim, “My Soul Desired Yiddish” in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, ed., Oxford University Press: New York, 1980. p. 326

Selection from author’s autobiographical notes on why he chose to write in Yiddish.

Michelson, Neil, *Too Young for Yiddish*, Neil Waldman, illustrator, Charlesbridge: 2002. Association of Jewish Libraries Notable Children's Book.

This children’s book provides fictional view of challenges Yiddish culture faced upon coming to U.S.

Roskies, David G., *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995.

Scholarly and highly readable work on art of Yiddish storytelling as exhibited by great Yiddish writers.

Roskies, Diane K. and David G. Roskies, *The Shtetl Book*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc.: U.S.A., 1975  
Excellent introduction to Jewish town life in Eastern Europe; see especially “Geography of Yiddish”.

Samuel, Maurice, *In Praise of Yiddish*, Cowles Book Company, Inc.: New York, 1971

#### Other Forms of Expression [Poetry, Plays, Folk Music]

Howe, Irving and Eliezer Greenberg, editors, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1969

Yiddish poetry in English translation written by poets from all over the Yiddish world; includes some women poets. With Introduction.

Howe, Irving, Ruth R. Wisse and Khone Shmeruk, editors, *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*: New York, 1988.

Original Yiddish poems with English translations; includes some women poets, introduction and bios.

Rubin, Ruth, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong*, The Jewish Publication Society of America: Philadelphia, 1979

500 + folksongs in transliterated Yiddish and English translation. Arranged by topic.

Sandrow, Nahma, translator and editor, *God, Man, and Devil: Yiddish Plays in Translation*, Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, New York, 1999.

Five plays in translation, with excerpts from others to show complexity and creativity of Yiddish drama.

*Tevye der Milkhiker* / Tevye the Dairyman, Film adaptation of the Sholem Aleichem play, directed by Maurice Schwartz, Poland, 1939. 90 minutes. Yiddish with English subtitles. Available from National Center for Jewish Film, [www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm/](http://www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm/)

Selected Resources Online:

*National Yiddish Book Center*, [www.yiddishbookcenter.org](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org)

A vibrant, non-profit organization working to rescue Yiddish and other modern Jewish books and celebrate the culture they contain. Publisher of *Pakn Trager*, an English language magazine, with selected Yiddish stories in translation available at web site.

*YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*, [www.yivoinstitute.org](http://www.yivoinstitute.org)

The resource center for East European Jewish Studies; Yiddish language, literature and folklore and the American Jewish immigrant experience. Founded 1925 in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania), as the Yiddish Scientific Institute, moved to New York in 1940.

*Teaching Heritage. Yiddish Culture: From Europe to America.* Lesson Plans,

[www.thirteen.org/edonline/teachingheritage/lessons/lp10/learning.html](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/teachingheritage/lessons/lp10/learning.html)

American Yiddish Poetry study.

*Yiddish Films* with English sub titles - Selected resources:

Ergo Media, [www.jewishvideo.com](http://www.jewishvideo.com)

Infomedia Judaica, Ltd., [www.imjl.com/catalog/video/yidvid.html](http://www.imjl.com/catalog/video/yidvid.html)

National Center for Jewish Film, [www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm/](http://www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm/)

*Jewish Short Stories from Eastern Europe and Beyond* (Audio Cassette) by National Yiddish Book Center (Author), Various Artists (Narrator) 1997

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