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DEFYING ODDS, YIDDISH LITERATURE GOES ONLINE

Amherst, MA –. The full texts of over 10,000 works of modern Yiddish literature, comprising the National Yiddish Book Center’s Steven Spielberg Digital Library, can now be read, downloaded, and printed in popular formats, free of charge, at www.archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter.

“It’s an historic moment for Yiddish culture,” says Aaron Lansky, founder and president of the nonprofit Yiddish Book Center. “The magnificent record of a civilization the Nazis sought to destroy has been brought fully into the 21st century.” The Center has rescued a million endangered Yiddish books and redistributed them to over 600 libraries and universities since its inception in 1980. Its collection, which includes thousands of duplicate copies, is believed to represent the majority of known titles published in Yiddish.

The unique new online resource, three million pages in all, is the result of an alliance between the Yiddish Book Center and another young and intrepid nonprofit organization, the Internet Archive in San Francisco. The project grew out of the organizations’ mutual goal of offering the public unencumbered access to the world’s intellectual and literary legacy.

Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, notes, “This is the first time a full literature of a people has been available online. We hope others follow the Yiddish Book Center’s pioneering example.” The Internet Archive, founded in 1996, offers free access to millions of books, music, and movies as well as billions of archived web pages. “We’re scanning about 1,000 books a day in 18 locations in five countries, from over 100 contributing libraries,” says Kahle. “It is thrilling to see these library collections go online.”

The project’s numerous technical challenges, including accommodation of the right-to-left Yiddish alphabet, were solved step-by-step by a small group of staff members, software experts and volunteers working via telephone and email from Amherst, San Francisco, Silicon Valley and Buffalo, New York. The Book Center was in a unique position to post its collection online, since most out-of-print Yiddish works are already in the public domain. “In the ten years since we first digitized Yiddish books, we’ve had only four copyright queries,” Lansky says. “Three of those who called ended up making contributions to help defray the cost of reviving their parents’ long-lost titles.”

Scholars, students, and readers will now be able to access most of the original novels, stories, poetry, drama and nonfiction titles published in Yiddish over the past 150 years. “Interest in Yiddish, especially among young people, has been growing rapidly since we rescued our first volumes 30 years ago,” says Lansky. “The internet is the best way – maybe the only way – to meet the needs of this new generation, since our physical copies of the books are becoming more scarce and more fragile with each passing year.”

This spring the Yiddish Book Center will open the Kaplen Family Building, a brand-new facility on the campus of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Together with an existing structure built in 1997, the Center’s 49,000-square-foot complex will house a core collection of physical books, as well as classrooms, a performance hall, a kosher kitchen, a recording studio, a reference library, public exhibitions and other resources. Lansky expects that teaching and learning about Yiddish culture will be transformed by the ready availability of the online books. “It opens up the field in ways we never could have imagined. There’s no limit to the educational possibilities.”

For more information about the National Yiddish Book Center, go to www.yiddishbookcenter.org, or contact yiddish@bikher.org. For information on the Internet Archive, go to www.archive.org, or contact info@archive.org.

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