

# Baym Tcenter

## *News from the National Yiddish Book Center*

### THE NEW YIDDISH LIBRARY

For as long as the Book Center has been rescuing Yiddish books, supporters who don't read Yiddish have been asking, "When are you going to translate them?" At last we have an answer: beginning right now.



**The editorial board of the New Yiddish Library at work.**  
Photograph by Fred LeBlanc.

Even as some staff members were putting the Center's catalog of Yiddish reprints online, others were planning for the next step in our publishing program.

Together with the Fund for the Translation of Jewish Literature, an important project established by the late Lucy Dawidowicz, the Book Center will establish the New Yiddish Library. The Fund's Neal Kozodoy and Aaron Lansky will serve as the Library's co-directors, scholar David Roskies will be the series editor, and Yale University Press will publish the translations.

On November 30, the Center hosted eight leading scholars of Yiddish for a two-day review of the state of the literature today. The board identified twenty Yiddish titles in immediate need of translation. Among them are the novel *Zelmenyaner* by Moshe Kulbak; a collection of Itzik Manger's poetry; a volume of "unknown" works by Isaac Bashevis Singer (most of which first appeared in Polish Yiddish literary journals in the 1930s); and an anthology of American Yiddish writing.

It's both an auspicious and an urgent moment for such a project. Auspicious, because for the first time all the important elements have fallen into place: funding, a publisher, a highly skilled editorial board, and of course an interested readership. Urgent, because few literary translators are deeply familiar with the Yiddish world of the authors, and those few are the last generation.

The books will be given royal scholarly treatment. They will be critical editions, each translated from the most authoritative text (the manuscript, when possible) and annotated by one of the scholars on the editorial board. Every nuance, historical reference and obscure liturgical pun will be elucidated. Introductory essays by the editors will set the author and the book in the context of Yiddish literature and world literature. The books may even include photographs illustrating the landscape, technology and costumes of the period. Editors and translators will work closely together to balance the claims of accurate translation and literary inspiration.

The books will also be more Jewish than previous translations. Earlier translations of Yiddish literature often suffered from cultural embarrassment; they downplayed Jewish distinctiveness, used Christian names for the Jewish holidays, and turned the polyglot feast of Yiddish prose into a monolingual porridge (see page 19). Present-day readers – who have been exposed to very culture-specific writing not only by American Jewish writers but by writers from all over the world – are adventurous, and enjoy the intellectual workout of learning a new cultural idiom.

Best of all, the books will never go out of print. When a title is retired from the Yale list, it will be scanned into the Book Center's Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, where it will be available on a print-on-demand basis.

Critically important seed funding for this historic project was provided by The Kaplen Foundation in 2001. In addition, The Posen Foundation has established The Felix Posen

Fund for the Translation of Modern Yiddish Literature, through which the Center will award grants directly to translators over the next three years for the translation of full-length Yiddish books.

The first three books will appear in July 2002: *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl* and *Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son* in one volume, translated by Hillel Halkin; the *Selected Poetry and Prose of Itzik Manger*, translated by Leonard Wolf; and an expanded edition of *The I. L. Peretz Reader* (now including Peretz's remarkable play *A Night in the Old Marketplace*), edited by Ruth Wisse.

What else will be on the list? Some decisions will depend on the availability of the right translator – poetry in particular requires really inspired pairings – and Yale will have a say in the overall makeup of the series. What is certain is that the books will represent the cream of Yiddish literature.

— C.M.



GIFTS & GRANTS

A generous gift from the Estate of Sophie and Hershel Freidkes will support the Center's new Workshops in Jewish Creativity for College Students, to be launched in May 2002. Estate executors Ruth Levy and Rubin Wallach chose to make this leadership gift in honor of their aunt and uncle, who were long-time friends of Yiddish culture. The \$100,000 contribution will provide funding for an innovative new model of Jewish education, encouraging talented young Jewish artists through intensive workshops, discussions, and seminars as well as one-on-one tutorials with prominent Jewish writers, poets, film-

makers, and other faculty. In acknowledging the gift, Aaron Lansky said, "This program will provide Jewish college students with a whole new way to explore and enrich their Jewish identities. We're enormously grateful to Ruth Levy and Rubin

Wallach for making possible this important educational initiative."

In recent months, the Book Center has also been the recipient of generous grants from several foundations:

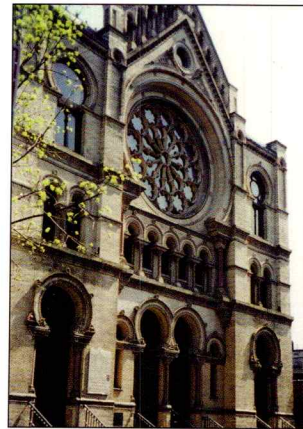
THE DIBNER FUND, for digitization and development of the online Yiddish catalog; THE NASH FAMILY FOUNDATION, for digitization of *yizkor* books, the memorial volumes commemorating Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust; THE SONYA STAFF FOUNDATION, in support of the Sonya Staff Fellow in the Yiddish Book Department.

*A hartsikn dank* – many thanks – to these and other generous donors who support the Center's work.



NEW YORK, NEW YORK

In partnership with two of New York's finest Jewish cultural organizations, the Center is planning a series of special events in the city, home to so many of our members. First, on April 23, 2002, there will be a celebration of our Great Jewish Books program at the brand-new Leonard Nimoy Theater of Symphony Space. Also at Symphony Space, on October 23, 2002, and February 5 and May 28, 2003, we'll co-host, with pro-



The Eldridge Street Synagogue.

ducer and radio personality Isaiah Sheffer, a series of readings by well-known actors and actresses from selected Great Books. A second collaboration with the famous Eldridge Street Synagogue will bring Book Center President Aaron Lansky to the Lower East Side for a June 23, 2002 public forum on

the extraordinary Yiddish poet Itzik Manger; a program on the legacy of Soviet-era Jewish poets is being planned for the fall. Look for details in the mail about these and other programs or call Laura at (413) 256-4900, ext. 133.



NEVER TOO YOUNG

The striking work of illustrator Neil Waldman (*Pakn Treger*, Summer 2001) will be the subject of an exhibition in the Gerson Gallery through June 2002. Waldman's most recent book, with author Rich Michelson, is *Too Young for Yiddish* (Talewinds, 2002). The book tells the story of a young boy – named Aaron, as it happens – who is inspired by his *zayde* to treasure books and to learn Yiddish "letter by letter, word by word." In time Aaron comes to understand something of his *zayde's* life in Eastern Europe and to imagine the shtetl where his grandfather "fed his family's chickens, chopped wood, and studied Torah." The book – which is printed and bound "back to front" – contains an explanation of the Yiddish language, a glossary of Yiddish words, and special mention of the National Yiddish Book Center. **PT**