

## Educating about Yiddish Culture: Web-based Resources from YIVO

by Suzanne Leon

*"The seminar surpassed my expectations at every level. In addition to the excellent introduction to the resources at YIVO, the seminar was filled with useful information to assist me when I teach the Holocaust. I now can teach about the rich life of Jews in Eastern Europe and help students understand the consequences of the Holocaust on the history and culture of Jewish life." - 2006 EPYC Seminar Graduate*

Founded in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania), in 1925, The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research has been headquartered in New York City since 1940. The institute is devoted to the study of Eastern European Jewish life, Yiddish language and culture, and the American Jewish immigrant experience by preserving the primary artifacts of this cultural legacy. The YIVO Library and Archives are an unprecedented repository of Jewish life and culture, with over 355,000 volumes in twelve major languages and more than 22,000,000 archival pieces. As the preeminent academic resource center for the study of Eastern European Jewry, YIVO's archival and library holdings are world-renowned and in continuous use by scholars, researchers and laypersons from all over the world.

In an effort to bring this rich historical and cultural legacy to younger generations, YIVO developed the Educational Program on Yiddish Culture, known as EPYC, which is a curriculum and interactive website created to familiarize students and teachers with 1,000 years of Eastern European Jewish history and culture. EPYC was developed by Dr. Adina Cimet, a distinguished sociologist, in conjunction with a distinguished advisory board of educators and scholars, including Dr. Samuel Kassow, the Charles Northam Professor of Judaic Studies at Trinity College and a specialist in Eastern European History, and Dr. Barry Holtz, Baumritter Professor of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

EPYC was developed as a comprehensive and content-rich curriculum ideally suited for use in Jewish settings for middle and secondary school students. EPYC may also be used as a resource for Holocaust studies and as a curriculum that advances multi-culturalism and tolerance in public schools. The curriculum is available in English and Hebrew free of charge in a downloadable format in the "For Teachers" section of the EPYC website.

EPYC was designed as an integrated set of materials that can be adapted to a variety of classroom settings. It uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, sociology, anthropology, religion and folklore.

### An In-depth Study of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe

More specifically, the EPYC website, "When these streets heard Yiddish" (<http://epyc.yivo.org>), uses the latest online technologies in an easy-to-navigate format, presenting students with an in-depth study of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before World War II. This is achieved by touring the sites' three distinct sections covering "Jewish Culture," "Lives," and "Places". The EPYC website includes self-guided tours, timelines, maps on Jewish emigration, monographs of Eastern European cities, audio clips of music, and voices of Yiddish speakers. The website is relevant to educational and adult audiences of diverse backgrounds and learning objectives – from novice learners who know little about Judaism to experienced students (grades 9 to 12) of Jewish history who want to learn more about Jewish life before the Holocaust.

The written curriculum includes two background essays for educators and adult audiences: *The Distinctive Life of East European Jewry* by Dr. Samuel Kassow, Professor of Jewish History at Trinity College, and *An Outline of Polish History* by Dr. Monika Garbowska-Adamczyk, Professor of Jewish History and Literature, and Dr. Christopher Garbowski, Associate Professor of English at Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin, Poland.

The core of the curriculum is a central textbook entitled *Cultural Monograph: Lublin, Poland* by Dr. Adina Cimet, which is a case study of the city of Lublin. Lublin was once a great center of Polish Jewry. In addition to being an economic hub, Lublin was also the center of Jewish self-government in Poland - the seat of the Council of Four Lands, the Jewish bureaucracy charged with overseeing all of the *kehillot* of Poland's Jewish communities. Using Lublin as a

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microcosm of a Polish city, students can learn about Jewish social life, governance, economics, religious, political and intellectual movements, and cultural life. The monograph cross-references a primary source appendix that includes maps, illustrations, photographs, charts, and statistics researched and collected by the YIVO archives and library.

The two student workbooks, for both basic and advanced students, were designed by Joshua Feinberg, a curriculum and museum education specialist, in accordance with the New York State history and the United States educational standard recommendations. The workbooks consist of ten thematic units designed to connect historical events with contemporary issues using primary and secondary source material. The teachers' guide provides in-depth background information and suggestions for class discussions and additional activities.

To introduce and familiarize educators with the EPYC program and the richness of Eastern European history and culture, YIVO offers a bi-annual teacher training program that consists of lectures and pedagogical workshops. Previously, the training program has received funding from the Claims Conference, US Department of Education and others, making it possible to offer a number of full and partial scholarships for transportation and expenses, as well as participant stipends. The next teacher training is currently scheduled for 2008.

## Other YIVO Web-based Resources

To increase accessibility of its collections, YIVO has digitized

certain collections, exhibitions, and public programs and made them available on its website, [www.yivo.org](http://www.yivo.org). A sampling of these resources include *People of a Thousand Towns*, a collection of 17,000 photographs of Jewish life in Eastern Europe from large Jewish centers to small towns and villages from the late nineteenth century to the early 1940s; the exhibitions *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Artifacts of the Vilna Ghetto* and *Ida Kaminska (1899-1980): Grande Dame of the Yiddish Theatre*; and public programs such as *Jews, Genes and Intelligence*, a lecture by Steven Pinker, renowned psychologist and cognitive scientist.

Notable web-based resources currently in development include the *Gruss-Lipper Digital Archive on Jewish Life in Poland* and the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

The *Gruss-Lipper Digital Archive on Jewish Life in Poland* will be a comprehensive digital archive of materials dating from 1900-1950 with special emphasis on Holocaust-era Poland. It includes a dedicated website with on-line descriptions, digital finding aids, a database of scanned documents and images, translations, multi-lingual glossaries, and powerful search tools.

The *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* is planned as the definitive reference work on all aspects of the history and culture of Jews in Eastern Europe from the beginnings of their settlement in the region to the present time. This multi-volume encyclopedia, comprising approximately 2 million words, 1200 images, and 175 maps, will draw on the most current scholarship in all relevant fields to explore Jewish life in all its variety and complexity. The print version is scheduled for publication by Yale University Press in 2008, with the web-based edition to follow in 2009. 