

# THE SECULAR YIDDISH SCHOOLS OF NORTH AMERICA COLLECTION AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

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The quest to recover the Lost Atlantis of Yiddishland has spawned a host of ambitious and well-publicized initiatives in recent years. Their success was made possible only through the strenuous exertions of grassroots *zamlers*—collectors of books, ephemera, music, and even radio broadcasts—who preserve and make accessible the legacy of a once-vibrant Yiddish culture.

The Friends of the Secular Yiddish Schools in North America (SYSNA) Collection at Stanford University is one of the organizations that is engaged in this effort. Since the early 1990s, this small group has amassed an archival collection that now occupies more than a dozen shelves (forty-two linear feet) in the Stanford University Libraries' Department of Special Collections. Gella Schweid Fishman, an alumna of the Sholem Aleichem schools in New York City, is the guiding force behind the Friends. She and her husband, the sociolinguist Joshua A. Fishman, spend a portion of each academic year at Stanford, which helps to explain why the Friends decided to donate these materials to this university.

From the outset, circa 1910, the Yiddish school movement in the

United States (and to a somewhat lesser extent, Canada) faced the irresistible pull of English, even as it contended with the dominant educational model of religiously oriented Hebrew schools. For some



Students in the second-year class at the Workmen's Circle High School, New York, 1922. Source: *Kinderland*, December 1922. Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

Jewish parents, however, the Yiddish shuls' avowedly secularist agenda offered a welcome alternative to having their children attend schools that were often connected to synagogues. By extension, it also relieved these families of the implicit obligation of joining a denomination within American Judaism. The secular Yiddish schools thus embodied a form of humanistic Judaism *avant la lettre*.

Multiple Yiddish school organizations co-existed and competed, each

according to the political ideology of its parent organization. Four movements are represented within the SYSNA collection's holdings, all of them on the political Left: the Labor Zionist *Farband*, the social democratic *Arbeter-ring* (Workmen's Circle), the pro-Soviet International Workers' Order (*Ordn*), and the unaffiliated Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute.

In an article in the Friends' *Shulgrusn* newsletter (2000), Joshua Fishman situates the Yiddish schools in the context of present-day public policy discussions of multiculturalism, bilingual education, and the maintenance of heritage languages. In addition, he underscores the

movement's uniqueness within the American context: "Whereas most ethnic schools focus on maintaining traditional identity" in a new environment, the Secular Yiddish Schools combined a concern for maintaining ties to the Jewish past together with a commitment to the creation of a distinctively new national-secular Jewish identity. He considers the schools' underlying philosophy and their pedagogical methods to be "radically innovative . . . No prior models had existed for such types of schools in Eastern Europe."

Furthermore, Fishman claims that other Jewish educators "borrowed methods and materials [from their Yiddish counterparts] despite mutual ideological opposition."<sup>1</sup>

The alumni, former teachers, parents, and others who donated the Yiddish school materials to Stanford did so long after most of the schools themselves closed. (Only a handful of secular Yiddish schools continue to function in the United States today.) Because these archival remnants belonged to private individuals and

not institutions, the schools' office files are largely absent from the SYSNA collection. On the other hand, it does include hundreds of student compositions, mimeographed curricula and newsletters, music compilations, souvenir journals, yearbooks, children's books and magazines, photographs, and ephemera. Taken as a whole, this archive represents one of a very few bodies of extant material documenting a neglected chapter in the American Jewish experience, one that underscores both the attractions and limitations of secular Jewish culture in North America.

To encourage use of the archive, the Friends sponsor a research fellowship for faculty, graduate students, and college seniors. Esther Reiter, a professor of social sciences and women's studies at York University (Toronto) and an alumna of an *Ordn* school in New York City, was the recipient of the first fellowship in 2002.

The Stanford University Libraries' Department of Special Collections has placed a detailed inventory of the SYSNA collection (M0732) on the Web.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the indexing terms that the library's staff assigns to the collection as a whole, individual folders are searchable according to specific topics that were devised by the collection's organizers. (Examples of these local subject headings include: Creative arts; Obituaries; and Rituals and lifecycle events.)

The tenth anniversary of the Friends' collecting effort was marked by an exhibition at Stanford in January and February 2005. At the exhibition's public opening (January 23, 2005), Ms. Fishman spoke about the origins and growth of this "living archive." In her keynote address, Dr. Sheva Zucker, a graduate of the I. L. Peretz School in Winnipeg and an author of



Cover illustration by Aaron Goodelman, *Kinderland*, January 1923. Courtesy of Stanford University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

Yiddish textbooks for students and adults, offered her personal reflections on the achievements and failings of the Yiddish school movement.

The items that were selected for the exhibition provide an overview of the secular Yiddish schools' development, activities, contributions, and ideological divisions.<sup>3</sup> These artifacts vividly reflect the degree to which educators viewed themselves and their protégés as participants on the world-historical stage.

For example, the cover illustration of a notebook used in Philadelphia's Workmen's Circle School No. 2, circa 1932, depicts a schoolboy carrying home a loaf of bread. This graphic is accompanied by the slogan, "*Tkh koyf broyt nor mitn yunyon leybel*" [I only buy bread with the union label]. Or, take the May 1939 issue of *Yungvarg*, published by the pro-communist IWO: The cover image, by William Gropper, portrays three children—one white, one black, and one Asian (one girl and two boys)—carrying a banner that proclaims: "*Der ershter may—undzer yontev*" [May First—Our Holiday].

With the passage of time, the distinctive voices of Yiddish teachers and their pupils have largely faded away. However, the subjects and values—and the Yiddish language—that were taught in these schools offer an example of the ways in which Jews have attempted to balance their desire to retain a separate identity while adapting to their surrounding society. As such, the Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection constitutes both a poignant legacy for the Yiddish-lover and a rich resource for the scholar.

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#### Bibliography

"Yiddish Secular Schools," in *A Bibliography of Jewish Education in the United States*, compiled and edited by Norman Drachler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, in Association with the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, [1993]: 204–31.

<sup>1</sup> Joshua A. Fishman, "The Great Contribution of the Secular Yiddish Schools," *Shulgrusn* 1:1 (Winter/Spring 2000): 6. In addition to publishing the *Shulgrusn* newsletter the Friends of the Secular Yiddish Schools in [North] America has its own Web site: [www.fsysa.org](http://www.fsysa.org).

<sup>2</sup> The finding aid is available through the Online Archive of California: [www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf5c6004gt](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf5c6004gt).

<sup>3</sup> The exhibition was curated by Gella Schweid Fishman, with the assistance of University Archivist Margaret Kimball and Exhibits Designer Elizabeth Fischbach.

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