YIDDISH ON DEMAND:
THE DEBUT OF THE STEVEN SPIELBERG
DIGITAL YIDDISH LIBRARY

Faye Zipkowitz

Description*:* The National Yiddish Book Center was founded in 1980 to gather, preserve, and redistribute books in the Yiddish language. Over the years we have collected more than a million volumes, and distributed books to over 450 academic institutions, individual scholars and students. When we realized that many titles in demand were becoming scarce, we began the work of preserving our entire collection, about 15,000 titles, through digitizing the books' contents and making them available as print-on-demand copies. We now have scanned about 11,000 titles which comprise the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library. The Library includes the Cotsen collection of children's books, and will include a collection of Yiskor books. The catalog is on the web, with MARC cataloging in standard LC romanization and in Yiddish, which is downloadable to local catalogs. There is also a purchasing feature at the website for the Yiddish reprints, and for materials from our English language Judaica bookstore. The Center hosts wonderful exhibits, educational and entertainment programs, seminars, workshops, Yiddish classes, and much more. This presentation will concentrate on the SSDYL, how it came to be, what it looks like, and how to use it to support Yiddish language programs, classes, adult education, and outreach projects.

Fay Zipkowitz earned her BA at Long Island University, her MSLS at Western Reserve University, her MA in English at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, her doctorate at Simmons College, and her Diploma from the Arbeter Ring Shule in Brooklyn, New York. She has served as a librarian at the Cleveland Public Library, archivist for the Abba Hillel Silver Memorial archives and Library, librarian at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, coordinator of the Worcester Area Cooperating Libraries, director of the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services, and is professor emeritus at the University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Library and Information Studies. Her research interests include library services to underserved populations and professional ethics. Since May, 1999, she has been working at the National Yiddish Book Center, cataloging the rich variety of materials which constitute the Yiddish canon and learning more about machine readable information than she ever intended to know. She is the world's oldest promising young professional, and wears red sneakers.

I'm very pleased to be here and to have the opportunity to talk with librarians about books and library services. My current position uses a lot of my library experience and skills, but the National Yiddish Book Center is not a library, and though I love my job I miss the regular contacts with librarians. I came to the NYBC in May of 1999, just as our President, Aaron Lansky, and Director of the digitization project, Gabriel Hamilton, were getting ready to attend the AJL conference in Florida. At that time Aaron described the establishment of a project to preserve forever books in Yiddish—the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library. Now the Library is a reality. And it is my privilege to tell you about it.

Slides 1-11 – Quick view of the NYBC

As many of you know, the National Yiddish Book Center was founded in 1980 to collect, preserve and redistribute books in the Yiddish language. We have collected over a

million volumes, and more are donated all the time. We have supplied whole collections to over 450 colleges and universities around the world, and thousands of books to individuals, scholars, students, collectors and dealers. Alas, not all of our collections are in good enough condition to provide to libraries, and we also began to run out of materials that are in high demand. So, about four years ago, a project was developed to create a digital library by scanning each of the titles in our collections. By doing this we could accomplish more of what the Center was founded for: to preserve the written Yiddish word, to make usable copies of books available, and to preserve the texts forever.

Slide 12 – Spielberg sign

Slide 13 – Spielberg sign

Slide 14 – The goals for the project

Slide 15 – Flow chart: selecting and coding for digitization

The project was begun with seed money from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, and was supported by other major grants and by an adopt-a book program. A contract was made with Danka Services International, now owned by Pitney Bowes, in Mechanicsburg, PA. We at the Center agreed to ship a minimum of 200,000 pages a month to the scanners, in return for a favorable price structure. The Center also decided that every title should be fully cataloged before going out for scanning. We had a short-title catalog in the form of an inventory list, and had begun cataloging on RLIN about 3 years earlier. Facing the numbers of 15 to 20,000 titles we expected to be scanned, the Center began a search for a cataloger who could work with the VTLS Classic software, maintain AACR2 and MARC standards, and create access in Yiddish to each record. And I said I can do that, so they hired me. We expected the cataloging part of the project to last 2-3 years. More on that timetable later.

Slide 15 – Flow chart – shipping books for scanning

Slide 16 – Scanning process and rejects returned to NYBC

A working database for cataloging was developed by Marcive, which created more or less full records for most of our titles. This database included RLIN records, and some very peculiar bedfellows based on the matches made by Marcive, but it was very workable. As the books were pulled from the shelves for digitizing, they were examined for appropriateness for scanning in a production mode process. If they seemed stable enough, and were complete, they were assigned an ISBN, and moved to me for cataloging. I completed the copy cataloging and for each record I entered a control number derived from the ISBN assigned in the digitization database. I added a series note for the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, and in Hebrew characters, the author, title and imprint in Yiddish. The latter sounds simple, but I had to use a diabolical software package called Windows for Hebrew, which plays havoc with all other programs on the computer. Those of you who have entered non-Roman characters into catalog records know the fun of moving back and forth from left-to-right and right-to-left. Eventually it becomes second nature, and you even memorize the Hebrew keyboard. And for each title I then created a second record that represents the digitized reprint version,

including the new imprint and the historical information. These are the records you see in the online catalog. The other records reside in our local catalog, representing artifactual copies of the books.

Slide 17 – Proofs returned to NYBC

Slide 18 – Proofing process and record keeping on the status of book titles

The database for the project tracks every title, whether sent for scanning or kept back for any reason. If sent for scanning, we track when it was sent, when the proofs come back, what the disposition of the proof is, any further work that needs doing, and when the title is ready for release into the online catalog. Also carried in the database is information about whether the books are part of the special collections—the Cotsen children's library, and the Yisker books, the literature collection.

Meeting the scanning contract meant cataloging about 40 books a day. Sometimes the system, or the cataloger, doesn't meet the challenge, so some books were shipped with photocopied title pages and other vital information kept for cataloging. We set aside temporarily books for which we had no good copy, for later original cataloging. And we set aside books that were imperfect, to look for better copies, or were unscannable for various reasons.

Most of the books came through the process very well. In fact, the reproductions are in many cases clearer and more easily read than the originals. Of course the digitized reprints are new, clean, and printed on permanent paper, which makes them more practical for libraries, and more palatable for people who react to handling crumbly paper. Many of our customers, however, still ask for original copies where possible. There's something about the original artifact, its aura, its provenance, which is very appealing to scholars, students, collectors and booklovers in general.

Slide 19 – Technical data about SSDYL

Slide 20 – Numbers for SSDYL

Slide 21 – Examples of reprint books

Slide 22 – Examples of original books

Slide 23 – Children's book, odd size

Slide 24 – Children's book, common size

I'd like to highlight two special parts of the digitization project, as subsets of the SSDYL. One is the Cotsen Collection of children's books. We digitized from microfiche about 850 children's books from the YIVO collections, in addition to all of the children's materials we had in our own collections. These represent some rare and hard to find items, and copies of the reprints will become part of the Cotsen children's collections at Princeton University. Neil Zagorin, our bibliographer, is preparing an annotated bibliography for these titles.

Slide 25 – Book not scannable, not salvageable

Slide 26 -Yisker book

Slide 27 – Inside of Yisker book

Slide 28 – Inside of Yisker

The second is Yisker books. We are arranging to have special, high resolution scanning done for these memorial books from our collection and from the New York Public Library's collection. As you may know, these are very important books put together by the survivors and descendants of survivors of the destroyed communities in Europe to memorialize their communities. They contain documents, essays, memoirs, photographs, maps, certificates, any memorabilia they could find and preserve as part of the memorial to their villages and towns. The books are usually large format, very well printed and bound, and were issued in very small print runs, usually by private subscription, and are very scarce. They are in high demand for their historical and genealogical information, but also for the picture they present of lost societies in eastern and central Europe between the world wars. We hope to have these done within the next several months. As part of this project we will be able to scan some of the other special handling items we've held back—with important illustrations, foldout maps, and books in non-standard formats—too large, too small, odd shapes, etc., and some rare books that should not be destroyed or damaged in the scanning process.

Another very important part of the SSDYL is the e-commerce component. Our catalog is maintained by VTLS, Inc., and they have also designed an e-commerce "skin" which enables people who search the catalog online to also place orders for reprints directly with the providers of the volumes. Although we do own the database, our contract with Danka includes several years of providing the reprint copies directly to the buyers—no inventory for us to keep track of, no pulling and shipping and invoicing. Our bibliographer and Yiddish Book Department continue to field requests for original copies, and to advise on editions, source materials, and research questions. We are also developing basic collections for libraries just starting to collect Yiddish books.

The database to support all this, as I've described, is an Access set of files, very complex, which tracks all the titles through the entire process and stores the information about sponsors, type of material, new title pages, and other relevant information. We can locate and determine the status of every title all through the process, and know when the books are available for purchase. Record keeping and reporting is a lot easier when the database is good, and Gabe Hamilton has made sure ours is good. He's terrific.

So, as of May 6, 2002, our catalog is online at our website, fully searchable in English and Yiddish, and the cataloging records are available for free downloading to local catalogs, liberating libraries of the processing burdens that surround materials in non-Roman alphabets. Currently there are just fewer than 11,000 titles in the database. This summer I hope to get into the "uncataloged" boxes and create the cataloging records for them. They will join the some 2000 titles we have cataloged which are waiting for scanning, as well as the special handling materials I've mentioned. All it takes is money.

Our local catalog contains close to 14,000 items, while the online catalog available through the website contains the items that are currently available as the SSDYL.

Slide 29 – Cataloging area

I said that I would get back to the timetable. None of our original estimates were accurate for creating and marketing the SSDYL, which will come as no surprise to any of you. Not only didn't we have any models for this project but VTLS had never before created the systems we needed. So everything is roughly eighteen months behind where we hoped it would be, or, on Jewish time. The bulk of the cataloging that I contracted to do was done in the 2½ years time frame, and I was all set to retire (again) as of Dec. 30, 2001, and to be on call to catalog additional books as needed, or to train someone else to do it. But if any of you know Aaron Lansky, you know that he usually gets what he wants, and he decided he wanted me to stay on as director of the Yiddish Book Dept. and the Yiddish Library Development Program, and to launch the digital library. I've moved to part time as part of our bargain, and am working on getting the word out to the library world about the reprints and the other projects we are working on, such as education, publishing and translating, which I'll be happy to tell you about when there's time. For today I am pleased to tell you that we have a fine collection of Yiddish books, a good catalog, excellent search capabilities, a good sales system, plans for growth, and the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library is a great success. We've not only created permanency for Yiddish printed literature, we've succeeded in achieving a major part of the basic mission of the NYBC—preserving Yiddish culture.

Slides 30-34 – Views of NYBC (if time)

Slide 35 – Fay's red sneakers

Slide 36 – Fay's diplom

Thank you for your attention—I'll be glad to answer questions or tell you more about the NYBC.