

JUDAICA RESOURCES AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY

Goldie Sigal

Description: The Department of Jewish Studies at McGill University is one of the largest in North America. Set against the rich tapestry of Montréal Jewish cultural life, it has an impressive undergraduate curriculum and an extensive graduate program leading to the Doctoral level. The graduate curriculum focuses on two main areas: the history of *Parshanut* (the Jewish interpretation of the Bible) and the history and culture of Eastern European Jewry. Interdisciplinary courses are coordinated with other Departments within the Faculty of Arts, the Jewish Teachers Training Program in the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Law, and the Faculty of Religious Studies. Library support for this extensive program is delineated. The collection policy and cooperation with other bibliographers and institutions are discussed, and McGill holdings and resources are outlined. Rare materials and Special Collections are mentioned, with particular focus on the Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry in the Division of Rare Books and Special Collections. A bird's eye view of the Fishstein website, "A Garment Worker's Legacy" (an online catalogue and exhibit), is presented [<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>].

Goldie Sigal was Jewish studies cataloguer and bibliographer at McGill University Libraries from 1977 to 2002, and continues to be active as a volunteer librarian at McGill and elsewhere. She was curator of a number of exhibitions of McGill's holdings in various aspects of Judaica, and contributed to *Fontanus*, the University's collections journal. After cataloguing the books in the Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry, she edited the published catalogue (*A Garment Worker's Legacy*, Montreal: McGill University Libraries, 1998 (Fontanus Monograph Series; 11). She was the curator of the exhibition which accompanied the launching of the published catalogue. The website by the same name, of which she was Project Curator, was launched in June, 2002.
[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>].

The Jewish Studies Department

The **Jewish Studies Department** at McGill University, one of the major academic centres of its kind in North America, was established as a Program in 1968. It is now a Department with an endowed chair, and offers a rich and diverse undergraduate curriculum, reflecting the entire spectrum of Jewish

civilization. Its graduate program, leading to the doctoral level, focuses on two main areas: the history of *Parshanut* (the Jewish interpretation of the Bible) and the history and culture of Eastern European Jewry.

The Jewish Studies curriculum is integrated with the flourishing Jewish Teachers Training Program in the Faculty of Education, and with the undergraduate program in Jewish Law in the Faculty of Law. In addition, interdisciplinary courses are coordinated with other Departments within the Faculty of Arts, the Institute of Islamic Studies, and the Faculty of Religious Studies. The present Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies is a prominent Jewish scholar, who is also a professor in the Jewish Studies Department. In addition, there is outreach to the general Montreal community in the form of a series of lectures featuring prominent scholars in Jewish Studies.

Library support

Library support for McGill's extensive program in Jewish Studies is manifested in various ways, details of which may be found by consulting the McGill University Jewish Studies Collection Policy, accessible on the Web [<http://www.library.mcgill.ca/collect/jewstud.htm>].¹

An important characteristic of collection development at McGill is cooperation. Liaison with the Jewish Studies Faculty is ongoing. The Jewish Studies bibliographer frequently cooperates with her colleagues in other subject areas and library departments in the choice of interdisciplinary materials. There is also occasional consultation with other Montreal institutions, such as the Jewish Public Library, the Canadian Jewish Congress Archives, and Concordia University.

The Collection.

The McGill Jewish Studies Collection as a whole is not as extensive as its admirable counterpart at the University of Toronto. However, a solid core of thousands of volumes for undergraduate studies, and graduate research in the two departmental concentrations, is maintained.

The collection is particularly strong in **Yiddish literature**. In addition to the substantial amount of Yiddish books to be found in the stacks of McLennan library, McGill's Division of Rare Books and Special Collections also has important Yiddish holdings. The most important of these is the Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry, which we shall be discussing later. Of interest as well are the archives of Dr. Abraham Roback, a former McGill psychology professor and prominent author of works on Yiddish literature. His archives include correspondence in Yiddish with many contemporary personalities.

Locations.

The main Jewish Studies collection of monographs and serials is situated in the **Humanities and Social Sciences Library** in the McLennan-Redpath library complex. A rich array of Judaica reference works and electronic resources is located in the Reference Department of McLennan Library.

The **Division of Rare Books and Special Collections**, in addition to the Fishstein Collection and the Roback archives mentioned earlier, contains other material of Jewish interest:

The **Rabbi Lewin Collection** consists of 168 volumes of rare Hebraica, published mostly in northern Italy between the 16th to the early 19th centuries. A significant portion of it is cabbalistic. Saul Katz, who is its volunteer cataloguer, believes that it may perhaps be "the most important collection of rare cabbalistic books in Canada".

The **Saul Shapiro Collection** contains over five thousand 19th and 20th century English language titles of Jewish interest donated to the McGill libraries by the Shapiro family. It includes many signed first editions.

¹ Other references and electronic addresses with reference to McGill's Judaica resources will be found in the Appendix at the end of this presentation.

The **Arthur Szyck Collection**, which is part of the Norman Friedman donation to McGill, includes first editions and other important material of this famous twentieth century Jewish artist and illustrator.

Among the Judaica manuscripts in the Rare Books Division, there are three large fragments from the Cairo Genizah, a 400 year old Torah scroll, and a Samaritan Pentateuch. The Rare Books Division also houses other early printed works of relevance to Jewish Studies, such as Hebrew Bibles, lexicons and rabbinic works in Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish.

[Slide: *Dux seu Director dubitantium*]

This is the title page of a Latin version of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed: **Dux seu Director dubitantium aut perplexorum*** / Rabi Roffei Aegyptii. Published in Paris in 1520, it is derived from the al-Harizi Hebrew translation of the Judeo Arabic.²

Other Locations & Projects. There are other Judaica treasures among the McGill libraries which not many people know about.

The **Osler Library of the History of Medicine** contains an incunabulum and several other early printed works by Maimonides, as well as a broadside of a Papal Letter, issued by Gregory XIII in 1584, on Jewish physicians. The library of the **Presbyterian College** houses some extremely rare polyglot Bibles and volumes from early editions of the Bomberg Pentateuch, and the **Islamic Studies Library** has some material in areas shared by Islam and Judaism.

The **Holocaust Archive**, “**Living Testimonies**”, initiated by Prof. Yehudi Lindemann of the English Department, is now headed by Prof. Marianne Stenbaek. It is a repository of approximately 150 audiovisual records of Montreal Holocaust survivors and other witnesses to the Holocaust.

The Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry

The most important Yiddish collection in the McGill Libraries, and one of the gems of the Division of Rare Books, is the **Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry**. [Those who have attended my Tuesday talk will likely find the rest of this presentation repetitive!] Considered to be one of the finest private collections of its kind in the world, it was acquired for McGill through the efforts of McGill Professor Ruth Wisse, (now at Harvard). She was in New York one day in the early 1980's, and heard that a family in the Bronx wished to donate a collection of Yiddish poetry books to a university library that would undertake to keep them together, preferably one that supported a Yiddish program.

The collection consists of about 2,300 Yiddish works, mostly poetry, emanating from some 25 countries during the first 4 decades of the 20th century – a period often referred to as “the flowering of modern Yiddish literature”. It has many rare volumes, most of which have been

² Reproduced in: Goldie Sigal, “Moses Maimonides: His Works and the McGill Collection”, *Fontanus* (v.1, 1988), p. 84-94, Figure 11.

preserved in vintage condition with the aid of beautiful jackets fashioned by Joe Fishstein, the Bronx garment worker who assembled them.

[Slide: Book samples]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>] Exhibit. The Man. Image 11.

These are some books in the Fishstein Collection, in their hand-crafted jackets. We recall Ruth Wisse's comment in her Preface to the published Fishstein Book Catalogue: "Almost each book had been provided with an extra decorative covering, and shone on the shelves like a bedecked bride. Joe Fishstein had wanted his books to look as precious as they felt to him."

The garment worker had put in a standing order with a Yiddish bookstore for every new poetry title published anywhere in the world, and for any book or journal about Yiddish verse. It also contains many unusual ephemeral items, such as albums of early 20th century postcards, photographs and trade union memorabilia, and offers rich opportunities for research to scholars of Yiddish literature and 20th century social and cultural history. It is not size as such that distinguishes this collection, however. It is distinctive because of its concentration of works rarely found elsewhere, and their excellent condition. A preliminary search has revealed that well over half the titles in the Fishstein virtual exhibit are absent in the Stephen Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, and we look forward to future cooperation with Aaron Lansky in this area.

[Slide: Website Home Page]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>]

The Fishstein website, entitled *A Garment Worker's Legacy*, was launched in 2002 by the McGill Digital Collections Program, and this is a reproduction of the home page. The logo is a portrait of Joe Fishstein taken by his great-grandson, Michael Rabinowitz, set against some of the books in his library. The left side reveals the two main divisions of the website – the **Online Catalogue** and the **Virtual Exhibit**, and the scrolling column on the right offers a brief description of the Fishstein Collection and the main sources of the website—the **Book Catalogue** (published in 1998), and the **Actual Exhibit** at Redpath Library, which accompanied the book launch.

In the second paragraph of the scrolling column, a hyperlink from "**major exhibit of highlights**" leads to photographs and audio-visual material from the actual exhibition, which include, among other things, a short TV clip on the exhibition and an interview with the gifted Yiddish poet and novelist, Chava Rosenfarb.

By pressing "**Catalogue**", we can access the preliminary and appended portions found in the published Book Catalogue, such as the Preface, Introduction and Table of Name Equivalents. It is also possible to search the Catalogue entries electronically, or to browse by topic or index. Special note should be made of the **Illustrator Index**, which could serve as a valuable resource for research in Jewish and American graphic art. There are more than 400 illustrators listed, including famous artists like Marc Chagall and El Lissitsky.

[Slide: Table of Name Equivalents]

[Appendix, 1998 published Book Catalogue]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>] Catalogue. Table of Name Equivalents.

Part of the **Table of Name Equivalents** (*Nemen farglaykhung reshimeh*) is shown on the screen. The table provides a list of names in the original Hebrew characters in which Yiddish is actually written, and links those names to the romanized L.C. name authorities used in the Author and Illustrator Indices. This should be a boon to frustrated Yiddish cataloguers.

[Slide: Website Home Page]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>]

Back at Home Page, we now explore the outlines of the **Virtual Exhibit**. The on-line exhibit consists of the contents of the original Redpath exhibit, greatly augmented, and strengthened with hyperlinks and enlargement capacities. Over 315 items have been included in the virtual exhibit, and more than 800 images, many of them nested. Time does not permit us to visit most of the sections in the virtual exhibit. I'll just be able to outline them briefly and give occasional examples.

I. THE MAN. The first of the Virtual Exhibit sections, "**The Man**", displays biographical material about Joe Fishstein, such as his Home Library Catalogue, and the hand-written notebook of some of his favourite poems.

II. THE MILIEU. The second section, "**The Milieu**", highlights the rich social and cultural milieu of the self-educated immigrant worker and the importance of the union in a worker's life. Joe Fishstein was an active member of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Typical advertisements for cultural evenings are displayed, as are source materials relevant to research in social and labour history.

III. FATHERS. "**The Fathers**" (*Di Klasiker* in Yiddish), features material relating to the Fathers of modern Yiddish literature – Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1915[?]), Isaac Leib Peretz (1851-2-1915) and Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916). Their creativity at the beginning of the 20th century forged Yiddish into a modern literary tongue and ushered in the period known as "The flowering of modern Yiddish literature", which lasted roughly until the outbreak of the second World War.

IV. THE AUTHORS. "**The Authors**" features a selection of portraits of some major Yiddish authors, culled from Fishstein's albums and scrapbooks. Also included are some Yiddish works by writers primarily known for their contributions to Hebrew literature.

V. POETESSES. **Women poets** made a significant contribution to Yiddish poetry years before feminism came into its own. Among them is the highly gifted poet Kadia Molodowsky, who was editor of the prestigious literary journal: *Di Sviveh*.

VI. POLAND. **Poland** and its environs constituted the well-spring of modern Yiddish literature. Warsaw, under the mentorship of Isaac Leib Peretz, provided its inspiration and nurture. Vilna, in Lithuania, was also a great centre of creativity. Among the literary landmarks displayed in this section are periodicals like *Di Khalyastre* and *Yung-Vilne*, as well as works by the P.E.N. klub on the eve of the Holocaust.

VII. SOVIET UNION. The Fishstein Collection is rich in rare, often ephemeral material stemming from pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union between the World Wars. Zvi Gitelman, the noted historian and scholar of Soviet Jewry, has commented that he was not even aware of the existence of most of the Soviet works displayed on the Fishstein website, which he termed “oysergeveynlikh”.

[Slide: Hekher fun der erd]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>] Exhibit. Soviet Union. Image 2.

Hekher fun der erd (Higher than the earth), by Der Nister (Warsaw: Progres, [1910]). The intriguing cover illustration is by Depner.

[Slide: Almanakh Vuspp]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>]. Exhibit. Soviet Union. Image 8.

Almanakh Vuspp, by the Alukrainishe asotsiatsye fun proletarishe shrayber, Idishe sektsye (Kharkov, 1929). The striking, unusual wrap-around cover is shown.

VIII. UNITED STATES. Moving along in the **Virtual Exhibit**, we come to the **United States**. Among the waves of Yiddish-speaking immigrants pouring onto American shores in the early decades of the 20th century were hundreds of poets. Numerous poetry anthologies, monographs, and literary magazines were published. 36 American Yiddish works are included in this section of the virtual exhibit.

IX. CANADA. Most Canadian Yiddish literary activity emanated from Montreal, and some from Toronto. A dynamic Yiddish literary and cultural life existed in Montreal, centering at its hub– the Jewish Public Library. In addition to some works by noted poets, several early Montreal Yiddish literary journals are displayed.

X. ISRAEL. Yiddish was actively discouraged in the land of Israel before the Holocaust, as it was perceived to pose a threat to the rejuvenation of modern spoken Hebrew. Nevertheless, Yiddish literature was published then, such as works by the prolific poet Yosef Papyernikov. After the Holocaust and the establishment of the State, Israel became the generator of most of the Yiddish literary production in the world.

XI. SPECIAL IMPRINTS. This section displays a variety of other unusual imprints, generally selected because of their place of issue or format. They include publications from Germany, Austria, and locations beyond the “Pale of Settlement” proclaimed by czarist Russia.

[Slide: Lider un gedikhten]

[\[http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein\]](http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein) Exhibit. Special Imprints. Image 1.

Lider un gedikhten (Lyrics and poems), by A.N. Stencl (Leipzig: Menes-ferlag, [192-]. 31x31 cm.
500 copies issued. Copy no. 400.

XII. TRANSLATIONS. Translations from world literature and also from Hebrew literature were in great demand by Yiddish readers, and some of the many hundreds that were published are displayed in this section.

XIII. HUMOUR. Humour forms a rich vein in Yiddish culture, and has probably acted as a survival mechanism in frequent troubled times.

[Slide: A bisl rekhiles]

[\[http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein\]](http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein) Exhibit. Humour. Image 6.

One of the gems of the Collection is: *A bisl rekhiles* (A little gossip), by Hagay (Hayim Goldberg), Warsaw, 1926. Also illustrated by the author, it is a Yiddish literary celebrity “roast” in honour of Purim, issued in only 125 copies, and is extremely rare.

The cover and part of the double first page are reproduced here.

We see some strange bedfellows on the literary Mt. Olympus as they contemplate contemporary literature: Among others, there are Homer, Maimonides, Goethe, Shakespeare, Schopenhauer, Heine, and Mendelsohn. In the foreground, Sholem Aleichem is holding onto Yud Lamed Peretz’s ankles, as the Yiddish writers peer down on some contemporary manifestations of so-called Yiddish culture.

[Slide: “Ot azoy...”]

[\[http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein\]](http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein) Exhibit. Humour. Image 7.

Another item in the Fishstein Collection by the same author/artist is a clipping entitled: “Ot azoy dertseylt di mayseh” (So goes the story). It is a satirical comic strip, probably dating from the twenties, in which Hagay pokes fun at the notion of the so-called “ideal” woman as being beautiful, virtuous and compliant, but utterly lacking any spark

of autonomy. The magician who has produced such a creation is driven to suicide by boredom.

XIV. THEATRE. Yiddish Theatre was very popular among the American Yiddish-speaking populace, and Second Avenue in New York became a kind of “Yiddish Broadway”.

[Slide: Theatre playbills]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>] Exhibit. Theatre. Image 1.

This image is a reproduction of a collage made out of contemporary theatre playbills in Fishstein’s collection.

XV. ILLUSTRATORS. We finally come to the last section in the Virtual Exhibit, “**Illustrators**”. Graphic art played an important role in the publication of Yiddish literature, especially poetry.

[Slide: Sives Hulin]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>] Exhibit. Illustrators. Image 14.

Sives hulin: eyne fun di geshikhten (Moscow: Ferlag “Leben”, 1917). It was written by the Soviet Yiddish author, Moysheh Broderzon, and illustrated by the famous artist, El Lissitzky. This work is one of the rarest and most valuable books in the Fishstein Collection.

[Slide: Chagall’s illustration]

[<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>]

Exhibit. Illustrators. Image 5. Nested Image 2.

This is a drawing by Marc Chagall, illustrating the poem, “Yidish”, by Avrohm Liessin, in vol. 1 of his *Lider un poemen*, New York, 1938. In it, Yiddish (which in the language can mean either Yiddish or Jewish) is personified by an angel who carries a *Sefer Torah* and touches the head of a sleeping poet.

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Ultimately, the goal of a catalogue or exhibition is the perusal of the books themselves. So, next time you are in Montreal, do come visit the McGill Libraries, whether it is to savour the delights of the Fishstein Collection, or any of the other Judaica mentioned today.

Comments and questions are welcome:

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See Appendix, next page

JUDAICA RESOURCES AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY: APPENDIX

Presenter: Goldie Sigal

Publications

A Garment Worker's Legacy: the Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry: the Catalogue. Edited by Goldie Sigal. Montreal: McGill University Libraries: distributed by McGill-Queens Press, 1998 (McGill Fontanus Series;11) ISBN 0-7717-0511-5 [bookstore@mcgill.ca]

Sigal, Goldie. "Moses Maimonides: His Works and the McGill Collection". *Fontanus* (v.1, 1988), p. 84-94.

Websites

- McGill Jewish Studies Department [<http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/jewish/>]
- A Garment Worker's Legacy: The Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry [<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fishstein>]
- McGill Jewish Studies Collection Policy [<http://www.library.mcgill.ca/collect/jewstud.htm>]
- McGill University Libraries (includes online catalogue (MUSE); Resources; Services [<http://www.library.mcgill.ca/>]
- McGill University. Jewish Studies: a selective list of reference sources [<http://www.library.mcgill.ca>]

Email: Jewish Studies Librarian: Sonia Silva [sonia.silva@mcgill.ca]
(Former Jewish Studies Librarian): Goldie Sigal [gsigal@attglobal.net]

McGill Library Locations for Judaica

Humanities & Social Sciences Library (McLennan-Redpath building)
Reference Department (McLennan Library, Ground floor)
Rare Books and Special Collections (McLennan Library, 4th floor)

Joe Fishstein Collection of Yiddish Poetry
Rabbi Daniel Lewin Collection [16th - 19th century Hebraica]
Saul Shapiro Collection [5000+ English language Judaica]
Arthur Szyck Collection
Lawrence Lande Collection of Canadiana [ca. 40 titles of Jewish interest]
Institute of Islamic Studies Library
Osler Library of the History of Medicine
Presbyterian College Library
Living Testimonies (Holocaust video archive): English Department,
Professor Marianne Stenback