

Chapter Chatter

New York Metropolitan Area (NYMA)

Remote from NYC: Historical Jewish Press Project

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On Wednesday, May 4, the New York Metropolitan Area (NYMA) chapter held “The Historical Jewish Press Project: Presenting Phase V.” The Zoom session, moderated by NYMA president Rina Krautwirth, featured three speakers who are completing the fifth stage of a joint project: digitization of Jewish-American newspapers.

MARLI & Beyond

The first speaker, Michelle Chesner—Norman E. Alexander Librarian for Jewish Studies, Columbia University—discussed the project’s three-way inception by herself, Steve Corrsin, former New York Public Library Dorot Chair, and Evelyn Ehrlich, formerly of New York University, in conjunction with the Jewish Historical Press at the National Library in Jerusalem. In 2010 Evelyn asked the NLI to create a scoping report on requested materials for Jewish Studies. The most desired were Yiddish-language newspapers. Evelyn, herself involved in Yiddish studies, was intrigued: apparently these newspapers were viewed as “deep desiderata”—*Forverts* (Forward), *Morgen Journal International* (International Morning Journal), *Der Tag* (The Day), and *Yiddishe Tageblatt* (Jewish Daily)—and were already undergoing preservation.

During a 2012 conference on digitization at Manhattan’s Center for Jewish History (CJH), the question was asked: “Why are institutions giving their newspapers to vendors to digitize, then sell back to us at insane prices?” Consequently, Columbia’s Butler Library, NYU’s Bobst Library, and the New York Public Library decided to pool their resources. The Manhattan Research Libraries Initiative (MARLI), a larger endeavor by the library systems of their respective institutions, allowed not only cooperation among libraries but extension of borrowing privileges to students and scholars. Funding made newspapers available in perpetuity.

In 2013 the three institutions partnered with the Jewish Historical Press Project, which is now ending its fifth phase. Selecting the newspapers, Michelle explained, “We looked at titles not already available in digital format,” to avoid duplication or co-option of titles not already included in other digital plans. Those selected ideally had microfilms or master negatives already owned by the NYPL, which sent copies among its vast collection to Jerusalem to be digitized.

Because titles had to be in the public domain, year 1923 was made the deadline. American-Jewish historian and professor Jonathan Sarna, who was a member of the advisory board, provided a list of the “Top 10” English-language newspapers. Eventually, however, the need to diversify in topic, theme, and language led to the representation of newspapers in other than English.

“It’s exciting to see how many have been added to the Jewish Historical Press Project,” Michelle gushed.

Broader Scope

For Lyudmila Sholokhova—Curator of the Dorot Jewish Collection, NYPL—this project was one of her first at NYPL. And she is already amazed at its scope. Throughout phases I-IV, approximately 700,000 pages were digitized—totaling 21 periodicals.

Like Michelle, Lyudmila considered copyright issues, consulted with an advisory board, and reviewed selections. In 2021, it was brought to her attention that 200 reels of the most popular selections, including *Der Tog* (The Day) and *Der Morgen-Zshurnal* (The Jewish Morning Journal), had been affected by the “vinegar syndrome.” Being not easily replaceable, they were moved to a certain area in the stacks where the other microfilms with similar issues are located. The librarians continued to serve the reels to the patrons with precautions.

Meanwhile, Lyudmila discussed the issue with today’s other two speakers, and the group agreed that it would be important to prioritize digitization of these titles. Their request was met with complete understanding by the National Library of Israel.

The National Library was kind in terms of not just prioritizing, but making it possible for patrons to do research,” Lyudmila remarked. This included patrons from all walks of life and all interests. “There were instances when patrons requested pages from the 1960s, and the NLI went ahead and digitized these years for us to accommodate these particular requests,” she added.

Although the group had planned some 25 new newspapers to be digitized in the Phase V, the actual number could be smaller, because of very large runs of *Der Tog* and *Der Morgen-Zshurnal*. However, the total projected amount of pages—approximately 300,000—will be the same. The remaining titles will be carried over and digitized in the following, sixth phase of the Project.

Digitizing *Der Tog* and *Der Morgen-Zshurnal* would be a milestone, since along with *Forverts*, these New York-based Yiddish daily newspapers are essential for understanding the American-Jewish history of the 20th century.

“Walking” Tour

Showing the work already done, Guy Burak—Librarian for Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Jewish Studies, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, NYU—lauded the careful attention paid by the NLI to quality control. Texts and images, scanned through optical character recognition (OCR), may vary according to script, but accuracy is generally high, thanks to NLI’s tight standards. Newspapers are spot-checked, even to the finest detail, ensuring that everything is correct.

“The combination of robust OCR and metadata allows getting ready to the level of addresses,” Guy remarked. Viewers, for example, can do a “walking tour” of Ladino communities.

A strong OCR made the platform powerful for answering historical questions. Newspapers, which have been digitized in their entirety, appeal to different researchers for different reasons—some because of ads, others because of articles.

What does Guy find fascinating? The press’ synoptic view of

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events on a given day, “what different newspapers in different parts of the world had to say about certain events.” One example was the reception of poet Bialik in the Jewish world.

“Students love it,” Guy said, “because you can see how the American press, Palestinian press, etc., responded to the same issue.”

He displayed features and search engines. Newspapers can be narrowed down to a specific country or language, although the default setting is the regional language and years of publication. A timeline can filter the search for an event, of particular use for genealogists.

In addition, ads and articles can be downloaded as PDFs.

“The interesting thing about OCR text,” Guy explained, “is a box on display where you can actually see the text as a text—not just an article. It can be cut and pasted to a Word document or any other software.”

The database is far from complete. There are gaps in years, which staff is trying to fill in. And there are always improvements. Basically, staff keep making changes.

“We’re in conversation with the NLI,” Guy explained, “to get metadata for individual titles so we can load them to our catalogs and do work that is complicated.”

Nevertheless, he added, “If there is a will, there is a way. And we hope it will work.”

“Broad & Targeted”

Earliest newspapers date from 1783, although not all are American-based or focused. Nevertheless, the collection encompasses all aspects of Jewish-American life and communities—i.e., Orthodox, Zionist, Bundist—and all subjects—religion, Holocaust, labor.

During the Q & A, Michelle addressed some of the difficulties. “Remember, older papers had the pre-YIVO Yiddish. Spelling might be different.” Historical Yiddish was basically a free-for-all; finding a unique word and spelling it in different ways helps.

Concerning updates, migrations to new platforms, and internal work, the speakers were asked: “How do you see the future with all the changes in technology?”

Answer: “We have no idea.” Michelle elaborated: “We are working on the concept of LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe).” Libraries will still have microfilm as back-up.

So, what’s in store for Phase VI?

Answer: “Dying Jewish newspapers,” Michelle answered. There are many that are looking for “homes.” The publishers and editors know they will soon run out of business, and this decade is basically the last to get the clearance and digitize content more easily than it will be 20 years from now.

How to gain financial support? Fortunately, the institutions themselves have allotted funds. Michelle added, “Vendors know that because our consortia are working on digitizing Jewish press, they are willing to work with us in making things accessible.”

How to let people know about the project?

Answer: “We get invited to NYMA sessions.”

Networking at AJL conferences has been helpful, if not crucial. “That’s why we want to get in touch with you guys,” Michelle explained. There are smaller newspapers in need of digitization.

The search is vast; organizations, like the Center for Sephardic Studies in Seattle, are constantly solicited for content. “We are somewhat targeted, somewhat broad.”

Michelle placed on the screen a comprehensive list, created by Yossi Galron, of currently digitized Jewish periodicals on all platforms, and in Roman and Cyrillic scripts, as well as Hebrew and Arabic: <https://library.osu.edu/projects/hebrew-lexicon/Jewish-Press.htm>. In addition, she mentioned a list of repositories available by subscription through JSTOR or Proquest, but these must be searched individually.

It is hoped that this May 4 session has been equally helpful. Yasher koach to Rina, and to our speakers for “making” history.

Long Island Chapter

Wendy Marx and Arlene Ratzabi attended the national AJL conference this past summer. We look forward to sharing our experience with our membership when we meet in September. Come October, we’ll meet up for our annual lunch /dinner in the Sukkah at the home of our treasurer Ronni Zolin. As a program, we will discuss the Torah...

Speaking of which, Soferet Adeena Eisen (adeena Eisen@gmail.com) is a great person for a program for your library. She’ll teach our group how to be a *Torah* Scribe for two hours. Our sacred *Torah* is the ultimate book.

Once again this past spring, our LIAJL sponsored a Librarians *Shabbat* at President Wendy’s synagogue. The service brought in members who never attend any of our programs. One congregant even became a new member and made a donation to LIAJL. Whatever it takes to get AJL’s name out there is important to me as President. I refuse to let our Long Island chapter fold.

Shana Tova, Sweetness and good health and Shalom to all.

Wendy Marx

JLMNC

Judaica Library Network of Metropolitan Chicago had a productive and enjoyable 2021/22 year, including Zoom programming that attracted over 40 viewers for each program.

2021/22 RECAP: The Prtizker Military Museum and Library was presented online by Pritzker Oral History Librarian and JLNMC Past President Leah Cohen, with special attention to Jewish content; Jewish Books, Jewish Bookclubs: Best of the Best was an outstanding online look at recent wonderful Judaica fiction and non-fiction, and how to run groups to discuss them, presented by JLNMC members Rachel Kamin and Debbie Steinberg; and The Unique Tri-Faith Initiative and Its Synagogue Library looked at a unique endeavor in Omaha, Nebraska that hosts a synagogue, church, mosque, and interfaith building on one campus. The synagogue library’s creation and partnership with Tri-Faith was also explored. Additionally, our busy group added new members, updated our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/JLNChicago>, and hired GeistCreatives to design a new logo, create our flyers, and help with technology.

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