

NYMA NEWS

Newsletter of AJL-NYMA

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Buried Treasure Heroic Paper Brigade @ Reference Workshop By HALLIE CANTOR Acquisitions, Yeshiva University Photos by TOBY KRAUSZ

Thanks to a fearless ragtag group, the attempts to erase a civilization were thwarted.

NYMA was treated to "Vilna Discovery: Lost Jewish Documents," held Monday, January 8, at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, of the Center for Jewish History. **Dr. David Fishman** – Professor of Jewish History, Jewish Theological Seminary – discussed the discovery of over 170,000 pages of Jewish materials believed destroyed during the Holocaust, and the subject of his recently published *The Book Smugglers: Partisans Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* (ForeEdge, University Press of New England).

Luminous Future

Nicknamed "Jerusalem of the North," Vilna was in prewar times a scholarly and creative powerhouse of *yeshivoth*, cafes, theaters, literary groups, and communal organizations. Both the Strashun Library and the Yiddish Scientific Institute were notable for their rare literature and Jewish history collections.

In September 1939 this regional capital was overrun by the Soviet Union. When, in June 1941, Vilna was again overrun, this time by Nazi army, the fate of its 40,000 Jewish inhabitants – a third of the local population – was sealed.

(Cont'd on pg. 6)

Dear NYMA Members:

Looking back at this past year, we feel gratified to see all that NYMA has accomplished. At the events NYMA held, librarians had the opportunity to learn about a diverse range of topics -- topics ranging from Eastern European Jewish history to computer coding in school libraries. It was also wonderful for our community of librarians to have had the chance to meet and share ideas.

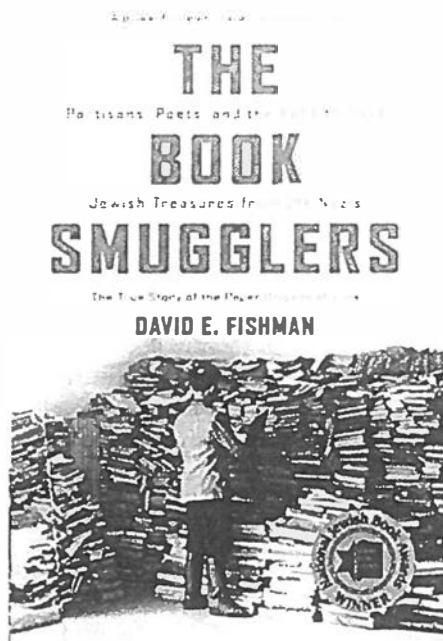
To recap, we held a Reference Workshop in January, where **Dr. David Fishman** discussed his research on the book smugglers of the Vilna Ghetto. At our Winter Conference in February, we heard from filmmaker **Frederick Wiseman**, who discussed his documentary on the New York Public Library; then from **Paul Glassman**, Director of Yeshiva University libraries, on trends in academic Librarianship; and finally from **Deborah Schranz**, Public Services Librarian, Jewish Theological Seminary, on the connection between Jews and the comic book industry. At this year's Day School Workshop, we had the opportunity to participate in an exciting hands-on lesson on how to connect coding to school libraries.

We would like to express our thanks to all who participated by contributing to the successful outcome of these events. Thank you also to all who helped organize the events, in particular to **Toby Krausz, Deborah Schranz, Leslie Monchar, Bruchie Weinstein, and Noreen Wachs**. If anyone has ideas for future events or is interested in organizing them, please reach out to us. We would love to hear from you!

We look forward to another year of programming that, we hope, can fulfill NYMA's mission "to provide a forum for exchange of ideas and discussion of issues of common concern among academic and research librarians of Judaica and . . . to promote continuing education for librarians through workshops and lectures."

We look forward to seeing you during the upcoming year!

Brian Katz
Rina Krautwirth



(Reference Workshop, cont'd)

Immediately the Jews were herded into two small areas which in prewar times housed only 6,000 people. The SS and Lithuanian collaborators systematically rounded up the terrorized dwellers and brought them to the pits of nearby Ponary to be shot. In September 1943 the ghetto was liquidated, the remaining populace shipped to Treblinka, although some managed to escape or join the partisans.

Yet even under the most miserable of conditions, the Jews managed to retain their heritage. A ghetto library was established under the directorship of Herman Kruk (1897-1944), a highly regarded librarian in prewar Poland, and Jews continued to read, write, and create output.

During the looting of European treasures, leading Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg desired books and artifacts for his Institute for Study of the Jewish Question, located in Frankfurt, with which to create a reference base for this “vanished civilization.” With the help of Johannes Pohl, a fellow Nazi and “expert” on Jews, these items would be plundered from YIVO and other repositories and shipped to the Third Reich.

Forty Jewish scholars, librarians, and workers were assigned to help carry out this task. Headed

by Kruk, this “Paper Brigade” divided materials into those to be deported and those to be destroyed. Yiddish speakers like the great poet Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2000) were kept on hand as translators.

But the slave laborers had other ideas. Risking their lives, they stashed away key books and documents away from Nazi eyes. In the end they rescued thousands.

“Kruk was the original book smuggler,” Dr. Fishman explained. His book, based on diaries and memoirs, describes their clandestine work. Guided by Kruk, this band of courageous men stored items in hideouts such as a stone-floored cavern under the ghetto. This was not merely an act of resistance but, as poet and fellow laborer Shmerke Kaczerginski (1908-1954) wrote, a statement of a “luminous future.”

When Vilna was recaptured by the Soviet army in July 1944, surviving members of the Paper Brigade, wondering what had become of their buried treasure, returned to the ghetto areas. To their amazement, they found some of the hiding places intact.

Kaczerginski attempted to retrieve these items and open a Jewish museum in postwar Vilna, but it was closed in 1949 by Stalin, along with anything hinting at ethnic or religious loyalties. (The poet did manage to spirit some items away to New York.)

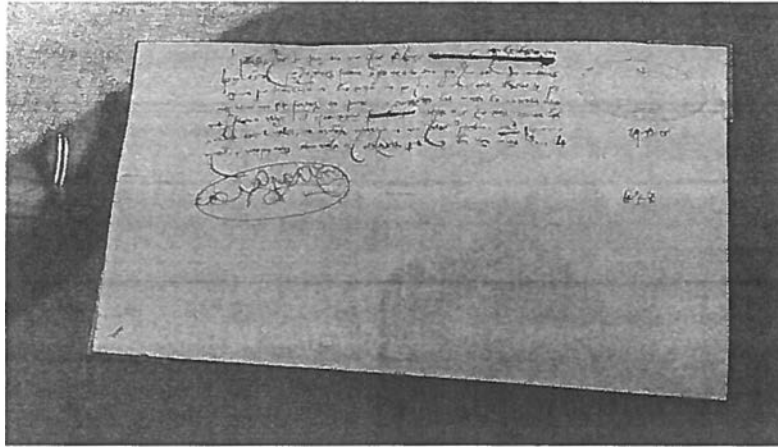
However, help came from a Lithuanian librarian, Antanas Ulpis. While assembling remnants of the national library in a former church, St. George, he sequestered Jewish materials in the basement, away from Stalin’s enforcers.

He has the thanks of the entire Jewish nation.

In Loving Memory

Much of the collection had already been found back in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. But in 2016 another cache was retrieved while clearing out the church basement.

Dr. Fishman traveled to Vilna in July 2017 at YIVO’s behest to evaluate the cache, partly because none of the assigned archivists could read Yiddish or Hebrew. Although Lithuania has chosen to retain all the documents in the library’s Judaica center as part of her national heritage.



Letter written by Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem, June 29, 1910, from a health spa in Badenweiler, Germany.

YIVO has been allowed to digitize them for its own public display.

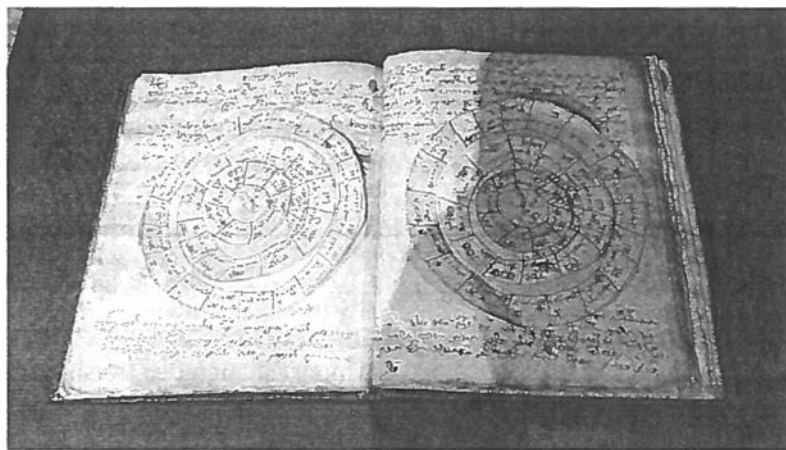
Dr. Fishman gave a slideshow glimpse at some of these items of which he had been involved in recovery and preservation. "It was a race to find anything falling apart," he said. Among the new collection were two letters by Yiddish storyteller Sholem Aleichem and a postcard written by modernist painter Marc Chagall.

After the lecture, NYMA attendees were treated to a larger display, located at YIVO's Rare Book Room, which included items found both recently and earlier. These ranged from rabbinic to secular – e.g. 18th century manuscript on astronomy, 1882 diary of Theodore Herzl.

Theater photos, memorial prayers of the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-49 – even fragments of archives from the original YIVO – all offer insights into everyday life in an Eastern Europe not very long ago.

These artifacts carry not only echoes from the past but messages on the triumph and continuity of Jewish life. A big thank you to workshop organizers **Toby Krausz** and **Deborah Schranz**, and to Dr. Fishman, for the countless hours spent on this major discovery and his new book.

But the biggest thank-you goes to those who ultimately made this book and discovery possible: the heroes and martyrs of the Paper Brigade. ■



Manuscript of Astronomy, 1751, by Issachar bar Carmoly (also known as Behr Lehrmann), Rabbi of Soultz, Alsace, Northeastern France. Carmoly was head of the yeshiva in Jungholtz.