

NYMA News

Newsletter of the Association of Jewish Libraries,
New York Metropolitan Area Chapter

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(R)Evolution

**Conference Fuses
Past, Present, Future**
By **HALLIE CANTOR**,
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Photos courtesy of
JSTOR, NYPL & YIVO

NYMA kicked off the 2019 year with “Reference Innovation in Digital Archiving and Resource Accessibility” – held Tuesday, March 26, at Stern College for Women.

Its theme? “New technology, and how it impacts on librarianship,” as NYMA co-president **Rina Krautwirth** described our annual Conference. The breathtaking advances in electronic databases shows just how far we’ve come in preserving, collating, and curating collections.

“J” as in Judaica

In “The Evolution of Digital Content and Accessibility: Behind the Scenes at JSTOR and ARTstor,” **Jordan Sears-Zeve** – Institutional Development Manager for Secondary Schools, JSTOR and ARTstor – narrated the transformation behind one of academia’s most popular electronic databases.

JSTOR – described on its webpage as “a digital library for scholars, researchers, and students” – began as a project of the Mellon Foundation, which was “committed to the well-being of diverse and demo-

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To Our Members:

We look forward to another fulfilling year of AJL-NYMA and are excited to look back at this past year as well. Although our events spanned a diverse range of topics, one underlying theme ran throughout: the impact of new technology on libraries and librarianship. Part of our mission as librarians involves the innovations that will enhance our work and benefit our patrons.

In February, we hosted our Reference Workshop, organized by **Deborah Schranz** and **J.D. Arden**, at the Center for Jewish History. We heard from attorney **Carole Basri** on her work with the artifacts of the Jews of Iraq and the documentary that she created on this topic. Additionally, we heard from **Akiva Weisinger**, founder and moderator of “G-d Save Us from Your Opinion,” his Facebook group of about 20,000 members.

In March, our Spring Conference at Stern College focused on digitization and its relevance to librarianship. We heard from **Jordan Sears-Zeve** of JSTOR about its vast online holdings, **Amanda Seigel** of the New York Public Library about their *Yizkor* books, and **Eléonore Biezunski** of YIVO about the Ruth Rubin Legacy exhibit.

In May, the school library workshop, organized by **Leslie Monchar** and **Bruchie Weinstein**, took place at the new Yeshiva of Flatbush High School library. Speakers **Rachail Kurtz** and **Rabbi Joseph Beyda** – both of YOF High School – discussed the library’s extensive renovations and provided a guided tour afterwards.

More than informative events, NYMA affords us all the opportunity to make connections, compare notes, and work on professional development. We would like to thank all who helped to make last year’s programming happen. If you are interested in helping to organize an event, please feel free to contact us at the email addresses below. We would love to have your input!

We look forward to seeing you again (or for the first time!) at our future events.

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cratic societies.” A pilot program was launched in 1994 to determine the site’s usefulness and functionality.

The mission? To strengthen and promote different contributions to humanities. From an initial few hundred titles, JSTOR now boasts over 2,600, shared by 11,000 institutions.

How has content changed? Nowadays it is far more interactive. JSTOR works with advisory boards, adding content based on user suggestions. Quality of a journal depends on whether it is peer-reviewed and how frequently its articles are cited. Journals should have a broad appeal, embracing multiple disciplines.

How are primary sources selected?

“Basically,” replied Jordan, “what is unavailable or difficult to access elsewhere or in danger of being lost.” Examples are 19th century British pamphlets or anti-apartheid materials published in South Africa.

The “sister” website, ARTstor, is a digital library of images, photos, and collections. Contributions are based on what can be shared.

As over time things must change, so too must websites remain open to improvements. For this JSTOR/ARTstor relies on user experience to add topics, pages, or suggestions. The goal is to help researchers figure out what they’re looking for.

JSTOR Labs, created in 2014, has developed tools to integrate and manipulate content. Another innovation, Text Analyzer, lives up to its name -- reviews information from within the text, analyzes contents, and comes up with keywords.

So where does Judaica fit in?

JSTOR has cyber-space devoted to Hebrew Studies, and a Hebrew Journal pilot program. A grant has been made available for the digitization of further content. A user survey – which to date has garnered 504 responses – also helps JSTOR

increase accessibility to materials.

Overall the database has expanded, apparently heading toward greater openness. In the future, Jordan described a platform where “participants can view curated content, upload their own academic content, and develop scholarly discourse.”

Past & Future Roles

In “Yizkor Books: A Digital Journal,” **Amanda Seigel** – Librarian, Dorot Jewish Division of New York Public Library – described this major NYPL collection and its major online change.

Yizkor books, created in memory of towns or communities destroyed during the Holocaust, paid homage to the daily lives and institutions of their citizens, with focus on the interwar period. Publication peaked in the 1950s and 1960s.



PINSK MEMORIAL – one of 100s at NYPL.

NYPL’s collection includes around 700 Yizkor books, of which 85% are digitized. Print copies, reproductions of the originals, are available at the reference desk.

Why are Yizkor books so useful? For general or genealogical research, location of relatives, Holocaust exhibitions, folklore or history of rabbinic figures. They are often needed by social workers helping clients apply for German reparations, as the Claims Conference requires proof of birthplace. Sadly, many of these books are the sole documentation of those areas.

“I get inquiries from around the world,” Amanda said. They come daily and weekly, over 4,000 alone in early 2019. In fact, the Yizkor Books are the most widely accessed among NYPL’s collections and databases.



RENAISSANCE WOMAN – mementoes of Ruth Rubin Legacy

Besides official locator of materials, what are some of Amanda's other duties?

- Advocate.
- Organizational Representative.
- Copyright maker.
- Data manager.
- Web designer.
- Bibliographic instructor.
- Translator.
- Subject/language specialist.

Amanda discussed all her roles and challenges – e.g. research on a place because of lack of standardized format. Names of towns or regions may have multiple spellings or may have changed along with political borders.

Languages? "It's complicated." Many researchers are unable to read Hebrew or Yiddish, the primary languages of the Yizkor books. JewishGen, however, publishes translations.

Credit for the digitization project goes to **Faith Jones** (now living in Canada). It began over 15 years ago, with the intent of simply getting the Yizkor books online. NYPL partnered with the Yiddish Book Center to scan collections. Yad Vashem helped in gaining access to the books.

For proprietary design of the site, outside help was contracted. The technology was advanced for its time, with the ability to view and download pages. "This was before smartphones, wi-fi," Amanda explained.

During phase two – or what she called "the awkward stage" -- Amanda fielded multiple complaints over the site. Because it was created by outsiders, she could neither edit code nor even ask for help. In 2012 the site was redesigned; after a contract was renegotiated, in 2015, with the Yiddish Book Center, it was reformatted for the digital collection platform.

Thus began phase three: metadata and catalog editing, reformatting data for libguides, indexing with alternate spellings available. The site now has bibliographies and recommended reading lists, as well as links to other reference materials – and the Yiddish Book Center. "There is also a Genealogy Indexer," Amanda added.

So what are future plans? "We hope to expand collections through additional permission, reformatting, and outreach," Amanda answered. New libguides are in the works, as well as alphabetical searches. Ultimately, Amanda said, the Yizkor books should be "Google-able."

The collection is available at Dorot Jewish Division, Room 111, of the main branch of New York Public Library. It is also available online through nypl.org, by typing *Yizkor* into Search.

Multi-Layered

In "Out of the Box and Onto the Web: The Ruth Rubin Legacy Online Exhibition," **Eléonore Biezunski** – Associate Sound Archivist, YIVO Institute for Jewish
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Research – described an amazing Renaissance woman and a project involving many layers of technology.

Ruth Rubin (1906-2000) – renowned Yiddish folksinger and folklorist – spent a lifetime dedicated to her work. Her passion ended up in some 33,000 items – commercial recordings, 78rpm acetate discs, LPs – along with personal materials. A prolific writer, she amassed countless conference papers, manuscripts, and a dissertation of Jewish women's folksongs. Schlepping the heavy recording equipment of her day, she interviewed Yiddish-speaking groups and individuals; in addition, she gave numerous radio shows, lectures, and concerts. There is even a documentary about her; in one scene she is at a senior citizens home, asking residents if they remembered songs sung in their shtetls.

Boxes of mementos were donated to YIVO. A good part of the labor involved sorting through everything and simply figuring out what was in there. In-house editing of tapes – reel-to-reel, cassettes, 8-tracks – involved splicing, regluing. Painstaking care had to go into

reassembling, let alone curating and displaying, the huge amount of material.

The most recent software for this project was 10 years old. Catalogs, many of which were typewritten, were partially preserved in analog; others were computerized, along with 20 years of song or folklore programs. Metadata – name of song, place of recording – was meticulously entered.

Like Amanda, Eléonore donned quite a few hats: curator, content manager, and liaison, who had to coordinate between the archivists and designers. Also publicist: in addition to some 3000 titles of field recordings were those of Ruth herself. Née Rifke Rosenblat, she had become a singing sensation in her own right, and her mellifluous voice poured through some of the speakers as Eléonore displayed samples of an ongoing project. The Ruth Rubin Legacy digital exhibit can be found on exhibitions.yivo.org/RuthRubin.

Yasher koach, Rina Krautwirth, for a highly educational afternoon. The biggest kudos go to three wonderful speakers, testaments to a wide range of knowledge and often backbreaking work. ■

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