FRANKELY SPEAKING

April 2013

Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies

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“Pesha and Banno.” Photo courtesy of Eric Bermann. It is taken from the exhibit “Pesha’s Journey: From Rabbi’s Daughter to Feminist Radical,” showing through May 31 at 202 South Thayer Street, Common Room.
From the Director: Living History

Deborah Dash Moore is the Director of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies and the Frederick G.L. Huetwell Professor of History.

Reaching the postwar era in my course, History of American Jews, I come to a moment when potentially some of my own experiences become relevant to the subject matter. Then I face a dilemma: just how relevant and pedagogically useful are my memories? Should they enter self-consciously into my lectures and our discussions? Long ago I adopted a policy of never teaching my own books to undergraduates. I wanted to avoid any conflict of interest if students were purchasing books. I also anticipated that students would feel uncomfortable criticizing their professor’s work. In addition, I recognized that students heard my interpretations in class and they didn’t necessarily need to read them.

But memories fall into a different category. I regularly ask students to read memoirs written by Jewish immigrants. They watch documentaries that include interviews of participants in living history. I encourage them to consider their own subject positions relative to the participation of Brandeis University students in the civil rights movement, and the faculty-student colloquium given in February by Professor Miyuki Kita from the University of Rochester. In her presentation she discussed an intensive campaign joined admissions and its students' civil rights activism. In her War II committed to non-discriminatory policies in a non-sectarian Jewish-sponsored university after World War II

Connections between the establishment of this secular, undergraduate university and its students' civil rights activism (among other things) are clearly intertwined questions. Would they cross picket lines under any circumstances? Picketing regularly occurred on Saturday. As Jews (and they are asked to assume Jewish identities for this exercise), would they walk a picket line on the Sabbath? Or would they just watch? Once they have chosen sides, I invite them to offer Jewish, ethical arguments for their position based on what they have read. (Theoretically they know from their assigned reading arguments Jews marshaled on different sides of the integration struggle.)

It is always a fascinating class and produces thoughtful, engaged participation. Relatively few of my students choose to picket. The majority prefers to be onlookers. But a vocal number decide to cross the picket line and purchase items in the store, thus violating both union solidarity and Sabbath prohibitions.

What I don’t tell the students, however, is that my idea for the class exercise comes from my own experiences. I participated briefly in picketing Woolworth’s. Now, after hearing Professor Kita’s presentation, I wonder whether I should tell them. What would my experience as an informant add to or detract from the class? I don’t have an answer to this dilemma of living history.

The State of Jewish Studies in Poland: A Conversation with Marcin Wodzinski

Marcin Wodzinski is a Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Centre for the Culture and Languages of the Jews at the University of Wroclaw. His special fields of interests are nineteenth-century Jewish social history, the regional history of Jews in Silesia, and Jewish sepulchral art. He has edited several of his books focusing on intellectual and religious trends, such as Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict (2005), published by the Littman Library, and Hasidim in the Kingdom of Poland, 1815–1867: Historical Sources in the Polish State Archives (2011). He has co-edited Jews in Silesia (2001); a special triple issue of Jewish History entitled Towards a New History of Hasidism (2013); Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry (Volume 27); and Jews in the Kingdom of Poland, 1815–1914 (forthcoming). He is vice president of the Polish Association of Jewish Studies and editor in chief of its periodical, Studia Judaica. In 2011, he received the Jan Kar ski and Pola Nirenska Prize, given by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

On April 3, he visited The Frankel Center and spoke on “Hasidism and Politics.” This lecture analysed the relationship between the state and the Hasidic movement from its inception in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century, but focused on the critical development of the Hasidic involvement in politics in the 19th century. The central thesis of the lecture was the unusually modern character of Hasidic political activity and the role of politics in the distinctive path of Hasidic development into “anti-modernist modernity.”

FS: Can you talk a bit about Jewish studies in Poland?

To put it briefly, Jewish studies in Poland are flourishing beyond any expectations. Thirty years ago, there was only one semi-academic, and isolated, institution dealing with Jewish studies in Poland, no publications, no scholars, no public. Now, we have six universities teaching BA or MA programs in Jewish studies, hundreds of students enrolling in our courses each year, six scholarly periodicals, and some 100 books a year. Each year the national bibliography records between 1500 and 2000 publications—books and articles—dealing with Jewish subjects. Not all of them are, of course, academic. Still, it illustrates the size of public interest. It is important to stress that there is...
increase in quality, too. A growing number of scholars in, or from Poland publish important studies. Some people foretell the Poles will be the next wave, after Germans, to flood positions in Jewish studies in European universities. And maybe, one day, in North America, too. Beware, Ann Arbor!

FS: What can you say about Jewish studies in Poland?

The roots of Jewish studies in Poland reach far back to amateur Hasidic historiography in the early 19th century. But academic studies began only in late 19th century, with Galician Jewish graduates of Austrian universities turning to Jewish scholarship. Moses Schorr, Majer Balaban and Ignacy Schipper come to mind as innovators.

The central Jewish Historical Institute, with a much wider scholarly agenda. Jewish studies did not develop, however, in communist times. Some 250,000 Holocaust survivors left Poland, and the remainder were expelled in 1968. After 1968, state censorship did not allow many publications on Jewish studies, one notable exception being a study proving Zionism to be the imperialist and racist agenda.

It was only in the late 1970s that independent samizdat publications brought Jewish issues back to the Polish public consciousness and, soon, to the academy, too. Many people like myself started with documenting Jewish landmarks in nearby neighborhoods, discovering the Polish-Jewish past, literature or culture that once flourished here and is no more. This was certainly amateurish, but gave great impetus to more structured, academic endeavors. In the mid-1980s, the very first Department of Jewish Studies was established in a Polish university. Since then, the development of Jewish studies in Poland has been just amazing.

FS: How did you become involved in Jewish Studies?

In the mid-1980s, I was studying Polish literature and found it not exactly to my liking, especially that Polish literary studies at the time were still dominated, horrible dictu, by structuralism. For some time, I was searching for something else, including esoteric literatures and anthropology, but did not consider Jewish studies. As some point I happened to meet Professor Jerzy Woronczak, one of the great scholars of the time who became my mentor. He was so much smarter than me, and I don’t really know when he urged me to study Jewish literature and culture. Then, you can say my involvement in Jewish studies is a product of disappointment, chance, and of the encounter with an interesting person.

Immediately after the war, the Central Jewish Historical Commission was established, whose goal was mainly to document Holocaust crimes. In 1947, this was transformed into the Jewish Historical Institute, with a much wider scholarly agenda. Jewish studies did not develop, however, in communist times. Some 250,000 Holocaust survivors left Poland, and the remainder were expelled in 1968. After 1968, state censorship did not allow many publications on Jewish studies, one notable exception being a study proving Zionism to be the imperialist and racist agenda.

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The great boom in Jewish studies came in interwar Poland, exemplified first and foremost by the VIVO (Yidishe Vishnhfelkher Institut) established in 1925 in Wilno (then Poland). Professor Majer Balaban established at the same time the first MA seminar in Jewish history at Warsaw University. This was annihilated with the Holocaust, but even at the time of the Second World War and the Holocaust, there were some scholarly activities. Emanuel Ringelblum documented life under Nazi occupation. Ignacy Schipper penned his history of Hasidism in Poland, miraculously survived and published only in 1992. (This is a very important and almost totally forgotten study.)

When asked the question, “Why study Yiddish?,” a very Yiddish answer might be, “Why not?” Study of Yiddish may stem from a personal connection to the language, its cultural heritage, its role as a window to Eastern European Jewish history and its connection to the Jewish American immigrant experience. Yiddish played and continues to play an important role within the modern Jewish experience.

Learning the language enables students to engage with the study of historical, literary and religious texts, as well as politics, folklore, anthropology, and other contemporary aspects of the culture, such as film and media.

Students of Yiddish can progress to a high level of fluency at the University of Michigan. Texts include Yiddish children’s literature, folklore, literary and historical texts, films, and music. Yiddish is examined within a broader context within the history, sociology, politics, and culture it produced.

The Yiddish program at Michigan has been built from scratch by a dedicated faculty and committed donors. Below, these faculty and students, too, talk a bit about Yiddish @ Umich.

Alexandra Hoffman, full-time lecturer, Yiddish

“Studying, working, and living in Ann Arbor for the past eight years, I have grown attached to the active and growing Yiddishist community at and around the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. The first time I taught Yiddish was in the Fall of 2009, and I received particular pleasure from my growing interaction with the students seeking to study Yiddish. The students in my classes have been – almost without exception – earnest, enthusiastic, independent, ambitious, amiable. I delight in learning with them and from them, as we share an appreciation of what we know of the Yiddish language and sustain each other’s curiosity to learn more.

“My only complaint, really, is that there aren’t more students. In the winter of 2010, we designed a new flyer advertising the Yiddish language course, and hung it around campus and the larger community. David Schlitt created a “Yiddish@umich” logo that we used on t-shirts that we distributed to students, staff, faculty, friends, and Frankel Institute fellows. This year, in order to create an opportunity for students of all levels to get to know each other and to promote Yiddish to the larger university community, we had a session of do-it-yourself stencil and free-hand t-shirt design; there will be another session on the last day of school, April 23rd. Learning through collaborative creativity has been a passion of mine since my involvement with Imagine Community, a grassroots organization promoting solidarity among homeless and homed people through skill-sharing, creativity and care. With the same goal of strengthening and expanding the community of Yiddish students and enthusiasts, I organized a short film series of old and new Yiddish films. I screened Yidl mitn Fidl in February, a medley of Yiddish shorts in March, and the new Yiddish film Romeo and Juliette in Yiddish was screened on April 9th.”

Anita Norich, Professor of English and Judaic Studies

FS: What is the role/use of Yiddish in your research and teaching?

“All-encompassing! I teach a range of Jewish literature...
courses as well as courses the English Department that are not about Jewish literature, but in all cases I try to incorporate some Yiddish in translation. My scholarly work is entirely concerned with modern Yiddish literature."

FS: What do you think differentiates U-M from other schools in its Yiddish curriculum?

“It has a full three years. Mostly, it has a wide range of faculty from different disciplines and departments who rely on Yiddish materials: English, Comp Lit, German, NES, PoliSci, History. It’s impossible to imagine a Jewish Studies curriculum at UM that doesn’t include some aspect of Yiddish alongside, of course, Hebrew.”

FS: To what do you attribute the surge in popularity of Yiddish?

“Good teaching!”

“Also: Yiddish is often seen as a source of ethnic identification that is neither religious nor Zionist. It may well be that for a number of our Jewish students, but it is also being studied by those who are not seeking that kind of identification or by those who are not Jewish. These students may come to study the language because they have become excited about literature they read in English translation, or because they are interested in some aspect of popular culture (such as film or klezmer music). Many—especially, but not only our graduate students—recognize that there are many subjects of interest to them that they simply cannot study without Yiddish. Some examples of reasons some of our recent students have learned Yiddish: to study American immigration; to compare Yiddish and Hebrew or Yiddish and German or Yiddish and English literatures; to study Eastern European Jewish history; to understand contemporary ethnicity. And because it’s a pleasure to learn a language that strongly connects to Hebrew literature, as well as the fact that most early Hebrew modern writers were bilingual, to some extent, Yiddish being their writing language as well.”

Oriam Zakai, post-doctoral fellow at the Frankel Institute

“I study Hebrew Literature and am currently working on a book about Hebrew Women’s writing from the pre-state period. Yiddish is important to my research because it was one of the native tongues of many of the writers I work on.

“Yiddish studies at the U of M consist of a really exciting mix of language with the study of Yiddish literature, culture, and history. The fact that the teacher, Sasha [Alexandra Hoffman] is a scholar of Yiddish literature really makes a difference. She succeeds in making the class fun and challenging, and in expanding students’ perspective beyond the nostalgic dimension of learning Yiddish.

“I believe the recent surge in the popularity of Yiddish has something to do the identity crisis of American Jewry in recent years. It seems to be part of the effort of certain parts of this community to better understand, and perhaps underscore, its difference from other white Americans.”

Zvi Gitelman, Professor of Political Science and Preston R. Tisch Professor of Judaic Studies

“I have been using Yiddish in my research since writing a term paper as a junior in college (1960). My first book (1972) was based largely on Yiddish sources and my current research on the Holocaust in the USSR uses Yiddish newspapers, memoirs, diaries and anthologies. Our curriculum is a solid combination of language and literature and gives graduate students some ability to work with Yiddish sources and undergraduates an appreciation of Yiddish culture and literature. Unfortunately, we have not done enough to place our Yiddish curriculum on a firm financial footing.”

Yaakov Herskovitz, first-year Ph.d. student, Near Eastern Studies and Judaic studies

“I am a student of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. During my M.A. studies, I took Yiddish as a research language and fell in love. I was drawn to its strong connection to Hebrew literature, as well as the fact that most early Hebrew modern writers were bilingual, to some extent, Yiddish being their writing language as well.”

Mikhail Krutikov, associate professor, Judaic Studies and Slavic Studies

“Yiddish literature is my primary research subject. I am primarily interested in its transnational and transcultural dimensions, the way Yiddish writers in various parts of the world represented their past and present, the ways of interaction between different parts of the Yiddish-speaking world, especially the Soviet Union, Poland and America. I always incorporate Yiddish literary texts in my courses, some of which are focused on Yiddish—such as the first-year seminar Yiddish Love Stories; others include Yiddish sources along with texts in other languages—Contact and Conflict: Jewish Experience in Eastern Europe or The Shtetl: Image and Reality.”

FS: What do you think differentiates U-M from other schools in its Yiddish curriculum?

“The number of faculty and diversity of their interests: We have the largest number of Yiddish-speaking faculty of all American universities, and Yiddish is incorporated in courses in various fields and disciplines: English, Slavic Studies, Hebrew, Comparative Literature, German, Political Science, American Culture.

“There is a combination of factors [that have brought on a renewed interest in Yiddish]: ethnic revival, search for roots and authenticity, klezmer, and the political and ideological “neutrality” of Yiddish—it creates a common ground for people with different political views, religious affiliation, forms of Jewish identity, as well as non-Jews. Yiddish is cool, ‘organic,’ homey, warm, unpretentious, open for all kinds of interpretation, and completely harmless.”

Avery Robinson, first-year master’s student, MA in Judaic studies, researching Jewish American culinary history

“I’ve wanted to learn Yiddish for quite some time: In addition to using a bisele Yiddish in my daily speech, I’m interested in knowing Yiddish so I can sing more songs, use more cookbooks, and read more stories. An emphasis on Yiddish culture for learning the language through songs, history, jokes, parables, and curses are the foundation for this colorful class. To me, the revival of Jewish culture sees Yiddish as a tool to create a distinctly Jewish setting that recalls the Ashkenazi heritage for building contemporary identities and connections.”

Students from Alexandra Hoffman’s Yiddish class custom-design t-shirts.
Two Prominent Israeli Scholars to Visit the Frankel Center in Fall 2013

During Fall 2013, the Frankel Center will welcome two prominent Israeli scholars: Galit Hasan-Rokem and Moshe Ma’oz. Galit Hasan-Rokem is the Max and Margarethe Grunwald Professor of Folklore & Narrative at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and has been appointed the Louis and Helen Padnos Visiting Professor of Judaic Studies for the Fall term 2013. Professor Hasan-Rokem is a distinguished scholar of Jewish ethnology and folklore, with an international reputation. Her scholarship includes Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity (2003), an influential study of rabbinic texts that moves beyond traditional analyses into the realm of gender and literary study. She has led several research groups in rabbinic and midrashic folklore, and the exegetical imagination. Out of these research seminars have come varied volumes that explore some of these themes. Professor Hasan-Rokem has co-edited A Companion to Folklore (2012), Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature (2000), The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poetry (1999), and Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes (1996) among other noteworthy books. In her scholarship, Professor Hasan-Rokem bridges the divide that often exists between scholars of late antique Judaism and those of contemporary Jewish life.

Moshe Ma’oz is professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he has specialized on Syria, Palestine, and Arab-Israel relations. In addition, he has also held scholarly positions at prominent American and British research centers, including the Middle East Institute, Harvard University; the Brookings Institution, and the Wilson Center. Ma’oz twice served as director of the Harry S. Truman Institute for Advancement of Peace at Hebrew University. He is also prominent in Israeli politics where he served as an adviser to Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, Defense Minister Ezer Weizman, and on the Knesset Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense.

Professor Ma’oz has also authored several books—Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography; Palestinian Leadership on the West Bank; The PLO and Israel; Syria and Israel; Palestinian Leadership on the West Bank; The PLO and Israel; Palestine During the Ottoman Period; Palestinian Arab Politics; Middle East Minorities; and Arab-Israel Relations; and Religious and Ethnic Minorities and Communications in the Middle East.”

Visit www.lsa.umich.edu/judaic for details.
Deborah Dash Moore Wins National Jewish Book Award

City of Promises: A History of Jews in New York edited by U-M Professor of History Deborah Dash Moore has won the Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year Award. Given each year by the National Jewish Book Council, the Everett award recognizes the best book of Jewish non-fiction.

“City of Promises is an unparalleled and essential study of one of the most significant Jewish communities in the modern world—and the largest in Jewish history,” attested the award committee.

Deborah Dash Moore served as general editor for the three-volume set. Each volume includes a visual general editor for the three-volume set. Each volume includes a visual.

In 1865. In New Amsterdam in 1654 up Linden, an unusual feature in essay by art historian Diana L. set. Each volume includes a visual...
SAVE THE DATE
April 16, 2013, 4 pm

“Black Harlem and the Lower East Side: Narrative Out of Time”
Catherine Rottenberg
202 South Thayer Street, Room 2022
Ann Arbor

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