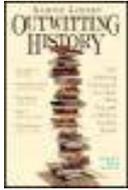


Librarian's Lobby
By Daniel D. Stuhlman
Yiddish Books part 1
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A few weeks ago I was browsing the new book collection of a local public library and saw a cover illustration with a pile of books. The title seemed to be an oxymoron, “outwitting history.” If history is what has happened, how can one change history. I picked up the book and saw the full title and subtitle, *Outwitting history : the amazing adventures of a man who rescued a million Yiddish books*, by Aaron Lansky.¹ I felt compelled to read this book about books. When Lansky was a 23 year old graduate student, he stumbled on the alarming situation that throughout North American, books that had survived the Holocaust and Stalin were being thrown away into the trash by people who couldn't read Yiddish. When Lansky started out experts told him that fewer than 70,000 Yiddish volumes existed. That meant actual items, not titles. In his first six months he collected more than that amount. The National Yiddish Book Center, which he founded, has collected about 1.5 million books to date (according to their web site <http://yiddishbookcenter.org>). They have scanned and made available for instant reprinting more than 14,000 titles.

This book is inspiring on many levels. First a young, almost naïve graduate student, confronted the Jewish organizational establishment for both monetary and moral support. Very few were willing to help him. Very few of these organizations understood the nature of cultural transmission. They had no idea of the role of librarians and libraries in the saving and transmitting literary culture. He was given some very valuable advice from one of his teachers to keep his headquarters of the New York City Metropolitan area to prevent territorial or ideological struggles. That advice helped him success where no one else could. The second level is that he learned enough about Yiddish and Jewish culture to realize what makes a book important. The book is a first hand report of his struggles and successes. He fought the establishment, time, the weather, lack of funds, and more to create an organization with a permanent home now located on the campus of Hampshire College in Amherst, MA. (3.5 hours from New York City; 2 hours from Boston)

Yiddish Language in Jewish Life

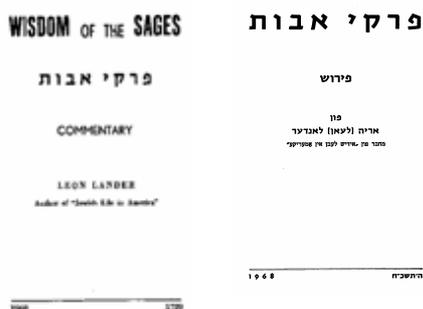
Yiddish as a language was called, *mama-loshan* as Leo Rosten says in *The Joys of Yiddish*, “For my mother, who taught me *mama-loshan...*”². *Mama-loshan* literary means, mother tongue, but the connotation is that it is the language taught by the mother. Since the language and literature was associated with women and everyday type affairs, it was not given the respect of Hebrew. Hebrew, German, French or English was used for the more scholarly material.

¹ Full citation: Lansky, Aaron, *Outwitting history : the amazing adventures of a man who rescued a million Yiddish books*. (Chapel Hill, NC : Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, c2004.) This article is not meant to be a review of the book. It gathered many fine reviews and the author was interviewed in the press and National Public Radio. The book is a great story and I enjoy repeating some of the sagas that he records. Every book has a story and it is a *yerusha* (inheritance) to pass on to the next owner.

² Rosten, Leo. *The joys of Yiddish* (New York : Pocket Books, 1970, c1968.)

Yiddish was not the only Judeo vernacular used by Jews. Originally Aramaic, linguistically related to Hebrew, was the language of the people of the Middle East. It became the language of everyday life and the Talmud. Even prayers were written in Aramaic. Other Judeo languages that existed include: Judeo-Latin, Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Tartar, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, and Judeo-Ibero-romance. This is not the place to give a history of these languages. Briefly a “Judeo” language was used by the Jews in a region. It used the Hebrew alphabet for writing, while taking almost all the non-religious vocabulary from the vernacular of the people around them. Since none of these Judeo languages captured the soul and spirit of the Jewish people as did Yiddish their literatures are very limited. Scholars differ as to when the German vernacular of the Jews became a distinct dialect. Yiddish is not even the only “dialect” of German. Rotwelsch, a language built on a strong substratum of German, also contains numerous influences from other languages such as Romany languages and Judeo-Latin. Some scholars say that up to the 16th century there was little difference in the German vernacular and the language spoken by the Jewish of Germany. A fuller story of the history of Yiddish may be found in one of these sources: Waxman, Meyer. *A history of Jewish literature*. New York : Bloch Publishing Co., 1933, Vol. 2 p. 613-665; Weinreich, Max. “History of the Yiddish language : the problems and implications.” In *Proceedings of the American Philosophical* 104:4, August 15, 1959, p. 563-570. Hutton, Christopher. *Society & the Third Reich : Mother-Tongue Fascism, Race, & the Science of Language* Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1998. Starting on page 214.

Since language slowly develops, the exact starting date of Yiddish is not clear. Until the late 19th century, the name of the language was either Judeo-German, *Ivri-Tetsch*, *Jüdischdeutsche*, or Mama-loshen. “Yiddish” is also the word for “Jewish.” Many English speakers would sometimes call the language is “Jewish.”³ Since we don’t have recordings of language from the early periods we have to rely on written documents. The earliest Yiddish text is a poem written (or copied) in 1382 in Egypt. Because of its refinement it was probably composed many years earlier. This is not the first use of Yiddish. Since the history of Yiddish is so important to understanding the place of the Yiddish book in our literary world, part two will continue the story.



Here is an interesting example of a book that could be confusing to the bibliographer. The book has two title pages. The title of the book is פרקי אבות (Pirke avot) which is Hebrew. The book has the Hebrew text with a Yiddish translation in one part of the book and also Hebrew text with an English translation and commentary in the second part. I knew this author, but he died before I became a librarian

Daniel D. Stuhlman is president of **Stuhlman Management Consultants**, Chicago, IL, a firm helping organizations turn data and information into knowledge. We are looking for new clients and opportunities. Visit the web site at Stuhlman.biz to learn more about knowledge management and what our firm can do for you. Previous issues of **Librarian's Lobby** can be found at: <http://home.earthlink.net/~DDStuhlman/liblob.htm>. E-mail him : ddstuhlman@earthlink.net.

³ This usage confused me as a child. I thought, “How could one speak Jewish?” “Jewish” in my language meant the name of the people.