

American Jews and Popular Culture: Yiddish
A Cincinnati Museum Center and Online Exhibit

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Exhibit Panel Correlation: “Celebrating Artistic Freedom: Art and Entertainment”

Ohio Social Studies Standards Correlation:

People in Societies

Grade 10

Point 5

INTRODUCTION

American Jewish popular culture was largely influenced by the Jewish immigrants who came to America from Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1924. These immigrants tended to speak Yiddish as their daily language, and it is the language that influenced much of the press, theater, radio, literature and music in this country. As families settled in the United States they were faced with a new culture, a new language and a growing economy, all of which represented extreme new freedoms for the people arriving from Eastern Europe and the repressive government of Russia (Shandler, 196). This newfound freedom presented opportunities to debate, discuss and entertain the population while addressing political and moral issues confronting the new immigrants. Yiddish, while familiar and a reminder of Eastern Europe, also played a strong role modernizing the American Jewish population by presenting historical dramas and realistic social drama along with modern drama from new authors such as Henrik Ibsen and Maxim Gorky.

Yiddish is the language spoken by Ashkenazi Jews beginning in the Middle Ages. It is derived from Hebrew, Loetz, German and Slavic. Since its formation in C. 1000-1250, it has undergone constant development. It can be classified into Old Yiddish (1250-1500), Middle Yiddish (1500-1750) and Modern Yiddish (1750- the 20th century) (D. Cohn-Sherkov, Encyclopedia of Judaism).

During the 1920s, American-born children of Eastern European immigrants began to define more precisely what it meant to be American and Jewish. Quotas restricted the numbers of new immigrants, and while the American-born children could often understand Yiddish, they spoke English as their primary language. Yiddish radio became an alternative media that provided a common understanding for Jewish immigrants and their children. Since World War II it has become a language symbolic for “memorializing the victims of Nazism” (Shandler, 198) and a means of non-assimilation and recognition of Jewish ethnicity.

Today there are several national organizations that support and seek to preserve the language and literature of the culture. Sound Portraits is an organization that has preserved much of Yiddish radio, and it makes some of these programs available through its Yiddish Radio Project. The National Yiddish Book Center is rescuing books and inspiring readers through a variety of programs, including a Summer Internship Program for adults and a series of films, lectures and art at the center on Hampshire College in

Amherst, Massachusetts. In 1998 Steven Spielberg's Digital Yiddish Library was launched. It contains both literature and oral histories. The Folkbiene Yiddish Theater is a nonprofit organization to preserve, promote and develop Yiddish Theater demonstrating that there is still a strong interest and audience for Yiddish theater. These are just a few of the organizations that provide opportunities to learn more about the Yiddish language and culture.

PRE-EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Objective: Before visiting the exhibit the students will:

1. Learn that Yiddish is a language that is still used today.
2. Learn about the history of the language and culture.
3. Be able to speak and understand some common Yiddish words and phrases.

In order to begin to learn about the American Jewish experience there are several assignments that can be used as part of a pre-exhibit lesson plan.

Assignment:

Go to the websites furnished in the reading above and prepare a short paper about the history of Yiddish.

1. Link to Library of Congress Haven to Home Exhibit.
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ex-current.html>
2. Link to Yiddish Radio Project
<http://yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/ymis>
3. National Yiddish Book Center
<http://yiddishbookcenter.org>
4. MyJewishLearning.com History and Community E-letter
<http://www.myjewishlearning.com>

The newsletter from January 27, 2005, has several articles and media materials on the history of immigration to America in the 1800s, Yiddish theater, press, film, and a discussion of history and community. There is a special feature on Molly Picon, a popular star of Yiddish stage and screen.

5. Common Yiddish Words found in English
<http://www.bergen.org/AAS/Projects/Yiddish/English/comwor.html>

Assignment II:

Have students work in groups and write a skit using Yiddish common words. A list of Yiddish common words is available at the Bergen Organization webpage, www.bergen.org/AAST/Projects/Yiddish/English/comwor.html. Have each group perform the skit for the rest of the class.

Assignment III:

Have students go to the Yiddish Radio Project website and go to Commercials on Yiddish Radio. Watch the NPR documentary on Commercials on Yiddish Radio and view the photos available in the photo gallery.

Divide the class into groups of 4 and have them write their own commercial that would be similar to the ones produced in the 1930s and 1940s.

Discuss how these commercials provide a picture of what ordinary people spoke and lived. How did they sound? What were some common expressions? What did they eat, drink, wear, etc.?

EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on issues of the past and provide a way for students to become engaged in their own interpretation and debate these perspectives. Then help students develop knowledge, skills and analytical abilities by asking questions, thinking critically and making intelligent inferences and reasoned explanations of events and issues of the past (Library of Congress, primary sources).

Different primary sources are created for different reasons and different sources are included for different reasons. Some documents are public knowledge and appeal to large audiences. They may be books, maps, pamphlets posters government documents. Every document reflects a point of view and biases. Viewing the Yiddish documents in the exhibit will provide a way for students to learn more about the culture, language and the opinions of the people producing the items.

Objectives:

1. Identify places in history for the items being viewed based on topics.
2. Develop a fuller understanding of Jewish immigrants and what it means to be Jewish and American after examining the documents and studying the writing samples displayed.

Assignment:

There are at least *nine* artifacts in the Cincinnati Museum Center exhibit that are partially or completely in Yiddish. Can students identify the artifacts based on their pre-exhibit research? Have them answer the questions below:

1. How are these artifacts similar or different from what students might expect of documents today (e.g. music, marriage certificates, patriotic posters)?
2. Why would Yiddish be used in these artifacts?
3. What experiences can you share concerning your families of origin (yours or those of your friends), perhaps with artifacts you know in languages other than English?
4. How does viewing these documents challenge or support information and understanding you have of Jewish immigrants and their American Jewish children?

Artifacts can be found at the exhibit and/or at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/haven-century.html>.

Some suggested items to review online (some are duplicated at the exhibit):

1. Tefilah mi-kol ha-shanah: Minhah Ketanah
[Prayers of the Entire Year: Minor Offering].
Furth: Zurndorffer & Sommer, 1842.
Hebraic Section (40)
2. Leo Rosenberg (1879-1963) and M. Rubinstein
"Leben Zol Amerika
[Long Life America}
New York: A. Tores, n.d.
Sheet music Cover.
Hebraic Section (51)
3. Francis Maersch (d1776)
A Plan of the City of New York from the Actual Survey, anno Domini M{D} CCLV.
New York: G. Duyckink, 1755
Enlarged Version
Engraved map
Geography and Map Division (11)
4. Haym Salomon's [1740-1785] Ketubah
Jewish Marriage Certificate, July 6, 1777
Hand-colored document
Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society
New York and Newton Centre Massachusetts (23)
5. Food Will Win the War-You Came Here Seeking Freedom, Now You must Help Preserve It
New York: Rusling Wood, Litho., 1917
Color Lithograph poster
Prints and Photographs Division (43)

6. Moise S. Gadol (1874-1941)
Libro de Embzar, The Book to Learn How to Speak, Read and Write from Spanish-
Jewish Language in English and Yiddish.
New York: 1937
7. J.H. Donahey (1875-1949)
Cleveland, Many Peoples, One Language
Color Poster, 1917
Courtesy of the HUC Skirball Cultural Center Museum Collection, Los Angeles (77)
8. “Jewish Jazz – Moron Music – Becomes our National Music –the Story of Popular
Song Control in the United States
Dearborn Independent, August 6, 1921
General Collections (133)
9. Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)
“Yigdal: A Round for Jewish Voices.”
Holograph score
Leonard Bernstein Collection
Music Division (201B)
10. Jozef Kroger
Thalia Theatre
New York: Jozef Kroger, 1897.
Color offset lithographic poster.
Prints and Photographs Division (68)
11. David Pinski
A Tailor Become a Storekeeper
The Federal Theatre Presents “The Tailor Becomes a Storekeeper:” A Comedy by David
Pinski and Music
Chicago: Cross & Banta, between 1939 and 1941.
Offset Lithograph poster
Federal Theatre Project Collection
Music Division (90)
12. David Pinski
A Tailor Becomes a Storekeeper
Costume design, watercolor and pencil on paper
Federal Theatre Project Collection
Music Division (91)

POST-EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

The Yiddish Radio Project is a project that includes the transcription disks of Yiddish Radio shows from the 1930s and 1940s that were found by Henry Sapoznik. A musician and historian, Sapoznik collaborated with David Isay to create an ongoing documentary series celebrating the recording. The collection has grown to more than 500 hours of recordings on 1,000 disks. These recordings include interviews, news programs and music shows. They provide an important look at the language and the people during these years before and after World War II.

Other websites that contain history and special projects about Yiddish can be found on the following links.

Websites:

NPR – <http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2002/yiddish>

Students can research other resources such as WVED's classic Forward Hour, the Yiddish Voice based in Boston, Massachusetts, on Wednesdays and read about the Yiddish Language Project based at Columbia University in New York.

Yiddish Radio Project: <http://yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits>

Students can view the photos and history in the documentary and listen to the audio extras under the various sections.

Objectives:

1. Students can hear Yiddish spoken as it was in the 1930s-50s.
2. Students will gain not only an understanding of the language but the culture of the time.
3. Students will experience how people talked, what they talked about, what was important to them during this time.

Assignment I:

The Yiddish Radio Project has a number of activities that can be used after visiting the exhibit. Have students go to the Radio Dramas of Nahum Stutchkoff at <http://yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/stutchkoff> and Levine and His Flying Machine at <http://yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/levine>

Ask the class to listen to the documentaries, view the photos and view the readings. Have the class divide into groups and each group prepare a presentation about what they learned. What were topics of the dramas of the time? Why did Jewish Americans celebrate Levine? What are similar situations today involving groups celebrating someone they identify with as one of their own, e.g. sports figures, etc.?

Assignment II:

1. Use the Yiddish Typewriter to create a short document in Yiddish. The following material with a live site to create material can be found at the NPR website: <http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2002/yiddish>. Students can create their own documents at the web page.
2. Have students read and show others the documents they have created.

Assignment III:

Objectives:

1. Learn more about what it means to be a Jewish American
2. Learn more about the identities of members of your family and community.

Activity:

StoryCorps is a national project to instruct and inspire people to record each other's stories in sound. The project was set up to resemble the oral history project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s' by recording oral histories of everyday Americans across the country. (Information on how to be part of the project can be found at <http://storycorps.net/about>.)

1. Listen to live radio broadcasts of Jewish Americans. The following are suggestions. Go to Storycorps <http://storycorps.net/listen>. Select from the following excerpts.
 - a. Debbie Fisher tells her friend Terrence Hicks about her father, an Auschwitz survivor.
 - b. Yvonne Powell tells her son Gordon about the Jewish family that lived downstairs from her during World War II.
 - c. Myra Schegloff tells her daughter Naomi about going to the Cone Island "schvitz" baths with her grandmother
 - d. Nate Herschberg sings a Yiddish song for his nephew Marc
5. Ask students to share what they learned from the interviews they heard.