AARON LANSKY

by NANCY WOLFSON-MOCHE

Talk about a blizzard. Fat flecks of snow swirled outside the small plane, affording pilot and passengers little visibility. It was mid-January, 1991 and Aaron Lansky, his wife Gail, the architect Allen Moore, and Myra Fein, the president of the Board of Directors of the National Yiddish Book Center (NYBC), Lansky's then-eleven-year-old nonprofit organization, were aboard a private plane destined for Martha's Vineyard. When the plane finally landed, the first thing Lansky spotted was a flashing yellow light next to the words: "DANGER. When light is flashing it is unsafe to take off or land."

Frazzled, they climbed out of the plane and into a car. They drove past one palatial home after another, pointing to each one and repeating, "Is that it?" Finally they reached a small salt marsh and overlooking the marsh they saw what appeared to be a small, unremarkable house. As the car came to a stop Lansky thought, "For

this tiny house I just risked my life?" They went inside. The whole space was oriented toward the marsh and a pond, and beyond the pond you could see the ocean. It was one of those houses that you want to move into on the spot. In that moment, Lansky knew it was *bashert* (meant to be): the non-Jewish architect who had designed this non-ostentatious, magical house was the perfect pick to design the permanent home of the National Yiddish Book Center.

Lansky, who relishes a good story, and who has gathered plenty of them in the course of his unexpected and surprisingly adventurous career as the man behind the rescue of 1.5 million Yiddish books, explains that they made the trip in order to check out a summer house designed by Moore, a Newburyport, Massachusetts–based architect.

Moore was in the running for the commission to design the NYBC's headquarters in Amherst, Massachusetts, on the campus of Hampshire College. It would be a Yiddish cultural and educational hub, housing a small portion of the then-million Yiddish *bicher* (books) that Lansky and his crew of *zamlers* (volunteer book collectors) had been gathering since 1980. And it would be a permanent home for the NYBC, which had been housed in seven different borrowed or rented buildings since its inception (including a former elementary school, a former roller skating rink, and a defunct shopping mall), before buying the land from Hampshire College.

Moore worked on the NYBC project "for four and a half years, six days a week, for almost no money whatsoever. It was a labor of love for him," Lansky says. The cluster of unpretentious, low-lying linked wings of the NYBC building designed by Moore has an unmistakable *shtetl* style yet blends organically into the rolling New England landscape. Like the Martha's Vineyard house on the salt marsh, the exterior does not reflect the interior. While small-scale and dark, with disconnected Old World references on the outside, the inside of the thirty-seven-thousand-square-foot, climate-controlled, fire-protected center, completed in 1997, is light, almost loft-like, and modern. And yet the building seems perfectly balanced and whole.

The architecture makes reference to the Diaspora: Jews may

have dispersed in small groups yet still remain connected and strong as a people. Lansky sees the building's architecture as a metaphor for his organization, which has managed to revive a deep-rooted yet widely scattered bygone culture by taking a forward-looking, modern approach. Book by book, small teams of volunteers rescued tens of thousands of Yiddish volumes that would otherwise have landed in the trash.

Actually, many of the books *had* already landed in the trash, and retrieving them was no easy feat. In *Outwitting History* (2004), Lansky's absorbing memoir of his often outlandish book-collecting adventures, he compares his perseverance to the United States Postal Service, as stipulated in their maxim, "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

He took note of that inscription on Manhattan's General Post Office early one sleety morning in 1980. He had been awakened at midnight the night before by an emergency phone call from his former Yiddish teacher, who had spotted thousands of Yiddish books in a dumpster on Sixteenth Street in New York City. Within hours the dumpster company was scheduled to pick up the overflowing container and render its contents landfill. To make matters worse, rain was forecast.

Lansky took an overnight train from Northampton, Massachusetts, where he was living, and made it to the dumpster seven hours later. The rain had beat him to it, and the books on top were already wet. With sixty dollars in his pocket and no credit card, he needed to rent a U-Haul A.S.A.P. Only one local U-haul dealer was willing to rent to him – contingent on a $350 cash deposit. His Yiddish teacher came up with the deposit. After rallying six friends to help load, they began packing the books into the rented twenty-four-foot truck. Their clothes turned red, yellow, blue and green, splotched by the book covers' running dyes. By nightfall they had saved about five thousand books, and sacrificed another three thousand that were thoroughly waterlogged. Lansky landed in bed for the next three days with a fever, his body depleted but spirit reinforced.

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Twenty-five years later on an early September afternoon Lansky sits in his large, light-filled corner office at the NYBC and reflects on a career spent rescuing endangered books written in a vanishing language, creating a home for them, preserving them, and promoting Yiddish culture – the center's work has gone far beyond simply collecting and storing books.

Yiddish may be a lost language, yet the NYBC claims to be the "largest and fastest-growing Jewish cultural organization in America." At last count, the NYBC had collected 1.5 million books, boasts thirty-five thousand members, attracts ten thousand visitors a year, and operates on a four-million-dollar annual budget. The Center publishes *Pakn Treger* (The Book Peddler), a thrice-annual magazine exploring Yiddish culture, history, art and life; offers internship programs; and is a pioneer in the innovative application of technology – thanks to an initial grant from his Righteous Persons Foundation, the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library scans every page of every Yiddish book in the Center's collection.

It took two and a half years to digitize the fourteen thousand individual titles that are currently available. This amounts to something like 3.5 million pages, all of which are preserved in digital files and, within the next few years, will be accessible online through a searchable database that Lansky believes will revolutionize Jewish scholarship. Printouts of all digitized books are available – it takes a few minutes to print out an on-demand reprint. In addition, surplus copies of the rescued books are made accessible by distributing them to libraries and educational institutions – the NYBC has provided Yiddish volumes to six hundred major university and research libraries. Recently, the process of translating selected volumes has begun and a Yiddish dictionary is in the works.

When Lansky established the NYBC in 1980, he was told a lot of things – he was told that there were only seventy thousand Yiddish books existing in the U.S., a number he collected in the first year alone. He was told that Yiddish was dead. "I must have gone to every major Jewish organization in America looking for help. And I sat in front of these expansive desks, and people would look at me in a

rather condescending way and say, 'Don't you know that Yiddish is dead? Forget it.' Well, I didn't believe them, and I appealed directly to everyday Jews, and the response has been sort of astonishing," he says.

He wasn't told that one day he would have 222 zamlers stationed throughout the U.S. and Canada collecting books. He wasn't told that the NYBC's internship program would routinely receive hundreds of applicants, or that approximately half of the center's interns would go on to further study or professional work related to Yiddish. He wasn't told that one day the NYBC would have a full-time staff of twenty, or that in 1989 he would be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, or that Yiddish would be the first literature to be digitized, becoming, as the *New York Times* reported, "the most in-print literature in the world."

The driving impetus behind the entire endeavor was that it was great literature that was being lost. "The literature had enough intrinsic worth that no matter what anybody told me about how Yiddish was dead, and how no one cared about Yiddish anymore, what I knew was it's just an extraordinary world literature that needed to be saved, no matter what," Lansky says. "All the other virtues, the fact that it's a critical part of defining contemporary Jewish identity, that's sort of secondary…great books need to be saved."

When Lansky began, he thought it would take three years to collect all of the books. Almost thirty years into the adventure, he's still at it. "Jews are just far more avid readers than I think anybody understood or anybody imagined," he says. "Books have a lot of meaning for Jews, unlike anything else. They allow for reflection, they allow for deliberative thinking, and so I think books have a real role to play. We are a People of the Book…because books are big enough and powerful enough to define and contain identity. Dispersed and landless throughout most of our history, Jews venerated books as a 'portable homeland,' the repository of our collective memory and identity."

Physically, the man who has been called the "Indiana Jones of Yiddish" does bear a slight resemblance to Harrison Ford. Lansky

is 5′6″, slim, bright blue-eyed and bespectacled with a lightness of being that defies his purposeful strength. With curly light brown hair that is graying at the temples, he appears much younger than his early fifties (he was born in 1955). He speaks with a Massachusetts accent, slower than you would expect, and his sentences are peppered with Yiddish words, inflections and humor. The Yiddishisms have a way of softening his sharp intellect and wit, bringing out his *haymish* (likeable, friendly) qualities. He is quick to quote Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, Abbie Hoffman, Mordechai Kaplan and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

The blonde wood furniture in Lansky's vaulted-ceilinged office is white oak (hand-built by Suzi Moore, Allen Moore's wife), and light pours through the floor-to-ceiling windows that face the "Yiddish Writer's Garden," commemorating 120 of the greatest Yiddish writers. The clean, sparely appointed office contrasts with the spaces described in *Outwitting History*, in which he depicts every place he inhabited, including his car and his parents' home, as being in a constant state of *hefkeyres* (chaos), crammed beyond capacity with his treasured Yiddish books.

Because the book collection has grown so large, Lansky explains, almost ninety percent of it is stored in a warehouse in Holyoke, a neighboring town. "Sometimes I walk into that warehouse and just get this sense of the weight of it all," Lansky says. "I don't mean because we crack beams – which we do – but just a sense of the weight of history and what an incredibly vibrant and intellectually engaged culture all of this was."

He is referring to the fact that until 1939, Yiddish was the first language of seventy-five percent of the world's Jews. Between 1864 and 1939 (the heyday of this thousand-year-old culture, when there were eleven million Yiddish speakers) thirty thousand Yiddish titles were published. "It was effectively sort of just ripped out of the fabric of Jewish life and nobody even knows that it exists anymore," he says.

Well, now they do, thanks to Lansky's drive to revive it. Recently, some college students have even deemed Yiddish "hip." Lansky calls it "the 'in' language of a people on the outs." *Yiddish*, which means

"Jewish," emerged in the tenth or eleventh century among Jews on the Rhine River. It is an East European vernacular that is a *mishmash* (hodge-podge) consisting of twenty percent Hebrew and Aramaic mixed with German, Latin, French, Italian, Polish, Ukrainian, White Russian and Slovak.

It is written in the Hebrew alphabet, but until the second half of the nineteenth century, Yiddish existed mostly as a spoken language. By the early twentieth century, there were Yiddish newspapers and magazines, films and plays, politics, art, music, and what Lansky calls "a free-wheeling literature that marked one of the most concentrated outpourings of literary creativity in all of Jewish history."

Among the best-known authors were Sholem Aleichem (who wrote *Tevye the Dairyman*, which later gained fame as the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*), Isaac L. Peretz (author of *The Golem*), Mendele Mocher Seforim (a pseudonym for Solomon Abramowitsch, meaning "Mendele the Bookseller"), and Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel Prize–winning, Polish-born author of thirty-six books, including *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*. They chronicled the average *Yankl* (Jack) and his outer and inner life, with angst-centered recurring themes like unrealized dreams, unarticulated worries and wants, and universal hopes and frustrations.

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Lansky was drawn to Yiddish as a child in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where his grandparents spoke Yiddish to each other, and to Lansky's parents (it was his mother's sole language until she was six) when they wanted to keep something from the children. He became intrigued with this secret language of the past. His mother's parents, both from a shtetl in what is now Poland, were educated Jews who spoke five or six languages.

"They weren't great intellectuals or great scholars, but they were intellectuals in the way many Jews were intellectuals: they valued learning, there were books and a piano in the house. Even though my grandfather worked as a junkman all his life, he had a

tremendous depth of education, both Jewish and non-Jewish," explains Lansky, who also collected junk for a few months after high school. His grandfather came out of retirement to accompany him on his junk hunt, and as they talked, Lansky discovered his grandfather's "inherent radicalism, inherent sense of justice and inherent sense of humor."

His grandmother had arrived in America at sixteen, alone, carrying one cardboard valise containing her most valued possessions, including books, Shabbos candlesticks, and photographs of her parents, whom she would never see again. After her brother picked her up at Ellis Island, they boarded the ferry to Manhattan and he flung her suitcase overboard, explaining that embarking on a new life meant "leaving the Old Country behind." Although he hasn't scoured the harbor bottom for his grandmother's baggage, Lansky satisfied his curiosity about his roots by collecting a significant portion of the Yiddish books that did survive the crossing.

His father's father peddled fruit and vegetables and chickens on Cape Cod and owned a local baseball team. Lansky's own father became a lawyer. His mother's family was "more active, more socially conscious and funnier," than his father's, and a large part of why he so values Yiddish culture. "My mother used to say to me, 'You have to marry a Jewish girl, so that when you tell a joke she'll get it,'" Lansky laughs. He did. He met Gail Sharpe at the end of 1989 and although on the surface they seemed worlds apart – she was well-dressed with polished nails, and not academic; he was perpetually scruffy, jeans-clad, and book-obsessed – they shared a sense of humor and common spirit. They were married a few months later, in 1990, and had two daughters, Sasha and Chava, born in 1991 and 1993, respectively.

Growing up in New Bedford, Lansky perceived the difference between what he terms "the front and the back of the shul." At the front of the shul were the mink-stole-clad, designer-conscious, well-assimilated congregants, while at the back were the old guys who used to *fabrengen* (eat, drink and argue). They would sit and drink *schnapps* out of paper water cups, eat raw onions and herring, and

talk constantly, always in Yiddish. Lansky preferred the "out" crowd at the back. "If you can understand the tension between the front of the shul and the back of the shul then you begin to understand what Jewishness is all about," he claims.

If Lansky has an intellectual fixation other than Yiddish books, it is this notion of duality and dialectical relationships. He sees "Jewishness" as a "religion of incongruities. It's high culture brought down to earth, and it's the tension between the two that gives Jewishness its oomph, that makes it funny when some people perceive it, but also makes it profound," Lansky says.

Duality was the theme of the "very small book" that Lansky credits with having determined his destiny, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, by Ruth R. Wisse. Lansky's synopsis of the book's thesis: "The *schlemiel*, the familiar protagonist of much of Yiddish and, later, American-Jewish fiction, appears foolish only insofar as he is out of place – a Jew who ventures into the mainstream world and asks 'the wholly spontaneous questions of a different culture.'"

Lansky read the book after his junior year of college, and immediately resolved to study with Wisse – now at Harvard – who was just starting a graduate program in East European Jewish Studies at McGill University in Montreal.

In 1973, in his first semester as a freshman at Hampshire College (where the NYBC is now headquartered), Lansky had taken the course, "Thinking About the Unthinkable: An Encounter with the Holocaust." At the time, it was uncommon for such a course to be offered in the U.S. – the Holocaust was not a topic of academic inquiry. By the end of that semester Lansky had become fascinated not so much with the Holocaust *per se* as with the Jewish people and culture as targets of German destruction. "What was there about Jewish culture that was so antithetical to fascist ideology that the Germans literally lost the war to pursue the death of the Jews? Who were these Jews? What was it about them, anyway?" he asks. He constructed his own undergraduate curriculum and in so doing taught himself Yiddish in order to read the primary sources. He "became enamored of it," he says, and perceived the language

as a "key to a civilization," the mid and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish culture.

Casually, Lansky and assorted friends and girlfriends began a search for Yiddish books. They struck gold for the first time in the late spring of 1975 on their first pilgrimage to New York's lower East Side when, after much finagling, the bookseller J. Levine on Eldridge Street led them to a basement where he had stored his father's library of one hundred Yiddish books. The highlight of that initial group of books was a fourteen-volume "deluxe" edition of the complete works of Sholem Aleichem. And so the *schlepping* unofficially began.

When Lansky got to McGill in the fall of 1977, the biggest challenge was not *reading* the assigned Yiddish books in the original, but *finding* them. All were out of print, and libraries had few. (This was, of course, long before the existence of Internet search engines and online book emporiums.) Once the Montreal Public Library's single copy of a work had been claimed, the other students often had to Xerox the whole book in order to take it home. David Roskies, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and also Ruth Wisse's brother, joked that Jews were no longer the *Am hasefer* (the People of the Book) but were now the *Am ha-kseroks* (the People of the Xerox).

If there was an "Aha!" moment for Lansky, it happened on a bleak, snowy winter day at McGill while he was sitting in a classroom. The assignment – *Fligelman*, a novel by Hirsh Dovid Nomberg – was announced and suddenly it occurred to him that while he was scrounging for the assigned books, at the same time, in other places, those very titles were being destroyed at an alarming rate. "If we don't save them soon, what in the world is the next generation going to do?" Lansky wondered.

"I knew how to drive a truck and I knew how to organize and make things happen, and I figured I could probably do this," he says of his decision to leave school and look for books. He never expected the process to be so enlightening, demanding – or enduring. What began as a short-term book-gathering leave of absence from

graduate school has occupied three decades of Lansky's adult life. His book-collecting odyssey (for which he could not solicit a penny in 1980 but was able to raise $8 million in 2004 alone) is itself a *bobbe mayse* (improbable tale).

Within a short time, the only thing he learned to expect was the unexpected. With zamlers stationed all over the New York area on the lookout for Yiddish libraries large or small, these treasured collections were often discovered just hours before the demolition crew was to come, spurring late-night calls and last-minute rushes to their rescue. Books were rescued from places like the Newark Public Library, where unsupervised workers were indiscriminately throwing away about two thousand books a day, including many of the library's three thousand Yiddish books. By the time Lansky and his crew arrived to spirit off the library's collection, about one-third of the Yiddish books had already been discarded. There were books to be rescued from small, informal libraries set up in apartment buildings, and of course, there were many, many books owned by individuals.

With a core crew of about three friends, he initially solicited books by hanging posters in laundromats, synagogues and senior centers. Lansky went from stores to homes to institutions, scouring attics, basements, dumpsters and demolition sites for Yiddish books. The individuals who called him to come and pick up their books were old at the time and are now mostly deceased. They fed him, serenaded him, told him stories, *kvetsched* (complained), *kibbitzed* (chatted), cried and laughed with him, and then thanked him, kissed him, and reluctantly, let him leave. "They sat me down at their kitchen tables and poured a *glezele tey*, a glass of hot tea, which they served with homemade cookies, *lokshen kuglech* (noodle puddings), or Entenmann's cakes," Lansky writes at the beginning of *Outwitting History*. As you read on, you accompany him as he *noshes* (nibbles) on gefilte fish, pickles, sauerkraut, bagels, bialys, lox and more, developing warm, deep friendships with many of the donors.

Throughout his active book collecting years, Lansky took notes and often tape-recorded the people he met – he wanted not

just to preserve their books but to preserve their stories. "I understood that this was a moment in history, it really was the passing of one epoch to the next," he says. "These people were pouring out their hearts and telling me their stories. I bought a little tape recorder, which I'd put on the kitchen table between the horseradish and the gefilte fish."

The time was right for the endeavor, Lansky says. "I think things happen at the right moment in history. It was just my good fortune that I entered graduate school when this was finally possible. If I had started ten years earlier, I don't think anybody would have cared – there were Yiddish books everywhere. Yiddish was still too present for people to take it seriously. I don't think anybody had a sense yet that we had lost a culture, because we hadn't lost it yet, it was still 'Big deal, all old people speak Yiddish, what's the problem here?' and if I started twenty years later, of course, the books would have been lost, it would have been too late. I consider it the great blessing of my life that the work was there waiting for me."

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Twenty-eight years into the adventure, Lansky is raising funds to expand the NYBC by almost doubling the size of the Amherst building. Allen Moore designed the addition, scheduled to open in spring 2009, which will include a climate-controlled library to house half a million volumes, a two-story "Yiddish academy" with classrooms, a performance hall that can seat 275, a student commons, a distance learning studies area, galleries and exhibition space, a kosher kitchen, office space and an outdoor "big top" tent for large summer audiences.

If there was anybody who imagined all of this, it might have been Max Weinreich, a founder of YIVO (Yiddish Scientific Institute), considered by many to be the greatest Yiddish scholar of his generation. Weinreich came to New York in 1939 at the age of forty-five, narrowly escaping the Holocaust. He then taught Yiddish to American students, though he had almost no takers. When a student asked him why he persevered, Weinreich responded, "Because Yiddish has magic, it will outwit history."

As you enter the vestibule of the National Yiddish Book Center the Weinreich quote is printed in English on the left wall, and in Yiddish on the right. These words could be Lansky's motto (they inspired his book's title), for he is fascinated with the magic of the unexpected. "I've seen [Yiddish] work its magic already, and I have great hopes for the future. This was a thousand years of Jewish experience," Lansky says. "The wonder is that it took so long for us to come to terms with what was lost."