AARON LANSKY

OUTWITTING HISTORY

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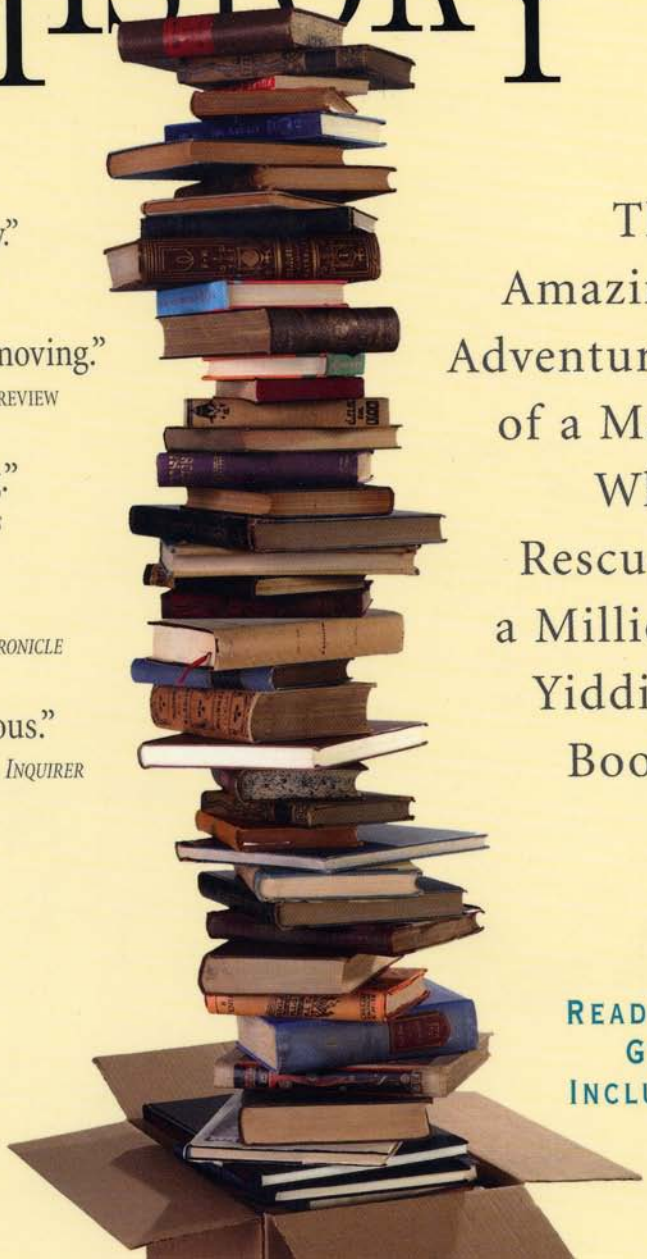
"Tasty."
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

"Often hilarious."
THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER



The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books

READER'S GUIDE INCLUDED

5. A Ritual of Cultural Transmission

Dear Mr. Lansky,

I thank you for your interest in Yiddish books. I hope you are interested in Hebrew also as I have books in both languages to give away. I am a very old man and I am afraid that after I will be gone they may throw them in the trash. Please do help me out.

Your Respectfully,
Norman Temmelman

In late July of 1980, I emptied my bank account, packed my rucksack, rented a van, and set out on the road for the first time. My plan was to begin with Mr. Temmelman in Atlantic City, then make additional stops in Philadelphia and New York. I figured that if I left Amherst early enough, I could do it all in a single day.

As I soon discovered, just scheduling such a trip was a workout. My knowledge of East Coast geography was imperfect, and when I phoned people to get directions and set a time for pickup, they were often so eager to talk, they wouldn't let me off the phone.

All except Mr. Temmelman. He, it turned out, didn't have a phone.

So I sent him a telegram letting him know when I'd arrive. On the appointed day I left Amherst early and made it to Atlantic City by noon. Mr. Temmelman's address turned out to be a high-rise building for the Jewish elderly just off the boardwalk, a block from one of the city's sprawling new casinos.

I entered the lobby and was immediately approached by a very old man wearing a heavy, dark wool suit on this steaming summer day.

"Mr. Lahnsky?" he asked in an unmistakable Yiddish accent.

"Mr. Temmelman?"

He smiled and shook my hand. "I've been waiting here in the lobby since seven this morning, I didn't want I should miss you." He took me firmly by the arm and led me up the elevator to his fifth-floor apartment. He lived in a single room. In one corner were a narrow bed and a metal nightstand piled with bottles of pills, in the other were a sink, a hot plate, and a kitchen table covered with stacks of bills and papers. The rest of the room was taken up with bookcases and cardboard boxes filled with hundreds of Yiddish and Hebrew books.

Mr. Temmelman put a kettle on the hot plate and set out a bowl of sugar cubes and two glasses for tea.

"Have you lived here long?" I asked.

"Oh no, we had a regular house. But three years ago my wife, *olehasholem* (may she rest in peace), died, and I had to move here, for the elderly. I left the furniture behind, but the books I brought with me." He was eighty-seven years old, he told me, and was about to leave on a trip to visit relatives in Israel. At his age he might not return, and he wanted to make sure his books were taken care of before he left.

I had figured book collection meant picking up boxes, carrying them out to the truck, and *fartig,* you're done and it's time to move on to the next stop. Instead, Mr. Temmelman insisted I join him at the kitchen table, where, for what seemed like hours, we sipped tea, sucked on sugar

cubes, and talked. When it came time to part with his books, his eyes welled with tears as he began handing them to me, one volume at a time.

"This book," he recalled, pulling a handsome volume of Zishe Landau's *Lider (Poems)* from a cardboard box, "this book I bought in 1937. It had just come out, it was a very important book, my wife and I we went without lunch for a week we should be able to afford it. And *this* book," he said, holding aloft a yellowed copy of *Ven Yash iz geforn (When Yash Set Forth),* Jacob Glatstein's powerful account of his travels in interwar Europe, "have you read this book?"

"Well, no, actually I haven't," I conceded.

"In that case, I want you should sit down right now and read this book."

It was a long afternoon. Every book he handed me had its story. This wasn't at all what I expected, and too spellbound and polite to interrupt, I fell hours behind schedule. But I did begin to understand what was taking place. Sitting together in that crowded apartment—he an eighty-seven-year-old man in a wool suit, I a bearded twenty-four-year-old in jeans and a T-shirt—we were enacting a ritual of cultural transmission. He was handing me not merely his books but his world, his *yerushe,* the inheritance his own children had rejected. I was a stranger, but he had no other choice: Book by book, he was placing all his hopes in me.

It was late afternoon before I was finally able to carry the books out to the van. I made a few quick calls from a pay phone in the lobby to apologize to the next people on the list. And then, as I opened the door to the van and was about to drive off, Mr. Temmelman came running over, grabbed hold of my arm, and spoke in Yiddish. *"Eyn minut, yunger-man, vuhin loyfstu?* (One minute, young man, where are you running?)"

"Where am I running? I'm heading to Philadelphia and then on to New York. I have other stops to make, I'm hours behind schedule and—"

"*Oy yungerman, ir farshteyt nisht* (Oy, young man, you don't understand). When I got your telegram I told everyone in the building you were coming. They also have books for you!"

I peered up at the twelve-story building.

"*All* of them have books?"

"*Vu den?* Of course all of them!" he responded, proudly indicating the full height of the building with a sweep of his hand. We walked back inside, Mr. Temmelman leading the way, and proceeded floor by floor, knocking at every door.

"Zayt mir moykhl," he'd say, *"ober der yungerman darf hobn bikher* (Excuse me, but this young man here needs books)."

People smiled. They clapped their hands. They came out with shopping bags, cardboard boxes, wicker baskets, suitcases . . . all filled with Yiddish books. To a greater or lesser degree, every person had to enact the same ritual of cultural transmission. They sat me down at their kitchen tables and poured *a glezele tey,* a glass of hot tea, which they served with homemade cookies, *lokshn kuglekh* (noodle puddings), or Entenmann's cakes. They all told stories. Some cried. One, a retired tailor, made me sit for twenty minutes while he stood and recited his latest Yiddish poetry. Everyone made sure I ate, at least half tried to fix me up with their granddaughters, and they all kissed me when I left. The sun was low in the sky when I finally said good-bye to Mr. Temmelman. By that time the van was so overloaded that the muffler scraped bottom at every bump, and I for my part was so full of tea and cake that I had to stop at every gas station between there and Philadelphia.

6. "Don't You Know That Yiddish Is Dead?"

My first inclination after leaving Montreal in the spring of 1979 was to make New York my home base, since, to paraphrase Willy Sutton, that's where the books were. But my teacher, Ruth Wisse, was dead set against it. The politics of the Jewish world there were too contentious, she explained, and the rancor of the Yiddish world was even worse. "If you're going to succeed," she insisted, "you have to start fresh. What you need is a Jewishly neutral location." So I returned to Amherst, the New England town where I had gone to college, moved in with friends, and, while finishing my master's thesis, began to lay the groundwork for what I was calling the National Yiddish Book Exchange. (Two years later we changed the name to National Yiddish Book Center, to reflect our expanding mission; for the sake of consistency, in this book I have used Center throughout.)

At the age of twenty-three, the first thing I needed was credibility, so I wrote letters to prominent Jewish writers and intellectuals. The response was heartening. Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin said it was "an idea whose time has come." Joshua Fishman, distinguished professor of linguistics at Columbia, called it "the only truly brilliant substantive/administrative plan suggested in the entire Yiddish Studies field in the

past decade." And Saul Bellow spoke from personal experience: "I was recently given a set of the complete works of Sholem Aleichem from a woman who didn't know what to do with them and would otherwise have thrown them out. So I understand the urgency and wish you good luck."

While universally supportive, almost every letter carried the same caveat: *Hurry*—it may already be too late! I consulted with scholars who, after some deliberation, estimated that there were seventy thousand Yiddish volumes extant and recoverable in North America. I figured it would take me two years to collect them all. But first I needed money: approximately $10,000, I thought, to cover the cost of a truck, gas, insurance, travel expenses, storage, and a modest living allowance for myself. So I sent off proposals to the major Jewish organizations, cut my hair, trimmed my beard, ironed my shirt, borrowed a suit and tie from a friend, and boarded the train for New York.

For the next two days I trudged from office to office, meeting with the leaders of the American Jewish community. My enthusiasm matched only by my naïveté, I assumed they'd review my proposal, listen to my irrefutable arguments (a chance to rescue an entire literature, after all!), ask a few probing questions (all easily parried), confirm my qualifications, applaud my initiative, and hand me a check. Instead, across one titanic desk after another, I met not with encouragement and support but condescension and dismissal:

"*Yiddish* books? You want us to help you save books in *Yiddish*? Why? Who cares? Don't you know that Yiddish is dead?"

Admittedly, some were kinder than others, but the sentiments remained:

"The Jewish future lies with Hebrew, not Yiddish."

"Only *bubbies* read Yiddish anymore."

"Your plan is a throwback, an anachronism."

"You're riding the wrong horse, barking up the wrong tree; why don't you just go back to school and forget the whole idea?"

"I don't think you understand," I protested. "If we don't save these books now they'll be lost *forever*! We as a people can't afford to lose our literature, our history, our culture. . . ."

S'hot geholfn vi a toytn bankes—it helped like cupping helps a corpse. At first I took it personally: Maybe my proposal wasn't clear enough, my borrowed suit didn't fit properly, I'd done a poor job ironing. But after listening to the same riff three, four, five times in a row, I began to see that it didn't matter how long my proposal or how short my hair. The priorities of the Jewish establishment had been set in stone years before: Israel, anti-Semitism, social services. In 1980 the national allocation for culture—literature, history, continuity, creativity—was less than one tenth of one percent of the total monies raised.

Of course, when you're talking about a $1.5 billion annual campaign, even one tenth of one percent begins to look like real money. So I made an appointment and the next day found myself in a skyscraper on East Forty-second Street, sitting across from Mr. Cohen, the head of the umbrella agency charged by the Jewish establishment with disbursing national funding for Jewish culture. I was optimistic. For one thing, there were books on the wall: real books, literature and scholarship, in Hebrew and English. For another, the meeting did not begin with a peremptory dismissal but with a sincere expression of interest.

I spoke at length, and when I was through, Mr. Cohen nodded in agreement. "You're absolutely right. The Jewish community should not allow Yiddish books to be destroyed," he said. "I'm with you all the way. There's only one problem. We have no money to give you."

"But I thought you're the national agency for Jewish culture."

"We are," he said, "but it's not so easy. After our own expenses, the money we get is divided among ten constituent cultural organizations. Some are big, some are small, and you can imagine what it took before

we finally worked out a formula for who gets what. Now no one wants to risk their own percentage by reopening the discussion. We haven't made an allocation to a *new* organization since we began, and I can't see our board members starting now, no matter how good your cause."

"But that doesn't make sense!" I protested. "The solution isn't to cut the pie smaller. The solution is to bring in new organizations, encourage young people with fresh energy and ideas, and create such a buzz that the federations will give you more money. That way you'll end up with a bigger pie for everyone!"

Mr. Cohen sighed so deeply, it sounded like an outbound commuter train releasing its air brakes across the street at Grand Central Station. "You're right, of course," he said softly, "but it just can't be done. Not yet. Not now." A kind man, he did offer one small measure of hope. As I was getting up to leave, he assured me that the entire process was "in transition," and that major changes in the structure of Jewish cultural funding were imminent.

"What do you mean by 'imminent'?" I asked.

"Well, the committees are being formed, and we're about to begin a thorough reevaluation along some of the lines you're suggesting. I think we'll start to see some real changes within the next three to five years."

"Three to five *years*! But books are being destroyed right now! What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

He shrugged. "I guess you're on your own till then. Maybe that's why no one has succeeded in establishing a new national Jewish cultural agency in America in almost twenty years. Who knows—you've got a good cause, maybe you'll be the first."

I left Mr. Cohen's office, walked across town to Penn Station, and boarded the Amtrak for New England. I was tired. I was disappointed. Above all I was angry. Yiddish books were being lost *right now*. There wasn't time for committees and studies. If the Jewish establishment

wouldn't supply the modest funds I needed to save Yiddish books, I'd just have to find the money someplace else.

So I spent that summer picking blueberries with a crew of migrant workers in Maine, and the next fall I took a job teaching evening Yiddish classes at the University of Massachusetts. My earnings were modest, but they were enough to live on as I began to lay the foundation of a new organization.

My first step, after printing business cards and letterhead, was to convene a board. I turned to the people I knew best: local professors and college administrators. Some, like Haim Gunner, Rich Alpert, Ruth Stark, and, later, our successive early board chairs, Joe Marcus, Penina Migdal Glazer, and Gail Perlman, accepted my invitation immediately and remained mentors and stalwart allies for years. Only one person turned me down: He told me he could not possibly jeopardize his "unsullied reputation" by associating with an enterprise "which in all likelihood will not succeed."

With help from my father, who's a tax lawyer, we incorporated and won tax-exempt status from the IRS. Then, on a cold night in April 1980, the entire board gathered around a simmering woodstove in the home of Nancy and Jules Piccus, my first Yiddish teacher, for our initial meeting. The agenda was brief: They signed the articles of organization, appointed me executive director, toasted *l'khayim,* and then adjourned to a table of white wine and brie, leaving it to me to work out the details.

The first detail was to find a building—a task complicated by our having no money. Space was at a premium in our area, but in early May I came across a want ad that sounded promising:

> 6,000 square feet on second floor of older industrial building near Northampton. Ideal for small business. Loading dock, elevator, ample parking. Reasonable rent. Inquire now for immediate occupancy.

The space was in a nineteenth-century redbrick silk mill, located in Florence, just three miles north of Smith College. I prevailed upon my old college professors Leonard Glick and Jules Piccus to drive over with me. The building's owner, Steve Cahillane, greeted us in person.

"We run a trash-hauling business out of the first floor," he explained, "and on the third floor is a clinical psychologist with a table tennis club on the side. The whole second floor is available: six thousand square feet at a dollar fifty a foot, nine thousand a year. Some people I've showed it to have found the space a little, well, *unconventional,* but that's something you'll have to judge for yourselves."

He wasn't kidding. The previous tenant had been a nonprofit group called Women in Construction, and one of the construction skills they taught was wallpapering. They practiced with remnants, and as a result, in the entire space virtually no two strips of wallpaper were the same. There were pinks, greens, yellows, and blues, flowers, stripes, paisleys, and polka-dots; the crowing roosters of a kitchen pattern alternated with the seashells of a bathroom, the tumbling astronauts of a kid's bedroom, the ducks and hunting rifles of a man's study, and the gold fleur-de-lis of a formal dining room. But apart from the funky wallpaper, the space was remarkably well suited. About half the floor had been left open as a single warehouse space, the rest divided into offices. There was more than enough room for all the Yiddish books our experts thought existed. Without so much as a word to me or Len, Jules walked over to the landlord and said, "It's not perfect, but what the hell, we'll take it!"

Leonard and I looked at each other, aghast. We didn't have enough cash to cover the first week's rent, let alone a year-long lease. *"Gelt,"* Len addressed Jules in an urgent whisper, *"m'darf hobn gelt* (you need money first)."

Jules was unfazed. He may have been a college professor, but somehow he was also a surprisingly astute businessman. There he was, ne-

gotiating on our behalf, using terms like "liquidity," "balloon payments," "accrual," and "deferral." The upshot? The landlord agreed to let us move in on June 1, with the first payment not due until September. "That way we'll be able keep our cash flow liquid until our major grant comes through at the end of the summer," Jules explained.

"Major grant? What major grant?" I asked as soon as we were alone.

"Don't worry," Jules assured us, "September is three months away. We'll come up with something before then. In the meantime we've got a space. Let's start collecting books."

We moved in on June 1, 1980. My best friend, Noemi Schwarz, contributed half her household furniture. Paul Novak, a master scrounger, drove in from Omaha with a large van and, for $100, managed to buy us a desk, two file cabinets, a picnic table, and a secondhand IBM Selectric typewriter. The next day I sat down at the IBM and wrote my first press release, announcing the formation of the National Yiddish Book Center and encouraging anyone with unwanted volumes to send them to us.

I made copies at the local Xerox shop and mailed them to three hundred newspapers. Then I sat down in the empty factory loft and waited: one day, two days, three days . . . The only sound was the occasional *boing-boing* of a Ping-Pong ball dropping through holes from the floor above. With no money for a telephone, I had routed calls through my friend Rich Alpert at the dean's office at Hampshire College. Toward the end of the week Rich phoned me at home to tell me that Jean Caldwell, the western Massachusetts correspondent for the *Boston Globe,* had seen a copy of the press release and would be at the loft to interview me at ten the next morning.

I woke early, bicycled the thirteen miles from Amherst to Florence, and changed from my bicycle shorts into carefully ironed clothes (well, at least they *were* carefully ironed before I stuffed them into my

rucksack for the ride over). Jean was right on time and her appearance was reassuring. An older woman with a warm smile, she carried a pencil and notebook and was dressed in comfortable clothes covered by an old London Fog coat. We sat down at the picnic table, surrounded by the dizzying display of wallpaper, and I began to explain my plans. I told her how important Yiddish was, how many young people were beginning to study the language, how urgently books were needed, and how, until now, unwanted Yiddish books had been regularly abandoned or destroyed. "Now all that will change," I assured her. "Soon this entire loft will be filled to the rafters with Yiddish books." And then, pointing to the only two boxes of books in the place—books I had picked up the day before by bicycle from a woman in Northampton—I boldly proclaimed, "You see, the deluge has already begun!"

Jean looked doubtful: two boxes weren't much of a deluge. But when I pulled out a jackknife and opened them, her whole attitude began to change. There were the usual books from Russia and Poland, printed before the war. "Imagine the miles those books must have traveled!" Jean marveled. There were novels, poetry collections, history, and essays—each with its own story. And as luck would have it, there was a copy of Harkavy's *Brifn-shteler,* a curious volume published in New York in 1902 offering a selection of form letters in Yiddish and improbably baroque English for use by newly arrived Jewish immigrants. Jean laughed aloud over choice selections, such as "From an Ardent Lover to a Lady," "Letter from a Young Lady to a Gentleman Declining the Offer of His Hand in Marriage," and "Telegrams of Ten Words or Less."

Objectively, there probably wasn't much of a story in an empty factory loft with two boxes of books. But Jean was charmed by the books she did see, and she was at least bemused by my vision of the deluge to come. Several days later her story appeared in the *Globe;* then the news went out on the AP wire, and before long the deluge did begin: so

many books that our local post office balked at the prospect of delivering them all, and we had to ask our congressman to intervene.

Along with the books came letters. Elderly Jews, often writing in Yiddish, offered their own libraries "so that someone should read these books after I'm gone." Younger Jews—often typing their messages on the letterhead of law firms, medical practices, businesses, or universities—told how they had inherited Yiddish books from parents or grandparents and had held on to them all this time, waiting for someone to come along who wanted them. By the end of June I was spending ten and twelve hours a day in Florence, swiveling between the IBM and an old Yiddish manual, answering the letters one by one. I advised everyone the same: Get sturdy boxes from your local liquor store, pack the books carefully, take them to the post office, and mail them in.

Fortunately, along with the books some people sent contributions. Modest, yes, but enough to install a telephone and buy planks from a local sawmill, which my housemate, Scott, sawed and planed and nailed into shelves.

Some of the letters I received were enormously touching. Martin Moroff, an elderly immigrant who ran a cigar store in Reading, Pennsylvania, wrote in Yiddish that he had been collecting Yiddish books on his own for many years, storing them in his home. Among the boxes he was preparing to ship were several that he recovered at the last minute from the *meysim shtibl,* the room where corpses are prepared for burial at the local Jewish cemetery. He whisked them out of there as fast as he could, he assured me, because *"Di bikher zenen geven lebedike nefoshes* (The books were living souls)."

In a later letter Mr. Moroff had another story to tell, about a scholarly Jew from Poland who had settled in Reading shortly after the war. The scholar and his wife loved books, and they amassed a large Yiddish library. But gradually, as the man became more successful in business,

he became more assimilated. He changed his name and spent less and less time reading. When his wife died he remarried, this time to an American-born woman who had little regard for literature. She promptly decided to renovate the house, and the first thing she did was get rid of her husband's books, piling them up on a neighbor's porch. As fate would have it, it began to rain that day, and by the time Mr. Moroff arrived at night—in response to an urgent phone call—the books were soaked through:

> *S'hot mir farklemt baym hartsn. Ikh hob oyfgehoybn a por bikher, es hot gekopet fun zey der regn. Neyn, s'hot getripet trern, di bikher hobn geveynt*. (My heart tightened with emotion. I picked up a few of the books and the rain dripped off of them. No, they were tears that fell, the books were crying).

Mr. Moroff was able to ship his books—and we were able to visit him in person some years later. But there were many people who, like Mr. Temmelman, could not manage to pack their books or carry them to the post office: They lived in walk-up apartments, or were too old or too infirm or simply had too many books to give away.