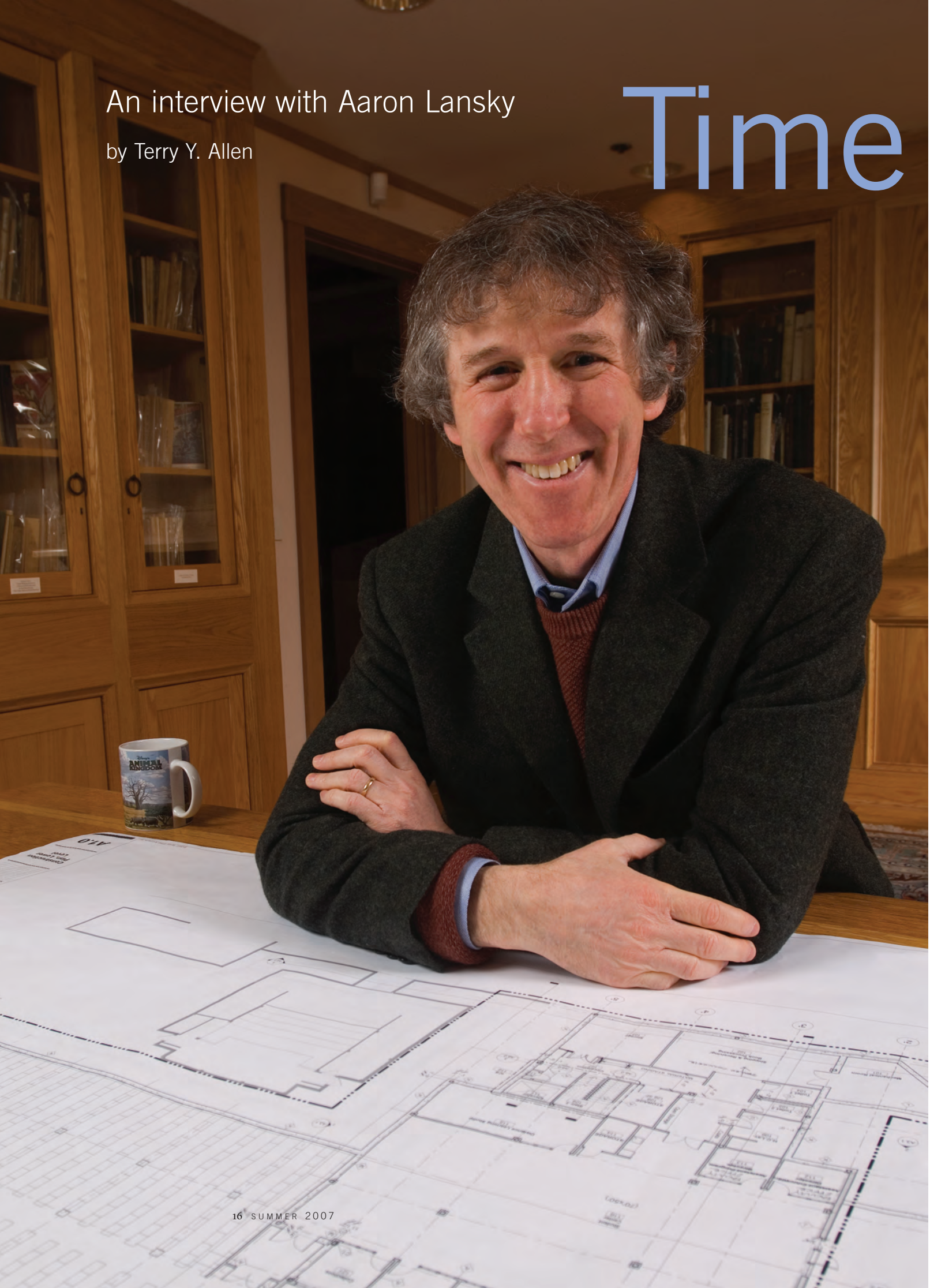
Time

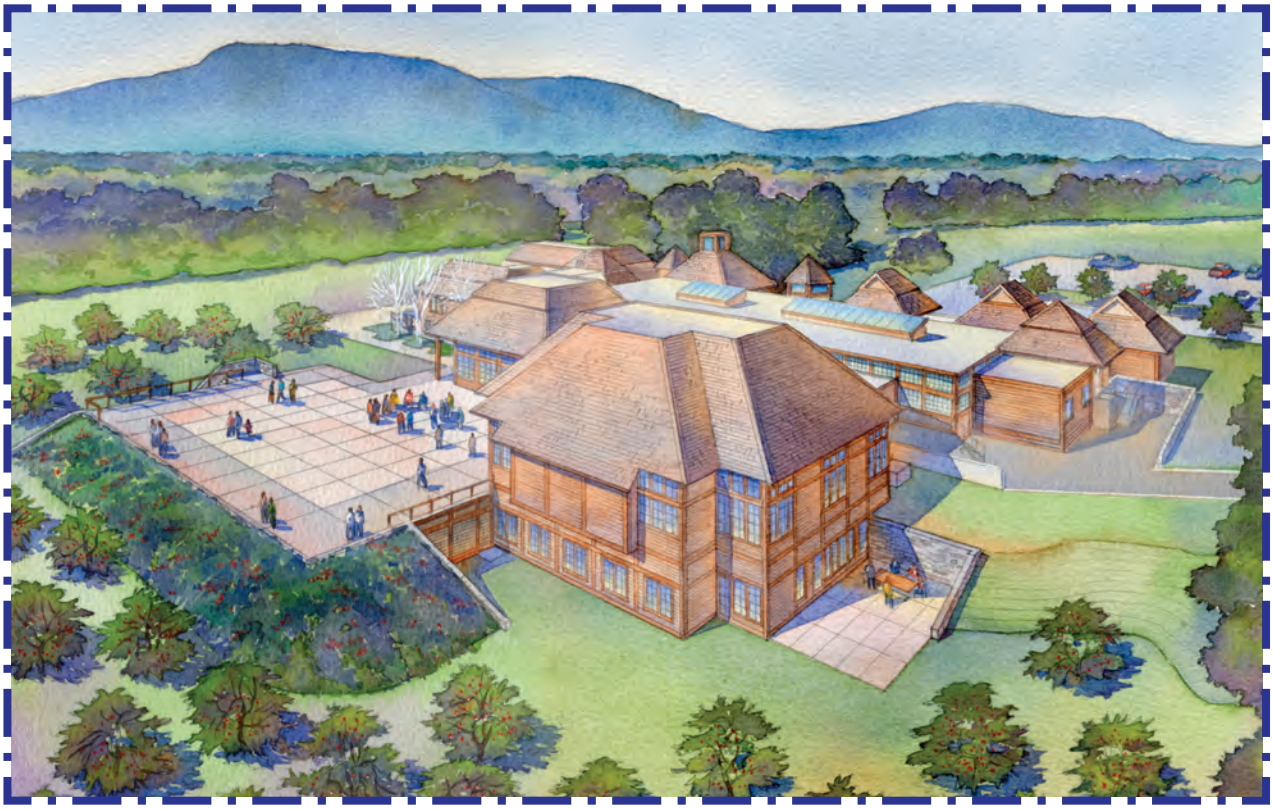
An interview with Aaron Lansky

by Terry Y. Allen



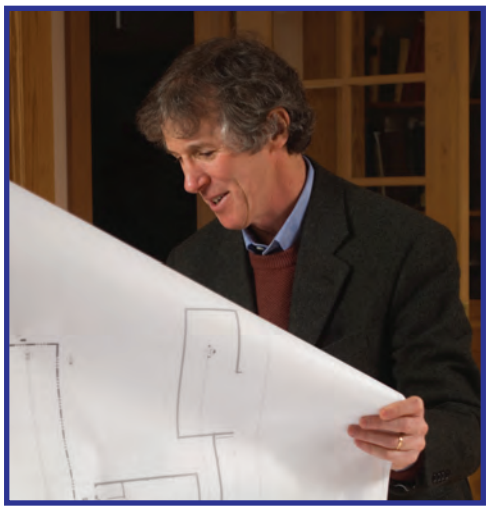
Photos by Ben Barnhart

to build again



Architectral Renderings by James Akers.

Last spring* Pakn Treger *talked with the National Yiddish Book Center's president and founder Aaron Lansky about the organization's bold plans to place Yiddish language, literature, and culture squarely in the mainstream of Jewish education. The beautiful new facility that will house the initiative, depicted in the architectural drawings on these pages, will open to the public this coming year.



Photos by Ben Barnhart

TA: The Book Center is 27 years old, there are 30,000 members, you've saved countless books from the landfill and provided a home for the cultural extension of Yiddish. You've digitized the collection and translated major works into English. Many people would say it's time to rest on your laurels. What do you say to that?

AL: I would say we've only just begun. The first thing was to save the physical books, to secure access to the culture. And I can't exactly say that job is done. Even at this late date, we're still receiving 200 to 300 books a week. Last April we sent two people down to Sao Paolo, Brazil, to retrieve 3,000 books in a building that was about to be torn down. And of course now we're working to place almost all our titles online, which will make the whole literature accessible and searchable.

TA: For anybody?

AL: For anybody, anywhere in the world, for free. But there is a much greater job still waiting. Now that the books are largely safe, the next obvious step is: "So how do you open up these books and share their contents with the world?" Because bound up inside this literature is essentially 1,000 years of Jewish experience as well as the Jews' first sustained literary encounter with the modern world. Very simply, if we want to know who we are, we need to find out what lies within the books. The Book Center holds the largest single collection of Jewish books anywhere in the world and the largest collection of Jewish books ever assembled in Jewish history. That puts a pretty big responsibility on us.

TA: So there's no resting on laurels?

AL: I don't think I've rested on a laurel, ever! But I have to tell you, I've never been more excited about what comes next. After 27 years of rounding up all the books, now we get to open them up, and we begin to transform American Jewish life by giving Jews a new understanding of who they are, of where they come from.

TA: What does it mean to "open up the books"?

AL: We want to give Jews a sense of their own history, literature, and culture. So our big step forward is to launch a "Yiddish academy," a Yiddish university, an educational center where people of all ages can come and discover this literature in a serious, substantive but also a really lively, exciting way.

TA: A yeshiva?

AL: Well, that's wonderfully alliterative with Yiddish, but not quite it. "Yeshiva" has a religious ring to it. In fact, it's really difficult to find the right term for what we're planning, because all the Jewish words for education come from a religious context and still hold religious connotations. And all the English words tend to be Greek or Latin: "academy" and "university" and "lyceum." Nothing quite fits what we're doing.

TA: You'll let us know when the word–

AL: I don't think we're going to get the word exactly. Which is actually a good sign, because it means what we're doing is novel and original, a whole new model. Jews today are living in the aftermath of the Holocaust, when the universe of Jewish life in Eastern Europe was essentially destroyed. It took time to regain our bearings after a calamity of that magnitude. There have been tremendous pressures to obliterate memory of this culture on many fronts – everything from Israel's trying to find a new beginning and erase the Diaspora past, to America's melting pot, where differences of religion were acceptable but differences of culture were not. So Jews in America inadvertently redefined themselves in Christian terms, reducing Jewish identity to a religion – a religion divorced from culture.

So we understand all that's happened historically. But, as we say in Yiddish, it's *shoyn tsayt.* It's time to begin to reclaim what we've lost, to come to terms with Yiddish language, with modern Jewish literature, with Jewish history and in particular Jewish social history: how Jews lived their lives. That includes folklore and ethnography and music and journalism and theater and film. There's a vast constellation of culture out there that we know remarkably little about.

Look at the curriculum of Jewish day schools around the country. The schools are burgeoning and most are really good: bright kids, excellent teachers. Yet the curriculum is inexplicably limited in scope in Jewish terms. Essentially, kids are learning ancient texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, but they'll graduate after 12 years never having heard of Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, or Isaac Bashevis Singer, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Or of modern Hebrew writers like Bialik or Agnon, another Nobel Prize winner, or of American Jewish writers like Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Grace Paley. None of them is included in the curriculum. There's obviously something huge that's missing from contemporary Jewish life. Our goal is to make all that accessible once again. There's a wonderful term in Yiddish: *a lebedike velt* – a lively world. That's exactly how we envision this new center.

TA: A lively world?

AL: Yes, it will be busy constantly, year round, with innovative programs and courses, seminars and events, a place where people can come to discover this culture and make it their own. For instance, we're going to start a Yiddish *ulpan. Ulpanim* are the Hebrew-language immersion programs developed in Israel. We'll be creating a similar program for Yiddish, offered to adults, college students, high school students, on beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. Participants will come for a weekend, or a week, maybe even a month at a time.

"Our big step forward is to open a kind of 'Yiddish academy,' a Yiddish university, an educational center where people of all ages can come and discover this literature in a serious, substantive but also a really lively, exciting way."

TA: So language immersion is the first aim of this program?

AL: That is one of the first aims. But with Yiddish you can't immerse yourself in language without immersing yourself in the culture as well. It's a package deal, and it's going to be a lot of fun. People will immerse themselves in language, and there will also be music, films, theatrical presentations, readings, and more.

Our second objective involves college students. We had 3,000 hits on our Web site for 18 positions for our summer internship program. This summer we're just a hair shy of 100 percent over applications from last year. That means we're going to have to turn away roughly nine out of every ten students who apply. There's something wrong with this picture, right? The rest of the Jewish community is pouring millions of dollars into trying to figure out how to reach young people – and in the meantime we're literally turning young people away.

So we want to dramatically expand our internship opportunities. Right now we have an eight-week program and most students come to us with no prior Yiddish knowledge. We give them a full-credit course in Yiddish language and another one in Yiddish literature and Jewish history and culture. They spend the rest of the day opening up boxes and getting hands-on work experience. Right now we're taking 18 students a summer. Once we open our new center, once we have the physical space to accommodate everybody, we'll expand the program to 45 students each summer. Then we'll introduce a winter session as well.

TA: Are these to be paid internships?

AL: Yes, we pay the students to come. They work very hard –

but they are working with Yiddish books, Yiddish knowledge, rather than having to work at menial summer jobs to make money. We want the best students, regardless of need.

TA: And there will still be boxes of books for them to open?

AL: I'd say in about a hundred years, we might run out, but at the moment there's no shortage of books. Of course, one of the great benefits of the educational center we're building here will be a 10,000-square-foot library.

TA: A repository?

AL: Yes, a repository for our most important titles. It will be rather cold – 55 degrees, 35 percent humidity year round, in order to preserve the books. You'll pass through an airlock to get into it, but once you're through the airlock and put on some warm clothes, you've got a lot of work to do. It's not only a matter of opening boxes, which is the immediate work, but also indexing literature, indexing periodicals. We'll be sending students out to collect oral histories and to do all sorts of related projects: digitization of music, collection of archival materials. This is not token work. Usually internship programs have kids Xeroxing papers in an office somewhere. The experience here involves dusty, backbreaking work that only young people can do. It takes strength, energy, and fortitude. The students really throw themselves into it. Eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-year-olds don't always have a chance to make a difference in the world. So that's number two: expansion of the internship program.

TA: And the third?

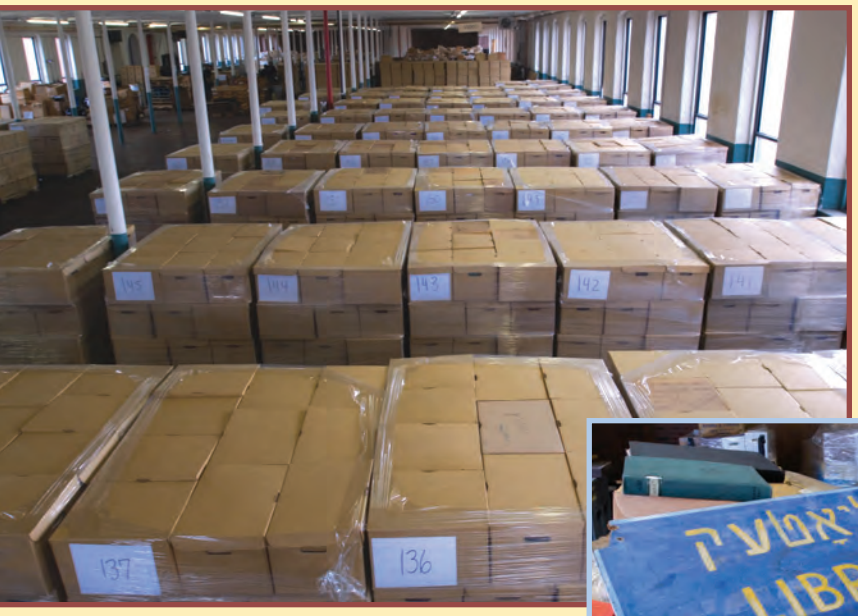
AL: The third will be geared toward high school students.

TA: Some kind of in-house immersion?

AL: Yes, in Yiddish language and modern Jewish culture, with plenty of opportunities for learning by doing, including hands-on work. High school kids can be every bit as engaged as college students.

And the fourth, initial aspect of our programs is a distance-learning center. It will be a state-of-the-art studio, where we can offer courses and broadcast programs over the Internet. We'll probably do this through a local college or university, but we haven't made the final arrangements yet.

TA: For credit?



Remember those Yiddish books you dropped off at the National Yiddish Book Center in shopping bags or grocery boxes, months or even years ago? For five weeks last spring, Book Center staff and a crew of 12 repacked hundreds of thousands of Yiddish books that had been stored since 1984 in a 19th-century brick mill building in Holyoke, MA. The result was an awesome sight: nearly 13,000 numbered, uniform, acid-free boxes neatly stacked and shrink-wrapped onto 323 pallets. The pallets were loaded into 48-foot commercial trucks and driven to a high-security warehouse facility nearby, where individual boxes and books can be easily located through a computerized retrieval system, whenever they're needed.

AL: Yes, there will be full-credit courses in Yiddish language and Yiddish literature. The world is moving in this direction. I don't think anything can quite take the place of actually being here, but it's a good start. The saying in Yiddish is *forshpayz*, an appetizer, a warm-up for what's to come.

TA: And this will be for anybody who signs up?

AL: Anyone, anywhere in the world. As far as possible, we want to make these programs responsive and self-sustaining.

TA: Who will be your faculty?

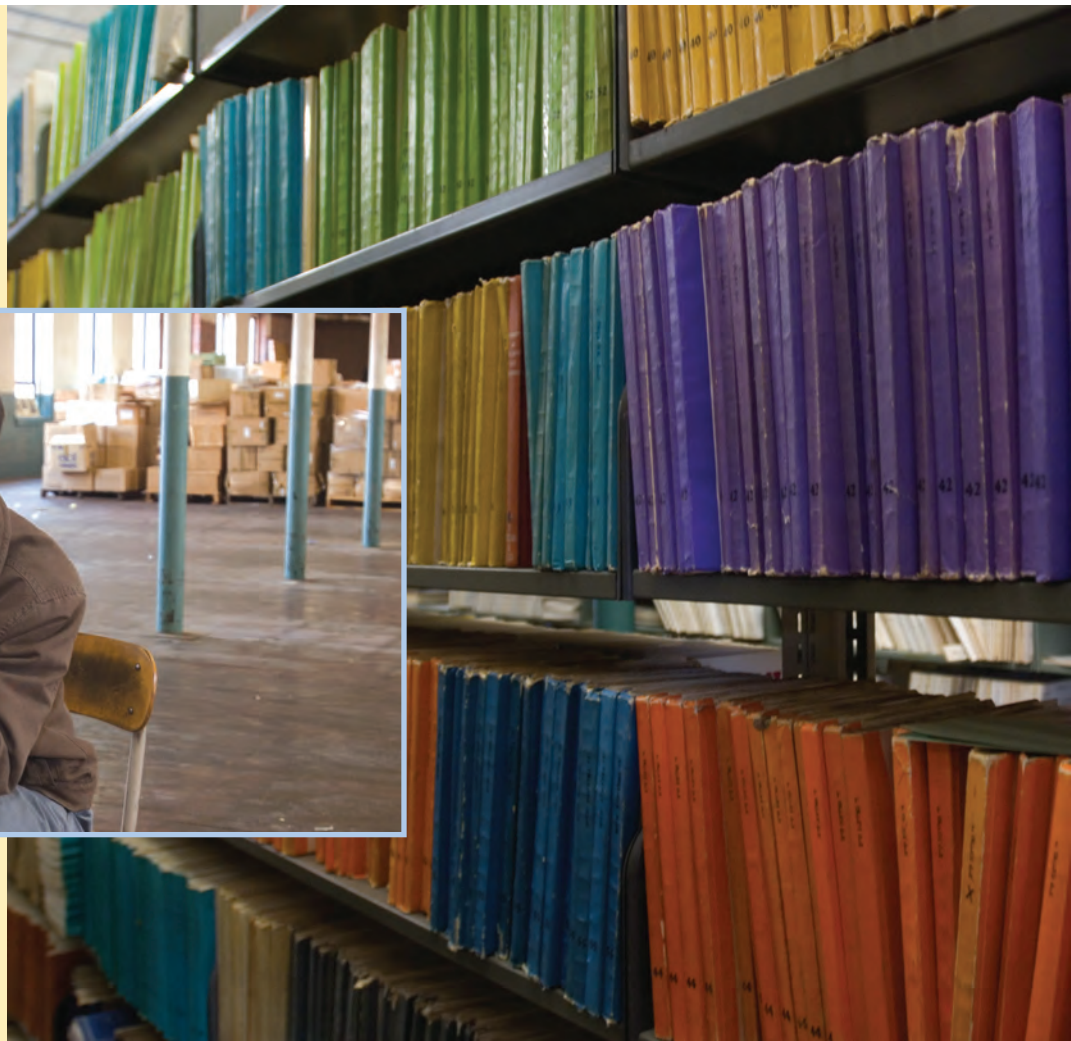
AL: We know many of them already – people like Ilan Stavans at Amherst College, who is a member of our board and a contributor to *Pakn Treger*; and Naomi Seidman, who was actually an intern here when the program first started and is now Koret Professor at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union. We are able to attract the very best people in the field. There will also be a director of the education center – a dean or a provost responsible for curriculum and program development, whose background is in Yiddish culture. There may be other people – an in-house language instructor, scholars-in-residence, that sort of thing.

TA: Is any of this going to be available to the local community? I'm thinking of performances and lectures, which are so popular.

AL: Of course. We already offer wonderful weekly public programs, and we're going to expand them. The new building will include a large multipurpose space, which can be used as a performance hall for audiences of up to 275. Our present theater, which is beautiful, a magical space, with perfect acoustics, holds only 78 people. It's just right for much of what we do, but frequently we have to turn away two or three times as many people as we can accommodate. Sometimes we have to run repeat performances or screenings. Our new performance hall will have full theatrical capability, so we'll be able to stage dance performances and big theatrical productions. There'll be a large kosher kitchen to accommodate participants who attend our conferences and workshops.

TA: Have you been rolling out this four-point program when you go on the road?

AL: Yes. And people really like it. And these are just the *first* four goals of the education program. I guarantee that another dozen ideas will follow. You know, some people think I must



Collection Manager Aaron Rubinstein at work orchestrating the packing and moving in Holyoke.

have a hard time coming up with new ideas. I'm almost embarrassed to tell them that my job is more about tamping down the ideas and picking the ones that we can realistically do or that will have the greatest impact. We have a very talented staff and they're always bubbling over with suggestions.

In Yiddish, they say a *bisl un a bisl makht a fule shisl*: a little bit of everything makes a full plate. It's very true in this case. We'll start small and realistically and then steadily grow.

TA: So the beginning is education?

AL: The beginning and the end is education. It's the process of sharing a culture. And not only for Jewish audiences. Yiddish represents a world literature and a culture that's deserving of a diverse worldwide audience. We certainly find that in our internship program: many students are Jewish, but many are not. A lot of people come from complex backgrounds. Young people with one Jewish parent or one Jewish grandparent ask: Who are we? What's this all about?

TA: You've been in the Yiddish cultural and literature business for almost 30 years. Have you noticed a difference in the wider public's understanding of and appreciation for Yiddish?

AL: Yes. It's been dramatic. In 1978, Isaac Bashevis Singer, a great Yiddish writer, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Perhaps that was the start. As Bashevis Singer himself said in Stockholm, the award was not only recognition of his writings; it was recognition of Yiddish itself. In some ways, Yiddish literature is the quintessential modern literature. It doesn't begin until the 1860s. It was a literature in which a traditional society met the modern world, so it has all the great themes of modern literature: the emergence of the individual; the working out of new sexual mores between men and women; the issues of generational conflict, of power and powerlessness. I think that explains a lot of its universal appeal. For example, Sholem Aleichem, who wrote in the early years of the 20th century, has been translated into 30 languages and is today more popular than ever in Japan, which is a culture intensely concerned with issues of tradition and change. Sholem Aleichem speaks directly to those issues.

TA: Back to your plans for education.

AL: To make all this possible, we simply need more space. We opened the doors to our existing building ten years ago. And although we were certainly looking to the future, we were still largely focused on the most urgent work at hand, which was rescuing the books, processing the books, cataloging the books. That's what this building was primarily designed for. So as you walk into the building, you look down from a balcony level into the centerpiece of the building: our very large book repository, with row after row of Yiddish books.

Now one of the things we couldn't have known ten years ago was just how many books we'd end up collecting. People walk in here today and say, I've never seen so many books in one place in my life! But the truth of the matter is that the books here represent less than 10 percent of our collection. The rest are stored in a 19th-century mill building in Holyoke, 12 miles away. Our original idea was to allow people to look at the books in this building, but not handle them. We thought of the books as cultural artifacts that had to be protected. And the books were all there was ten years ago.

TA: So it was an exhibition, in a manner of speaking?

AL: In a sense. Of course, we had extensive museum exhibitions upstairs, which were designed to explain this culture to a broader public – the 99 percent of our visitors whose Yiddish is imperfect at best. The 10,000 people who come each year want to understand the culture, but very, very few can actually read these books.

TA: What changed?

AL: Not long after we moved into the building, it became apparent that there were still two very real problems to be overcome, even though the books themselves finally had a permanent home. First, even with all the volumes we'd collected, we didn't have enough copies of the most critical titles to meet demand. For example, *The Brothers Ashkenazi* by I. J. Singer is arguably the greatest Yiddish novel ever written. We have only a few copies in this entire collection! Not that the book wasn't widely read, but it was *so* well read, so much in demand, that few copies survived. Can you imagine an analogous situation in any other literature? Suppose that in all the libraries and all the bookstores in the world there were three copies left of *War and Peace,* three copies of *Moby Dick.* The United Nations would be convening an emergency session to deal with the crisis!

Well, we had that problem, along with the fact that so many of the books we had collected were printed on poor quality wood pulp paper, which has a very short life and is particularly vulnerable to pollution. Unlike today's cotton rag paper, it begins to decay very quickly, it becomes yellow and brittle. A lot of our books are literally crumbling, falling apart. So we decided to digitize the literature.

TA: How long did that take?

AL: Five years. Thanks to Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, the David and Barbara Hirschhorn Foundation, and dozens of other generous donors, we were able to use the latest technology to scan and store every page of approximately 13,000 discrete titles – almost four million pages, all of Yiddish literature compressed into files and stored on disks that fit into a shoebox. Now we can present a brand new, library bound, acid-free reprint edition of each title, on demand. And our latest project is to place the content of most of these books online, in fully searchable form, making Yiddish literature instantly accessible to everyone, everywhere. The effect of these breakthroughs is to make the "artifactual" books – the originals we've collected – less sacred. Suddenly we could let people touch the used books in the stacks, we could lower the price of each volume. That was part of what began to change our way of thinking.

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TA: But that's not the whole story.

AL: No, not at all. The real issue becomes education. We always knew that we would want to run small programs for college students and adults. But we couldn't have anticipated the way demand would increase. Something has changed in the Jewish community. I think that the assimilationist trend was reversed and a sea change began to take place. Maybe it had to do with a broader trend toward multiculturalism. When my grandparents came to America, religious pluralism was acceptable but cultural and linguistic pluralism was frowned upon. That's changed now. There's a much healthier, livelier, roiling mix of cultures in America. And Jews are ready to take their place and bring their own treasures into the light.

Twenty years ago, our first interns were ideologically committed to Yiddish, or they still had nostalgic feelings for grandparents or relatives who were immigrants and native Yiddish speakers. Today, that's gone. The students who come to us today have grandparents who themselves grew up in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Detroit, Houston, or Phoenix. It's a really different world. Today's students are curious, earnest, and motivated by common sense. Whether they're Jewish or not, they understand that Jews have played a critical role in human history. They understand that you can't skip a millennium of Jewish experience and sensibility and still know who you are. So they turn to Yiddish, the language that three-quarters of the world's Jews were actually speaking for 1,000 years. This doesn't preclude the study of Hebrew and ancient Aramaic texts; it doesn't preclude theological study, but it does complete the picture.

Our concern at the Book Center is to demonstrate that Jewishness, in order to evolve and adapt, has to continue to embrace the fullness of Jewish experience, to include not just religion but also culture and history and literature. We're trying to restore that sense of wholeness, that integrated view of Jewish life. That's the big job we have before us. The specific way we do that is to teach the part that's missing, the cultural side that informs the lives of American Jews, and yet that most of us know so little about.

TA: You break ground for the new building this coming fall. And if all goes well. . .

AL: We open our doors in a year.

TA: Let me ask you one final question. Is all this possible?

AL: By all practical measures, no. But we've done the impossible so many times before that I'm not worried. I'm sure we'll succeed. PT

Terry Y. Allen is a contributing editor to Pakn Treger.