

The American Jewish Newspaper Digitization Project

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Description: The objective of the American Jewish Newspaper project is to build “The Jewish Press in the USA” section, hosted by JPress, in collaboration with the National Library of Israel, Tel Aviv University, the MaRLI (Manhattan Research Library Initiative) partners (N.Y.U., Columbia University, New York Public Library), and additional partners. This presentation will talk about the genesis of the project and address how it was conceived. It will cover what was learned along the way, in terms of logistics, but will also explore the question: how can a number of institutions with very different cultures and resources available to them collaborate successfully? The presentation will conclude highlighting a number of planned “future developments.”

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Slide Comments

Slide 2 The Project

The project aims to develop the North American section on the Historical Jewish Press site. <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/>

Before our project pilot, the Historical Jewish Press had all of 2 American Jewish newspapers digitized, both in English: Leaser’s *The Occident* (1843-1869) and *The Chicago Sentinel* (1911-1949).

The site now has 7 titles available, 3 in English, 2 in Ladino, and 2 in Yiddish. Currently, in phase 2, work is underway for 4 additional newspapers: 2 in Ladino, 2 in Yiddish, and *The Chicago Sentinel* is being digitized through 1977.

Slide 3 The Project Partners

The partners collaborating on the project are:

Historical Jewish Press, consisting of The National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University, and **MaRLI**, the Manhattan Research Library Initiative.

In 2011, Columbia University Libraries, New York University Libraries, and The New York Public Library joined forces and founded MaRLI in an effort to coordinate their collecting; more specifically, to eliminate duplication of specialized materials, and to identify opportunities for shared collecting.

While MaRLI was primarily conceived of as sharing their rich collections, the directors at all 3 institutions encouraged subject librarians to be creative and explore ways of expanding the partnership into new areas. Collaborating on a project that creates digital primary source materials certainly does just that!

Historical Jewish Press offered itself as a natural partner, in terms of who would digitize and host the materials. The site defines itself as the place where researchers can search newspapers from Jewish communities worldwide and throughout the ages, regardless of language. At this point, it has a total of 54 newspapers representing the journalistic output from Jews in Palestine/Israel and the diaspora.

From the users' perspective searching one site where resources have been aggregated is preferable to having to move from site to site, assuming the user even knows where a specific resource can be found.

Furthermore, Historical Jewish Press, being academic and not for profit, assures that the project adheres to principles valued by the scholarly community, such as open access. This is becoming important in an information landscape in which copyright and the commercialization of information increasingly threaten intellectual creativity.

It also makes it more likely that the site is built with a view toward optimal performance for activities needed for research and instruction, including preserving and keeping the integrity of the original materials.

And last, but not least, Historical Jewish Press, has the expertise to handle Yiddish language materials.

Slide 4 Project Genesis

It all began with a scoping report commissioned by NYU Libraries in 2010, in order to get a better understanding of needed resources for Yiddish studies.

Rachel Kranson, then a Ph.D. student in NYU's Hebrew and Judaic studies department, spoke with NYC-based scholars in the field of Yiddish studies and, among several questions, asked what resources in digital form students, faculty and scholars would find particularly useful for research and instruction.

Her interviews found unanimous support for digitizing the American Yiddish press; it was identified as the most pressing project.

The top most requested newspapers were: *Der Forverts*, *Morgn Zhurnal*, *Der Tog*, and *Yidishes Togeblatt*.

Let me share with you 2 quotes from the Scoping Report, since they are quite illuminating:

David Roskies, professor of Yiddish Literature and Culture at JTS had this to say:

“Digitize the Yiddish press! ... Europe is already well covered ... America has nothing. So you should definitely start with the American Yiddish press ... this is a number 1 priority. Any self-respecting culture would have done this years ago.”

Jeremy Dauber, professor of Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture at Columbia University, was summarized as follows: There is a “desperate need to digitize the Yiddish press, as well as the little magazines and pamphlets. The vast majority of Yiddish literature first appeared, or solely appeared, in the press, even if it was subsequently published in other forms. For example, IB Singer was first published in the *Forward*. And as literary scholars become more interested in context ... we need to see what was printed alongside these works, what other issues were important at the time.”

Finally, and significantly, the Scoping Report found that a searchable version of the American Yiddish press would be very useful to researchers without the requisite language skills to read through a Yiddish newspaper. For example, a researcher could just enter search terms and come up with several relevant articles, which then could get translated.

I shared the report with my MaRLI colleagues to help us determine which newspapers to digitize. We knew that *Der Forverts*, the top candidate, was already negotiating with Historical Jewish Press. We therefore decided to focus our attention on the next level of titles.

To help us in the selection process, we developed several criteria.

Slide 5 Non-Subject Criteria

We started with non-subject criteria. In an effort to make the most of our resources, we decided to focus on newspapers not yet available in digital form. This may seem obvious, but for example an electronic version of *The Occident*, albeit content only not as it was printed, was already available on jewish-history.com before Historical Jewish Press decided to re-digitize the paper.

Therefore, a first important step for us was to identify newspapers already digitized and made available in general newspaper databases or included in other digitization initiatives.

For example, key English language titles from the American Jewish press are included in the Proquest Historical Newspapers database. Readex is another commercial vendor with some digitized newspapers.

Then there are the non-commercial digitization initiatives, such as the Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project; Chronicling America at the Library of Congress; the Ohio Memory Project, which includes the *Ohio Jewish Chronicle*; the Digital Library of Georgia, which digitized *The Southern Israelite*; and others. (More examples can be found here: <http://nyu.v1.libguides.com/AmericanJewishHistory>)

In terms of public domain, for the pilot phase, to keep it simple, we opted to digitize issues only up to December 31, 1922.

However, now for phase 2, we decided to digitize up to December 31, 1977, since newspapers without copyright notices are in the public domain. It just means that we will have to do some research.

Slide 6 User-Driven Criteria

In addition to what we learned from the Scoping Report, we also received informally collected usage data from the New York Public Library, which identified the following newspapers as being requested most often by readers: Forverts; American Hebrew (already digitized by Proquest); Morgn Zhurnal; Der Tog; Fraye Arbeter Shtime; Jewish Messenger (already digitized by Proquest); Hebrew Leader; and La Amerika.

Additionally, Jonathan Sarna, a member of the Historical Jewish Press Academic Commission, compiled for us a list of what he considers are the top 10 English language American Jewish newspapers. Looking over the list, there were only 2 newspapers that met our non-subject criteria (most importantly, not already digitized and in public domain). They were the *Los Angeles B'nai B'rith Messenger* (1897-) and the *Baltimore Jewish Times* (1919-).

Finally, informal conversations with scholars and Ph.D. students netted us recommendations of different types of newspapers, which we would want to realize in later phases of the project. For example, Hasia Diner suggested

newspapers/magazines geared toward children/young adults; and Gennady Estraikh mentioned publications that focused on members of specific trade groups as their audience.

Slide 7 Subject-Specific Criteria

In the absence of comprehensiveness, given the fragility of the source materials, we chose newspapers that would provide a flavor of the many voices representing the then Jewish community in America.

For example, I found this interesting tidbit in Aviva Ben-Ur's "Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) Press in the United States." (*Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. Jewish Women's Archive, 2009).

"Some of the most vitriolic debates concerning Sephardic women occurred in response to reports on the Sephardic immigrant community appearing in the Ashkenazic American press. In 1916, an internal debate among Sephardic male leaders was sparked after the journalist Celia Silbert, a librarian at the Educational Alliance, published an article on the Oriental Jewess in New York in an issue of the *American Jewish Chronicle*. The controversy...focused on Silbert's preference for the adjective "Turkish," rather than "Sephardic," to describe her subjects, and on the dismal picture she painted of the backward economic status of Oriental Jewish women."

Slide 8 Titles Selected

After applying our criteria we arrived at 5 titles that we proposed to our Historical Jewish Press partners as good candidates for digitization. You see 3 titles on this slide: one in Yiddish, Ladino, and English.

La Amerika. The 1913/14 *American Jewish Yearbook* had this to say about the title: "A weekly newspaper, *La Amerika* ... is now in its third volume. It was founded November 11, 1910, for the purpose of helping to organize the community. It circulates in all the Ladino communities of the continent."

Morgn Zhurnal was founded in 1901 by the politically conservative and religiously Orthodox publisher Jacob Saphirshtein. In 1916, it reached its peak circulation of 111,000, compared to the number of 199,000 of *Der Forverts*. (Based on Mordecai Soltes, *The Yiddish Press*, 1950)

Bnai Brith Messenger, according to Professor Jonathan Sarna and I quote: "This is the foremost Jewish newspaper of the West Coast. It chronicles the rise of Los Angeles from a minor community to the second largest Jewish community in the United States."

The other 2 papers we selected were: *Progreso*, another weekly Ladino paper, and *Di Varhayt*, the predecessor to *Der Tog*, with a circulation of 89,000 in 1916.

Slide 9 Project Genesis continued

In light of the fact that money would change hands, the partners decided to work out a Memorandum of Agreement that would serve as a legal document to: describe our project, its terms and objectives; define our partnership, particularly what each partner would contribute to the project; and settle on a timeline.

In terms of contributions, the partners basically played to their strengths. For example, New York Public Library contributed the content, and the National Library of Israel did the digitization work.

We have also now officially entered phase 2 of our project, since the MoA was just signed by the partners.

We basically continued on the trajectory we developed for phase 1, with the following exceptions:

We did commit to some copyright research, to enable us to digitize titles up to 1978.

We were successful in securing outside funding to supplement the funds coming from our own budgets.

Slide 10 Overarching Context

I also need to point to developments in teaching and learning, and the overall information landscape that had a direct influence on this project.

One is the importance of primary source materials in scholarship and teaching on every level, whether advanced or beginning. Our user-driven data speak to that.

According to Dan Hazen, former associate librarian for collection development at Harvard, two realities are compelling us to change how we define library success in today's environment.

The first reality is our shrinking collection budgets, and the other is the continually and fundamentally changing information landscape. (Just think of the electronic journals and ebooks tidal waves, and mass digitization efforts like HathiTrust).

Both realities have challenged us to think carefully on what we spend our funds, and how we build our collections.

Our success is no longer defined by quantity, the number of volumes added to the collection annually, nor is it defined by that rare title sitting on our Special Collections shelf.

Instead a new measure of our success is our ability to provide large corpora of digitized resources. Remember the Scoping Report, and conversations with scholars and students emphasized the importance of having access to digital and searchable primary source materials.

In light of the above, we MaRLI subject librarians decided to spend some of our collections budget and restricted funds on a project that the scholarly community has been asking for.

Slide 11 Future Developments

Broadening the selection of newspapers by genre (e.g., literary, humorous/satirical titles); by specific political, cultural, and religious leanings; by intended audiences (e.g., women, youth); by importance (e.g., unsuccessful short-lived papers).

Reaching out to entities that have newspaper digitization initiatives underway, such as Chronicling America at the Library of Congress or the Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project, and inviting them to integrate their materials into the Historical Jewish Press gateway.

We have had a meeting back in April to begin planning for an academic conference on the American Jewish press.

Potential date is fall 2016.

Current members of the planning committee, most likely to be expanded, include: Rebecca Kobrin from Columbia; Hasia Diner and Gennady Estraiikh

from NYU; Yaron Tsur from the Historical Jewish Press and Tel Aviv University; Judith Siegel from the Center for Jewish History.

Finding a US hosting site that would mirror the “Jewish Press in the USA” section on the Historical Jewish Press site, for preservation purposes. A suitable candidate might be the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) given their long-standing commitment to newspapers and foreign language materials.