

FROM MEMORIALS TO INVALUABLE HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION: USING YIZKOR BOOKS AS RESOURCES FOR STUDYING A VANISHED WORLD

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Description: This presentation will describe large existing collections of Yizkor Book held at libraries in the U.S. and abroad. The overview will include information on provisions for online searching capability and the availability of books for loan and/or for selected page duplication. An attempt will be made to present an in-depth analysis of over 500 Yizkor Books in terms of the localities (towns and countries), the country and date of publication, the language (primary and secondary), the availability of information on town history, the inclusion of photographs and name lists, and more.

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At the Libraries of Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, as well as at a number of other institutions around the world, there are collections of books locked in glass-enclosed bookcases. Most often these publications do not circulate. They are treated like rare books only more so because thieves have stolen them. These are the collections of Yizkor Books, memorial books to the victims of the Holocaust. What wealth is stored in these books to make them so valuable that they are worth stealing?

The purpose of this paper is to try to find answers to the question posed above by analyzing the contents of a core collection of about 500 Yizkor Books and to study them otherwise in order to establish what information can be gleaned from these material for the study of Jewish history and family genealogy.

Yizkor Books have been referred to variously as Yizker Bikher and Pinkeysim in Yiddish, chronicles, gedenkbuecher in German, and Sifre Zikaron in Hebrew. The word ‘Sefer’ can be used in referring to a book, any book, but also specifically to a holy book. All of these names are used to refer to the books written about towns and cities (shtetls), in Eastern Europe, published since 1943. The purpose was to document and to remember, to preserve and to commemorate and for the “...establishment of surrogate tombstones” (Kugelmass and Boyarin). As soon as the survivors realized the great losses they suffered personally and as a people, they had a need to find a way to commemorate their relatives and neighbors and to describe the world in which they had lived prior to the Holocaust. These “...are often eloquent voices of simple people determined to preserve a glimpse of a world they knew, loved, and lost” (Ibid). In the Jewish historical tradition, to achieve that goal they turned to the book. Using the written word, they found a means of documenting for posterity the history of the towns prior to World War II, events that swept over the towns during the war, and the fate of individuals who had been the inhabitants of the towns. There was a very strong

sense among the survivors that if they could not have the physical connection to the dead that cemeteries usually constitute, at least they would have books as memorials. The first of this genre was the Lodz Yizkor Book published in 1943.

For the purposes of this paper, the strict definition of Yizkor Books is used in that these were written without any accepted guidelines, by survivors of a specific locality, who belonged to an organization, a landsmanshaft, with representatives in Israel, and the United States, and often also in Canada, and South America. The materials included were written by many authors and edited by one person or at times several people. The landsmanshaft organizations sponsored the publication of the books in limited numbers of 1,000 copies or less, for financial reasons, but also due to fear that not too many people other than families of the few survivors would be interested in purchasing them. As will be seen, the towns represented are spread out in Eastern Europe. There are some Yizkor Books about Hungarian towns, for instance. However, most of the books about Hungarian, German, and Czech towns are not included. These books were written mostly by Jewish or non-Jewish individuals, inhabitants of the towns who wanted to document the history of the town's Jewish population and their fate during the Holocaust. These types of commemorative books have been published all along with many well into the 90's. This is not the case with the Yizkor Books. The largest number was published in the 60's, many were published in the 70's, and then the numbers began to decrease. Chart No.1 illustrates the years of publication of the Yizkor Books discussed here.

Most of the Yizkor Books deal with one town or city, but there are books for countries or regions such as Greece, Lithuania, Galicia, Transylvania, and Ruthenia, and there are books that include a large city and the towns around it. Of the Yizkor Books used in this study, about 10% deal with two or more towns, and about 5% deal with countries or regions. It is for this reason that in 500 books more than 636 towns are represented.

There is no one conclusive number for Yizkor Books published due to the difference in definition as to what constitutes a Yizkor Book. In 1973, Abraham Wein talked about 400 that were written in the previous thirty years. Bass included 342 in a listing published the same year. Kranzler talks about 600 in 1979 and Hauptman mentions 800 in 1998. As defined here, the number is probably somewhere between Kranzler's and Hauptman's estimates. But no matter what number one accepts, the information available to us in Yizkor Books is included in a staggering number of pages, probably much higher than the 150,000 pages mentioned by Wein in 1973. He said already then that they "contain a greater amount of information and data on the life of Eastern European Jewish communities than all other publications" [on the subject]. Thousands of authors were involved in the writing of the books, probably at least 10,000, and there were over 1,000 editors. Some editors such as David Stockfish and A. Shtein worked on numerous Yizkor Books. In some, historians were involved, but most contributors were people who experienced the happenings and were eyewitnesses rather than intellectuals or researchers. Often the editors were members and functionaries of the landsmanschaft organizations in Israel and the Diaspora.

Yizkor Books were written in Hebrew and in Yiddish. Many had the same text in both languages to make it possible for those who did not know Yiddish any more to read about the towns of origin of

their families. Some have summaries or introductions in English and a few in Spanish since the books were underwritten by family members living in the United States and in South America, mainly in Argentina and Mexico. Since the 90's, JewishGen has been coordinating efforts to translate Yizkor Books into English so that increasingly they are available for those who are not able to read Hebrew and Yiddish. Chart No. 2 illustrates the distribution of languages of Yizkor Books. The Yiddish of these books is of great importance as a source of local dialects and slang used generally and developed during the Holocaust in various regions of Eastern Europe. However, Hebrew is the predominant language. Of the collection examined here, 62% are in Hebrew. This is not surprising as 412 were published in Israel. The United States follows with 74. The distribution by country of publication is illustrated in Chart No. 3.

Before World War II, over three million Jews lived in Poland, at the time the country with the largest Jewish population. Half a million lived in its largest cities, Warsaw and Lodz. All but 10% of them perished during the Holocaust. It is therefore not surprising that close to a half of the Yizkor Books are about towns in Poland. Ukraine follows with 110 and Belarus with 76. Chart No. 4 illustrates the distribution of towns by country. Some towns have two or even more Yizkor Books. Of the towns in this study, 13% were in this category. Most often these are books about the larger towns with large Jewish populations. Some towns and certainly regions have multi volume Yizkor Books such as Slonim with four volumes, Pinsk and Vilna with three, Bessarabia with three, and Lithuania with four.

Sizes of the towns described in the Yizkor Books vary from the largest, Warsaw, with over 300,000 to small ones with as few as 10 Jewish inhabitants. The median size is 2,500 people.

Identifying towns can be quite a challenge at times since the names changed so often. As a result, some towns have as many as 15 different name versions. What is now called Navahrudak was Novogrudek or Nawardok at one time. Here at least the names are similar. There are examples of towns with totally different names in different periods. There are names that are very common and appear again and again in different areas of Eastern Europe, and there are towns with similar sounding names. The Library of Congress has an authority file for most of the towns and that resource was used in this study. In cases where it has not established a name, NIMA is used as the authority.

It is important to keep in mind that there are additional sources for the study of pre World War II European Jewry such as the German gendenkbueche. These include very precise information on the fate of the town's Jews because it was available in the towns' records. Inhabitants had to register every change of address and so one can trace families using the town archives. Some of the books were published quite early such as the Munich memorial book that came out in 1958. But many have been published in the years since then and these continue to be written.

In spite of the fact that no basic guideline was used for the writing of Yizkor Books, the information included in them can be generally categorized. Clearly, not everyone includes all the information, but the following reveals the wealth of knowledge that can be gleaned from these books. Many have sections on all or some of the following:

- The history of Jewish life in the town from the first settlement, including everyday life, market days, transportation, religious life, role of women, relations with Christian neighbors, etc.
- Documentary materials relevant to that history, such as articles from newspapers, copies of certificates, registers of dead, and much more.
- Illustrations such as detailed maps of the town, sometimes with streets in the Jewish quarter and names of families that lived there, photographs of meetings, rabbis, school children, synagogues, parks, and more.
- Information on the economic life of the Jewish population including lists of professions at different periods in the town's history, Jewish factories, etc.
- Literary works by local writers such as poems, songs, stories, etc.
- Description of what happened to the population during the Holocaust, where they were transported to, how many escaped and to where, participation of town inhabitants in the partisan movements, and correspondence between organizations in the town and world Jewish organizations.
- Descriptions of concentration camps and forced labor camps in the town's vicinity.
- Diaries written during the Holocaust.
- Names of collaborators.
- Names of German officers who were responsible for major actions against the Jewish population of the town.
- Descriptions of Righteous Gentiles in the town.
- Details on waves of immigration especially to Palestine.
- Lists of local people who fought and died during the War of Independence.
- Indexes of names and places.
- Lists of names of town inhabitants who perished during the Holocaust.

These categories represent information that is incredibly valuable for the study of Eastern European Jewry. Research has been done using the information, but much more remains to be evaluated. One must keep in mind, as Wein suggests, that the veracity is at times questionable. They were written with a defined purpose to show the beauty of the life that was destroyed, and not by objective historians determined strictly to document the times. Where these exist, archival records of towns can be used for comparison purposes. The full spectrum of subjects on Jewish life in the shtetls can be researched extensively based on this treasure trove of information. Family genealogists can benefit greatly from these books. Often a picture included may show a relative, a map can show the name of the street where the family lived and the proximity to the school, synagogue, market. Descriptions of common local professions may apply to family members, and names lists often include family names. Even in cases where a large part of the family immigrated to the United States or Palestine early in the 20th century, very often some members remained only to perish with their progeny during the Holocaust. These are a few examples of how Yizkor Books can be used in studying family history.

For the survivors of the Holocaust who came from Eastern Europe to the United States, to Israel, and elsewhere, the first task was to establish a new life for themselves. Many did so by assimilating and

in the process losing contact with their roots. Well into the 20th century, comfortable in their surroundings, these same people and their descendants have been anxious to re-connect to their roots by traveling to their places of origin and by collecting any information. The great value of Yizkor Books is that they can be most helpful in this process for individuals studying their genealogy as well as in the study of the history of the period in general.

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YEAR OF PUBLICATION

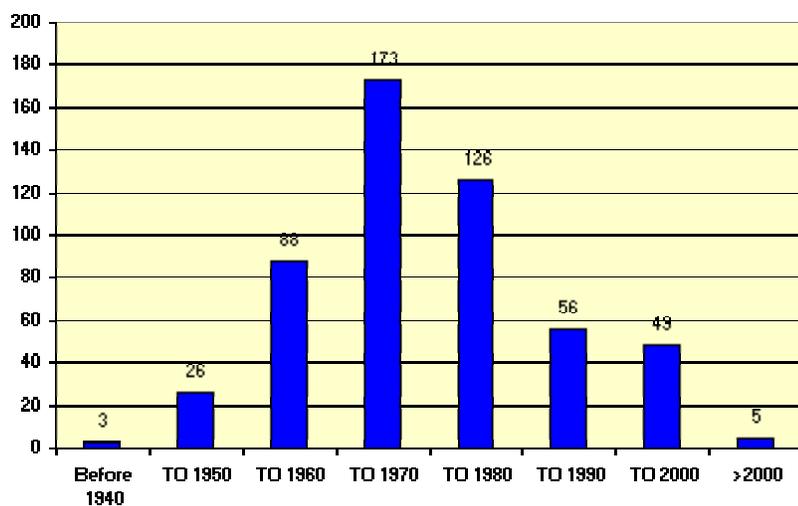


Figure 1

PRIMARY LANGUAGE

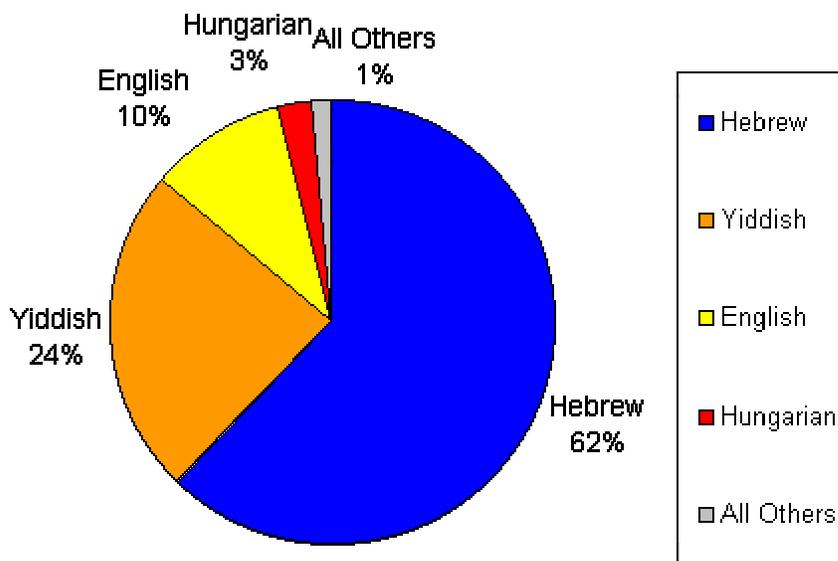


Figure 2

COUNTRY OF PUBLICATION

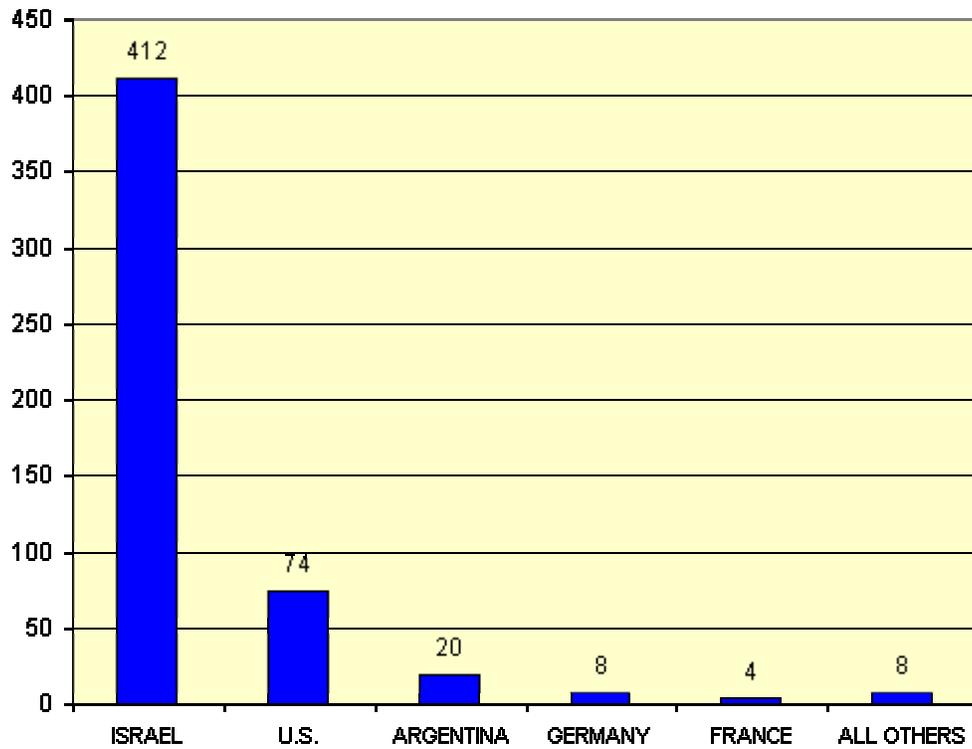


Figure 3

COUNTRY OF MEMORIALIZED TOWNS

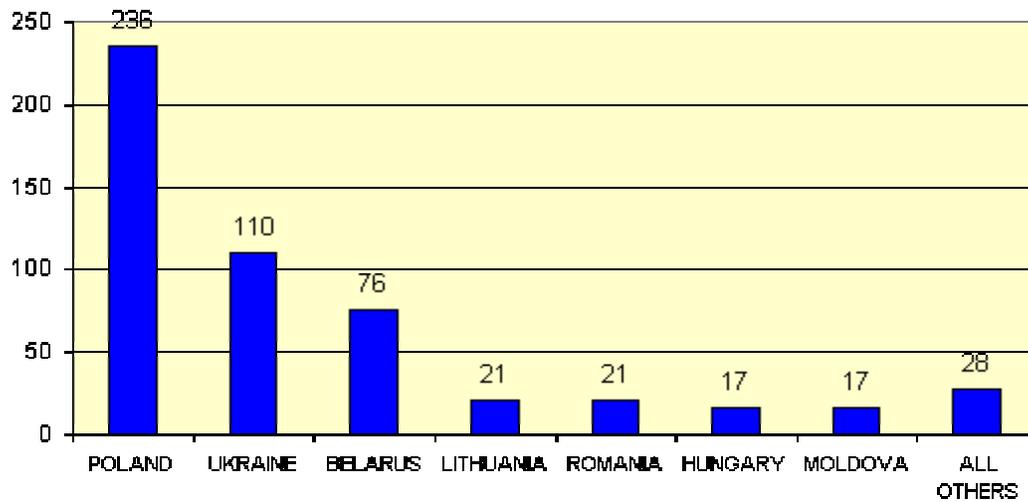


Figure 4