



Outwitting History

The Massachusetts
Book Award Winner in
Nonfiction for 2005



A Reading and
Discussion Guide



Prepared by
the Massachusetts Center for the Book
www.massbook.org

OUTWITTING HISTORY SUMMARY

When he was a twenty-three-year-old graduate student, Aaron Lansky stumbled upon an alarming fact: throughout North America, thousands of Yiddish books—books that had survived Hitler and Stalin—were being discarded and destroyed. As an older generation passed on, more often than not their precious Yiddish volumes were literally thrown in the trash by children and grandchildren unable to read the language. An entire literature was on the verge of extinction. So Lansky issued a public appeal for unwanted Yiddish books. The response was overwhelming.

When Lansky started out, it was believed that fewer than 70,000 Yiddish-language books existed. Lansky and a team of young volunteers hauled books from cellars, attics, synagogues, abandoned buildings, and even Dumpsters and recovered that number in six months. Twenty-five years and one and one-half million books later, the National Yiddish Book Center is one of the fastest-growing Jewish cultural organizations in the world.

Outwitting History is an inspiring adventure tale told with the exuberance of a man whose passion and persistence created a home for a precious legacy. And it confirms the prediction made by Isaac Bashevis Singer when he accepted the Nobel prize: “Yiddish has not yet said its last word.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On their first trip to New York to look for Yiddish books, Lansky and his fellow students stop for lunch at the Garden Cafeteria (page 20). The humorous scene that follows highlights the central theme of difference and similarity developed throughout the book. How does difference yield to common cause at the physical level and the emotional level in this vignette? Where do you find these themes further developed in the book?
2. Characters in this story are dressed in particular and significant ways. How do the clothes help us to understand people, priorities, and cultures in *Outwitting History*?

3. Lansky describes himself as the man who saved Yiddish books (rather than Yiddish literature). What do books mean to Lansky and to the people who donate them? Look for examples on page 37 and page 45. What other passages about the meaning or importance of books did you notice? Do books bear meaning in your family or cultural history? And why did books take on such special importance for Jewish immigrants in America?

4. Why did so many older Jews consider their Yiddish books their *yerushe* or “inheritance”? How is this concept of inheritance different from or similar to your own?

5. Much is made of the differences between the Hebrew and Aramaic books that scholars read and the Yiddish books that Lansky too often finds heaped in dusty piles in attics and basements. The differences are those of classical and popular culture, of high and low art. How do those distinctions play out in the book? How do other distinctions between high and low culture affect your life?

6. Discuss some of the ways the next generation considered themselves to be “unlike” their immigrant grandparents. Is it unusual to find children more interested in the generation of their grandparents than that of their parents?

7. Lansky describes the National Yiddish Book Center as a “home” for Yiddish books. Where had these books been living before? Why did they need a home?

8. When Lansky wanted to start the National Yiddish Book Center, he came full circle, to Amherst, Massachusetts, where he first learned to read Yiddish. What motivated this choice?

9. What opposition to a National Yiddish Book Center did Lansky encounter and have to overcome? What were the political and fiscal reali-

ties with which he grappled? Do you think most start-up nonprofits face similar challenges?

10. Lansky describes the Canadian immigration experience as a “mosaic” rather than a melting pot (page 227). What does he mean by this? How did American Jewish culture and Canadian Jewish culture develop differently?

11. This is a story, finally, of local heroes, of individuals who make contributions to a larger good. Who is your favorite local hero or what is your favorite vignette from the book? How does this personal story fit into the larger historical context?

12. In the end, do you think Yiddish “outwits” history? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

1. Meals and food play a central role in *Outwitting History*. Plan a potluck for your discussion group using some of the dishes mentioned in the book.

2. Isaac Bashevis Singer—among other accomplished writers in Yiddish—is mentioned often in this account. Read aloud his short story “Gimpel the Fool.” What makes this story relevant today?

3. Research other Yiddish authors at the website of the National Yiddish Book Center (www.yiddishbookcenter.org).

4. Place a long sheet of paper on a table. Using *Outwitting History* as a guide, draw a time line of the story of Yiddish.

5. The English language has been enriched by many Yiddish words. Discuss the meaning of words such as *shmaltzy*, *kibitz*, *shmooze*, *chutzpah*,

glitch, and mishmash. What other Yiddish words can you find in English use today? Create a list for your group.

6. Imagine that you are moving to a place with no knowledge of American culture or English language. What books would you select to reflect American culture, values, and language? If you can, gather those books together, and see if they will fit on a shelf, in a bag, in a box—or perhaps you will need a refrigerator packing crate! How can you preserve your selection of books? Who will inherit them?



The Massachusetts Book Awards are a program of the Massachusetts Center for the Book, an affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. We work with the national center and within a network of fifty state-center affiliates across the country to promote “books, reading, literacy, and libraries.” The Massachusetts Center for the Book is supported by a partnership among the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library, Hampshire College, the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, and Simmons College, with additional support from Five Colleges, Inc., and the Massachusetts Library Association.