

Outwitting History: The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books



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The great Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich was delivering a lecture in Finland when the Nazis invaded his native Poland. The lecture saved his life. He made his way to New York, where he opened his doors to new students. Many thought his work was hopeless—especialy since half of the world's Yiddish speakers had been killed in the Holocaust. Asked why he persevered, Weinreich answered simply: "Because Yiddish has magic, it will outwit history."

And so it has—though in ways few could have imagined. In 1980, a twenty-three-year-old student named Aaron Lanksy set out to rescue the world's abandoned Yiddish books before it was too late. Precious volumes that had survived Hitler and Stalin were being passed down from older generations of Jewish immigrants to their non-Yiddish-speaking children—only to be thrown away or destroyed. With little more than his own chutzpah, Lansky issued a worldwide appeal for unwanted Yiddish books, and the response was overwhelming.

Outwitting History is an adventure tale filled with unforgettable characters and told with the exuberance of a man whose passion led him from house to house, country to country, collecting treasured books and heartfelt, often hilarious stories of the vibrant intellectual world these older Jews inhabited. Lansky and a team of young volunteers crisscrossed America, shlepping books from attics and basements, demolition sites and Dumpsters, while shmoozing with their owners, who insisted on feeding them a little nosh—gefilte fish, kasha, blintzes, latkes, kugel—before handing over, one book at a time, their beloved literary history.

When Lansky started out, experts believed that fewer than 70,000 Yiddish-language books still existed. Twenty-five years and 1.5 million books later, the organization Lansky founded, the National Yiddish Book Center, is one of the largest and fastest-growing Jewish cultural groups in the world. As he takes us along on his groundbreaking journey, Lansky explores the roots of the Yiddish language and introduces us to the brilliant Yiddish writers—from Mendele to Sholem Aleichem to I.B. Singer—whose lasting cultural relevance is evident on every page. He shares the humor, tenacity, and love for the written word that unites Jewish immigrants with everyone who cares about the future of great literature. And he enables us to see how an almost-lost culture is the bridge between the old world and the future.

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