

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

by Aaron Lansky

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

## **A Reading and Discussion Guide**

Prepared by

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### **SUMMARY:**

When he was a 23-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 Jewish 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 1.5 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. (Hardcover pp 20 ff). 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 and 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 (HC page 37 and 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 difference between the Hebrew and Aramaic books that scholars read and the Yiddish books that Lansky too often finds heaped in dusty piles of 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 oppositions to a National Yiddish Book Center did Lansky encounter and have to overcome? What were the political and fiscal realities 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. (HC, pp. 227) What does he mean by this? How did American 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](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org)).
4. Place a long sheet of paper on a table. Using *Outwitting History* as a guide, draw a timeline of the story of Yiddish.
5. The English language has been enriched by many Yiddish words. Discuss the meaning of words such as schmaltzy, kibitz, shmooze, chutzpah, glitch, and mish-mash. 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?

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from the National Yiddish Book Center website <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/+9>

Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1955, Aaron Lansky grew up in a Jewish home where books were valued, and where Yiddish was mostly a "secret language" spoken by his mother and grandmother when they wanted to keep something hidden from him and his two brothers.

It wasn't until 1973, when as a student at Hampshire College he took one of the first courses ever offered on the Holocaust, that Lansky developed a passionate interest in the culture the Nazis had sought to destroy. "I was 19 when I began studying Yiddish," Lansky recalls. "Suddenly an entire universe opened up to me. It was like discovering Atlantis, a lost continent, a treasure-trove of Jewish tradition and culture, sensibility, wisdom and passion, all locked up in this amazing modern literature."

After graduating from Hampshire College in 1977 with a B.A. in modern Jewish history, Lansky enrolled in a graduate program in East European Jewish studies at McGill University in Montreal. There he discovered that large numbers of Yiddish books were being destroyed – not by anti-Semites, but by Jews who could not read the language of their own parents and grandparents. Convinced that someone had to save those books, Lansky, ignoring the cautions

of experts who considered the task impossible, left McGill and started what he then called the National Yiddish Book Exchange. He set up shop in an old factory in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he shared space with "a weaver, a potter, and a woman who sold goat's milk."

In 1980, when Aaron Lansky issued his first public appeal for old Yiddish books, it was estimated that only 70,000 Yiddish volumes were extant and recoverable. He rescued that many within six months. Today the National Yiddish Book Center's collection totals over 1.5 million volumes. Esquire Magazine, in 1984, included Lansky in its list of "The Best of the New Generation: Men and Women Under 40 Who Are Changing America." He has since received numerous awards and recognitions, including a National Jewish Book Award, honorary doctorates from Amherst College and the State University of New York, and a 1989 "Genius Grant" from the MacArthur Foundation. He lives with his wife Gail, their two daughters, Sasha and Chava, and a dog named Lily.



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