

Annual
Bulletin
2019



Jewish Studies Program

At Cornell University

*Program
Highlights
2018–19*

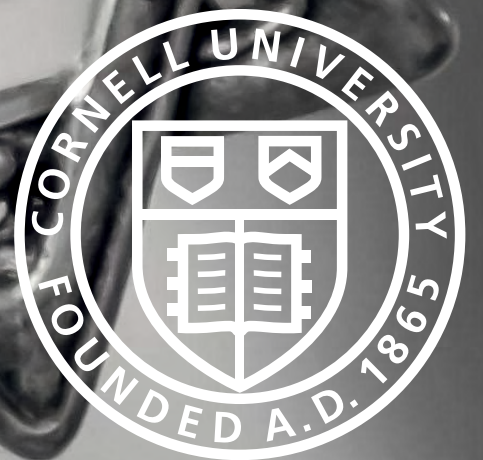
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“Bogdan’s Journey”
With the Help
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Dear Friends,



To quote that great band Earth, Wind, and Fire, **“we just wanna give gratitude”** for all the good things that came our way during this academic year.

Many of those that have already come to fruition are described in this newsletter. Some we don't have the space to describe in the detail they deserve, such as Bill Stern's generous offer to help us complete our set of a historic Babylonian Talmud printed in Germany in the late 1940s (see photograph above). Others are major gifts that will enrich and deepen Cornell's course offerings in Jewish Studies. These include the Herbert and Stephanie Neuman Chair in Hebrew and Jewish Literature, and the Bruce E. Slovin Assistant Professorship in American Jewish Studies. We look forward to sharing more news about these major gifts with you as plans are finalized.

I'm grateful, too, for the new burst of student engagement, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and immensely heartened by the continuing support of the Friends of Cornell

Jewish Studies. I also want to acknowledge the support of our former Arts and Sciences Dean Gretchen Ritter and of our new Dean Ray

Jayawardhana. My faculty colleagues in Cornell Jewish Studies constantly demonstrated, in their teaching and research, the vitality of Jewish Studies as a scholarly endeavor. And we couldn't do it without our staff, Julie Graham, Chris Capalongo, and Ayla Cline.

For all of these and more, and to each of you for reading, for attending events in Ithaca and New York, and for your support, my gratitude.

Stay well—

Jonathan Boyarin

Paul and Bertha Hendrix Director of Jewish Studies

The Pearl and Otto Delikat Holocaust Memorial

The Pearl and Otto Delikat Holocaust Memorial Fund was established in January 2019 shortly after the passing of Otto Delikat (father of Michael Delikat, '74 and grandfather of Stacey Delikat '04 and Jonathan Delikat, '10) at age 96. The Fund will support and recognize student research in the Holocaust and Jewish culture in the Cornell Jewish Studies Program.

Born in 1922 in Vienna, Austria, Otto was arrested by the Nazis in 1940 for the “crime” of being Jewish and going to a movie theatre. After a year in a prison in Austria, Otto was sent to the Flossenburg concentration camp in Bavaria Germany where he was one of only eight survivors. Sent to Auschwitz in 1942 and assigned to the Birkenau railroad siding, he sorted the luggage taken from the new arrivals as many were immediately sent to the gas chambers. Following many close brushes with death from illness and Nazi brutality, in 1944 he was transported to clean up the evidence of genocide in the Warsaw Ghetto. From there, Otto went on a death march to Dachau and then to Muhlendorf, a forced labor camp where prisoners worked underground building silos for German V-2 rockets. In April 1945, the Nazis loaded the remaining Muhlendorf survivors on cattle cars, planning to take them to the Alps and kill them. Allied bombers disabled the train tracks, and two days later the Allies liberated about 1,000 of the survivors on the train. After the war was over, Otto assisted Allied intelligence in hunting down Nazi war criminals. He met Pearl, a Hungarian Jew and Birkenau survivor, in a displaced persons camp. They married in Germany, where their first child Janet was born, and with the support of UJA/Federation funds, emigrated to the USA in 1947.

When Otto received the Man of the Year Award at his synagogue in 1994, his rabbi wrote that Otto “reminds us of where we have come and what Jews have endured. But more than all else, he reminds us that, yes, there is a rebirth for Jews, and that we rise again with dignity.” What now could be more fitting than to commemorate the life of Pearl and Otto — and so many of their generation — by helping to pass along Jewish memory and culture to the coming generations?

Highlights of Our Public Programs

Our public program series continues apace. Some highlights of this past year included:

Dr. Elissa Sampson delivered a talk on “A History of Jewish Social Justice” in mid-October at Manhattan’s East End Temple. November saw the first event sponsored by the newly formed undergraduate Jewish Studies Club. Dr. Erez Pery came to Cornell for a screening of his film “The Interrogation,” which focuses on the post-war interrogation of Rudolf Höss (see article page 3). Our own Professor Lauren Monroe gave a talk on “Stripping Off the Robe: New Light on Biblical Joseph,” on November 7.

The following week, Klezmer violinist Alicia Svigals and pianist Donald Sosin played their newly commissioned score at Cornell Cinema as accompaniment for a showing of “The Ancient Law,” a

German-Jewish silent film from 1923 about an orthodox rabbi’s son who yearns to become an actor. In early December, we returned to New York City, with an encore performance of the musical drama “Monish,” based on the classic Yiddish poem by I.L. Peretz, performed by the “Big Galut(e)” ensemble at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan.

In February 2019, Jewish Studies hosted a well-attended talk by Professor Dorian Bell on “Viral Populism: Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and the Refugee ‘Crisis.’” On March 4, director Lawrence Loewinger joined us for the Ithaca premiere of his Polish award winning film “Bogdan’s Journey.” Kielce, Poland was the site of Europe’s last Jewish pogrom — in 1946. The film describes the determined efforts of Bogdan Bialek, a Catholic Pole who refuses to let the people of Kielce forget the legacy of that pogrom. (See student Barr Lavi-Romer’s response to the film, at page 7.)

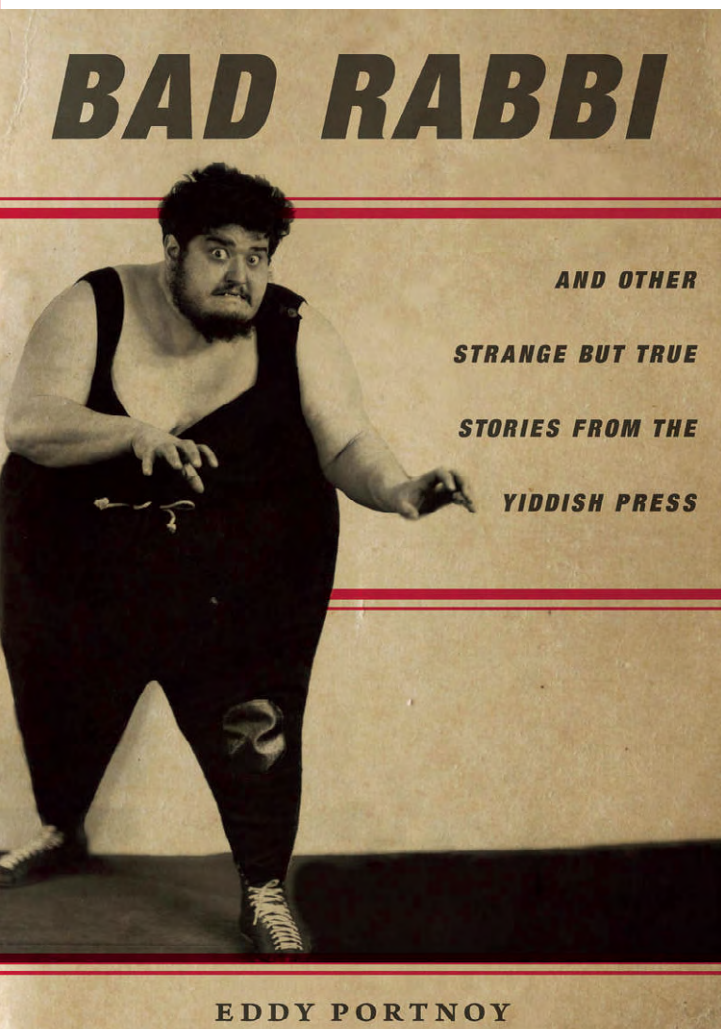
The similar and different experiences of Asians and Jews in modern America is a topic at the cutting edge of academic Jewish studies.

Judith Cohen, Chief Curator of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Historian, to Ithaca for a series of events on March 24-25. The primary purpose of Cohen’s visit was to meet with people from the Central New York area who are descendants of Holocaust survivors, examine the priceless artifacts they possess, and provide guidance on the process of donating their unique items to permanent Shoah archives.

On April 15, Professor Jodi Magness from UNC-Chapel Hill spoke on “More than Just Mosaics: The Ancient Synagogue at Huqoq in Israel’s Galilee.” Since 2011, Professor Magness’s excavations have brought to light the remains of a monumental, fifth century synagogue building paved with stunning and unique mosaics, including biblical scenes and the first non-biblical story ever discovered decorating an ancient synagogue.

Our final events of the year included lectures by Jonathan Karp, Associate Professor in the Departments of Judaic Studies and History at Binghamton University, on “Asians and Jews: Overrepresented Minorities?” and Dr. Nora Rubel on “A ‘Jewish’ Joy of Cooking?” sponsored by the Jewish Studies Club along with the Program. ♦

For more information please visit the news section of our website at <http://jewishstudies.cornell.edu>.



Scene from “The Ancient Law”

Eddy Portnoy, Academic Advisor and Exhibitions Curator at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, joined us for a discussion of his book, *Bad Rabbi: And Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press*, on March 11. A mid-March workshop organized by Postdoctoral Fellow Cara Rock-Singer on “Gendering and Embodying the Jew: Judaism, Secularism, and the Politics of Difference,” provided a day of intense and fruitful discussion with faculty from Cornell and elsewhere as well as graduate students. Cornell University and Ithaca College Jewish Studies Programs joined forces to bring

Student Highlights

Graduate Student Profile

Editor's note: We asked our first-year Ph.D. student Re'ee Hagay to tell us a bit about what brought him to Cornell. He writes:



I remember being 12 years old in my father's car on the way to our weekly visit in my grandparents' home in Holon, Israel, as we listened together to the Beatles' albums, including George Harrison's songs with the sitar, tambura, tabla and other instruments that colored the music with Indian sound. My father told me that these sounds evoked his memories of Iraqi music he

had heard during family celebrations as a child, and explained this connection by pointing out the relative geographical proximity between Iraq and India. This shared listening experience prodded me to consider the concrete and imaginary relations between sounds, memories, and geographic spaces, questions that are still at the heart of my academic work.

I have been exploring the continuous engagement of Iraqi-Jewish cantors with Arabic music. The cantors' memories reveal modern and ancient layers of the past, when multi-directional routs of migration between Baghdad, Jerusalem and Cairo were taken. The cantors' descriptions of their experience in Arabic music further overlap with theological discourses of diaspora and exile — in particular, via return to the mournful wailing of the Jewish exiles upon their arrival to the rivers of Babylon, as depicted in Psalm 137. Sounds of mourning continued to preoccupy my research in a more recent project dedicated to the biography of the late Yemenite-Israeli singer-songwriter, Ahuva Ozeri. As a child, Ozeri was sent by her mother to serve as a mourner in homes of deceased people in Tel Aviv's Yemenite quarter. The mourning continued to shape Ozeri's

musical practice in its changing forms and contexts. Created in South Tel Aviv, Ozeri's music derived from a range of traditions originating in other areas of the global south. These included blues and gospel from the southern United States, South Asian film music, and mid-twentieth century popular Egyptian songs. ♦

Undergraduate Jewish Studies Club

The Jewish Studies Club has celebrated its first academic year on campus. The club, consisting of about thirty members and five executive board members, hosted several activities throughout the year. The Club is devoted to building a community that will research and discuss Jewish culture and history.

On November 1st, the Club hosted a showing of the film "The Interrogation," including a discussion with director Erez Pery. "The Interrogation" focuses on the post-war questioning of Nazi Rudolf Höss, the Kommandant at Auschwitz from 1940 to 1943. He returned to that death camp in the summer of 1944 for Operation Höss: the rapid murder of Hungarian Jews. After the war, Höss appeared at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Before being sentenced to hanging, Höss was questioned and composed an autobiography titled *Commandant of Auschwitz*.

The screening and discussion had a great turnout, and there was a very productive discussion following the film in which Dr. Pery answered questions about various ethical and practical dilemmas raised by the film.

Dr. Pery is a senior lecturer at The School of Audio and Visual Arts at Sapir College in Israel. His work focuses on memory, history and trauma within visual culture. Dr. Pery's scholarship focuses on ethical and aesthetic issues related to the representation of Nazi concentration camps in post-war documentary films. He is also the Artistic Director of the Cinema South International Film Festival and editor of the Cinema South critical anthology.

This past spring semester, the club hosted lively dinners with Professor Jonathan Boyarin, Dr. Elissa Sampson, and Professor Olga Litvak. Each of them shared the stories of their personal career and



research journeys and provided career advice to the Club's members.

In early May, the Club hosted Professor Nora Rubel, Professor of Jewish Studies and Chair of the Department of Religion and Classics at the University of Rochester. She gave a lecture titled "A 'Jewish' Joy of Cooking? How a Twentieth Century Cookbook Containing Frog's Legs, Snails, and Ham Became a Beloved Jewish Icon." We can't wait to see what the Club does next year! ♦

Graduate Student Reading Group

In the fall 2018 semester, a group of Cornell graduate students whose research touches upon Jewish topics formed a Jewish Studies Reading Group. The students collectively selected the readings for their monthly meetings, not an easy task given their wide range of interests and "home" disciplines: Romance Studies, Comparative Literature, Middle Eastern Studies,

Besides the intellectual benefits of the meetings, the group also fosters camaraderie.

Political Science, and History. For their discussion of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," they invited Professor Boyarin to help them unpack the intricacies of that text, and they plan to invite more faculty to their meetings in the future. Besides the intellectual benefits of the meetings, the group also fosters camaraderie. One of the organizers of the group reported that its meetings were instrumental in propelling a reorientation of her research towards greater emphasis on Jewish history than she had initially planned, as it brought to the fore questions that she had not thought about beforehand, and illuminated the rich possibilities of engaging with the Jewish philosophical tradition. ♦

From Cornell to the Catskills and Back



Over 100 attendees revisited the Borscht Belt with an evening of nostalgic reminiscence.

On December 13, 2018, the Jewish Studies Program, in conjunction with the Smith Family Business Initiative in the SC Johnson College of Business, sponsored an event titled “The Borscht Belt Revisited: From Cornell to the Catskills and Back.” Members of the Friends of Cornell Jewish Studies alumni group — Bob Katz ’69, Eric Roth ’74, Laurie Roth ’75, Sam Seltzer ’48 and Andrew Tisch ’71 — served as co-hosts for the event, which was held at the College of Business’s New York office, located at 45 West 57th Street in Manhattan.

Over 100 attendees enjoyed an evening of nostalgic reminiscence. Ricelle “Bunny” Grossinger, the widow of Paul Grossinger ’36, the one-time owner of Grossinger’s Resort Hotel, and her grandniece and fellow hotelier, Rachel Etes Green ’98, regaled the crowd with stories of their family’s sprawling Catskills resort. Located in Liberty, New York, Grossinger’s was one of the largest establishments in the Catskills and renowned for its kosher cuisine and Borscht Belt entertainment. For over 65 years, Grossinger’s catered to a largely Jewish clientele from New York City. At its height, the resort included 35 buildings on 1,200 acres and attracted 150,000 guests a year. Co-host Bob Katz recounted

tales of his family’s ownership of Totem Lodge, a Catskills-style resort on 500 acres in Averill Park, New York. And Marisa Scheinfeld, an author and photographer who was raised in the Catskills, presented images from her recent book *The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America’s Jewish Vacationland*. Shot both inside and outside the former hotels, bungalow colonies and other Catskills sites that once attracted generations of American Jewish guests, Scheinfeld’s photos document the decline, demolition and, in some instances, repurposing of these abandoned structures.

From kugel to egg creams to borscht (of course), the food served at the event also took the crowd down memory lane. In keeping with traditional Catskills style, the variety of the food offerings was wide and the portions were huge. By all accounts, no one left hungry. ♦



LEARNING ON THE GROUND: The Lower East Side and Chinatown

Students in the undergraduate seminar “Lower East Side: Jews and the Immigrant City” came to New York City to experience the famous neighborhood’s history as well as learn about its contemporary challenges. AAP graduate students enrolled in a Mellon seminar on urbanism taught by Professor Pedro Erber joined the Jewish Studies class on March 24th, sparking vibrant discussions between students and faculty on the role that urban planning, renewal, community activism and housing play in immigrant life. As they walked the streets, students learned about the Lower East Side’s historically overcrowded tenement conditions that

City. Created by Mayor LaGuardia, it was built to ensure that pushcarts were taken off the streets by placing vendors into a supervised enclosed space. The market closed in May 2019 and its remaining vendors moved to a new space in Essex Crossing, a large new development. Next, a visit to a community garden illustrated how the neighborhood hit its nadir in the 1960s and how its burnt-out tenement lots became the basis for an urban gardening movement that helped reclaim the area for residents. Both gentrification and persistent poverty were visible as the students walked through the neighborhood, and became threads in understanding its current challenges.

A visit to a rare tenement synagogue gave students the opportunity to learn about its young congregation, see a community art exhibit now housed in its erstwhile women’s gallery, and learn about historical Jewish migration and immigrant societies. Students then visited a former synagogue that had become a community center after the congregation sold the building: the restoration of its memorial plaques was accompanied by the creation of new community murals. Its successful adaptive reuse serving neighborhood youth now allows for after-school programs and a community supported agricultural program providing neighborhood residents with well-priced, fresh healthy food direct from upstate farms.

After walking through Chinatown and learning about its communities, students visited the Museum of the Chinese in America (MOCA) to see Maya Lin’s new architectural makeover of the

Museum’s space. MOCA provided a special tour led by a Cornell graduate in Asian Studies, who guided students through gallery spaces and provided the context for the history of “Chinatowns” in the wake of the Federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The next day, a small group of students, faculty and alumni from Cornell and NYU participated in Triangle Fire commemoration activities, including chalking and lighting yahrtzeit candles outside of the erstwhile Lower East Side tenement residence of Julia and Israel Rosen, the only mother-son pair to die in the 1911 fire. Participating in a chain of memory and transmission of a story of Jewish and Italian immigrants allowed the archival materials the students studied at the ILR School’s Kheel Center to come alive. ♦



Chalking in Memory of Triangle Fire Victims

sparked rent strikes and changes to New York City’s building code.

The day started at the Essex Street Terminal Market, one of the last of its kind left in New York



At the Sixth Street Community Center (Former Munkatcher Shul)



Pinkesim in the Cornell University Library

During the summer of 2018, the Cornell University Library, with vital assistance from the Friends of Cornell Jewish Studies, acquired a critically important collection of *pinkesim*, or ledger books. These detail membership and communal activity for Jewish immigrant societies in the *landsmanshaft* tradition and for venerable synagogues established in New York's Lower East Side and elsewhere on the Atlantic seaboard. The 318 ledgers are primary sources of information for research focusing on the

descendants. The ledgers will reside in the vault of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections in Kroch Library. These *pinkesim* reflect the metamorphosis of New York's Lower East Side and other predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, offering insights into Jewish organizational, religious, and community life in America. Financial records in these ledgers record individual contributions, community expenditures, and free loans. Extensive texts of meeting minutes give witness to the use of Yiddish, and sometimes German and English, to record administrative and social aspects of community life. Many ledgers contain pages filled with well-formed script, now difficult to read without training, in the fluent Yiddish that was the primary language of millions of Eastern European Jews until the Holocaust.

The *pinkesim* also complement the Cornell Library's other collections deriving from the legacy of Central and Eastern European Jewish history and literature. These collections include a compilation of works produced in Hebrew, German, and Hungarian during the nineteenth-century Haskalah era, and the bilingual Catherwood Library archives of the Jewish immigrant Left, the latter being the focus of a digitization project directed by Dr. Elissa Sampson (<https://digital.library.cornell.edu/collections/iwo-jpfo>).

Following initial cleaning and examination of the *pinkesim*, the Cornell Library will catalogue the collection. An array of data from each ledger will facilitate research access via the Library's online catalogue, and the Library's Department of Preservation will stabilize the documents to make them accessible in the RMC reading room. Records for individual ledgers will start becoming available as early as the late fall of 2019. ♦

For further information on the collection of *pinkesim* or on other Jewish Studies collecting initiatives in the Cornell Library, please contact Patrick J. Stevens (pjs3@cornell.edu).

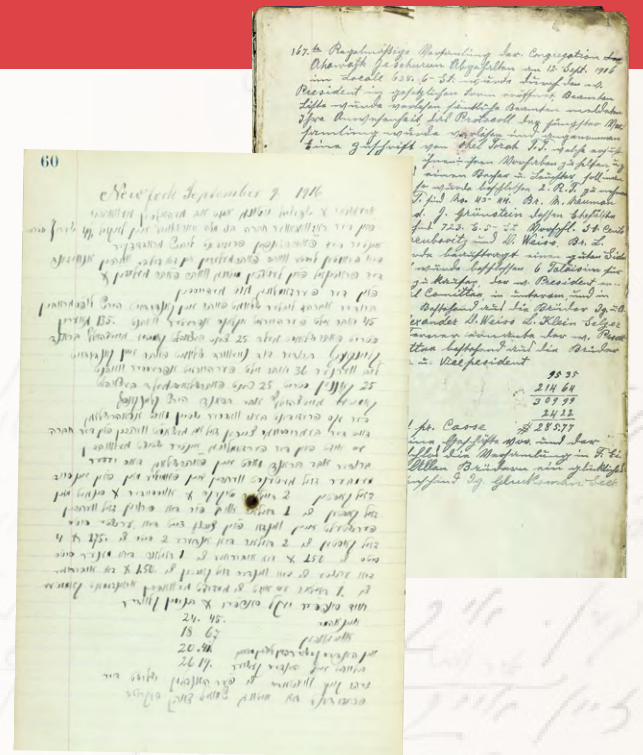


These *pinkesim* reflect the metamorphosis of New York's Lower East Side and other predominantly Jewish neighborhoods.



This pinkes was made to record the names of the deceased men and women of the Tomashov Lubelsk Sick Benefits Association

Jewish immigrant experience from before 1900 to about 1940. They document the history of communities transplanted from Central and Eastern Europe along with the acculturation of individuals who adopted America and bequeathed it to their



WATCHING

“Bogdan’s Journey”

Editor’s note: Students in Dr. Elissa Sampson’s class on the Jewish Lower East Side were asked to attend Jewish Studies events and write brief response papers. We wanted to share with our readers student Barr Lavi-Romer’s response to the film “Bogdan’s Journey” documenting one Catholic Pole’s refusal to let the memory of the 1946 pogrom in Kielce, Poland be forgotten (see “Highlights of our Public Programs,” p. 2).

There are few unfamiliar with the struggle against a violent history, whether this history belongs to a family, a nation, or a people. Yet how many of us actually question how blame, and shame, are passed down over time and generations? How many of us ask: can responsibility be placed upon a town? A people? A nation? How many of us wonder at the action required when responsibility is assumed? At the beginning of “Bogdan’s Journey,” we are momentarily transported back to July 4, 1946. We are shown a small Polish town, Kielce, a town that, at the start of this day, shelters more than two hundred Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. By the end of this day, more than forty Jewish refugees have been killed and eighty more injured by a combined



group of militia, soldiers, and townspeople, and Kielce is no longer simply a small Polish town. Kielce is now the site of what will become known as Europe’s last Jewish pogrom. Considered a forbidden subject in communist Poland, the pogrom went unaddressed and unmentioned for over thirty years. And years of silence have left discussion of the pogrom restricted and painful. Many refuse to acknowledge any Polish role in the pogrom, insisting that all responsibility lies with secret police. Others simply balk at the notion of reopening a decades-old wound. And then there is Bogdan Bialek, a Catholic Pole who is determined to confront Kielce’s history and the prejudice that lives on years after the pogrom. “Bogdan’s Journey” follows Bialek as he struggles to bring to the forefront a history that many would rather forget.

Bialek shoulders the questions that many choose to shirk. But what makes Bialek’s journey perhaps most captivating is his imperfections, his humanity, the vulnerability he demonstrates as he searches for the answers to unanswerable questions. At times Bialek is unwaveringly determined; at times he falls into fits of melancholy and disillusionment. He cries openly when speaking with Jewish survivors of the pogrom. Sometimes he is at a loss for words. Once, when a survivor says that she is sure he would have saved her had he been alive then, his response comes quietly but quickly: “I am not sure. I do not know what I would have done.” Bialek does not claim to have all the answers, and it is precisely this uncertainty that allows his experience to resonate so powerfully with a variety of audiences.

On one level, “Bogdan’s Journey” is a powerful tool for revealing both the trauma and potential for healing that come with reopening this dark chapter in Polish history. But the film is not meant solely for Polish and Jewish audiences. Towards the end, Bialek says that the people of Kielce today are not responsible for the 1946 attack against the town’s Jewish residents; however, they are absolutely



responsible for what is done with that memory. They are responsible for the prejudice that they allow to flourish around them to this day. They are responsible for ensuring that the past is not repeated. His words are directed at the people of Kielce,

but his message points clearly to each of us in the audience. It is nearly impossible to hear him speak without recalling our own histories and the questions we ourselves have refused to confront. We are responsible — not for having all of the answers, but for asking the painful questions about our histories, and for taking action in the present.

Watching “Bogdan’s Journey” is a painful experience. It hurts to sit in a theater and listen to the retelling of the events of 1946, to be shown images of the dead and the injured lying upon the ground, half-covered by twisted sheets, alone on the ground or, even more horrifyingly, cradling a dead child. It hurts as a Jew, and it hurts as a human. Yet the pain of the experience was not shocking — I think that most who see such a film enter the theater already anticipating the pain that lies ahead. What I found more shocking was the extent to which I related to Bogdan himself, the Catholic Pole who at first glance seems like he could not be more different from me. By age alone, Bogdan is removed from the events of the Holocaust and the 1946 pogrom, yet his heritage links him irrevocably to their memories. I, too, am removed from, yet tied to those events. And though it seems my connection, my Jewish

Can responsibility
be placed upon
a town? A people?
A nation?

heritage, should place me on a side opposite Bogdan’s, and my experience should be the reverse of his, I instead saw my own struggle mirrored in his. I, too, have grappled with what it means to carry a memory that is not my own, and the responsibility attached to that memory. How do we, the generations that follow these horrors, keep these memories alive without causing unnecessary hurt and pain? How much of the pain of those memories belongs to us? How much do we have a right to feel? How much do we have a responsibility to feel? How do we make true the words we hear so often: *never again?* ♦

Library Receives Jewish Fables From Around The World

A newly arrived collection of Jewish books containing fables, with around 400 volumes spanning six centuries, will enrich Jewish studies at Cornell and cast light on the depth and breadth of Jewish civilization.



The collection, which includes a 15th-century Torah scroll and six volumes from the first complete printing of the Babylonian Talmud in early 16th century Venice, was delivered

to the Cornell University Library's Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections (RMC) by Jon Lindseth '56, a devoted bibliophile who spent several decades acquiring these books.

The books are in several languages, including Hebrew, Yiddish, Aramaic, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and Judeo-Persian. They were printed all over the world and include animal stories from the Hebrew Bible and other religious texts as well as translations of secular stories, such as Aesop's Fables, in Hebrew.

to the use of Hebrew and Jewish vernaculars than the religious. You can see the flowering of an entire literary tradition."

"Jon Lindseth is one of the greatest book collectors of his generation. His generosity to Cornell and its library has brought so many treasured collections — from historical documents on women's rights to unique manuscripts by Vladimir Nabokov to a new collection of underground comix," said Katherine Reagan, RMC's curator of rare books and manuscripts. "This is another spectacular example of his support of Cornell's research and learning."

The Lindseth collection of Jewish fables complements existing library materials relating to Jewish studies, including RMC's collection on the Haskalah — the 19th-century European Jewish enlightenment — and significant holdings on Jewish labor history in the ILR School's Kheel Center of Catherwood Library.

"You can gain a lot of knowledge — material knowledge, tactile knowledge — about early modern Jewish culture from looking at these books, from smelling them and touching them and seeing the

"The focus is on animal stories with moral connections, and Jon built this collection by finding every example he could of a Jewish fable, and then going back to the oldest, rarest sources he could find to illustrate those fables," said Patrick J. Stevens, the Selector for Jewish Studies and Curator of the Fiske Icelandic Collection at the Library. "These books show that there is much more



These books show that there is much more to the use of Hebrew and Jewish vernaculars than the religious.

amount of work that goes into the typesetting and some of the illustrations," Professor Jonathan Boyarin said. "These things carry their history inside themselves." ♦



Faculty Spotlight



Olga Litvak, Laurie B. and Eric M. Roth Professor of Modern European Jewish History



Q What drew you to Cornell?
Several things. To begin with, the outstanding History Department faculty, with whom I instantly felt an intellectual and personal connection. Second, the chance to participate in making Cornell a center of excellence in Jewish Studies. But I have to confess that what made Cornell absolutely irresistible was Olin Library — both its extraordinary (and growing!) collection in Russian and Jewish Studies and its highly professional, resourceful and supportive staff.

You've been here for a little less than a year. What has surprised you or impressed you most about the place?

I continue to be amazed at the quality of the students. They are bright, curious, imaginative and intellectually ambitious. And despite all the hand-wringing about declining undergraduate regard for the humanities, I have met many Cornell undergraduates who are deeply interested in the kinds of questions typically associated with the intensive study of literature, philosophy and history. Maybe it's we, the grown-ups, who have given up the cause for lost, way too soon.

How have you changed your repertoire of courses as a result of coming to Cornell?

Maybe not so much the repertoire, as the style of teaching. It is true that at Cornell, I have the opportunity to teach courses that are closer to my own work in Jewish history, but the greatest change, I think, has been in the way I teach. The intelligence and curiosity of the students and the encouragement and example of my colleagues in History and Jewish Studies have allowed me to be much more adventurous in the way I design courses, in choosing the readings that I assign and in the way I conduct lectures and discussions.

What about your scholarly trajectory? What connects the several major projects you've already completed to each other?

The larger intellectual project that informs all my work

involves rethinking the old problem of continuity and discontinuity in Jewish history, or, to put it in a form familiar to every historian of Jewish experience and expression — what makes Jewish history Jewish? The field has shifted back and forth between the idea that there is a metaphysics of Jewish identity which renders Jewish history one and indivisible, and the idea, informed by cultural studies, that Jewish history constitutes a plurality of stories refracted by the diversity of Jewish lives. I've been thinking about how to transcend this distinction by focusing on the dynamic relationship between the two institutions — the synagogue and the study house — which has shaped Jewish consciousness and the Jewish imagination for two thousand years and continues to do so still, even though both synagogue and study house look different than they used to. I am interested in how the structures, sensibilities, and styles of thought associated with these two Jewish public spaces have shaped conflicting beliefs and opinions about what Jewishness means. It is this debate, carried out both explicitly and implicitly inside the walls of the Jewish “house of commons” (Hebrew *beyt-knesset*) and the Jewish “university” (Hebrew *beyt-midrash*), that makes Jewish history Jewish. I suppose this is not exactly an earth-shattering discovery; who could possibly be surprised by the proposition that what makes Jewish history Jewish is an argument?

What are you working on now?

I am writing a book about the origins of the Jewish national movement, tentatively titled *Zionism Before Herzl: The Cultural Origins of the Jewish Revolution*. It situates the beginning of Zionism in the traditional culture of Jewish learning that developed in and around the “Lithuanian Jerusalem” under Russian imperial rule. My aim is to shift the focus of the story from the secular narrative that currently dominates scholarship on Zionism to a place — the study house — where many Jewish ideas were incubated, where the Jewish imagination was nurtured and where Jewish politics was born. The book will put “Jewish” back into “Jewish nationalism.” ♦

Jewish Studies Program

At Cornell University

Spring 2019 Bulletin

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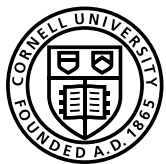
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