Yiddish 30
Yiddish Literature in Translation 1

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Syllabus – Yiddish 03000

1. Department Course Number and Title
   Yiddish 03000
   Yiddish Literature in Translation I

2. Distribution Requirements for Group I-IV
   This course fulfills the Group II requirement for Language and Literature/Foreign Languages

3. Demonstration of Course Transferability
   Yiddish 30 is equivalent to HUM E09 at City (3 credits); HEBR 218 (Masterpieces of Yiddish Literature in Translation) at Hunter (3 credits); YIDDISH 150 at Queens (3 credits), to elective credits at Staten Island, and to elective credits in Comparative Literature at Brooklyn.

4. Bulletin Description of Course
   Yiddish 30 examines the Yiddish literary and cultural achievements of Yiddish writers in the modern world, with an emphasis on the American Jewish experience from the great waves of migration in the middle of the nineteenth century, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, until the present. All readings and discussions are in English. Designed for non-Yiddish speaking students. Pre or co-requisite: English 01200.

5. Number of Weekly Class Hours: Three hours per week

6. Number of Credits: Three credits

7. Pre or Co-requisite: English 12

8. Justification for Course

9. Although Yiddish is not the vernacular of any specific country, Yiddish Literature (predominantly through Mendele, Shalom Aleichem, and Peretz) established itself as a national, identifiable literature at the turn of the century. Yiddish Literature is the collective expression of the folk voice and culture of East European Jewry; it is the summary of the matrix of modern Jewish experience.

In combining Jewish folk heritage with the modernism of European Literature, Yiddish Literature has attained a universal, humanistic significance. In addition to dealing with the national destiny and interests of the Jewish people, the (tragic) course of Jewish History, and the destroyed world of European Jewry, Yiddish Literature contains literary importance of universal appeal. While dealing with the crises of the Jews, it has at one and the same time transcended the ghetto origins and added to moral awareness and humane understanding.
Of utmost significance, a study is warranted of the multi-faceted contributions of the 3.5 million immigrants who brought with them from Eastern Europe and, earlier, from Central Europe, from 1888-1925, social, religious, and cultural traditions that were reshaped and transformed in the United States. Furthermore, after World War II, as the US became the intellectual and cultural center of world Jewry, replacing Eastern Europe as the largest, major center of Yiddish-reading Jews, New York City became home to the Yiddish literary establishment, including the two most popular Yiddish novelists (Chaim Grade and Isaac Bashevis Singer). According to the report of the 1948 American Jewish Year Book, "as a result of the destruction of East European Jewry, this country now holds first place in Yiddish culture ..." These contributions have enriched our American diversity and deserve serious study. The Yiddish experience in America provides a powerful example of successful acculturation while maintaining ethnic identity.

In addition, Yiddish Literature has become universally relevant and appealing to diverse immigrant groups by reworking Jewish folk material in modern literary forms and by addressing such themes as the conflict between faith and doubt, tradition and worldliness, belief and disbelief; the dichotomy between the sacred and profane, and between the preservation of faith and assimilation; the struggle between morality and bestiality; social corruption; the horrors of the sweatshop; abuses of women and children; the disintegration of the home and the decomposition of the community; the fragmentation of the larger human community and the disharmony of the world; themes of exile, alienation, and abandonment; themes of redemption and the search for meaning; themes of anti-heroism and heroism.

YD 30 expands the student’s cultural awareness and literary sensitivity; broadens the student’s perspectives; and provides for vertical coordination of the language/literature program. It furthers the commitment of the Department to bridge divisions in our pluralistic world and to promote intercultural understanding.

10. Necessitated Course Withdrawals None

11. CPI Requirements
   Yiddish 30 fulfills one CPI unit for the area of Literature (#3) or for an elective.

12. Field Work, Internship, or Independent Study N/A

13. Textbook

14. Required Course for Majors N/A

15. Course is open to students who have completed English 01200.

16. What Students Will Know and Be Able To Do Upon Completion of Course

Students will recognize and have a general knowledge and appreciation for the contributions of modern Yiddish writers, from the inception of Modern Yiddish Literature in the second half of
the nineteenth century until the present time. Students will be able to determine the point of view, values, or intent of instructive material. They will understand the ideologies inherent in the various genres of Yiddish literature and gain an understanding and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the shtetl.

Students will learn of the unique and ironic development of Modern Yiddish Literature. They will distinguish between Early Yiddish Literature and Modern Yiddish Literature; they will recognize the antagonism of the Haskalah towards Yiddish and the development of Modern Yiddish Literature as a utilitarian vehicle to “enlighten” the masses; They will realize also the contributions of Hasidism towards the validation of Yiddish as a language and literature.

They will analyze and interpret representative writings of the “classical trio,” the three founding fathers of modern Yiddish Literature: Mendele Mokher Sefarim, Shalom Aleichem, and Peretz; as well as later Yiddish writers.

They will understand the influence of the "classical trio" on the US experience and relate these works to contemporary life today. They will learn that while Shalom Aleichem had produced his Tevye series in the United States (adapted for stage and film several times, most famously as Fiddler on the Roof), the literary masterpieces of Mendele and Peretz, who never left European soil, have nevertheless impacted Yiddish theatrical production in the United States and have been reworked into modern literary forms in the US. Students will understand why Mayor Wagner in 1952 dedicated Peretz Square, saying "[Peretz's] writings gave hope and purpose to the people."

They will establish the relationship between Modern Yiddish Literature and Yiddish film. Students will gain knowledge of the major trends that contributed towards the development of Modern Yiddish Literature (Haskalah, Hasidism, Socialism, Anti-Semitism), and which, in turn, generated Yiddish theater and cinema. Students will become aware of the fact that Yiddish Literature was the basis and the inspiration for theatrical productions that include The Fiddler on the Roof, The Dibbuk, The Tenth Man, Hester Street, and Yentle - productions that continue to reflect the US experience in its diversity.

Students will compare the film, Tevye der Milkhiger to the literary work from which it derived. In studying The Tevye Series, the student will integrate history, sociology, and psychology. They will learn how the political events and social conflicts during the reign of Czar Nicolas II (1894-1917) reflected directly and indirectly in the tragedies of Tevye’s daughters; and they will explore why this work has been incredibly popular in the United States and why immigrants of diverse nationalities and ethnic groups in America have identified with Tevye.

Students will assess the cultural importance of the Second Avenue Yiddish theatres for the Jewish immigrant, and the importance to this day of the Folksbine theatre that has staged numerous classics.

Students will explore “the Golden Era of Yiddish Theatre,” the importance of the Second Avenue Yiddish theatres for the 3.5 million Jews who settled in the US between 1888 and 1925, and the function of the theatre as an agent for Americanization and acculturation. They will evaluate the Golden Era of Yiddish Theatre, which refers to the eighteen year career of the reformation and the flowering of the American Yiddish stage by the Russian born American
playwright Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), "the Jewish Shakespeare," who injected the Yiddish theater with realism and naturalism. Students will discuss how he challenged tradition, how he was influenced by Shakespeare (The Jewish King Lear and Mirele Efros- The Jewish Queen Lear), how he entertained theater goers, and how he shaped the way they saw the world. They will discuss the themes of intergenerational estrangement, the manic pursuit of the dollar, the subject of women’s emancipation, and how Gordin impacted the US experience in its diversity not only with his own plays but those that he staged by Shalom Ash, Shalom Aleichem, and Peretz.

Students will also assess the contribution of the Yiddish press as a vehicle for acculturation and Americanization.

The student will examine the psychological effects of poverty and the effects of social trends as social idealism, universalism, assimilation, and anti-Semitism on the immigrant in United States.

Students will analyze, critique, and explore works that described the socioeconomic conditions of the Jewish immigrants, especially the realism and horror of the sweatshops and difficulties of maintaining one’s Jewish identity. Students will explore Jewish life in transition, namely the identity crises and conflicts suffered by the Jewish American immigrant at the turn of the century (Hester Street, My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner). They will relate the subject matter to their personal lives; correlate, synthesize, and integrate the diversity of information and ideas.

Students will study the lyrics of Modern Yiddish and its themes that have transcended the ghetto origins and added to moral awareness and humane understanding.

This course will provide students with the perspective and depth to analyze the formation of labor unions and to appreciate the contributions of Yiddish writers to the development of labor unions. They will read selections from the earliest important group of Yiddish writers in New York known as “The Sweatshop Poets,” since they responded to the plight of the oppressed immigrants. They will be acquainted with these writers who expressed the suffering of the Jewish worker and summoned him to struggle against his exploiters. Students will realize the role of the Jewish immigrants not only in making New York a fashion center, but their role in the formation of the ILGWU itself, which was critical for the labor history of the 1920's and 1930's.

The student will be able to articulate and argue his positions; to develop his own thoughts and perspectives on the reading material, to formulate and understand his own values and to become aware of others’ values; to make informed, intelligent values decisions.

17. Method of Teaching: Explanatory lectures; discussion of reading passages; question-answer periods, and participatory student presentations.

18. Assignments to Students
Weekly assigned readings from the text and/or supplementary material distributed in class; Written term paper; Assigned oral presentations

19. Method of Evaluation
The midterm exam (25%), the final exam (30%), a term paper (25%), and the quality of student participation (20%) determine the student's grade.
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Topical Course Outline

I. Introduction:
   The Development of Modern Yiddish Literature
   Early Yiddish Writing vs. Modern Yiddish Literature
   The Haskalah (The Hebrew Enlightenment) vs. Yiddish
   Contributions of Hasidism towards Yiddish
   The Major Trends that contributed towards the Development of Modern Yiddish Literature (Haskalah, Hasidism, Socialism, Anti-Semitism), and which, in turn, generated Yiddish literature, theater and cinema in the US.
   Knowledge of the mores, values, and socio-economic condition of the Jewish immigrant

II. The Three Founding Fathers of Modern Yiddish Literature and Their Influence on the US Experience:
   A) Analysis and interpretation of representative Writings of the "Classical Trio":
      Mendele Mokher Sefarim (Shalom Yaakov Abramovitsh (1836-1917), "Grandfather of Modern Yiddish";
      Shalom Aleichem (Shalom Rabinovitsh; 1859-1916), "Folk voice of the People," and I.L Peretz (1852-1916),"Father of Modern Yiddish Literature."
   B) Their impact on Yiddish theatrical production and literary forms in the US.
      Thus, while Shalom Aleichem had produced his Tevye series in the United States (adapted for stage and film several times, most famously as Fiddler on the Roof), the literary masterpieces of Mendele and Peretz, who never left European soil, have nevertheless impacted Yiddish theatrical production in the United States and have been reworked into modern literary forms in the US. For example, Mendele’s Yiddish novels The Travels of Benjamin III, a picaresque satire that parodies life in the Pale of Settlement, and the romantic novel and social satire, Fishke the Lame, have been translated into English and published by Schocken Books in 1996. Fishke the Lame has been recast into the Yiddish film, “The Light Ahead,” that reflects the artistic peak of American Yiddish film. It is at the same time an attack on shtetl life and a romance of an impoverished disabled couple who yearn for emancipation from the superstitions and corruption of the shtetl: themes that appealed to and with which the Jewish American immigrant identified. The film, which was produced in 1939 under the direction of Edgar Ulmer, has been restored by the National Center for Jewish Film and is often viewed on campuses throughout the United States. Students will analyze “A Night in the Old Marketplace,” the recent adaptation of Peretz’s 1907 play by Grammy award-winning Frank London into a multimedia production that mixes Jewish music, jazz, and world beats.

   C) Shalom Aleichem - The Tevye Series/ "Tevye der Mikhiger"/ Fiddler on the Rood
   D) Evaluation of themes as abuse and/or vulnerability of women, social morality, effects of poverty and unemployment
      Selections from Abramovitsch’s "Fishke the Lame," clips from the film "The Light Ahead." Shalom Aleichem, The Penknife; On Account of a Hat; The Little Pot; A Daughter’s Grave; Hodel; Chava; the film “Tevye der Mikhiger”; Peretz: The Three Gifts, Bontshe the Silent"; "A Night in the Old Marketplace."

III. The "Golden Era of Yiddish Theatre"
   A) The Cultural Importance and Attraction of the Second Avenue Yiddish Theatres for the Jewish immigrant/ Thomashesvsky, Jacob Adler
   B) Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), "The Jewish Shakespeare": His eighteen year career of the reformation and flowering of the Yiddish stage; his impact on the US experience with his own plays and those that he staged by Shalom Ash, Shalom Aleichem, and Peretz.
   C) Themes of intergenerational conflict; the manic pursuit of materialism; women's emancipation/How to be an American and be a Jew? How to protect religious values
and the family from disintegration in a secular society? How to enjoy opportunities for material success in America without relinquishing spiritual values? Pride in Jewish vitality and American patriotic enthusiasm

Selections: Mirele Efros, Uncle Moses, Three Cheers for Yankee Doodle (lyric).

V. The Influence of the Yiddish Press: An agent for acculturation and Americanization in the language of masses
   A) Abe Cahan's Forward: A Vehicle for Americanization and propagation of socialism.
   B) The impact of the Forward's "Bintle Brief" (Bundle of Letters) on the transitional, ethical culture of the Lower East Side

IV. The Sweatshop Poets of New York: Response to the plight of the oppressed immigrant
   B) Their role in the labor history of the 1920's and 1930's
   C) Selected poems: "To the Hammer," "Di Grine Kuziner"," In Struggle," "My Resting Place"

V. The Dybbuk, by Ansky:
   A) Its Hasidic-Gothic Themes
   B) The evolution of The Dybbuk from its introduction in New York in 1921 by Maurice Schwartz to The Tenth Man, a radical reworking of the play with 622 performances from 1959-1961.
   C) The relevance of The Tenth Man for American Jewry: Is there a future for an American Jewry that rejects the ancient customs and beliefs and relies more on the synagogue as a community network than as a spiritual space? Does psychoanalysis surpass Old Country mysticism?

VI. The Universal Appeal of Isaac Bashevis Singer
   A) The Secularization of Religious Material
   B) Exile, Evil, Redemption, and Messianism
   C) Supernatural Dimensions and the Questioning of Empirical Reality
   D) Sentiments of Holocaust survivors towards New York
   E) Yentle the Yeshiva Boy: Singer's attitude towards gender roles

   Selections: Gimple the Fool, Yentle the Yeshiva Boy, One Day of Happiness, excerpts from Shadows on the Hudson.

VI. Chaim Grade: The conflict between religious faith and skepticism
   "My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseyner" (1951): One of the most poignant post-Holocaust debates about the nature of Jewish identity and faith in Yiddish literature.


