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## UNESCO REGISTER OF GOOD PRACTICES IN LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

### Winnipeg Yiddish Women's Reading Circle

(Canada)

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#### Brief description:

This report describes the activities of the Winnipeg Yiddish Women's Reading Circle, a reading group in Manitoba, Canada that uses texts in Yiddish to provide participants with opportunities to speak and read the language, to regain confidence in their linguistic competence and to tutor each other.

Yiddish is a Germanic Jewish language. In the 2006 census of Canada, 16,295 people indicated Yiddish as their mother tongue. For the Winnipeg (Manitoba) community, where the project is located, the number of Yiddish speakers is approximately six hundred.

The Reading Circle was started in the wake of the rediscovery of Yiddish women's literature at a local library event in Winnipeg. In the circle, female members of the local Yiddish community meet regularly once a month to read and discuss texts by female Yiddish authors. Since the start of this library event, the Reading Circle activities have resulted in the revitalization of Yiddish language competence in its members. Reading the texts aloud and group discussion on the texts as well as language issues more generally, has allowed for an invigorating exchange between more and less fluent Yiddish speakers. As a further result, an anthology of English translations of stories by the female Yiddish authors, edited by an academic expert, was published. The Reading Circle assisted with the translation and compilation of texts for this anthology, further contributing to the rediscovery and revitalization of Yiddish among participants.

**Reader's guide:**

This project is an example of a community-driven, low-cost effort for language revitalization via the social activity of regularly holding a reading circle, using texts in the endangered language of Yiddish. In addition to the rediscovery of 'buried' linguistic competences, a form of 'peer-teaching' is achieved among participants with different degrees of language mastery. Organizational and resource requirements are fairly low; the concept is therefore flexible and could be easily adaptable to different cultural contexts and participants' circumstances. The publication of an anthology, which grew out of the Reading Circle's activities, exemplifies how small local projects (community initiatives) such as this one can lead to broader-scale opportunities for awareness-raising and cultural transmission.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

**Background: current situation in the language community:**

Yiddish is an endangered language, mostly because its (Jewish) primary communities in Europe were destroyed in World War II, but also due to cultural assimilation. However, some native speakers remain who either learned the language in the European Jewish communities or from their parents who emigrated.

In North America, specialized Yiddish day or evening schools have not only maintained linguistic competence for North American-born learners, but have also preserved the literature and culture.

Although Yiddish in its grammatical structure is strongly related to German, it is written in the Hebrew alphabet. Many North American native speakers of Yiddish cannot read Yiddish because they do not know the alphabet. This is particularly true for women, who are not required to learn the Hebrew language, and thus the Hebrew alphabet, for religious observance.

At present, the use of Yiddish continues to diminish in North America, and many Yiddish speakers' abilities (in speaking and, particularly, in reading) are declining. For Winnipeg, the site of this project, it is estimated that the Yiddish-speaking population has decreased from approximately ten thousand in the 1920s and 1930s to only approximately six hundred today.

**Impetus for the project:**

The Winnipeg Yiddish Women's Reading Circle was established in the wake of a community attempt to save the Winnipeg Jewish Public Library, which had a large and significant Yiddish collection.

A series of lectures called 'The Voices of Our Literary Foremothers', held in May 1999, was one of a number of events offered at the library in the attempt to reinvigorate library programming. The organizers, surprised and pleased by the number of titles by women they discovered in the collection, were eager to create opportunities under which these authors could be better known. Their pleasure at discovering the quantity and quality of the work in this collection was equalled by the frustration that the authors' names were completely unfamiliar, in contrast to those male writers who wrote in Yiddish and whose literary legacy is secure (such as Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Mendele Menachim Sforim).

Although the library was in the end dissolved in 2000, much of the collection was preserved, thanks to the efforts of the library's board. Some of the collection was retained in Winnipeg and the remainder was dispersed to a variety of libraries elsewhere. Following the success of the "Literary Foremothers" lectures and the dissolution of the library, the Reading Circle was formed.

**2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

**Project's strategies and activities:**

The Winnipeg Yiddish Women's Reading Circle meets once a month from September until June at a local multi-purpose senior centre in Winnipeg, the Gwen Sector Creative Living Centre, to hear and discuss writings of women in Yiddish.

The Reading Circle began in 2001 with ten members and currently averages twenty attendees at each meeting, with the largest attendance so far being twenty-nine.

Many in the group of seniors had been involved in the 1999 'Literary Foremothers' lecture series at the Jewish Public Library and went on to become involved in the Reading Circle. At first they planned to run a book club, but soon realized that since literacy in Yiddish varied among participants, and since books in Yiddish were not readily available, the book club format was not feasible. They returned to a format they were familiar with from their mothers' generation: the *leyenkrayz* or Reading Circle.

Under this format, a text is read aloud in Yiddish by a single adept reader, and then discussed by the group as a whole. Thus, those less literate or linguistically competent in the language would still be able to follow. The format also allows listeners to interrupt the speaker for clarification of specific terms or usages, as well as origins of words (Yiddish includes vocabulary from many other languages; primarily Hebrew but also Russian, Polish, Ukrainian and others).

Readings are in Yiddish, but discussion is largely in English. Photocopies of the text in Yiddish are distributed so that listeners who do have some literacy can follow. Where translations exist, the English version is also distributed upon request.

In addition to the monthly meetings, the group has, during the last four years, scheduled an annual wind-up and dinner with entertainment in Yiddish to an audience that includes friends, family and other interested community members. The first year saw the performance of an original Yiddish play, the second the production of a Yiddish version of 'My Fair Lady' (where the protagonist must learn to speak proper Yiddish), the third year the performance of a feminist version of 'The Fiddler on the Roof' (with the locale changed from Eastern Europe to a former Jewish farm colony in Manitoba). In 2007, the event was a Variety Show with a dozen members performing in Yiddish, telling jokes and stories, and singing songs. The 2008 wind-up also featured humorous Yiddish skits.

### **Organization:**

The Program Committee, with Reading Circle coordinator Jeanette Block, meets twice a year to establish the schedule and program. At these meetings, topics are discussed and readers recruited and assigned for specific dates. A letter is then sent to all members of the Circle providing them with this information.

Reading Circle attendees are charged two Canadian dollars per meeting if they are not members of the Gwen Sector Creative Living Centre, to cover costs of photocopying, postage, coffee, etc.

The organizers have seen to it that participants' needs are taken into consideration. The Gwen Sector Centre is geographically accessible and wheelchair accessible. Cost is minimal. Meetings take place at noon; an inexpensive kosher meal (respecting dietary restrictions for those who are observant) is available at the Gwen Sector. All of these small considerations contribute to attendance and the success of the project.

### **Project resources:**

Gwen Sector funds the Reading Circle as one of its programs but leaves programming to the coordinator and committee. Gwen Sector staff provides the space, send out the mailings, do the photocopying, set up the room, etc. The Reading Circle has received some small grants (\$300 to \$500) from the Women's Endowment Fund of the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba as well as the I.L. Peretz Folk School Endowment Fund (from a local Yiddishist group).

**Project spin-off activities:**

In the first year, stories for the Reading Circle were drawn from the 1993 anthology of translations of women's writing, *Found Treasures* (Second Story Press, Toronto). The Reading Circle had to use extensive research to locate the original Yiddish texts. A particularly helpful resource was the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. Where one of the *Found Treasures* authors was of particular interest, the Reading Circle would go on to read other stories by that author.

As their interests expanded, the Reading Circle used further resources such as the Mendele Yiddish Language and Literature listserv, an on-line service for Yiddish enthusiasts. The National Yiddish Book Centre in Amherst, Massachusetts (USA) was also a research resource, providing a detailed list of women authors.

The Reading Circle members' enthusiasm for the quality of the work of female Yiddish authors was countered with the frustration that this work had never been translated into English and was thus unavailable to the majority of North American readers. Some members began to independently translate the stories. At this point, in 2001, Rhea Tregebov, poet and professor of Creative Writing and Translation at the University of British Columbia, who had worked on the earlier landmark anthology *Found Treasures*, became involved. Hearing of the interest the stories had stimulated within the Reading Circle, she suggested that an anthology of translations be compiled.

The anthology was envisioned as a way to bring the work of Yiddish women writers to the attention of non-Yiddish readers, but also as a means of introducing other Yiddishist groups to writings to which they had not previously had access, and thus to contribute to the preservation and transmission of Yiddish culture.

Selection of the stories for the anthology was a cooperative effort. Since Rhea Tregebov is not a native speaker of Yiddish, Jeanette Block, the Reading Circle coordinator, would outline the stories to her. Where they agreed that a story was worth pursuing, one of six core translators drawn from the Reading Circle would provide an initial translation. Tregebov would then edit and polish the translation and offer it back to the translator for review. Other members of the reading circle would also flag interesting stories as well as provide extra help in hunting down references and providing biographical material.

The anthology, *Arguing with the Storm*, was published in the spring of 2007 by Sumach Press (Toronto) and has been well received. In total, it includes the English translations of fourteen stories by nine authors, eight of whom are deceased; authors' biographies accompany the texts.

Sumach sold American rights to The Feminist Press (CUNY), and an American edition of the anthology was published in March 2008 with an introduction by American scholar Kathryn Hellerstein.

### 3. OUTCOMES

#### **Achievements and positive results:**

Through its activities and the publication of the anthology, the Reading Circle has succeeded in facilitating the preservation and improvement of the linguistic capabilities of its members, the dissemination of yiddishkayt (Yiddish culture) and also the stimulation of a second generation's interests and abilities in the language and culture: another reading circle of younger individuals (mostly in their fifties) called, tongue-in-cheek, "The Next Generation", was formed under the mentorship and encouragement of the original Reading Circle, and has in turn contributed to the language revival of its members. In the first year The Next Generation met, a Reading Circle volunteer attended each of their meetings as a resource. This group is still continuing to meet.

Many Canadian-born Reading Circle participants had not spoken Yiddish at any length for decades. When their own parents passed away, there was little reason to converse in Yiddish with their English-speaking contemporaries, and children and grandchildren who were often non-Yiddish speaking. Unaware that their linguistic capacity had remained latent but largely intact, many were astonished at how rapidly and easily it was revived by Reading Circle activities. Since most of the participants were in their late seventies or early eighties, there was a particular pleasure in having their intellectual capacity increase at this point in their lives.

The discussions in the group were also highly stimulating, and many participants were motivated to continue further reading on their own, both in Yiddish and in English (where translations existed).

A great deal of learning has taken place. Jeanette Block, the Reading Circle coordinator, reports that for the first few years, where English translations were available, she would photocopy an equal number of copies of the stories in English and Yiddish. In the spring of 2007, however, she realized that over time she had been distributing fewer English copies and more members are now following the readings using the Yiddish copy.

The ongoing enlargement of the circle of participants has added to the linguistic richness of the experience. New members who came (or whose parents came) from diverse geographic areas expand the group's knowledge of regional European dialect variations. Members who are fluent in Hebrew are able to clarify Hebrew terms within the Yiddish. And of course, all members bring their own diverse views and perspectives to the discussion of the literary material.

Because the literature discussed was largely written by a generation prior to the participants', many of the members have felt a reinvigorated connection with their own parents, particularly their mothers, who are at this point long-deceased. Discussions are lively and opinions are often divergent. Although the participants share an ethnic background, live in the same city and are of the same generation, this is not a homogeneous group. Some participants are religiously observant; some are life-long secularists. Political views also differ. Nonetheless, the discussions take place in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance.

The Reading Circle group has thus grown and thrived, despite the health challenges its members increasingly face. Winnipeg has an extremely harsh

winter climate, but meetings continue with energy and enthusiasm even throughout the winter months.

**Further positive outcomes:**

(1) The publication of *Arguing with the Storm* and the recognition it brings have been greatly rewarding to the translators involved as well as the Reading Circle group as a whole. For the Reading Circle members involved in the production, the process of working with the literary texts for the anthology and of translating the stories significantly deepened their understanding of the Yiddish language. Thus, for example, they worked with dictionaries, some of which dated from the era of the stories' publications, to refine their understanding of given words. Rhea Tregebov's queries as secondary translator often instigated long discussions with regard to idioms or phrasing. And since the Reading Circle is such a collaborative group, they would also confer with each other where a word, phrase, idiom or interpretation was troublesome.

The recent launch of the anthology was a festive community event that was very well attended by an audience of all ages. The translators were asked to sign copies of books and were applauded after they read portions of the stories they had translated. The local Jewish weekly publication, the Jewish Post and News, reported on the event.

(2) In part because of the activism and encouragement of the Reading Circle, the books donated from the original Jewish Public Library are now offered in a dedicated section of the local Jewish Community Centre library in the "Yiddish Vinkel" (Yiddish corner). The opening of the Vinkel in September 2005 was a large public event with close to 200 people in attendance. The featured reader, Chava Rosenfarb, is the one living author featured in the anthology *Arguing with the Storm*. This event helped to raise general public awareness in Winnipeg of Yiddish literary heritage. The existence of the Vinkel improves accessibility to the Yiddish collection.

(3) Benefits of the Reading Circle also spilled over into a pre-existing Yiddishist group, the Mameloshen ('Mother Tongue', the phrase often used to describe Yiddish). Mameloshen, whose membership is largely European-born with many Holocaust survivors, has been meeting bi-monthly for approximately ten years, to discuss in Yiddish about language, culture, literature, and current events. While Mameloshen is not dedicated to women's literature, the Reading Circle has also provided them with readers and reading material. Reading Circle members furthermore assisted the elderly Mameloshen group when illness threatened to end the group. Mameloshen has recently been revived at a nursing home by some members of the original group who now reside there.

(4) A few years ago, a local radio program in Yiddish, thirty minutes every week, lost its long-time host, who died at age 95. He has since been replaced by a member of the Next Generation group.

(5) American publication of the anthology is bringing the works of the featured authors to a larger audience, particularly, to an audience of further Yiddish reading clubs. Requests have already been received for copies of the Yiddish texts, and The Feminist Press is hoping to have scans of the Yiddish texts available on its website soon.

**Problems that were encountered:**

With regard to the compilation of the anthology, it should be noted that seniors may have difficulty accessing computer technology. The translations were thus mostly done in hand-writing, and communication by phone or mail was preferable to e-mail. The frustrations of working with computer technology for seniors should not be underestimated. Fortunately, the project was able to function around these obstacles. Having the resources to transcribe the hand-written translations and the budget for phone calls and travel, through Rhea Tregobov's academic affiliation and funding, was very helpful.

**Lessons learned:**

One of the biggest lessons learned in the course of the Reading Circle's activities was to value, rather than underestimate, the resources that seniors offer and not to be dismissive of the contribution they can continue to make. Contrary to Western ageist stereotypes, the Winnipeg Reading Circle has proven to be a dynamic group capable of effecting linguistic and cultural preservation through the depth and breadth of its collective experience.

On the other hand, the group did need the assistance of younger people (Rhea Tregobov and the director of the Gwen Sector) to assist not only with the problems presented by technology but also by the institutional structures in place (for funding, facilities, etc.), which in the present day represent a very different bureaucratic environment than when the group members were in the work force.

**Recommendations to people carrying out similar projects:**

Those carrying out similar projects for the Reading Circle would want to emulate the Winnipeg group's attention not only to the needs (financial, health), but also to the diversity (social, religious, political) of participants.

There is also a need for leadership, for someone to take on the role of organizer, regardless of how collaborative and democratic the group's structure is. Further, if reading circle members are of the same age as the Winnipeg group, they shouldn't hesitate to enroll children and grandchildren in assisting them in coping with the technology, which is such a boon in these cases. The same applies to working with government or charitable institutions for support; the seniors may need the assistance of younger individuals in interpreting not only language but also requirements of these institutions. Ultimately, this may also draw the younger generation into the project itself.

Lastly, while the non-professional translators brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to the project, the anthology would not have happened without having a professional present to steer the project. This was a very successful combination of skills and assets. Thus, for those who are interested in translation projects, it is important that individuals with professional experience and training be brought into the project, whether they come from the publishing or the academic area. Linguistic ability without professional expertise cannot provide the kind of quality of translation that literary works deserve, and the difficulty of translation is often underestimated.



**Future prospects:**

It is hoped that a positive reception of the anthology will further encourage commitment to the Reading Circle. And one of the greatest hopes is that the anthology will provide a jumping-off point for other reading circles just as the *Found Treasures* anthology did for the Winnipeg group.

**4. FURTHER RESOURCES**

See Irena Klepfisz's introduction to *Found Treasures* for historical background on Yiddish:

Forman, Frieda, Raicus, Ethel, Swartz, Silberstein, Sarah and Wolfe, Margie (eds.) 1993. *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*. Toronto, Second Story Press.

*This project was selected in the framework of UNESCO's work for the safeguarding of endangered languages and intangible cultural heritage.*

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