A Parent’s Perspective

I have taught students at UW-Madison for going on 18 years, and yet, until this year, when my daughter started her senior year in high school, I never fully realized how much hard work precedes our students’ arrival on campus: the applications and anxieties, the test score and grade worries, the juggling of after-school jobs and volunteer activities, and the seeming fickleness of getting in anywhere these days.

Now that I am living this phase of life as a parent, I am more impressed than ever with our students here. They come from all over the country and all over the globe. They bring with them a few choice belongings, a desire to make friends, and intellectual curiosity about the world they will inherit. They leave as almost-adults, having had their assumptions challenged, their minds opened, their skills sharpened, and their optimism left intact. A great college education is a tremendous gift, and it is largely due to your gifts that this institution remains great.

It is thanks to you and your gifts that the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies just keeps getting better. Thanks to our wonderful donors, Board of Visitors and a supportive administration, we hired two new faculty members this year, both specialists in Yiddish! Soon we will be offering Yiddish language courses in addition to Hebrew. And seemingly overnight, we have become the place to go to study Yiddish, with no fewer than 8 specialists on campus.

I don’t know where my daughter will end up going to college, but I have to admit that if she goes to a place as wonderful as UW-Madison, I’ll be thrilled.

Simone A. Schweber, Director
Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies
and Goodman Professor of Education and Jewish Studies

4223 Mosse Humanities Building
455 N. Park Street
Madison, WI 53706
(608) 265-4763
jewishstudies@wisc.edu
jewishstudies.wisc.edu

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The Holocaust has left its imprint on all areas of knowledge and has shaped our understanding of the world as it is today. A new course on the Holocaust that we taught in Spring of 2016 combined our two areas of expertise, literature and music, to examine the influence of the Holocaust on testimonies, film, literature, graphic novels, and culture at large. The course served to shape students’ perceptions of this time period and demonstrate its relevance to their personal interests, current studies, and their social environment.

For the course’s capstone project, the students explored their future plans in light of the course material. They presented their projects to a panel of scholars from the United Kingdom and Australia—experts on the Holocaust who happened to be in Madison, Wisconsin, for the international musical collaboration, “Performing the Jewish Archive: Out of the Shadows.” The visiting scholars were deeply impressed by the quality of the students’ presentations. Dr. David Fligg, a musicologist from the University of Leeds, was especially moved by three presentations in particular: one on how Israeli pop musicians have integrated Holocaust tropes into their work; another on how deception in the Terezín ghetto catalyzed an outpouring of musical creativity, and a third entitled, Codes of Ethics from Three Perspectives: Mass Communication, Nursing, and Audiology. Hannah Klegon, a Jewish Studies major who plans to teach in Jewish schools next year, reported that the class gave her “a totally different perspective on learning about the Holocaust” which she knows will affect her teaching.

The content of the course exposed students to the ethical transgressions and genocidal atrocities that have continued to plague many parts of the world: Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, South Sudan, and Syria. Classes were guided by difficult issues and thought-provoking questions, such as: What have we learned from the Holocaust? What, if anything has changed? Perhaps most importantly, what has not? They also approached the poignant question of the moral obligation of the witness, which remains of utmost importance.

We will again offer our course on music, literature and memory of the Holocaust this coming spring semester. This time, it will culminate in UW–Madison’s highly regarded Undergraduate Symposium where students can present their final research projects to students from across the campus and members of the broader community. Please join us, if not for the course, then for the symposium.
In late October 2015, I received an email from a Wisconsin alumnus and Center for Jewish Studies board member by the name of Michael Stern. He had recently discovered a collection of postcards that had been sent between 1940 and 1941 to his parents, George and Mary Stern, then residing in Racine, Wisconsin. George and Mary were Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and the letter writer was Mary’s mother, Sara Spira, writing from Nazi-occupied Poland. While her children had managed to make their way to the United States in September 1938, only shortly before Kristallnacht, Sara Spira had not been able to leave Europe before the escalation of anti-Jewish measures and the eventual outbreak of WWII.

The postcards were written in German and Michael initially asked for a faculty member just to translate them and help him make sense of the contents. I was in the midst of my first very busy semester at Wisconsin, so I did not think I would be able to help much. But when I opened the scan of one of the postcards that Michael had emailed me, I realized that a gift had fallen into my lap. I had planned to teach a course on Holocaust history in the spring, and I hoped my students would emerge knowing the what, how, and why of the Nazi genocide. But in the process of designing the course, I had become increasingly concerned that my emphasis on the policies and institutions of the perpetrators ran the risk of reducing its victims to mere numbers. The course was missing a component that would allow students to engage with these victims as individual human beings whose thoughts, deeds, and experiences were a crucial part of understanding the Holocaust.

As I read the first letter and summarized it for Mike, it struck me that here was a woman writing to her daughter and son-in-law in Wisconsin from a world that must have been utterly incomprehensible to all of them – a world of cruel decrees, destruction, and death which had uprooted, ghettoized, and abused her solely because she was a Jew. The postcard bore witness to this process as it was unfolding; even the minutia, the stamp, the format of Sara Spira’s mailing address, and the specific time and place in which it was written bore testament to the simple act of having lived. By itself the letter could not offer an analysis of its causes or insights into the motivations of its perpetrators, but Sara Spira’s letter invoked the language of family and human connection. It carried the personality of an individual bound...
up in collective forces beyond her control and sustained, for a time, by the concern for her daughter and her son-in-law on the other side of the Atlantic. I realized that Sara Spira’s postcards could be a way for my students to integrate study of the victims alongside analysis of the perpetrators.

Thanks to the generous support of Michael Stern, the Mosse Program, and the history department, I was able to hire Rebekka Grossmann, a gifted Mosse Fellow from Hebrew University, to transcribe and then translate the remaining thirteen postcards before the spring semester began. The postcards thus became the centerpiece of my course, accessible to a class of 41 curious undergraduates.

I designed the course so that we spent Mondays and Fridays chronologically studying the ideas, decisions, and institutions behind what became the Holocaust. On Wednesdays, we studied the postcards of Sara Spira, examining one letter each week. The students were assigned to annotate these postcards – to construct a historical commentary on them that would explain what Sara Spira was saying and not saying – in the context in which she was writing. To do this, students had to research and master everything from Nazi censorship laws to food supply in ghettos to the timetables of deportations to death camps. They also had to immerse themselves in the very personal world of Sara Spira: constructing family trees, plotting out networks of relatives and friends, and trying to keep up with the whereabouts of refugees, deportees, extermination and concentration camp prisoners over the course of the war – often until the deaths of the individuals. The students picked their own missions, concentrating on topics that especially interested them; what they found surprised us all.

Some of the greatest discoveries made by the students, who scoured print sources as well as the databases of Yad Vashem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum online, were details about the fate of Sara Spira and other relatives that had been hitherto unknown to Michael Stern. The students discovered documentation referring to Sara Spira’s initial deportation to Poland, a subsequent move from Krakow to a small nearby town under duress and they figured out where and when she was most likely killed by the Nazis. One student even reconstructed the incredible journey of a relative who survived imprisonment in Holland, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald, largely due to his expertise as a scrap metal dealer. Through the annotations, the students used historical scholarship produced by experts to illuminate the fate of individuals; through the case of this scrap metal dealer, the fate of one individual led students to examine the specific mechanics of Nazi persecution and its various competing institutions (one of which wanted the man for his skills in procuring metal for the German war industry and one of which relentlessly pursued him as part of the “Final Solution”). Learning how he had survived was one of the most inspiring insights of the course.

As the students accumulated ever more knowledge about Sara Spira and the Holocaust as a whole, I thought there had to be a way they could organize their research collectively and present it to the university community. The students designed a web site to present both the raw materials of the postcards and their research as part of the “Sara Spira Project”; the site takes visitors on a journey through her experience, and by extension, theirs. The site is a brilliant work of public history targeted to other undergraduates, the alumni community, and their families and friends at home. Please feel free to view it at: saraspira.wordpress.com.

For me, this project embodies the Wisconsin Idea, bringing rigorous university knowledge about the past to the larger public and thereby helping us all handle present challenges together. To consider only one of these present challenges: earlier in the academic year, in a dormitory on campus, a student had plastered the door of two fellow students, both of whom were Jewish, with swastikas and images of Hitler. For him, Hitler and swastikas were mere abstractions that one could invoke jokingly as an insult.

In an unsolicited reflection that I received after the semester, one of my students described the course as being “about regaining agency for voices that have been silenced [through] analyzing primary source material from Holocaust victims.” For her, the Sara Spira project was a way to “oppose instances of ignorance and discrimination.” I like to think that after having taken this course, none of my students could see Hitler, swastikas or indeed any act of discrimination as an abstraction, but rather as a lived experience we all must oppose.
From First to First-Class: Center for Jewish Studies Welcomes New Faculty in Yiddish

By Barbara Sanford

One hundred years after UW-Madison offered the first Yiddish language college classes in this country, it is fitting that the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies welcomes two new Yiddish literature and culture professors: Sunny Yudkoff and Marina Zilbergerts.

Dr. Yudkoff, (Assistant) Professor of Jewish Studies and German, Nordic, and Slavic, was previously a senior lecturer in Yiddish at the University of Chicago. She received her PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University. Her research and teaching interests include Yiddish and Hebrew literature, film and culture; American Jewish literature and culture; transnational medical humanities; age studies; ethnic-American and immigrant narratives; and Central European cultural history. She is currently working on a book entitled Let It Be Consumption!: Tuberculosis and the Modern Jewish Writer.

Professor Yudkoff has recently received awards from the Paula E. Hyman Mentorship Program, the Posen Society of Fellows in Jewish Studies, and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture Doctoral Scholarship.

This fall, Dr. Yudkoff is teaching “Migration in Film and Literature: The American Jewish Experience” and “The Autobiography of Illness.” In the spring, she will teach “Angry Jews: From Saul Bellow to Bernie Sanders” and “Representations of the Jew in Eastern European Culture: Writing the Jewish Body.”

“My goal is for students to develop a thick understanding of the modern Jewish experience, which is multinational, multilingual and multicultural,” Yudkoff says. “In medical humanities courses, my goal is also for students to understand the relationship between the way we talk and write about health and illness and the way we experience health and illness. Overall, my goal is to impart to students the power of words to construct identities—be they personal, artistic or civic.”

“I’m very happy to be joining the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies, which has such a dynamic faculty working across time periods, geographic regions and languages,” she adds. “I’m particularly excited about the many Yiddish and Yiddish-interested courses offered by the Center and the many pockets of Yiddish studies around campus.”

Dr. Zilbergerts, Lipton (Assistant) Professor of Eastern European Jewish Studies, was previously a teaching fellow at Stanford University, where she earned her PhD in comparative literature. She received a fellowship from the Posen Society of Fellows. Her research and teaching interests include Hebrew, Yiddish and Slavic literature and culture; American Jewish literature and culture; European Jewish history and culture; and Yiddish and Jewish Diaspora studies.
About Samuel Lipton

The Lipton Professorship of Eastern European Jewish Studies was named in honor of Samuel Lipton, the brother of Frances Weinstein. Sam, the son of Isaac and Ida Lipton, was born in 1921, and grew up in Burlington, Wisconsin, where he was the high school valedictorian. He had a perfect grade point average at University of Wisconsin-Madison and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. On February 4, 1944, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps where he was eventually assigned to Air Corps Intelligence. In May of 1944 he was in England with the 66th Bomb Squadron. At the war’s end, he returned to UW-Madison where he served as a teaching assistant, earning both his MS and PhD in biochemistry. He then held research positions at Pabst Brewery in Milwaukee and the Enzyme Institute at UW-Madison. He published many papers in chemistry until retiring to Nevada, where he could hike and fish and camp. He is remembered to this day not only for his sharp intellect, but for the tremendous kindness with which he cared for his parents and family. We are honored at the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies to have this chair named in his memory.

This spring, Professor Zilbergerts will teach “Russia and the Jews: Literature, Culture and Religion,” which will take students on a journey of two centuries of Jewish creativity in the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, examining the rise of movements such as Hasidism, Zionism and Communism through literary works which are analyzed amid the cultural developments of their day.

“I’m excited to be joining the Center for Jewish Studies as it expands to form one of the foremost programs in the country,” says Zilbergerts. “My goal is to establish a set of core courses that will give students rigorous knowledge of the rise of Jewish literature and culture in Eastern Europe and an ability to appreciate its wonders.”

The addition of professors Yudkoff and Zilbergerts means that UW-Madison now has a powerful corps of 7 professors on campus with expertise in Yiddish language, politics, history and culture. Professors Yudkoff and Zilbergerts join Professor Tony Michels (history), Professor Mark Louden (language), Professor Philip Hollander (literature), Professor Pam Potter (music), Professor Amos Bitzan (history), and the Mayrent Institute director, Henry Sapoznik.
Save the date:

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conneyproject.wisc.edu

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July 9-13, 2017
Registration required

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