Doc Chat Episode Fifty-Four Transcript

Exploring 125 Years of the Forverts, New York City's Legendary Yiddish Newspaper (April 28, 2022)

CARMEN NIGRO: Hello, everyone, and welcome to "Doc Chat". I'm Carmen Nigro. "Doc Chat" is a weekly program from NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections. And highlights ways to [inaudible] incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Lyudmila Sholokhova, the Dorot curator for collections, the Jewish Division, is joined by Gennady Estraikh. And they will discuss 125 years of the "Forverts", New York City's legendary Yiddish newspaper. Gennady is a Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. His fields of expertise are Jewish Intellectual History, Yiddish Language and Literature, Soviet Jewish history. And his latest book is "Transatlantic Russian Jewishness; Ideological Voyages of the Yiddish Daily Forverts in the First Half of the 20th Century", published in 2020. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments, though make sure you change your chat mode to Panelists and Attendees so that everyone is included. Once we begin the Question and Answer segment, make sure your question and answers are included there under the Q&A tab. We won't be looking at the chat for questions. We'll answer questions from the Q&A tab only. Please note that closed captioning is provided. Use the tab at the bottom for the live transcript if you would like. Now, let me hand it over to Mila and Gennady. Welcome.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Thank you very much, Carmen. And it's great to be here again. This program is about the history of the most popular and influential Yiddish newspaper in the United States that celebrates its 125th anniversary of its debut. To a certain degree, this newspaper is a symbol of the American Jewish community. And since the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library was established in the same year as "Forverts" in 1897, the library historically possesses the most complete set of this important newspaper. The library initiated production of microfilms very early in the 1930s. And most sets of this newspaper into different repositories of the world is actually, are actually in your public library sets. The newspaper has been digitized as a part of the Jewish Historical Press project at the National Library of Israel up to 1979. And the New York Public Library is a major contributor of the Jewish American Press to the project. The New York Public Library closely cooperates with the Columbia University and NYU as a part of the Marmot Consortium for this project. And here is my first question to Gennady. So, Gennady, welcome. So, why did the "Forverts" newspaper come to the American ground? And how was it different from the other periodicals that were established earlier?

GENNADY ESTRAIKH: Initially, it wasn't so remarkable, actually. It was one of the few newspapers launched in the United States. And this newspaper was launched from the very
beginning as a socialist newspaper. So, it was a product of various discussions and actually conflicts even in the camp of socialism. And in particular, Jewish socialists. It became really quite remarkable. And then, later, really remarkable, after more or less 19093, when from a dry socialist newspaper, it transformed into a popular and widely-read publication. This was different. A combination of popular outlet and socialism as a combination.

SHOLOKHOVA And so, who was the people in the leadership of the newspaper?

ESTRAIKH Actually, the newspaper is usually associated with one name, is its editor. Abraham or Abe, he was better known as Abe Cahan, who actually was one of the founders of the newspaper, but later he left. Cahan left and, finally, he settled around 1903 and created the new model. Actually, the new model for this newspaper and the generally a new model for a Jewish and, in this case, Yiddish newspaper that reads such a high circulation here. There was also another person because there are many remarkable people who wrote for the newspaper or members of the editorial staff. But I'll mention just one name. It is Baruch Charney Vladeck, who was the manager for many years, the manager of the newspaper. And he was quite a significant figure in the socialist movement and in general, in Jewish, and the general American Life.

SHOLOKHOVA Because the images actually, I found this cartoon and one of the first issues of the "Forverts" newspapers actually declaring the socialist platform. We can see there's a capitalist and there is a laborer squeezed between two millstones. [inaudible] So but I have another question for Gennady. How did the newspaper manage to attract the audience? What was the secret to this popularity? I know that there were like, very popular columns such as [inaudible] for another column, so maybe you can comment on this a little bit.

ESTRAIKH Yes. Actually, the newspaper and quite often the newspaper would be blamed for it afterwards, that it actually created, it used language. I mean, really, the Yiddish, the registers of Yiddish, the camber of Yiddish, which just a regular Yiddish reader would understand. So, it wasn't really a newspaper that tried to become too sophisticated, too difficult to understand. It was the idea and this was the concept of Abe Cahan, to make it understandable. And also, there were various, we can call it tricks actually, how to attract readership. Publishing sensational novels, reflecting various developments in Jewish life and actually in American life. And also paying very significant attention to the events in the old country, in the Russian Empire because this was really what the readers were interested in. Also, the cultural life, theater, and so on. And you mentioned the "Bintel Brief". This was an important segment in the newspaper, that was a segment for feedback. A person who had problems could write to the newspaper and expect to get a piece of advice. And this was very important. Yeah. There were other things. There was, one time, for example, very many readers would be attracted to the gallery of vanished husbands. Here a husband disappear and his photo would appear in the newspaper. Photos here would be printed and readers would vote. And I remember, for one, there was the cycles of such a competition, which meant the winner would get a return ticket to Palestine. Yes. So, the matrix.
SHOLOKHOVA Can you comment on the circulation dynamic of the "Forverts" since that time?

ESTRAIKH It started, it actually the best period of time, it was in the 1920s. The circulation reached a quarter of a million. At that time, the newspaper was printed in New York and in Chicago. There were two printing shops. And each printing shop produced six versions of the newspaper, specifically for various geographical locations. Separate for Boston, separate for Los Angeles, separate, of course, for Chicago, and so on. Altogether, according to an article in the "Forverts", the newspaper employed in the 1920s 2,000 people. Quite a remarkable figure. And they were in about 100 places in the United States. It also had foreign correspondence. It had a European Bureau based in Berlin with contributors writing from various countries here. Finally, because the circulation started declining, I'll jump to 1962. In 1962, it had about 52,000-53,000 copies a day. And then, what was really a significant change, it was 1983. In 1983, the newspaper stopped being daily and turned into a weekly newspaper.

SHOLOKHOVA Okay.

NIGRO Mila, I'm sorry to interrupt.

ESTRAIKH [inaudible] "Forverts" building.

NIGRO Sorry. Mila, I'm interrupting only because we can't see your slides advancing.

SHOLOKHOVA You cannot see my slides?

NIGRO I can see your title slide, but I cannot see the second, third slide, fourth slide as you advance through the deck.

SHOLOKHOVA Okay. One second.

NIGRO So, I just want to make sure that the audience can see as well.

SHOLOKHOVA All right, let me. So, what are you seeing now?

NIGRO I am still seeing just the title slide.

SHOLOKHOVA Wow. Sorry. Okay.

NIGRO Oh, here we go. Thank you. Thank you, very much.

SHOLOKHOVA Okay. So, Gennady, so, let's talk a little bit about the historical "Forverts" building, if possible.
ESTRAIKH Yeah. This was a very important moment in the history of the newspaper and, generally, in the history of the American Jewish and Yiddish press. In 1912, this building here, so became the, it started housing the editorial office of the newspaper that, it had 10 floors. The 10th floor was actually the floor where the editor was sitting, and actually the manager was also sitting. The building also had a separate place as a, you know, for gatherings. Yes. And many important gatherings of socialist Jewish organizations, and so on took place in this building. The building was occupied, not exclusively, by the Forverts. There were also other organizations that had their office, and particularly the [inaudible]. The workmen's circle, or the workers' circle editors, known nowadays, also had its offices there. And it remained until I believe, 1972, or something. This remained the building of the Forverts before. And later it moved. Of course, it wasn't the same scale of operations and not the same scale of finances actually to run the newspaper as but [inaudible] once said when he was asked how the "Forverts" can still operate in the 70s. And he told me, he had good sense of humor. He said that apparently the accountants are such old men that they still, they simply can't see and can't realize that the newspaper has no money. Yeah, because it was a joke, the newspaper headline [inaudible].

SHOLOKHOVA Oh, interesting. So, while I didn't realize it was a program actually, I came across a few very interesting images that I have never seen before. For example, it's not just the Forverts building, but it's also all around. It's also the view from the building. It's like the view would progress into the future of Americans. As you can see the lower east side, you can see the bridges. Clearly, the more historical moment. It was just everything about this building, about not only like architectural views of the building, but also all around it. And here, we can see the offices inside the building. Like, up on the right. On the right side, we can see like the small portrait of Abe Cahan who was the Chief Editor, Editor in Chief of the "Forverts" newspaper. But you can see this drawing by Jacob Epstein is very atmospheric. And this is another image that's actually from unidentified ghetto newspaper office. And here is a question for you an idea though, in the 1910s, 1920s, well, what was the other Yiddish newspaper, and how does it compete or compare with the "Forverts"?

ESTRAIKH Because the competition was very serious. Yes. The "Forverts" always remained the strongest newspaper with the highest circulation. But there was competing outlets. For example, that the "Forverts" actually had as a result of the competition ideological disagreements. Actually, there were some spin-offs from the "Forverts". In 1905, another newspaper, also a socialist newspaper, was established in New York. And its name was "Wahrheit", meaning truth. And it was also a socialist newspaper. And the split was initially personal between Abe Cahan and others, Jewish journalists, and socialists. Yeah. The newspaper "Wahrheit" declined in 1919 but, for quite a while, it was a very significant newspaper. And initially, it was just another socialist newspaper. But very soon, it turned into a form, a tribune for Labor Zionism or various forms of Labor Zionism. So, it had a different agenda. Another newspaper in competition was, of course, the communist newspaper, actually this year. Also, on the same day when the "Forverts" was established, April 22nd, the communist newspaper was also established on the same, April the 22nd, but 25 years later. So, this year, its centennial year. It doesn't exist, but it's the centennial of the newspaper. And it was
also in competition. There were also other newspaper. In 1914, a very important daily started appearing in New York, [inaudible], "The Day". It was more sophisticated, more intellectual, and more national or maybe even nationalist, a nationalist liberal newspaper. There was also a traditional. For traditional readers, there were also newspaper. For example, the [foreign language spoken] was also in competition because the "Forverts" wasn't traditional. The "Forverts" would be published on Saturday. The "Forverts" would be published actually, on any day including all Jewish holidays here. That, of course, wasn't so traditional compared to, for example, the [foreign language spoken] that would, didn't appear on Saturday.

SHOLOKHOVA So, but how it is the newspaper after the events of the World War II?

ESTRAIKH The reaction to the World War II was, of course, it was a bit of a confusion. There was an element of a bit of a confusion. Because during the First World War, the "Forverts" was strongly pro-German and anti-Russian. As a con road, it was a war between the Russian barbarous and the civilized Germans. Yes, of course, it created significant problems for the newspaper, when the United States entered the war. But it survived. It's another story, stuff, we don't have time for the story. But when the war started, the Second World War started, especially the phase was, you know, between the Soviet Union and Germany, they had to explain their position. By that time, it was a strongly anti-Soviet newspaper. And they had to find, somehow, the right tone and the right line that we support the fight of the Red Army, of the Soviet army against the Nazis. And they were happy to support, even to participate in fundraising, and so on. But certainly, it didn't mean that they would start supporting the Soviet government itself. So, this was the position. But the "Forverts", as a newspaper, as a reflection of the events of the war, of the Holocaust, the understanding of the Holocaust. Because initially, there were news, there were articles that revealed it was very difficult to understand what was going on. The newspaper is a very important source for historians, for anyone who is interested in this page in history.

SHOLOKHOVA Yeah. And I remember. You also mentioned when we've talked before that actually, the newspaper became more was Zionist. But even the Zionists got inclinations after World War II, especially.

ESTRAIKH That's right. It started turning to Zionism in the mid-1920s. Mainly to the Labor Zionism, yes, somehow. And not everyone, not every contributor was happy with this. There were many contributors who were strictly anti-Zionist. So, it was a fight. A discussion about, a whole discussion, even among the contributors, the editors. And but greatly after the Second World War, it became really pro-Israel pro-Zionist.

SHOLOKHOVA Right. And so, we really have a couple of minutes left and just really a few words about the literary component of the newspaper and contribution of Bashevis Singer and Sholem Asch to the newspaper.

ESTRAIKH Yes, the newspaper published numerous articles, literary pieces, novels, stories,
poems, by scores of writers. The most prominent of them, is, of course, Sholem Asch, yes, who was prominent. And later, in, beginning from 1939, he was rejected by the "Forverts" and severely criticized for his so-called Christian novels. Yes. So, he became, too, it was a jump from being the star writer to actually a writer hated by the newspaper and supposedly by the readers of the newspaper. And the second one, of course, was Bashevis Singer who became, of course, the Nobel Prize winner in 1978. And he became the literary star of the newspaper in the second half, mainly of the 20th century. Yes, [inaudible].

SHOLOKHOVA And in what format the newspaper now appear?

ESTRAIKH At the moment, it appears in internet. It can be read. And it's, I really admire the efforts of those who are contributors now to the newspaper. The editors. And they're doing their best, you know, to keep this, the name of the "Forverts" important. Yes. And, and to continue to attract readers here to this unique Yiddish newspaper.

SHOLOKHOVA Thank you very much.

NIGRO Thank you. I think it's time for some questions now. First of all, if you do have questions, please drop them into the Q&A tab, and we will try to get to them. Our first question comes from Stephen [assumed spelling] who asks, was circ decline due to Yiddish not being as common or as well as assimilation?

ESTRAIKH There were, of course, quite a few reasons, including the reasons that you mentioned. So, of course, a very important reason for decline was also that there was no strong Yiddish education in the United States. The best afternoon schools. There were no daily schools. There were a couple of attempts that failed. So, as a result, the younger generation would join the ranks of the readers but in very small numbers.

NIGRO Okay. And there was a next part of that question, was there large circulation in the early '60s due to the rise of the new left because it was a socialist news? Was it still considered a socialist newspaper in the '60s?

ESTRAIKH It was. It was considered it struggled to define its socialism. Yes, quite. Abe Cahan, for example, in after the Second World War, defined his socialism mainly similar to the Labor Party in the United Kingdom, this kind of socialism. So, moving from socialism to something liberal. The rise, the significant number, it wasn't so much with the attraction of socialism, I believe. It was more that there were still readers. And importantly, after the Second World War, a significant number of survivors came to the United States. And this was a very important reinforcement of the circles of Yiddish speakers, including Yiddish readers.

NIGRO Excellent. So, Alex asks, can you speak to any influence that the newspaper had on local New York City politics?
ESTRAIKH No doubt. But it's a very, it is a huge topic. It is a huge step because it was, of course, reflected. And many people associated with the newspaper or even employed by the newspaper would be involved in various political debates and institutions based in New York here. Is an excellent question but, unfortunately, I don't have time to give any reasonable answer.

NIGRO All right. Alexander asks, has "Forverts" ever published anything by or about Jabotinsky?

ESTRAIKH Maybe later. I can't say that I read every issue, that I read every issue of the "Forverts", so I can't argue. Certainly, it would have been impossible to imagine in, even in the 1920s and in the 1930s, because essentially a newspaper that were only turning to the Zionist project and mainly Labor Zionist project, not exactly in the vision of Jabotinsky.

NIGRO And Mila, this question I think you can help with. What's the easiest way to access the "Forverts"? Is it online through the Historical Jewish Press or via microfilm or?

SHOLOKHOVA Well, absolutely. It's online through the Historical Jewish Press. They recently changed the interface. And it's very user-friendly and very easy to use and also OCR searchable. I definitely recommend this.

NIGRO And does that cover the entire range of the historical paper?

SHOLOKHOVA It covers up to 1979. There are some gaps.

NIGRO There's some gaps.

SHOLOKHOVA Yes. Yeah, here and there. Because not all issues survived, unfortunately. But the New York Public Library kind of set of the newspaper is the most complete one.

NIGRO Yes, and there was a question about accessing it outside of New York, but I've encouraged that person to email us so we can tailor --

SHOLOKHOVA Certainly.

NIGRO -- and tailor their answer to their location.

SHOLOKHOVA No. Yes, any location, from any location.

NIGRO Okay. If we have any more questions, please drop them into the chat right now. What other papers from New York City are we seeing in the Historical Jewish Press?

SHOLOKHOVA Well, there are many. First of all, we're now focusing on going the most popular
newspapers. Actually, there’s talk of more culture now. Well, that, there are many others. Basically, I think of digitized. I can’t even list all titles. There are, kind of, dozens of them, already. Yeah. But at the moment, we’re focusing on the talk and worker journal. And possibly in the future, we are hoping to digitize [foreign language spoken] significant media of the [inaudible].

ESTRAIKH And may I add that it is really a revolution. This is a revolution, this way of having access to, you know, thousands and thousands of issues. And access from any kind of computer is a revolution for research. It’s a revolution for, you know, for understanding the importance of the press. Yes.

NIGRO Madeline asks, Is the English language "Forward" on the web equivalent to the Yiddish version or is it very different?

ESTRAIKH You know, from the very beginning, from time to time, the "Forverts", even the 1920s, would introduce an English section, usually on Sunday. And, as a rule, they were different. They targeted a different audience. And clearly, it was not spelled out, I believe, but from reading you understand that it targeted mainly the younger audience. Yeah. Somehow, the young people. So, some sometimes translating. And it remained actually always the same that some elements would overlap. But usually, it was a different edition. And when the newspaper, the English newspaper, the English "Forward" was launched, it was a different newspaper. Sometimes, because the neighbors here, not in the same office. And, of course, they used the same material, but essentially different newspapers. And they remained, more or less, even in online, the same. Similar but different.

SHOLOKHOVA Similar, but different. And Ellen [assumed spelling] would like to know, did "The Forward" interview Trotsky?

ESTRAIKH It not only interviewed for Trotsky, it published a few of his articles. Yes. Trotsky didn’t know any Yiddish. Yeah. Because the translators published in the "Forverts" and also in a journal affiliated at that time with "The Forward" [inaudible], yes. But it ended up with the scandal. Scandal, you know. This Trotsky came to the office, and there was a scandal between Trotsky and Abe Cahan. And they believed, and you can read in Trotsky’s memoirs, how he despised the "Forverts". And actually, you can read how Abe Cahan disliked Trotsky afterwards.

NIGRO All right. Thank you so much for answering these questions. If anyone else has remaining questions, you can email the Dorot Jewish Division at dorotjewish@nypl.org. Links to these collection items and other resources along with the video of and transcript of this episode will be published shortly on a post on the NYPL blog, which we’ll send out to everyone who registered. All previous episodes can be found there as well. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the "Doc Chat" channel on the NYPL blog, and you’ll find this link in the chat. "Doc Chats" are held usually every Thursday. This is our last one for the spring. We have a very exciting planning for the Fall coming up. So, look for new sessions of "Doc Chat" after the
summer break in September. Thank you so much for your chat today, Mila and Gennady. It was rich and wonderful. So, thanks again.

SHOLOKHOVA Thank you, Carmen.

ESTRAIKH Thank you. Thank you.

NIGRO Take care and we'll see you next time.