“Yiddish has magic”: The Yiddish Book Center (Amherst, MA)

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Abstract

The Yiddish Book Center (YBC) is a non-profit organization located in Amherst, Massachusetts, committed to the preservation, study and celebration of Yiddish literature and culture. Over the years, this organization has overcome many obstacles, one of the most challenging and consuming being an urgent capital campaign, launched in 1991, to raise funds for a new and permanent location. This case study recounts the inspiring story of the YBC as a niche cultural organization and dissects how they managed, in face of discouraging odds, to commit wholeheartedly to their mission and successfully reach their fundraising goals.

Keywords: Yiddish, Jewish organizations, preservation, capital campaigns

Introduction

The Yiddish language has found a new and permanent home in Amherst, Massachusetts at the Yiddish Book Center (YBC): a non-profit cultural organization that identifies not only as a library, but also as a museum and an educational center. “Yiddish, a vernacular Germanic language typically written using the Hebrew alphabet, was spoken by more than three-quarters of the world’s Jewish population for a thousand years” (Goldscheider, 2002, par. 9). Today, Yiddish is widely considered a dying or “endangered” language given that approximately half of its speakers perished during or in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the language consequently faded out of use over time (Gasztold, 2015, p. 34; Lansky, 2011).

The story of the YBC has been communicated over a variety of platforms, including their website, Yiddish oral history projects, video memories and testimonies (Yiddish Book Center [YBC], 2011), their annual magazine publication *Pakn Treger* (Lansky, 2011) and a short documentary (Ball, 2011). Offering perhaps the most insight of all is Lansky’s (2005) memoir, *Outwitting History*, which eloquently captures the vision and journey of the YBC from the perspective of its creator. Together these sources present Yiddish literature and culture as tangible and living and recount the story of the YBC’s growth as an institution.

The YBC has come a long way since its inception in 1980. At the time, YBC founder and now President, Aaron Lansky, was a 24-year old graduate student of Yiddish literature, struggling to locate available copies of his assigned readings. As Lansky turned to the private collections of members of his community, he soon came to realize that “untold numbers of irreplaceable Yiddish books—the primary, tangible legacy of a thousand years of Jewish life in Eastern Europe—were being discarded by American-born Jews unable to read the language” (YBC, n.d.[C]). Lansky recognized this as an urgent cause and decided to take it upon himself to collect and rescue the world’s remaining Yiddish books. Considering that Yiddish literature is finite and that the language is at risk of fading further out of use, Lansky has remained optimistic, holding on to the words of the great Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich, who famously stated, “Yiddish has magic, it will outwit history” (Goldscheider, 2002; Lansky, 2005, p. XI).

Indeed, the YBC’s very existence serves as a testament to Weinreich’s famous words. When Lansky and his small team first started collecting Yiddish books, some of which were handed over “lovingly,” while others were rescued “from demolition sites and dumpsters,” experts estimated that no more than 70,000 were extant. Yet, within just six months they had collected well beyond that figure and went on to recover over a million Yiddish books. To this day, the Center continues to accept an incoming stream of book donations from all over the world (YBC, n.d.[C]). Over the years, the YBC overcame numerous financial and storage challenges to become the largest Yiddish collection in the world, and with 30,000 registered members, one of the largest Jewish cultural organizations in the United States (Gasztold, 2015, p. 36). This paper aims to spotlight the growth of the YBC as a unique case study, zooming into a transformative and definitive period of their history: an ambitious and urgent capital campaign launched in 1991 to fund the creation of a new and permanent building. Despite

representing a supposedly fading cultural niche, the YBC managed to raise over \$7 million dollars, acquire land, build and open a state-of-the-art facility to the public within just six years (Lansky, 2005, p. 284). The success of the YBC at this time can generally be attributed to the enduring strength and clarity of their mission and vision and the steady development of their network of generous members.

Figure 1: Aaron Lansky, founder of the YBC (1998) surrounded by overflowing boxes of Yiddish book donations (Hart, 2016).

Mission, vision and collections

The YBC aims to actualize the following mission: “to recover, celebrate and regenerate Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture” (YBC, n.d.[A]). Their purpose was clear from the start: rescue and collect Yiddish books from around the world, before it becomes too late. Today, the collection strengths of the YBC include classics of Yiddish literature, rare *yizkor* “memorial” books (firsthand accounts of Jewish life before, during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust), children’s literature, various oral history projects, archival recordings and Yiddish audiobooks, as well as an impressive Digital Yiddish Library of 12,000 titles available to read online and download free of charge. The vast majority of the physical collections are Yiddish books, with some materials in various audio formats including vinyl, reel-to-reel and cassettes, and some art and posters that make up part of their permanent exhibition (YBC, n.d.[B]). The Center also has a fairly extensive collection of printing artifacts for display purposes only, including Yiddish typewriters, as well as Yiddish metal and wood type collections and a rare Yiddish linotype machine (YBC, n.d.[D]).

The YBC was never envisioned as a “static storehouse” for books. Rather, these materials would come to the YBC to be preserved, both physically and digitally, and serve as an active learning collection to be explored and celebrated through oral history projects, translation initiatives, educational programming, and exhibitions. They would also be distributed to strengthen Yiddish collections at hundreds of university and research libraries around the world (YBC, n.d.[C]).

Support did not always come easily to the YBC. In fact, especially in their early days, some of the strongest opposition against their efforts were fellow Jewish organizations who considered saving Yiddish to be a trivial mission (Lyman, 1997). As a small non-profit, highly dependent on long-distance travel and storage space, the organization also struggled financially. According to long-time board member Penina Glazer, funding was initially so scarce that the whole organization was being “run on a shoestring” (YBC, 2011).

A space to call their own

The original home of the YBC was an old redbrick schoolhouse in Amherst, MA. The organization operated out of this space for 11 years until it was suddenly reclaimed by the town in 1991. This development left the YBC, with its limited budget, effectively homeless. Yet, Lansky saw the bright side of the situation, accepting it as an opportunity to finally design a permanent home with improved and stable conditions for their collections (Lansky, 2005, p.277).

Figure 2: The bright and colourful repository stacks at the Yiddish Book Center (Yiddish Book Center, n.d.).

The YBC team began by searching for land, hoping to secure a location nearby and in partnership with some of the local colleges. After considering various offers, Lansky’s alma mater, Hampshire College, turned out to be the best fit. The president of Hampshire College at the time, Gregory Prince, was interested in developing a ‘cultural village’ made up of non-profit organizations around the campus. Prince envisioned a symbiotic relationship, where the organizations would benefit from the established community and services on campus, while the college and students would be enriched by their unique resources. Prince agreed to lease out land to the YBC for one dollar a year for the next 99 years, but the YBC was reluctant to accept the offer unless they could own the land, firmly believing that Yiddish, having suffered through enough impermanence, needed security and stability. Three more years passed before the president was able to bring his board around to transferring the ownership of the land – a 10-acre apple orchard at the edge of campus – which was finally sold to the YBC for \$200,000 (Lansky, 2005, p. 278; Lyman, 1997).

Although the YBC had luck in securing the land, many challenges awaited them in the process of finding the right architect and raising funds to construct the building itself. After interviewing a dozen firms to no avail, a board member eventually recommended an architect named Allen Moore, who was experienced in building “imaginative cultural and educational buildings in the U.S. and Europe” (Gasztold, 2015, p. 36; Lansky, 2005, p. 279). In time, Moore proposed a plan for a 27,000-square-foot wooden building, integrating a reading library, extensive book storage, an exhibition space, a hundred-seat theatre, a bookstore, offices and a kosher kitchen. The building would be “modern, bright and airy, with state-of-the-art climate control, fire protection and security” all the while playfully evoking the architectural design of a *shtetl* (a traditional Eastern-European Jewish village). The YBC team loved the design, but the next step was daunting: raising funds. The entire project, including the land, design and construction was estimated to cost \$7 million (Lansky, 2005, p. 280).

Fundraising Challenges and Successes

Though experts said it could not be done, the YBC remarkably managed to reach the total goal of their capital campaign and construct their new building. The success of this fundraising project can be attributed to the clarity and strength of the Center’s identity and mission, community-based funding strategies and, in part— to timing and luck.

Studies that explore fundraising and the challenges of leading capital campaigns generally agree that successful campaigns and continued support ultimately come down to strong organizational identity (McGregor, 2011, p. 133; Moore, 2014, p. 376; Young, 2001, p. 139). According to Woronkiewicz and Nicholson-Crotty (2017), capital campaigns, as major events in the development of a non-profit organization, require great dedication as they tend to consume most of the organization’s energy and resources. In anticipation of and during these campaigns, it is imperative to maintain clarity and consensus on the organization’s mission and vision across the institution (Young, 2001, p. 139-140). Donors also tend to be most

responsive to unique organizations that demonstrate an evident and tangible impact (McGregor, 2011, p. 133).

It is clear that the YBC team had a strong grasp on their mission and purpose as an organization from the very beginning. From the outset of the YBC in 1980, the urgency of their mission of rescuing Yiddish books was abundantly clear to all team and board members. They were aware that they were assuming the responsibility of preserving not only the physical materials, but also Yiddish history and culture more broadly. The YBC team saw themselves as more than just custodians of Yiddish literature—the Center was always envisioned as a vibrant and dynamic educational and cultural space. Though not all members of the Jewish community agreed on the value of Yiddish revival, this organization ingrained a strong commitment to its mission among all staff members. Ultimately, the YBC team believed in the value of their work. They felt dedicated and committed to their cause and took the responsibility for the revival and representation of Yiddish seriously (Lyman, 1997).

Before the launch of the campaign, the largest monetary gift the YBC had ever received was \$10,000, with most individual contributions averaging between \$18 to \$36 a year. Funding experts predicted that it could not be done—that they would need to raise 40% of the expected cost before the campaign could be officially announced to the public (Lansky, 2005, p. 281). Woronkiewicz and Nicholson-Crotty (2017) assert that approximately 40-60% of the total goal of a capital campaign should be sourced from just 10-15 gifts. Though experts warned Lansky of similar figures, he took matters into his own hands, by announcing the campaign and writing a personal plea to his network of loyal members.

To their surprise, the response was overwhelming. Their phones rang off the hook, and the YBC started receiving cheques of \$50,000 from donors who normally contributed no more than \$20 a year. Within just two months, over 4,000 members had contributed \$2,625,260 via mail (Lansky, 2005, p. 281). At this point, Lansky began travelling to visit hundreds of individuals and foundations. While some turned him away empty-handed, many did make contributions. In the end, some of the largest donations included \$250,000 from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, \$600,000 from the Kresge Foundation and \$1 million from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation (Lansky, 2005, p. 281-282; Lyman, 1997).

The YBC also followed practical strategies towards community-based funding. According to Moore (2014), since they tend not to receive much government support, heritage language programs are most successful in fundraising when they turn towards their own community. This includes reaching out to their own members for support, but it also means extending beyond the cultural community to local institutions (Moore, 2014, p. 370). This is exactly what the YBC did. The team began by reaching out to members of their own Jewish community, but they also made connections beyond this network to find support through local organizations and schools, with a great deal of support coming from Hampshire College, the institution that ultimately offered them a site for their new home. Although the largest gifts did come from a handful of foundations, a significant portion of the total campaign was sourced from thousands of individual contributors (J. Correspondent, 1997). Overall, this case suggests

that despite the projected measurable trends of successful capital campaigns, those led by cultural or heritage organization may have the flexibility to drum up more unique sources of funding.

Raising funds, designing and actually constructing the building took several years with the process itself being plagued by countless technical challenges. From weather fluctuations to negotiations with contractors, suppliers, unions and town officials, the YBC faced a fair stream of obstacles in their capital campaign and building process. Finally, in March of 1997, over three miles of steel library shelving were donated and installed; and, the next month, the YBC team began the long process of installing plaques in honour of each of their 10,000 donors (Lansky, 2005, p. 284). Having overcome all the challenges, the new home for the YBC turned out just as it was initially envisioned. On a sunny day in June 1997, the building was officially opened to the public with over 3,000 guests in attendance (Lansky, 2005, p. 284; Lyman, 1997).

In retrospect, Lansky himself reflected that much of the success of this campaign came down to “a miracle of timing” and luck. Indeed, this transformative period in the Center’s history seemed to arise at “this perfect moment in time, coming at the cusp of two epochs in Jewish history” when there was finally a balance of sufficient interest in the organization and its mission (Lyman, 1997).

Conclusion

Although the story of the YBC is fairly niche and unique, it still offers valuable lessons on fundraising, team building and the development of strong mission statements that may resonate within the broader world of non-profit organizations. While the YBC may attribute some of the success of their capital campaign to luck and good timing, the real ‘magic’ of this organization ultimately comes down to the hard work and commitment of the YBC team as well as the legacy and spirit of Yiddish. The YBC has come a very long way since its inception in 1980 and the opening of its new permanent home in 1997. Over the years, The YBC invested significant effort into developing strong and meaningful bonds across their network of donors and proved their authenticity as an organization by consistently practicing and expressing gratitude for their support (Lansky, 2005, p. 284). From the start, the YBC team believed in their mission, even when few others did. The YBC prevailed in face of countless obstacles, and readily took on the responsibility of preserving and bringing life to a significant and nearly lost cultural memory. Somehow, even the advice of fundraising experts was no match for the perceived magic of Yiddish to find relevance and speak to generation after generation, despite the threats that, time and time again, sought to erase it (Lansky, 2005, p. XI). This capital campaign proves to be more than just a business case—it is a compelling and emotional story about the survival and preservation of a culture. The YBC is a testament not only to the spirit of Yiddish culture and language, but also to the impact that a small organization may achieve

when it revolves around a strong and united vision, optimism and a deep commitment to its mission and community.

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