

Education & Culture

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'Butterfly Wing Tray' created by the Yiddish poet H. Leivick while he recovering from tuberculosis in Denver, 1932-1935

YIVO 100 Amazing Objects

By STEVE MARK
IJN Staff Writer

Stefanie Halpern has one of the neatest jobs in the world.

Halpern, 40, is the director of collections for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, where over 24 million pieces of Jewish history reside. The Institute was founded in 1925 in Vilna (then in Poland, today Vilnius, Lithuania) and relocated to New York in 1940.

"We have gathered so many materials from over the past hundred years," says Halpern. "There are amazing, wonderful and strange objects in our collection, and we thought we should highlight them."

Of all of those pieces of Eastern European Jewish history at her disposal, Halpern has one favorite that happens to have Colorado lineage (Halpern promises she isn't pandering to the IJN readership). It is a wooden tray called the "Butterfly Wing Tray," created by Yiddish writer H. Leivick while he was living in

Denver, 1932-1935, at the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society (JCRS).

"I've always been partial to the Butterfly Tray for a couple of reasons," Halpern says.

"One, it's very beautiful. And, it's a strange object.

"The story that I had always been told from the person who donat-

ed it was that it was made by H. Leivick when he was convalescing in a sanatorium in Denver, after suffering from tuberculosis."

Six years ago, as YIVO's 100th anniversary was on the horizon, Halpern was brainstorming about how to commemorate that milestone.

"There are so many amazing, won-

derful, strange objects in our collection," says Halpern. "I thought we should highlight them and show how you can tell a big story from one small object."

"All of the scholars who have passed through our doors at YIVO have used these materials at one point."

The commemorative volume, *100 Objects*, published by YIVO this year, contains 100 of Halpern's (and the YIVO staff's) favorite Jewish artifacts, cate-

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YIVO'S CENTENNIAL

100 artifacts for 100 years

100

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gorized by genre: history, culture, the written word, beliefs and customs, performing and visual arts, labor, youth and immigration.

Plus, this genre of artifacts: The Holocaust and its Aftermath.

Each of the 100 items displayed in the book is accompanied by an essay written by historians and

products for smoking cannabis.

"Originally created to celebrate Chanukah with his family," the description by Eddie Portnoy says, "Daily realized that others might be interested, and he put it into production."

Halpern said:

"It was the centerpiece of a big exhibition we did in 2022 about cannabis. It is a Chanukah related item but it also connects with ancient Israeli religious rituals.

"I thought we should show how you can tell a big story from one small object"

professors from across the country.

"This gave scholars the opportunity to sort of think outside the box about what the object was telling," says Halpern, "and I wanted to make sure that these objects had an interesting story associated with them either historically, or some kind of interesting provenance, or even something shocking that you wouldn't expect to see in an archive or library — especially a Jewish one."

Halpern says it took many months to whittle down the multitude of items on hand at the Institute to 100 items selected for publication.

In the book's 316 pages, there are photos of Theodor Herzl's diary, Marc Chagall's art sketches, a manuscript of Sholem Aleichem's and a Roman *ketubah*.

Also included is a 1892 copy of the US Constitution and Declaration of Independence, printed in Yiddish.

There is an entry of a menorah bong, from a donor in Austin, Texas.

The description in the book notes that the glass menorah bong was created by Dave Daily, the owner of a company that makes high-end glass

"It's also playful and fun, you know?"

"Overall, I wanted to have people say, 'Wow, I can't believe YIVO has something like that in their collection.'"

"We have things that are so contemporary and so outside of what we would think about in an archive that focuses on Eastern European Jewish life and Yiddish history."

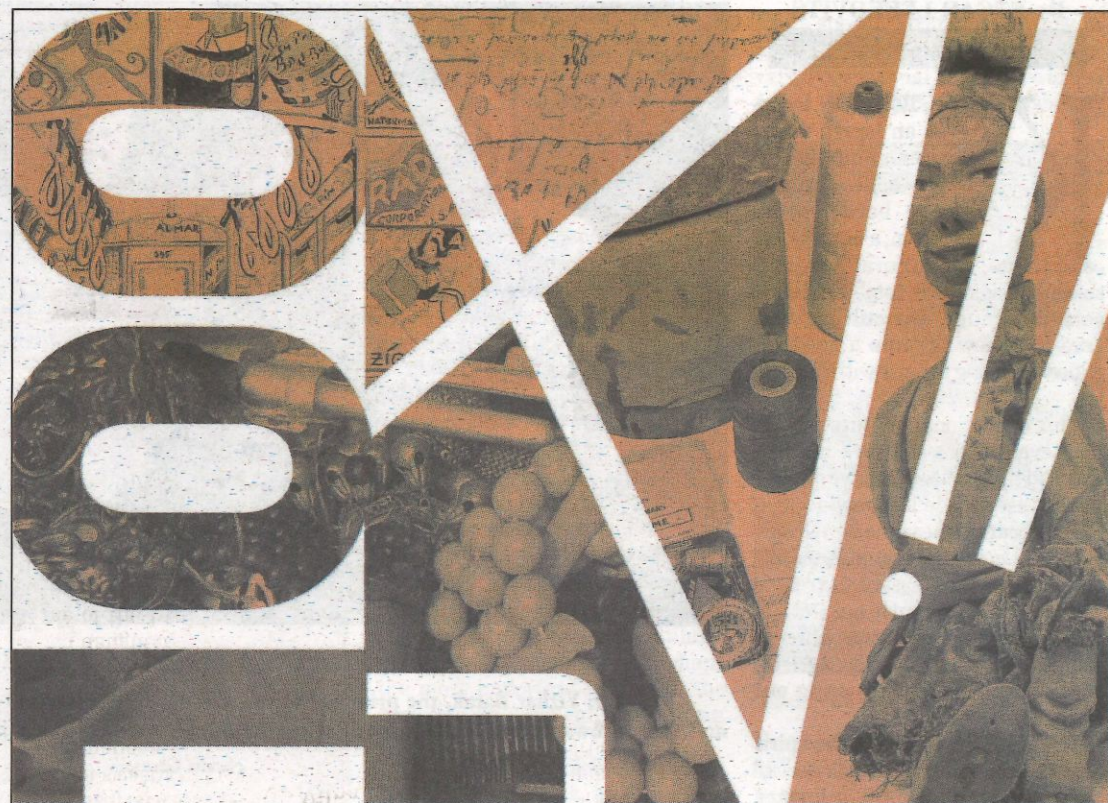
One of the 100: the red shoes worn by Yiddish stage and screen actress Mae Simon, who arrived in America as a youngster, when she appeared in the production of "The Red Shoes."

The description written in the book said:

"Mae Simon saved little of her theater paraphernalia, but throughout her life, she kept her fancy red shoes. She aged, but they never did, serving as an *aide-memoire* of her youth and glittering days on stage."

The most powerful objects in this print display are from the Holocaust era. YIVO described in the chapter's prelude:

"The possibility that the Germans



100 OBJECTS

from the Collections of the
YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

themselves and even the passive spectators of this unparalleled Jewish tragedy will try to belittle it makes the establishment of such archives imperative."

That chapter contains an arrivals and departures ledger from Auschwitz, hand-written library usage statistics from the Vilna ghetto, a swastika *grager*, and Otto Frank's national refugee service case file (Otto was the only member of his family to survive the war; one member who did not was his much-celebrated daughter, Anne).

One of the Institute's items is a Torah scroll with a Nazi (thought to be Arthur Seyss-Inquart) paint-

ed on the parchment. The description says:

"An American couple on a European vacation was strolling through a flea market in Vienna. This unframed oil painting caught their eye but not because of the artwork. This amateur-looking portrait of a bespectacled man was painted on the blank, reverse side of a piece of parchment ripped from a desecrated Torah scroll. The Germans took special glee in defiling items considered sacred by Jews."

Another entry in the book is a pair of glasses worn by Shmuel Zygielbojn, a leading member of the Jewish Workers' Bund in Poland.

"When we have archivists here working on Holocaust materials, they sometimes find it a difficult process," says Halpern.

"I think I would feel similarly if faced with going through and reading these materials every single day. It would be very wearing on me."

The book also includes a photograph of a Remington Rand Deluxe typewriter that belonged to Yiddish writer Chaim Grade, who survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and immigrated to New York in the late 1940s. Grade wrote poetry and novels on Jewish life. This year, after sitting in a manuscript since 1983, his final novel *Sons and Daughters* was published.

The typewriter and case were acquired by YIVO in 2013 and had not been opened since 1982. When opened by YIVO, one piece of discolored paper was still lodged in the typewriter carriage, with Yiddish text:

"Already in the mild weather of the spring, he went out without a coat, carrying a soft hat in one hand and a worn briefcase in the other."

It was unclear what project Grade was working on; he died in 1982.

Still, of the millions of items under her umbrella, Halpern favors that one obscure artifact from Denver.

"The object itself is beautiful," Halpern says, "but the fact that it came with a story that took a little digging, then unraveled into history — that's just the sort of collection I wanted the book to have." You'll have to read the book to get the story.

Your coffee table awaits.

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yivo.convio.net/100-Objects ■

SWASTIKA GRAGER
Austria or Germany, ca. 1945-1950

It was common among the Jews of post-WW II Eastern Europe to refer Hitler as Amalek or Haman, thereby connecting their most recent mortal enemy with their historical enemies.

Carving the phrases 'blot out the memory of Amalek' and 'Curse Haman, Curse Hitler,' into the grager placed Hitler and the Nazis in a league with the traditional enemies of the Jews.

