

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: A Rosh Hashana postcard, published by Verlag Central, Warsaw, ca. 1910. Below: two postcards from a series of romantic images published by Verlag Synaj (Sinai), Warsaw, ca. 1910

SEND A POSTCARD!

In the early 20th century, people across the world were united in the craze for sending postcards. **Stefanie Halpern** explores the surprising demand for these miniature missives

“From far, far away, over lands, deserts, and oceans, I send you my blessing, my dear beloved children, as is my old custom. I place my hands on your head and say, first to you, Zalmen: ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.’ And to you, my beloved daughter, Yente Rokhl: ‘May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. May God bless you and keep you. May God shine light on you and be gracious to you. May God turn toward you and grant you peace.’”
– David Holtz to Zalmen Holtz, 12 October, 1921

From 1920 to 1924, David Holtz sent over 700 postcards from his home in the Polish town of Skierniewice to his son, Zalmen, who was living on New York’s Upper East Side. The postcards, which are held in YIVO’s Genealogy and Family History Collection, carry good tidings and family news – both celebratory and sorrowful. As David so poignantly demonstrates in his 12 October 1921 postcard, offering his son and daughter-in-law the traditional Shabbat and holiday blessing for children, these short but powerful messages allowed families to remain connected even across great distances.

Spurred by an article by Dr Emanuel

Hermann, a Viennese Jewish economics professor who touted the merits of creating a cheaper and easier way to send messages than the letter, the Austrian post put the first postcard into circulation on 1 October 1869. At half the price of sending a letter, the postcard quickly gained popularity, and billions were sent and received worldwide during their heyday between 1895 and 1920. There was such a demand for these miniature missives that in major cities postcards were picked up and delivered up to a dozen times each day.

Postcards were also collectible items and publishers issued special albums for safeguarding a collection. Those looking to expand their assortment often posted advertisements in local papers asking



travellers to send them postcards from specific places.

The craze was not lost on the Jewish world, and YIVO’s collection contains thousands of postcards on Jewish themes that were printed and sold by publishers around the globe. These publishers placed advertisements in the Yiddish press encouraging readers to send a self-addressed postcard in exchange for a free copy of the publisher’s postcard catalogue.

Images on these Jewish postcards were wide-ranging: renderings of biblical settings and Zionist themes; portraits of well-known Jewish writers, actors, cultural figures and rabbis; humorous cartoons and satirical caricatures; candid street scenes taken by photographers in Eastern European cities; pastoral scenes of shtetl life; and even photographs showing the horrors of pogroms and war. Particularly lively were the postcards meant to be sent for Rosh Hashanah. These images, often staged by actors in costume, depicted scenes of everyday Jewish life including Shabbat meals, weddings, brises (the circumcision ceremony) and even divorces.

Many of the postcards are sentimental in nature, with images of couples sharing intimate moments. Though there is nothing explicitly Jewish about the images themselves, each of these postcards includes a poem in Yiddish printed on the front that illuminates the romantic theme.

Take, for instance, two cards clearly published as part of a series. The first pictures a loving couple kissing under a full moon. The accompanying Yiddish poem reads: “Bathed in beads of silver beauty, / A young spring eventide looks on; / Hands and lips in tight embrace, / The moon shines radiant and laughs...”

The second postcard pictures the same couple, now facing away from one another, despondent looks on their faces. The poem reads: “Even among loving couples / A cat sometimes springs in between... / There they sit sad and aggrieved, / The moon can only bite its tongue...”

From blessings to breakups, one was never at a loss for words as long as the advice from the Yiddish advertisements was followed: “shikt a postkart” – Send a postcard! ■

See: yivo.org. **Stefanie Halpern** is the director of the YIVO Archives.