

# HAPPY BIRTHDAY YIVO!



To mark its centenary, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research has published a book that tells the story of Jewish life through 100 objects – chosen from the thousands in its archive and library. **Stefanie Halpern** picks her top five

**T**his year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, a library, archive and research body dedicated to preserving and promoting Jewish history and culture. To celebrate this milestone, YIVO is launching 100 Objects from the Collections of the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, a beautifully illustrated volume that illuminates Jewish history by examining some of the thousands of objects from its archives and library. The book includes essays by leading scholars and staff members on everything from beliefs and customs to visual arts to the history of the labour movement.

Other events planned for the anniversary year include an exhibition at YIVO's New York base on the institution's history; a conference, YIVO in America, about the organisation from the 1940s; and an online lecture series highlighting YIVO's work.



## FIVE OBJECTS THAT TELL JEWISH STORIES

### 1 MAE SIMON'S RED SHOES NEW YORK, c1925

It is said that red shoes are made for dancing and fantasising. There is little doubt that the small, cherry-red satin shoes seen above, with their fiery, rhinestone-studded heels, were made for dancing on the stage.

These sexy slippers, with their titillating frisson of demureness and eroticism, were worn by Mae Simon, a popular star of the Yiddish stage and screen. Born in Grodno, Polish Lithuania, in 1886, Simon came to America at the age of 10 (or 14 – she shaved four years off her age). She fell in love with New York's Yiddish theatre and, at 15, joined an amateur dramatic club. Simon soon began to act in Yiddish vaudeville houses, especially at the Atlantic Garden, in the Bowery area.

Simon was a versatile actor and she also performed major roles in the classic Yiddish theatre repertoire and even headed her own company. She saved little of her theatre paraphernalia, but throughout her life (she died in 1950) she kept her fancy red shoes.

*Edited extract from an essay by Edna Nahshon*

### 2 OZE BREASTFEEDING POSTER BERLIN, GERMANY, 1926

The poster, “*Tsum gezunt, tsu lange yorn iz der mames milkh*” (For health and long life – mother's milk) was issued by the OZE Association in Berlin in 1926. OZE (Obshchestvo Zdravookhraneniia Evreev, the Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jews) was founded in St Petersburg in 1912 to address Jewish health concerns in Russia.

The organisation championed preventive medicine – a novel concept at the time – focusing primarily on mothers

and children. It established milk-drop and consultation stations, school nutrition programmes, mobile dental clinics and summer camps. It also vaccinated children and held campaigns to eradicate tuberculosis, favus and other common infectious diseases among Eastern European Jewry.

The poster, which was illustrated by Salomon Nichamkin, depicts a mother rejecting a bottle of cow's milk, its long shadow symbolising potential harm. Embracing the baby in a protective manner, she offers her breast, encouraging breastfeeding with her loving gaze. The image portrays a middle-class Jewish woman (not representative of the typical OZE recipient), wearing some makeup and a green robe to match the slogan's color.

*Edited extract from an essay by Rakefet Zalashik*

### 3 ANTISEMITIC LETTER FROM LAKE MOHONK MOUNTAIN HOUSE ULSTER COUNTY, NEW YORK, 1922

The Lake Mohonk Mountain House was built by a pair of Quaker twins, the Smiley brothers, between 1869 and 1910. Its beautiful location in the Catskill Mountains, in New York State, was a prime vacation destination. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Through its buildings and roads, its land, and its spirit, Mohonk exemplifies America's history and culture...”. Indeed.

On 14 June 1922, Mr and Mrs Morris Feldberg, about whom nothing is known except that they were Jewish, sent a letter seeking employment. The prompt reply on 15 June in the name of a descendant of the founders of the Mountain House was more than an expression of the pervasive antisemitism of the time. The phrase “people of your race” aligns this letter



with the most murderous set of ideas of the modern world: the quack genetics of race science.

In 1925, Adolf Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* that his “eyes were opened to” the two greatest perils of the German race: “Judaism and Marxism”. Hitler's eyes were opened in part by a 1916 book he called his “bible”: *The Passing of the Great Race*, by the American lawyer and zoologist Madison Grant. Grant wrote that he wished “to rouse his fellow Americans to the overwhelming importance of race and to the folly of the ‘Melting Pot’ theory.” If the nation did not listen, he warned, we must write “*Finis Americae* [the end of America].”

In June 1922, Mohonk was simply doing its part to save America.

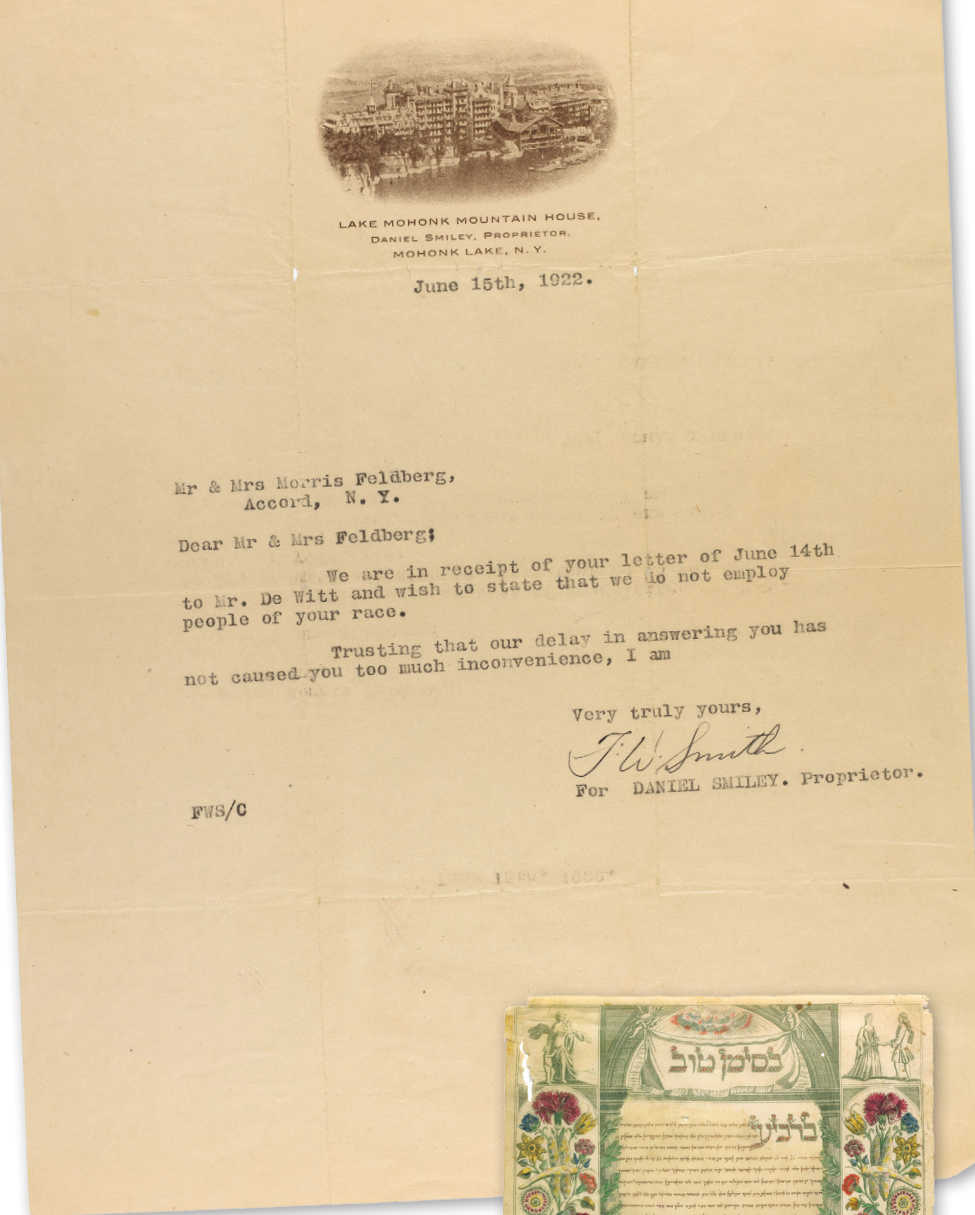
*Edited extract from an essay by Jonathan Brent*

### 4 CHAIM GRADE'S TYPEWRITER NEW YORK, LATE 1940s

This Remington Rand Deluxe Model 5 Hebrew typewriter belonged to the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade. Born in Vilna in 1910, Grade survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and immigrated to New York in the late 1940s.

Housed inside a large, faux-leather case, the typewriter was acquired by YIVO in 2013, along with the rest of Grade's literary estate following the death of his widow, Inna Hecker Grade. The case had remained unopened since Grade's death in 1982 and, when YIVO staff opened the latch, a puff of dust wafted out. Inside, it was discovered that the typewriter still had a fragile, yellowed piece of paper in it, apparently the last lines Grade ever wrote. The sheet of paper contains just one sentence, possibly part of a story he was working on. The Yiddish text reads, “Already in mild weather of late spring,

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he went out without a coat, carrying a soft hat in one hand and a worn briefcase in the other.”

The page that Grade left in the carriage of his typewriter has remained undisturbed, the final work of an unfinished manuscript.

*Edited extract from an essay by Eddy Portnoy*

### 5 ROMAN KETUBAH ROME, 1833

By 1833, when this ketubah was handed by Gabriel Pineda to his bride, Esther, or a member of her family, the custom of illuminating ketubot was already beginning its 19th-century decline. The custom was at least 200 years old, having originated among the wealthier Sephardic Jews of the Venetian ghetto around the turn of the 17th century, when Jews were denied more public symbols of status.

Marriage contracts, which dated to antiquity, specified the obligations of a husband to his wife in dry formulas, but the lavish illustrations often told a broader story. A ubiquitous feature of illuminated ketubot was the arched gateway. Familiar from the title pages of Jewish and Christian books, its use on a ketubah symbolised the formation of a new home. As was



common, the gateway in this ketubah was personalised for the occasion, with the groom's initials (GP) adorning one column and the bride's initial (D) on the other.

At the bottom of the document the groom and his witnesses sign their names in Latin, adding elaborate flourishes. This is rococo style, a last burst of Jewish extravagance before a more sober epoch of civic integration. ■

*Edited extract from an essay by Naomi Seidman*

100 Objects from the Collections of the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research edited by Stefanie

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