



Interviewee: Jonathan Brent

Title: The lost civilization of the Eastern European Jews

Duration: 7 minutes, 26 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

Many people have either sentimental or terrible associations with the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe. Few remember that the Jews in this region spoke their own language and lived out their cultural, political and religious lives over a thousand-year period.

In this episode of Bookpod, Jonathan Brent – executive director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research – talks about the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, a vast book and online project that recovers the long, diverse civilization of the Jews in Poland, Russia and other European countries.

Presentation

The Jewish people lived in Eastern Europe for one thousand



years. It was a civilization. It was not simply a place where they lived. It was not that the Jewish people merely contributed to German culture or to Polish culture or to Russian culture. They built their own culture.

The development of Jewish secular culture out of the essentially mercantile and religious origins – the pods, if you will, that were established there in 900 A.D. or 1000 A.D., before the Lithuanians or the Russians were even baptized, the Jews were there with their traditions, with their God, with their customs.

They lived in Eastern Europe at the end of the Holy Roman Empire through the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, through the Enlightenment, up through the modernization and the industrial world.

And in this, they did, indeed, produce Einstein and Freud and Mendelssohn and all of these glorious cultural achievements, but the main achievement was their own language that they produced and their own culture that had manifestations in music, in literature, in philosophy, in art. And that is what the Encyclopedia is about.



This is a culture, a civilization that has not been studied enough.

The relations between the Jews and their neighbors was never what it has come down to what we think it was. It was never this walled separation. There was intermarriage. There was a great deal of borrowing of traditions, musical traditions, dance traditions, poetic traditions, legal traditions, philosophical ideas that were constantly leaking in back and forth.

For instance, a study has been made not long ago about the origins of the bar mitzvah. Nowhere in the Bible does it say[s] at the age of thirteen that a boy should come and read the Torah. How did that get started? That got started because organized Jewish communities recognized a need that they saw their Christian neighbors fulfilling with Confirmation.

When I was in Moscow not long ago, a friend of mine, a Jewish man who was a former deputy prime minister of Russia under Yeltsin, he says to me, "Jonathan, would you like gefilte fish?" I said, "Gregory, in Moscow, I would love gefilte fish!" He said, "Good, I'll take you to the best



Ukrainian restaurant in town." And they served me gefilte fish that was like right off of my grandmother's table. And this was a Ukrainian restaurant. It had nothing Jewish about it.

So, the cuisine, the songs, all kinds of things. Where did the sonnet come from, the sonnet that Shakespeare wrote? Did he invent the sonnet? No, he borrowed it from the Italians and then developed it.

This is the way language develops, and this is what Weinreich, who was one of the founders of YIVO, was able so brilliantly to demonstrate in his book, *The History of the Yiddish Language*, which is that Yiddish is *the* linguistic manifestation of the Jews' interactions with all of their neighbors. It is not a degrading story. It is a beautiful story because the Jews were part and parcel of the cultural dynamism and the cultural life of Europe over a thousand years.

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The Encyclopedia is coming at exactly the right time. In America, kids eighteen-, nineteen-year-old kids are going back searching for their roots. Why? Because, I think, American life is essentially a rootless life. It's a life



that, at least in its most consumerist and popular forms, provides the soul with as much nutrition as a McDonald's hamburger. And you're going to die from it. You need real nutrition. And real nutrition is knowledge.

I think we want to be able to put this history into a dispassionate and acceptable form intellectually because in a way, to do that is to make it something we can grasp, that it isn't just this looming shadow over our heads that seems so much bigger than we are, that's magnified by fear and paranoia and grief and hate and all of those things.

To make the Encyclopedia, this online version of the Encyclopedia, really available worldwide is a spectacular accomplishment.

Now, in effect, we're giving the Lithuanians and the Poles and the Russians their history back to them. It's their history and many Poles and Lithuanians and Russians are beginning to understand, and Germans, of course, have understood this now for a while, which is that it's their history as well. That the Jews were part of their history. You can't take the Jews out of Poland and still have Polish culture or Lithuanian culture or German culture. The Jews



helped make it. This is an extraordinary story.

Valedictory

You can explore the online edition of the YIVO *Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* by visiting yivoencyclopedia.org.

Yale University Press published the book edition.

Encyclopedia editor is Gershon David Hundert. Director of Publications Jeffrey Edelstein oversaw the project.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.

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