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## The "An-ski Expedition": Documenting an Endangered Culture

### Lesson plan for a lesson in Cultural Studies

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#### Overview:

From 1912 to 1914, a team of researchers headed by Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport (a writer, playwright and folklorist, better known by his pen name, S. An-ski) travelled to about 60 Jewish communities in the regions of Volhynia and Podolia in the Russian Empire. The scholars were interested in collecting anything and everything that related to the everyday life and culture of Jews in Eastern Europe, so they collected legends, folk songs, sayings, gravestone rubbings, documents, jokes, folk art, and more.

#### Grade Level:

Middle School to High School

#### Goals:

Students will explore the An-ski Expedition as an example of a project that documented an endangered culture (in this case, traditional Jewish culture in Eastern Europe before World War I).

#### Learning Objectives:

Students will:

- gain an understanding of the concept of an "endangered culture."
- learn about the importance of the preservation of folk culture through the collection and study of art, music, photographs, stories, and other artifacts.
- explore an example of ethnographic fieldwork in action.
- learn about traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

#### Suggested Time Frame:

One 1-hour class period with optional additional time for presentation of extension projects.

#### Learning Activities:

##### #1

Read the PowerPoint presentation "It is necessary to give our children folktales and songs" (online or as a printout) with the class and discuss.

#### SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS:

- What made An-ski and his colleagues fear that many elements of traditional Jewish culture in Eastern Europe might disappear?
- What is the difference between "traditional" culture and "mass" culture?

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- Why do you think An-ski and his colleagues felt a sense of loss about the disappearance of "old ways"?
- Why do you think it's important to preserve endangered cultures? Or do you think it shouldn't be a priority? Why not?

## #2

Discuss the types of artifacts collected by the An-ski Expedition, making a list, if desired, on the blackboard.

### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS:**

- How do these artifacts help us get a sense of traditional Jewish life? Is there anything that you find particularly intriguing or surprising about the items on the list?
- If your "culture" were endangered and An-ski were to come to you and ask you to provide him with something important to preserve, what sorts of "items" would you give him? Why? How would they portray the values and experiences of your family and community?

## #3

Explore with the class some examples of endangered cultures in the world today. For instance, languages: no one knows exactly how many languages there are in the world today. One estimate puts it at about 6,900. As many as 3,000 languages are considered endangered. What makes a language endangered? Linguists define a language as endangered when there are fewer than 2,000 people who still speak it or almost all of its speakers are elderly and it isn't being taught anymore to younger generations. Give the class a list of examples of endangered languages.

### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPIC:**

- What forces in the world today do you think might be speeding the disappearance of languages and traditional cultures?

## #4

The Jewish communities that the An-ski Expedition documented in Russia and Ukraine in the early 20th century are no more. There are still Jews living in some of those towns but they are few in number and many of the societal structures that once shaped Jewish life are gone, along with many traditional customs. The Jewish population in that region was the victim of genocide during the Holocaust, when almost half of all Jews in the Soviet Union were murdered by the Nazis. The Soviet Union repressed religion and ethnic identity. These are external factors that contributed to the near disappearance of traditional Jewish life, but there were also internal factors within the Jewish community that brought about great change. The generations after An-ski were increasingly integrated into Russian life and society and did not hesitate to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities that drew them away from the towns to the big cities. Beginning in the late 1980s, when the Soviet regime loosened emigration laws, hundreds of thousands of Jews left Russia and the Ukraine for Israel and the United States. But Jewish religion and culture have not disappeared. There are an estimated 13.3 million Jews in the world today. The three countries with the largest Jewish populations are Israel, the United States, and France. While Jewish life is —everywhere—very different from the way it was in An-ski's time, many Jews still believe that preserving, studying, and even sometimes reviving older traditions are important.

One example of this is what is known as the "klezmer revival." Musicians, most (but not all of them) Jewish, have set about learning the repertoire of klezmer musicians (the bands that were hired, in the old days, to play at weddings and other Jewish celebrations). Some of the revivalists

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even learned Yiddish, the everyday language of the East European Jews, so that they could sing the lyrics to the songs they played.

Obtain one of the following music tracks from [itunes](#), [amazon.com](#) or another online music store for the class as an example of a modern klezmer band performing traditional Jewish repertoire:

- Brave Old World, *Kolomeykes*
- The Klezmatics, *Heysen Tartar-tants*
- Kapelye, *Odessa Bulgar*

#### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPIC:**

- If An-ski were alive today, how do you think he might make use of new media and technologies, such as email, Facebook, and itunes to document and disseminate knowledge of traditional Jewish culture?

#### **Extension Activities:**

- Create a plan for an ethnographic expedition in your neighborhood or region, or among members of your ethnic, religious, or cultural group.
- Select one of the languages on the "Endangered Languages" handout or any other language considered "endangered" in the world today and research it on the Internet and in the library. Write a report addressing the following questions: Where is the language spoken and by whom? How many people still speak the language? Are there projects dedicated to documenting or reviving the language?

Ideas for other endangered languages to research, as well as useful information in general for this assignment can be found on

The INNET Languages in Danger website:

[www.languagesindanger.eu](http://www.languagesindanger.eu)

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Languages in Danger' website. The browser address bar displays 'http://languagesindanger.eu/'. The website has a navigation menu with links for 'home', 'interactive map', 'book of knowledge', 'teaching materials', 'what can be done', and 'contact'. The main heading reads 'LANGUAGES IN DANGER'. Below this, there is a search bar and a section for 'FEATURED LANGUAGE' titled 'teop'. The 'teop' section includes a photograph of children in a rural setting and a brief description: 'Teop is an Oceanic language, spoken in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. The grammar of Teop exhibits certain unique features, especially as regards the verb complex and the argument structure (the phenomenon of reduplication). Read more in Book of...'. There are also links for 'LOCATION' (with a world map icon) and 'ABOUT PROJECT' and 'QUIZZ'.

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– the National Geographic web site “Disappearing Languages”  
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/mission/enduringvoices/>  
– and at “Living Tongues”  
<http://www.livingtongues.org/>

- Students who select Krymchak should consult the YIVO Encyclopedia article "[Krymchaks](#)."
- Pick (from the Online Encyclopedia) one type of "artifact" (e.g., folk songs, literature, ceremonial art ) and make a PowerPoint "museum" exhibition about that sort of artifact, emphasizing what you think it reveals about the values of traditional Jewish life.
- Read the handout about traditional Jewish foods in Lithuania and the *YIVO Encyclopedia* article called "[Food and Drink](#)" and then prepare your own report about a recipe or food tradition from your own family or ethnic tradition.
- Interview family members, if possible, about the significance the food or recipe has for the family. Prepare a bibliography of printed and online sources that you think would be useful for further research on your topic.
- Prepare a short PowerPoint presentation on klezmer music, addressing the following questions: Where was klezmer music *traditionally* played? What are names of some of the types of klezmer music played at weddings? What musical traditions of other ethnic groups have influenced klezmer music?
- Incorporate audio tracks into your presentation if possible. Consult "[Music: Traditional and Instrumental Music](#)" in the YIVO Encyclopedia and the following web sites, in addition to other sources:

*Playback: Klezmer Finds Its Roots* [http://www.budowitz.com/Budowitz/Essays\\_files/VP\\_Budo\\_Hadassah\\_Cover\\_Story\\_Complete.pdf](http://www.budowitz.com/Budowitz/Essays_files/VP_Budo_Hadassah_Cover_Story_Complete.pdf)

*Jewish Music in Rumania*

<http://www.dinayekapelye.com/jmromania.htm>

*The Klezmer Revival: Old Meets New*

<http://www.berkshireweb.com/rogovoy/interviews/klez.html>

## **Materials:**

**PowerPoint presentation:** "It is necessary to give our children folktales and songs"

## **Articles in the YIVO Encyclopedia Online:**

<http://yivoencyclopedia.org>

- [An-ski Ethnographic Expedition and Museum](#)
- [Amulets and Talismans](#)
- [Engel, Yo’el](#)
- [Folklore, Ethnography, and Anthropology](#)
- [Folk Songs](#)
- [Food and Drink](#)
- [Iudovin, Solomon](#)
- [Krymchaks](#)
- [Music: Traditional and Instrumental Music](#)

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- [Proverbs](#)
- [Rapoport, Shloyme Zaynvl](#)

**Maps in the YIVO Encyclopedia Online:**

- [The An-Ski Expeditions; locations visited 1912–1914.](#)
- [Eastern Europe, 1815.](#)