

**“It is necessary to give our
children folktales and songs”**

The An-ski Ethnographic
Expedition, 1912-1914

*Material is adapted from the Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe and is
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The An-ski Ethnographic Expedition

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) traveled to about 60 Jewish communities 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.

The world was changing at a rapid pace and many old customs and folk arts were not being passed on to future generations. An-ski and his colleagues saw Jewish culture as *endangered*.



Zusman Kiselgof (right) recording Jewish folklore or music during the An-ski Ethnographic Expedition to the Volhynia and Podolia regions of the Russian Empire, 1912-1914. (YIVO)

The Expedition

The An-ski expedition visited Jewish communities in Volhynia and Podolia, provinces of the Russian Empire that are now part of Ukraine. The expedition was cut short in 1914 by the outbreak of World War I.



Locations visited by the An-ski expeditions, with national boundaries shown ca. 1914. (Gabiella Safran)

Who carried out the expedition?

S. An-ski (Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport, 1863-1920) was a Russian and Yiddish writer, ethnographer, and political activist. He was born into a poor family, and his mother, separated from his father, ran a tavern. An-ski's formal education ended when he was young, but he continued learning on his own and left home in his late teens to become a tutor.

He is most famous for his play *The Dybbuk*, which is based on the folklore collected by his expedition. Today, it continues to be performed in many languages around the world.

He was also a passionate revolutionary, who worked to bring about the end of tsarist rule in Russia. He wrote the anthem of the Bund, the Jewish socialist party.



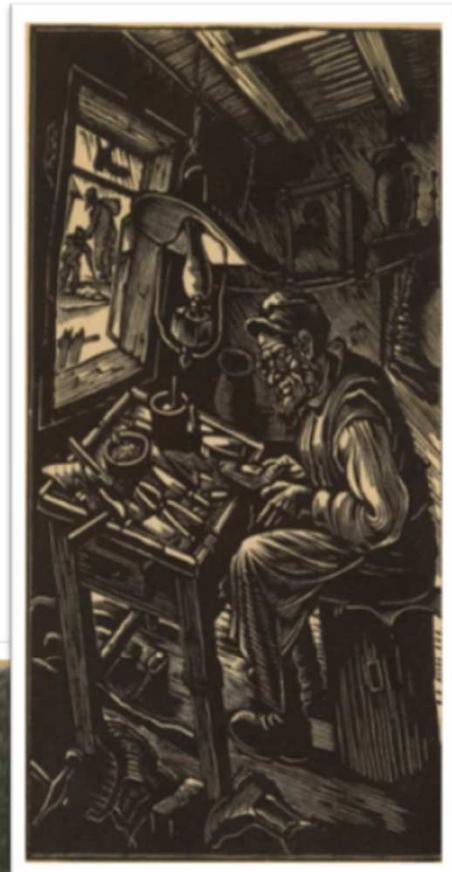
Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport (standing, 4th from left) with members of the acclaimed Yiddish theater group, the Vilna Troupe, Poland, ca. 1919. The Vilna Troupe was the first to perform his play, *The Dybbuk*. Sadly, An-ski died before his play made it to the stage. (YIVO)

Solomon Iudovin (1892-1954) was an artist and photographer whose specialties were woodcuts and book illustration. Between 1920 and 1940, most of his work was devoted to Jewish themes, inspired by his participation in the An-ski Expedition.

Yo'el Engel (1868-1927) was a composer, musicologist, and ethnographer who studied at the Moscow Conservatory and was the music critic at a leading Russian newspaper. In the late 1890s, he began to collect Jewish folk songs and was a prominent leader of the Society for Jewish Folk Music. As a composer, he is best known for his vocal arrangements of Hebrew poetry and Yiddish folk songs.

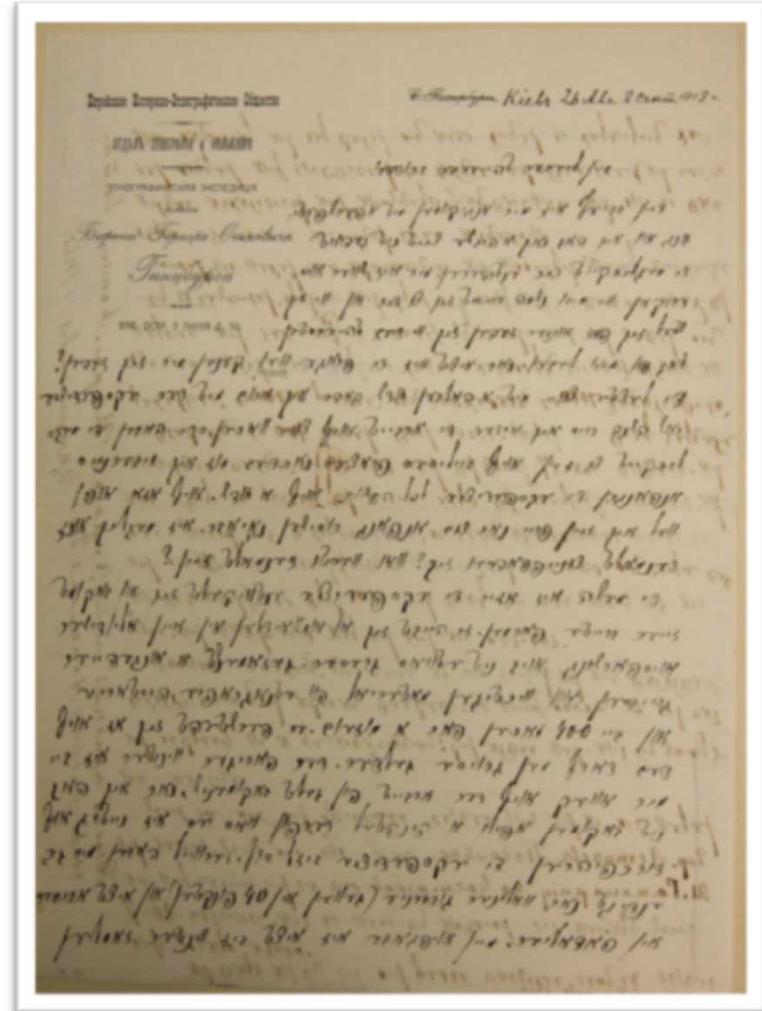
Top: Woodcut by Solomon Iudovin. (YIVO)

Bottom: Yo'el Engel leading a choir at a children's summer camp, Malakhovka, near Moscow, ca. 1920. Photo by Sh. Koldavsky. (YIVO)



What did the expedition collect?

- 2,000 folktales, legends, and traditions
- 1,500 folk songs
- 1,000 instrumental and synagogue melodies, and drinking songs
- 700 artifacts
- 100 manuscripts
- Also:
 - Customs
 - Ceremonies
 - Superstitions
 - Incantations
 - Proverbs
 - Parables
 - Letters
 - Artworks
 - Marriage contracts
 - Photographs of people, homes, synagogues, tombstones



Yiddish letter from An-ski to his friend Chaim Zhitlowsky, September 8, 1913, describing some of the items collected by the Expedition.

Examples of Jewish folklore and artifacts from *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

(These items are similar to the sort of materials collected by the Expedition.)

Paper cut. Moshe ben Aharon, Galicia, ca. 1875. Elaborate cut-paper decorations like these were used in synagogues to indicate the correction direction to face during prayer. While it was common for Galician paper cuts to feature lions, the other animals depicted here (elephant, otter, beaver, leopard, wild boar) are unusual. (Gross Family Collection)





Sarah Levenkind Natelson wearing an old-fashioned traditional bonnet, Kaunas, ca. 1880. (YIVO)



Decorative pastries for (left) a wedding celebration and (right) a wedding or a circumcision ceremony, possibly baked in Lwow, ca. 1930. (Museum of Ethnography and Crafts, Lwow)



16th-century fortified synagogue, Husiатыn, Poland, 1920s. Photo by Alter Kacyzne. (YIVO)



Title page of *Tsene-rene* (Slavuta and Lemberg, 1848). The *tsene-rene* was an extremely popular type of literature known as the “women’s bible.” It contained stories from the Bible and commentaries in Yiddish, the everyday language of Jews in Eastern Europe. The *tsene rene* was read by those who were not educated enough to read Hebrew, the language of scholarship and prayer—mainly women, but also some men. (YIVO)



Children playing, Kremenets, Ukraine, ca. 1913. A photograph taken during the An-ski Ethnographic Expedition, 1912-1914. (YIVO)

Willow-bark horn. Mayer Kirshenblatt from Toronto, Canada made this toy in the early 1980s to replicate a handmade toy he remembered from his childhood in interwar Opatów, Poland. Children made horns like this one in the springtime. They called them *trompaytes* (trumpet) or *shoyfres* (shofars, the ram's horns blown in the synagogue during the High Holidays). (YIVO)





Amulet, Warsaw, ca. 1850. This amulet promises miracles to those who make charitable donations, and a blessing in the name of Rabbi Me'ir Ba'al ha-Nes, a sage from ancient times whose name means "Master of the Miracle." (Gross Family Collection)