

Yizkor Books as Holocaust Grey Literature

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Abstract

Yizkor is a Hebrew word meaning 'you will remember', and Yizkor books are books that commemorate the vanished communities destroyed by the Holocaust. As the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the German concentration camps is commemorated this year, it seems fitting, with this conference being held in Europe, to call attention to this unique and interesting body of literature.

Yizkor books present an historic but interesting type of grey literature, with significant modern day interest. While the Yizkor Book had its origins in the 13th century, it re-emerged early in the 20th Century as a tool for documenting the declining villages and Jewish communities of Eastern and Western Europe. Following the Holocaust, these books were put to a new purpose in their memorialization of the destruction of Jewish life in Europe's cities and villages. These books originated as manuscripts, collected in bits and pieces by fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies, and were eventually printed non-commercially in very small editions in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. Like the world population of Jews, the collections of these books are diasporic; scattered throughout the world. They are of current interest to a variety of scholars and others, for example – as tools for genealogical research and study – both for families of those who perished and for genealogists; to historians as primary sources- rich with detailed information about the past; to sociologists and anthropologists, as studies of a segment of European village life; to psychologists with an interest in the documentation of memory, and, it is hoped, to scholars of information creation and dissemination, as an addition to the canon of grey literature.

This paper approaches Yizkor books from all of these angles, and focuses on contextualizing them as Holocaust-era grey literature. The creation of these books, their publication and distribution history, and collection development efforts are discussed. Like the vanished communities that they describe, these books themselves have become endangered due to their small production numbers and various preservation challenges. Currently, there are digitization efforts underway to preserve and to increase open access to this genre of literature. These efforts are described and discussed.

What Is Yizkor, What Are Yizkor Books, and What Makes Them Grey?

Jewish law teaches that death is to be acknowledged communally, and this tradition of collective mourning encompasses a wide range, from the loss of an individual to the loss of a homeland or location. The rituals for collective mourning are, to a large extent, prescribed and codified. When a loved one dies, and on the anniversary of the person's death, a prayer, called the Mourner's Kaddish is said in the presence, and with the support, of one's community, defined as a minimum of ten community members. During the year, with the observance of certain holidays, there are special services, called Yizkor Services, which serve the purpose of communal mourning for the loss of loved ones, for the loss of the first and second holy temples in biblical times, and for the losses suffered in the Holocaust. There are many other mourning rituals and practices, which serve to re-establish a world which has been radically de-stabilized by a death (1). The term 'yizkor' is Hebrew for 'you will remember'. During a Yizkor Service, individuals are remembered by name, with the names of the deceased generally spoken aloud. The origin of the yizkor book, the topic of this paper, can be traced to this tradition. Yizkor books can be described as a Jewish communal response to the Holocaust. There is little published about the actual production of this genre of literature, and most of what we know comes from an oral tradition. It is hoped that this paper will make a useful contribution to the literature on this topic.

The first yizkor book, or 'memorbuch' as it was called in old German, was written at the end of the 13th century as a record of the individuals and communities slaughtered during the 200 years following the First Crusade through Central Europe. The original purpose of the yizkor book was liturgical. By including lists of names, places, and dates, it allowed people to remember and to state specifics in the Yizkor prayers, and to acknowledge that these people lost their lives specifically because of their faith. The post-Holocaust yizkor books – the focus of this paper, are descended from this original one from the medieval era.

Yizkor books fit both the definition and the 'spirit' of grey literature, and possess many characteristics of materials that we generally think of as grey. Aside from being produced non-commercially, much grey literature can be described as being data driven. In spite of the potential for very large audiences via the web, most of what is generally considered to be grey has a very small and specific intended audience. Additionally, while some grey literature is peer-reviewed, much of it does not