

FOCUS/FRONT LINES

Spotlight: WJC Establishes Institute for the Study of Yiddish and European Jewish Culture

Seeing the revival of the Yiddish language as instrumental in regenerating Jewish life in Europe after the tragedy of the Holocaust, the World Jewish Congress will establish the WJC Institute for the Study of Yiddish and European Jewish Culture in Vilnius, Lithuania by the end of 2014.

The Yiddish language served as the bedrock of Jewish culture in Europe until its near-disappearance in the flames of the Holocaust. It is estimated that before World War II Yiddish was spoken by 11-13 million people.

Estimates of the number of Yiddish speakers today vary from 2 million to less than 600,000, but even the most optimistic studies indicate that the vast majority of Yiddish speakers today are mostly elderly people and the ultra-orthodox. The situation has become so critical that today Yiddish is listed in the UNESCO Red Book of Endangered Languages as "Severely Endangered." Further, the Yiddish language has almost disappeared from the curricula of universities and other academic institutions around the world.

Ninety-five percent of Lithuanian Jewry were murdered in the Holocaust.

Examples of courses to be offered at the Institute include: Intensive Yiddish Language; Yiddish Literature; Ashkenazi and European Jewish Culture; Yiddish Folklore; Jewish Religion, Thought and Heritage in the Context of Yiddish Culture; Yiddish and Multicultural Europe; The Influence of Yiddish on Jewish Life, Culture and Traditions; and The Lost World of the Shtetl. 